

The stylistic mainstream of American popular music was, until at least the mid-1950s, largely oriented toward the tastes of white, middle- or upper-class, Protestant, urban people. In economic terms, this makes perfect sense, since it was these people who for many years made up the bulk of the expanding urban market for mass-reproduced music. From whom have the vital “peripheral” musical impulses of which we have been speaking come? The evidence, as you shall see, is abundant: from African Americans, poor southern whites, working-class people, Jewish and Latin American immigrants, adolescents, gays, and various other folks whose “difference” vis-à-vis the mainstream has at times weighed upon them as a burden.

The history of popular music in the United States shows us how supposedly marginal musics and musicians have repeatedly helped to invigorate the center of popular taste and the music industry. Regrettably, it has sometimes also been the case that the people most responsible for creating the music that people in the United States and elsewhere consider quintessentially American have not reaped an equitable share of the profits accumulated from the fruits of their labor.

STREAMS OF TRADITION: THE SOURCES OF POPULAR MUSIC

In 1937 the anthropologist Ralph Linton published an article entitled “One-Hundred Percent American.” “There can be no question about the average American’s Americanism or his desire to preserve his precious heritage at all costs,” wrote Linton. “Nevertheless, some insidious foreign ideas have already wormed their way into his civilization without his realizing what was going on.” These “insidious ideas”—derived from the cultures of Asia, the Near East, Europe, Africa, and Native America—include pajamas, the toilet, soap, the toothbrush, the chair, shoes, the mirror, coffee, fermented and distilled drinks, the cigar, and even the newspaper. On the train to work, Linton’s “average American” reads the news of the day, imprinted in characters invented by the ancient Semites by a process invented in Germany on a material invented in China. As he scans the latest editorial pointing out the dire results to our institutions of accepting foreign ideas, he thanks a Hebrew God in an Indo-European language that he is 100 percent (decimal system invented by the Greeks) American (from Americus Vespucci, Italian geographer).

Similarly, every aspect of popular music that is today regarded as American in character has sprung from imported traditions. These source traditions may be classified into three broad “streams”: European American music, African American music, and Latin American music. Each of these streams is made up of many styles of music, and each has profoundly influenced the others.

The European American Stream

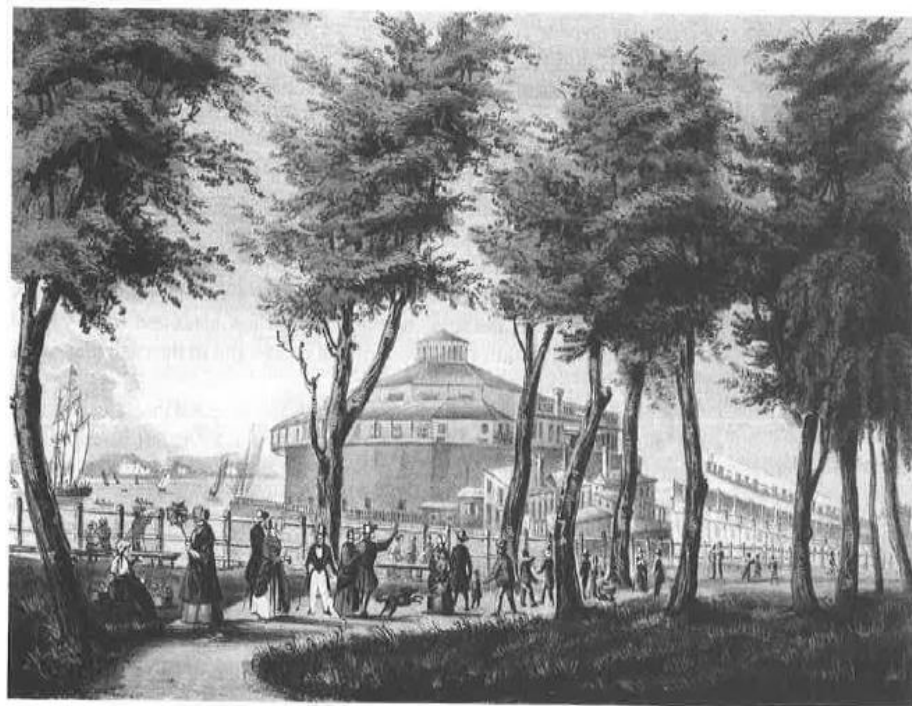
Until the middle of the nineteenth century, American popular music was almost entirely European in character. The cultural and linguistic dominance of the English meant that their music—including folk ballads, popular songs printed as sheet music, and various types of dance music—established early on a kind of “mainstream” around which other styles circulated.

At the time of the American Revolution, professional composers of popular songs in England drew heavily upon **ballads**, a type of song in which a series of **verses** telling a story, often about a historical event or personal tragedy, are sung

to a repeating melody (this sort of musical form is called **strophic**). Originally an oral tradition, passed down in unwritten form, ballads were eventually circulated on large sheets of paper called *broad-sides*, the ancestors of today’s sheet music. While some broadside ballads were drawn from folk tradition, many were urban in origin and concerned with current events (much like today’s tabloid newspapers). In most cases only the words were provided, with an indication of a traditional melody—for example, “Greensleeves”—to which they were to be sung. Ballad-mongers hawking the broadsides sang them on the streets, an early form of commercial song promotion. Composers of broadside ballads often added a catchy **chorus**, a repeated melody with fixed text inserted between verses.

The *pleasure garden*, a forerunner of today’s theme parks, was the most important source of public entertainment in England between 1650 and 1850. Large urban parks filled with meandering tree-lined paths, the pleasure gardens provided an idyllic rural experience for an expanding urban audience. The pleasure gardens became one of the main venues for the dissemination of printed songs by professional composers, and many of the first widely popular songsheets were illustrated with sketches of the gardens and other romanticized rural scenes. In the 1760s the first American pleasure gardens opened in Charleston, New York, and other cities.

The English *ballad opera* tradition was also extremely popular in America during the early nineteenth century. These stage productions drew upon ballads, some



Castle Garden, New York City, in 1848, as depicted in a lithograph by Nathaniel Currier. Courtesy Library of Congress

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of which had previously been circulated as broadsides. Perhaps the best known of the English ballad operas is John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), designed to counter the domination of the British stage by Italian composers and musicians. The main characters in ballad operas were common people, rather than the kings and queens of imported operas; the songs were familiar in form and content; and the lyrics were all in English rather than Italian.

The pleasure gardens and ballad operas both featured songs produced by professional composers for large and diverse audiences. Melodies were designed to be simple and easy to remember, and the lyrics focused on romantic themes.

The English folk ballad tradition thrived in America, and songs were reworked to suit the life circumstances of new immigrants. In the early twentieth century folklorists interested in continuities with English traditions were able to record dozens of versions of old English ballads in the United States. While today these songs are preserved mainly by folk music enthusiasts, the core of the tradition—including its musical forms and storytelling techniques—lives on in contemporary country and western music. In addition, vocal qualities derived from the Anglo-American tradition—notably the thin, nasalized tone known as the “high lonesome sound”—continue today as markers of southern white identity.

Irish, Scottish, and Italian songs also influenced early American popular song. Copies of Thomas Moore's multivolume collection of *Irish Melodies* (a collection of Moore's poems set to Irish folk melodies, published in London and Dublin between 1808 and 1834) were widely circulated in the United States, and Scottish songs such as “Auld Lang Syne” (probably written in the late seventeenth century and still performed today on New Year's Eve) also enjoyed wide popularity. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Italian opera was also very popular in the United States. Songs by Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and other Italian composers were published as sheet music, and the *bel canto* style of singing—light, clear, flexible, and intimate—had a major effect on the development of popular singing style.

Dance music was another important aspect of the European influence on American popular music. Until the late nineteenth century European American dance was closely modeled on styles imported from England and the Continent. Country dances—in which dancers arranged themselves into circles, squares, or opposing rows—were popular. In the United States the country dance tradition developed into a plethora of urban and rural, elite and lower-class, black and white variants. It continues today in country and western line dances and in the contradances that form part of the modern folk music scene.

The nineteenth century also saw a move toward couple dances, including the waltz, the galop, the schottische, and the ballroom polka, the last based on a Bohemian dance that had already become the rage in the ballrooms of Paris and London before coming to America. Later, in the 1880s, a fast dance called the one-step, based in part on marching band music, became popular. These couple dances are direct predecessors of the African American-influenced popular dance styles of the early twentieth century, including the two-step, fox trot, bunny hug, and Charleston.

In addition to songs and dance music produced by professional composers for a largely urban audience, immigration brought a wide variety of European folk music to America. The mainstream of English-dominated popular song and dance music was from early on surrounded by a myriad of folk and popular styles brought

by immigrants from other parts of Europe. The descendants of early French settlers in North America and the Caribbean maintained their own musical traditions. Millions of Irish and German immigrants came to the United States during the nineteenth century, seeking an escape from oppression, economic uncertainty, and—particularly during the potato famine of the 1840s—the threat of starvation. Between 1880 and 1910 an additional seventeen million immigrants entered the United States, mostly from eastern and southern Europe. These successive waves of migration contributed to the diversity of musical life in the United States. European-derived musical styles such as Cajun (Acadian) fiddling, Jewish klezmer music, and the Polish polka—an energetic dance, quite different from the “refined” style of polka discussed above—have each contributed to mainstream popular music while maintaining a solid base in particular ethnic communities.

The African American Stream

Not all immigrants came willingly. Between one and two million people from Africa, about 10 percent of the total transatlantic traffic in slaves, were forcibly brought to the United States between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The areas of western and central Africa from which slaves were drawn were home to hundreds of distinct societies, languages, and musical traditions.

The genesis of African American music in the United States involved two closely related processes. The first of these was *syncretism*, the selective blending of traditions derived from Africa and Europe. The second important process was the creation of *institutions* that became important centers of black musical life—the family, the church, the voluntary association, the school, and so on.

It is misleading to speak of “black music” as a homogeneous entity. African American culture took different forms in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, and the United States, shaped by the particular mix of African and European (and in some cases American Indian) source traditions, and by local social conditions. In the United States, people from the Senegambia region of West Africa—the Wolof, Mandinka, and other groups—appear to have made up a large part of the slave population. Kunta Kinte, the ancestor of *Roots* author Alex Haley, was a Wolof man from what is today the nation of Gambia; the banjo, an African American invention, was developed from stringed instruments common in the Senegambia region; and certain aspects of blues singing, including the role of the musician as a social critic, are derived from the *griot* (praise singer) traditions of the West African savannah.

Certain features of African music form the core of African American music and, by extension, of American popular music as a whole. *Call-and-response* forms, in which a lead singer and chorus alternate, the leader being allowed more freedom to elaborate his part, are a hallmark of African American musical traditions. In much African musicmaking *repetition* is regarded as an aesthetic strength, and many forms are constructed of relatively short phrases—often two to eight beats in length—that recur in a regular cycle. These short phrases are combined in various ways to produce music of great power and complexity. In African American music such repeated patterns are often called *riffs*.

The aesthetic interest of much African music lies in the *interlocking* of multiple repeating patterns to form dense *polyrhythmic* textures (textures in which many rhythms are going on at the same time). This technique is evident in African Amer-

ican styles such as funk music, particularly the work of James Brown, and the instrumental accompaniments (“beats”) for contemporary rap recordings. One common West African rhythm pattern has generated many variants in the Americas, including the “hambone” riff popularized during the rock ‘n’ roll era by Bo Diddley, Johnny Otis, and Buddy Holly.

In contrast to the aesthetics of Western art music, in which a “clear” tone is the ideal, African singers and instrumentalists often make use of a wide palette of **timbres**. *Buzzing tones* are often created by attaching a rattling device to an instrument, and singers frequently use growling and humming effects, a technique that can also frequently be heard in African American genres such as blues, gospel, and jazz. In West African drumming traditions the lead or master drummer often plays the lowest-pitched drum in the group. This *emphasis on low-pitched sounds* may be a predecessor of the prominent role of the bass drum in Mississippi black fife-and-drum ensembles and of the “sonic boom bass” aesthetic in rap music (the *whooomp!* created by heavily amplified low-frequency signals). Kurtis Blow, a rap performer and producer, described the rap producer’s goal in terms of breaking car speakers, house speakers, and boom boxes, identifying this as “African music”!

The influence of African musical aesthetics and techniques on American popular music has been profound. The history of this influence, which we shall examine in some detail, reveals both the creativity of black musicians and the persistence of racism in the music business and American society as a whole. The origins of a distinctively American style of popular entertainment lie in the minstrel show of the mid-nineteenth century, in which white performers artificially darkened their skin and mimicked black music, dance, and dialect. In the early twentieth century African American ragtime and blues profoundly shaped the mainstream of American popular song. The “jazz age” of the 1920s and the “swing era” of the 1930s and 1940s involved the reworking of African American dance music so it would appeal to a predominantly white middle-class audience.

Although country music is typically identified as a “white” style, some of its biggest stars—for example, Ray Charles and Charley Pride—have been black, and the styles of influential country musicians such as Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, and Willie Nelson were strongly influenced by African American music. One could cite many more examples of the influence of black music on the musical “mainstream” of America: 1950s rock ‘n’ roll was, in large part, rhythm & blues (R&B) music reworked for a predominantly white teen music market; the influence of 1960s soul music, rooted in black gospel and R&B, is heard in the vocal style of practically every pop singer, from Bonnie Raitt and Whitney Houston to Bruce Springsteen and Michael Jackson; the virtuoso guitar style of heavy metal owes a large debt to the urban blues of Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf; and rap music, based on African-derived musical and verbal traditions, continues to provide many white Americans with a vicarious experience of “listening in” on black urban culture.

We could say, then, that with every passing year American popular music has moved closer to the core aesthetic values and techniques of African music. Yet this way of phrasing the matter is somewhat misleading, for it directs attention away from the fact that African Americans are Americans, that the ancestors of black Americans arrived in the United States *before* the forebears of many white Americans. The complex history of interaction between European American and African

American styles, musicians, and audiences demonstrates the absurdity of racism, just as it attests to the unfortunate tenacity of racial thinking in America.

The Latin American Stream

As in the United States, musicians in Latin America developed a wide range of styles blending African music with the traditions of Europe (including colonial powers such as Spain, Portugal, and France). Caribbean, South American, and Mexican traditions have long influenced popular music in the United States.

The first Latin American style to have a major international impact was the Cuban *habanera*, an African-influenced variant of the European country-dance tradition that swept the United States and Europe in the 1880s. The characteristic *habanera* rhythm—an eight-beat pattern divided 3–3–2—influenced late nineteenth-century ragtime music and was an important part of what the great New Orleans pianist Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton called the “Latin tinge” in American jazz.

The next wave of Latin American influence on the music of the United States came from Argentina. The *tango*, initially played by musicians in the capital city of Buenos Aires, was influenced by the Cuban *habanera* rhythm, Italian and Spanish songs, and the songs of *gauchos* (cowboys). The tango reached Europe in the 1910s, where it was popularized by Carlos Gardel, a film and recording star who is today regarded as a national hero in Argentina. In the United States the ballroom version of the tango, a couple dance featuring close contact between partners and an insistent rhythm, was popularized around 1914 by dance stars Irene and Vernon Castle (see Chapter 3). One of the first big tango stars was Rudolph Valentino, whose film persona somewhat indiscriminately mixed the stereotypes of the “Latin lover” and the proud and independent Middle Eastern sheik.

The next wave of Latin American musical influence was the *rumba*. The roots of the ballroom rumba style that became popular in the United States lie in 1920s Cuba. The rural *son*—a Cuban parallel of “country music”—moved to the city of Havana, where it was played by professional dance bands. These musicians created a more exciting style by adding rhythms from the *rumba*, an urban street drumming style strongly rooted in African traditions.

A “refined” version of *rumba*, developed by musicians working at tourist hotels in Cuba, was introduced to the world by Don Azpiazu and his Havana Casino Orchestra. Azpiazu’s 1929 recording of “El Manicero” (“The Peanut Vendor”) became a huge international hit. Within a few months of its release many dance orchestras in the United States had recorded their own versions of the song, a phenomenon later known as “covering” a hit song. The *rumba* reached a height of popularity in the United States during the 1930s and was succeeded by a series of Cuban-based ballroom dance fads, including the *mambo* (1940s) and *cha-cha-chá* (1950s).

Variants of Cuban-based music in the United States ranged from the exciting blend of modern jazz and *rumba* pioneered by Machito and Dizzy Gillespie in the 1940s to the tourist-oriented style performed by Desi Arnaz’s orchestra on the *I Love Lucy* television show. The 1960s saw the emergence of *salsa*, a *rumba*-based style pioneered by Cuban and Puerto Rican migrants in New York City. The stars of *salsa* music include the great singer Celia Cruz and bandleader Tito Puente. In the 1980s Miami Sound Machine created a commercially successful blend of *salsa* and disco music, and “world beat” musicians such as Paul Simon and David Byrne began to experiment with traditional Afro-Cuban rhythms.

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The Brazilian *samba* is another dance style strongly rooted in African music. The variant of samba that had the biggest influence in the United States was the *carioca*, a smooth style developed in Rio de Janeiro. The *carioca* was boosted in the 1940s by the meteoric career of Carmen Miranda, who appeared in a series of popular musical films. A cool, sophisticated style of Brazilian music called the *bossa nova* ("new trend") became popular in United States during the early 1960s, eventually spawning hit songs such as "The Girl from Ipanema" (1964).

Mexican music has long had a symbiotic relationship with styles north of the Rio Grande. At the end of the nineteenth century Mexican musicians visited the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (an early example of the world's fair) and later toured throughout the United States. The two best-known Mexican-derived styles today are *conjunto acordeon* ("accordion band") music, played in northern Mexico and Texas; and *mariachi* ("marriage") music, a staple of the Mexican tourist trade, performed by ensembles made up of guitars, violins, and trumpets. Country and western music has been influenced by Mexican styles since at least the 1930s. Mexican immigrants in California (*Chicanos*) have also played an important role in the development of rock music. This continuing influence is exemplified by Ritchie Valens's 1959 hit "La Bamba," based on a folk tune from Veracruz; the mixture of *salsa* and guitar-based rock music developed in the late 1960s by guitarist Carlos Santana; recordings of traditional Mexican songs by Linda Ronstadt; and the hard-rocking style of the Los Angeles-based band Los Lobos.

In this chapter we have discussed some unifying themes that run through the history of American popular music and described some of the diverse traditions that have contributed to this rich history. Now we want to get more specific, beginning with the nineteenth century, when the music business and the first distinctively American styles of popular music began to take shape.