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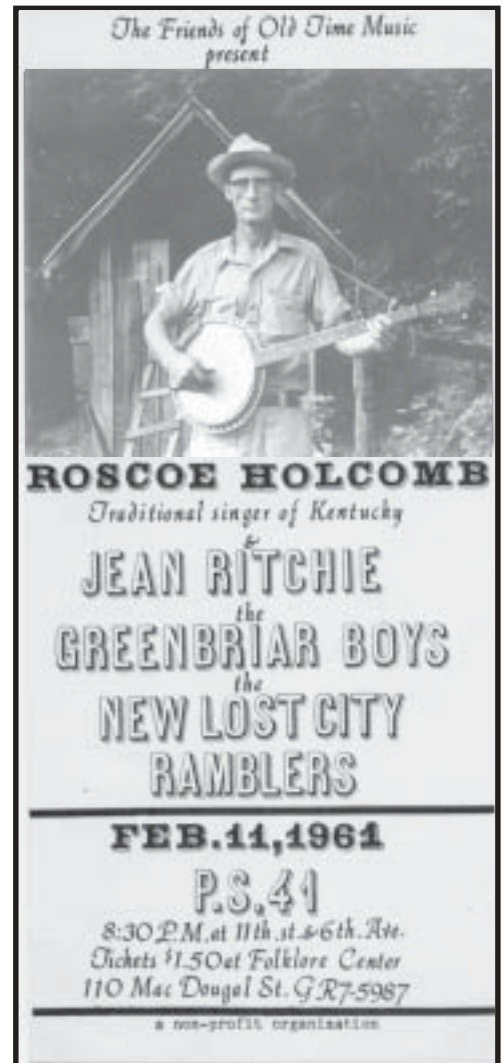
Staging the Folk: New York City's Friends of Old Time Music

by
Ray Allen

The cultural revolution of the Sixties was waiting to happen when Bob Dylan arrived in Greenwich Village in late January 1961. In *Chronicles: Volume One*, he recalls that up and down MacDougal Street one could hear angst-ridden beat poets, modern jazzers, and subversive comedians. But it was Dylan's passion for folk music that drew him to clubs and coffeehouses like the Café Wha?, the Gaslight, Gerdes Folk City, and the Village Gate that were overflowing with musicians eager to carve out a place in the burgeoning folk music revival. There Dylan could hear a wide range of styles that at that time fell under the folk umbrella: the slick arrangements of the Journeymen and the Clancy Brothers; the edgy topical songs of Tom Paxton and Len Chandler; the old left pronouncements of Pete Seeger; the laments of transplanted bluesmen Sonny Terry and John Lee Hooker; and the old-time mountain music and bluegrass styles of the New Lost City Ramblers and the Greenbriar Boys.¹ Dylan would soon leave his own indelible imprint on the revival, alloying traditional country and blues styles with social commentary and abstract poetry to produce a potent sound that would seduce the baby boom generation.

But Dylan wasn't the only new arrival in the Village during the winter of 1961. In March the *New York Times* music critic Robert Shelton announced that "Five farmers from the Blue Ridge Mountains brought a ripe harvest of traditional music to the city Saturday night."² The farmers turned out to be a group of unknown mountain musicians led by Tennessee banjoist Clarence Ashley and featuring the blind guitar virtuoso Arthel "Doc" Watson. The concert, held at P.S. 41 in Greenwich Village, was sponsored by a loosely knit organization of urban folk enthusiasts with the down-home moniker the Friends of Old Time Music (FOTM), a group Shelton characterized as "a sort of Anglicized, folk-oriented Pro Music Antiqua." A month prior to the Ashley/Watson presentation the FOTM had staged their inaugural concert with Kentucky banjoist and songster Roscoe Holcomb, and over the next four years would sponsor performances by an array of country, blues, and spiritual singers. FOTM artists Mother Maybelle Carter, Dock Boggs, Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, Almeda Riddle, Mississippi John Hurt, Fred McDowell, Gus Cannon, and Bessie Jones, along with the aforementioned Ashley, Watson, and Holcomb, would become heroes to urban folkies who favored homegrown southern styles over the sanitized commercial folk music that had reached a national audience in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The FOTM was the brainchild of urban folk musicians John Cohen and Ralph Rinzler, with the advice and support of musicians Mike Seeger and Jean Ritchie, square dance teacher Margaret Mayo, and folk music



Friends of Old Time Music Concert Flyer
Photo and flyer design by John Cohen

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Staging the Folk (continued)

promoter Izzy Young.³ Cohen and Seeger performed with the New Lost City Ramblers, a trio specializing in southern mountain music learned from old records and field recordings. Rinzler played with the New York-based Greenbriar Boys, one of the first and most influential northern bluegrass bands. All three were city-bred, but had traveled to the Appalachian Mountains in recent years to discover and record traditional mountain music that would be released on Moe Asch's Folkways label. The purpose of the organization, as Cohen, Young, and Rinzler reported to readers of *Sing Out!*, was to pay tribute to the rural musicians who were the "original source" upon which the urban folk revival was built.⁴ Urban audiences who had heard only recordings and city interpreters of traditional styles were ready, the FOTM organizers believed, to experience "the real thing" in person.

Of course this was not the first time urbane New Yorkers had been directly exposed to southern folk artists. Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Aunt Molly Jackson, Josh White, and Jean Ritchie had been part of the city's musical fabric since the 1930s, but they had settled in New York and developed their own careers and cosmopolitan ways. John Hammond's legendary 1938 Spirituals to Swing Concert had included rural blues and spirituals singers, and Alan Lomax's 1946 and 1947 Town Hall midnight concerts and his Carnegie Hall "Folksong '59" show had introduced a variety of blues, spiritual, and hillbilly performers to midtown audiences.⁵ But the FOTM brought the sound of raw rural music to New York at a pivotal moment when folk music was blossoming into a national fad and growing numbers of urban players were eagerly searching for authentic roots music untainted by commercialism or artsy affectations.

Perceptions of "authenticity" were key to the FOTM project, and they found a powerful ally in Shelton. In an attempt to differentiate the FOTM's farmer musicians from their more polished and professional city counterparts, he described them as purveyors of "real folk music, without any personal or commercial axes to grind." They were utterly "down-to-earth" performers whose music had "the well-worn quality of fine antiques, a rut and a scratch here and there only heightening the character of a family heirloom." In a provocative move to reveal the sublime aesthetic power of such unadulterated folk traditions, Shelton went so far as to compare the interplay of Ashley's banjo and Watson's guitar on a plaintive ballad to "fine chamber music."⁶

In retrospect it is clear that claims of pure authenticity by Shelton and the FOTM organizers involved a degree of hyperbole, for with the exception of Roscoe Holcomb, all of the FOTM performers had made commercial recordings, appeared on southern radio broadcasts, and performed on stage within (and in some cases outside) their home communities. John Cohen, whose poster for the March 1961 FOTM concert was the source of the Shelton's description of the Ashley/Watson entourage as "farmers," later admitted that:

There was a misconception about Clarence Ashley by many of us who had heard him originally on the 1952 Folkways *Anthology of American Folk Music* LP. Here is this man with an incredible, high, clean voice, carrying on with great naiveté the purity of this music, the Appalachian sound. And this old guy comes out on stage, snapping his suspenders—he was a Vaudeville entertainer—in that tradition. And then we found out he had done blackfaced comedy. He was a great entertainer, but we couldn't cast him in the mold of the pure mountaineer, when the pure mountaineer wasn't so pure.⁷

Yet at the time Cohen and Shelton did position Ashley and the others as exemplars of pure tradition, in a conscious move to present them as an alternative to the commercial city folk music that, to their minds and tastes, lacked cultural and aesthetic credibility.

FOTM's attempts to present white mountain musicians in the heat of the civil rights movement to a progressive New York City audience steeped in the leftist folk song tradition of Guthrie and Seeger proved politically sticky. John Cohen recalls a group of young students hanging out at Izzy Young's MacDougal Street Folklore Center in early June 1961 wondering out loud if the upcoming FOTM concert would showcase "those southern white guys in the white sheets." When the March 1961 Ashley/Watson program ended with all the participants singing a powerful rendition of "Amazing Grace," Cohen observed that the secular, heavily Jewish audience was deeply moved at what some New Yorkers might have viewed as a display of redneck Bible-thumping. Later he realized:

The act of finding linkages between people who would otherwise be opposed to one another was interesting and political. We were putting our stamp of approval on these white guys who [whose culture] until that time had been stereotyped as racists, lynchers, and all those nightmarish things about the South. We were trying to turn Ashley and Watson and the Stanleys into real people, and I thought this was a good thing—acknowledging those people and their culture was political. . . . We were looking for deeply human, positive connections rather than confrontations.⁸

The FOTM was an almost exclusively white organization, and one that seemed to have no overt political agenda with regard to race and the civil rights movement. Its members were, however, aware and appreciative enough of southern black folk music to include African American performers on many of their programs. Their June 1963 concert featured three African American singers, jug-band legend Gus Cannon, and Memphis bluesmen Furry Lewis and Willie Borum. In October of the previous year the FOTM had

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ISAM Matters

Our condolences to the family and friends of **Charles Wolfe**, who passed away in February of this year. Charles was a long-time contributor to this Newsletter and his insightful commentary on country and gospel music will be sorely missed. His remarkable career and prodigious scholarship are recounted by colleague and co-author Kip Lornell on page 13 of this issue.

On a brighter note, ISAM's Spring 2006 **Music in Polycultural America** colloquium series opened with a lecture and solo performance by Brooklyn's legendary pianist and composer **Randy Weston**. Weston, who turns eighty this year, will receive an honorary doctorate from Brooklyn College in June (see page 4). The series continued with a talk on John Cage and his attitudes toward sound recordings by Brooklyn College's newest American music specialist **David Grubbs**, and a film screening and discussion of the urban folk music revival by **John Cohen** of the New Lost City Ramblers. Finally, Brooklyn College's **Ray Allen** and **George Cunningham** discussed the politics of interracial collaboration in George Gershwin's folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*. Thanks to the Ethyle R. Wolfe Institute for the Humanities and the Cerf Fund for their continued support of our speaker series.

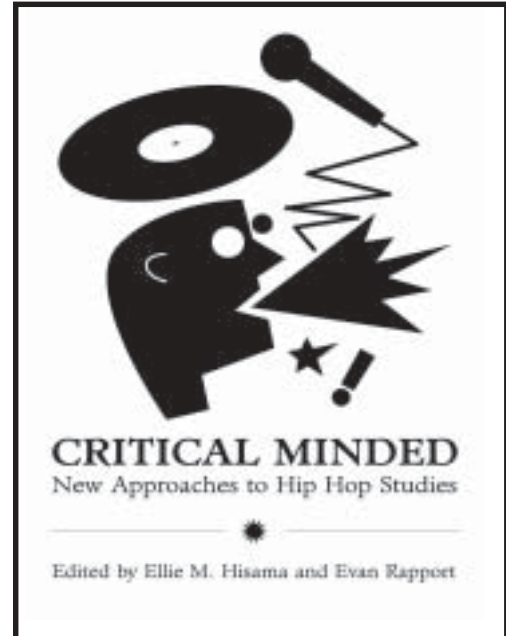
Our congratulations to Brooklyn College's world renowned composer **Tania León** for being awarded the rank of Distinguished Professor this spring. We look forward to her new recording due out in fall 2006 on Bridge Records. Kudos also to our own **Jeff Taylor** for completing *Earl "Fatha" Hines: Selected Piano Solos, 1928-1941*, now available from A-R Editions as part of their *Music of the United States of America (MUSA)* series.

Former ISAM director **Carol Oja** will be co-hosting the festival **Leonard Bernstein: Boston to Broadway**, at Harvard University, 12-14 October 2006. Noted scholars, critics, Bernstein family members, and artists including director Harold Prince, actor/dancer Chita Rivera, music director Rob Fisher, singer Marni Nixon, and choreographers Kathleen Marshall and Donald Saddler will participate in the celebration. Events will include concerts, panel discussions, master classes, film screenings, and exhibitions of Bernstein photographs and memorabilia with a special focus on the Boston cultural and education communities in which Bernstein was raised. For more information visit www.bernsteinatharvard.org.

ISAM and Citylore will be co-sponsoring a conference and concert in honor of the forty-fifth anniversary of the founding of **New York City's Friends of Old Time Music**, and the release of three CDs of the FOTM's early 1960s folk music concerts by Smithsonian Folkways. See Ray Allen's cover story for an account of the organization's contributions to the folk music revival, and visit our website, www.bcisam.org, for more on the conference currently being planned for 18 November 2006 at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City.

—Ray Allen

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Celebrating Randy Weston

Honoring a Brooklyn Son

ISAM is delighted to announce that on 1 June 2006 pianist and composer Randy Weston, one of the music world's greatest treasures, will be receiving an honorary doctorate from Brooklyn College. He will be joined on the dais by Arturo O'Farrill, another sought-after pianist and Director of Lincoln Center's Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra, who will be receiving a Distinguished Alumnus Award. The preceding evening, Brooklyn College president Christoph Kimmich will welcome both pianists, along with Salim Washington and members of the Brooklyn College Jazz Ensemble, for a special invitation-only concert and cabaret.

Celebrating Weston is especially appropriate this year, as he has reached his eightieth birthday (he was born the same year as both Miles Davis and John Coltrane) and shows no signs of slowing down. As he has put it with characteristic humor: "I plan to celebrate my birthday all year long." The festivities got off to a brilliant start on 12 and 14 January 2006 with two concerts at Long Island University's Kumble Theater in downtown Brooklyn, both events sponsored by Brooklyn-based presenting organization 651 Arts. For the first concert, in an intimate setting where he was surrounded by the audience onstage, Weston showed why he is one of the few jazz pianists today who can sustain an entire evening of solo piano (his mastery of this demanding art form is further proved by 2002's brilliant "Ancient-Future," released with his 1984 solo recording *Blue*). In the second concert, Weston was joined by longtime compatriots Alex Blake on bass, percussionist Neil Clarke, and trombonist Benny Powell, as well as a variety of musicians from around the world: a Senegalese kora master, a virtuoso on the Chinese pipa, and, perhaps most importantly, Cuban conga legend Candido (Camero), himself eighty-five years young. Typically, in the latter concert, Weston seemed as much listener as participant, delighting in watching and hearing his fellow musicians honor him. They, in return, showed him a combination of love and respect that added an intangible, almost mystical aura to the proceedings.

On 14 February, as part of ISAM's Speaker Series, Weston performed a solo concert of his own works here at Brooklyn College, and engaged in an informal dialogue with the audience. He was honored afterwards with a piano-shaped red velvet cake from Brooklyn's legendary Cake Man Raven, and a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday," with our own Distinguished Professor Tania León on piano.

It is especially fitting that Weston will be honored by an institution that bears the name of his birthplace, for the vibrant cultural scene of Brooklyn—where he still makes his home—has always remained a crucial force in his art. One hopes that this celebration will encourage others to investigate Brooklyn's rich

jazz history and continuing vibrant musical life—one quite distinct from that of its more famous neighboring borough.

(Note: For a detailed study of Brooklyn's jazz scene, see Robin Kelley's piece in our Spring 2004 issue.)

—Jeff Taylor

Randy Weston and Brooklyn's African Village

In 1992 pianist and composer Randy Weston explained the genesis of one of his original works on *The Spirits of Our Ancestors* CD, "African Village Bedford-Stuyvesant":

African Village Bedford-Stuyvesant is that part of Brooklyn where I grew up as a boy. It was the most popular part because that's where most of the clubs were, the ballrooms. . . . So this song is just a description of that special community of Black people from different parts of the world—from the Caribbean, from the southern part of the United States, from the West. For me it was like an African Village despite the fact that it was located in Brooklyn, New York.¹

The "African Village" is a suitable metaphor for Weston's musical approach, as he envisions the village in global terms, encompassing the entire African diaspora, from Morocco to Bed-Stuy. Weston has lived in both places, but now spends most of his time in New York.

Weston's introduction to music was rather inauspicious: it involved piano lessons reluctantly taken at his parents' behest that he later likened to "forced labor." Fortunately, he endured them and soon became immersed in Brooklyn's unique jazz world of the 1930s and 1940s. This nurturing environment was key to Weston's development, as the borough was brimming with musicians and places to hear live performances. Brooklyn's "African Village" was the perfect setting to coax a reluctant teenager to move beyond private study and actually become part of the music scene. Weston recalled some of the musicians and clubs in a 1970 interview with Art Taylor in *Notes and Tones*:

At one time, the jazz in Brooklyn was unbelievable. We had Tony's, we had the Baby Grand on Sunday afternoons. Lem Davis and I used to give concerts and we would feature Monk, Bennie Green, and J. J. Johnson in the early forties. The Putnam Central was the spot because everybody was there: Dizzy, Miles, Leo Parker, John Lewis, Milt Jackson.²

Weston credits the sounds of Duke Ellington and Count Basie with shaping his musical approach, but Thelonious Monk was his major early influence. Weston recalls informal lessons at Monk's apartment, where he and often a few fellow musicians would gather to sit wordlessly and listen to the master play for hours on end.



Randy Weston
Photograph by Ariane Smolderen

Randy Weston (continued)

“Monk was the one that really reached me because of his sound. He put the magic, for me, into the music. For me, his music is very natural, very logical, a combination of both,” Weston remembered in a recent interview.³ Part of what impressed him was that Monk “didn’t have to play a lot of notes.” Like his mentor, Weston generally prefers a few well-timed pitches or chords, often percussive and syncopated—with the occasional Monkesque blue note thrown in—rather than a volley of sound.

The diasporic crossroads that Brooklyn is today mirrors Weston’s musical approach, which he calls “African Rhythms”—the same name he uses for his ensemble. Weston is ambivalent about the label “jazz,” which he feels isn’t comprehensive enough to fully describe the music he makes. In 1970, Weston told Art Taylor:

Today the word *jazz* doesn’t describe what’s going on in music. Music has become more modern, more rhythmic. It’s more influenced by modern classical music. I think music now has become more personalized. I have been searching for a title to describe my own music and I thought of African Rhythms. Because I play calypso, I play jazz, I play spirituals, I play Latin, and I play African music. So how can anybody just call me a jazz musician? What I do is use the root of all this music, which is Africa and the rhythms of Africa.⁴

It seems Weston’s philosophy hasn’t changed very much; he answered a question about African/hip hop musical connections directed to him at a recent Brooklyn College performance by referring to the African basis for the rhythms used in both.

Weston, the child of a Panamanian father and African American mother, absorbed both musical and non-musical influences from his parents. His father was a follower of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, known for its attempts to return blacks to Africa and also for its pan-African goal of creating a spiritual connection between Africans scattered across the globe, and he would remind young Randy of his African roots and the need to study his heritage, despite his home in the United States. From his mother, Weston received “the black church and the blues.”⁵ As a result, Weston’s sound is crafted from a variety of sources: “cultural memory ... of the black church, of going to calypso dances, dancing to people like the Duke of Iron, of going to the Palladium and hearing the Latin music.”⁶ His comments reflect the ability of African Rhythms, culled from the experience of the cultural mash-up created every time Africa’s descendants encountered another culture, to transform and yet survive.

Weston’s pan-Africanist approach is one that resonates throughout his music and life. From his classic 1960 recording *Uhuru Africa!*, issued a year before he would travel to the motherland for the first time and recently re-released as part of a boxed set by Mosaic Select, through his 2006 CD on Random Chance Records, *Zep Tepi*, African themes, melodies, and rhythms permeate Weston’s work. A number of his compositions, including “Blue Moses” and “African Cookbook,” have become jazz standards in their own right, and are based on traditional sacred tunes. “Blue Moses” is based on a Gnawa sacred melody, but is a good example of the deeper African musical connection. Weston explains that “[t]he Gnawa believe that every person has a color

and a note. Blue happens to be the color of the saint of whom this song is about, thus Blue Moses. Blue is also the color that I responded to at a Gnawa ceremony.”⁷ *Zep Tepi* is Weston’s return to the trio format, a staple of his early career, joined by musicians who are now regular sidemen in Weston’s “African Rhythms” ensembles, Neil Clarke (bass) and Alex Blake (African percussion). Other *Zep Tepi* tracks offer versions of familiar Weston tunes, including “High Fly” and “The Healer,” and pieces composed, appropriately enough, as tributes to his father (“Portrait of Frank Edward Weston”) and Thelonious Monk (“Ballad for T”). As a whole, *Zep Tepi* has a sound that is often contemplative and introspective, taking advantage of the space allowed by the trio format.

Weston’s other major project this year is a historic reunion with the Gnawa Master Musicians of Morocco, recreating a 1999 collaboration captured on the live *Spirit! The Power of Music* CD (Sunny Side) and documenting the influence of Gnawan music on him when he lived in Morocco in the early 1970s. In *A Night in Tunisia: Imaginings of Africa in Jazz*, Norman Weinstein comments on the difficulty faced by artists like Weston in creating Afrocentric music. Weston has attempted to meld cultures through his inventiveness and imagination, creating in the process what Weinstein calls an “intercultural weave based upon a profound respect for the complexity of music East and West,” resulting in a “hybrid synthesis [that] does not reduce two [musical] languages to a lowest common denominator.”⁸ Through study, observation, and practice, Weston has been able to bridge the divide between Brooklyn and Africa, offering a synthesis of styles and flavors that honors the entire diasporic legacy while allowing each tradition to stand on its own as a distinct part of a unified whole. The tour with the Gnawan musicians is a fitting direction for Weston to take, as so much of his career and life have followed the West African concept of *sankofa*: the idea that one needs to recapture and understand the past for the strength and wisdom necessary to move into the future.

—Hank Williams
The Graduate Center, CUNY

Notes

¹ Randy Weston, *The Spirits of Our Ancestors*. CD insert booklet. Polygram Records, 1992.

² Arthur Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician to Musician Interviews* (Da Capo Press, 1993), 20.

³ Fred Jung, “A Fireside Chat with Randy Weston.” All About Jazz website (http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article_print.php?id=386), accessed 4 February 2006.

⁴ Taylor, *Notes and Tones*, 29.

⁵ Elzy Kolb, “Randy Weston, Still Feeling the Pulse of African Rhythms,” *New York Times* (22 July 2001, Westchester Weekly, Section 14WC): 10.

⁶ Jung, “A Fireside Chat.”

⁷ Weston, *Spirits of Our Ancestors* booklet.

⁸ Norman C. Weinstein, *A Night in Tunisia: Imaginings of Africa in Jazz* (Scarecrow Press, 1992), 114.

“The Jew who Buried Hitler”: Music and Identity in Mel Brooks’s *The Producers*

As of December 2005, Mel Brooks’s *The Producers* has three incarnations: the original 1968 film, the 2001 Broadway hit *The Producers: The New Mel Brooks Musical*, and the 2005 film of the musical. The working title of the last, *The Producers: The Movie Musical*, and that of the Broadway version, indicate Brooks’s fascination with genre and his delight in parody. In addition, as with his earlier spoof-movies, *History of the World, Part I* (1981) and *Blazing Saddles* (1974), Brooks wraps serious social matters in humor. The aim of *The Producers*, however, to posthumously humiliate Adolf Hitler, creating catharsis through laughter, is more personal to Brooks as a Jewish American in the post-Holocaust world. Brooks’s scores for all three versions are critical to the success of his parody, for the music and dance sequences allow him to walk successfully the fine line between tragedy and comedy. Moreover, his clever use of Jewish and African American topics lies at the nexus of two subtexts central to *The Producers*: the Black-Jewish dialogue and the Jewish assimilation narrative.¹ Many of Brooks’s films feature ostensibly Jewish protagonists who are assisted by African American “side-kicks” (*Blazing Saddles* highlights this relationship by reversing the model). In *The Producers* the black musical topics—references to the blues, swing and certain dance styles—function as the unseen (but heard) African American sidekick in Brooks’s attack on Hitler via his Jewish avatars, Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom.

The climax of the story comes with the success of Bialystock and Bloom’s musical *Springtime for Hitler*, which they produced in an intentional attempt to engineer a Broadway flop. In each version African American topics are featured at this moment. The music, choreography, and lavish staging of the title number all serve to satirize the Third Reich’s similarities to show business. Although much of the humor comes from references to Broadway conventions—the Busby-Berkeley style choreography and blonde chorus girls reminiscent of Ziegfeld’s Follies—African American idioms are employed as well. At one point the Nazi soldiers tap-dance, an unexpected performance made all the more remarkable by its roots in blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville. In the 2001 adaptation of “Springtime for Hitler” for the Broadway stage, an interpolated solo for Hitler himself, called “Heil to Me,” makes copious reference to swing. The orchestration of the number emphasizes clarinet, saxophone, and brass and the alternation between Hitler’s cries of “Heil myself!” and the chorus sounds like the accelerating call-and-response between horn sections in a big band shout chorus. Although swing and tap-dancing were popularized by white performers, Brooks demonstrates an awareness of their black origins. The lyrics to the swinging “Haben Sie gehört das deutsche Band?” reference Duke Ellington’s “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got that Swing),” and in *Blazing Saddles* it is Count Basie’s band that visibly accompanies the black sheriff’s ride into town. In short, “Springtime for Hitler” evokes, in both its screen and stage versions, the sounds and images

of the American musical comedy in its heyday, with its roots in African American music clearly showing.

In the first film, however, black topics play an even more critical role in the character assassination of Hitler. In the 1968 version of *Springtime for Hitler* the dictator first appears after the opening number in a private interlude with Eva Braun, during which he works out his military strategy through an improvised blues.

He accompanies himself on piano with a walking bass and the harmony and vocal melody follow the twelve-bar blues progression. Moreover, the lyrics have the same AAB verse form as the blues and feature traces of jive-talk, which, in addition to his scattling, neutralize through comedic effect the sinister overtones of the accompanying “Sieg Heils.” This reference to a quintessentially black idiom is what inspires the first laughter from the audience, turning Bialystock and Bloom’s hoped-for failure into a success. Brooks’s mission, though, is

accomplished. As he pointed out in a 2001 interview after his own Broadway success, “if you stand on a soapbox and trade rhetoric with a dictator you never win . . . but if you ridicule them, bring them down with laughter—they can’t win.”² Brooks clearly sees Bialystock and Bloom as his representatives—“Max and Leo are me, the ego and id of my personality”—and through them, with the aid of African American topics, he has laid low the most sinister figure in history.³

The Producers, then, is also part of the Black-Jewish dialogue that has shaped American popular music since the early twentieth century. From its earliest roots in Tin Pan Alley, the music of show business was not only created and performed largely by Jewish men and women, but also, as Jeffrey Melnick illustrates, “depended on African American music.”⁴ Regardless of whether one agrees that Jewish Americans had “a right to sing the blues,” popular songwriters like Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, and George Gershwin, among others, made frequent use of black musical topics, particularly the blues. Kern’s insertion of a twelve-bar blues in “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” to characterize the mulatto Julie in *Show Boat* (1927) and Gershwin’s blues-inflected score for the opera *Blue Monday* (1922) are just two examples of this kind of musical blackface, which had been a part of popular music for decades. Moreover, as literal blackface did for actors like Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, these references bind Jews and African Americans together, even though the history of this relationship in American popular culture has been, and continues to be, a complicated one.

Brooks, at least, carefully emphasizes the supportive and positive aspect of the Black-Jewish bond. In *History of the World*, he casts Gregory Hines as a slave for sale in a Roman market who attempts to save himself from the Coliseum first by



Gene Wilder and Zero Mostel in
The Producers (1968)

The Producers (continued)

entertaining the crowd with a soft-shoe and, when that fails, by declaring himself to be a Jew, since “lions only eat Christians.” In addition, Brooks updates his use of African American topics from the blues and tap-dancing of his earlier films to a rap performance by the polemical comic Dave Chapelle in *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (1997). Each time he engages the Black-Jewish dialogue Brooks does his best to maintain the agency of both sides.

However, *The Producers* is ultimately an expression of Jewish American identity, enabled by Jewish and African American topics. In *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, Andrea Most outlines the Jewish assimilation narrative implicit in early musical comedies and which continued to more subtly influence plotlines into the postwar decades. Many Jewish Americans used the Broadway musical as a vehicle for “self-fashioning” and Brooks recalls this narrative in the characterization of Leo Bloom, who harbors a “secret desire” to remake himself as a Broadway producer.⁵ Bloom’s first solo in the 2001 stage production, “I Wanna Be a Producer,” frames his struggle with invocations of Jewish dance music and the blues. The song opens with a clichéd *shtetl tanz* (a stereotypical style of dance associated with Eastern-European Jewish villages, or *shtetls*) in D minor, complete with klezmer modal inflections, sung by the accountants at Bloom’s firm. This dour sound is elided with a fragment of the blues through a wailing clarinet solo emphasizing the lowered third. An African American accountant then steps forward singing in “Old Man River” style: “Oh I debits all de mornin’ and I credits all de ebenin’ until dem ledgers be right.” Bloom’s apotheosis is completed in a dance interlude that features him performing a soft-shoe, as well as dancing the lindy with one of the chorus girls to pounding tomtoms and jungle noises reminiscent of Ellington’s arrangements for the Cotton Club. The fusion of Jewish and African American topics makes Bloom one of many Jewish Americans, both real and fictional, to fashion themselves as American through Broadway and the appropriation of African American idioms.

As the other half of Brooks’s personality, Max Bialystock already views himself as an inheritor of the Jewish American tradition of the Broadway musical. In his solo “King of Broadway” from the 2001 stage production, there is another *shtetl tanz*, this time in C-sharp minor, and the solo played by a blind violinist features the raised fourth scale degree typical of the klezmer mode *Mi Sheberach*, an altered version of the Western Dorian mode. Moreover, as Bialystock recounts the last words of Boris Thomashevsky in the patter section, he is accompanied by a violin *doina* (a virtuosic klezmer improvisation) over a pedal on hammer dulcimer (another klezmer instrument). By associating himself with Thomashevsky, the great impresario of Yiddish theatre at the turn of the twentieth century, Bialystock positions himself as heir to New York’s Jewish tradition and Broadway in particular. Clearly, Brooks is also declaring himself the “King of Broadway,” a title rightfully claimed given the record twelve Tony Awards garnered by *The Producers: The New Mel Brooks Musical*.

The singing performance of the African American accountant and the entirety of “King of Broadway” are notably absent in the latest film version of *The Producers*. For timing, the removal of “King of Broadway” was only prudent, since it does not advance

the plot and might seem redundant since Bialystock’s Jewish identity is readily apparent without musical elaboration. In addition, the number would lack the irony on film that it had on the stage of the St. James Theatre. *The Producers* in its Broadway form is a brilliant postmodern pastiche, endlessly referential and self-referential, and overtly conscious of its own mechanisms (Ulla, at one point, asks Bloom why he has moved “so far stage right”) and the conventions of the genre. The original blues reference in the Broadway version of “I Wanna Be a Producer” is no more than twenty-five seconds long, too short for its absence in the 2005 film version to be a matter of editing for time, and the African American accountant (though silent) still appears on screen. It seems unlikely that Brooks would remove this passage for the sake of political correctness since the rest of the movie musical is still provocative, highly inappropriate, and thus funny. Rather, the original blues reference in “I Wanna Be a Producer” operates in a similar fashion to “King of Broadway”: in the stage production it is a reference to early musical theatre that would not be understood the same way outside the context of the Broadway musical. In any case, the intersection of African American topics and the Jewish assimilation narrative remains central to all three versions of *The Producers*.

The critical success of the *The Producers: The New Mel Brooks Musical* contrasts sharply with the box-office failure of the original film and subsequent relegation to the status of cult classic.⁶ Perhaps between 1968 and the present the cultural work that Brooks intended to do with his first film has been accomplished: we are now able to laugh at Hitler. In this sense Brooks has fashioned his own identity as, in the words of one critic, “the Jew who buried Hitler.”⁷ Moreover, the last two versions of *The Producers* also re-contextualize the Jewish assimilation narrative and parody the close association of American Jews with the black musics that influenced American popular song and the genre of the Broadway musical. Brooks’s spoofing implies a critical commentary as well, forcing us to engage with the clichés and appropriations he uses for comic effect. *The Producers* stands as his most recent contribution to the fraught but continuing Black-Jewish dialogue.

—Katherine Baber
Indiana University

Notes

¹ The term “topic” is borrowed from the work of Leonard Ratner, Kofi Agawu, and Robert Hatten and is defined as “a complex musical correlation originating in a kind of music.” See Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Indiana University Press, 1994), 294. In other words, a topic is a reference to a particular musical style and, in this case, topics have racial and ethnic associations as well.

² Nancy Shute, “Mel Brooks,” *U.S. News and World Report* (20 August 2001).

³ Sam Kasher, “Producing the Producers,” *Vanity Fair* (January 2004).

⁴ Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews and American Popular Song* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 18.

⁵ Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 11.

⁶ The 2005 film was only moderately successful at the box office and earned four Golden Globe nominations.

⁷ Robert Brustein, “The Jew Who Buried Hitler,” *New Republic* 224, No. 22 (28 May 2001).

In Search of Aaron Copland

Not that Copland is missing; his music seems to be everywhere these days. College students in my introduction-to-classical-music classes, shifting with the sands of popular culture, actually recognize some Copland. In addition to the classic “Simple Gifts” variations from *Appalachian Spring*, pieces like *Fanfare for the Common Man* and “Hoedown” from *Rodeo* are now on their musical radar, thanks to television commercials by the U. S. Navy Recruitment Office and National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, respectively. Without prodding from me, students agree that Copland is the classical composer whose music sounds most American.

Copland’s death in 1990 and the centennial of his birth in 2000 prompted glowing festivals, remembrances, and documentaries, but also encouraged a scholarly Copland literature. Copland’s autobiography, with Vivian Perlis (1984, 1989), Howard Pollack’s superb biography of the composer (1999), and the housing of the Aaron Copland Collection in the Music Division of the Library of Congress have established a new baseline of research. To these fine efforts must be added *Aaron Copland and His World*, edited by Carol J. Oja and Judith Tick (Princeton University Press, 2005; \$22.95).

Oja and Tick’s reader is the latest in a remarkable series of composer-and-world books dating back to Walter Frisch’s 1990 edited volume, *Brahms and His World*, published by Princeton and connected with the Bard Music Festival. The reader seeks Copland—famously private, graciously accommodating—in different contexts, even on different stages, each discussed in one of the book’s seven sections: nuanced biographical sketches (“Scanning a Life”), cultural studies (“Copland’s Greater Cultural World”), correspondence with Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Berger (“Copland’s Inner Circle”), analysis (“Analytic Perspectives”), Copland’s brushes with politics (“Political Edges”), Copland as musical spokesman (“Copland and His Public”), and finally, a wise appraisal of Copland’s legacy (“Reconfiguring Copland’s World”) by Leon Botstein, the guiding force behind the Bard Festivals.

One might expect the most direct way to Copland, “a careful person with a reticence about overt displays of emotion or speaking about himself” as Perlis writes (156), would be through biography and letters. Howard Pollack’s essay, “Copland and the Prophetic Voice,” suggests that Copland’s “voice” was not so much Jewish as one with Old Testament “prophetic resonance,” the musical consequences of which fall into five characters: declamatory, idyllic, agitated, sardonic, and visionary. Pollack hears Copland’s music channeling “Hebraic” ideas into a bigger, all-encompassing Americanism. Martin Brody, in “Founding Sons: Copland, Sessions, and Berger on Genealogy and Hybridity,” compares Copland’s autobiographical sketch “Composer from Brooklyn”

(1939) to passages from the composer’s *Music and Imagination* (1952) and the Perlis chronicles. Brody suggests Copland chose his musical heritage and created his own musical past. Moreover, Brody compares the “national” voice of Copland and Roy Harris (“immigrant” cosmopolitanism) to the “universal” voice of Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, and Samuel Barber (“exile” cosmopolitanism) (24). Embedded in Brody’s search and comparison is a brief and insightful discussion of Copland’s chord-spacing and his use of the triad as a molecular building block, often released from its past tonal hierarchy.

Wayne Shirley presents with deft commentary the entire Copland-Berger correspondence.¹ Berger seems to have written more to Copland than the reverse, and Copland’s correspondence is carefully measured. The same may be said for his letters in the Copland-Bernstein correspondence, selections of which are printed with commentary by Perlis. Bernstein, grabbing the center of attention, seems to overwhelm the older composer.²

Other essays follow different search tactics. Emily Abrams prints a catalogue of Copland’s appearances on television—in interviews and documentaries—beginning in 1958. She also transcribes a television show, “Aaron Copland Meets the Soviet Composers” (WGBH, Boston, 1959), in which moderators Copland and Nicolas Slonimsky politely discuss American and Soviet music with a group that included composers Dmitry Kabalevsky and Dmitry Shostakovich and musicologist Boris Yarustovsky. The Russians seemed most concerned about the “twin evils” of jazz and serialism (381). Melissa de Graaf’s edited transcript (by Gisella R. Silverman) of a post-concert discussion between Copland and the audience at a New York City Composers’ Forum concert in 1937 shows the composer fending off questions on jazz, music and society, modernism and dissonance, Gershwin, and politics.

Two excellent essays in the reader analyze Copland’s music, perhaps the best place to find the composer: Larry Starr’s strong prose analysis (“War Drums, Tolling Bells”) of the *Piano Sonata* (1939-1941), and Elliott Antokoletz’s discussion of *Appalachian Spring* and *Billy the Kid* (“Copland’s Gift to Be Simple within the Cumulative Mosaic Complexities of His Ballets”). Antokoletz compares Copland to Bartók and Stravinsky, all three absorbing folk tunes into a contemporary musical language: tune cell curlicues, off-center ostinatos, and “varied cyclic repetition” (the-same-but-different), subjecting folk tunes to expansion, contraction, rearrangement, and superimposition. The planed and layered phrases of Copland’s ballets created mosaics of sound (quilts, even), revealing a profound “gift for combining the clear and simple melodic surfaces of American folk idioms with complex phrase and period interactions” (273).



Aaron Copland, 1933
Photograph by Ralph Steiner

Aaron Copland (continued)

Many of the authors approach Copland through cultural studies. Paul Anderson writes about the influence of André Gide on Copland, whose library (housed in the Library of Congress) contains thirty books by Gide. Anderson focuses especially on Gide's *Corydon*, Copland's personal copy of which contains the composer's many marginal notes, a book that "provided a logical framework within which homosexuality could be acceptable and even desirable" (55). Dance historian Lynn Garafola discusses Copland's collaborations with Ruth Page (*Hear Ye! Hear Ye!*), Eugene Loring (*Billy the Kid*), Agnes de Mille (*Rodeo*), and Martha Graham (*Appalachian Spring*)—in short, the foundations of modern American ballet. Art historian Gail Levin draws affinities between Copland's music and Mexican modernism in music and the visual arts by addressing the works of Diego Rivera, Carlos Chávez, Miguel Covarrubias, Silvestre Revueltas, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and others. Cultural historian Morris Dickstein discusses "Copland and American Populism in the 1930s," showing the composer and other American artists fusing modernism and populism in music, film, journalism, literature, and the visual arts. Beth E. Levy's essay, "From Orient to Occident: Aaron Copland and the Sagas of the Prairies," posits *Music for Radio* (1937) as pivotal in the reception of Copland's music in the late 1930s and 1940s, helping "reconfigure Copland's reputation, making him appear less 'Jewish' and more 'American'" (316-317). Neil Lerner discusses the Copland score for the documentary film *The Cummington Story* (1945), produced by the Office of War Information, about the Cummington (Massachusetts) Refugee Hotel for European war refugees.

Finally, Elizabeth B. Crist, in her essay "Copland and the Politics of Americanism," and more fully in her recent book *Music for the Common Man* (Oxford University Press, 2005), weaves together the music, culture, and politics of the 1930s and 1940s. She carefully explains Copland's relationship with the left—"the Communist movement (if not the Party) and ... left-wing politics more generally" (278)—that culminated in the composer's appearance before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1953. Crist surveys the political inferences in such Copland compositions as *Music for the Theatre* (1925), *Statements* (1935), *Lincoln Portrait* (1942), and *The Tender Land* (1954) concluding: "Separately, these pieces stand as specific examples of Copland's progressive politics as expressed in his music. Together, they advance a liberal, pluralistic notion of musical Americanism" (279). Although Crist draws a compelling and detailed background, Copland's exact role in it eludes. Indeed, sometimes Crist may overstate her case. She suggests the sly quote of "Sidewalks of New York" in the second movement of *Music for the Theatre* implies Copland's "defense of cultural pluralism" (284); its appearance in *Statements* is a "reference [to] the failed promise of Tammany ... as well as the cultural conflicts surrounding [Al] Smith's presidential bid" (287). ("Sidewalks" was Smith's campaign song.) Even Crist acknowledges that Copland's careful modesty and privacy make him difficult to pin down: he "speaks with an identifiably

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American Opera: An Evening with James P. Johnson

Composer and pianist James Price Johnson (1894-1955) may be one of the most under-appreciated creative minds in American music. Though he has been acknowledged for decades as one of the most important figures in the history of jazz piano, and his popular songs—especially “Charleston,” a virtual anthem for the 1920s—are still part of the national consciousness more than fifty years after his death, his impact on American culture has yet to be fully assessed.

His improvised jazz performances survive in dozens of thrilling recordings (most of which have been reissued on CD), and the songs in sheet music and renditions by legions of jazz performers. Yet like many African American musicians of his generation, Johnson also made forays into compositional forms more strongly aligned with the European concert hall. And as is suggested from his own comments made in a 1953 conversation with Tom Davin (the entire interview has now been published for the first time in the Italian journal *Musica Oggi*) the impulse came partly from firsthand exposure to the works of great European composers. As a teenager with a strong singing voice, he was once auditioned by Frank Damrosch (brother of Walter) for the chorus in Damrosch’s production of Haydn’s *The Creation*, and he recalled other contact with European art music during his early years in New York:

I used to go to the old New York Symphony concerts; a friend of my brother’s who was a waiter used to get tickets from its conductor, Josef Stransky, who came to the restaurant where he worked. I didn’t get much out of them, but the full symphonic sounds made a great impression on me. That was when I first heard Mozart, Wagner, Von Weber, Meyerbeer, Beethoven and Puccini.¹

It may have been this early exposure to opera, as well as his awareness of Gershwin’s landmark *Porgy and Bess* of 1935, that led him to compose two one-act operas in the late 1930s: *The Dreamy Kid* and *De Organizer*. Of these two, only the latter was ever been performed and then only once (at Carnegie Hall in 1941, under the auspices of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union). The scores survived only in bits and pieces.

In 1997, James Dapogny at the University of Michigan discovered a partial score of *De Organizer* in Michigan’s Eva Jessye Collection (Jessye herself was a well-known African American choral director, who had, among many accomplishments, conducted the choruses in the original *Porgy and Bess* production). With the help of additional material provided by Johnson’s grandson Barry Glover, Dapogny painstakingly pieced together a complete score for *De Organizer*, which was performed at Michigan in a concert version in 2002.

Johnson had always envisioned his two one-act operas performed together in a single evening, and after his restoration of *De Organizer*, Dapogny set to work on *The Dreamy Kid*, for which there existed a partial draft of the entire opera and orchestrations for the first 150 bars of the work, which proved invaluable in gauging Johnson’s intentions for the entire piece.

On 23 and 25 March 2006 at the University of Michigan, both of Johnson’s one-act operas were performed together for the first time, as the composer had always hoped. The event was a remarkable collaboration between Dapogny (who even manned the piano during *De Organizer*), orchestra conductor Kenneth Kiesler and his gifted student ensemble, director Nicolette Molnár, and a superb cast of singers from the Michigan School of Music’s opera program. *The Dreamy Kid*, based on a 1918 play by Eugene O’Neill (there is, incidentally, no evidence Johnson and O’Neill knew each other), was presented first. With a cast of only four singers, this was by far the more complex of the two pieces, with long swathes of

continuous recitative and arioso passages, and few set pieces or identifiable tunes—one exception being a touching lullaby for the bed-ridden character of Mammy, beautifully sung by mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Gray. The work has its shortcomings both in dramatic structure and musical details, where a consistent lack of modulation often creates a monochromatic effect. Yet, the piece shows how well Johnson knew the operatic tradition, and was able to turn it to his own ends. *The Dreamy Kid* is not a “jazz” opera nor a musical theater piece with high-art pretensions, but something unique, with a vocal language all its own. It makes one ponder what Johnson might have been capable of had he enjoyed more financial support and public acknowledgment, and had not been plagued by ill health in his later years.

A rousing performance of *De Organizer*, with its libretto by Langston Hughes, was presented after intermission. Though the subject matter (the ill-fated organization of the early sharecropper’s unions) is serious, the piece is of an entirely different musical character, with tuneful jazz and

blues-based choruses and solo arias, and one set piece (“The Hungry Blues”) that is well known to jazz fans, having been recorded by Johnson in a three-minute version in 1939.

The successful realization of these two pieces owes much to Dapogny’s lifelong love of Johnson’s music, and his experiences as composer, pianist and bandleader working primarily in pre-1940 jazz idioms. Certainly it is hard to imagine anyone better qualified to bring these obscure works to the public. As he told *Detroit Free Press* writer Mark Stryker about his work on *De Organizer*, “I tried to channel James P. Johnson. I don’t hear anything here that I think James P. Johnson couldn’t or wouldn’t have written.”² The result may be quite different than what Johnson actually intended—we’ll most likely never know how he himself would have worked out the complete scores for both pieces—yet the spirit of this great musician was undeniably captured in this wonderful evening, and the presence of Johnson’s daughter and grandson in the audience only added to the occasion. Hopefully the resurrection of these works (and their planned recording) will help audiences appreciate Johnson as far more than “The Father of Stride Piano.”

—Jeff Taylor

Notes

¹ Tom Davin, “Conversations with James P. Johnson,” *Musica Oggi* 23 (2003-04): 73.

² Mark Stryker, “A Giant’s Lost Legacy,” *Detroit Free Press* (1 December 2002).



Minnita Daniel-Cox and Lonel Woods in James P. Johnson’s *The Dreamy Kid*
Photo by Peter Smith, courtesy of University of Michigan Theater and Dance

American Opera: Dreiser's Tragedy Transformed

Composer Tobias Picker and librettist Gene Scheer have created an inspired and gripping opera based on the 1925 Theodore Dreiser novel, *An American Tragedy*. The work was premiered at the Metropolitan Opera on 2 December 2005 and is Picker's fourth opera, following his successful *Emmeline*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, and *Thérèse Raquin*. The opera betrays influences from his former mentors Wuorinen, Carter, and Babbitt, as well as from Gershwin, Barber, Bernstein, Sondheim, and Copland in the more effusively lyrical moments. At times, even tinges of Wagner, Richard Strauss, and Berg appear in its compelling orchestrations. Overall, Picker's music is "easy" on the ears and often melodramatic where it needs to be. Not surprisingly, several critics rank him among the finest Neo-Romantic composers of our time.

This was Gene Scheer's Met debut as librettist. A songwriter as well as lyricist, Scheer has written many acclaimed songs (e.g., "American Anthem" used at President Bush's 2005 inauguration) as well as the libretto for Picker's *Thérèse Raquin*. Word has it Scheer's children's opera *The Star Gatherer* (music by Steven Paulus) will soon be receiving its premiere.

In *An American Tragedy* Scheer and Picker have succeeded in transforming a major American naturalistic novel into an effective two-and-a-half hour musical drama for a large opera house. Such a task was not easy. The novel's 101 chapters fill more than 800 pages to tell the story of Clyde Griffiths's attempt at earning a living at his uncle's shirt-collar factory in Lycurgus, NY, and of his secret love affair with one of the workers, Roberta Alden, who becomes pregnant and whom he eventually drowns after falling passionately in love with a wealthy debutante, Sondra Finchley. Many wonderful moments and minor characters of the original novel necessarily had to be set aside. Most of Dreiser's feisty multi-faceted social commentary on the lone individual's struggle to "make it" and on the inequities between classes in Pre-Depression America also had to be removed or could only be suggested in the libretto. Thanks to the Scheer/Picker team's use of hymns and an added church scene in Act II, some of Dreiser's cynical view of the Christian establishment does come through.

Unlike the 1951 movie adaptation of Dreiser's work, *A Place in the Sun*, Scheer and Picker have remained quite true to the novel. The principal characters have kept their names, and the dialogue and arias nicely bring out the idiosyncrasies of each role. Some changes, however, were obviously necessary. Except for Clyde's soliloquy arias in the second scene of each act ("A motorcar"; "It

will not take too long"), the novel's ever-present inner voice (Clyde and often Dreiser himself) is almost totally absent. We get to know the operatic Clyde and his flaws primarily through what he says to others. With opera's time constraints, each of Clyde's love affairs blossoms much more rapidly than in the novel. Certainly operagoers who read (or re-read) the novel before attending a production will appreciate more fully the quirks of each character.

Scheer and Picker have turned the three-book novel into a two-act opera, the second act of which begins in the middle of the second book, with the already pregnant Roberta longing for Clyde, who now loves Sondra. The opera then quickly moves through Clyde's drowning of Roberta in an Adirondack lake, his trial and guilty verdict, and his ultimate execution.



Nathan Gunn as Clyde and Patricia Racelle as Roberta in Tobias Picker's *An American Tragedy*
Photo by Ken Howard, Metropolitan Opera

In cinematic fashion Picker uses continuous music throughout, despite the division into a prologue and fifteen scenes. Several melodies, dissonant chords, rhythms, and textures become familiar through their reappearances in the course of the opera. For example, the opening dissonant chords of the overture return when the utter tragedy of Clyde's plight is emphasized. Especially effective is the descending three-note motive that connects Clyde's "I promise" at the end of Act I with the start of Act II, when Roberta anxiously awaits his return, as well as with the later trial scene when the motive is set to the spectators' echo of the D.A.'s "He hit her." One of Clyde's favorite lines, "You are so beautiful," appears in three different contexts (first with Sondra, then at the lake, and finally recalling Sondra in the courtroom) and fascinatingly accentuates the subliminal association.

Taking advantage of the Met's superb musicians, the orchestration is attractively lush and multi-hued, responding to the characters and situations without becoming overly melodramatic. Sometimes the orchestral texture thins to just two exposed lines suggesting the poignant intimacy of chamber music. Every instrumental part demands the utmost virtuosity in rendering Picker's "ear-tickling" accompaniments and short *intermezzi* for scene changes. As in *Emmeline*, Picker writes marvelously mimetic "machine music" for the noisy factory and for Gilbert's racing motorcar. The unexpected dissonant *tutti fortississimo* chords that introduce the murder scene on the calm lake are both shocking and tragic. Other fine orchestral tone-paintings include the vaudeville theater, social dancing

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American Opera (continued)

(foxtrot) at the birthday party, the serene waters of Big Moose Lake, the tensions of the courtroom, and the loneliness of Clyde's prison cell.

The cast for the premiere was first-rate, led by Dolora Zajick as Elvira, with Susan Graham as Sondra, Patricia Racette as Roberta, and Nathan Gunn in the complex role of Clyde. As several reviewers noted, Zajick's performance of the heart-rending mother's role was "colossal," bringing down the house at every performance. Such gifted dramatic singers alone made the production worth seeing.

Challenging, mostly syllabic vocal lines set the pervasive dialogue in Scheer's libretto. Picker tailored each role to the singer's voice. Somewhat manneristically, the principals often employ their highest tessitura at the ends of phrases, usually with a melody that rockets up to the singer's highest pitches. Such tonal heights usually reflect the character's elevated emotional state, but when the singer seems to strain to reach the notes, the high pitches can be more distracting than effective.

Nonetheless Picker never forgets what works in great opera or musical theater. He successfully mines the musico-dramatic potential of the solo aria, the rapturous love duet, the dynamic ensemble, and the Greek chorus. At least eight times the action stops for a brief aria that concludes with a climactic, applause-inducing cadence. These "set pieces" or songs—mostly newly devised for the opera and *not* in the novel—deepen each character's persona. In the opera's touching prologue the boy Clyde, alone, sings the old hymn "'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus" before he is joined by his mother and other children. Two of the arias are Clyde's soliloquies, mentioned above. Then there are Sondra's magnificent paean to New York City ("New York has changed me") and her seductive invitation for Clyde to visit her that summer ("We have a cottage on a lake"). Act II opens with Roberta, alone, reading her first worried letter to the absent Clyde ("Today I pretended you'd be here soon"). Later, Elvira invokes her motherly trust and Christian faith as she movingly urges her son Clyde to tell the truth at the trial ("You did nothing to deserve this"). In the final scene Clyde sings a short, hymn-like prayer confessing his wrongs and seeking Jesus's help ("Lord Jesus give me peace")—a gripping allusion to the prologue's hymn-singing child Clyde, who now reappears to accompany the condemned man's walk to the electric chair. The voices end on a unison C, a key of "light" and understanding. Picker perfectly sets the texts of these arias, allowing every word and tone to be heard and to tell.

Each of Clyde's meetings with a girlfriend leads to a duet. Early in the piece Clyde and Roberta meet in a riverside park and learn more about each other ("Out for a walk?"), concluding with their first good-night kiss. Later, when Clyde responds to Roberta's news of pregnancy, Picker offers a "deconstructed duet" that moves from serene harmonization ("You have to marry me") to an agitated, angry repartee ("All right! I will marry you then") that brings down the curtain. At the start of Act II Clyde's rapturous love duet with Sondra ("We should go dancing tonight") dramatically evolves into a "love-triangle" trio, as the

lonely Roberta adds her concerns from another level of the stage. Then both women—in melodic unison!—ironically use the same words: "I feel like I've been waiting a whole life waiting to be desired by someone like you." In the middle of the church scene Clyde and Roberta meet privately for a brief, tense duo ("No more waiting"), as he promises to meet and marry her, and she reasserts her love and anticipates their departure and marriage—all while fragments of themes from happier times recur.

There are other passages where Picker makes such striking use of an ensemble of singers. For example, in the Act I scene outside the Empire Vaudeville Theater, as Clyde is falling in love with Roberta, the young Clyde (again singing a hymn) and his mother Elvira "enter his conscience" and create a quartet, as they warn Clyde of the devil's temptation to sin. Later, before he takes Roberta to bed, the already conflicted Clyde participates in a potent trio ("Clyde, you stir my deepest memories") with both Roberta and Sondra, who each think fondly of him from their separate stage locations. Such sublime moments always maximize the realization of opera's potential.

In some ensembles a chorus augments the drama, either as participants or as commentators. As noted above, other children join in the hymn-singing during the prologue. At the end of the opera's first scene a chorus lauds the capitalistic successes of businessman Samuel Griffiths and compares him to millionaires like Vanderbilt, Astor, and Dupont. In the second act, as members of the Griffiths family and Sondra react to news of the murder and Clyde's involvement, a chorus sings excerpts from the published letters of the late, lovelorn Roberta. And at the murder trial the chorus augments the scene's tension by serving as the angry, vocal spectators and jury.

The production was further enhanced by Francesca Zambello's effective staging and Dunya Ramicova's elegant period costumes. Adrienne Lobel, in her Met debut as set designer, was particularly creative with the three-tiered, sparsely decorated stage levels and occasional projected backdrops that visually supported the story's passion, jealousy, anger, and despair.

An American Tragedy is a superb opera that one hopes will stay in the repertoire because of its dramatic story and masterful music. Tobias Picker remains among America's finest composers, and we can only look forward to his future contributions to opera. Astonishingly, this was only the fourth world premiere at the Metropolitan Opera since James Levine assumed musical leadership in 1971. We can be thankful, then, that the company has announced another premiere for next December: Tan Dun's *The First Emperor*.

(Note: For more on Picker's works, see www.tobiaspicker.com)

—Bruce C. MacIntyre
Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center, CUNY

Remembering Charles Wolfe (1943-2006)

In the fall 1988, ISAM founder H. Wiley Hitchcock invited Charles Wolfe to pen his first "Country and Gospel Notes" column for the ISAM Newsletter. Over the next sixteen years he would acquaint Newsletter readers with the rapidly expanding body of scholarship and essential recordings that defined these two neglected areas of American music study. In his inaugural column Charles reviewed *Happy in the Service of the Lord: Afro-American Gospel Quartets in Memphis*, by ethnomusicologist Kip Lornell, who would soon become a close collaborator.

We had corresponded and spoken on the phone many times, but when I finally met Charles Wolfe in person early in 1980, I knew that we would be friends for a long time. In addition to the obvious musical interests, we both enjoyed trying local barbecue joints, talking about sports, and discussing the mysteries of how higher education actually works (or doesn't). Charles was happy where he was, literally in the middle of Tennessee with Nashville less than twenty-five miles away and so many research opportunities within several hours' drive.

Growing up in central Missouri, Charles had always been interested in music, but since he was not a musician, he opted to study English at nearby Southwest Missouri State University. After graduating in 1965, the University of Kansas offered him a generous graduate fellowship, enticing him and his new wife Mary Deane to move a few hundred miles west. Charles told me he had hoped to pursue a dissertation on Jimmie Rodgers and the blues, but because the topic was not deemed appropriate for an English Ph.D. in the late 1960s he ended up writing on Dickens. In 1970 he accepted a position in the English Department at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro. After gaining tenure at MTSU, Charles was able to once again pursue his musical interests, starting with his work on the Grand Ole Opry.

His initial book was the first scholarly study of the Grand Ole Opry. This project began as a slim, insightful book that Tony Russell published under the *Old Time Music* imprint in 1976. For years Charles worked on a massive revised and expanded version. Finally, *A Good Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* was published by Vanderbilt University Press in 1999 to universal and well-deserved praise. As he demonstrated in his wide-ranging survey of string bands and early country music, *Tennessee Strings* (University of Tennessee Press, 1977), Charles's interest in country music was not limited to Nashville and the Opry. Nor was it short lived. Over the next three decades he would write eloquently on many facets of country music in such influential works as *Kentucky Country: Folk and Country Music of Kentucky*

(University of Kentucky Press, 1996), *The Devil's Box: Masters of Country Fiddling* (Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), *Classic Country: Legends of Country Music* (Routledge Press, 2000), *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music* (McFarland and Company, 2005), co-edited with Ted Olsen, and *Country Music Goes to War* (University of Kentucky Press, 2005), co-edited with James Akenson. A comprehensive book on bluegrass legend Bill Monroe, co-authored with Neal Rosenberg, will be published by the University of Illinois Press in 2006.

Country fiddling from Uncle Jimmie Thompson to Chubby Wise also fascinated Charles. He authored dozens of articles on southern fiddling and string bands for *Old Time Music* and *The Devil's Box* as well as several bluegrass publications. The majority of these articles contained new information gleaned from scores of interviews conducted over several decades of field work and digging. In 2004 the International Bluegrass Music Association awarded Charles and co-author Eddie Stubbs its prize for the best liner notes for their work on a comprehensive Mac Wisemen set. Many of the dozens of liner notes that he wrote focused on either early country music or bluegrass.

Although known primarily for his writings on country and bluegrass music, Charles's musical tastes were wide-ranging, including a deep interest in African American blues and gospel. His *DeFord Bailey: A Black Star in Early Country Music* (University Of Tennessee Press, 1993), co-authored with David Morton, focused attention on the much-neglected career of country music's first important black performer and recording artist. In early December of 1988 I recall phoning Charles from Smithsonian Folkways, where I was surrounded by photographs, sound

recordings, and other archival information about Huddie Leadbetter. Charles casually noted that it was remarkable that no one had written a biography of Leadbelly. Within two months we had a contract and about three years later we had co-authored *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (Harper Collins, 1992).

Working with Charles was easy and enjoyable. Chatting with him about his widespread interests is probably what I will miss most now that he has moved on. If I mentioned a new barbecue joint over in Cannon County he was ready to hop in the car and try it out. He would want to bring his grandchildren along, and that was just fine with me, because I know that he loved to watch over them. I suspect he's doing that right now.

—Kip Lornell
The George Washington University



Charles Wolfe
Photo courtesy of Middle Tennessee
State University

Staging the Folk (continued)

paired the black one-man-band performer Jesse Fuller with Doc Watson, and a December 1963 show matched black songster Mississippi John Hurt with white Virginia coal miner and banjoist Dock Boggs. The racial implications of the June 1963 blues concert, taking place only a month after the Birmingham riots had shocked the nation, were not lost on Shelton in his *Times* review. He noted that while in the past white intellectuals read James Baldwin “to get an insight into the thinking and emotion of the Southern Negro,” perhaps the time had come to “listen to the joys and troubles of the ‘unlettered’ as they express themselves in their blues songs.”⁹

In their work as cultural mediators between southern folk and northern urban audiences, Cohen and the FOTM were engaging in a form of advocacy that Alan Lomax would later articulate as “cultural equity.” Lomax coined the term in calling for global recognition that all cultures produced worthy art and that local communities worldwide could be empowered if their cultural expressions were given equal time in the media and educational institutions of society.¹⁰

The practice of cultural equity meant educating northern audiences about southern music and culture, black and white. On the Folkways albums they produced, Seeger, Cohen, and Rinzler included copious notes about the history of southern folk music, sources for repertoire, instrumental techniques, and lyrics to songs. Working with live performers in workshop and concert settings offered them the opportunity to expand their educational mission. Only a week before the first FOTM concert in New York, Seeger and Cohen had helped arrange for Holcomb, black guitarist Elizabeth Cotten, and Virginia bluegrass legends the Stanley Brothers to appear at the first University of Chicago Folk Festival. In workshops and on the concert stage, Seeger and Cohen provided background introductions for the individual musicians, advised with repertoire selection, led informal discussions about instrumental and vocal technique, and served as musical accompanists.¹¹ The idea of on-stage presentation and interpretation that had been so successful in the Chicago festival spilled over into early FOTM programs, infusing them with moments of informality that blurred the boundaries between concerts and workshops. Cohen, who had located Holcomb on a field trip to eastern Kentucky in the spring of 1959, appeared on stage with him at the first concert, providing guitar accompaniment and interjecting information about Holcomb’s repertoire and banjo style. Rinzler, who had run across Ashley at the Union Grove Fiddler’s Convention in 1960, introduced the second concert. Prior to the program he and Seeger worked with the musicians for several days in selecting an appropriate repertoire, and he had earlier convinced Watson to lay aside his electric guitar and revive his traditional family repertoire. Seeger, who had tracked down Boggs in southwestern Virginia in the summer of 1963, served as emcee and accompanist for the Boggs/Hurt program that took place in December of that year.

When programs featured musicians with whom they had little personal contact, the FOTM organizers called in additional experts. The Canon/Lewis/Borum blues concert was introduced by Samuel Charters, whose 1959 publication *The Country Blues* had brought considerable attention to the neglected field of rural blues. Alan Lomax, a veteran stage and radio commentator on folk music, presented Mississippi cane fifer Ed Young, Georgia Sea Island

singer Bessie Jones, and blues guitarist Fred McDowell. Shelton judged that Lomax and the musicians achieved a satisfactory blend of entertainment and education, concluding that their presentation was “as musically appealing as it was intellectually stimulating.”¹²

The efforts of Cohen, Rinzler, and Seeger to stage traditional folk musicians for urban audiences at the Chicago Folk Festival and the FOTM concerts would be further refined at the Newport Folk Festival where Rinzler and Seeger served as advisers and field workers between 1963 and 1967. These early attempts to recontextualize informal folk performance in formal stage settings served as models for Rinzler when he became director of the first Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in 1967. That festival, staged on the National Mall in Washington with federal government support, grew into an annual summer celebration of folk music, dance, and crafts from around America and the world. The Smithsonian Festival was the culmination of the vision Rinzler, Cohen, and Seeger were working out in the early 1960s folk festivals and FOTM concerts: the dignified presentation of local artists, located through field research, in an arena that mixed education, entertainment, and the politics of cultural equity. As the festival’s current director, Richard Kurin, has reflected:

For Rinzler, the festival could be a massive demonstration of the desire of grassroots people for aesthetic justice ... the festival would give voice to the people and announce to the public, the media, and Congress that there was “culture” back home and that that culture was worthy of national pride, attention, and respect.¹³

Achieving pride, attention, and respect for southern folk culture, and forming the sorts of cross-cultural “linkages” that Cohen alluded to, were not always easily obtainable goals. The restaging of folk artists in venues foreign to their home environments could be fraught with problems. Cohen and Rinzler worried that Ashley and other artists might slip into their old vaudeville and blackfaced minstrel routines. Although he found the blues concert moving, Shelton noted that “Guitars were out of tune” and that the “dialect was so totally esoteric that those who have not listened to the recordings or read the growing literature in praise of it [country blues] may not have been able to understand what was going on.”¹⁴ Presenters needed to be mindful not to indulge in the sorts of patronizing romanticism that inadvertently might reduce mountain farmers and delta bluesmen to exotic others for the voyeuristic pleasure of urban audiences familiar only with hayseed or minstrel stereotypes of southern folk. And culture critics pointed out that large and impersonal folk festivals could tear local traditions free from their cultural moorings, resulting in decontextualized restagings that could not possibly communicate the subtle complexities of original aesthetic or social intent of a tradition. Such events, cultural historian Robert Cantwell has argued, are more likely to serve the political agenda of the presenters, not the folk themselves.¹⁵

From our present vantage point it is impossible to surmise exactly what sorts of aesthetic, social, and political messages were conveyed to those who experienced the FOTM concerts firsthand; undoubtedly the country/city cultural gap was too wide for everyone to fully appreciate the art they were witnessing, and preconceived notions of folk primitivism were probably reinforced

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for some. Yet despite these inherent problems, the FOTM organizers appeared to resist the temptations to over-romanticize, patronize, or otherwise exploit the rural artists they presented to their fellow New Yorkers. Perhaps it was their individual experiences as musicians, folk music collectors, and educators that led Cohen, Rinzler, and Seeger to forge such deep personal ties with their folk mentors and to communicate so genuinely the respect and admiration they felt for southern mountain music. By the early 1960s they had joined Alan Lomax as pioneering cultural brokers who creatively mediated between America's rural folk and the urban audiences who fuelled the folk revival.

* * *

There is no evidence that Bob Dylan ever attended any of the FOTM concerts. However, in *Chronicles* he recalls meeting FOTM performers Clarence Ashley, Gus Canon, and other “unmistakably authentic folk and blues artists” at Izzy Young’s Folklore Center on McDougal Street. Later he recounts hearing Ashley, Roscoe Holcomb, Dock Boggs, and Mississippi John Hurt at Alan Lomax’s Third Street loft parties, events he characterized as “spiritual experiences.” Dylan also reported that upon first hearing Mike Seeger perform at one of the Lomax gatherings he was so stunned by Mike’s total mastery of traditional styles, genres, and repertoire that he realized that only by “writ[ing] my own folk songs, ones that Mike didn’t know” would he be able to make a viable contribution to the folk music revival.¹⁶ Dylan would certainly go on to write his own “folk songs,” and transform the music into the new genre of folk rock, but as cultural historian Benjamin Filene points out in surveying three-and-a-half decades of Dylan’s work, his best compositions have always remained deeply rooted in traditional American folk ballads, blues, country, and gospel music.¹⁷ By introducing southern folk styles and living practitioners of those styles into the Greenwich Village folk scene in the early 1960s, the Friends of Old Time Music reminded Dylan and many lesser known New York citybillies where their music came from and what invaluable sources of inspiration traditional performers could be in the ongoing transformation of American roots music.

The Friends of Old Time Music concerts were recorded in the early 1960s by Peter Siegel. Forty years later Siegel has selected and mastered material from the original concert tapes to produce a three CD box-set which will be released on Smithsonian Folkways in fall 2006.

Notes

¹ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (Simon and Schuster, 2004). See the first two chapters for Dylan’s description of Greenwich Village when he arrived in early 1961.

² Robert Shelton, “Folk Group Gives ‘Village’ Concert,” *New York Times* (27 March, 1961).

³ Information on the organization and presentations by the New York Friends of Old Time Music was gathered from John Cohen, interview with Peter Siegel, 18 February 2005, Putnam Valley, NY; and John Cohen, interview with Ray Allen, 13 December 2005, Putnam Valley, NY.

⁴ John Cohen, Israel Young, and Ralph Rinzler, “The Friends of Old Time Music,” *Sing Out!* 11 (February/March 1961): 63.

⁵ Background on the early folk music revival in New York City is found in Ronald Cohen’s *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival & American Society, 1940-1970* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 3-124.

⁶ Shelton, “Folk Group Gives ‘Village’ Concert.”

⁷ Cohen interview, 13 December 2005.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Robert Shelton, “Folk Trio Sings Memphis Blues,” *New York Times* (8 June 1963).

¹⁰ Alan Lomax, “Appeal for Cultural Equity,” *Journal of Communication* 27 (Spring 1977): 125-38.

¹¹ For an account of the early University of Chicago Folk Festivals, including workshop descriptions, see John Cohen and Ralph Rinzler, “University of Chicago Folk Festival,” *Sing Out!* 12 (April/May 1963): 8-10.

¹² Robert Shelton, “Third Folk Concert in Series Performed,” *New York Times* (10 April 1965).

¹³ Richard Kurin, *Reflections of a Cultural Broker: A View From the Smithsonian* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 128.

¹⁴ Shelton, “Folk Trio Sings Memphis Blues.”

¹⁵ A useful reflection on the cultural and political ramifications of recontextualizing folk culture for urban audiences via the folk festival is found in Robert Cantwell, “Feasts of Unnaming: Folk Festivals and the Representation of Folklife” in *Public Folklore*, eds. Robert Baron and Nicholas Spitzer (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 263-305. See especially pages 295-97 for Cantwell’s discussion of the problems of interpreting folk practices through concert/theatrical and exhibitory festival presentations.

¹⁶ The three Dylan quotes are from *Chronicles*, pp. 19, 72, and 71 respectively.

¹⁷ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 218-32.

Aaron Copland (continued)

American voice, but the accent is hard to place ... it seems especially easy to invest his works with a whole host of values and press compositions into the service of widely varying ideologies” (299). Crist’s careful context compels, even thrills, but Copland again escapes.

Here is a wonderful and important collection of essays on a composer at once familiar and elusive. Copland, when queried regarding his preference between analytic approaches—historical context vs. row-hunting—responded equivocally: “I, of course, love both” (215). Perlis’s summation of Copland’s politics suggests a similar ambiguity: “Copland was not by nature a political person; he joined neither the Socialist nor the Communist Party, but for a time in the early 1930s he was what might be called a fellow traveler. When questioned about his leftist activities, his answer was simply, ‘It seemed the thing to do at the time’” (106). In the end, both books teach more about the context and historical staging of Copland’s life than about the central character. Perhaps one finds Copland only in the “long line” of his notes. De Graaf’s transcript shows that at the beginning of the post-concert question-and-answer session at the 1937 Composers’ Forum concert featuring Copland’s music, the composer deadpanned: “I’d much rather go home. This is not my idea” (401).

—Wayne Schneider
University of Vermont

Notes

¹ Berger’s letters are in the New York Public Library; Copland’s are in the Library of Congress.

² Copland’s 111 letters to Bernstein are available online and at the Library of Congress; Bernstein’s 114 letters to Copland are restricted—excerpts have been published here and there, and some letters appear in this reader for the first time.

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Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University

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