

Reviews

Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought*. New Americanists Series, ed. Donald E. Pease. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. x + 335 pages, 8 black and white photographs; ISBN 0-8223-2577-2 Cloth – \$59.95; ISBN 0-8223-2591-8 Paperback – \$19.95.

One of the familiar concerns of Anglo-American high modernism in the first quarter of the 20th century focussed on the retrieval of classical ideals in forms compatible with contemporary conditions of modernity. A complementary concern was the creation of a usable past based on native materials. Michael North is one of several scholars who have recently examined how these early modernists often donned black minstrel masks to re-create a good night out in Harlem night spots.¹ 'Our orchestra/is the cat's nuts – // Banjo jazz/with a nickelplated // amplifier to/soothe // the savage beast -/Get the rhythm // That sheet stuff's a lot a cheese,' Williams shouted, joyously drunken, in one of his *Spring and All* poems.

But Du Bois, Locke and James Weldon Johnson had no intention of letting go of the 'sheet stuff,' let alone of subscribing to the minstrelizing of their musical heritage. Paul Anderson's valuable study of Harlem Renaissance writing about black folk music restores the origins of a continued debate, in all its complexity, about its rightful admission of that heritage to the concert hall as an essential part of American culture in the 20th century. Recent scholarship which emphasises 'signifying' has tended to elevate Ellison, Hurston and Hughes as the pioneers of a true understanding of the character of African American music by locating it in a 'blues aesthetic' which implicitly abandons the concert hall to white American ideas about American culture.

Past scholarship about the 1920s (for example Huggins or Lewis) has fuelled such a retreat by regretting the conservatism and snobbishness of Johnson or Locke's observations about contemporary popular black urban music: 'Men like James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke expected some race genius to appear who would transform that source into *high* culture. [...] The same improbable will-o'-the-wisp entranced white musicians like Paul Whiteman and George Gershwin. It perplexed black musicians James P. Johnson and Fats Waller. *We now know better*, but some would have said that Duke Ellington was mesmerised as well,' to take a standard example from Huggins' classic *Harlem Renaissance* [my emphasis].² There is a suggestion here that Johnson and Locke were simply irrelevantly 'wrong.' Anderson's close re-examination of Du Bois and Locke on the 'concert' tradition in African American music is a vindication of their thought, and implicitly points up much of the currently high value

1. Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

2. Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (1971; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 10.

put on black popular music as in fact a diminution of the aspirations and claims of the Harlem Renaissance generation of intellectuals.

The relatively superficial, if not downright condescending, views of what Harlem Renaissance intellectuals thought of music in some of the standard criticism about the period partly follows from ignoring the central place that the black folk music inheritance held in Renaissance debates about history, racial memory, and cultural transmission. Anderson brings out how spirituals became focal point of such debates. He shows convincingly that more was at stake than can be taken care of by regretting that powerful minds like Du Bois and Locke aspired to make black music become part of 'polite' culture and conversely turned up their noses at the lively and pleasurable use of black folk music in contemporary cabaret and vaudeville entertainment.

Anderson expands on Samuel A. Floyd's suggestion that the Harlem Renaissance debate about the character and proper performance of the spirituals provides key texts for an understanding of the issue of African American culture in the early part of the 20th century.³ Du Bois' 'reading' of the spirituals – the 'sorrow songs' – as myths that memorialised black slavery and anticipated emancipation, was strongly influenced by his German and Victorian education which contained ideas about how folk material worked up into art would help build the self-consciousness and manly self-possession fundamental to a national cultural identity. The spirituals were analogous to a 'national' mythology and gave the African American people a claim for admittance to what Du Bois called the 'kingdom of culture' – especially, in Du Bois' view, as they were performed in churches and concert halls nationally and internationally by the Fisk Jubilee Singers collective. Such a context allowed the spirituals to be heard as what they effectively were: a people's 'anthems' – elegiac, yet uplifting, and appropriate for an aspiring black cultural nationalism. Therefore Du Bois wanted African American folk music to be dissociated from the inauthentic, debasing 'coon songs' popularised by minstrelsy and, later, by vaudeville. But Du Bois also insisted that the spirituals not be restricted to the black church, and particularly not be conflused with ecstatic, but musically simple gospel hymns which appealed to the body rather than the soul. Given Du Bois' notion of the 'kingdom of culture' there was no racial dilution involved in envisioning a future moment in which African-American spirituals were worked up into fully scored compositional form, that is into the major forms of high musical culture, a realm beyond national or racial boundaries.

Anderson is good at nuancing and particularising Du Bois' positions through the 1920s and 30s. African American music offering original symphonies and operas, for example, he thought of as an active, appropriating process, not a passively imitative one. To reduce Du Bois to a snob who wanted African American music to merely imitate Beethoven or Brahms or his adored Wagner is to misunderstand Du Bois' posi-

3. Samuel A. Floyd in Samuel A. Floyd (ed), *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1990); and Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995).

tion. Anderson carefully pursues Du Bois' race-proud demand that white America recognise that what is valuable and new in American music derives from black music's shaping influence on it. Du Bois was keenly aware that those who argue that black folk music has value to the extent it satirises white musical forms (standard example: cake walk as derived from emulative parodies of polite Southern antebellum dances) help authorise a difference that will in time grow into a rigid separation between serious, formal, complex 'cosmopolitan' music on the one hand, and simple regional music for pleasurable entertainment and dancing on the other. This separation in effect strengthened the position of those who *openly* favored black music as performed in minstrelsy travesties because black dances and music were a travesty of those of their social betters anyway!⁴

Du Bois was, as is well-known, deeply skeptical about whether the so-called jazz age had anything to do with, or to offer to, an understanding of what black culture was about. But Du Bois' contemporaries, famously Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, pretended only to see a high academic who held a rather restricted place for pleasure. Pleasure in Du Bois' view was subservient to the task of getting access to, sharing and participating in, the highest strivings of civilised culture. Hughes, by contrast, was enthusiastic about the city's black musicians, dancers and entertainers. Their fashionableness gave them high visibility and gave black artists the possibility of sharing in that part of modernism which valued hedonism and primitivism.

In historical terms Du Bois' idealistic view of art and culture was defeated by the actual trends in a commercial, modernistic culture, including those trends represented by the most talented artists of his generation, Toomer, Hughes and Hurston. All resented Du Bois' stern and high-minded moralism in aesthetic matters. On the other hand, as Anderson points out, Toomer and Hurston's convictions about the death or vitality respectively of the black folk inheritance were not exactly vindicated either. Toomer's elegiac view of Southern folk life in a period of mass migration to the city was brilliantly embodied in *Cane*, but today few would agree with him that African American culture has disappeared into a general American culture.

Hurston's feistily exuberant use of folk materials has been canonised in today's class rooms. Hurston held acerbic views of the Fisk Singers' concert hall performances, which she argued were inauthentic. She did not share Du Bois' (or Locke's or Johnson's) perspectives on 'Negro folk music,' namely that it was unique raw material to be worked up into formally through-composed forms. Hurston thought of spirituals as

4. A contemporary analogy: Henry Louis Gates' famous, if anachronistic, analysis of Coltrane's 'My Favorite Things' as signifying on Julie Andrews' version of same (in Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*) makes Coltrane's into a piece of inverted minstrelsy, thus relying on the same premises as those of, for example, a Van Vechten. Are theories relying on signifying as a crucial concept in a 'black' aesthetic in effect theories of minstrelsy? To what extent do they share the same 'racist' premisses as 'original' minstrelsy? (As has been pointed out, the idea that Coltrane had listened to Andrews doing the tune first is anachronistic given the fact that Andrews recorded the tune four years *after* Coltrane's 1960 Atlantic recording.)

folk music – folk music performed the way she had experienced in all-black communities. To a much higher degree than Du Bois or Locke, she appreciated the jazzily ‘asymmetrical rhythmic patterns and designs’ that came to the fore when performed by real Southern folk for local audiences. But inevitably, as Anderson acutely points out, she argued herself into a defensive idealisation of this music as a ‘pure product’ of a particular all-black neighborhood that was unavoidably threatened by ‘modernity’ via radio, movies etc, which brought other versions and performance styles of black music, however ‘inauthentic’ or ‘diluted’ they seemed by regional Southern standards. Hence her heated polemics against metropolitan and academic concert hall performance styles of the spirituals as tepid, polite versions of the real thing. Ironically she was therefore much closer to Du Bois and Locke in her implicit awareness that black folk music would be transformed in the cities upon contact with the rest of American music culture, especially when its profitable potentiality was ‘discovered’ by a rapidly expanding entertainment industry.

Hughes and his version of a black ‘blues aesthetic’ also have high canonicity in today’s classrooms. The latter was famously announced in ‘The Negro and the Racial Mountain’ in 1926, a polemical response not only to George Schuyler’s denial of the desirability, or even viability, of a distinctive African American Culture bound to specific regional idioms such as spirituals, jazz and blues, but also to Du Bois and Locke’s fastidious cultural idealism which refused, or remained skeptical about, forms of black folk idioms in the 1920 tied to commercialised entertainment and named according to changing fashions, ‘ragtime’, or ‘blues,’ or ‘jazz.’

Hughes claimed, and showed, that black memorialisation of their history could be, and by implication was, also conveyed in such forms as blues. Anderson cannily reminds the reader that quite a few of Hughes’ early poems which refer to the (African) past are not exactly blues; for example, his famous ‘The Weary Blues,’ which is not a blues but a poem which quotes a blues.

Despite the apparent antagonism between Hughes and Du Bois, Anderson points out similarities. Both sides wanted to ‘use’ and reconstruct the African-American folk inheritance into something larger, more universal: either a national American modern culture, or, even more idealistically and patriotically, by making American culture *the* cosmopolitan modern idiom. Hughes may have delighted in his cabaret, blues and jazz entertainers. But he wasn’t ‘entertaining’ in the same sense they were. He was publishing a volume of poetry, that is a contribution to Culture (with a capital ‘c’). Hughes’ poetic practice recognized that African American poetry would have to be as fragmentary and allusive as the modernism it contributed to and participated in. But Anderson’s book reminds the reader that despite Hughes’ laid-back ‘folksiness’ and preference for short poetic forms, he did collaborate with several African-American composers and their sometimes quite ambitiously large-scale, ‘narrative’ compositions throughout his life: for instance with William Grant Still, Charles Mingus, Randy Weston and others. These were compositions which had a programmatic and epic content, namely to tell the history of the African American people. Such collabo-

rations indicate that some of Hughes' activities shared Du Bois' idealistic hopes for a national black music.

Possibly the most interesting part of Anderson's valuable book, at least to me, is his chapter on Alain Locke. Locke's position in the literary canon is not as high as Du Bois'. He is mainly remembered as the mastermind and editor of the landmark anthology, *The New Negro*, and otherwise as an aesthete and snob in cultural matters, miles away from the world of Hughes' or Hurston's blues and 'folk' aesthetic. But Anderson's careful exposition especially of Locke's *The Negro and his Music* (1936), which makes one wish that this book was generally available again, does justice to the circumspect, balanced judgments that characterised Locke's thinking. He was less dogmatic and ideological about cultural matter than was Du Bois. More than the latter he appreciated the informal, improvisatory, 'hot' repertoire of black music ('jazz'), as did Hughes. But much more than Hughes or Du Bois he was aware of the achievement and potential of Duke Ellington. In him Locke saw a distinct promise of an African-American musician and composer who would elevate black folk forms into formal, composed music consonant with the idea of modern culture as both African-American and 'cosmopolitan,' in Locke's terminology.

Anderson examines in detail Locke's aestheticist inheritance from the influential Walter Pater. Locke came away from Pater with the notion that progress towards the universal was a process of 'purification,' or sublimation, of the gross and impure. Like Du Bois, Locke tended to find grossness in the mass produced, minstrelized versions of black folk music, that is in blues and 'hot jazz' music for entertainment and dancing. Inevitably ideas of purity project narratives of decline from an ideal state, and Anderson points out certain similarities between Locke and Toomer on this point. The golden age of 'pure' black folk music has been diluted to the wrong kind of 'cosmopolitan' music, viz. the profitable popularity of 'jazz.' Yet Anderson persuasively argues that Locke did not entirely give in to the nostalgic despair that is implied by 'golden ages'; witness his interest in, for instance, Ellington.

Locke moved pragmatically between various positions: now he called for more black self-consciousness in music, now for an all-American cultural nationalism, now for a cosmopolitan music in the 'international' modernist mode. Anderson makes the reader see this shifting not as inconsistent vacillation between dogmatic positions but as a subtle, continual adjustment between ideals and actual possibilities.

Critics more sympathetic to actual black music in the 1930s were not enthusiastic about *The Negro and his Music*. Sterling Brown did not admire a book in which, he said, the author took his views about the uses of jazz from Dvorak and Stravinsky. He charged Locke with responding to jazz intellectually: by thinking about what it could or should be in order to be important, instead of trying to familiarise himself with jazz as it was actually played.

Anderson's book also takes a good long look at white patrons who got passionate

about certain forms of black folk music. In contrast to Du Bois and Locke, who were knowledgeable about all that was written about African American cultural matters, these white 'connoisseurs' took no notice of what African American writers wrote about their own music. This created sometimes offensive, sometimes very naive views of what the former took authentic black folk music to be. Particularly challenging to Du Bois and Locke was that these white commentators and enthusiasts held views about jazz, for example, that seemed to share their own contempt about the use of 'Negro' materials in urban entertainment, in vaudeville, hotels and theatres, and later in radio and the movies. But the 'hot jazz' connoisseurs also despised the use of black folk material in piano concertos. No 'sheet music' for them. Nobody could despise Paul Whiteman and his 'symphonic jazz' as much as these white jazz aficionados. When Van Vechten returned thanks for Hughes' support of *Nigger Heaven*, he wrote affectionately that 'you and I are the only coloured people who really love *niggers*.'

It has been a commonplace to ridicule Whiteman's music making as a caricature of 'real' jazz, despite the fact that musicians themselves, black and white, admired the musicianship of Whiteman's band. Applying Gerald Early's canny discussion of Whiteman, however, Anderson sees white enthusiasm for what was claimed to be authentic jazz, the small-band 'hot jazz' styles, lots of extravagant solos, brief, informally arranged *tutti* parts and the rest, as in practice also amounting to an attack on the 'symphonic' jazz Ellington was trying to write and perform at that time, in 'Reminiscing in Tempo' and, later, 'Black, Brown and Beige.'

John Hammond, white millionaire patron, was not only in a position to go to the south and south-west to indulge his passion for hot jazz, but also came to be in a position to put clout behind his rather rigid views of what was authentic black music – in contrast to Du Bois or Locke or Johnson, let alone Ellington or James P. Johnson – namely in his capacity as A&R man for Decca and then Columbia records.

Hammond, with his fine record of anti-racist, integrationist and left-wing sympathies, the 'discoverer' of Basie, Billie Holiday, Charlie Christian, Teddy Wilson and many others, is also an interesting figure in the story about the American left's view of African American music in the 1930s. And Anderson does an admirable job in telling some of it – at least the jazz part. To Hammond, to use Van Vechten's (not Hammond's) offensive phrase, Count Basie's blues-derived riff-style jazz was authentic 'nigger' music, while Ellington's long, through-composed pieces, such as the aforementioned 'Reminiscing in Tempo' (1935) and 'Black, Brown, and Beige' (1943) were neither authentically black, nor, for that matter, jazz at all.

Early shrewdly pointed out that Whiteman in a sense was unique, for a white musician and bandleader, in that he took jazz seriously by not minstrelizing it. Paul Whiteman's idea of 'symphonic jazz' culminated, as is well-known, in the 1924 performance of Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue' concerto, which certainly had 'Negro material' in it. Here was a demonstration of 'folk' material worked up in 'modern' sym-

phonic form – as Whiteman understood it; that is in the late 19th century romantic genre that signified ‘national’ character in similar symphonic work by Czech or Russian composers, both sources of inspiration to Gershwin. As Anderson persuasively shows, Ellington was aware of Whiteman and Gershwin and saw them not necessarily as people who had diluted, or satirised jazz, but as competitive models to be emulated. Ellington wish was to produce a large-scale, composed work (on ‘sheet music’); a modern work, but one that was inspired by, and told American history from, an African American point of view, and not as Gershwin told it in his all-black opera, ‘Porgy and Bess.’

Ellington’s aspirations were closer to Du Bois’ and Locke’s hopes. He too continued a tradition of African American concert music that began with the Fisk Singers and the spirituals. Anderson puts Ellington in a position where he is shown to make that tradition modern and a poignant vehicle for race pride. Ellington explicitly wanted his jazz ‘symphonic’ composition to be more than ‘swing’ (the 1930s commercial name for ‘hot jazz’). It should be music that was a ‘genuine contribution from our race.’ Hence ‘Black, Brown and Beige,’ which grew out of an earlier, less familiar venture, the music for the revue ‘Jump for Joy’ (1941). ‘Black, Brown and Beige,’ which contained several genres and other formal structures than the conventional swing number of a 1930s band like Goodman’s, was not only a ‘response’ to Paul Whiteman and Gershwin’s ‘American’ jazz concerto and opera; it was also, as Anderson deftly comments, a response to John Hammond’s version of authentic black music history demonstrated in two ‘From Spirituals to Swing’ concerts (1938-1939), which, as the name suggests, culminated on stage with the current swing music of the Basie and Goodman groups. Swing music was essentially dance music with a funky beat; or, in Hurston’s terms, the jook-joint invading the Carnegie Hall concert stage. Ellington wanted his music to accomplish more than funkiness and ‘getting-down.’ Like Du Bois and Locke he was keenly aware of the memorialising tradition in black music-making, to which the concert setting beginning with the Fisk Singers’ spirituals gave a cultural resonance and importance that performing in cabarets, restaurants and theatres could never provide.

The need to write long, ‘epic’ music works that would be ‘genuine contributions’ from the race, as Ellington put it, has now been generally recognised as a typical African American music genre for some time. The establishment of trumpeter Wynton Marsalis as Artistic Director at the Lincoln Center marked the canonisation of jazz as America’s ‘classical music.’ As Anderson notes, this is fine as far as it goes. But the effect of the admission of jazz, once a black ‘folk’ music produced and consumed as entertainment, as concert music has paradoxically been not only to suppress the memory of how controversial Ellington’s long, epic jazz compositions once were, but even more significantly to create a new variation on an on-going debate about African American music in which Marsalis and his friend Stanley Crouch often seem to struggle to preserve an invented history of a canonical, ‘pure’ black jazz against the dilutions of an encroaching ‘pop’ music business. The canonisation of Ellington has in practice authorised a rigid conservatism that has not so much kept

white versions of black music out, as kept out other contemporary African American composers who have written long Ellington-inspired musical works. These have been less worried about 'impurity' and generic boundaries between popular and 'serious' concert hall music. Composers and musicians like Sun Ra, John Carter or George Russell have done such large-scale epic works that are distinctly African American in musical sensibility and form and which aim both to commemorate the sufferings of their people and to project a transformed, liberated future for them. But their music does not sound like the 'classic' jazz regularly performed at the Lincoln Center.

Thus a contemporary controversy about Wynton Marsalis' conception of the true African American jazz heritage harks back to a debate begun 100 years ago by W.E.B. Du Bois about the history and utopian projection contained in the 'sorrow songs.' Anderson's book is an admirably thorough, subtle and careful analysis of its continued relevance for understanding contemporary African American culture.

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Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. x + 1167 pp., 32 pp. of black and white photographs. ISBN: 0-394-52836-0; \$35 cloth.

The American journalist and historian Robert A. Caro has by now come a long way with a remarkable book project. Caro's publication of *Master of the Senate*, the third volume in his series on the life of Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ), reaffirms his position as perhaps the foremost political biographer of our time. Caro has been studying Johnson for nearly three decades, and so far his efforts have yielded exceptional results. With its well over 1,100 pages, the present volume sheds more light on the uses and abuses of power than we can find in a mountain of political science textbooks.

The first volume in the series is called *The Path to Power* (1982). In great detail it covers Johnson's coming of age in impoverished Hill Country, Texas, the first contacts he made with political life in Washington, D.C., and his first congressional campaigns. The book ends with Johnson's defeat in the 1941 Senate election, which took place when he was still only 32 years of age. Already in that first book Johnson comes across as a full-fledged power-broker, hungry too for wealth, and willing to do anything to win political favor. Caro also points to positive sides in Johnson's character, sides known to only a few. Already at the start of his career Johnson demonstrated, along with a strong desire for money and power, his empathy with people who were poor and vulnerable, plus a phenomenal ability to get things done. This ability was one day to serve voters in the poor constituencies of Texas very well.

Volume two, *Means of Ascent* (1990), describes three phases in Johnson's life during the 1940s: his brief and less than distinguished military service during World War II,