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Book Review

A Review Article of *Race Music; Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*. by Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. Berkeley: University of California Press, and Columbia College Chicago: The Center for Black Music Research, 2004. Paper, 281 pages.

The Boys in the Band to the Boys in the Hood

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> Blackness doesn't exist until it is done, or "practiced," in the world. Musical styles and ethnicities are loaded signifiers, each doing important cultural work in the social world. Music codes and ethnic markers are rather unstable: what they mean depends on many contingencies, such as historical context, geographic location, who is uttering them, and who is interpreting them. The perceived boundaries surrounding ethnicity and musical styles are rigorously policed. Sometimes we can't believe our eyes or our ears: Can white R&B singer Bonnie Raitt *really* sing the blues: Can white scholars *really* write about black music? Is biracial pop singer Mariah Carey *really* black? (Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. 38).

The extensive quotation above, from *Race Music*, by African American musician and scholar, Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., highlights issues that extend from the study of African American music into a number of other fields in which black creativity and culture figure. Not reproduced above, however, is one further query in the author's series of questions: "Can black scholars *really* achieve the 'proper' objective distance from black subject matter?" (Read, "Can you *black* scholars really be objective?"—as if, for centuries, white bias has been absent from academic discourse.) Obviously, scholars of any hue or origin can be bad ones and commit a number of academic sins; but this question can be a particularly venal one, as it is most often leveled against those perceived as not belonging to the "club", whatever that club might be—"Excuse me, sir/madam, can it be that you work here?"—and most immediately "disses" not only the perceived intruder's objectivity, but also his or her experience. Issuing from the mouths of white scholars, such a question suggests racism. If anthropologists and sociologists and ethnomusicologists can be observers who participate, why can not a participant, who is a scholar, observe?[1] Are the roles of scholar and participant mutually exclusive? Why cannot these roles constitute a Möbius strip of increased insight and learning?

Indeed, the centrality of race as much as the denial of it has provoked a number of academic catfights; and thus Ramsey uses up a lot of gas explaining why he employs both the personal and the professional to write as he does before

launching into his subject—1940's through 1990's race music, genres marketed in the culture industry as "'race records'." (3) For the adjective, "race,"

> …represented a kind of positive self-identification among African Americans….during the first half of the twentieth century….[and] calling oneself a race man or a race woman became a way to display pride in being an African American…[as well as being an effective member of one's] immediate community. (*ibid*)

Clearly, the term did not mean or imply a "naïve position of racial essentialism." (Ramsey 3*)* Moreover, the same usage persists. For example in 2004, African American scholar, Robin D. G. Kelley, applies the term to Theolonius Monk thus: "…this side of Monk--*the "race" man,* [emphasis mine] patron of the black freedom movement, critic of police brutality--was not the dominant image projected by the mainstream media" (digital text).

To return to the question, "Can black scholars *really* achieve the 'proper' objective distance from black subject matter?", the right to write about one's own community may go even beyond Ramsey's stated aim, " I want readers to understand something about what it means to be writing black music research as an African American at this time." (43) For, given the dearth of black music writers in the press[2] and given the tentacular reach of race into every pore of cultural life in the Americas, it behooves all of us to follow Ramsey's arguments closely as he dissects the relationship of blackness to black music and black music research. He is not simply making claim to "insider" status and, at the same time, flashing his academic union card. He is also doing his work. Ramsey is no African American Alan Lomax with a late model tape machine, recording "the folk." It is not about *them.* Rather he interweaves personal and public to demonstrate various tropes of race music and African American oral culture—a physical, vocal, and verbal vernacular signifyin(g) with its "principle of repetition and difference, [and its]… intertextuality…." ; and he thus shifts the discourse from object to subject, to *us* (Gates 64).

The black vernacular—for that is what we are dealing with here—is neither blighted nor pure. To make this point, Ramsey cites the work of Robin D. G. Kelley regarding "an autonomous 'folk' untainted by the mass media or popular culture"—wherein Kelley exposes the naiveté of assuming that any cultural production scented with commercialism must be discredited and, along with it, its creators (Ramsey 39). Further, "…too much attention to the infrastructure of ideology (historical racism, pseudoscience) that determined the historical 'they-ness' of folk tends to gloss over, if not erase, the power of group identity, not to mention its pleasures" (40).[3]

Let us now turn to African American modernism. During the 1930s Depression, an historic "Great Migration," saw rural blacks from the Deep South pour into the U.S. urban North, bringing the musical traditions of southern shout, gospel, and jook joints (to name but a few) into the urbane setting of clubs, house parties, and new musical styles. The body was not to be left behind, not in worship nor in play; and a critical link here is the "blues muse" (47). For example, when Mahalia Jackson, quintessentially known as the Queen of Gospel, was chastened for moving what one Chicago minister thought of as too blues-ily, with too much

"twisting and jazz," she responded with, "'This is the way we *sing* down South! I been singing this way all my life in church!'" (54) Indeed, an interesting expression of this same trope is the way jazz artist Theolonius Monk "…danced around the piano while his sideman continued to play[. This] rendered Monk more than a jazz musician—he became a performance artist." (Kelley, digital text). More specifically Monk's was a *black vernacular* performance—at that, from one of the quintessential ambassadors of bebop.

Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones') classic work on black vernacular music, *Blues People,* tends to emphasize the "blue-ness" of the blues muse and its source among uprooted former slaves whose only moment of having a "place" in American society was while in bondage. (55) It is important to emphasize that in the 1940s, when African American modernism began to flourish, "African American music…became…a site for expressing some of the paradoxes, contradictions, tensions, and, of course, *the joys and pleasures* [emphasis mine] of African American life in those years" (Ramsey 97). That "[t]he migration north was…the main reason for the rise of a black middle class in America…." is arguably so (Jones 123). That this middle class, as Baraka/Jones might be read as suggesting, viewed race music with ambivalence or even disdain may be an oversimplication (see his chapter, "Enter the Middle Class," 122 ff). In fact, Ramsey makes a point of emphasizing how the forties' Louis Jordan, whom his own family of northward-traveling migrants no doubt listened to, insisted upon a popular music " '…a working man [not a member of the bourgeoisie] could relax to"(65). Depending upon the critic, class distinctions appear ambiguous. Are we to assume, then, that among Baraka's bourgeoisie was the minister who reprimanded Mahalia Jackson because the black middle class did *not* bump and grind? Or did it? Perhaps Alain Locke and the so-called "Harlem Renaissance" intellectuals who constructed the assimilationist "New Negro" may have preferred to dress up black music and black musicians for the concert hall, as Ramsey goes on to say later in the book; but the boundaries of class and genre were two of several permeable frontiers that race musics crossed (see discussion of Locke's "tapered vision of culture," as Ramsey puts it, 113-114)[4].

Significantly, Ramsey asserts, in the black body we have a clear example of African American revisionism in view of mainstream modernist musical practice:[5]

> When Dizzy Gillespie joked, bumped, and ground during his performances in the 1940s…journalists reprimanded him for demeaning the bebop aesthetic. Yet Gillespie has cautioned us about leaving the body out of the Afro-modernist aesthetic: "Jazz was invented for people to dance. So when you play jazz and people don't feel like dancing or moving the feet, you're getting away from the idea of music. Never lose that feeling of somebody wanting to dance; that is one of the characteristics of our music" (73).

In the very first chapter of her *Steppin' the Blues; The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance*, Jaqui Malone confirms this, linking African-based musics and the body with Kongo scholar, K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau's description of Africa as "the dancing continent"(9). Her subsequent discussion, Ramsey's book, and the work of other scholars in this area suggests that race music, as Ramsey describes it, is that aspect of African American music that has not succumbed to the (white?)

"modernist mind-body split" (Ramsey 73). Though once more, be clear: in no way does this unified body and mind denote the stereotype of "all black folks got rhythm," nor the Stepin Fetchit gestures of obsequiousness, or the self-mockery of old-time "coon shows." Rather the physical expressivity is an African-based trope that is encompassed in everything from Dizzy's enthusiastic moves to the choreographed ones of hip-hop artists today.

Not only in keeping a unified body/mind field did Afro-modernism make significant departures from the modernism of the largely Euro-American mainstream, but, as exemplified by the Dizzy Gillespie tune, "A Night in Tunisia," other departures were also made. Ramsey demonstrates that Dizzy further attempted to link his "…sonic experiment to an African past, to his South Carolinian not-so-distant past, and to an Afro-Cuban future for jazz music" (98). Here he participated in "…a new transatlantic cultural dialogue" (*ibid*) an observation which, to me, suggests the more recently developed (post-bebop) Atlantic World paradigm of such cultural critics as Paul Gilroy, who very specifically discusses transatlantic Black music in his *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (41 ff.). Further, Ramsey's discussion of the original jazz session where the "paradigmatic pianist of the bebop movement," Bud Powell, recorded "Un Poco Loco," emphasizes the plasticity of race music as it incorporates, often coopts, or works with, styles from afar. (Ramsey 128) Alas, the discussion is disappointingly short, for Ramsey merely tantalizes the reader with his allusion to Afro-internationalism and the "'Diasporic dance'" in Powell's "Poco Loco" solo work, but fails to develop it as thoroughly as this reader would like (127 – 130).

Nonetheless, the central trope of African American artistry, improvisation, turns "…on its ear one of the 'truths of the Western music tradition *and of modernism* [emphasis mine]" (Ramsey 96). In black musics this deviation also allows technology a rather distinctive place—from the extension of vinyl as a listening media via the LP record to tape recorders, to Jimi Hendrix' reverb, to the scratch and sampling techniques of much later black DJs, to the influence of Caribbean dub on the development of rap and later hip-hop, to name but a few examples. Further, "[o]ne notable shift occurred in the 'Race' division of popular music, where fragmentation took place, separating genres into different marketing categories" (100). What developed was a discourse of high- versus lowbrow music outside of, and sometimes within, the African American context and, as Ramsey is at pains to say, a sometimes dismissal of the more popular genres as not having the same musical "heft" as jazz, especially bebop (see 106 – 110).

Here we have the heart of Ramsey's discussion in the sense that he has been able to identify the several *fuentes*, sources, contributing to the development of race music, sometimes dismissed because it is popular, current, "hot" as opposed to "cool".[6] Can what's hot, what's pop, what's hip-hop be taken seriously as a music to be studied? Foregrounding James Brown as the virtuoso of funk and the herald of working class race music of the 60's, he shows us that this music can indeed be taken seriously and that it is far more complex than might be supposed. I just wish Ramsey had given us more. (What about Motown? What about Marvin Gaye? to name but the tip of the tip of the iceberg.) Nonetheless, following the dictum of The Last Poets, "Play that Funk…Play it good./ From the boys in the band to the boys in

the hood…" (Umar Bin Hasan 84), *Race Music* goes on admirably to tackle an analysis of what its author calls "the Age of Hip-Hop." For, finally, "…scholars no longer have to apologize or hide their passion for this [kind of vernacular] music…" (Ramsey 163 – 164)

Resplendent in its hybridity, hip-hop originated out of the New York City's urban "multiethnic collection of African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Latin American youth" (Ramsey 193). Egregiously, " [w]e're talking about style and spirit and the innovations that those things spawn. It's on TV; it's in the movies, sports and clothes and language and gestures and music" (Alexander 16). Its verbal force, rap, is a vocal performance which, alternatively, draws water from an ancient well[7] and has a long legacy in the African American community itself, referencing everything from black preaching styles to scat to Gil-Scott Heron and the Last Poets, double-dutch chants, etc. (165).[8] Riffing off of Gates' debunk of the commercialization of hip-hop as "guilts-ploitation," Ramsey introduces this muscial trope with a long discussion of "hip-hoppist"[9] films as illustrative of the post-industrial African American phenomenon of black "ambiguity about upward mobility." Outstanding are *Boyz N the Hood, New Jack City,* (168) and Spike Lee's Ur-film *Do the Right Thing* (172). Yes, these films might also be read as glamorizing the ghetto, but Ramsey's analysis of the sonic background in *Do the Right Thing* goes a little further. As opposed to a lulling score, "…Lee's use of rap music breaks that pattern. He positions it as an intrusive, embodied presence in the film….setting the tone for this cinematic treatment during the opening scene of the film…."(175). which in turn sets the stage for a performance of black vernacular dancing by actor, Rosie Perez. Neither *Do the Right Thing*'s themes nor its score has a place for a Hollywood bowl orchestra following the camera to the well-watered lawns and gently chiming doorbells of white suburbia.

If "African American music [demonstrably African at its core]…exists as a code of patterned sound and behavior by which human beings exchange experiences in a specific context," (Wilson 156) then it makes perfect sense that Ramsey invokes Gates' deeply African trope, Signifyin(g), as its modus operandi. (I just wish he had spent a little more time, too, on African musicology.) Signifyin(g) clearly applies to the modernist verbal virtuosity of hip-hop; and to characterize hip-hop only as Gangsta Rap is thus shortsighted in the extreme. Leaving no blood, in fact, Ramsey blows that stereotype—he notably does not even bother to engage it—by analyzing the impact of, collision with, and ultimate conversation between gospel and hip-hop styles in the mosaic approach of the 1992 *Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration.* In this short but most thought-provoking chapter he makes a final, persuasive argument : that W.E.B. DuBois' concept of double consciousness "no longer capture[s] the complexity, elasticity, or 'additiveness' [that] describe[s] black cultural production or identity in the late twentieth century." (Ramsey 199) I agree.

I will close anecdotally: when I was teaching in the U.S. two summers ago one of my students, hearing I was based in Istanbul, gave me a CD from his Turkish roommate. The first cut was "P. Diddy vs. Ibrahim Tatlises" and it was, indeed, a conversation between the Turkish pop singer and P. Diddy (a.k.a. Puff Daddy), the

rapstar. I have since searched high and low for that MP3, long since loaded into my own computer from a student-made CD, but I can find very little information—what album the cut is on, when it was made, or anything else. But I did find a website, in German, which had featured it at one time. In addition to the journey—from hip-hop New York youth culture to the hip-hop culture of Turkish migrant youth in Germany---the lyrics are telling. "Yo!" Puff Daddy gives the call. His beginning rap, the backbeat and the off-the-beat handclapping are superimposed over a Tatlises orchestration and the black body is immediately engaged: "I just wanna get you out on a dance floor." This is repeated several times; Tatlises kicks in—P. Diddy fades, the clapping continues, a few hip-hoppist melismas electronically reverbed come in, then Puff Daddy throws down the Signifyin(g) gantlet, "y'know what I'm saying? Respects to all the DJs, MCs, Producers out there…"—as an invitation to an aural, oral, Signifyin(g) duel with the skeptics who didn't think this kind of combination was possible. The plastic, improvising nature of black music offers an invitation —get out ona dance floor! —without losing its own identity or suggesting that another hide theirs. Hot dog! Ramsey's analysis is right!

And, ironically, as I write this and listen to Puff Daddy and Tatlises one more time, my song selection shifts to an Alan Lomax field recording of the gospel tune, "God's Unchanging Hand," with A. Burton and congregation handclapping in the same rhythmic pattern as P. Diddy, just slower. The proof of paternity is there.

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Notes:

[1] What I *do not* mean here is an observed "other" who then becomes a participant who observes. While this can be so, Rather, this reviewer affirms the significant Africanity of American culture in both the restrictive U.S. sense and the more inclusive continental sense. Being African American is most emphatically *not* exotic, "other", etc.

[2] Underscored in the spring of 2003, by the e-firing of albeit curmudgeonly Stanley Crouch from *Jazz Times* for suggesting that mediocre white musicians were being unduly favored by white critics.

[3] For persons not familiar with how race plays out in the Americas, the latter—the pleasures of group identity in the black community is critical: all too often, black culture is [mis]taught abroad as a culture of victimization rather than one of magnificent survival.

[4] On the other hand, critic Hurston Baker partially exonerates Locke for enlarging "'traditional African American discursive possibilities" (Ramsey 116).

[5] And, to quote Gates again, let us be reminded that "Signifyin(g) [itself] is a metaphor for textual revision." (88)

[6] I refer the reader to almost any of the works of Robert Farris Thompson for more elaboration on the African—Yoruba and Kongo—sources of these two concepts, as there is neither time nor space to do it here. Suffice it to say that, for example, the concept of "cool," as spiritually integral to African-based expression is especially evident in Yoruba art.

[7] To paraphrase the title of a piece by South African jazz artist, Abdullah Ibrahim.

[8] As a scholar of the diaspora in the Anglophone Caribbean, I would also add, dub poetry (Mikey Smith, tragically stoned to death in Kingston, Jamaica in 1983, Mutabaraka, Linton Quesi Johnson are names that come to mind.)

[9] I credit Kamau Brathwaite for that term in a personal communication, NYU 2003.