Alex Kurata

First year Seminar – 101

Garabedian

February 19, 2017

Essay #1: Black Musicians Struggled for Way *TWO* Long

I personally believe that Charles Hughes’s central thesis is supported best by the second chapter in the book “The Music and Mythology of the Memphis Sound”. The author states his thesis: “Throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s, triangle musicians both challenged and reinforced the racial perceptions surrounding their music and made little attempt to reconcile the contradiction.” and two lines later continues “Through their work, the musicians of the country-soul triangle became pivotal actors in the larger trajectory of U.S racial politics in the twentieth century”[[1]](#footnote-1). The musicians are not just getting their chance at being in the spotlight, but rather making influential moves to help progress preconceived notions of racial attitude of the country. Hughes creates a distaste for the ideal philosophy that being friends helps repair relations between different colors. Rather he makes a direct statement in the “Coda”[[2]](#footnote-2) of the book, citing Benjamin DeMott’s view of “Friendship Ideology”[[3]](#footnote-3) as the most accepted opinion of how history tells the story of racism. The second chapter in the book makes a clear distinction that the clearest way for black people to find success in the music industry is by profoundly laying the stepping stones for everyone to walk on, and they are as Hughes’s thesis states “The pivotal actors”.

The Memphis sound originates from the infatuated trance that comes from a musicians’ soul and the microphones in the recording studio. As Hughes shows us through chapter 2, the musical wonders that are born from the Memphis sound, all have something to prove, just some more than others. The black musicians are given such little chance in the world that is performance. Black musicians were given such few options in the world of popular music, that they had to subside in tiny venues for white patrons[[4]](#footnote-4). The internal bias of the industry completely blocked the devotion of these musicians. The taboo stricken sounds of the black artists created a newer genre of music branded “rhythm and blues” (R&B), a different more soulful feeling music[[5]](#footnote-5). Being in a realm of performance that these musicians guarded heavily, for a very generalized perspective, white people had longed to be a part of a success they did not have. These musicians felt aghast with one another in the genre, “Black musicians had long used stereotypes of inherit musicality as a kind of racial capital, and their concern about the presence of whites in the Memphis R&B scene can be understood as a desire to police this boundary and protect their professional turf”[[6]](#footnote-6). The black musicians are showing a perseverance through their plight in creating a better world of opportunity for themselves and each other, and are willing to bend of backwards to protect it.

Beyond the studio, in the musician’s eventual recognition, black musicians faced a ubiquitous feeling of tension in the booth. Beyond the central theme of racism in the country at the time, these musicians felt like they had to justify and prove themselves every step of the way. From being judged in the studio to being judged on the face of a record, to even just being a person plunged deeply in the epithet of discrimination[[7]](#footnote-7). Musicians didn’t really feel comfortable with each other. The common racial division in the world crafted a division in the dilute pool of artists that cut in the same studios.[[8]](#footnote-8) They had one thing in common, music, anything past that was a mystery, both race’s biases still persisted even though they wholly weren’t too different people. The distinct separation of both races still left a clear understanding that black musicians have more to prove than their white counterparts. As Hughes describes Jerry Wexler took Aretha Franklin to Muscle Shoals to a recording session and it became the “brilliant illustration of [southern soul music’s] limitations”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Aretha, a prodigy in her art, still had more to prove in a studio than any other artist there. She was presented with regality, and could not produce the sounds that Jerry Wexler had wanted.[[10]](#footnote-10) Most other (white) musicians could be looked upon with a sense of respect, but black artists needed to earn that respect, through no quantifiable matter other than impressions in the studio. Aretha’s original impression in the session, and a later racial disagreement caused her to. No second chances, no demeanor for more time, no realistic opportunity. She eventually found success cutting songs with another studio, and as Hughes describes her fortune in the industry “Aretha Franklin’s success represented the culmination of the Memphis sound as both a stylistic movement in the U.S. popular music and overarching ideology of cultural progress”.[[11]](#footnote-11) The latter half of the quote should sound a bit familiar hmm? Referring Hughes original thesis, the author is showing how musicians of the time overcame and persevered through so many obstacles in their way, paving a better path for more to follow, generating the eventual miscegenation between all musicians.

Now why does this chapter back up Hughes’ thesis better than any other? Although the book in its entirety generates a very sound structure to Hughes’ ideas, chapter two presents a very powerful argument backed by the clear struggle with racism. Other chapters capture the real disadvantage that colored people have in the music industry, but rather chapter two, captivates a time where black people had to nearly force themselves into music. As Hughes mentions in this chapter; the assassination of Martin Luther King plays a role in generating a distinct division in the country[[12]](#footnote-12). The country soul musicians are not exempt from any conflict in the world. This chapter captures the real effects of everything, music can be a very influential factor in all these people’s lives, but they are not immune to the world. The success that comes from these musicians had to overcome an age turned against them. They did not want to make friends but rather make a better future.

The pioneered sound that came from the country soul triangle, comes from the struggle of musicians fighting for each other. Charles Hughes’ thesis in this title, shows how these musicians are pioneering a music, but rather than doing it for the money or the fame, they are fighting to present a better cause. The black musicians, from Aretha Franklin to Percy Sledge to any other artist who was brave enough to break the stereotypes. The times were different, and people are always unwilling to change. So, to defy all precedent set, and to stand up and show that they are capable to shifting the racist attitude set in the country, is truly a sentiment to Hughes’ argument. These musicians are in Hughes’ words “pivotal actors in the larger trajectory of U.S racial politics in the twentieth century” .

# Bibliography:

Hughes, Charles. *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in The American South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

“Muscle Shoals”, Film, [Director](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS703US703&espv=2&biw=1025&bih=518&q=muscle+shoals+film+director&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAOPgE-LSz9U3KDcsM4rP0RLLTrbST8vMyQUTVimZRanJJflFANEPeIYmAAAA&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjK7KuL753SAhXGMSYKHS5OBDoQ6BMImAEoADAS): [Greg 'Freddy' Camalier](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS703US703&espv=2&biw=1025&bih=518&q=Greg+%27Freddy%27+Camalier&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAOPgE-LSz9U3KDcsM4rPUQKzc8tzkjNytMSyk6300zJzcsGEVUpmUWpySX4RAJJEmIcyAAAA&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjK7KuL753SAhXGMSYKHS5OBDoQmxMImQEoATAS), [Producers](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS703US703&espv=2&biw=1025&bih=518&q=muscle+shoals+film+producers&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAOPgE-LSz9U3KDcsM4rP0RLLTrbST8vMyQUTVgVF-SmlyalFAP2VjA8mAAAA&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjK7KuL753SAhXGMSYKHS5OBDoQ6BMIoAEoADAU): [Greg 'Freddy' Camalier](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS703US703&espv=2&biw=1025&bih=518&q=Greg+%27Freddy%27+Camalier&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAOPgE-LSz9U3KDcsM4rPUQKzc8tzkjNytMSyk6300zJzcsGEVUFRfkppcmoRAL7ebA4yAAAA&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjK7KuL753SAhXGMSYKHS5OBDoQmxMIoQEoATAU), [Stephen M. Badger](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS703US703&espv=2&biw=1025&bih=518&q=Stephen+M.+Badger&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAOPgE-LSz9U3KDcsM4rPUeIGsQ2NTeKzsvK0xLKTrfTTMnNywYRVQVF-SmlyahEAHqZAQDMAAAA&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjK7KuL753SAhXGMSYKHS5OBDoQmxMIogEoAjAU), 2013.

1. Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in The American South* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2015), 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An Epilogue of the authors thoughts and notions about the content in the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A term coined by Benjamin DeMott, compiling the view that being friends can repair relations between different races. *Ibid.*, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid.,* 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid.,* 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid.,* 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.,* 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid.,* 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid.,* 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid.,* 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid.,* 78/79. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid.,* 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)