ESSAY

The History of Song Is All About Outsiders

From ancient Greece to rock and roll, musical innovation has come from those on society's margins.

Clockwise from top left: Muddy Waters, Mick Jagger, Dr. Dre, B.B. King and Bob Dylan. **ILLUSTRATION:** PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: GLUEKIT, GETTY IMAGES (5)

By Ted Gioia

Updated Oct. 19, 2019 4:21 pm ET

Popular songs are big business nowadays, the driving force behind a $10 billion industry. But it all started in the humblest way possible. The first documented song in the English language came from the mouth of an illiterate cow herder. More than 1,300 years ago the Venerable Bede, a medieval scholar known as the "father of English history," wrote down the words sung by Caedmon, who tended animals at a Benedictine monastery in North Yorkshire. Bede marveled over the miracle that allowed an untutored servant to create such a remarkable hymn.

Caedmon's song might have seemed like a miracle, but in the long history of music this kind of surprise is actually the rule, not the exception. Innovative songs almost always come from outsiders—the poor, the unruly and the marginalized.

The scholars Milman Parry and Albert Lord confirmed this fact in the 1930s, when they set out to trace the origins of ancient epics like the Iliad and the Odyssey. Their research took them to Bosnia, where they met Avdo Mededović, an illiterate peasant farmer they dubbed the "Yugoslav Homer." Accompanying himself on a one-string instrument, Mededović performed a single story-song that took seven days to complete and went on for 12,311 lines—roughly the same length as the Odyssey. He performed entirely from memory, aided by patterned improvisations of the kind used by jazz musicians.

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Parry and Lord later declared that every one of the great singers of tales they encountered during their field research was illiterate. The ability to sing an epic poem was not only a skill that couldn't be taught in college, but a formal education would almost certainly destroy it.

Other researchers have found similar performers, almost always among the poor and outcast. Song collector John Lomax was so impressed with James "Iron Head" Baker, discovered during a 1933 visit to record prisoners at Huntsville Penitentiary in Texas, that he later described him as a "black Homer." Or consider the case of the Russian epic singer Vasily Shchegolenok, who amazed Leo Tolstoy in the 1870s with his storytelling and influenced the famous novelist's own writing style; or the herder Beatrice Bernardi, who astonished the famous art critic John Ruskin in Tuscany in the 1880s with her ability to sing lengthy tales by memory.

History books sometimes acknowledge the "low" origins of our more popular genres of music. The association of musical innovation with enslaved people, for instance, is well known in the Americas, where the descendants of slaves shaped the provocative sounds of jazz, blues, samba, salsa, reggae, soul music and numerous other genres. But in many other instances, such origins are obscured or ignored. Most music students are taught, for instance, the Lydian and Phrygian modes, invented by the ancient Greeks, without ever realizing that these terms came from the ethnicities of the enslaved performers who created these sounds.

Likewise, the love-song tradition associated with the troubadours of southern France actually originated with female slave singers in the Islamic world. These songs entered Europe via the Iberian peninsula, and their distinctive poetic themes were adopted by the nobility, who often sang about being enslaved to love. The idea that a feudal lord could be a slave seems incongruous, until you realize that actual slaves originated this style of singing.

A Greek vase from 380 B.C. depicting a musical contest. PHOTO: ALAMY

As these examples suggest, such visionary outsiders are eventually imitated and assimilated by cultural elites. Sometimes, if they live long enough, they become elites themselves. In the 1960s, many parents were shocked by their first encounters with the Beatles and the Rolling Stones—but those bad boys eventually were knighted and turned into Sir Paul McCartney and Sir Mick Jagger. Bob Dylan was a leader of the counterculture in 1966 but honored as the Nobel laureate in literature in 2016. The album "Straight Outta Compton," by hip-hoppers N.W.A., was banned by many retailers and radio stations in 1988 and was even denounced by the FBI. But in 2017, the album was chosen by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Recording Registry for its cultural merit.

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These humble origins can be traced in almost all song genres. In the early days of the U.S. music industry, record labels had to undertake field trips to the most impoverished areas of the South whether they were seeking out blues musicians for black audiences or country stars for white audiences. And the same linkage can be seen in other parts of the world, in the history of Jamaican reggae, Brazilian samba, Argentine tango, Greek rebetiko and a host of other world-changing song styles.

Alas, the very process of legitimization involves distortion—obscuring the origins of music and repurposing it to meet the needs of the powerful. Today, the most popular songs still come from outsiders—just look at hip-hop or rock or R&B or outlaw country music and see how the same pattern plays out in different contexts. Whether we are dealing with the troubadours, the Beatles or Snoop Dogg, an officially cleansed public image is promulgated while the disreputable past is shuffled offstage and out of view.

The institutions that sanction and preserve musical culture will never be able to guide us, however, to music that is new or different. The purified musical heritage that they preserve may be highly respectable, but it leaves out too much.

Outsiders are especially well positioned to disrupt old traditions and create new ones, for the simple reason they have the least allegiance to the prevailing manners and attitudes of the societies in which they live. In music, we crave this disruption and the excitement it brings. Again and again, we turn to bohemians, rebels and others who operate on the margins of society to provide us with songs we can't find elsewhere.

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For the same reason, we ought to celebrate diversity—not because it's fashionable or politically expedient but because it brings creative outsiders into the musical ecosystem. We often fear strangers arriving in our midst, but they serve as catalysts that spur new forms of artistic expression. Just look at the port cities and multicultural communities, from Lesbos to Liverpool, that have played a key role in the history of song.

In a sense, the internet has turned all of our neighborhoods into virtual port cities, giving us immediate access to a world of sound outside the purview of powerful interests. We shouldn't take that for granted: It's almost certainly where the next musical revolution will begin.

—This essay is adapted from Mr. Gioia's new book, "Music: A Subversive History," published by Basic Books.