Music of the Common Tongue

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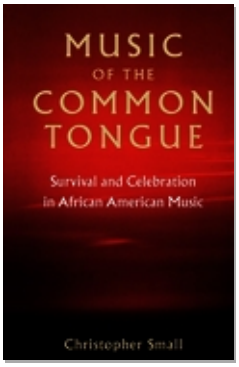

Chapter 14

ON RECORDS AND REWARDS

I suggested in the preceding chapter that to judge modern popular music solely from recordings is to gain a very partial and even distorted view of it. Records, and the recording industry, have clearly had a profound influence on the history of all western musical performance in this century, and the Afro-American tradition is no exception, but it cannot be said either that they have entirely determined what happened in any part of that tradition, or that what can be heard on records gives a complete picture of it. In this chapter I wish to examine some of the effects of recording, and the role the music industry has played in Afro-American musicking.

To this end, I intend making what seems to me a reasonable assumption, that the nature of recorded music and, in particular, its function in human life, remains the same as that of 'live' musicking; to put it briefly, it remains a performance, in which the relationships which go to make up the participants' sense of identity are explored, affirmed and celebrated. This would appear to go against the nature of a gramophone record, which is indisputably an object, but in fact nothing essential has changed from live performance. We have first to ask what recording does to a performance, by interposing between performers and listeners a process of electronic transformation of the sound vibrations into ripples in a groove or into electromagnetic impulses in a tape. We shall leave aside for the moment the commercial aspects of the operation, which, important as they have become, are not intrinsic to it.

In the first place, recording does not capture the whole performance as we have observed it; only the sounds made by the performers are reproduced, leaving all other aspects of the performance to the imagination of the listener. Those sounds

are extended by the recording as far as is desired in both time and space; they are made available to those who cannot be present either for geographical or for temporal reasons — or, indeed, for social reasons, since they are made available also to those who are unwilling or frightened to go into the place of the actual performance (this of course applies as much to classical performances as to low-down blues or punk rock). If the sounds are to be recreated as a performance in the mind of the listener, that is to say, if listeners are to be able to construct from them that set of social relationships which we have seen to be the real function of a musical performance, imaginative work has to be done on them. It is for this reason that we cannot obtain the complete meaning of a record from its audible content only, any more than we can from the sound-content alone of any other performance, or indeed from a score.

Let us look at it first from the performer's point of view. To record the sounds of a performance is to fix them in a way never before known in the history of human musicking; not even the fixing that occurs in the pages of a score is so complete. This means that the performers have to decide much more carefully than for live performance which part of their repertoire, and which of the large number of possible ways of performing it, best represents them, and they are thus obliged to engage in a greater degree of premeditation and preparation. Musicians and their listeners seem to have accepted over the years of recording that some sacrifice of spontaneity and excitement is necessary in order to obtain the cleanest and most polished performance, one that will stand up to repeated playings. The fixing is coupled with the limitations of duration that the medium imposes. For the classical musician, accustomed to the pre-existing limits of the score, and to the predictable length that this implies, the durational limits of recording are no great problem; the relation between the duration intended by the composer and that permitted by the recording is easily worked out in advance, and breaks made where necessary in the performance. But for the Afro-American musician, to the extent that the performance is normally improvised, and depends for its duration on such factors as audience response, the

limits of even the LP record, let alone the earlier three-minute, 78-rpm disc (the limits of the CD medium have yet to be explored) can be a Procrustes' bed. As a remarkable account by William Ferris Jr has shown, blues performance in its original habitat — a gathering of a few friends at home over cans of beer — is a freewheeling affair, interspersed with stories and jokes and lasting continuously through the evening: 'Throughout the evening there is a constant flow of verbal interplay between the singer . . . and his audience . . . the role of 'performer' shifts repeatedly from the singer to his audience and back to the singer.'[1]

The actual blues sung in Ferris's transcription were all taken from records, confirming the idea of Harold Courlander which I quoted earlier, of 'feedback' from records to 'folk' performance and back again, but the blues sung here were fragmentary, frequently elided and combined freely with one another. On records, on the other hand, the performer has to make his or her point within the brief timespan (the three-minute convention seems to have outlived the limit imposed by 78-rpm records), and therefore has to move at a speed quite different from the leisurely build up that is possible under live conditions of that kind. The three-minute format was standard for all kinds of Afro-American musicking up to the coming of the LP record, and for a long time after that it was only jazz musicians who took advantage of the twenty or so minutes permitted by the LP to expand and take their time. The favoured type of record for rock'n'roll remained the 7-inch, 45-rpm single; it was the free-form improvisation favoured by San Francisco musicians that first made use of the potential of LPs in the rock field.

It is common today to find a popular song issued in at least three recorded forms: a three-minute 7-inch, 45-rpm single for home listening and for jukeboxes, a somewhat longer track on an LP, and a twelve-inch, 45-rpm version which extends the performance to ten or fifteen minutes and was developed for use in discotheques, where dancers like to hear the music over a longer timespan. These different versions are not made during the recording sessions, where, indeed, it is likely that they have never existed at all, but by permutating during the editing process the material that is on the tapes. The fact that

these different versions can be made emphasises the music's nature as being essentially performance, and the expansion and contraction of that performance to suit the needs of different kinds of occasion is entirely in accordance with the procedures of improvising musicians in the Afro-American tradition.

Another factor that changes the musicians' performance in the recording studio is the need to imagine rather than experience their relationship with an audience; without that response they often feel they are playing into a void that gives them no help at all. Many performances, of course, are put together in the editing process, piece by piece, much as a film is constructed, and many musicians do not, or have learnt not to, mind too much the lack of direct communication. But there is always a loss of excitement and 'lift' that no amount of studio technology can conceal, and what is to be heard on record with some musicians does nothing like justice to their live performance. The practice of making recordings in front of an audience, sometimes in the studio itself, can ameliorate this situation, but it has its difficulties also. For practically all artists making a record is a matter of balancing spontaneity against accuracy and clarity.

For the listener, on the other hand, the sounds heard when a record is played have to be fleshed out by the imagination before the illusion can be created of a performance that has any meaning; somehow the ideal society has to be created, in no matter how imaginary a form, if any emotional experience is to be gained. Again, this is not difficult for the classical-music listener, for not only are the relationships of the concert hall already formal and distant because the listener in the hall is in any case alone with the sounds, but also he or she needs to do a good deal of imaginative work before the impersonal surroundings can be transformed into the composers' imaginary Iberias and Vltavas, and the prosaic-looking musicians who are impassively bowing, blowing and banging on the platform can become Don Juans, Romeos and Juliets and Polovtsian dancers or the heroes and heroines of those abstract dramas which are symphonies and concertos. All that the listener requires of the record, therefore, is that it preserve unchanged, or possibly enhanced, the sound-

relationships of the concert hall or opera house (I have more than once heard listeners who, having got used to the sound of a symphony orchestra on modern recordings, have expressed disappointment at the way it sounds on first hearing it in the concert hall). And of course, as audiences are used to sitting still and being passive, having never considered the possibility of influencing a performance or experiencing the mutual stimulation of performers and audience, they do not miss these things on the record.

The society brought into existence by a performance in the Afro-American tradition, on the other hand, is made with the active collaboration of both parties, and it is an important part of the business of every performer to establish a relationship with the listeners that is close, warm and, above all, personal (the fact that in many cases this closeness and warmth are not genuine but are faked does not diminish the strength of this ideal but rather pays tribute to it). The very uniqueness of vocal and instrumental tone cultivated by Afro-American performers has contributed to this personal feeling, even more so since the days when records were made by shouting into an acoustic collector horn, giving what was probably the initially accidental effect, produced by the necessary disposition of the musicians in relation to the horn, of having the singer's voice sound closer than the instrumentalists. With the flexibility bestowed by the microphone, and, later, by multiple microphones and multi-track recording, it has become possible to play with the perspective of the sounds, placing some close up and some at a distance, in a way that would be impossible in a live situation; the art of crooning, practised with such success by Bing Crosby and the young Frank Sinatra, was an early example of creating the illusion of physical presence in this way. Modern recording techniques can bring into existence, by manipulation of the sound-perspectives, a whole theatre of the imagination in which the listener can imagine a drama played out by him or herself with the artists, generally of course the lead singer, the physicality and individuality of whose vocal presence (what Roland Barthes called the 'grain' of the voice) invites a response which may be completely independent of what the artist is singing about. It is not only a singer that can evoke such responses;

great instrumentalists like Lester Young (who insisted that his solos 'tell a story'), Charlie Parker, Jimi Hendrix or Jerry Lee Lewis can equally create the illusion of presence and direct communication with the listener even though they are separated not only by space and time but also by a complex technological process.

It was, and is, a technique; it does not happen naturally, that trick of creating the illusion of physical presence in a medium that is not naturally sympathetic to it. It seems to have been mastered first by black blues artists, who grasped very quickly the fact that the physicality of the performance, which is necessary if the listener is to extract any meaning from it, must be simulated in the recording process. There is, clearly, nothing wrong with such simulation, any more than there is in the simulation of the concert hall or the opera house on a classical record; it is simply a way of making it possible for the social relationships of the live performance to be recreated in the listener's imagination. The listener is of course not bound to do simply this, but is free to use the imagination in any way he or she likes; thus it is possible to imagine oneself on the podium of a great concert hall, conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, or lying in bed next to the singer who is singing to oneself alone. The more private the listening the more possible it is to indulge in such solipsism, to create a world in which only the singer and the listener exist. Alternatively, it is possible to bring into existence new kinds of community, such as that described by Paul Willis, in which leather-clad bike boys cement their culture and community in transport caffs with jukebox-played records of 1950s rock 'n' roll (it has to be on seven-inch singles — LP transcriptions will not do); as Willis says: 'For them the loud strident tones of the music symbolically held and generated all the important values — movement, noise, confidence. The very air was fuller and more homely to breathe, vibrated by *their* music.'[2]

On the whole, however, listening to records is not a particularly sociable activity, but tends to be done either solitarily or in small groups (it can cement a society of two, as would-be seducers know well). The sight of a roomful of people sitting and staring into space while a symphonic work is played on a record player seems somehow irresistably

funny, a caricature of all the intrinsic oddness of the concert-hall ritual. The tendency for larger groups of people to use recorded music simply as a background for social intercourse (itself a valuable social function of music, and not to be despised) is not a result of corruption by Muzak; on the contrary, Muzak owes its ubiquity to the lack of social focus which is inherent in the performance of recorded music. Perhaps this is why the habit has grown up in British pubs of having the record player or jukebox turned up so loud that everyone has to shout at full voice to make themselves heard above it.

The one type of social activity for which recorded music can and does act very successfully as focus is dancing. It is interesting that early advertisements for the gramophone and for records made much of this function, and, more specifically, that it was much used among rural black Americans, of whom, in the 1920s, 'between 10 and 20 per cent had phonographs, and a larger proportion had records.'[3] Their records, virtually all made by black musicians, were greatly treasured in families that often had little else to treasure, both as an expression of racial pride in the artists and as a source of music for dance. The communal function of recorded music is discussed by Titon:

> '. . . 19 per cent of the black homes in Macon and Green Counties, Georgia, had phonographs early in the 1920s. The families listened and danced to records made by black blues singers, jazz musicians, preachers and gospel singers, which were aimed directly at the black buying market. Neighbors without phonographs bought records and played them on their friends' machines. Since the record players were actuated by spring motors, the small models could be taken outside to picnics, parties and other social affairs, where music was popular and local singers were unattainable.'[4]

Dancing is itself a powerful tool for the affirmation and celebration of common values, and can thus reinforce the relatively weak society created by a recorded performance. The most intense contemporary use of recorded music in this way is in discotheques, 'focal points, contained environments,'

say the authors of a book on New York's discos, 'with a common music, where people gather together to do whatever people do in places where they come together to dance and celebrate, to entertain and be entertained . . . As you enter, electricity shoots through the air in all directions. The energy flows from the music and the lights and the crowd, from inside yourself . . . Perhaps you are excited knowing that you are dressed in a certain way, in a way that you have chosen to present youself to the world that is this particular disco . . . The music and mix are constantly changing. A deejay tries to sense and physically see what brings the crowds, what keeps them shifting and continually building on the dance floor . . . Each night there is a peak of disco experience, a peak of excitement when the music is most stimulating . . . The peak is like a sexual climax when everything and everyone flow together, a moment when time seems erased. Before this peak, there may be lesser crests and dips, oscillations in energy and excitement. After the peak, the most chaotic, individualistic and generally frenzied moments of the disco night tend to happen. The moment itself is indistinguishable while you are experiencing it.'[5]

There is clearly more to the task of the disco deejay than simply putting on records and ensuring a continuous flow of sound; to take the inanimate objects that are gramophone records and combine them in improvised sequence in such a way as to take hold of a crowd of strangers and turn them into a unified group, to catch the mood of the occasion, to enhance and reinforce it, as an art that partakes of the nature of musical creation. The way that certain black disco deejays in Harlem and The Bronx, as well as certain Jamaican sound-system men, developed this art further and in a highly unexpected manner is the story of rap and of toasting, the first of which I have already discussed; apparently independent in their origins but now intertwining in the discos of New York and London, the two arts are manifestations of the black genius for humanizing the mechanical in surprising ways, a genius that can be seen, too, in the spray-painted designs on the cars of the New York subway trains.

It will thus be clear that, whatever changes the recording of musical sounds has brought about, it has not changed the

fundamental nature or social function of the musical act. The gramophone record or recording tape is an inanimate object containing coded information which can be turned into sounds by putting it into movement on the appropriate apparatus, but to turn those sounds into music, which is to say a performance, requires imaginative work on the part of the listener; it is this that ensures that musical meaning resides not in the recording alone but in the interplay between the sounds coming from it and the listener's imagination. Thus the meaning of a record is not determined, any more than is the meaning of a musical composition; there is always room for creative response on the listener's part which can turn the most banal of recorded sounds into a significant experience. In this respect a record has much in common with other vernacular art-objects. A greeting card, for example, may in itself, by high-art standards, be banal and tasteless, but the act of sending and receiving it can be moving and beautiful. It will of course be more moving if it is the most beautiful card the sender can find — but still it is the act of choice that is treasured; the card is only the instrument of that choice. As in all human life, things themselves are important only in so far as they facilitate or obstruct desired actions; the opposite belief is the prevailing heresy of modern industrial society and thus, of course, of its art.

Records have a dual nature, in that, while they are undoubtedly things, and things with a saleable value, they are bought in order to turn them back into actions, that is to say performances, and for most people they are valued only so long as the performance they carry is itself valued; only the archivist values them as things in themselves. The high turnover rate in popular music as a whole means that there is a high rate of discard of old records, while in the classical field, and, to a lesser extent, jazz (reflecting perhaps the closer relation which we have noted it bears to classical music) there is a tendency to hold on to them. This is in line with the presumed permanent value of works of classical music and with the tendency to historicism which we have noted. The attitude of the classical-music enthusiast towards recording is encapsulated in an enthusiastic comment by the American historian Jacques Barzun:

> 'This mechanical civilization of ours has performed a miracle for which I for one cannot be too grateful: it has, by mechanical means, brought back to life the whole repertory of Western music — not to speak of acquainting us with musics of the East. Formerly, a fashion could bury the whole musical past except for a few dozen works arbitrarily selected . . . [Today] neglected or lesser composers come into their own and keep their place. In short the whole literature of one of the arts has sprung into being — it is like the Renaissance rediscovering the ancient classics and holding them fast by means of the printing press. It marks an epoch in Western intellectual history.'[6]

I shall not comment on this passage, other than to suggest that the epoch which the writer hails may be one of decline rather than of development: the phrase 'holding them fast' seems to sum up the enterprise. In any case, the average buyer of Afro-American music — and indeed the average Afro-American musician — would probably find in it little point of contact with his or her experience and interests. For such a musician, or record buyer, records are a way of extending the performance in space rather than in time. The past is gone, and posterity can look after itself; what matters, what has always mattered, in Afro-American musicking, is the validity of the present experience.

Up to now I have been writing as if records were made only to serve the purposes of the musicians who play for them and the listeners who listen to them. But it is of course impossible today to ignore the third party to the transaction: the record company and others who stand to make money from the manufacture and sale of records. There are many excellent accounts of the ways in which the financial structure of the record industry affects what musicians play and what listeners get to hear, and I do not intend to duplicate them here, but some comments are necessary. It is significant that most stories about the horrendous practices of record companies are confined to the popular field; we read much of the way in which recording groups such as The Monkees, The Bay City Rollers, and, more recently, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, were put together by record companies or producers without

regard for musical criteria in order to extract the pocket money of teenagers, who are assumed to be so bemused and brainwashed by the publicity that they are incapable of distinguishing good from bad, but little is said of similar practices in the classical field. An account of the role played by Decca Records and by the publishing firm of Boosey and Hawkes in the career of Benjamin Britten, or by Deutsche Grammophon in those of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Herbert von Karajan would make equally interesting reading.

If the practices of record companies in classical music are less outrageous than in Afro-American, it is largely because in classical music, which accounts for less than one-tenth of record sales over-all, there is less money at stake. But there is another factor; although the classical-music market is small by comparison with the huge sales of popular records, the recording industry's control over that market is much more assured, and we need not imagine that the record companies are not aware that there is an extensive, if informal, propaganda machine at work on their behalf, staffed by critics, schoolteachers and classical-music radio executives, both affirming the social prestige (a classic advertising ploy) of classical music and inculcating the idea that there are certain works (eg the symphonies of Beethoven, the concertos of Mozart) which every 'serious' music lover ought to have in his collection of records. There is thus a market which may be small in comparison with that for, say, David Bowie, but it is steady; further, each work can be sold over and over again, not only in new interpretations (often by the same artist) but also as new technological resources become available; first, electrical recording, then LP, then stereo, quad and finally (so far) CD. New 'authentic' performances on period instruments, a bonus from the musicologists, whose labours are often financed by record companies, are also good for business.

Classical records are advertised and marketed like any other commodity. Here, in an unguarded moment, speaks the advertising sales manager of a British commercial television company: 'The British public is not ignorant or effete in its taste. It's just not well enough advised. People don't want to be embarrassed by going into a specialist record shop and not

knowing what to buy. TV is a natural to give that advice . . . The emphasis at first is of course on the music and not on the artists — although certain classical artists would go down very well indeed. Then in time people become fussy — look at confectionery and the amount of advertising (and consumption) now of relatively sophisticated products like After Eight [chocolates]. Television also reaches the immense A/B, C1 market, and that's a very important one for classical records.'[7]

A musician, of whatever kind or persuasion, who wants to make a career in his art is bound at some point to do business with the record industry; since the early 1950s records have replaced publication as the dominant mode of dissemination of musical compositions, and it is the representatives of the record industry who control musicians' access to a wider public. Because of the clear-cut division of labour in classical music, and because the musical work to be recorded is already in existence, the classical artist finds himself speaking the same language as the record executive; contracts are drawn up and fees paid according to a system, and with the protection of a copyright law, that has precisely this situation in mind.

A vernacular artist, on the other hand, especially one working in the potentially lucrative field of popular music, is from the moment of entering the record executive's office in a vulnerable position. Not only is the division of labour by no means clear-cut, not only is there a good deal of traffic in material of which nobody is sure who (if anyone) is the owner, but in many cases the musical work comes into existence only in the recording studio or the cutting room; further, the record company may insist on assigning to an artist or a group one of its staff producers who may completely remake the performance. As many people have to be paid, all this contributes to the artists' being ripped off; they may well find that they have signed a contract which makes them responsible for the expenses of a recording session, or that they are to be paid a flat fee only, with no access to royalties no matter how successful the record they make; composers of songs are liable to be paid little or nothing for songs made successful by major recording artists (the black bluesman Arthur Crudup received no royalties at all for *That's All Right Mama*, Elvis Presley's first

record). The original recording artist, who is often black, may have to sit by and watch another, often white, musician make money and reputation by covering his or her songs and even sometimes his or her very style of performance. Here, for instance, is the experience of two major black musicians in the recording industry on which they are forced to rely for the dissemination of their performances. First, Billie Holiday: 'My friends are always telling me, "You should be rich, Lady, I just paid ten bucks for a couple of your LPs." I always say, I'm grateful you like my songs — even those of twenty years ago. I have to tell them it ain't going to bring me a quarter. I made over 270 songs between 1933 and 1944, but I didn't get a cent of royalties in any of them.'[8] And, second, Ornette Coleman: 'Ornette made eight more records, a total [in 1966] of ten, but as yet he says he has never received a royalty cheque large enough to pay his phone bill. In fact, one company informed him that he owed *them* money . . . A reputable critic has said that one record of Ornette's was reissued three times, and had a gross sale of 25,000 copies.'[9]

Even the most commercially successful artists receive only a small proportion of what their talents and hard work have earned: 'Frank Sinatra kept only 6.66 per cent of the $11 million he earned between 1941 and 1946 . . . Even The Beatles got only 8 per cent of the profit of LP sales as performers, while EMI got 40 per cent and the retailers 26 per cent. On singles, the artists earned only 2 per cent!'[10] Not even The Beatles could buck that system. It is in fact possible to propose a rule of thumb, that if an artist or group makes a lot of money it is only after a lot of other people have made a lot more money first. Thus, Elvis Presley may have become a millionaire, but 'the sale of Presley's records soon accounted for nearly 25% of Victor's overall sales, and carried the company through the latter part of the fifties, much as The Beatles were to carry Capitol [*with their US sales alone!*] in later years.'[11]

I say this, not merely to show how badly record companies can treat popular artists, given the chance — that has all been well documented elsewhere — but to absolve the artists from necessary complicity in the system that abuses them and their talents. They have to expect to be ripped off; the best that they

can hope for is, first, that sales will be sufficient to provide, out of the small proportion that comes back to them, a reasonable sum, and, second, they will attain a strong enough position vis-à-vis the record company to gain a measure of control over what they play, how they play and how their records are presented to the public. Musicians of all persuasions, of course, enter the profession for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from, at one extreme, a pure desire to make money (music, like sport, can form an avenue of escape from poverty), or the wish to enter the charmed world — mostly fictitious — of the famous and glamorous, or to enjoy power, to, at the other extreme, the pure desire to make music in a particular way and to have it disseminated as widely as possible. Most musicians' reasons are a mixture of any or all of these; few are averse to making money from their art but most are just as concerned as other people to make a decent living, as well as to do the job as they think it ought to be done. The motives of record executives, on the other hand, are a mixture of cupidity, cynicism, racism, assumptions and prejudices about popular music, with genuine enthusiasm, knowledge and even love of the music. What is finally released to the public is the result of negotiation between these factors.

There is, however, no need to assume that such negotiation will result in a mere compromise between the opposing forces of 'art' as represented by the musicians, and of 'commerce' as represented by the management. It is, after all, not inconceivable that both parties might have an interest in producing something that is as good as possible, even if they do not always agree on what the word 'good' means. The assumption that there is a necessary opposition, commonly made by highbrow critics (and especially by Marxist critics, of whom Theodor Adorno was the worst but by no means the only offender), is based on a further assumption which equates popular taste with debased taste, portraying 'the masses' as bemused victims of the ruthless publicity machines of record companies and others, and as zeroing in unerringly on all that is worst in their products. The worse it is, they assume, the better it will sell. Here, for instance, is one of Britain's best-known high-culture salesmen writing in the London *Times*: 'If

enough people are fed for long enough on a diet of bread and milk — and, moreover, mass-produced sliced bread and sour milk — they will cease to believe that there is more robust fare available, quite apart from the danger that their teeth will fall out, thus making it impossible for them to eat the meat even if they could be persuaded to try it. I could, of course, declare that since *I* know the difference between art and rubbish I don't care how many people are unaware of it; but I do not like to think that all that yelling and lies and public relations and salesmanship and fiddling and puffing are making it impossible, or at least very difficult, for millions to reach out for art who might otherwise do so.'[12] For this writer, 'art', as the remainder of his article makes clear, means the symphonies of Mozart.

I have no doubt that record company executives frequently wish that the high-culture demonographers' nightmare *were* true, that the entire world of popular music *were* inhabited by a single taste public conditioned to accept anything that they cared to foist upon it. But even though such ideas form the basis of the music policies of the British Broadcasting Corporation, of which I shall have more to say later, and of the Arts Council of Great Britain, not to mention the educational system, the very statistics show their absurdity. The record companies themselves base their calculations on the assumption that only about one record in ten will ever make any money, while, according to Simon Frith, one writer has calculated that 'more than sixty per cent of all singles released are never played by anyone.'[13] It would appear that the marketing strategies adopted by record companies, from radio interviews to payola, from personal appearances and tours to promo copies, are responses more to failure than to success in controlling the musical tastes of the majority of record buyers.

The trouble, from the record companies' point of view, is that the popular-music public is not monolithic at all, but consists of a very extensive network of overlapping publics of differing tastes, each based on a shared sense of identity which itself may be subtle, and unexpected to the lover of classical music (it is not necessarily even class-linked), which interlock and overlap in often surprising ways, as well as changing

rapidly over time (it is, after all, in the musical sense a non-literate public); all of this renders it highly unpredictable. Further, musicians themselves have as a rule a clear sense of their own identity and that of those to whom they want or expect to appeal, and while they like to think their records will sell a large number of copies their commitment to that is not quite of the same order as that of the companies themselves (I supppose that is what 'selling out' really means to a musician: the exchange of one's own sense of identity for that of the company), who don't give a damn who they sell to as long as they sell. Thus, while the final aim, or at least dream, of the big record companies is of a single unified world-wide public taste, musicians know instinctively, and probably not even consciously, that this is not only not desirable but not even possible; the nearest thing to it is the public for classical music, but that is another matter.

That this should be so is not surprising, for, regardless of the technological and commercial processes which intervene between performer and listener when a performance is recorded, the fundamental motivation for participating in a musical act remains the same as it has always been: to affirm, explore and celebrate the participants' sense of who they are. That professional musicians have always had to negotiate a position between their own values and those of whoever is paying them is a matter which I discussed earlier, and nothing in the recording process changes that; since the beginning of civilization money has been an element in that negotiation, and today, when society as a whole is governed as never before by money values, and who you are is to a great extent how rich you are, it is not surprising if money is built into the identities of many musicians, both classical and vernacular. While the love of wealth is not necessarily an amiable character trait, it is one that is today greatly encouraged by the leaders of our society, and at least in many popular musicians it is fully integrated into the public personality; it is upfront, as they say, and not hidden behind a mask of disinterested devotion to art. This integration means that art and commerce are not necessarily in opposition; it is noticeable how many of today's popular musicians, even those who, as they are quite willing to

tell us, devote themselves single-mindedly to the pursuit of fame and money, manage to do so through songs and performances that are well-crafted, at worst competent and at best memorable. There is, after all, nothing new in this; many of what are today regarded as great masterpieces of western music (Mozart's *Requiem* is only the first that comes to mind) were made strictly and explicitly for money. That highbrow critics should today damn popular music because it is made for money is special pleading which rests on the security of an art that is insulated from the brute realities of survival by state and private subsidy, as well as on the assumption that those who pay for their own musicking are unable to distinguish good from bad. It is not a mistake that is made by vernacular musicians themselves; those who do make the mistake of despising their audiences, to the point of deciding that anything will do for them, very quickly learn to their cost that it will not.

It all means, in the end, that vernacular musicians today, even the most 'commercial' of them, make music for the same reasons as musicians have always done, and that, furthermore, they maintain their identity, as musicians have always done, in a process of negotiation with those who pay them. Unlike the classical musician, whose ultimate source of support is the state, or those close to the centres of state power, the vernacular musician is paid, finally, by those who want to hear him or her; the power of record companies, as of radio networks, publishers, entrepreneurs, managers and promoters, lies in their ability to bring about or prevent, and to influence the manner of, the encounter between performers and listeners. But only performers and listeners, between them, can realize that encounter, and that is the source of *their* power.

It is interesting to consider two ways in which record companies, as well as radio networks and other interested parties, do attempt to impose some order on the situation; these are the star system and the imposition of categories onto the endless variety of vernacular musicking. Both of these devices involve manipulation of musicians' and listeners' sense of identity in a particular way and both are, up to a point, successful.

A star, of course, is not just a good player or singer; rather, it is an artist who has the ability to project a kind of personality, which is usually simplified and two-dimensional, and onto which a large number of those watching and listening can project their own personalities, their desires and their aspirations. From the point of view of the purveyor of music as product, the 'star system' means ease of marketing, with an easily recognizable and stable product, no matter whether the star's name is Michael Jackson, John Coltrane, James Galway or Herbert von Karajan. The buyers know what to expect and the company knows what its market is. This is the rationale behind those cover versions of rock'n'roll records which were made in the mid-1950s by members of the major American record companies' stable of contract artists; Pat Boone's version of *Long Tall Sally* might have been a pale shadow of Little Richard's, but it was stable, predictable and controllable, unlike the unnerving and unpredictable volcano which was the original.

For the fans, a star is a means to another end, a tool in the development of their sense of who they are, to be used for as long as he or she is useful for this purpose. One writer, describing her teenage experiences as a fan of the Bay City Rollers, a British group of the early 1970s (one reference book calls them 'the epitome of a mediocre pop group turned into superstars by astute management')[14], said: 'Our real obsession was with ourselves; in the end, the actual men behind the posters had very little to do with it all.'[15] The rock critic Dave Rimmer, commenting on this, says, 'In the classic model, of which both the Rollers and Duran Duran are examples, what the actual men behind the posters *do* have to do with it involves a convoluted process of both desire and identification. Sure, the fans drool over the man of the dream. But as long as he's a cut-out-and-keep graven image rather than an actual flesh and blood presence, in their dreams is precisely where he remains. This distance is undoubtedly part of the attraction. It's safe. It allows an outlet for all the fans' newly-discovered sexual energy while at the same time allowing them to cling a little longer to an ideal of romance and true love. Sooner or later the stark realities of burgeoning adulthood will come creeping in, but for the time being, a poster does fine.'[16]

There is much that is questionable in such easy assurance, not the least of which is the assumption that the star will be male and the fan female. The author does, however, make it clear that the fan is actively involved in his or her own fanship, making what he or she wants of the image that is presented, a point that is made also by Simon Frith: 'The usual theory is that the star is an extraordinary fellow who brings excitement and glamour into the lives of his fans, ordinary people, but the process works the other way around too; stars, dull professionals, are made glamorous by the imagination and wit and excitement of their fans.'[17]

The trouble is that the star system imposes severe limitations on the potential for growth of both stars and fans, not only reducing their interaction to a small number of stylized gestures, and distancing fans from the realization of their own creative potential, but also requiring that the image projected by the star be stable enough over a period of time to permit full exploitation of that identification. An abrupt change of style, which is a natural event in human growth, or a change which is not immediately comprehensible, can lead to rejection — a fact which has posed problems for many stars who want to move on to new creative fields, and not only in music. Bob Dylan, for example, encountered the wrath of fans in 1965 when he switched during a Newport Folk Festival concert from acoustic to electric guitar, with all the change of identity that that implied, while, more recently, Boy George, when he cut his hair and tried to modify his cosy drag-star image, found himself simply abandoned by the fans who had previously taken him to their hearts. What is at stake here is not the absolute right of the artist to follow the dictates of artistic impulse — outside the subsidized sector that has always been a matter for negotiation — but, rather, a matter of permitting those natural processes of development and change which we all undergo to take place.

The star system also has wider social and political implications, characterized by Guy Debord as a prime manifestation of the Society of the Spectacle: 'Under the shimmering diversions of the spectacle, *banalization* dominates modern society the world over . . . The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this

banality by embodying this image of a possible role. Being a star means specializing in the *seemingly lived*; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations which are actually lived. Celebrities exist to act out various styles of living and viewing society — unfettered, free to express themselves *globally*. They embody the accessible product of social *labor* by dramatizing its by-products magically projected above it as its goal: *power* and *vacations*.'[18]

The star system, in fact, completely dominates the arts of western industrial societies; it functions effectively to distance the majority of people from their own creativity by using talented people to act out fantasies of creativity, as well as of 'power and vacations'. The star, in fact, as Debord suggests, is chosen to do the living on behalf of his or her fans. The image of success is as shallow as the whole business is fraudulent; the star's life, simply by reason of his or her stardom, is in its own way as narrow, as confined and anxiety-ridden as that of any fan. To turn a musician into a star is thus to defuse any challenge his or her musicking may pose to conventional values; the star is removed to another plane of existence, a fantasy world, where nothing that is done or said has any bearing on the real world. Only the image is real. Once a vernacular musician achieves any kind of success, the temptation to allow oneself to be thus co-opted is constant and insidious, and very rarely able to be resisted completely; we may be practically sure than any musician who achieves fame has made some compromises with the system, and will be obliged to do so every day of his or her professional life. For the classical concert artist or composer, on the other hand, the tensions involved in being a star are not so acute, since, as I have already pointed out, that person already has made an accommodation with the prevailing power system, to the point of internalizing its values, before ever stepping on to the concert stage.

Erecting categories and confining musicians in them also makes for easier marketing; we may consider it as a kind of obverse of the star system. The practice is as old as recording; Caruso and Melba, both of whom started recording in the first decade of the present century, were probably the earliest

whose image was as important a part of their appeal as what they actually sang. Similarly, in the 1920s, the 'race' labels advertised their stars like so many known commodities: 'Don't miss this latest hit by Ida Cox and the famous Blues Serenaders;'[19] 'Now you'll get a kick out of this new Paramount "Lockstep Blues". It has good words and a good tune, one of Blind Lemon Jefferson's best,'[20] and so on. Under the system of classification, Melba and Caruso sang opera (Caruso, in an interesting and surely calculated extension of his image, later extended into Neapolitan song and even the songs of George M. Cohan), Ida Cox and Lemon Jefferson sang blues, Boy George the New Pop, Dylan folk songs, and each was expected to remain within the image and the category. It might be good for marketing to keep the image of the star steady, the categories clear, but it is limiting for musicians, confining them in a way quite unlike that in which they operate in real-life performance. In each generation there is a handful of artists, such as Miles Davis, David Bowie and the pack-joker Malcolm McLaren, who manage (or are given permission?) to avoid typing and becoming trapped in an image — if, indeed, their shape-shifting does not become, as Bowie's seems sometimes in danger of doing, an image in itself and marketed as such.

The recording process, then, is perceived differently by the three parties to it. Musicians see it primarily as a means by which their performances can be made available to a large number of people, for reasons which vary from pure delight in making music to pure delight in making money, with any mixture of these and other motives. Those two aims are not, as we have seen, necessarily incompatible with each other, and coexist in most musicians. Musicians will try to extract as much satisfaction (that is to say, affirmation of identity) from the performances as possible, while trying to make them as attractive as possible to listeners, and while it is the second that will make them their living, we should remember also that the desire to engage with an audience is an essential part of the makeup of every musician. This desire stems not from exhibitionism or sycophancy but from a genuine need for identification; what Charles Keil says of the urban bluesman, that 'his first obligation is to his public rather than to a private

muse,'[21] is probably true, in their heart of hearts, of all musicians, deny it as they may. Musicians will, in fact, use whatever situation in which they find themselves to do what gives them most satisfaction, and that satisfaction comes ultimately from establishing a satisfactory relationship with their audience. The interpolation of the apparatus of recording, production and marketing of records in order to widen the circle of that relationship exacts its price as well as making the relationship much harder to assess, since sales of records, the final criterion, are very much after the event; there is no immediate feedback. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that without the desire to build a relationship with listeners, however alloyed it may be with the desire for money and for the trappings of fame, any musician or group of musicians can ever attain more than a momentary success. This applies both to concerts and to the recording studio; those who buy tickets and records are also searching for, and quickly recognize the absence of, that relationship. As with all human musicking, 'good' tunes, 'good' arrangements and so on are only the material on which a good *performance* can be built, and a good performance is one in which performers and listeners together can explore, affirm and celebrate their feelings of who they are. Recording changes nothing in that respect.

Record companies, for their part, share with musicians an interest in making records that will appeal to as many people as possible, but their executives are inclined to think of records as so many 'units' to be sold, and of musicians as workers whose labour and ideas are unfortunately necessary in order to give those units value. It is they who control the musicians' access to the audience of record buyers and thus to their main source of income; while outstandingly successful musicians may gain considerable negotiating power and even control, not only over their performances but also over production and marketing, the ultimate power over what gets recorded, how it is recorded and how it is presented to its potential audience lies with the company. That said, the fact remains that the company has no power either to generate or to command the use of performances; that lies with the musicians and with the audience. It is at best a middleman, a facilitator.

The role of the third party, the listener and record buyer, is ambiguous. To the record company, and to some extent the musicians, he is simply a member of 'the public', that fickle monster which exists in order to buy records, fan magazines, posters, T-shirts and other appurtenances of the star system, to attend concerts on promotion tours, and to respond to the musicians' often outsize egos, and which must be placated and manipulated in its power to make and destroy careers. It is this public that the highbrow critic perceives as stupid, monolithic and willing to buy whatever rubbish musicians and record companies, in sinister collusion, care to foist upon them. But for the individual listener, on the other hand, the purchase of a record or of concert tickets is a matter of deliberate and careful choice, often highly informed and discriminating, and the response to the musicians' personality and style, only a part of which can be inferred from the sounds which are coming from the record grooves, is a matter to which he or she gives a good deal of attention. Opinions on music and musicians among enthusiasts, once past the teenybopper stage, are likely to be at least as judicious and as shrewd as among classical concertgoers and generally stop short of the kind of undiscriminating adulation given, often by those whom one would expect to know better, to say, James Galway, the Amadeus Quartet or the King's Singers.

It is clear that the control exercised by the record companies, despite their central position in the recording process, is precarious, to say the least. It is a testimony to the creativity of so many musicians and listeners that under these conditions so much valuable musicking does take place. The system takes a heavy toll, however. It is not just that only a small proportion of the $2.5 billion that the record industry was reputedly worth in 1983 finds its way back to the musicians on whose activities it is all based, but also that owing to the star system the distribution of rewards is extremely uneven.

This unevenness bears particularly heavily on black musicians. It has been a major argument of this book that the vernacular-music tradition which has come to be the principal form of musicking in western society in our century is black American in origin and in essence. It is not only that the whole tradition has grown out of those two powerful trunks, blues

and black religious music (themselves the outcome of a synthesis made by blacks of African and European ways of musicking) but, further, nearly every major style of twentieth-century vernacular music and dance owes its origin to initiatives by black musicians and dancers, most of them unknown to history. As we have seen, many white artists warmly acknowledge those black ancestor-figures, but the fact is that the skills and the inventiveness of black musicians and dancers have never been properly recognized, either in terms of public appreciation or in terms of financial reward in proportion to their achievements. To the public at large, the Kings of Swing were Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller, not Count Basie or Duke Ellington, the greatest tapdancers were Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, not Bill Robinson or Honi Coles, the first important musicians of rock'n'roll (I have it on the authority of a serious history intended for use in schools) were Elvis Presley and Bill Haley, while Little Richard and Chuck Berry were mere r-and-b singers who rode on their coattails to fame. One could multiply examples over and over — there are others to be found in this book — without in any way wishing to detract from the achievements of many fine white artists which, considerable as they are, do not only owe much to black creativity but would have been unthinkable without it.

The inability to see the power of black creativity, and the insistence on perceiving blacks simply as entertainers but nothing more is deeply ingrained in European and Euro-American society. It is an aspect of those attitudes which seem to have developed out of the continuing need to justify slavery, a hundred or more years after its formal ending, so deeply is its unacknowledged guilt burned into the European soul, which go under the name of racism. One need not postulate any conspiracy to keep blacks from gaining their proper recognition; it is quite sufficient that whites as a whole have learnt to perceive blacks even in the most favourable light as emotionally and spiritually underdeveloped — in a word, as childlike — and not to be taken seriously either as people or as artists. It makes no difference in practical terms if this underdevelopment is attributed to persistent 'primitive' African traits (the colonialist position) or to the brutalizing effect of slavery

which is supposed to have destroyed all traces of the blacks' former culture (the liberal position); either way blacks are simply not regarded as capable of engaging in serious human, let alone artistic, activity. Whites do not think this; we *know* it, as we know the colour of our hair and the sphericity of the earth, having absorbed rather than consciously learnt it from a thousand words, stories and gestures of peers and elders, from books, films, television and newspapers alike. I do not believe that any white European or Euro-American can have escaped this conditioning; it is a fact which any white person who wishes to enter seriously into a discourse with Afro-Americans and their culture (something which for our own sakes we need to do) must face, as the alcoholic must face the fact of his or her alcoholism. The most damaging forms of racism are those which do not recognize themselves for what they are. Damaging, of course, to whites as well as to blacks, for what whites are denying is not only an important means of exploring, affirming and celebrating who we are, but also a crucial aspect of our intellectual and cultural heritage, which as long as it remains unacknowledged leaves us helpless in the face of our own destructive myths. 'Repressed gods,' says Ean Begg, 'take their captors captive.'[22]

Those who control the access of musicians to any but their most intimate audiences — record companies, radio networks, promoters and managements, even historians and scholars — bear a heavy responsibility in the denial of the centrality of the black contribution, not only to modern vernacular musicking, but to modern consciousness itself. They would not, however, have been so successful in their denial were the white majority not so willing to be deceived. I have argued earlier that this willingness is the result, not of any inbuilt quality of the human soul (racism, especially in view of what black people have endured over the centuries, is remarkable for its absence in their attitudes — a fact which is confirmed by the whole nature and history of black musicking) but of the particular circumstances in which Europeans, and especially British, people encountered Africans for the first time on a large scale in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These circumstances have been admirably desribed by Winthrop Jordan[23] and I need not go into them here, but it is possible to see in

present-day musical and scholarly practices, many of them in themselves trivial, the way in which the downgrading of blacks operates. A few examples must suffice.

At a recent broadcast by a well-known wind quintet on the BBC's classical-music channel, after the 'serious' fare of the concert an encore, Scott Joplin's *The Entertainer*, was played, to a clearly delighted studio audience, at breakneck speed which destroyed all its elegance and subtlety, and in flat disregard of its composer's instruction on the score: 'Not fast — it is *never* right to play ragtime fast.' There is an assertion by a premier scholar in the field, James Pullen Jackson, that blacks could not possibly have developed spirituals from their own resources but must have cribbed them from whites. Look at the conventional account of rock'n'roll which writes black musicians out of their central role in its development. Or the use of the term 'serious music' for western classical music. Or look at the redefinition of bebop by some writers as over-intellectual and out of touch with its origins (the opposite was true) and the insinuation made by many critics and jazz historians that the musicians were getting too big for their intellectual boots — which happened precisely at the point in history when black artists, like other black Americans, were demanding recognition as serious human beings. Then the virtual absence from British television and radio of programmes in which Afro-American music is treated as an important part of contemporary experience, and the almost universal presentation of Afro-American music in a featureless, eventless perpetual present which by depriving it of both history and context renders it trivial and devoid of positive social content.

The last two examples remind us how we can be misled by high-culture critics concerning Afro-American music. It is not that record companies and radio stations are foisting a load of trivial and pernicious rubbish on to a helpless public, but rather that those gatekeepers, through their manner of presentation, are trivializing a way of musicking which, for musicians and listeners alike, is a powerful means of affirming and celebrating identity, in a society whose tendency is increasingly to render the majority of its members powerless and faceless. The trivialization serves another purpose also.

We have seen how the musicking of the slaves incarnated the values of a culture which was very attractive to those white Americans and English who encountered it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and how that attraction could be neutralized and rendered safe through the process which has been called minstrelization. It is possible to see that process at work today, not necessarily any more consciously now than then, as those who have a large stake in the industrial values of Europe and America perceive the attraction and at the same time the danger which Afro-American culture, through its musicking, presents. Since those who exercise control over the contact between musicians and audiences have a considerable stake in those industrial values, we can see a circular process at work which would, if it were not for one factor, result in the relegation of Afro-American musicking to the fringes of western musical activity. That factor is the profitability of the music for concert promoters and managements, record companies and radio networks, as well as for T-shirt manufacturers, souvenir sellers, fan-magazine publishers and other hangers-on who for the most part have no interest in the social, political or spiritual content of a performance, and do not care how subversive it may be to the values which support their own prosperity, so long as, in the short run, it makes money for them. This is the Achilles' heel of the system which Afro-American musicians have always been prepared to exploit as they themselves are exploited by it. Unlike classical performance, in which the ideological circle, as we have seen, is closed, keeping the culture safe from 'pollution' but also closing it off from life, the control over the content of Afro-American musicking, as well as over its accessibility to both performers and listeners, is never complete.

Jimmy Cliff expresses this from the viewpoint of the black reggae musician:

> 'I see the music industry as just another industry within the Babylon system. The Babylon law is a jungle law — the fittest of the fit survive. The music industry happens to be the one I'm involved in — but the whole system is a jungle of vampires, parasites, ticks . . . lice. The only way is to study and understand how the system works, then you can start to do something about it. When you are naive, when you come

> with honesty in your heart, you find the world isn't so — it's really a matter of studying. I've had a lot of hard experiences in my career, not only with the film [*The Harder They Come*, in which he starred] but with records. These mistakes can't be made again. The whole system's a vampire, everybody's out to dig you out or rip you off — you have to learn or you'll get burnt . . . They can rip you off, but they can't take everything . . . I don't see it's wise to go to extremes and kill your life . . . I don't see it's wise to lock myself away either. But intertwine and learn.'[24]

We are thus faced with the paradox that, on the one hand, the musicians and their musicking are downgraded by the representatives of the official musical culture and some of the most creative and innovative musicians of our time are thrown onto the mercies of the most rapacious sector of society and denied the proper reward, either in terms of social esteem or financial gain, of their creativity, skills and hard work, while on the other hand it is that same outsider position and low status that enable them to evade the kind of ideological control to which musicians in the classical tradition, apparently without even noticing it, are submitting. The moral panics, scandals and clean-up campaigns which erupt every few years around popular music, especially in times of political reaction, are indicators not only of the fear felt by the representatives of the official culture for those human values of which Afro-American musicking has been the vehicle for more than two hundred years, but also of their failure to cast out the simultaneously disturbing and liberating outsiders or even to keep them under control. If those panics and scandals tend to centre on one aspect of the musicians' expression, that of sexuality, that tells us more about the guardians' principal preoccupation than of what is actually embodied in the musicking, and should not blind us to the fact that its subversive liberating force penetrates every aspect of human identity.

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