At the center of our Institute this summer has been a recurrent question: What is music? This section addresses that question through the lens of criticism, which we have defined broadly as the meanings that people have made of the jazz and Motown music we studied. Criticism, in this sense, is a record of the various answers that have been given to the question of what music is.

In our research, we have considered a range of such critical interpretations. As might be expected, we have compiled music reviews and articles from well-known periodicals like DownBeat, Rolling Stone, The New Yorker, and the New York Times. These pieces provide a window into the judgments and evaluations that jazz and Motown music received upon initial release. Similarly, the liner notes from albums such as What’s Going On? and Song for My Father offer interesting perspectives on the meanings that artists and critics attached, in this case quite literally, to music.

We have also considered documentary films like The Night James Brown Saved Boston and I’ll Make Me a World, which constitute important attempts to place the meaning of music in a cultural and historical frame. Non-documentary films like Dreamgirls also reflect the critical understandings of music and the circumstances that led to its creation. Likewise, children’s books like The Blues Singers: Ten Who Rocked the World exemplify the way music and musicians are valued in our culture and how their images are passed down to young people.

Finally, we have compiled some examples drawn from the academic layer of critical interpretation. Books by Craig Werner and Suzanne Smith present important voices in a scholarly conversation about the meaning of these musics, a conversation that in itself exemplifies the academy’s growing conviction that popular culture and popular music matter and are worthy of study.

As Jian Leng writes in the April 2011 issue of The Figure in the Carpet, “the humanities, above all, are about understanding the various meanings and values we derive from and assign to all the symbolic, artistic, rhetorical, and representational things that we do.” Studying the criticism that has developed around jazz and Motown is thus essential to a humanistic understanding of the impact this music has had. Studying this criticism highlights many important issues. What is—and what should be—the relationship between music and politics? What connection is there between race and music? How does race affect a critic’s ability to evaluate music? In what ways does criticism reveal the racial, gender, and class biases of the critic?

Criticism, we have come to believe during our research in this Institute, is much more than ephemeral opining. Instead, criticism is intimately connected to the taste communities that arise around music. Criticism exemplifies the sociopolitical impact of music. At times—as seen in the DownBeat panel discussion between critics Ira Gitler and Nat Hentoff and jazz artists Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach—there can be a contentious tug-of-war between those who produce music and those who make meaning of it. At other times, criticism can actually shape the development of the music itself.

This section of the Resource Guide offers a range of possibilities to teachers who wish to give their students a sense of how jazz and Motown music have been received and interpreted.

**Anthologies**

Autobiographies & Biographies


*Dreamgirl: My Life as a Supreme* is an excellent source describing the rise (and fall) of the Supremes, the stresses of showbiz, and the inner workings of the Motown Record Company. This book details the early life of Mary Wilson and her move to the Brewster Projects in Detroit where she would meet Flo and Diana. The book goes on to describe the girls’ early successes and eventual recording contracts with Motown. It then gives a detailed chronology of hits, tours, and dramas that occurred within the Motown family—especially between Diana Ross, Berry Gordy, and Florence Ballard. These dramas are described as being the reason for replacing Flo with Cindy Birdsong, which is the next major event in the story, followed by Diana’s increased fame and launch into solo stardom. The book concludes by telling of Florence’s lonely death and funeral, but it does not bring its audience up to the present with Diana’s and Mary’s solo careers. The dream seems to die with the disbanding of the original group.

This book contains excellent criticism. Told from the perspective that only an insider could have, *Dreamgirl* opens a real window into what racism was like in the South at the time of the Supremes’ rise (1960s), what it takes to make it to the top, the rigorous schedules and demands that accompany the glitz and glamour of show business, and how the Motown machine was able to produce hit after hit in the 1960s. Although Mary Wilson intends her book merely to tell the story rather than provide commentary, she accomplishes both, and gives the reader a lot to think of concerning the poor treatment of African American performers, the crossover ability (and its backlash) of the Supremes, the important and integral people behind Berry Gordy at Motown, and Diana Ross’s aggressive personality and special relationship with Berry Gordy.

This book is an excellent read to help better discover what life is truly like when your childhood dreams come true—for better or for worse. *Dreamgirl* is packed with successes and failures, familiar faces, and the insider details. Reading this book will leave you better prepared to understand what goes on behind the scenes in showbiz, and what life is really like when you “make it big.” (Danielle Asay)

Books & Book Chapters


“What’s Going On? Motown and the New Detroit” delves into the political climate of Detroit in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly with respect to Motown’s engagement with local and national politics. The chapter begins with a discussion of Aretha Franklin Day, which was held on February 16, 1968, and featured the singer, herself a product of Detroit and the daughter of prominent Detroit minister C.L. Franklin. Martin Luther King also appeared at the event, and Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” was a fitting anthem to express the sentiments of those working within the black freedom struggle. At the time, Franklin’s creative expression and the political overtones of the song contrasted somewhat with the constraints Motown placed on its artists. However, Smith argues, this changed after the assassination of Martin Luther King: “At Motown, the tragedy of King’s death renewed the record company’s commitment to the national black struggle and to Detroit’s efforts to reinvent itself as a model city.” Berry Gordy himself attended King’s funeral and “pledged his continued support of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.” Soon after the funeral, Gordy sent Stevie Wonder, Gladys Knight and the Pips, the Supremes, the Temptations, and an eleven-piece band to perform at a benefit concert for the SCLC. Motown also created a new label, the Black Forum spoken-word label, which released speeches by Stokely Carmichael and Martin Luther King, poetry by Amiri Baraka, and more. The chapter then delves into the increasing frequency with which Motown allowed its artists to move into more politically and socially conscious material, with critical discussions of each of its examples.

The chapter is significant in its exploration of the lesser-known side of Motown, in which Berry Gordy felt compelled to engage with the politics of the time rather than focusing exclusively on artists’ ability to “cross over” with white audiences and gain commercial success. Smith deftly provides examples in which Berry Gordy and Motown were front and center in the Civil Rights Movement. However, she also examines Gordy’s ambivalence regarding the company’s role in politics, as well as the perception among some activists that he was disengaged from the civil rights struggle. The writer also firmly establishes the Motown sound within the Detroit landscape, which suffered heightened racial tensions and rioting at this time.

From a critical standpoint, this chapter is significant in its analysis of music that addressed political and social issues. Smith argues, “Stevie Wonder was the first artist to record such material in his June 1966 release of ‘Blowin’ in the Wind.’” Smith also discusses works by the Supremes, the Temptations, and Marvin Gaye. Gaye’s album *What's Going On* is discussed at length, in terms of the artist’s own inspiration for the album and its impact on Motown and the larger political context. She explains that the album became the inspiration for the theme of Jesse Jackson’s first Operation PUSH Expo in 1972. (Angela Watson)

This source is a chapter from S. Frederick Starr’s book Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917-1980. The chapter focuses on the presence of jazz in the USSR from 1960-1967, bridging the transition from Khrushchev to Brezhnev. The chapter provides deep insight into the presence of jazz in the USSR during this time period, as well as the popularity of American jazz in 1960s Soviet culture. Starr discusses the tours of American jazz musicians in the USSR, the power of the Voice of America program, the political and economic difficulties faced by Soviet jazz musicians, and the role of jazz festivals in introducing Soviet audiences to American jazz. Starr also focuses on the inspiration that many Soviet jazz musicians felt upon hearing or seeing their American counterparts. The chapter thus provides a broad overview of the presence of jazz in the Soviet Union.

The historical context provided by this reading is extremely valuable for understanding jazz in its relation to the Cold War. Starr provides a detailed description of the reception of American jazz musicians in the USSR. He also draws a contrast between the relative popularity of jazz and the highly ambivalent feelings towards the music held by Soviet authorities. Starr writes of this topic, “Nikita Khrushchev launched an all-out attack on jazz and modern art. ‘When I hear jazz, it’s as if I had gas on the stomach,’…. In a completely organized society, such comments can easily be translated into national policy” (270). However, the official Soviet position on jazz would waver dramatically according to Starr, in many ways inspired by the popular reaction to American jazz musicians who toured the USSR. Clearly, then, the US use of jazz as a form of cultural diplomacy had its desired effect: it inspired greater Soviet acceptance of an art form that is unabashedly American and that, in the minds of many, represented American ideals. It displays a shared cultural understanding and exchange during a time when some Soviet and American propaganda represented the two societies as wholly incompatible. This text can be utilized to inspire several discussion questions. Why would Soviet leadership be reluctant to allow jazz performances? Why is it meaningful that Soviet musicians performed jazz inspired by American performers? How can abstract music be seen as a political statement in the context of the Cold War?

Starr’s text serves as a valuable critical document by describing in detail both the Soviet reception of American jazz and the creation of Soviet jazz as a response to the American music. In a controlled society like the USSR, such perspectives can be very difficult to source, particularly if they oppose the “official” view of jazz at the time. While Starr himself doesn’t review any music critically, he discusses various critical perspectives on jazz and the development of an intellectual community surrounding jazz. Members of this community created magazines, scholarly articles and books that analyzed jazz from various perspectives. Starr’s text provides material for extended inquiries into the critical perception of jazz in the USSR. What does the mere presence of an intellectual debate about jazz in the USSR mean? What factors may have made jazz attractive or unattractive to Soviet critics? What type of jazz music proved popular in the USSR? (Jesse Klausz)


Teachers who want to give their students a short reading assignment to lay out the basic story of Motown and suggest some of the complexities underlying that story will find this section of Craig Werner’s book quite valuable. Werner begins by summarizing the “standard version” of Motown’s history, wryly describing it as “the most compelling version of the American dream ever released in blackface.” Werner plumbs the deeper implications of Motown’s American dream story, however,
viewing Berry Gordy’s economic success through the lenses of literacy, power, and freedom. Citing literary critic Robert Stepto’s notion of a “symbolic geography” in black life, Werner imagines Gordy as a kind of escapee from oppression seeking economic freedom in the Top 40 charts, liberating himself and others from the inequalities of a racialized music market. Werner notes Gordy’s shrewd financial literacy, his ability to “play the game as it’s really played”—glancing briefly, by contrast, at the economic snares that tripped up Mahalia Jackson and James Brown. “Like Booker T. Washington,” Werner notes, “Gordy wore whatever mask suited his purposes.” Werner goes on to emphasize the community of people who helped Gordy make Motown a success—the savvy Artist Development Department led by Maxine Powers and Cholly Atkins; the vocal talents of people like David Ruffin and Levi Stubbs; the instrumental virtuosity of the Funk Brothers; and the songwriting skills of Smokey Robinson, HDH, and Norman Whitfield. Werner concludes by quoting Martha Reeves on the family feeling of Motown’s early days: “It really was a magical time.” As an accessible synopsis (for older high school students) of the critical understanding of Motown, these seven pages from Werner’s book seem just about perfect. (Frank Kovarik)

**Children’s Books**


This book, first published in 2001, is written by Julius Lester and beautifully illustrated by Lisa Cohen. The book depicts ten blues singers who rocked the world, starting with a grandfather talking to his granddaughter about the history of the blues when she comes to visit her grandfather every summer. The grandfather has always told stories about Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King Jr. Now, he wants to tell her about some of the great blues singers, and he starts by telling her that he used to play a guitar and do a lot of singing, and he saw a lot of blues singers. He starts with the music that he is playing in the background; he tells her that many of the singers today are walking in the footsteps of blues singers such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Son House, Robert Johnson, and Muddy Waters. She asks the question, “Who’re they?” He says, “Well, I’m glad you asked,” and explains that the roles of grandfathers are to remember how things used to be so we can tell our grandchildren. Grandfather says that he remembered Bessie and Muddy Waters and passed the story on to her. So, she responds by asking, “So what are the blues?” “Well, the blues are like having the flu in your feelings. But instead of your nose being stuffed up, it’s your heart that feels like it needs blowing.” Grandfather explains that blues is not only a feeling; it’s also a kind of music that cures the blues. The music and the beat wrap around your heart like one of your grandmother’s hugs. Grandfather states that the roots of the blues go back to slavery, and that if anything gave you the blues it was slavery. One of the ways black people fought against slavery was with the breath in their bodies. They wove hope on the air by singing songs called spirituals—songs for the spirit. Grandfather ends by saying that blues music probably started out in the fields when slaves worked from sunup to sundown: “Honey, if it wasn’t for the blues, we probably wouldn’t have anything to listen to except our toenails growing.” Grandpa lists each singer starting with Bessie Smith and her accomplished songs such as “Crazy Blues.” Bessie was Empress of Blues; Robert Johnson made an eerie sound from his guitar; Mahalia Jackson sang gospel and brought the blues into her gospel songs; Muddy recorded his first commercial record, “I Can’t Be Satisfied”; Billie Holiday was known for the white gardenia she always wore and a song called “Strange Fruit,” which was her last song; BB King, Ray Charles, Little Richard, James Brown, and Aretha Franklin are just a few of the talented “Ten Who Rocked the World.”

From the critical perspective, this is a children’s book, and I would think that critics would love to see the implementation and understanding of blues incorporated into the early settings in a school system. At this early level, the children will learn an appreciation for the various genres of music once they have been exposed. This understanding can be a bridge for children to have an appreciation for all
genres of music. Also, there should be more copies of this book in every school library as well as public libraries in every major and metropolitan city within the United States.

From an educator’s perspective, I would read the book to the students as I played softly some of the selected pieces recommended for students; even the middle school students would enjoy listening to these great blues artists. Then, I would list several of the musicians of the board so that the students can choose a genre and an artist to create a Comic Strip, PowerPoint or I-movie as their presentation on the history of the blues. (Charlie Eruchalu)


This book by Carole Boston Weatherford was first published in 2000 and is beautifully illustrated by Eric Velasquez. It depicts our rhythm sounds as originating from Africa. The book displays a colorful African scene with straw huts and zebras galloping across the compound of the villagers as someone is playing the drum. In the foreground is an African mask that represents the Yoruba tribe in West Africa. Weatherford says on the first page: “This is Africa where rhythm abounds and music springs from nature sounds, played on a drum carved from a tree that grew in a forest of ebony.” As Weatherford portrays our history on each page of this children’s book, she describe the kalimba chiming for rain (the kalimba is a hand-held plucking piano that is traditional in the African culture). The book tells about our history and the Africans who were stolen and brought over as slaves in the New World and sold on the auction blocks throughout the colonies; it portrays the runaway slaves crossing over into the secret passages and escaping to freedom while following the drinking gourd. Weatherford fuses into her book the life of the banjo and its significant meaning to our culture, and the mockery of whites as blacks portray them in the Cakewalk Strut and the feelings of lost love and hard times depicted in the Delta Blues, with Harlem crowning Duke, Cab, Count and Ella as they “Hi-de-ho throughout Harlem, and how Birdland jazz broke free and the sounds of bebop came to be.” Weatherford ends this book so eloquently by stating, “Jazz is a downbeat born in our nation, chords of struggle and jubilation, bursting forth from hearts set free in notes that echo history.” This is “the sound that jazz makes” as the pictures in the book show a man blowing on his trumpet and women and children with their hands extending over their heads in glorious exaltation and a little boy proudly playing his horn in the foreground. This book is an excellent introduction for children to the history of black culture as well as to the influence of black music on American culture.

In lectures and sessions we have covered an enormous amount of African American history and have been introduced to Swing, Jazz, Bebop, Funk, Avant guarde, Fusion and Jazz-funk. The 1920s was the Big Band era with greats such as Duke Ellington, who stomped at the Savoy, Count Basie and Dorsey. These bands played with rhythm sections and an emphasis on the piano, drums, bass, trumpet, trombones and melodies; eventually, the music would evolve into a more complex sound and music called bebop.

From the critical perspective, this is a children’s book, and I would think that critics would love to see the understanding of jazz incorporated into the early settings in a school system. An understanding of jazz can be a bridge for children to an appreciation for all genres of music. Also, there should be more copies of this book in school libraries as well as public libraries.

From an educator’s perspective, I would read the book to the students as I play softly the African tones of drum beats as the story climbs to the apex, and progressively play music that reflects each page of the story, ending with various pieces of music in the jazz genre from Coltrane, Bird, Parker, Miles, Blakely, Hancock etc. Then I would list several of the musicians on the board so that the students could choose a genre and an artist to create a Comic Strip, PowerPoint or I-movie as their presentation of jazz. (Charlie Eruchalu)
Documentary Films


This penultimate episode of a six-part documentary on African American art in the twentieth century offers a succinct and accessible account of how the Black Arts Movement raised questions about integration and began consciously to adopt the ideals of the Black Power Movement in its project of self-definition. The episode begins by mentioning artists like Nat King Cole and Sidney Poitier, who broke through the color line to achieve so-called “mainstream” success. It also groups Berry Gordy’s black-owned Motown record label along with such artists. Motown and Poitier then become a kind of contrast with the new artistic attitudes that much of the episode explores. As Gerald Early puts it in this episode, “For the Black Arts people the biggest problem with integration was that it was accepting a white value system. It was accepting a system of white aesthetics. It was essentially saying, OK, as a black person, what you did was you made yourself into a white person.”

Gwendolyn Brooks becomes the episode’s object lesson in how the Black Arts Movement changed the focus of some black artists. Brooks was already a well-established poet in the 1960s, with a Pulitzer Prize and a secure publishing arrangement with Harper & Row. She was inspired by her contact with Amiri Baraka, who had written critically of her poetry, feeling that she was too restricted in her writing and that she didn’t seem angry enough. “Something new was happening,” Brooks recalls, describing a musical written by Oscar Brown that enlisted some members of the Chicago street gang the Blackstone Rangers. Soon Brooks herself became part of the movement, starting a writing group for Chicago youth that included people like Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni. Brooks changed to a natural hairstyle in order to look more like the young people she was working with, and her poetry took on a new militancy, as seen in her book *In the Mecca*, which featured a poem called “The Sermon on the Warpland,” with an epigraph by Ron Karenga. She eventually ended her business relationship with Harper & Row, publishing her autobiography, *Report from Part One*, with Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press instead. Looking back on these developments in her work, Brooks says, “I would have been inadequate, incomplete” without having met the young people she began working with in 1967.

Except for the introductory references to Motown and a brief mention of Diana Ross in a clip of Amiri Baraka performing one of his own exhortatory poems, this episode makes little mention of black music of the period. It focuses on writing and the visual arts instead. Nevertheless, the episode does a nice job of showing how black artists became involved very overtly in the Black Power Movement—and how and why that movement took on a somewhat different focus from the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s. The episode shows how artists interacted with and were influenced by critics (Baraka being one of the most influential). In doing so, it sets up a clear context that students and teachers could then apply to black music to think about how it relates to the aesthetic and political movements of the time. (Frank Kovarik)


*The Night James Brown Saved Boston* documents the singer’s performance at Boston Garden on April 5, 1968—the day after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. At the same time the concert was held, riots were erupting in cities across the United States, including Chicago, Baltimore, Detroit, New York, and Washington D.C. Officials in Boston feared their city would succumb to a similar fate. However, James Brown’s performance had the effect of soothing the racial tension in the city, ultimately sparing Boston from the death and destruction that befell the rest of the nation. Actually, the concert was almost cancelled by then-mayor Kevin White. He was afraid that a large gathering involving a
predominantly black audience could only spell more violence. Tom Atkins, former City Councilman, convinced Mayor White that cancelling the concert would only anger the black community even more. They decided that the concert could have a positive effect. The mayor came up with the idea of televising the concert on the public television station so that instead of rioting on the streets, people would stay home to see the show. News stations promoted the concert heavily, and it was described as a memorial concert. In fact, violence almost did erupt at the concert when members of the audience began to rush the stage, and members of the Boston Police Force started to intervene in the situation. Amazingly, James Brown took control of the situation and was able not only to get the police to step aside, but also to get the audience to return to the floor.

The film is significant in its depiction of a recording artist as an important figure in the Civil Rights Movement. It also provides an overview of the state of the nation at the time of Martin Luther King’s assassination, using news footage from broadcast stations around the country, and showing looting, burning buildings, and confrontations between black citizens and members of the local police forces and the national guard. The film also features interviews with members of Brown’s band, music journalists, a Boston deejay from this era, and civil rights activists Dr. Cornel West and Rev. Al Sharpton. Moreover, the film depicts the larger historical context of the event, with respect to the Vietnam War and other events of the time, and it follows Brown’s social contributions after the concert. And, of course, the film includes footage from the concert itself and other clips from James Brown’s performances.

From a critical lens, the film is significant for its inclusion of members of the music industry and critics, and their overall consensus regarding Brown’s significant contributions to music and civil rights. As the film documents, Brown is front and center in promoting peace in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.; he promotes pride in being black, and he uses his fame to try to help other members of the black community gain financial success. In some ways, Brown is a useful figure in terms of comparison to other artists who began taking on a more active role in the black freedom struggle at the time. Of all the musicians at the time, Brown is perhaps the most significant in his contributions to the Civil Rights Movement, not only in terms of his critical reception but also for his recognized role within the larger community at the time. (Angela Watson)

Essays / Scholarly Articles


This essay begins with a seemingly simple observation: “Most jazz critics have been white Americans, but most important jazz musicians have not been.” Baraka plumbs the implications of this observation in fascinating ways, offering an important and interesting perspective on the meaning of jazz, the question of what black music is, and the question of who has the right (and the ability) to write perceptively about it.

Central to Baraka’s argument is the notion that “Negro music is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world,” attitudes that arose directly from African American experience. As such, this music (of which jazz is a prime example) was originally inaccessible to white people. As Baraka puts it, “The music and its sources were secret as far as the rest of America was concerned, in much the same sense that the actual life of the black man in America was secret to the white American.” White musicians came to understand this music and even to play it with great skill, Baraka argues, because for the most part they understood the attitude that underlay it.

The typical white critic, on the other hand, according to Baraka, paid more attention to “his appreciation of the music rather than to his understanding of the attitude which produced it.” Because of this unfortunate tendency and because most jazz critics have been white, Baraka asserts that most jazz criticism “strips the music too ingenuously of its social and cultural intent.” Thus jazz critics missed the whole meaning of bebop in its early incarnations because they were “completely unaware of the
psychological catalysts that made that music the exact registration of the social and cultural thinking of a whole generation of black Americans.” Similarly, they miss the meaning of Coltrane’s cries and Coleman’s screams and rants. “The notes mean something,” Baraka writes, “and the something is, regardless of its stylistic considerations, part of the black psyche as it dictates the various forms of Negro culture.”

Black music is thus the voice of a people who have undergone and continue to undergo a unique experience in America. St. Louis writer and activist Jamala Rogers has observed, “This is the predicament of Black America: we live a totally different reality from the majority race.” Black music, for Baraka, is an artistic response to that reality. All too often, Baraka asserts, the white critics who have sought to define and judge jazz have little or no understanding of that reality, and so their writings about jazz are embarrassingly shallow and irrelevant. Baraka concludes by calling for a criticism that employs “standards of judgment and aesthetic excellence that depend on our native knowledge and understanding of the philosophies and local cultural references that produced blues and jazz.”

This essay’s brevity makes it a good possibility for use in a high school classroom. Students will probably still need some assistance from the teacher in understanding it, however. Once they do understand it, the essay would seem to offer many avenues for discussion about music criticism and black music. How is music (jazz, blues, hip-hop, etc.) expressive of a particularly black experience? What about white performances of these musics? Do critics’ racial identities and experiences continue to shape and limit their evaluations of black music? (Frank Kovarik)

Barnes, Lois J. “The Use of Recorded Music in Teaching the Civil Rights Movement.” *Southern Social Studies Quarterly* 14: 3-16.


This article by Jacqui Malone is a critical review of Cholly Atkins’s career in choreography, focusing particularly on his work at Motown Records. The article begins with a description of Atkins’s early career as a vaudeville tap performer. Malone then tracks Atkins’s transition to choreography and his hiring by Motown Records to work in Artist Development and help with stage choreography. Malone describes in detail the effect of Atkins on the dance routines and overall presentation of Motown on stage and on TV, concluding that Atkins’s dance-oriented choreography helped to fulfill Gordy’s dream of crossover success. The article is a fascinating and in-depth study of the evolution of Motown’s visual presentation, an easily overlooked but important aspect of Motown’s popularity and importance in the 1960s.

Malone touches on many important historical concepts in her review of Cholly Atkins’s choreography at Motown. Malone investigates the role of dance in finding a crossover audience. She states, “Although [Berry] Gordy’s immediate goal was to produce hit records, he felt that the groups’ longevity would depend on the presentation of stylish live shows to crossover audiences” (14). Gordy’s perspective on the importance of dance in reaching crossover audiences inspires many questions centering on the role of race in popular music. Why did Berry Gordy feel that dance was important in reaching a crossover audience? To what extent was this feeling informed by societal expectations of black popular music? Would the same expectations be applied to white musicians, and if not, then why?

From a critical perspective, this article is extremely valuable as it provides a thorough investigation of the choreography of Cholly Atkins and his various influences in developing Motown
stage performances. Malone tracks the influence of Atkins’s vaudeville tap training as well as vernacular dance in his Motown choreography. She states of Atkins’s choreography:

He taught [singers] to perform their music by doing dances that worked their magic not by retelling a song’s storyline in predictable pantomime but by punctuating it with rhythmical dance steps, turns, and gestures—drawn by the rich bedrock of American vernacular dance. In doing so, he virtually created a new form of expression: vocal choreography. (17)

Atkins thus used dance to visually interpret the “Motown Sound.” In this way, Atkins’s choreography can be seen as both a part of the music and itself a critical response to the music, as Atkins would shape and mold his dances to each song (rather than the more common practice of creating songs to fill a dance craze—see “Let’s Twist Again”). Malone’s article draws critical attention to an essential component of Motown’s crossover success and in so doing provides opportunity for inquiry. What characteristics are common in Atkins’s choreography? How did Atkins interpret the “Motown Sound”? What image was Motown trying to sell of its stars, and how did Atkins’s choreography help to shape that image?

Malone’s article provides valuable insight into the performances that proved so critical to Motown’s crossover success. In so doing, the article opens up questions about the role of race in 1960s popular music and the images Berry Gordy chose to display of his stars. The article would be particularly useful if presented in conjunction with videos of performances choreographed by Atkins, such as the Supremes iconic routine for “Stop! In the Name of Love.” (Jesse Klausz)


The role of black women in the Civil Rights Movement has often times been overlooked and neglected. Standley says that it is true that men were the principal leaders of the movement because women were kept out of leadership roles in the organizations. But is it completely accurate to say that many of the protests led by ministers were initiated by women? Despite the exclusion of black women from those top positions, and the little recognition they received from either blacks or whites, there were some published accounts of black women activists that gave some a sense of empowerment.

For example, Martin Luther King Jr. is usually cited as the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, yet the boycott was started by Jo Ann Robinson and the women’s group she headed, the Women’s Political Council. Bernice Reagon, who was suspended from Albany State College for participating in civil rights demonstrations, and who sang with the Freedom Singers of Albany, credited the battle for equal rights with giving her the sense of confidence she needed to combat all forms of oppression. Diane Nash, who organized sit-ins and freedom rides for SNCC, inspired many college-aged men and women to fight for their rights.

The essay goes on to describe how some women challenged their male leaders. This made me think critically about how the Civil Rights Movement was portrayed. Septima Clark, who was an activist for the SCLC, talked freely about what she saw as the sexism of the SCLC staff. She states that the men would send her into places because she could always make a path in to get people to listen to what she had to say. But she felt they didn’t have any faith in women at all. She also says that she didn’t think Dr. King thought much of women either, because when they were in Europe, Dr. King said, “Anything I can’t answer, ask Mrs. Clark,” but he never allowed her to speak to any group she got them admittance to.

In the classroom this behavior would bring about a lot of questions about the Civil Rights Movement. Can Dr. King and the other leaders of the movement fight for equality and still not consider their own black women as equals? The only woman we hear about in the movement is the iconic Rosa Parks. But then some people say that Rosa was a “plant” by Dr. King, and did not decide to sit on the bus herself.
The essay also brings up the issue of black women challenging the authority of black men in leadership positions, instead of allowing them to be “men.” This issue could express itself in the classroom through a debate about women’s empowerment and how it affects men. The students could research some of the women who were instrumental in the movement, and then see what, if any, interactions they had with their male counterparts.

Finally the essay shows how musicians of the time, like Bernice Reagon, who is the founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock and a Freedom singer, could also have a political impact. While perhaps not a traditional jazz singer, Reagon through her music embodied the “soul jazz” movement, which harkened back to “folk” music. The Freedom Singers were able to inspire and motivate others to move and act, and they were led mostly by women.

Overall, the essay sheds light on interactions, or lack of interactions, between male and female leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, and challenges us to look at the internal workings of the organization. (Anissa Barron)


This article offers a thorough comparison of the canonization of jazz with the canonization of African American literature. Thomas examines the canonization process of each—revealing the significance of the process, as well as the determination of authorities and influences affecting it.

The essay is divided into six sections. The first looks at issues of authority and power in the process of creating the cannon. Thomas shows how changes in the cannon reveal changes within culture and society. In the second section, Thomas specifically traces the canonization of jazz in the American academy since the 1950s. He looks at how pedagogical practice influences cannon formation and quotes Dr. Early in reference to this issue related to African American literature. The third section illuminates the drawbacks of cannon making with specific references to jazz and African American literature. Section four discusses Wynton Marsalis’s authority as a jazz performer and composer. The fifth section highlights jazz and Afro-American literature’s achievement of institutional and canonical status as a means for revealing much about cultural change and cultural politics; references are made to the Black Arts and Civil Rights Movements. The final section identifies the importance of archival work to minority cultures and arts that often fall victim to “institutional forgetting.” It also details the process through which Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC) became an essential organization at Lincoln Center.

Thomas’s essay introduces and cites many jazz critics and experts—including Krin Gabbard, Gunther Schuller, Martin Williams, Gerald Early, Wynton Marsalis, and Albert Murray. In addition to those interested in the challenges and benefits of canonization, the essay would be useful in outlining the influence of jazz in American culture—especially the emergence of jazz authorities. (Anilise Lange)

Films


Released at the very end of our period of study in this Institute, this film offers an intriguing contrast to the 1964 film Nothing But a Man. Both films are centered almost exclusively on African American characters, and both films prominently feature the music of Motown in their soundtracks. Indeed, Motown Records released an accompanying soundtrack album for Cooley High. Many of the same songs appear in the two films. There are important differences between the two films, however. For one, Nothing But a Man was written and directed by white artists, but Cooley High was written and directed by blacks. Nothing But a Man is set in the South—mostly a small town in Alabama—but Cooley High takes place in the urban North—in the black neighborhoods of Chicago. Whereas Nothing But a Man might be labeled an art house film or even agit prop, Cooley High has typically been labeled...
blaxploitation. (Both films, I would argue, go beyond these limiting labels.) *Cooley High* has also been described as a black version of George Lucas’s *American Graffiti*.

Like that film, *Cooley High* is tinged with nostalgia and saturated with the music of the previous decade. In that regard, the film may be seen as an example of the argument Gerald Early makes about the music of Motown in his book *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture*. Early notes that “the memory of Motown, and more generally of its era, may be holding blacks together, as we are torn apart by centrifugal social and political forces that frighten us even as they may, in the long run, bless us with a newer freedom” (134-35). The film depicts a segregated urban world of housing projects and economic struggle, dilapidated and graffiti-covered buildings, dull and prison-like schools, prevalent prostitution, alcohol and marijuana use, problematic male-female dynamics, and fight-prone youth. At the same time, that world is somewhat more intact than the one depicted in other blaxploitation films. There’s a relative innocence to the adolescents who dance to the music of early Motown. There are no guns or narcotics here. The high-rise and low-rise public housing seems more or less livable. When the main characters cut school, they go for a spirited jaunt to the Lincoln Park Zoo. Indeed, screenwriter Eric Monte told the *Los Angeles Times* that he wrote the film in order to dispel myths about growing up in the projects. "I grew up in the Cabrini-Green housing project and I had one of the best times of my life, the most fun you can have while inhaling and exhaling,” Monte said. Nevertheless, the film ends on a tragic note and with an allusion to *Les Quatre Cents Coups*, Francois Truffaut’s iconic NewWave film of adolescent alienation.

*Cooley High* has had a significant cultural legacy. Most immediately, it inspired the seventies-era TV show *What’s Happening!!* In addition, it clearly influenced the 1991 John Singleton film *Boyz in the Hood*, which takes several of its plot elements directly from *Cooley High*. In addition, the Motown group Boyz II Men’s first album, also released in 1991, was entitled *Cooleyhighharmony*. Obviously a significant piece of African American cinema, the film offers plenty of grist for classroom discussion, particularly about the meaning of Motown music for American blacks, and about the state of African American life in 1964 and 1975. (Frank Kovarik)


This film is based on the 1981 Broadway musical of the same name. Both the musical and the film present highly fictionalized versions of groups like the Supremes, solo acts like Marvin Gaye, and powerful executives like Berry Gordy of Motown. Although the film is only loosely grounded in fact, it gives a fairly accurate depiction of what life in the early days of Motown was like. In the first act of the film, we see the discovery of the girl group “The Dreamettes” by the Berry Gordy character, Curtis Taylor Jr. (played by Jamie Foxx), and their first big break singing backup for Jimmy Early, a Marvin Gaye-type character played by Eddie Murphy. The film then goes on to illustrate how the Dreams (no longer the younger-sounding Dreamettes) got their own act, how lead singer Effie (Jennifer Hudson) was replaced by the lighter-sounding, crossover-inducing Deena (Beyoncé Knowles), and how eventually Effie was kicked out of the group after growing unhappy with her lot and becoming pregnant with Curtis’s child. Act II opens years later with Effie now struggling to find work as a single mother while Deena enjoys a successful career and being married to (the now very well-off) Curtis, and Jimmy Early turns to drugs more and more when he is continually denied cutting-edge material to sing. Jimmy Early then dies, and Effie records a new single—which is soon bumped off the charts by Curtis, who uses payola to get the Dreams’ cover version played instead. Deena, upset with Curtis’s control over her life, reconciles with Effie, exposes the payola operation, and leaves Curtis. The show ends with the farewell performance of the Dreams—including a song sung by once-member Effie—and Curtis’s realization that he has a daughter.

*Dreamgirls* is packed with criticism and commentary of the Motown era. It touches only lightly on the racism issue, but focuses heavily on Curtis’s understanding of what sells, his absolute control of his company and his artists, and his underhanded dealings with payola and the mafia. In an NPR interview, Smokey Robinson critiqued the “villainous” portrayal of the Curtis/Berry Gordy character,
which prompted an apology from Paramount to Gordy and others from Motown. *Dreamgirls* also offers criticism on the drug use of many major stars during this time period through the Jimmy character, and portrays the edging out of Effie very much like the story of Flo from the Supremes (though the film is not nearly as harsh on the Deena character as most people are on Diana Ross). Though not entirely factual, *Dreamgirls* has a lot to offer the viewer who is trying to understand the story of Motown and the Supremes. (Danielle Asay)


Three soulful sisters rise out of Harlem to become music’s hottest singing group in this rags-to-riches tale of glitz, glamour and the high price of fame. These divas explode onto the scene with off-the-hook harmonies and a sexy style that catapults them to superstardom—but not every fairy tale has a happy ending. The story line will follow a group of sisters as they take their careers from small jazz clubs to the Fox Theatre. Sister and the Sisters get a crack at stardom when a thug with connections named Satin (Tony King) takes over, booking the girls into bigger venues. He also takes Sister as his mistress, turning her on to drugs and thus turning her into an easy victim for his sadistic physical abuse. Sister (Lonette McKee) is initially the film’s focus, but once she descends into addiction and leaves, Sparkle takes the group to the top, and Irene Cara’s thin but lovely voice carries the rest of the movie.

*Sparkle* is a tribute to the soulful music of Curtis Mayfield and Aretha Franklin. “The music and atmosphere that was the heart and soul of Motown in the 1960s is as much a character in this film as the individuals portrayed throughout the story,” says Carrie Jones, Michigan Film Officer director, in a statement. “This is an incredible opportunity to highlight one of Detroit’s most significant cultural exports of the last century.”

This movie has a double bonus with the motion picture soundtrack as a “bonus.” The DVD has but one important extra: a five-song CD taken from the original soundtrack album on which Mayfield’s songs were sung by Aretha Franklin (who is not in the movie). It may sound like an odd concept now, but that full-length LP was one of the high-water marks of both Franklin’s and Mayfield’s latter-day careers, and even the mere five selections are staggering soul performances. The sticker on the DVD box says, “Before Dreamgirls there was Sparkle” as quoted by Eugene Marks.

From a critical perspective, the movie is set around the time period that we are addressing; the Motown sounds and the social implications of the city are also portrayed in this movie, which could be depicting any city in the cosmopolitan USA. A beautiful black girl wants to make it out of the ghetto; however, she is lured into a sense of false bravado when she meets a man who feels that she has what he is looking for, which is vulnerability that he can control through drugs, sex and coercive tactics. She is beaten and drawn into situations beyond her control, and her confidante, Sparkle, will be the catalyst to bring the group to the pinnacle of stardom. I looked at regular patrons who viewed the movie and considered their opinions about the movie; KendraG1398 stated, “Sparkle is a wonderful movie! It’s a classic, I really don't think there should be a remake because Sparkle is a phenomenon all on its own. It doesn't need a twenty-first century upgrade. After all, nothing is like the original!” We have been looking at what is authentic and what isn’t; this movie depicts the 70’s time period, and the songs are the jams that we danced to during this post civil rights period. Aretha Franklin moved from Columbia Records to Motown during this time, and Curtis Mayfield was at the height of his career with his soon-to-be released album of *Super Fly*. Paula Patton is thinking about doing a remake of the movie, and there is already buzz about perfection that should not be messed with; some of the names that are being considered for this remake are Alicia Keys and Salli Richardson. But this is a classic that should not be tampered with, says Paula Patton.

From an educator’s perspective, I would not play the movie in class in its entirety; however, excerpts could be used to generate guiding questions and a debate as to what social, political and economic impact this movie had during the height of the 70s black culture. I would also play the soundtrack of this movie. Students might create a Comic Strip, PowerPoint or I-movie as their presentation. (Charlie Eruchalu)
Interviews


This source is an out-take from a 2009 radio interview of Dave Brubeck on NPR’s All Things Considered program, accessed here from NPR’s blog. While the interview mainly deals with the 50th anniversary of Brubeck’s Time Out album, the linked portion focuses on Brubeck’s 1962 jazz musical The Real Ambassadors. Brubeck and his wife Iola wrote the musical and recorded it with, among others, Louis Armstrong and Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross. It focuses on the importance of jazz musicians in spreading positive images of America, while also critiquing the United States’ policies on race. In this interview, Brubeck provides insight into the conception of the musical, gives background information on how he and other jazz musicians came to represent the United States internationally during the Cold War, and gives fascinating insight into Louis Armstrong’s feelings about representing the United States internationally during segregation. The interview, which is five minutes long, also contains music from the album. This would be an excellent source to use in class, particularly one focusing on cultural diplomacy during the Cold War, because of the deep insight it provides.

Brubeck and the interviewer Michele Norris provide a unique perspective on The Real Ambassadors in this interview, focusing particularly on the musical’s treatment of segregation in the United States. On this topic Brubeck states,

We tried to make people laugh at the ridiculousness of segregation. [On] Louis’ first song…Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross are singing from the Bible, ‘God Created Man in his Image and Likeness.’ We wanted the audience to chuckle about the ridiculousness of segregation, but Louis was crying… It was just too emotional.

Brubeck’s words show how criticism can add to our understanding of a particular piece of music. Brubeck clearly comprehends the emotional nature of the musical, so it would be enlightening to discuss with students why Brubeck might have decided to treat this material as a comedy. Furthermore, what does it mean that Brubeck and Armstrong had clearly distinct emotional experiences of this music? Why would a musical about Cold War relations satirize domestic segregation, or how are segregation and the Cold War intertwined issues?

Insofar as Brubeck serves as a critic of his own work here, and does so nearly fifty years after the release of the album, this interview can also be used to help illuminate the factors that can affect music criticism. There are many possible discussion questions that arise from this line of inquiry. What problems and advantages arise when an artist serves as a critic of his/her own work? What information is useful to know about a particular critic before reading his/her criticism? How does the passage of time affect critical perspective? These questions can help guide discussion and would be particularly useful if this interview were compared with critical reviews of The Real Ambassadors from the 1960s.

This interview helps highlight the distinction between the way the United States chose to portray itself and the reality of its domestic policies. While the United States used jazz to represent its freedom to international audiences, segregation greatly restricted the rights of a majority of jazz musicians. The image Brubeck paints of Armstrong crying while singing in The Real Ambassadors vividly portrays the emotional impact of such hypocrisy. (Jesse Klausz)
Music Recordings / Liner Notes


This source consists of liner notes written by Amiri Baraka for the John Coltrane Quartet’s album Live at Birdland. The album contains portions recorded live at New York’s Birdland club and two songs, “Alabama” and “Your Lady,” recorded in studio. Baraka’s liner notes provide critical perspective on the album’s songs and also place the album, as well as John Coltrane’s music in general, in a social/historical framework. Baraka’s notes speak extensively of the distinction between the experience of seeing a live performance and listening to an artifact such as an LP.

These notes use Live at Birdland as a lens through which to view the greater struggles Baraka associates with jazz music and the country as a whole. He begins his notes by stating, “One of the most baffling things about America is that despite its essentially vile profile, so much beauty continues to exist here. Perhaps it’s as so many thinkers have said, that it is because of the vileness, or call it adversity, that such beauty does exist” (225). Baraka thus sets the stage for his analysis of Coltrane’s album, focusing on the interplay of beauty and adversity in the music. As such, Baraka provides a framework through which largely abstract, non-vocal music can be understood as both commenting on and naturally arising from the social and political conditions in the United States.

Baraka reviews several of this album’s pieces through this established critical lens. For example, of the track “Alabama,” Baraka writes, “The whole is a frightening emotional portrait of some place in the musicians’ feelings. If that ‘real’ Alabama was the catalyst, more power to it, and may it be this beautiful, even in its destruction” (228). The “real” Alabama that Baraka alludes to is the 16th St. Baptist Church bombings, generally thought to be the inspiration for “Alabama.” Baraka does not speculate on whether that event truly inspired Coltrane, and his message seems to be that such speculation is irrelevant. Regardless of Coltrane’s inspiration, “Alabama,” for all its artistic beauty, springs from the violent horrors that Coltrane, as a black American, confronted. A close reading of Baraka’s comments in conjunction with listening to “Alabama” could inspire many discussion questions. Why is there such beauty in a piece so clearly inspired by adversity? How can this beauty be seen as a social or political statement? Is “Alabama” a portrait of the bombings or, as Baraka contends, of Coltrane’s emotions? Baraka’s notes inspire more questions than answers, helping students to think about the myriad ways music—all art—can be perceived. (Jesse Klausz)


This album includes both political speeches and music from the civil rights era. It features artists ranging from jazz musician Les McCann to James Brown, Nina Simone, and the Staple Singers, and speeches by Huey Newton, Stokely Carmichael, and Malcolm X. Gerald Early provides liner notes illuminating the theme “Black Power.” (Angela Watson)

This “live” performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* of Diana Ross & the Supremes expertly lip-syncing to their new hit single, “Love Child,” is a departure from regular Supremes repertoire. The girls are usually so elegant and poised, but in this performance they are bopping along in bare feet and street clothes, wearing their hair au natural. The reason for the departure from glamour is in the content of their song. “Love Child” is one of the first Supremes songs that provides an open social commentary on life in the late 1960s in urban America, and the Supremes wanted it to be taken seriously.

“Love Child” tells the story of a child born into poverty in a “tenement slum,” with no father around (“he never even married mom”). Although the song does not explicitly mention race, it is certainly implied that this is a major problem with African American families living in poverty. A decade earlier, Abbey Lincoln had begun singing and speaking out in support of the healthy black heterosexual relationship, which she felt was something that was undervalued and did not even exist in many places. In her autobiography, Mary Wilson states how rare it was to have a father living at home (in the Projects) with his children—most fathers were never around, and it was up to the mothers to raise and support their families as single parents. The number of illegitimate children living in poverty throughout the country was certainly high enough to inspire this song by the Supremes. Why Berry Gordy allowed them to sing their first overtly political song at this late point in their career is unknown, however. He must have realized that in late 1968, social commentary was going to sell.

The debut of the new single “Love Child” on *The Ed Sullivan Show* was a very telling performance. From the way they dressed and moved to the rhythm and lyrics they chose, it was clear that the Supremes did not think of this new song as another love song, although love is in the title—it was a song with a real message that they wanted their audience to hear. If anybody made a major change in his or her life based on hearing this song, I would be surprised. However, by publicly exposing this problem, the Supremes drew attention to the fact that there was a problem with black heterosexual relationships and family life in urban America, just as Abbey Lincoln had tried to do years earlier. Hopefully it urged some to think more about their actions, as Diana Ross pleaded: “This love we're contemplatin' is worth the pain of waitin'/ We'll only end up hatin' the child we may be creatin'/ Love Child, never meant to be/ Love Child, scorned by Society/ Love Child, always second best/ Love Child, different from the rest.” In this song, the Supremes provide excellent criticism of the free love ‘60s by making listeners remember that actions have (sometimes unintended) consequences, and that it is worth the wait in order to give children the better lives that they deserve. (Danielle Asay)


What impact did Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On* have on black music during the Vietnam Era? During the height of the Vietnam War, out of Motown emerged this smooth, quiet storm of a man called Marvin Gaye, who would go on to sell one of the top four money grossing albums of all times. In the album *What’s Going On* Gaye sang about war and how wars are still being fought. It was not just about the war in Vietnam but the wars that are still being fought all over the world, the war on injustice, the war on poverty, the war against inhumanity, the war against drugs and the war against hate crimes; there’s a war going on. As Soul-patrol is quoted as saying, “Sometimes while discussing Soul/Funk music we tend to forget that the music did not exist in a vacuum. The music was a product of the existing environment of the time in which the musicians who created the music lived.” I read the articles from various sources that claim that the period of Soul very much parallels the Civil Rights Movement. As Soul-patrol stated, “Soul Music and the Civil Rights Movement had a dual impact on each other.” How much of a political or social impact did Marvin Gaye’s song have on society and black consciousness as a whole? According to “Song Fact,” this was one of the first Motown songs to make a powerful political statement; others in the Motown family were recording serious material as well. “The song had a tremendous impact because listeners weren’t used to hearing social commentary from Gaye.” As Jackson Browne said, in a 2008 interview with *Rolling Stone*: “No one was expecting an anti-war song from him; but it was a moment in
time when people were willing to hear it from anybody, if it was heartfelt.” And who better to tell it than the person who has talked to us about love and desire. The lyrics state it best: “Picket Lines and picket signs, don’t punish me with brutality, talk to me so you can see what’s going on?” This album ranked number one on the R & B chart. Yes, this song did stir up social criticism by forging new innovations in soul music.

From a critical perspective, as America shifted its values and culture, did society perceive the Black Power Movement as a catalyst for that social change and was it perceived in a positive or negative light? Did this movement bring about more sales of black music or did record sales decline? Were blacks beginning to have more positive roles on television during this movement? Was Hollywood shifting with the shift in cultural values or still holding onto stereotype castings for blacks? Did critics of the recording industry or movie industry have a paradigm shift as well when writing reviews about blacks in music?

(Charlie Eruchalu)


The title and cover art (Head Hunter) of Herbie Hancock’s album Head Hunters is the twelfth studio album by American jazz musician Herbie Hancock, released October 13, 1973 on Columbia Records in the United States. The album has only four songs with nuances of funk, fusion, and an African flair; the songs are high energy and appealing to a new and young generation of jazz fans. The artwork on the CD lends credence to Hancock’s head as a time meter as he bellows out tunes from the Fender Rhodes Electric Piano and ARP Odyssey Synthesizer. Scott Thompson’s short essay inside the CD booklet offers a captivating analysis as to why this album became so successful (it was one of the biggest-selling jazz albums in history). According to Thompson, “This album reflects sounds as fresh and funky as it did nearly two decades ago.”

The liner notes make nuances about the direction in which Hancock wanted his music to progress. Times were changing and so were people evolving, and he wanted something different for the music that he felt was stifling. Hancock wanted a new direction for his music to take it to the next level, and he had heard about and listened to both Sly and James Brown as both incorporated funk into their music. As Thompson states, “Head Hunters was on the cutting edge of the revolutionary changes that jazz music was going through in the early ‘70s.” Herbie Hancock began studying piano at the age of seven. He was classically trained; he later formed his own jazz ensemble in high school. In 1963, Hancock played with Miles Davis, as he learned that he was influenced by the best, and he learned a lot about music from Miles and how music was transforming and how the musicians were reacting to the changing of the times. Herbie appreciated how Miles would incorporate innovations into the sounds of his unique expression of music, and Herbie was impressed by the way Miles was so receptive and open to integrating new nuances into his style of music. As he conceptualized the album Head Hunters, he wanted to do an album on funk. From a critical perspective of the music, after the experimental jazz of the late 1960s, the genre became directionless and was also having to compete with the increasing popularity of rock music. For some critics, the 70s was the decade in which jazz died. But James Maycock argues that fusion jazz, as popularized by CTI Records, was unfairly criticized and may actually have given the genre the kiss of life. As James Maycock, states, “the result of this dilemma was the birth of jazz fusion, and the success of Miles Davis’s album Bitches Brew, in 1970, encouraged many other jazz musicians to tackle this new musical style.” Also, Maycock states, “with the new jazz-funk seminal album Head Hunters, it was an updated version of the soul-influenced jazz music of the late 1960s, but with the earthiness of those recordings extracted and replaced with a smoother texture of orchestral strings, classical guitars and flutes that gave the music the feeling of a film soundtrack.” This Jazz funk album has a definite spin of the various genres of music, which have been discussed in class; this music has evolved into a generation of young jazz enthusiasts who have followed the rock ‘n’ roll, the Rhythm and Blues crowd and now have a broader respect for jazz musicians and the integration of funk as part of the revolutionary change in jazz music.

As a teacher, I would play Herbie Hancock’s Head Hunters and have the students explain why this album sold over 500,000 copies and why the music of other jazz musicians, such as Miles Davis’s On
the Corner album, were not as appealing or attractive to the new generation of jazz enthusiasts? Did marketing the album contribute to the success of Hancock’s album and the failure of Miles Davis’s album? Why did Herbie Hancock’s album become such a trend for the new generation of jazz enthusiasts? (Charlie Eruchalu)


Abbey Lincoln begins her song with the trumpet, trombone, and tenor saxophone playing a staccato beat in unison. They start out very loudly, then in the second stanza quiet their playing considerably to allow Abbey to sing. From the title of song “AfroBlue,” one can surmise that the land Abbey is dreaming of where her soul is from is Africa. Her second verse says that she hears a hand stroke on a drum, which also conjures images of drummers in Africa.

Lines from the song describe a boy meeting a girl, and their subsequent rendezvous. I also think they could describe Abbey’s realization that there is a connection between her life in America and her roots in Africa:

And my slumbering fantasy assumes reality
Until it seems it’s not a dream the two are me and you.

These final lines could symbolize that she realizes that Africa and its roots are inside her. Critically, some listeners could look at this song as Abbey being overly sexual, when that is what she was trying to move away from by becoming a jazz singer. Conversely, this could have been one of the first songs that described relationships between black males and black females as beautiful, and asserted that all shades of black people are beautiful.

I think high school teachers could use this song to describe symbolism in music. The music of today is often times overtly sexual, and a comparison could be made between Abbey Lincoln and a contemporary artist. One could also teach metaphors and figurative language. (Anissa Barron)


Ira Gitler’s controversial negative review of this album led to a panel discussion on “Racial Prejudice in Jazz” in the pages of DownBeat magazine, where the review first appeared. The discussion included, among others, Lincoln, Max Roach, Gitler, and Nat Hentoff, who wrote the liner notes for this album. The notes and the album itself are thus an important companion to a reading of the review and the panel discussion. (Frank Kovarik)


Nathan begins his liner notes by stating that Simone’s ability as a musician, singer, songwriter, and performer has singled her out as a legend in her own time. The 10 albums she cut for Colpix Records from 1959-1963 are definitive representations of Nina’s vast scope as an artist.

She was born in Tryon, North Carolina, as Eunice Waymon, and later changed her name to Nina, which is Spanish for “little girl” and Simone after French actress Simone Signoret. In 1963 Nina moved to Philips Records where she recorded seven albums and broadened her appeal to include European audiences who loved her “honest approach and uncompromising artistry.” Nina’s stand on civil rights and equality were self-evident through much of the material she recorded for the label, and she continued to focus on relevant social issues after signing a new contract with RCA Records in 1967. With this label she achieved even greater international visibility thanks to hit singles like “Ain’t Got No-I Got Life,” “To Love Somebody,” and “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black.”

At her recording of Nina Simone at Town Hall, Nina had a chance to re-visit some of the “torch songs” that made up a good portion of her repertoire in nightclub performances. Songs like “The Other Woman” and “You Can Have Him,” two classic songs that deal with infidelity, and “Exactly Like You’
and “Fine and Mellow,” from the songbook of one of her favorite artists, were included on the album. Showcasing her dexterity as a pianist, the album also included the instrumentals “Under the Lowest,” “Return Home,” and “Summertime.”

Throughout the liner notes Nathan never visits anything except for positive praise for Simone and her music. He mentions that the original liner notes of The Amazing Nina Simone proclaim that she would “emerge as the greatest new singing talent to hit the recording field in a decade.” He also says, “She does not compromise; her artistry is paramount; and she always delivers with relentless passion, heart, and soul.” This claim seems to contradict some of my other research about Simone and her tantrums and antics.

I think teachers could use these liner notes to study tone, and compare and contrast. Marketers who want someone to purchase an album are not going to say anything bad about the artist. If I hadn’t heard anything else about Nina Simone, I would think she was a jazz legend who never had any problems, and was the consummate professional. These notes could be used to compare and contrast with my other article about Nina Simone. Some similarities are that both critics believe that Simone was a wonderful artist and released superior music. Some differences are the depiction of Simone as always professional. I think students would enjoy and learn from the liner notes, as they give a complete picture of Nina Simone’s musical journey through her different record companies. (Anissa Barron)


This classic Blue Note album, re-issued on CD under the direction of Michael Cuscuna, constitutes an interesting artifact of black music—from the cover art to the liner notes (by the ubiquitous white jazz critic Leonard Feather), from the re-packaging design to, of course, the music itself, including the title track, a hard bop standard which would later be alluded to in Steely Dan’s “Rikki Don’t Lose That Number.” (Frank Kovarik)

Simone, Nina. The Best of Nina Simone. 1969 Philips 600-298 CD.

This CD has a compilation of Nina Simone’s most famous works, including “Four Women,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “Summertime.”

-------. Black Gold. 1970 RCA Victor APL 1-0241 CD.

This CD contains Nina’s civil rights anthem, “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black.”


The booklet included in this “definitive performances” DVD describes the background story of the Supremes, details their successes and their legacy, and explains the chosen content of the DVD. In its brief history of the group—from the Primettes to “Someday We’ll Be Together”—the essay presents events in a positive light and praises the Supremes as “the greatest female vocal group in pop music history,” claiming that the Supremes are “a window to a whole world—not only to the past of music and fashion, but also to the past of America’s shared culture, attitudes, self-image and standards.” This essay is certainly written by a critic who fancies the Supremes and their place in popular music and culture. The author does go on to mention that not only were the Supremes fantastic, but so were H-D-H and the Funk Brothers. It is nice to see in a Supremes tribute someone giving credit to those people behind the scenes who helped make the Supremes the success that they were. The brief history in the booklet concludes with the statement, “The film version of Dreamgirls reminds us of the way The Supremes became the ultimate embodiment of an American archetype.” This may be true, but the author would have done well to expound on exactly what he meant by that claim. Perhaps he believed that the performances would be evidence enough in themselves.

The sixteen performances chosen for viewing on this DVD are sixteen of the eighteen “top ten” hits that the Supremes had during 1964-1969. Concerning these performances it is worth noting that twelve songs became “number one” hits, a very grand achievement, and that the brilliant Holland-Dozier-
Holland (H-D-H) team composed all but two of the hits included in the program. After compiling these hits, the producers of this commemorative DVD decided, “Because the footage that comprises this collection is so vibrant, charming and fun, we chose to abandon the standard documentary approach that combines interviews, still photos, memorabilia and the inevitable ‘egghead’ musicologist ruminating on the artist.” This statement not only criticizes the traditional approach of making a documentary, but also implies that the Supremes are above that—in the first full-length home video dedicated to the group, the footage alone can speak for itself as to their greatness. Perhaps no extraordinary measures are necessary in order to see just how extraordinary the Supremes are. (Danielle Asay)


Innervisions is widely regarded as the artist’s first overtly political album, with songs like “Living for the City” and “Higher Ground.” The release of such work marked a shift in the way Wonder was regarded in the critical community, as an introspective and socially conscious artist. (Angela Watson)

--------. “You Haven’t Done Nothin.” In Fulfillingness’ First Finale. New York: Motown, 1974. 3746303322. CD.

Critic Albert Murray, in his book The Omni-Americans, asserts that music contains “the most comprehensive rendering of the complexities of the American Negro experience” (146). If we take Murray’s idea seriously, teachers seeking to give a sense of the African American experience in the period from 1959 to 1975 ought to look carefully at the music from that period and select pieces that evoke the complex political, aesthetic, social, and cultural currents of those times. This song, released near the very end of the period, strikes a strong note of disaffection and disillusionment. For students who may be under the impression that the Civil Rights Movement put to rest racial grievances in the mid-1960s, this song offers a fiery corrective. The song also may surprise students who think of Stevie Wonder as merely a benign, smiling old-timer who turns up on telethons or old clips from The Cosby Show or Sesame Street. (The backup vocals from the Jackson 5 may also expand students’ sense of the political dimensions of that group as well.)

In this song—a number-one pop hit—Wonder delivers a blistering funk jeremiad. Commonly interpreted as an accusation of then President Richard Nixon, the song minces no words in its chorus: “We are sick and tired of hearing your song/Telling how you are going to change right from wrong/’Cause if you really want to hear our views/You haven’t done nothin.’” The anger in the song is right on the surface, and the first-person plural connotes a strong sense of racial solidarity. “We are sick and tired,” sings Stevie, and it seems clear that he means black people, and not, for instance, an interracial group of civil rights protesters. There’s also no real reason to imagine the song as addressed solely to the President. It might be addressed to anyone in a position of power who does not take into consideration the views of African Americans or use that power to bring about substantive change. “The world is tired of pacifiers,” Stevie sings, expressing the same type of frustration that Martin Luther King Jr. expresses in “Letter from Birmingham Jail”—frustration with those who pay lip service to justice while advising those who struggle for freedom to go slow and calm down.

The song’s release on the relatively staid Motown label is a measure of the artistic autonomy Stevie Wonder had carved out for himself by 1974—as well as, perhaps, a measure of the turbulence of the times. The song is also firmly planted in the funk genre, a genre seen as distinctly black. With its funk elements and political stridency, the song seems not to fit the usual Motown formula for crossover success, yet it went to Number One on both the pop and soul charts, and the album it appeared on won a Grammy for Album of the Year. Why? teachers might ask their students. What was it about this song and this album that made it so appealing to Americans’ musical tastes in 1974-75? What does it say about America at this time that a song full of so much black anger would achieve so much commercial and critical success? (Frank Kovarik)
Periodicals (Magazines & Newspapers)


Janus Adams begins her article in April 2004, a year after the death of Nina Simone. Nina's voice, which was "as raspy and venerable as the generations of whom she sang," was riddled with pain. On stage Nina exuded confidence and poise, but off stage she was unsettled and uncomfortable. No matter how hard she tried to maintain an air of confidence and flair, she was haunted by her childhood demons of not being beautiful and accepted. But Nina was able to persevere through her own self-doubt and deliver memorable and moving music.

Simone merged European and African styles and melodies flawlessly to move crowds of all hues. This also meant that she simultaneously had the opportunity to anger crowds of all hues as well. Having met Nina Simone, Adams could love only her music, and not Nina herself. Simone was widely known for her insults and tantrums, and Adams remembers her obnoxious behavior at a concert where she refused to come on stage for over an hour because of poor ticket sales, punishing the crowd in attendance. As Adams reminisces with her friends, they can all recall horrible "Nina Stories."

Despite her behavior, Nina was to become the musical voice of the Civil Rights Movement. Beginning with the anthem "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black," and flowing to "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free," Nina seemingly carried all Negroes’ feelings vicariously on her back. "Mississippi Goddam," expresses the anger and despair of the black community. She is held in tribute today for her bold lyrics and uncanny ability to inspire in others what she couldn't seem to see in herself, beauty in blackness.

Adams critically speaks about Simone and her behavior. She recalls that Nina grew to understand that "the sin was not in being Black, but in the affront of those who asserted privilege in being white." I find her opinions interesting, and probably indicative of most who knew Nina—they loved the music, but disliked the person. People still went to hear her in concert, where often times her behavior would become as much of the show as her music.

I believe that educators could use this article to show how music might not always reflect the musician. I think all grade levels could address the theme of Nina Simone's music while then exploring the subject of how black women are beautiful, but she couldn't see the beauty in herself. Teachers of females of all races can address the notion of beauty, and analyze who defines beauty, and how all women can be included in that definition. (Anissa Barron)


This article is a dual review of Marvin Gaye’s What’s Going On and Stevie Wonder’s Where I’m Coming From, written by Vince Aletti in 1971 and published in Rolling Stone. Aletti reviews What’s Going On quite positively but has an overall unfavorable reaction to Where I’m Coming From. Both albums took on political subjects, a departure from previous Motown practices. The article serves as a good reference for gauging the reception of these albums from a “popular” perspective at the time of their release. Such information provides valuable context to the music. As such, this review would be best used in conjunction with one or both of the albums discussed within it.

This review intentionally groups these two albums because of their thematic similarities. In 1971, both Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder were able to exert a degree of musical autonomy, and both chose to use that autonomy to infuse sociopolitical messages into their music. In addition, both Gaye and Wonder chose to produce the records themselves. As such, these records represent part of an important period at Motown Records in which Gaye and Wonder, as well as some other artists, were able to negotiate significantly greater control over their products than had previously been the case. This review draws
attention to this change and places the records in the context of the times and opens up several questions about the records. What did Wonder and Gaye choose to do with their increased freedom? How did the themes and music change from their previous records? Given the popularity of political musicians like Bob Dylan, why might Motown have resisted allowing artists to make sociopolitical statements in their music before this time?

From a critical perspective, Aletti’s review provides an interesting comparison of the two albums. He describes *Where I’m Coming From* in largely negative terms, calling it “Quite a disappointment.” Aletti pinpoints Wonder’s lyrics and production as particularly weak, calling his lyrics “sadly undistinguished,” and his production “self-indulgent.” His only praise for the album centers on Wonder’s voice and the only two non-political songs on the album. Aletti is much more positive about *What’s Going On*, which he describes as something of a concept album, carrying in his words, “one many-faceted statement on conditions in the world today, made nearly seamless by careful transitions between the cuts.” After significant admiration of the album, Aletti states, “There are very few performers who could carry a project like this off. I’ve always admired Marvin Gaye, but I didn’t expect that he would be one of them. Guess I seriously underestimated him. It won’t happen again.” However, as with Wonder, Aletti is not particularly impressed with the album’s political lyrics, which he describes as “hardly brilliant, but without over-reaching they capture a certain aching dissatisfaction.” Aletti’s statements inspire several discussion questions. Why did he not expect that Marvin Gaye would create a successful concept album? Is it related to his position as a Motown Records artist, or are there other factors? How might Aletti’s background, and his expectations for a Motown record, inform his negative perspective of the albums’ sociopolitical lyrics? (Jesse Klausz)


This essay makes some fascinating statements about white youth and black music, authenticity and soul. Als, an African American critic, writes about the white kids he knew growing up who gravitated toward black music (James Brown, Aretha Franklin) as a way of brushing up against what they considered “the Real.” From his older sister, Als learned a different metric for evaluating an artist’s soul, “one that was not limited by race, though it grew out of black music.” Als considers white artists like Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro, Ricki Lee Jones, and PJ Harvey to be “black” because of the way that their work recognizes in black music “their own identification as emotionally and politically disenfranchised people.” On the other hand, Als considers Aretha Franklin and Lauryn Hill, artists who come out of the black middle class, to be inauthentic. Als faults Franklin for presenting “a manufactured, impersonal form of blackness,” for sounding “just the way white people imagined a black woman would sound—plaintive but feisty, indomitable but sad.” As for Lauryn Hill, Als writes, “She speaks from a blacker-than-thou stance that feels contrived,” and asserts that “it’s as if she’d learned the rhetoric of persecution without actually knowing what it is to live it.” Als makes a complicated and surprising argument, one that students may find puzzling or may disagree with but one that will likely spur a spirited engagement with questions of authenticity and race and the way people use these concepts to make meaning out of music. (Frank Kovarik)


Barnett begins her interview with Abbey Lincoln by asking what makes a good singer. Abbey replies that she has always been concerned about telling a story. She says that music is social, and that people are not concerned with how beautiful your voice is, but they want to know can you tell me how it is to live out here. She says Billie Holiday has a weak voice, but she sang about bodies hanging, and Armstrong had a funny, squeaky voice, but there would be no jazz without him: “We don’t come from a tradition that worries about pretty singing. Good singing is in the way you use your voice.”

Barnett then goes on to ask about Lincoln’s songwriting process. Abbey says that lyrics come to her first because she is a poet. She says that she is “inspired by a holy muse and her ancestors.” This is a glimpse into her feeling of connection to the past and Africa.
Barnett questions Abbey about “A Wedding Song,” which was written as a celebration of her marriage to Max Roach. Abbey says she wrote the lyrics to a song Roach composed titled “Prelude.” She wrote the lyrics to “cement the joy I felt and to express gratitude I felt for having found a companion, someone to work together with and to exchange ideas with.” In this line of question and answer, Abbey says that even though her mother and father were both in the house when she grew up, she never saw marriage or happiness for herself. She says that she knew that “black men and women had a hard time together.” I think this gives insight into how black life and marriages are portrayed. She goes on to say that she thought she and Roach could build something together and that even though the marriage didn’t last, they did create something lasting that “was not a baby!” This is further insight into the thought that the only positive thing that black marriages created was babies.

I think this is a wonderful article for teachers to use in comparing the roles and stereotypes of black marriages in the 1960s and today. Would we say they are different? Can you think a marriage creates something positive if it ends in divorce? Abbey also delves into the question of her representing her African heritage. In class I would give the students the quote by Abbey:

My life didn’t begin with slavery and neither did yours, you hear? That’s what they’d like you to believe, but don’t go for the okeydokey. You’re too smart for that. Our lives, black lives, began with the pyramids, with mathematics, science, and the philosophy the Greeks eventually stole and passed off as their own. I’ll tell you my continent is Africa. That’s mine.

Students could then analyze and internalize what Abbey meant by this quote, and look at it critically to see if they agree or disagree. (Anissa Barron)


This article details the effectiveness of utilizing innovative teaching methods in order to best validate the importance of history in students’ lives. More specifically, the author treats the topic of using oral histories to teach African American history. When this article was written, the importance of teaching black history was still in question, as the author implies, but its teaching was required. The article states that “[u]ntil the formal historical scholarship and the informal oral tradition of the black man is synthesized in the classroom, the value of black history will never be revealed” (30). This article focuses on two instructional approaches: using biographies of popular music artists to teach historical analysis, and using these artists’ song lyrics to demonstrate social themes.

This article would be of particular use to a classroom teacher because the author suggests prominent artists, such as Isaac Hayes, B. B. King, Aretha Franklin, Smokey Robinson, Roberta Flack, Ray Charles and Diana Ross, whose music can “provide significant insights into the past, present, and future of Black America” (22). The author aids teachers further by including a detailed list of lyric and album resources, arranged thematically, and mostly included in the scope and sequence of this seminar (Jazz and Motown, 1959-1975). Although the author does not comment specifically on the artists or their albums, by simply including them and linking them with important social themes the author suggests their credibility as true examples and texts of African American culture. The songs included on the author’s list are certainly considered in his opinion to be samples of authentic “black music”—with social and political messages imbedded in them to boot—and therefore should be used to teach black history.

The criticism in this article is minimal because the author only includes those sources that he personally deems valuable to teaching black social history in the 1960s and 1970s. The author does comment on the worth of his sources by cross-referencing them with important social and cultural themes of the ‘60s and ‘70s. To conclude his positive criticism, he even goes as far as to state that without using innovative techniques, such as his approach of the historical analysis of contemporary music in the classroom, students will “question the validity of black history in their lives” (36). Many teachers today are realizing the importance of using popular music to teach history, but because this article suggests using popular music to teach contemporary black history, it could be considered “ahead of its time.” (Danielle Asay)

This glowing review of Stevie Wonder’s 1974 album (which would go on to win the Best Album Grammy in 1975) offers teachers a useful example of how popular music was evaluated by critics of the era. The review begins with an analysis of the album’s cover art, interpreting the lavishly prepared images in light of Wonder’s career and life, and connecting them to the songs on the album. In our current era, when album art is either greatly diminished (because of CDs’ smaller size) or completely dispensed with (because consumers download songs directly to their iPods), it’s instructive to see a concrete example of how important album art used to be.

In his second paragraph, Emerson discusses Wonder’s work in the context of his business relationship with Motown, claiming, “Since he assumed complete control of his musical direction in 1972 (relegating Motown to the role of merchandiser), Wonder's albums have been about vision.” This sentence interests me for two reasons. First of all, it seems remarkable that the critical reception of Wonder’s work is so highly attuned to the economic circumstances of its creation. Does this statement suggest that Motown in particular and record labels in general were viewed with suspicion by critics, and that Stevie’s achievement of “complete control” endows him with a more respectable status as artist? Secondly, the observation that “Wonder’s albums have been about vision” constitutes a highly literary interpretation. The focus here is on the lyrics as a poetic corpus with coherent thematic concerns and motifs. This way of viewing popular music seems to have probably been something relatively new in 1974. Were the albums of Diana Ross and Supremes or Smokey Robinson and the Miracles analyzed in this way when they were released? When did this change come about—and is it at least partly related to the sense that Stevie Wonder is now in “complete control of his musical direction”?

The racial assumptions in this review are also fascinating. Witness this passage from Emerson, who is white:

FFF is less funky, less specifically black than its predecessors. For Wonder's onward and upward development has consistently been away from strict soul music and racial categories or limitations. Because of this, his appeal—greater than that of almost any other performer today—cuts across social and ethnic barriers. In this respect he's ideally suited to Motown, which has never been content with an exclusively black market. But unlike so many Detroit acts, whose wooing of white listeners leaves them pallid and gutless, Wonder's music expands and its integrity is strengthened, not diminished.

It’s surprising to read that this album is less funky and less black when one of its best-selling tracks (“You Haven’t Done Nothin’”) is both propulsively funky and racially militant, seeming to call America to account for bad faith in addressing the needs and concerns of black people. When Emerson writes that this album “aims at relaxed enjoyment; it's not something to get hot and bothered about,” one wonders if he accidentally skipped over “You Haven’t Done Nothin,’” or if he failed to hear the protest elements in “Heaven is 10 Zillion Light Years Away.” In that song, Wonder addresses an age-old question: If there’s a God, why does evil exist in this world? For example, Wonder asks, “Why must my color, black, make me a lesser man?” When his friends, noting such injustice, ask him where is his God, Stevie (or, at least, the narrator of the song) replies, “It’s taken him so long ’cause we’ve got so far to come.” The failing is not God’s, the song implies, but humanity’s.

In any case, Emerson seems to ignore such references to black people’s freedom struggles in his desire to see Wonder’s artistic progression as one that transcends race. Emerson is also aware of Motown as a label that seeks to expand beyond racially circumscribed markets, yet he also expresses the commonly held notion that many Motown acts have become less authentic because of that quest. While some Detroit acts’ “wooing of white listeners leaves them pallid and gutless,” Emerson writes, “Wonder’s music expands and its integrity is strengthened, not diminished.” This claim could be a great item to use for a class discussion about race, music, criticism, and the idea of authenticity. How is it that some black artists expand their audience and achieve greater “integrity,” while others become “pallid and gutless”? 
And who gets to make the judgment of which artists have integrity and which ones are pallid and gutless? Does a white critic have less of a right to do so than a black critic? (Frank Kovarik)


In this 1973 interview, Ben Fong-Torres of *Rolling Stone* covers a lot of ground about Stevie Wonder’s career and personal life in this year, following the release of *Talking Book*. With hit singles “You Are the Sunshine of My Life” and “Superstition” released from this album, Stevie is riding high. He has also finished touring with The Rolling Stones. The context of the interview is a post-concert party Motown has thrown for the star. This was also around the time Stevie negotiated for his groundbreaking contract with Motown in which he got his own publishing and a substantially higher royalty rate. Fong-Torres writes, “Now in his eleventh year in show business, formerly Little Stevie Wonder is in absolute control.” The interviewer quotes Wonder’s attorney who negotiated this deal as stating that Stevie is the first “artist” Motown created in the past 13 years they’ve been putting out records. In this sometimes-rambling interview, the writer covers such territory as Wonder as death, the artist’s failed marriage, Wonder’s image, and the way sex is different for blind people (Wonder seems incredulous to be asked this question). They also discuss living as a black person in the United States, Wonder’s interest in Afrocentrism, and details about other musicians of the time.

This article is significant in its depiction of the artist at the time, in terms of how Wonder’s public persona was changing from the Motown Revue’s 12-year-old wonderkind to a more introspective, culturally significant artist who had found his own voice. It is also significant in its analysis of the commercial aspects of this same concept, in Wonder’s having greater leverage to control his artistic creations. Moreover, the article delves into the artist’s ability to cross over to a more mainstream audience, a “wider, whiter” crowd, as the writer puts it. It is also significant in that it just skims the surface in terms of talking about the social issues that Wonder would later gain more respect for, and have more ability to talk about, as we see when comparing this to later interviews with the artist.

From a critical lens, the article is significant for how the issues of race are just beginning to be discussed at this time in Wonder’s career, when *Talking Book* was his most recent release. Generally, *Innervisions* is thought to be the groundbreaking album, the album where Wonder truly stakes his claim as a socially conscious black performer. However, this interview, for all of its shortcomings and its departures into not particularly relevant or respectful topics, shows signs of critics beginning to take the artist seriously, as the name of the article implies. Fong-Torres and Wonder discuss how growing up, the artist felt more marginalized because of his race than because of his blindness, and Wonder points out that this idea is borne out even in the press: “This cat said in an article one time, it was funny: ‘Damn! He’s black! He’s blind! What else?!’ I said, ‘Bull shit, I don’t wanna hear that shit, you know.’” He also discusses the song “Big Brother,” which has a quite overt political message. Wonder explains, “We don’t have to do anything to them ‘cause they’re gonna cause their own country to fall,” seeming to echo the sentiments of Amiri Baraka. Fong-Torres also discusses his covers of more politically oriented songs, such as “Blowing in the Wind.” (Angela Watson)


This review of the Supremes portrays them in a very positive light. Not a single word of negative criticism is used in describing this girl group. The author is enamored with their look, their charm and sex appeal, and their ability to cross over… not just to a white audience, but to an older audience as well. This article quickly chronicles the Supremes’ rise to fame from the projects of Detroit to the “Artists Development Department” at Motown Records, and then to the stage of the Apollo Theater.

It is very interesting to note that a white author wrote this positively biased review. Seemingly, Berry Gordy did achieve what he wanted in crossing-over. From the author’s interview with Diana Ross, the reader can tell that he found her sexy yet classy, and very real. The author believes that these
Supremes really are super—because they were able to come from such humble beginnings and make it in a white world and a man’s world. He loves their songs, for which the girls credit the genius of the Holland-Dozier-Holland team, and the flirty way that they croon the songs—though he does not mention the quality of their voices or the musicality of the tunes. The author glosses over this possible short sight by saying how he enjoys the way that their sound has evolved to a smooth balladry, and how amazing he thinks their costumes and performances are. To say that the Supremes have a fan in this critic would be an understatement—I just wonder if everybody felt the same way about this chart-topping crossover trio.

(Danielle Asay)


This article contains a concise compilation of jazz terms and phrases with their corresponding definitions as recognized in the early 1960s. Lexicographer Elliot Horne presents words that jazz-festival goers might hear as they attend various performances during the jazz-festival season (of 1961). The brief introduction to the list of fifty-three terms reveals Horne’s intention to educate people in the current jazz language, because it has a habit of changing with passing years. The list of words is compared to a program in baseball. The inclusion of such an article in the *New York Times* suggests the readers of the time would not have been adept in the language of jazz music.

The article relates to numerous topics covered in the Institute, including the following selections: boss, Soulville, and “the pots are on.” Each of the previously listed can be used to describe how and where a musician might play jazz. This article might be useful to a 21st century novice music scholar interested in researching jazz of the 1960s, as it provides a user-friendly list of words and definitions significant to understanding jazz descriptions and criticisms.

The article shows how jazz music was talked about at the time. Horne was a jazz writer and critic who worked for Columbia Records in the 1950s. His expertise in the field suggests his word choices, definitions, and examples should be accepted as accurate and significant. Further analysis could be conducted to identify words left off the list, and conclusions could be drawn for their exclusion. Was it for the sake of the lexicographer, reader, or newspaper? The article’s inclusion in a mainstream newspaper reveals both the significance of jazz to the culture but also aspects of its unfamiliarity to particular communities. Within the classroom, the article might be utilized to illustrate the changing nature of the English language and its many nuances. Mature students could create a similar list for hip-hop or rap music modeled after this list. (Anilise Lange)


This article appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* five days after James Brown’s historic performance at Boston Garden the day after Martin Luther King was assassinated. The article credits the singer with helping to prevent, in Boston, the violence that overtook many of the nation’s cities at this time. Hunt writes, “James Brown might seem an unlikely apostle of Martin Luther King’s message of nonviolence. But one could hardly have found a more effective one last Friday night.” In fact, the article reports, city officials in Boston feared the worst, as “Boston’s black community ha[d] been smoldering over a series of minor incidents for several weeks” prior to the assassination. However, officials made the shrewd decision to carry on with the James Brown concert and to televise the performance on the local educational station, WGBH. The show was broadcast live from The Garden and repeated from 8:30 p.m. to 2 a.m., and it was repeated again Saturday night.

This article is relevant as a primary source document to accompany the documentary film *The Night James Brown Saved Boston*. The article confirms much of what appears in the documentary, but also differs in interesting ways. In the documentary, then-mayor Kevin White takes much of the credit for the decisions to carry on with the concert and to televise the concert. This article credits “two Negroes who work frequently with slum youth,” Clarence Jones and Rev. Michael Hanes, with realizing that
cancelling the show would ignite tensions. The person credited with the idea to televise the show to keep people at home was “Negro city councilman Thomas Atkins.”

The Night James Brown Saved Boston was originally released in 2008. From a critical lens, this article is significant in several ways. First, the article confirms that, at the time of the concert, people recognized and gave credit to James Brown for helping to prevent a race riot in Boston that seemed all but inevitable. It is also significant in its use of language in several respects. For each black person mentioned in the article, the race is indicated as “Negro.” Everyone else is assumed to be white; race is not mentioned for non-blacks. Even James Brown is described as the “Negro entertainer.” Interestingly, he is also classified as a “rock ‘n’ roll performer,” when today he would probably be categorized as a soul performer. (Angela Watson)


This panel discussion among jazz musicians and jazz critics was prompted by Ira Gitler’s negative review of Abbey Lincoln’s album Straight Ahead. The review itself is reprinted here as well. Gitler criticizes Lincoln’s singing, but his primary complaint is with “the conscious racial angle” of the album. The discussion makes for an interesting dramatization of some of the racial and aesthetic tensions between white critics and black musicians during our period of study. Incidentally, Part 2 of the discussion appears in the March 22 issue of DownBeat. (Frank Kovarik)


This article is a critical description of a 1967 performance by the Supremes. Rice analyzes the group’s opening night performance at the Shoreham Hotel in New York—commenting on their sound, choreography, and attire. Rice sees them as artfully blending sound, rhythm, and choreography to the audience’s delight. Perhaps his critique is influenced by the standing ovation the ladies received, as noted in his opening paragraph. Regarding their stage motions, he believes every movement of the three women has been “meticulously polished until the flowing synchronized gestures of the girls create the stunning effect of a lovely water ballet.” Rice briefly mentions Mary Wilson and Florence Ballard as being the harmony for Diana Ross’s “flights of fancy.” He critiques Ross’s performance as a soloist, noting her vocal talents as limited. Yet, she does certain things extraordinarily well. Although Rice compliments the polished nature of the trio, he also cites the perfection as a shortcoming, because the ladies lack spontaneous inspiration—a mark of great performers.

This article offers a unique view because it critiques many contributing factors that made the Supremes the Supremes: sound, choreography, attire, Motown, and Diana. The emphasis on the trio’s polished movements ties in particular aspects studied at the Institute, including Berry Gordy’s desire that all Motown performers be capable of dining with royalty and presenting themselves in professional manners. The work of the charm schools caught the attention of Rice. It’s also interesting that the critic comments on Ross’s ability to charm every male in close proximity with her beautiful dark eyes. Overall, the critique underscores the fact that commercial music of the time was as much about selling an image as it was a sound. (Anilise Lange)


This article is a concise critique of John Coltrane’s Live at Birdland with additional commentary on Coltrane’s personal character. Byron Roberts centers his critique on the concept of principles. He claims Coltrane’s “version of jazz” to be one of principle, suggesting the saxophonist will vary his style and approach but never compromise his independence. Roberts believes the album released on Impulse Records will solidify Coltrane’s position within the family of modern jazz independents. Miles Davis’s influence on Coltrane is recognized as well as their falling out.

According to Byron Roberts, although the album sounds “helter-skelter” at times, a grand pattern of experimentation—both group and individual—holds it together. Coltrane’s quartet musicians,
comprised of McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison, and Elvin Jones, understand and sympathize with Coltrane’s principles as best heard through “Alabama.” Roberts suggests the song functions as social commentary on the “problems of the Negro” in Alabama, as well as the showcase of Coltrane’s “musical soul with the ephemeral beauty of life.”

For comparison purposes, it might be interesting for students to relate this praise-giving review with reviews of Coltrane’s 1965 releases: *A Love Supreme* and *Ascension*. Do his principles, clearly significant to this reviewer, receive consideration by other critics who review his following works? Does Coltrane’s social relevancy in *Live at Birdland* carry over to his 1965 releases? This article could be utilized by educators interested in reactions to “Alabama” and its influence on the Civil Rights Movement. Byron makes a few comments about the “racial problems” in Alabama in 1964. (Anilise Lange)


In this 1975 article, *New York Times* writer Jack Slater discusses Stevie Wonder’s career up to this point and also joins him for part of the “Stevie Wonder Fall Festival” tour. Slater combines details from interviews he conducted with Wonder on the way from his performance in Richmond, Virginia, to another in Greensboro, North Carolina, with reviews of both shows, while also discussing the larger place Wonder occupies in the historical, social, and cultural landscape of the time.

As Slater points out, this tour was Wonder’s first national tour since his near-fatal car accident in 1973. At this point, he had spent 13 years in show business, winning four Grammies. Slater distinguishes Wonder’s material at this point as indicative of the singer’s “coming into his own” as an artist, writing songs dealing less with romance and more with “racial grief, urban defeat, religious experience, as well as… such conundrums as transcendental perception.” His adulation of the artist is evident throughout—he goes so far as to refer to a national magazine declaring Stevie “the most admired musician of his generation,” comparing him to the likes of Marvin Gaye and Aretha Franklin and declaring Stevie to be the most “creative” and “versatile” of all.

Slater also addresses Stevie’s ability to cross over to new audiences of whites, referring to the performer’s 1972 national tour with the Rolling Stones. Throughout the article, Slater draws a clear distinction between “black music” and other types of music, arguing that “black music” had begun to surpass white-created rock music, which was becoming more concerned with pageantry than creative expression, using Elton John and David Bowie as examples.

Slater also delves into Wonder’s formative years and addresses the influence of the star’s blindness on his upbringing and his music, at one point comparing Motown’s role in the boy’s life as “Stevie’s Great Black Father.” Slater also addresses the material Wonder created earlier in his career at Motown, dismissing it as “romantic fluff.” He discusses the racial context of Wonder’s work in detail in the piece, of course doing so in a way that is indicative of the cultural perspectives of the time. Some examples of this are his frequent comparisons of the artist to a black preacher, his referral to “Higher Ground” as a “black” song, and his statement that the album *Fulfillingness’ First Finale* reveals Wonder’s “black man anger.”

Because this article appears in the *New York Times*, it would have been written for a very mainstream audience. This work contains excellent information about Wonder’s career and some meaningful reflections on race from the performer himself. It provides a window into how critics at the time defined Wonder’s work as “black music” and certainly raises questions about how racial issues and popular music were written about by the mainstream press at the time. (Angela Watson)

**Watkins, Boyce.** “Goodbye Dorothy, You’ll Never Be Forgotten.” *BLACFAX* 13, no. 52 (Fall 2010): 28.

Dr. Boyce Watkins describes in this article how Dorothy Height taught him the meaning of the word courage. Dorothy Height was accepted to Barnard College, but was denied admittance because they had already accepted their two black students for the year. He speaks of how his goddaughter attends the
college now, and how she shouldn’t take it for granted. The college issued an apology, but at the age of 68 Height was too old to attend, but not too old to continue to work and struggle for justice.

Dorothy Height was the only female among the “Big Six” leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. She stood arm in arm with Martin Luther King Jr., and advised Presidents Eisenhower, Johnson, and Roosevelt. As Chair of the National Council for Negro Women for 50 years, she maintained a tireless quest to support the black family. As a founder for the Black Family Reunion, which is still held annually in Washington D.C., Height helped to support the cornerstone of the black community. Even at the age of 98 Dorothy Height was prepared to meet with President Obama about the state of the black community.

This was a very complimentary and heartfelt article written by a man who begins the article by stating that Dorothy Height was born on the same day as his father. This, he said, was significant because she had as dramatic an effect on his feelings and views of leadership and courage. He goes on to describe Height’s life as “nearly as long as that of Jesus.” This, he says, should let us know that it’s never too late to change the world. He also says that she “sacrificed her opportunity to marry and have children to help other women and their families.” He concludes the article by saying that there will never be another woman like Dorothy Height. He adds that there “is a little bit of Dorothy in each of us,” and that we must “insist upon carrying the torch.”

Dorothy Height was often critical of the women in the music industry during the 1960s because she said they would not use their influence to positively affect the world. She looked down on the Motown women of the time, especially Diana Ross, because they would not publically speak out against racism and chose to cross over to appeal to the white audience. I would tend to disagree with Height because it is possible to make a statement with your presence, which is what I think Diana Ross and other Motown women did.

I would use this article in two very specific ways in the classroom. First, I would use it to teach the students about “tone.” After reading this article, we can’t help but love Dorothy Height. She “sacrificed her own opportunity to have kids” for others. The use of the word “sacrifice” makes her seem larger than life. Watkins doesn’t explain if she could have children, and I know that she never married. He also equated her life to the life of Jesus. This comparison immediately evokes saint-like qualities for Height. Words are powerful, and often students don’t always understand their power. This article is an excellent example of how word choice and usage can sway our opinions of a person.

I would also use this article to teach about the influence that women had in the Civil Rights Movement. Dorothy Height was there to “remind” President Eisenhower that black kids and white kids should be allowed to attend the same schools. She also “helped” President Johnson understand that black women deserved to stand at the highest levels of government. As the only female representative among the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, Dorothy Height held her ground and forced blacks to take a look at themselves. Even at the age of 98 she was chosen to speak for black women and their struggles. Students could extend research by seeing who the “Big Six” leaders of the Civil Rights Movement were, and also who were some other females in the movement that the author may have overlooked. (Anissa Barron)


This is an ambitious attempt to define and explain jazz through recordings that mark significant turning points in the genre’s history. In the opening of the article, Wilson comments that many have attempted to succinctly define jazz, but he also acknowledges no satisfactory, agreeable definition of it has emerged yet. Therefore, listening to jazz is the best way to understand what it is. Wilson attempts to demonstrate what jazz is by providing a list and brief description of jazz recordings—conceding that many will likely have issue with the list. Wilson claims his list is not merely a “greatest” hits list by the “greatest” performers; rather, it’s a list of the inaugurators.

He begins the list with the traditional New Orleans ensemble and “King Oliver” from King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band with its unique contribution being the addition of a second cornetist. Next, he
cites Louis Armstrong’s “Louis Armstrong Forever” for his establishment of the soloist over the ensemble. The next significant change came with Lester Young, who changed long-standing rhythmic patterns with his saxophone playing as heard on Lester Young Memorial Album. Examples of the new harmonic concepts that followed may be found on The Genius of Charlie Parker. Wilson believes no significant change or shift has occurred in the jazz solo since Parker; he believes Ornette Coleman may be capable of such change, but it was too early to tell at the time. Wilson also briefly mentions significant jazz vocalists and other contributions to jazz music.

Wilson’s article gives a critical interpretation of the qualities valued within jazz music from a 1960s perspective. Educators could play the author’s selected pieces for students and ask them to identify significant differences in the sounds of the music as the timeline progresses. Responses and discussion could evolve from a comparison of student opinions with those of John Wilson. Advanced students might be asked to continue the list by selecting recordings since the article’s publication and providing criteria similar to that offered by Wilson in 1960. (Anilise Lange)


This article, written in 1959 by New York Times jazz critic John S. Wilson, is a profile of the radio host William Conover. Conover served as the host of the program Music U.S.A., a two-hour jazz and popular music program broadcast by the United States Information Agency (U.S.I.A.) through the Voice of America radio station. The station broadcast throughout the world in an attempt to spread a positive image of the United States. Critically, Conover’s program broadcast to the Soviet Union and its satellite nations, providing a rare avenue for US culture in Communist states. The article describes the immense popularity of the program and Conover’s celebrity status in Moscow, Warsaw and other locales, providing insight into these international perspectives on jazz. The article serves as a good introduction into the United States’ use of jazz as a diplomatic tool in the 1950s and 1960s while opening up significant questions about the official presentation of this endemic art.

Conover’s show served as the only means by which many people in the world could hear jazz. Conover thus had both a wide audience and near-monopolistic control of jazz in parts of the world. This made him one of the world’s most influential jazz commentators, whose perspectives helped shape international ideas about jazz. Conover believed that jazz represented American ideals, stating, “[E]veryone is free to express himself. This is jazz. And this is America... It’s a musical reflection of the way things happen in America... They love jazz because they love freedom.” The sentiment that jazz reflected American political freedom suggests implicitly that jazz could not possibly be created in a Communist state. Many contemporary critics shared this view. To what extent, though, did jazz music actually reflect American political realities in 1959? Furthermore, to what extent did the musicians creating this music agree with Conover’s assessment? Conover’s words open avenues to discussion and inquiry.

The article also presents Conover’s highly problematic views on U.S. race relations as seen through the lens of jazz. He states, “Jazz corrects the fiction that America is racist. Minorities have a tough time everywhere, but the acceptance and success of so many Negro musicians and singers in jazz in the United States makes it obvious that someone like Louis Armstrong, for instance, is not an exception.” Wilson, also white, does not decry or analyze Conover’s fantastically distorted perspective. This provides significant opportunity for discussion. What does it mean that the “official” ambassador of jazz not only was white but denied the existence of racism in the U.S.? Why might the United States be interested in spreading Conover’s view of jazz and racism internationally? These questions would be echoed later in Conover’s career. An October 18, 1971, article on the subject in the Times, “Conover, Voice of Jazz, is Challenged as a ‘Czar,’” would serve as an excellent companion article in class. This article provides unique perspective on government-endorsed jazz criticism. It would allow students to analyze not just the
particular views of an individual, but also the way the United States chose to present itself in the world. (Jesse Klausz)


This article was printed in Marvin Gaye’s hometown newspaper, the Washington Post, the day after “Marvin Gaye Day” was declared in Washington D.C. The article features large pictures of the singer performing at his piano and a picture of Gaye with his mother and father when he is presented with a key to the city. The article points out that it was the artist’s first performance in 3½ years. Actually, as the writer explains, Gaye performed several times that day, first at his alma mater, Cardozo High School. He spoke about “self-respect and drug abuse” and performed the song “What’s Going On” with the Cardozo band accompanying him. Next, he went to the District Building to receive a key from the mayor. At the key ceremony he again performed “What’s Going On,” this time with the backing of the Howard University Band. Finally, the day culminated with a performance to a sold-out crowd at the Kennedy Center’s Concert Hall.

This article is significant for its depiction of Marvin Gaye as “one of soul music’s most influential artists,” attributing his importance to “the equal amounts of instrumental sophistication and social consciousness.” This article serves as an excellent primary source documenting just how important Gaye was viewed to be in response to the critically acclaimed album *What’s Going On*, which delved into serious political and social issues inherent to the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, Coretta Scott King sent a telegram in honor of the performer that a delegate read at the concert.

From a critical perspective, the article is as significant for what is included as for what is left out. For example, the writer points out that the Kennedy Center audience was “almost exclusively black.” This is in contrast to other Motown artists of the time that played for predominantly white audiences, including Stevie Wonder, who was performing with the Rolling Stones on tour at this time. It is clear that Gaye was embraced by the black community in Washington D.C., who roared with excitement and approval at the artist’s introduction. Another interesting element is that Marvin maintains his outspokenness when presented with a key to D.C., which he had always felt was a hypocritical city in its espousing of freedom and its simultaneous denial of basic rights to its black residents. In response to being handed the key, Marvin says, “I’ve often wondered what you do with a key to the city. I wonder if it will do any good if I get stopped by a police officer and show it to him.” Although this quote appears, no explanation or analysis is given in response, and the reader is not told if the mayor responded to the remark. (Angela Watson)

**Web Sites**


The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) is scheduled to open on the National Mall in 2015, making it the newest Smithsonian museum. Its mission is to help all Americans remember, and by remembering, to stimulate a dialogue about race and help to foster a spirit of reconciliation and healing. Until then (and after), the NMAAHC Web site intends to be a valuable source for those interested in learning more about the contributions made by African Americans to the nation’s history as well as those desiring to celebrate their hopes, dreams, and aspirations throughout American history.

The resources and information available include biographies, images, personal accounts, multimedia, and various other forms. Many images of artifacts are available, including James Brown’s organ and Michael Jackson’s fedora from his 1984 Victory Tour. Efforts are made to show how the arts and entertainment helped to bring social and political change both regionally and nationally. Numerous
artists and figures are highlighted, including Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Diana Ross, Amiri Baraka, and Stokely Carmichael. Although the Web site does not allow for direct interaction with or viewing of objects in the present, it does give students access to reliable, documented images and information. Therefore, it is an ideal source for younger students. It presents easily digestible material relevant to jazz and its many related topics. (Anilise Lange)