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Blended Styles in African American Folk-Fusion

Sounds of old time string band music have resonated with generations of musicians from Alabama to New York. Salient across the Appalachian region, string band music is one of the main identifiers of its people. Though often thought of as an ethnically homogenous musical tradition from the British Isles, the style contains more influences of African Americans than has been highlighted in popular culture. Through deepening understandings of these histories, a variety of artists are working on expanding the genre to also embrace the black heritage of this style through a nuanced kaleidoscope of influences. This nuance has led to the blossoming of a 21st century renaissance of black folk artists reclaiming, blending, and rewriting the history of the Appalachian - American musical tradition. Though black musicians have been playing this music throughout American history, they have gone virtually unrecognized until recently¹. Musicians such as The Carolina Chocolate Drops and Jake Blount are reclaiming the old-time tradition of black string band music. The singer/songwriter Valerie June has also made great strides in the reclamation of the artistic genre by fusing folk influences with other vernacular music traditions. Crucial to its understanding as a cultural phenomenon, the oral tradition of folk music often allows for musicians to learn and modify songs and stories however they see fit. These artists use this concept as a vehicle for the expression of a pan-African musical identity.

Of the many instruments in the old-time string band tradition, that which is best understood to be of West African origin would be the banjo. Closely related to instruments of West Africa, the instrument's relatives were a staple of griot culture pre-colonization. With the

¹ Giddens, 2017

transatlantic slave trade, many of these musicians and historians were forcibly relocated to plantations in the rural south, bring their altered scales, now understood as the blues scale, with them. Focused on other pan-African music traditions, scholarship did not begin on the old-time music tradition of former enslaved people until the 1920's, which is problematic. It is clear that the instrument was a staple of plantation life.² As seen in John Rose's mid 18th century painting *Slave Dance to Banjo* and Henry Ossawa Tanner's later 19th century painting *The Banjo Lesson* the instrument itself held deep rooted connections with plantation life for black enslaved people. There has also been scholarship studying fiddle traditions from the pre-European colonial period that may date earlier and have been more widespread than the banjo. However, is under researched. Thought to have been used for entertainment, religious gatherings, and accompaniment to work songs, it is likely to have been enjoyed by both black slaves and their white masters together. Being observed by rural Caucasians, many of them began to take part in the musical tradition alongside the black performers, bringing their own cultural ideologies and performance styles with them. As the musical practice began to break off into a more racially and ideologically divided country during the civil war, minstrelsy and blackface became popular entertainment among many white audiences through which the banjo and its music was performed around the country as an accompaniment instrument.³ Leading into the 20th century, the United States entered the great migration, industrial revolution, and the burgeoning of the sound production industry with the invention and widespread use of radio and physical media formats. This recording industry eventually began to record folk music for American audiences but whitewashed the genre in similar ways to jazz and rock and roll before it.

² Djedje, 2016

³ Summary of The History of Minstrelsy, 2019

As a result, artists such as the Carolina Chocolate Drops began to reclaim the black roots of the genre. The North Carolina based trio consisting of Rhiannon Giddens, Dom Flemings, and Justin Robinson play a combination of old time songs, songs from popular genres, and original compositions all in the string band style. One of their most popular songs is “Hit ‘Em Up Style”, which is a cover of a song of the same name by Blu Cantrell. As performed by the chocolate drops, the song is rearranged from an electroacoustic R&B groove to a dance song with fiddle, guitar, banjo, and vocal percussion. This string band style cover helps to contemporize the ensembles performance style and make it more relevant to the conversations of black popular music. In addition to covering popular songs, the ensemble also creates a variety of new compositions in the old-time string band style. Another song from this album, “Cornbread and Butterbeans”, sings about the joys of southern culture. In the rural, poor south, some of the staples of their diet and food culture is cornbread, due to the abundance of the grain in agricultural areas. Even my grandmother, now, still has fond memories of and continues to make cornbread from scratch to serve to my family as an extension of the localized tradition. Therefore, The Carolina Chocolate Drops are relating the living art form to the culture in which it had blossomed.

Personal styles of these Affrilachian reclamation artists range from traditional string band music and instruments. Thus, further utilization of other vernacular musical aspects of the time are leading to more than just lyrical and metaphorical fusion. Valerie June is notable for her use of the latter of these. Performing around New York and Nashville, she began working on her first album, *Pushin’ Against a Stone*,⁴ where she reflects on her childhood growing up in rural Tennessee, specifically her time at church with her working-class parents and grandmother. June

⁴ June, 2017

says that much of her singing comes from the gospel vocal traditions of African American churches in the south. The use of spirituals, gospel songs, and the incorporation of old time music in her everyday life played a vital influence into her burgeoning musical career. Though she lived around these influences as well as country music, she refuses to put one name on her style of music. She said in an interview that “genres don’t really exist” and that she tries to express the music that she grew up with as well as the sounds that inspire her. Some of her direct influence were from blues artists Elizabeth Cotton, Skip James, and Etta Baker.⁵ Like those before her, she uses this style of music as a vehicle for hybridization and increased artistic awareness, promoting better representation of the cross-cultural potential of this vernacular music style. One of her most popular songs, “Workin’ Woman Blues”, has a range of influences from all areas of her musical upbringing. Most notably, it incorporates a variation of 12-bar blues forms common to jazz and other old-time music. The instrumentation of the song consists of a guitar played in a banjo-like picking style similar to Elizabeth Cotton’s playing with a solo voice accompaniment. It also utilizes a partial drum kit with an emphasized high hat and a jazz trumpeter. These instruments use techniques of developmental thematic variations of the supporting sound which creates grooves that are not common to old-time or country music.

In its accompanying music video, she is directly comparing her two working lifestyles of ‘traditional’ women's roles such as cooking and cleaning the household against her life as a musician, gigging at night. The lyrics acknowledge her dislike of working in the household, “Aint fit to be no mother/ Aint fit to be no wife yet”⁶, while also saying that she wants a sugar daddy to take care of these duties to which she feels obliged, so she can be a true 21st century working woman. This is a great contrast of images because it is showing that she is aware of the

⁵ June, 2013

values often taught in the rural south about homemaking, however instead of wanting someone to take care of her financially, she wants someone to take care of the home, so she can feel free to live and work as she sees fit. This is the reason to contrast her folk music style playing with the jazz trumpet in order to show a contrast of traditional values and how she wants to express herself.

In addition to “Workin’ Woman Blues”, the song “Shakedown” contemporized the instrumental accompaniment with the use of electronic instruments, synthesizer, and a full drum set. These blendings assist in the blurring of genres in her music as they start to add identifiers of other genres such as rock and electronic music. Playing an electric guitar in a style similar to many pop-country artists the sound does a great job exploring the types of aural ornamentation that can be added to the playing style. Additionally, the use of the keyboard and synth solos show references to other genres of music outside of old time and pop country the music video for this song is most intriguing because of multiple factors including the setting and instrumentation. Appearing to be on a small stage with a vintage-style cardioid microphone as a reference to nostalgic time period. Referencing the past could be seen as an understanding of how her people were disenfranchised, but also bringing the style forward into the present with complex stage lighting, electronic instruments, and bright clothing. Lyrically, the song has a double entendre of meaning. As it speaks of breaking down, shaking, and feeling the music, it is clear that she is encouraging her audience to have fun with the music and dance in a way that would have been indicative of the old-time tradition. However, the music is also speaking of taking a system that repeats a vicious cycle of naive ambivalence and breaking it down for one's own purpose. As expressed by the setting, this helps contribute to the fusion of ideas and reclamation of musical styles salient throughout Valerie June’s musical output.

Jake Blount is another artist influenced by this string band tradition. After graduating Hamilton College with a degree in ethnomusicology, he has studied with numerous notable banjo and fiddle players such as Rhiannon Giddens and Hubby Jenkins. Additionally, has won numerous competitions for banjo playing and has continued the tradition of teaching and sharing his music with others. Through his scholarship and performative study, he has focused on venerating his ethnic history through music performance and the sharing of knowledge with other banjo players.⁷ Featured on Cameron Dewhitt's podcast *Get Up in the Cool*, an old-time string band podcast, he spoke often about his qualms with the current status of old time music as a predominantly white, 'sit down and listen' music style. He had a desire to expand the world's knowledge of the African American influences of this roots music and be comfortable dancing to it. He is directly influenced by fiddlers and banjoists such as Joe Thompson, Dink Roberts, and Will Adams but does not limit himself to learning from only black artists as studying the music of Bruce Molsky. He often participates in jam sessions in order to learn new tunes and create his own interpretations of the music. In addition, researched recorded songs from the early years of the music tradition to better understand how the genre has changed. The bulk of his research has focused on understanding transcriptions of old time music done by anthropologists and early ethnomusicologists who studied black music styles before the advent of the recording industry. Though he does not try to re-create historic performances, he strongly informs his style from the old masters of the form and re-records many 'lost' songs in order to reintroduce them to the old-time community.⁸ However, the chief difference between him and other artists of this style is that his upbringing was in urban Philadelphia from a family of non-professional musicians surrounded by musical theatre and rock/pop music followed by classical collegiate musical

⁷ JAKE BLOUNT: About, 2017

⁸ Blount, 2016

training. Jake Blount leans his performance interests toward understanding the music meant for dancing. Joe Thompson's main influence on Blount's music was the understanding that artists intentionally adjust their playing style to fit their audience's expectations. Therefore, he has done work toward understanding the ways in which the same songs have been reconceptualized over time melodically and also harmonically to suit the audiences and social justice issues.

Structured on a less common eight-bar blues form that was also used in Ray Charles's "Sweet Sixteen Bars", the song "John Henry" was based on numerous tales of John Henry. Though purely in the old-time string band instrumentation, the song has many references from variants of the John Henry story as sung across multiple blues and gospel traditions. As an expansion (or retraction) of the popularized 12-bar blues form this new arrangement of various songs blends the musical traditions of gospel singing, blues, and string band into one with an incorporation of lyrical and harmonic devices. Curiously enough, the song incorporates asymmetries of the harmonic pulse as well as incorporation of I⁷, II⁹, and bVI chords as harmonic substitutes for subdominant and tonic chords, which is not the standard. This, coupled with upbeat accompaniment patterns, helps to retell this story in a way that could be danced to by the growing old-time string band audiences. This continues the tradition set forth in other iterations of the story as told by numerous generations of people, and as sung by choirs, minstrels, and American griots alike. Blount's arrangement takes its lyrics from folk tunes "This Old Hammer" and "The Ballad of John Henry" to create a fused version that sings both about the significance of hammer, John Henry's life, but also continues into his legacy as an African American hero. He takes special care to note that through Henry's work and death, much like the work done by those who came before him, does not signify the end of the fight toward equality. Instead, the death of John Henry in this song still leaves his friends and family vulnerable to

further oppression. This allows for those who understand his story to remember those who came before us and know that the work toward better treatment of people of color in the United States is not over. Through the utilization of these blended lyrics and forms from multiple songs as well as a plead for continuation of the good work, Blount created a new narrative that allows room for these types of folk stories to be told.

With the understanding of African American music being derived from systematic modes of oppression, his album *Rise Again* in collaboration with Emma Joy⁹ focused on reanimating this music for political reinterpretation for contemporary issues. Best represented by the third song of the album, “Chilly Winds”, the song was derived from a gospel song of the same name. Salient across African American gospel and soul music, the most common iteration of the song often speaks of the longing to go to a land where the ‘chilly winds’ of oppression and discrimination don’t blow, and it is warm and sunny. This song is performed from the point of view of a nonspecific member of the LGBT+ community who has experience discrimination from not only society at large, but from their own friends and family.

Thought to be quintessential to American musical culture, many forget the roots of such expressive traditions as jazz, blues, Hip Hop, R&B, but more so of old time string band music. All of these derive themselves from disenfranchised African Americans struggling for artistic and social equality. A variety of Afrilachian artists are working on expanding old time to highlight the importance of such African Americans by expressing their personal musical upbringings, expansion of melody, harmony, and instrumentation, and rebranding past struggles in ways are relevant to contemporary society. These artistic variations have begun to change this tradition of change in a much greater way. Thus, through this expansion of artistic

⁹ Blount, 2016

reinterpretation through the lens of modernism, The Carolina Chocolate Drops, Valerie June, Jake Blount, and a growing number of string band enthusiasts are beginning to lift this antiquated veil that has covered this music in the public eye for far too long.

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