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


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- 1 *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe*. Edited by Neil A. Wynn. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, "American Made Music Series", 2007. Pp. xii + 289. ISBN 9781604735468 Paper
- 2 Some scholars might wonder if there is anything new to say about the history of the blues: this overlooked book will serve as a welcome answer. A collection of fifteen new essays, mostly by renowned European scholars, *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe* focuses on the birth, recordings, production, and reception of blues music in Europe. More than just "an European appreciation of the American blues artists," it focuses on how Europe served as a catalyst for the evolution, distribution and preservation of the African American music and heritage, mainly before the 1970s.
- 3 Right from the start, editor Neil Wynn provides some impressive statistics gathered from various and reliable sources, proving that the blues audiences had burgeoned outside the USA, and especially in Europe: "Europeans did not just listen to or play black music – they were among some of the first to write scholarly works dealing with it" (In Belgium, f. ex. Robert Goffin had established the first jazz magazine in 1921). In his "Introduction," Professor Wynn adds that in terms of markets for African American music, Europe has more than often been ranked number one: "Even today, European interest in the blues remains high – it is reported that 70 percent of blues record sales are in Europe" (4). This impressive number is repeated as well in Robert Springer's chapter (246).
- 4 Many historical, anthropological and sociological dimensions emerge from the recent research made available here. For example, British scholar Paul Oliver – the most respected commentator on blues for half a century – writes in chapter 2 about how the music industry, that is the record companies and the music stores during the early 1950s were "marketing" the African American music, which was labelled then as "Race Records" (30). This decade probably was the *apogée* or the "Golden Age" of the blues in terms of creativity, but its recordings were not mainstream anywhere and were still

considered “alternative” in England, to be found in a few specialized stores. In a demonstration about the independent record companies, Paul Oliver explains how the imported record labels (like Okeh) and even the numerical series corresponded to musical styles and therefore targeted a specific audience: either the Whites or the Blacks (30). At a time when records (namely 78 rpm) did not usually have a picture sleeve (and videoclips did not exist at the time), it was very difficult for a blues lover to guess if a given recording artist was “really Black”; therefore, many blues collectors living in Great Britain would rely on the last names of the artists (preferring a “Peg Leg Howell or a Peetie Wheatstraw rather than a Smith,” 30). Using this misleading system based on last names, many blues enthusiasts would then have avoided the music of Lonnie Johnson and Robert Johnson, who were two of the most authentic blues artists of all time!

- 5 Several chapters gather some new, valuable information about the obscure origins of the blues. A blues expert and collector from Germany, Rainer Lotz, situates some archival material located in Germany which confirms that blues recordings existed in the late 19th century; these ragtime, jazz and music-hall acts of African American performers touring in Europe were sometimes advertised in Germany as “nigger song and dance” (sic), even before 1909  which is often seen as the epoch of the “official” birth of the blues in the USA (85). Quoting his previous and overlooked publications, Rainer Lotz’s chapter features many rare images of vintage adds that appeared in German newspapers about blues artists that were published between 1891 and 1909, an era which is considered like the pre-history of the blues (80).
- 6 In another chapter dedicated to how The Beatles, Rolling Stones and other British groups “reappropriated” the African American music (with a British accent) in the early 1960s, Rupert Till quotes Colonel Tom Parker, who was Elvis Presley’s manager, who once declared that white artists were successful only because they were Whites in a white-dominated USA and not because of their talent or creativity: according to Parker, these non-Black performers were more easy to “market” and promote for the U.S. audiences, even if they actually “copied the arrangements note for note, but that way it was accepted” (Colonel Tom Parker, quoted by Till, in Wynn, 186). Regarding The Beatles, Rupert Till mentions how they recycled some tiny stylistic elements borrowed from R&B into their own compositions: “The characteristic ‘Wooh’ often sung by The Beatles (in songs such as ‘Help’, ‘She Loves You’, and ‘I Saw Her Standing There’) was taken from soul band The Isley Brothers, picked up when the band recorded the Isley Brothers’ ‘Twist and Shout’, and also from Little Richard, who himself copied the idea from gospel singer Alex Bradford” (187).
- 7 In Chapter 13 discussing “The Reception of African American blues and gospel music in The Netherlands,” Guido Van Rijn indicates that a few gospel performers toured in Holland, for example the Wilmington Jubilee Singers who played in Amsterdam “in 1895, 1898, 1899, and 1905” (220). Before them, the Fisk Jubilee Singers had performed for Queen Sophia in 1877; after their performance, the Queen asked for an encore and met the American artists (219).
- 8 For academics and scholars, I do have one remark related to theory and methodology of “Atlantic Studies.” Even though the concept of “Atlantic Studies” is not mentionned anywhere in this scholarly book, I believe the study of African American music (like this excellent book) can be used as an interesting illustration of the many cross-cultural connections between Africa, the Americas, and Europe in terms of culture and art.

Related works and similar research such as *How Britain got the blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style*, by Roberta Freund Schwartz confirm that these methodological approaches (which are qualitative, comparative, and transdisciplinary) bring the studying of African American music into the immediate sphere of Atlantic Studies (Laberge, 2009).

- 9 *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe* is arguably the best book on blues that has appeared since Edward Komara's essential *Encyclopedia of the Blues* (Routledge, 2006). The style is always clear and vivid; this whole collection of essays can be read almost like a novel if you are a blues addict. Only one tiny mistake remains : British historian Eric J. Hobsbawm wrote about jazz under the pen name of Francis Newton (and not "Frances"; see: Note 61, 22). I recommend *Cross the Water Blues* to students and blues aficionados as well.
- 10 Yves Laberge, Ph.D. , Québec City

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