American Popular Music, 5th Ed
CHAPTER FIVE: RACE RECORDS AND HILLBILLY MUSIC (OUTLINE)

The Music Business: Race Records and Hillbilly Music – Intro

- Many of the bestselling songs of the 1920s and 1930s were produced by the Tin Pan Alley establishment.
- The music industry was more interested in guaranteeing profits than in encouraging musical diversity or experimentation.
- Record companies targeted new audiences between World War I and World War II (1918–40) and recorded music derived from the folk traditions of the American South.
- Encouraged by the migration of millions of people from rural communities to cities such as New York, Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, and Nashville in the years following World War I
    - These migrants constituted an audience for music that reflected their rural origins and for new, distinctively urban styles of music derived from the older oral traditions.

Race Records and Hillbilly Music

Terms used by the American music industry from the early 1920s until the late 1940s to classify and advertise southern music. Record companies usually advertised in racially segregated catalogs and brochures.

Race records – Recordings of performances by African American musicians, produced mainly for sale to African American listeners.

Hillbilly or old-time music – Performed and marketed to southern whites.

<u>Similarities between race records and hillbilly music</u>:

- Rooted in long-standing folk music traditions in the American South
- As they entered the mass marketplace, blended these older rural musical styles with aspects of national popular culture.
- Grew out of the music industry's efforts to develop alternative markets during a national decline in record sales.
- Disseminated across the country by new media—including electric recording, radio, and sound film.
- Affected by the process of urban migration.
- Provided the basis for forms of popular music that emerged after World War II

Race records

- In the 1920s, the record business began recording material closer to African American folk traditions for sale to an African American audience.
- The music industry's discovery of black music (and southern music in general) can be traced to a set of recordings made in 1920 featuring the black vaudeville performer Mamie Smith (1883–1946).

    Mamie Smith:

    - Known as "The Queen of the Blues."
    - A pioneer blues singer, pianist, and black vaudeville performer.
    - In 1920, recorded the bestsellers "Crazy Blues" and "It's Right Here For You, If You Don't Get It, 'Tain't No Fault of Mine"
    - Mamie Smith's success as a recording artist opened up the record industry to recordings by and for African Americans

Race music

- The term was first applied by Ralph Peer (1892–1960), a Missouri-born talent scout for Okeh Records. He had worked as an assistant on Mamie Smith's first recording sessions.
- The term was soon picked up by other companies and was also widely used by the black press.
- The performances released on race records included a variety of musical styles:

    - Blues
    - Jazz
    - Gospel choirs
    - Vocal quartets
    - String bands
    - Jug-and-washboard bands
    - Verbal performances, such as:
        a) Sermons
        b) Stories
        c) Comic routines

Race Records – Labels

- Okeh Records, under the direction of Ralph Peer, was the first label to send mobile recording units into the South, seeking out and recording local talent.

- Paramount Records, the second company to enter the race music market, began in 1922 as a subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Company.
- The large record companies took several years to catch on to the new trend:
    - Columbia Records started its successful race series in 1923.
    - Vocalion/Brunswick Records entered the field in 1926.
    - The conservative Victor Company—which had heard and rejected Mamie Smith in 1920—waited until 1927.
- The 1920s also saw the emergence of African American–owned record companies.
    - The first of these was Black Swan, founded in 1921 in New York by Harry Pace, a former partner of the bandleader and songwriter W. C. Handy.
- By 1927, a total of some five hundred race records were being issued every year.

Classic Blues

Classic blues songs were performed by high-class nightclub singers:

- Alberta Hunter (1895–1984). Billed as the "Marian Anderson of the Blues"
- Ethel Waters (1896–1977). Entertained the growing African American middle class in New York, Chicago, and other northern cities

The most influential singers performed in a somewhat rougher vocal style:

- Gertrude "Ma" Rainey (1886–1939). Popularly known as the "Mother of the Blues"
- Bessie Smith (1894–1937). Called "Empress of the Blues"
- Rainey and Smith developed their singing styles in the rough-and- tumble black vaudeville and tent shows. Their early recordings:
    - Released during the height of the so-called blues craze (1920– 26)
    - Sold well among both whites and blacks
    - Signaled the emergence of a style of performance more directly and deeply informed by African American musical traditions than either nineteenth-century minstrelsy or the ragtime-tinged pop songs of the early twentieth century

Bessie Smith (1894–1937)

- The most important and influential of the woman blues singers from the early twentieth century

- Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee; began recording in 1923
- Stylistically a blues singer even when performing novelty and vaudeville numbers; had a majestic voice
- The centerpiece of Columbia's race record labels

W. C. Handy (1873–1958)

- "Father of the Blues." The most influential of the classic blues composers
- Born in Alabama. Son of a conservative pastor who forbade him from playing the guitar. He learned to play the cornet instead. Went on to college, received a degree, and became a schoolteacher.
- Cofounded the first African American–owned publishing house.
- His music owed much to Tin Pan Alley as well as African American folk traditions.
- His biggest hit was "St. Louis Blues," written in 1914.
- Moved to New York City, where his dance band became successful and made several recordings.

Listen to "St. Louis Blues" by W. C. Handy, sung by Bessie Smith (1925)

- This was the type of recording that introduced much of white America to the blues
- It represented a hybrid approach to the blues, somewhat removed from the "down-home" interpretation by country blues performers/composers such as Charley Patton and Blind Lemon Jefferson.
    - Accompaniment—reed organ and cornet
    - Call and response between cornet and Smith
    - Form: Based on the AABA model commonly seen in Tin Pan Alley songs

The Country Blues

- Also referred to as "rural," "down-home," or "folk" blues**.**
- Performed mostly by Itinerant male folksingers traveled the rural South/Delta region.
- Country blues had existed for decades before the first vaudevillian blues songs appeared on record.
- The blues was the music of the impoverished black work force.

- Provided a dynamic, flexible framework for publicly recounting aspects of their experience
- The rural musicians who played this style of music were not recorded until the mid 1920s.

Charley Patton and "Tom Rushen Blues" (1929)

- Charley Patton (ca. 1881–1934). One of the earliest known pioneers of the Mississippi Delta blues style.
- The son of sharecroppers**.** A charismatic figure whose performance techniques included rapping on the body of his guitar and throwing it into the air.
- His powerful rasping voice, strong danceable rhythms, and broad range of styles made him ideal for Saturday night dances and all-day picnics.
- Patton's reputation and ability to secure work were boosted by his work as a recording artist.
- Between 1929 and 1934 Patton recorded nearly seventy songs—blues, African American ballads, ragtime, Tin Pan Alley hits, and even church songs.
- Unlike European-derived ballads, in which a story is usually presented in narrative fashion, Blues songs are more frequently like a series of evocative snapshots, assembled around a theme or set of themes: lost love, sexual desire, work, violence, loneliness.

Listening: "Tom Rushen Blues"

- Performed by Charley Patton**.** Recorded in 1929 by Paramount Records
- Twelve-bar form using three chords.
- AAB text (with a few minor variations, typical of rural blues performances)
- Patton sings in the rough, heavy voice typical of Delta blues.
- His emphatic approach to guitar playing is also representative of the style.
- The lyrics of the song focus on Patton's overnight incarceration in the Bolivar County, Mississippi, jailhouse, after being arrested for drinking moonshine.

Blind Lemon Jefferson: The first country blues star

- Born in Texas. Was a traveling blues performer
- First records released in 1926
- East Texas style:
    - Vocal quality is more nasal and clearer than Mississippi Delta style

- Guitar accompaniments are sparse and less rhythmically steady
- Guitar is used as an extension of the voice

Listening: Blind Melon Jefferson, "That Black Snake Moan"

- Written and performed by Blind Lemon Jefferson. Recorded by Paramount Records in 1926.
- Melody consists of brief repeated ideas
- Each of the six three-line stanzas has basically the same melody
- Call and response between voice and guitar
- Lyrics – about sex

Robert Johnson (1911–1938)

- No country blues artist had a greater influence on later generations of blues and rock musicians than Johnson.
- His work was especially revered by the British guitarist Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, and by Eric Clapton, whose band Cream released a celebrated cover of Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" in 1968.
- When his complete output was reissued on compact discs in 1990, the set quickly became a surprise million-seller.
- Robert Johnson's brief life is shrouded in mystery and legend:
    - Little is known of his early years.
    - His guitar playing was so remarkable and idiosyncratic that stories circulated claiming he had sold his soul to the devil to play that way.
    - When performing for an audience, he apparently turned in such a position as to conceal his hands so that nobody could see what he was doing to produce his sounds.
    - Johnson died in 1938, apparently a victim of poisoning by a jealous husband.

Listening: Robert Johnson, "Cross Road Blues"

- The vocal is like intensified speech. He has a rough, untrained vocal timbre***.***
- Call and response between vocal and guitar.
- Free approach to blues form – meaning he didn't always stick to 12-bar blues structure.

Early Country Music: Hillbilly Records

Hillbilly or country music

- Commercially produced music associated with the rural white South and Southwest
- Country music reflects the values and traditions of the performers, who were rural, mostly poor, southern whites. It is a regional music with an international following.

  Musical elements:

  - Clear, honest vocal style
  - Southern dialect (accent)
  - Nasal vocal timbre; no vibrato
  - Most other elements of country music come from other sources: European folk music, parlor songs, jazz, and blues.
  - The balance between traditional and outside elements has defined the fundamental tension in country music (tradition versus change, old country versus new country)

Hillbilly music

- Like the race records of Southern rural African Americans, “hillbilly music” was the designation for recordings of early country music.
- The first commercially successful hillbilly record, featuring a North Georgia musician named Fiddlin’ John Carson, was made by Okeh records in 1923 during a recording expedition to Atlanta. This expedition was led by Ralph Peer, a talent scout/record producer who later discovered the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers.

  Radio:

  - Important in the rapid growth of the hillbilly market – it made the music accessible to a larger audience.
  - Early radio played a large role in popularizing hillbilly music but had a lesser role in popularizing race music. This is because most radios and all radio stations were owned by whites. There were no black disc jockeys until the 1930s, when Jack Cooper started his race music show in Chicago.
  - The first station to feature country artists regularly was WSB in Atlanta, which began broadcasting in 1922. Soon followed by WBAP in Forth Worth, TX.
  - Nashville, home of the *Grand Ole Opry*, is the center of country music. The *Grand Ole Opry* was a radio show broadcast from Nashville on WSM.

Vernon Dalhart (1883–1948):

- Texas-born light-opera singer who recorded the first big country music hit. Began his recording career in 1916 singing light opera but convinced the Victor Company to let him record a hillbilly album to cash in on the new genre's popularity.
- He recorded two songs in 1924:
    - "Wreck of the Old 97," a ballad about a train crash in Virginia
    - "The Prisoner's Song," an amalgam of preexisting song fragments
- He adopted a southern accent and sang in a plaintive way that country music fans found appealing.
- This record was the first big hillbilly hit – a million-seller.
- Dalhart's recording represents the hybridization between southern folk music and Tin Pan Alley pop music. It is an early example of the "crossover hit."

Pioneers of Country Music: The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers

The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers were both discovered at a recording session in Bristol Tennessee in August 1927. Their fame was boosted by hit records and radio appearances, and they had a profound impact on generations of country and western musicians.

The Carter Family

- Regarded as one of the most important groups in the history of country music. The Carters were not professional musicians when their recording career started in 1927.
- The Carter Family presented more conservative elements of country music: God and home; high moral values.
- The Carter Family preserved the traditional music of their native Appalachian Mountain home (in Virginia) by arranging and adapting old songs from the Anglo-American folk music tradition.
- Their repertoire also included old hymns and sentimental songs reminiscent of the Tin Pan Alley tradition at the turn of the century.
- Between 1927 and 1941, they made *over three hundred recordings* for a half-dozen companies. Their most popular songs are still performed by country musicians today.

Southern Gospel Music: Black and White

Commercial recordings of sacred music were popular in the South:

- Sacred music was important in southern culture.
- There were significant differences between white and black styles of gospel music.
- Two examples of southern gospel music:
    - "Gospel Ship," recorded by the Carter Family in 1935
    - "The Sun Didn't Shine," recorded by the Golden Gate Quartet in 1941

Carter Family

- The unprecedented popularity of the Carter Family as recording and performing artists opened the gates for a succession of family-based acts.
- There was no firm separation between secular and religious music. They recorded both types extensively.
- Their gospel recordings include arrangements of old folk hymns:
    - "Can the Circle Be Unbroken"
    - "Gospel Ship"
- The Carters' straightforward, unadorned performance style on such records is indicative of the humility and devotion that marked authentic religious faith. This aesthetic of plainness was a longstanding feature of the culture of Protestant immigrants from Britain and Ireland.

Black church

- In African American communities, religious music has tended to be centered more exclusively in the church. Rural black churches made extensive use of music.
- Encouraged the development of a distinctive style for African American gospel music and led to the emergence of talented performers in the style.
- The great black gospel groups, such as the Golden Gate Quartet, were not family acts but typically comprised unrelated individuals who came together to sing religious music, often in a local church or school choir.
- Black gospel music developed an identity separate from white religious traditions.
- Black gospel music also separated itself from other musical traditions in the black community itself:

- Black gospel artists were expected to perform sacred music only, not to indulge in "dirty" music like the blues.
- This explicit division between religious and secular music remained an important characteristic of African American culture for a considerable time.
- A major sign of change came in the 1960s, when "soul music" emerged as a new term applied to secular music that consciously incorporated stylistic elements from black gospel.

- In contrast to restrained white gospel music, black gospel music tended to favor extroversion and an intense expressivity.
  - It emphasizes the personal and ecstatic aspects of religious experience.

Jimmie Rodgers (1897–1933)

- First inductee to Country Music Hall of Fame. He was the most versatile, progressive, and widely influential of all the early country recording artists.
- Ex–railroad brakeman from Meridian, Mississippi**.** Known as the "Singing Brakeman"
- Early country music's biggest recording star**.**
- The quintessential rambler – he celebrated the allure of the open road and chronicled the lives of men who forsook the benefits of a settled existence.
- His influence can be seen in the public images of Hank Williams, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, and almost every contemporary male country music star.

Listening: "Blue Yodel No 11"

- Written and performed by Jimmie Rodgers, recorded in 1929.
- Particularly close to rural black models. It's a typical blues song in terms of the text, melodic style, and form. The song has a highly personal tone.
- Singing style rooted in blues: rhythmically free and unstilted delivery.
- Highly inflected phrasing. Vocal style more expressive than pretty.
- *Yodels* between stanzas.
- Rodgers uses the guitar strictly as accompaniment, making no attempt to set up any kind of melodic response (as with Blind Lemon Jefferson) or rhythmic counterpoint (as with Robert Johnson) to his vocal.

Popular Music and the Great Depression

The Great Depression (1929 – roughly 1939)

- Threw millions of Americans out of work
- Had a major impact on the music industry:
    - In 1927, 106 million phonograph discs were sold nationwide; by 1932, sales had plummeted to only 6 million.
    - Many small record companies were wiped out overnight.
    - Large companies such as Columbia and Victor were forced to reorganize and consolidate.
    - Most people simply did not have the spare income to spend on records.

Effect on race records

- The race record market was crushed by the economic downturn
- During the early 1930s, the first black-owned music-publishing and film-producing companies were also wiped out.
- Record companies relied on established artists and cut back on the field expeditions that had characterized the early years of the race record business.
- The most successful African American musicians of the depression era were those whose records were featured in the mainstream record catalogs, particularly jazz-oriented dance orchestras.

Effect on hillbilly records

- Hillbilly record sales were also affected by the depression, although not as severely as race record sales. Although sales declined in absolute numbers, hillbilly music actually *increased* its share of the overall market during the economic downturn.
- In 1930, rural and urban hillbilly records accounted for 25% of the total American market.
- It was during the depression that the country music business was really established, with the biggest stars signing lucrative advertising contracts and appearing on radio and in Hollywood movies.

Hillbilly and blues singers injected a note of social realism into popular music

- They chronicled the suffering of the homeless and unemployed
- The Dust Bowl farmers whose way of life was threatened by ecological, as well as economic, disaster

- The textile and mine workers of the South, whose attempts to unionize were resisted – often violently – by big business.
- Examples of songs that dealt with the depression include the rare down-to-earth Tin Pan Alley song: “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” (A Number One hit for crooners Bing Crosby and Rudy Vallee in 1932)

“Woody” Guthrie

- One of the musicians most closely associated with the plight of American workers during the Great Depression.
- Born in Oklahoma in 1912 as Woodrow Wilson Guthrie. He began his career as a hillbilly singer, performing the songs of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers.
- With his father dead and his mother committed to an asylum, Guthrie quit school at sixteen and spent years wandering throughout the Southwest.
- In the late 1930s, he migrated to California as part of the stream of impoverished “Okies” described in John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath.*
- These experiences turned Guthrie toward composing songs that were more overtly political in nature, including “This Land Is Your Land,” “Talking Dust Bowl Blues,” and “Ludlow Massacre.”
- After 1940, he was known primarily as a protest singer:
    - His political orientation was summarized by a sign on his guitar that read, “This Machine Kills Fascists,”
    - Guthrie had a direct influence on later urban folk musicians such as the Weavers and Bob Dylan.