



The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States

By Samuel A. Floyd Jr.

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When Jimi Hendrix transfixed the crowds of Woodstock with his gripping version of "The Star Spangled Banner," he was building on a foundation reaching back, in part, to the revolutionary guitar playing of Howlin' Wolf and the other great Chicago bluesmen, and to the Delta blues tradition before him. But in its unforgettable introduction, followed by his unaccompanied "talking" guitar passage and inserted calls and responses at key points in the musical narrative, Hendrix's performance of the national anthem also hearkened back to a tradition even older than the blues, a tradition rooted in the rings of dance, drum, and song shared by peoples across Africa.

Bold and original, *The Power of Black Music* offers a new way of listening to the music of black America, and appreciating its profound contribution to all American music. Striving to break down the barriers that remain between high art and low art, it brilliantly illuminates the centuries-old linkage between the music, myths and rituals of Africa and the continuing evolution and enduring vitality of African-American music. Inspired by the pioneering work of Sterling Stuckey and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., author Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. advocates a new critical approach grounded in the forms and traditions of the music itself. He accompanies readers on a fascinating journey from the African ring, through the ring shout's powerful merging of music and dance in the slave culture, to the funeral parade practices of the early new Orleans jazzmen, the bluesmen in the twenties, the beboppers in the forties, and the free jazz, rock, Motown, and concert hall composers of the sixties and beyond. Floyd dismisses the assumption that Africans brought to the United States as slaves took the music of whites in the New World and transformed it through their own performance practices. Instead, he recognizes European influences, while demonstrating how much black music has continued to share with its African counterparts. Floyd maintains that while African Americans may not have direct knowledge of African traditions and myths, they can intuitively recognize links to an authentic African cultural memory. For example, in speaking of his grandfather Omar, who died a slave as a young man, the jazz clarinetist Sidney Bechet said, "Inside him he'd got the memory of all the wrong that's been done to my people. That's what the memory is....When a blues is good, that kind of memory just grows up inside it." Grounding his scholarship and meticulous research in his childhood memories of black folk culture and his own experiences as a musician and listener, Floyd

maintains that the memory of Omar and all those who came before and after him remains a driving force in the black music of America, a force with the power to enrich cultures the world over.

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Editorial Review

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African American music deserves but seldom gets as much attention from academics as from music critics. Floyd takes the rare scholarly approach to it and sets a standard for subsequent studies. The range of genres he discusses is comprehensive (it includes slaves' ring shouts, turn-of-the-century cotillion dances, jazz, R & B, etc.), and the connections he makes are particularly perceptive. Drawing on the works of prominent cultural theorists, such as Henry Louis Gates, Floyd traces the key elements in the music's panorama to an aesthetic that is still clearly linked to African myths and rituals (one example he cites is call-and-response technique, which is pervasive throughout many stylistic categories). A midwesterner, Floyd attends to the historically important but frequently overlooked Chicago Renaissance of black cultural activity and to the influential composers from that city as well as to the more familiar Harlem efflorescence. Complementing the discourse are plenty of musical examples. Academics, critics, scholars, and fans alike stand to gain much from carefully reading this impressive work. *Aaron Cohen*

Review

"Diligently traces the history of Black music--its African influences and evolution."--*Emerge*

"Dares to take on the whole span of black musical history."--*Chicago Tribune*

"Important...An exceptionally erudite and thoroughly readable work."--*I.S.A.M. Newsletter*

"Impressive."--*Booklist*

From the Back Cover

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