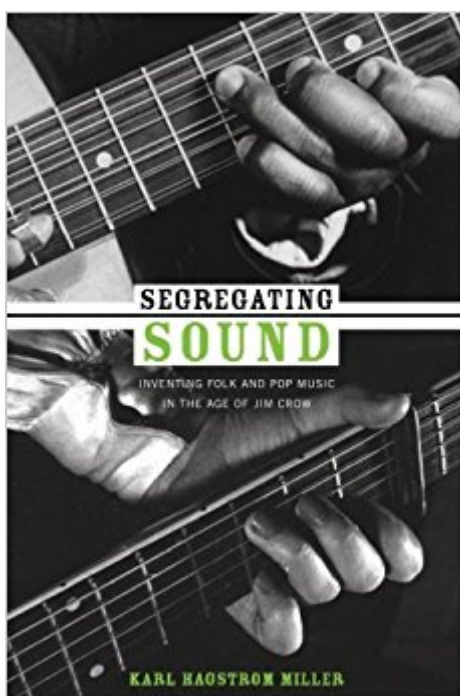


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Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk And Pop Music In The Age Of Jim Crow (Refiguring American Music)



Synopsis

In *Segregating Sound*, Karl Hagstrom Miller argues that the categories that we have inherited to think and talk about southern music bear little relation to the ways that southerners long played and heard music. Focusing on the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, Miller chronicles how southern music—•a fluid complex of sounds and styles in practice—•was reduced to a series of distinct genres linked to particular racial and ethnic identities. The blues were African American. Rural white southerners played country music. By the 1920s, these depictions were touted in folk song collections and the catalogs of “race” and “hillbilly” records produced by the phonograph industry. Such links among race, region, and music were new. Black and white artists alike had played not only blues, ballads, ragtime, and string band music, but also nationally popular sentimental ballads, minstrel songs, Tin Pan Alley tunes, and Broadway hits. In a cultural history filled with musicians, listeners, scholars, and business people, Miller describes how folklore studies and the music industry helped to create a “musical color line,” a cultural parallel to the physical color line that came to define the Jim Crow South. Segregated sound emerged slowly through the interactions of southern and northern musicians, record companies that sought to penetrate new markets across the South and the globe, and academic folklorists who attempted to tap southern music for evidence about the history of human civilization. Contending that people’s musical worlds were defined less by who they were than by the music that they heard, Miller challenges assumptions about the relation of race, music, and the market.

Book Information

Series: Refiguring American Music

Paperback: 384 pages

Publisher: Duke University Press Books (March 1, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0822347008

ISBN-13: 978-0822347002

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.4 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #197,222 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #52 in Books > Arts &

Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Blues #61 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music >

Customer Reviews

“[T]he most thorough achievement thus far in a growing body of scholarship and criticism demystifying and dissecting the roots of American music, and by extension the American music industry. . . . Miller goes several steps further than prior bodies of research, tracing back the artificial distinction to a confluence of marketing, scholarship, and music classification decisions, each driven to some degree by the prevailing racial attitudes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.”

— Mark Reynolds, *PopMatters* “A cultural exploration and, in part, a polemic, *Segregating Sound* is at once a social history, musical history, business history and an intellectual history. . . . Miller is an engaging writer who regularly turns memorable phrases. Thickly researched and cogently argued, *Segregating Sound* makes a thought-provoking, very likely lasting contribution to how we think about and relate to American musical genres.”

— Barry Mazor, *American Songwriter* “[B]rilliant . . . Miller is the first scholar to take the overwhelming presence of popular music in the South seriously and to weave the story of changing ideas about what makes music ‘authentic’ into the history of what musicians from the South were actually playing and what people were actually listening to. *Segregating Sound* tells the stories of the varied cast of characters who invented the category of southern music, a significant part of what is called ‘folk’ or ‘Americana’ or ‘roots’ music today and understood as part of the American musical canon.”

— Grace Hale, *Southern Spaces* “[A] marvelous reappraisal of early 20th century American musical culture. . . .

[Miller’s] book is rich with examples of folklorists or academics heading south in search of something ‘elemental’ and pure, and editing out anything that didn’t fit. And there was a lot.”

— Hua Hsu, *The Atlantic.com* “Miller . . . provides a fascinating exploration of the segregation of commercial music in the US during the course of the 20th century. . . .

Supported by extensive notes, this study adds considerably to the already extensive literature on the blues and country music.”

— R. D. Cohen, *Choice* “Ultimately Miller’s study succeeds because it questions many assumptions about folk and pop music, and about the commercial music business and the academic folklore world.”

— Rory Crutchfield, *Popular Music* “*Segregating Sound* provides a convincing and far-reaching argument that the duality within southern music developed out of three factors in the latter part of the nineteenth century: the rise of political and economic segregation, the academic professionalization of folklore, and the

modernization of the music industry. . . . Segregating Sound is a valuable and interesting work that anyone working in cultural studies should consult. — Kenneth J. Bindas, Register of the Kentucky Historical Society

“In this head-banging, eye-opening study, Karl Hagstrom Miller examines with stunning clarity the historical and material grounding of the music industry’s three main revenue streams: live performance, recording, and publishing. Along the way, he demonstrates how the notion of authenticity in folklore discourse, systemic Jim Crow, and minstrelsy legacies worked together to calcify our contemporary—and quite naturalized—perceptions about music and racialized bodies. If you ever wondered where MTV, CMT, VH1, and BET got their marketing logic, look no further. In fact, you’ll never experience a Billboard chart, nor the words “keep it real” in the same way after reading this book!” — Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., author of *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*

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This is a very interesting re-examination of the cultural milieu in which southern music came to be marketed by the incipient record industry and the way that Jim Crow shaped both cultural expectations of audiences and musicians. It also takes to task the expectations and assumptions of early folklorists whose classist, racist search for "authenticity" led them to distort the world and humanity of the subjects of their research. Miller is careful to portray the complexity of the subject matter. Throughout, Miller paints a careful and moderate picture of southern musical culture from 1880 to around 1920. He notes the ambivalent nature of a culture where Afro American composers of coon songs can use white racist stereotypes of black former slaves to lift themselves and while the folklorists seeking to preserve "authentic" primitive culture lament that the world they assume exists has been "contaminated" by the outside world. Of particular value is Miller's original research tracing the historiography of the oral historians themselves who have preserved so much of the history of the south that might otherwise be lost to us. While noting the invaluable nature of this work, Miller also points out some aspects of it that ought to give us pause as various commentators seek to push into territories guided by their own ideological biases and presumptions, which leave them blind to what they are actually being told by their informants. A clear, and revelatory, example of this is found in the interaction of John Lomax and Roosevelt Sykes where Lomax is pressing for information about anti-white or anti-Jim Crow lyrics, but Sykes cagily dissembles insisting that

nobody sings those types of songs. While it should be clear to any reader, and may even have been clear to Lomax on reflection, that Sykes's reticence is out of fear for his own safety in the face of this white man who could do him real harm, it also illustrates how little Lomax understood his informant at the time and therefore illuminates why we should have pause in taking the work of early folklorists and anthropologists at face value, despite the pricelessness of the work they did. Which leads me to my only real criticism of the book. Where Miller is astute and adept in calling into question the paradigms and framings of early generations of folklorists and anthropologists, he is less perspicacious where it comes to the theories currently operatant in his own academic culture. Throughout the book, Miller regularly uses modern theories of race relations to analyze source material in a manner that, while perhaps legitimate is still left entirely unjustified. So when Miller occasionally puts on his critics hat and deploys anachronistic ideas like "white skin privilege" when talking about white bluesman Frank Hutchison or addresses Jim Crow in terms of "white supremacy," the modern reader follows and understands his point. But given this is all done within a book challenging such racial paradigms of a previous era, there seems to inevitably be a bit of cognitive dissonance present that more careful unpacking of such language might have avoided. I'm also not a fan of the election to use endnotes rather than footnotes or chapter endnotes. This is an editorial style that makes close reading more awkward than it needs to be and is regrettable, although only a minor inconvenience. All in all, I highly recommend the book to anyone interested of the history of popular music in the United States. There is startling and fascinating material here that one would have to be a profession scholar to find on your own that I have not seen reproduced elsewhere and that alone recommends it. Miller's excellent historiography, agree with his conclusions or not, is thought provoking and well reasoned and his thesis is well worth considering.

all good.

Karl Hagstrom Miller's Segregating Sound contains some remarkable misinformation. "Academic collectors were particularly slow to associate the blues with folklore." Sounds interesting, but it happens to be flatly false. John Lomax included the song "The Blues" in a list of "genuine Negro folk-songs" in print in 1912, and characterized blues songs as folk songs in his 1917 article in The Nation. Howard Odum published blues, such as "Frisco Rag-Time," in the Journal Of American Folk-Lore in 1911. E.C. Perrow published blues lyrics in the same journal a few years later. Associating the blues with folklore is exactly what these people were doing. "The blues were a successful, almost viral, product of the music industry and professional songwriters." Sounds

interesting, but it happens to be flatly false. There is no credible evidence, zero, of any pro writers creating blues songs as early as, e.g., the folk blues song Elbert Bowman recalled he heard black workers singing by 1905, a variant of "K.C. Moan." (Bowman recalled well that the period was 1903-1905, because 1903-1905 was when blacks came through his small, heavily white town building a railroad line. His recollection fits great with those of others, such as the recollection of Emmet Kennedy regarding a variant of "Poor Boy Long Ways From Home." Not all blues music was 12-bar, and not all 12-bar music was blues music; e.g., "Stack-a-Lee," which existed by 1897, isn't a blues song.) "Prior to the mid-twenties, practically every commentator, with some minor exceptions, understood the blues as a commercial style." Sounds interesting, but it happens to be flatly false. Famous, Southern-born black songwriter W.C. Handy wrote in 1919 about blues: "[I]t is from the levee camps, the mines, the plantations and other places where the laborer works that these snatches of melody originate." (Handy's interview with the periodical *Along Broadway* in 1919 was consistent; the periodical wrote of the songs of the black cotton-picker and plowman and explained, "The story of Handy's success in putting these weird songs to music reads like a fairy tale.") Another famous, Southern-born black songwriter, Perry Bradford, said in 1921: "[B]lues originated from old... folk lore songs." Famous, Southern-born black songwriter James Weldon Johnson explained to readers that Handy's "Memphis Blues" had Handy's name on it, was but was really one of those songs that just grew, in 1917. *Literary Digest* gave the tune "The Blues" as an example of a "classic... of the levee underworld" in 1917. *Current Opinion* wrote about "... widespread discussion of the origin of the 'blues,' a type of folksong..." in 1919. Black classical composer Clarence Cameron White, born in Tennessee in 1880, in *The Washington Herald* 12/3/19: "Blues... is a term derived from certain labor songs of the Negroes in the South. These people have not stopped creating folk-music with the end of the Civil War.... The 'blues' are particularly the musical expression of road gangs, or of convict laborers." Harry Pace of Pace and Handy, born in 1884 in Georgia, in *The Evening World* 8/26/20: "Blues... in reality is the new folk music of the American negro." Etc. "Perhaps the most dramatic reinterpretation of the blues as folk songs came from the sociologists Howard Odum and Guy Johnson. They collaborated in 1925 to publish *The Negro and His Songs*, a large collection of African American religious and secular selections, many of which were culled from Odum's previous academic journal articles. They equated reimagining pop tunes as folk songs 'blues' with 'popular hits' and emphatically insisted that they were 'not folk songs.'" Nope, that's an inaccurate description of what Odum and Johnson wrote in that book. And Odum thought in 1911 (and in 1908) that the folk blues he had collected in 1905-1908 were folk songs, which would be why he published them in 1911 in a

journal called "The Journal Of American Folk-Lore". "In newspaper articles written between 1916 and 1919... [n]either Handy nor writers profiling the composer identified the blues as folk music." Nope, see the three 1917-1919 Handy-related articles I mentioned above. "W.C. Handy was more responsible than anyone for establishing the blues as folk music." The only people who ever "established" blues music as folk music were the black folk musicians who invented blues music in the first place. Etc. Amazing.

Fascinating discussion of the origins of the recording industry in America, its effect on what is considered "folk" music, and how "white" and "black" categories of music were emphasized for marketing purposes. The chapters in this book are separate and distinct, so you can skip the parts that are of less interest--I read about 80% of it. Some of the highlights: * the early record industry in the USA focused on selling highbrow records, but eventually expanded to more popular fare that instantly sold well--a decision in part based on their commercial experience in other countries; * early "black" music was recorded by white artists; once black artists were allowed to record their own work, white artists who recorded "black" music had to shift their style; * record companies emphasized black/white dichotomies in their categorization of the market--black artists such as Leadbelly were only allowed to record music that could safely be categorized as "black" Leadbelly's favorite song was by Gene Autry, a country-western singer; * Record companies shifted white southern artists into safety "hillbilly" categories, and weren't interested in hearing their renditions of pop or show tunes, thus distorting a real sense of the music they really played. Underlying all this is the question of what "folk" music is, and the impact of academic experts on the burgeoning study of folk music, and their interaction with and effect on the recording industry (e.g. how musical styles such as the blues shifted from being "pop" to "folk" music).

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