

## RACE, MUSIC, AND A MEANINGFUL APPROACH TO TEACHING HISTORICAL METHODS

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Oliver Sacks, a neurosurgeon in New York City and the well-known author of *Awakenings*, recently described the case of a forty-two year old man named Tony Cicoria who was struck by lightning. After almost dying at a nearby hospital, Cicoria appeared to recover fully within weeks, only to discover that, for the first time in his life, he had what Sacks referred to as an “insatiable desire to listen to piano music.” The individual had no formal musical training and yet within months he began teaching himself how to play the piano and eventually began composing complex, original works. In his book *Musicophilia*, Sacks describes other patients, many quite elderly, who discovered that music long forgotten from childhood had the ability to induce seizures. Such cases suggested to Sacks the powerful, in his words, “engraving of music on the brain.” The man struck by lightning was a dramatic example of how humans are inescapably a “musical species.”<sup>1</sup>

While Sacks explored the “extraordinary tenacity of music memory” or the role of music in shaping the cognitive map of individuals, my interest as a historian lies in the power of music in illuminating what Abraham Lincoln referred to as our “mystic chords of memory.” Speaking at his first Inaugural Address in March 1861, Lincoln used the metaphor of music to remind an increasingly divided nation that the “chorus of the Union,” his term for collective memory, lay embedded not in Americans’ neurology but rather in “every living heart.” As a result, when I agreed to teach a required historical methods course with a rather dry catalog description—“An introduction to the discipline, including study of research and writing techniques, historical methods, and the nature and varieties of history”—I chose to use music as the focus. I entitled my section “Doing History: Race and American Music” and aimed to ground the course on methodology in what I hoped would be the meaningful historical context of African-American history and music.<sup>2</sup>

I am not a musician nor do I have any formal training in musicology. I am an historian who grew up in Austin, Texas, the self-proclaimed “Live Music Capital of the World,” and really enjoys music. More importantly, I have always found music to be a portal to the past, a fleeting opportunity to travel back to what British novelist L.P.

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<sup>1</sup>Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Knopf Publishing, 2007), 5, 47.

<sup>2</sup>Sacks, xi; Abraham Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861, [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).

Hartley referred to as a "foreign country."<sup>3</sup> For me, it is impossible to separate my attraction to much of American music from my similar interest in many topics in American history. A colleague of mine once confessed to me that his love for European history stemmed from a young infatuation with Nazi Germany. The rich legacy of American music seems like a much more entertaining portal than the "Hitler Channel" on cable television. My students seem to agree: My approach to music as both a fan and as an historian resonates with my students, who often lack formal training but nevertheless find themselves thinking about music as some sort of soundtrack for their generation.<sup>4</sup>

For years I have used music to teach topics in American history. I provide students with lyrics, I play music in the classroom, and I sometimes use Bob Dylan's song, "The Times They Are a-Changing'," as the basis for a cumulative essay question for an upper-division course on American history since 1945. Sometimes the evolution of the popular music industry itself has served as valuable historical evidence. My students and I have discussed the important shift from pop 45 singles to concept albums as a metaphor for the evolution of baby boomers during the turbulent sixties. Historians and others have long looked to music for a window into the past. The cover photograph and article about legendary jazz singer Nina Simone in a recent *Journal of American History* is just one example. Resources for using music to teach American history have grown in the last decade, notably with an entire issue of the *OAH Magazine of History* in 2005 dedicated to the topic.<sup>5</sup>

However, this course was somewhat different in that I proposed to use music not just to illustrate an historical topic but rather to teach historical analysis and research methods. This involved combining many of the elements found in history methods courses with readings and assignments specific to the topic of music and race. First, I assigned several chapters from textbooks that have become standards of history methods courses: James Davidson and Mark Lytle's *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* and Conal Furry and Michael J. Salevouris's *The Methods and*

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<sup>3</sup>The phrase "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there" comes from L.P. Hartley's novel, *The Go-Between* (New York: Knopf Publishing, 1954), 1. For a historian's take on the phrase, see David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>For more on an historian's approach to music, see Lawrence Levine's "Musical Odyssey on an American Historian," in Jeffrey Jackson and Stanley C. Pelkey, eds., *Music and History: Bridging the Disciplines* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>Ruth Feldstein, "'I Don't Trust You Anymore': Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s," *Journal of American History*, 91:4 (March 2005), 1349-79; "Teaching History with Music," *OAH Magazine of History*, 19:4 (July 2005). For an example of a seminal work on African-American history, culture, and music, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

*Skills of History*.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these surveys of methodological issues, I assigned James Madison's *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America* to provide a historian's approach to the history of race, the phenomenon of lynching, and the role of memory.<sup>7</sup> Madison's work, which is especially useful to students from the Midwest—the story is based in Marion, Indiana, in 1930—provides a foundation from which students then read a journalist's approach to music and lynching: David Margolick's "*Strange Fruit: Biography of a Song*."<sup>8</sup> While Madison's work illustrates a fairly traditional approach to an historical event, his interest in the power of a single photograph and the continual reinterpretation of an historical event since the 1930s raises important questions for students learning about the discipline of history. In contrast, Margolick's focus is on the history of a song, specifically the origins and impact of Billie Holiday's legendary anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit." Margolick and others attribute the song's lyrics, written in 1938 by Abel Meeropol, to the lynching photograph earlier in the decade that figures so prominently in Madison's book. Long before the image captivated historians, the photograph was initially the focus of journalists and Americans who viewed it in newspapers or purchased the horrific photo on postcards.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Margolick is a journalist and his portrait of "Strange Fruit" lacks the historical context, analysis, and documentation typically found in scholarship by historians.<sup>10</sup> This comparison between the two works is an important ingredient in the course not only because it illuminates central features of the historical discipline, but also because the course's major assignment asked students, as historians, to produce a research paper that combined the best of both Madison's *A Lynching in the Heartland* and Margolick's "*Strange Fruit*." Modeling this approach to both history and music became easier after I initially taught the course when I found historian Scott Nelson's book, "*Steel Drivin' Man*"—*John Henry: The Untold Story of an American Legend* in

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<sup>6</sup>James W. Davidson and Mark H. Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005); Conal Furay and Michael J. Salevouris, *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Whelling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2000).

<sup>7</sup>James Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America* (New York: Pelgrave, 2001).

<sup>8</sup>David Margolick, "*Strange Fruit: Biography of a Song*" (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

<sup>9</sup>For the photograph, see an online collection of lynching photographs: <http://withoutsanctuary.org/>

<sup>10</sup>For more on "Strange Fruit," see *Strange Fruit* [videorecording], presented by Independent Television Service, produced, directed, and edited by Joel Katz (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2002).

2007.<sup>11</sup> I now use chapter two of the book in which Nelson consciously reflects on the historical detective work necessary to explore the origins of the popular song amid the labor history of the South.

The course combines the rather traditional topics of history methods outlined in the two textbooks with the historical analysis of race and music via a required research project on a song in American history. Building on our analysis of "Strange Fruit" in the context of both the history of American jazz and African-American history, we were now ready to apply the combined approaches of Madison and Margolick to other songs. Early in the semester, I provided each student with a list of possible songs (title and composer/singer) and students participated in a random drawing for their song. After a week to trade songs if desired, the students began completing an analysis guide with over thirty research questions organized into six categories:

- A. Basic Information on the Song
- B. Historical Context of the Song
- C. The Audience: The Consumption of Popular Culture
- D. Musical Context
- E. Historical Analysis
- F. Historical Interpretation

After identifying the important individuals associated with the song in Category A, students faced questions in Category B that encouraged them to place their song within the larger historical context of American history, especially the history of race. I asked students to think back to the secondary sources that informed their U.S. survey courses and to situate their piece of music within that larger narrative. Category C included questions about the song's intended audience and how it might have been consumed by Americans at the time. Category D involved questions about how the song relates to the broader history of American music over the last two centuries that I mapped out for them in lectures. I also assigned an online chapter from the *Grove Dictionary of Music* and placed an excellent history of American music by Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, entitled *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV* (2003), on reserve in the library.<sup>12</sup> Questions under Category E, "Historical Analysis," dealt with the song as a valuable primary source. Examples included questions about the lyrics as text and how the analytical tools of race, class, and gender might inform a historian's approach to the song. The last category included questions that encouraged students to reflect on their role as historians in relation to the song. For example, "What inferences did you make when first analyzing the song as an historical document?"

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<sup>11</sup>Scott R. Nelson, "Steel Drivin' Man"—*John Henry and the Untold Story of an American Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 21-40.

<sup>12</sup>Grove Music Online, <http://www.grovemusic.com>; Starr, Larry and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). A number of textbooks are available on music history, but most focus on classical music from Western Europe.

In an attempt to connect the important work on historical methodology to my students' analyses of the songs, I also included questions in the analysis guide directly tied to specific chapters in *After the Fact* and *The Methods and Skills of History*. As students read assigned chapters in these books, they answered questions in the guide related to their song as well. My aim was to cover the central issues of historical methods while asking students to apply these issues to their individual research project. Examples included:

1. In Furay and Salevouris (Chapter 4), the authors provide some basic "starter" questions to ask when analyzing an historical situation:
  - A. What was the role of political, theological, scientific, or social ideas in contributing to your source?
  - B. What was the role of economic or technological factors?
  - C. What was the role of organized groups?
  - D. What was the role of certain individuals?
  - E. What was the role of long-standing legal, customary, and diplomatic conditions?
  - F. What was the role of contingency?

\*Answer the above questions for your song in American history.

2. Furay and Salevouris discuss the role of bias in historical sources and interpretations in Chapter 4. How might bias influence an analysis of your specific primary source?
3. Furay and Salevouris discuss the importance of avoiding presentism or judging the past using the values and beliefs of the present in Chapter 5. Provide an example of a possible presentist interpretation of your source.
4. How might your analysis of your primary source relate to some of the ideas presented in Davidson's *After the Fact*? Select **one** of the following quotes from your assigned readings in Davidson and explain its possible relationship to your analysis.
  - A. "The reconstruction of an event is clearly different from the event itself." (p. 1)
  - B. "A keen mind working on an apparently small topic may uncover relationships and connections whose significance goes beyond the subject matter's original boundaries." (p. 24)
  - C. "It seems only logical that historians should bring to bear the tools of modern psychology to assess the man's personality." (p. 160)
  - D. "Yet no matter how 'artless' the photographs of Jacob Riis may be in terms of their aesthetic control of the medium, to assume they are bias-free seriously underestimates their interpretive content." (p. 217)
  - E. "If that conclusion is correct, it suggests that neither the reflective hypothesis nor the manipulative hypothesis explains how the mass media affect history." (p. 369)

I chose music ranging from songs of the antebellum period to hip hop in the early years of the Reagan Administration. While I initially and naively feared not being able to find enough songs appropriate for the assignment, I soon realized that, despite teaching the course a few times, the real challenge was making choices from so many interesting options. There are a remarkable number of songs associated with my course topic and I plan to create other versions of the course with labor songs or music centered on social protest. With a few exceptions from the history of jazz, I restricted my choices to songs with lyrics to encourage students to approach the lyrics with the same critical analysis an historian would use to tackle another text such as a diary entry, a famous speech, or a legal document. Students researched their song as a primary source and wrote a ten to twelve-page paper that placed that source within the larger historical context and historiography of both American music and race in the United States. In addition, I required each student to create a fifteen-minute oral presentation that included a PowerPoint slide show, an audio clip, and their analysis of their song. Some of the more effective songs I have assigned include:

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| 1. Follow the Drinking Gourd—slave song    | 12. Which Side Are You On?—SNCC Singers                |
| 2. Steal Away—Fisk Jubilee Singers         | 13. Woke Up This Morning—SNCC Singers                  |
| 3. Old Folks at Home—Stephen Foster        | 14. Think—Aretha Franklin                              |
| 4. John Brown's Body—Julia Ward Howe       | 15. Say It Loud—I'm Black & I'm Proud—James Brown      |
| 5. Tiger Rag—Original Dixieland Jazz Band  | 16. Society's Child—Janis Ian                          |
| 6. Black and Tan Fantasy—Duke Ellington    | 17. Southern Man—Neil Young                            |
| 7. St. Louis Blues—Bessie Smith            | 18. Whitey on the Moon—Gil Scott-Heron                 |
| 8. Old Man River—Paul Robeson              | 19. The Message—Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five |
| 9. We Shall Overcome—Pete Seeger           | 20. Fight the Power—Public Enemy                       |
| 10. That's Alright—Elvis Presley           |  |
| 11. Shake, Rattle, and Roll—Big Joe Turner |  |

Now that I have taught the course a few times and had a chance to talk with students about the approach, I believe the infusion of meaningful historical content in the form of music and the issue of race has some significant advantages. First, despite the fact that the new social history is hardly new, most of our majors come to college with a relatively traditional political narrative about American history. Songs from African Americans struggling to create art within a society often wedded to an oppressive racial hierarchy contribute to all our efforts to bring multiple voices into the classroom and, over the course of the semester, collectively create a powerful historical counter-narrative. Our class discussions ranged from the colonial period through the twentieth century and the fact that we rarely mentioned political decisions emanating from the nation's capital was a powerful testimony to the ability of social history to revolutionize our students' sense of the past. I always include at least one slave spiritual and many of the songs deal, at least indirectly, with issues such as labor, social class, gender, religion, migration, and daily life.

Second, placing songs as cultural and historical artifacts at the center of research projects introduces students to another field often overlooked in secondary schools—cultural history. Students find in music an accessible path to generate questions about authorial intent, cultural hierarchies, assimilation and resistance, folklore, and the consumption of popular culture amid a growing system of market capitalism. Used to thinking about power solely in terms of electoral politics and wealth, students exploring the production and consumption of songs often written and performed by marginalized Americans found themselves rethinking issues of power. I utilized songs by Stephen Foster, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, and Elvis Presley to direct students to research the ways white composers, musicians, singers, and fans appropriated black cultures and, in turn, reconfigured white identity and American popular culture. Although Michel Foucault and other theorists comprised only a fraction of the course, topics such as the impact of minstrel music, jazz, R&B, or hip hop on the dominant white culture and identity since the nineteenth century inevitably encourage students to question their notion of hegemony within American society. As one student explained, researching music “led me to analyze and think critically about situations that I would usually see as ‘life’ and it being the ways things are.”<sup>13</sup>

Third, as someone interested in American social history during the twentieth century, I have found music particularly useful in illuminating for students what historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has recently identified as the “long civil rights movement.”<sup>14</sup> The dominant narrative of the civil rights movement emphasizes the challenges to racial segregation in the South between 1954 and 1965 and, unfortunately, divorces civil rights from labor activism and other issues such as gender. This emphasis on the “classical phase” of the movement obscures these issues outside the South and includes what Hall refers to as a “narrative breach” between a limited, popular notion of the movement and the efforts of Americans to resist racism and economic exploitation in recent decades. In contrast, the “long civil rights movement” places the developments between *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 within the broader context of American labor history, political radicalism, New Deal reform, modern feminism, and conservatism during the Cold War and beyond.<sup>15</sup>

Our students are too often impoverished by the convenient periodization of course catalogs and textbook chapters and music can help address this collective amnesia. Songs such as Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” reveal the connections over

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<sup>13</sup>Written comments from students in History 200, Fall 2006 and Spring 2007, in author’s possession.

<sup>14</sup>Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History*, 91:4 (March 2005), 1233-1263.

<sup>15</sup>Hall, 1236, 1251.

time and between social movements rarely found in historical narratives, conventional surveys, or public history. The fact that Abel Meeropol, a Jewish school teacher and a member of the Communist Party in New York City, wrote the lyrics for "Strange Fruit" years before more conventional stories of the civil rights movement begin with *Brown* helps students explore the role of the Old Left and labor issues in forming the long struggle for racial justice throughout the twentieth century. Even the hysteria of the Cold War, often tucked between discussions of the Great Depression and the civil rights movement, emerges from the analysis of "Strange Fruit" as Meeropol and his wife, key figures in the leftist community in New York, adopted the two children of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg after their arrest and execution for espionage in 1953, a year before the *Brown* case.<sup>16</sup>

Often songs performed by multiple singers over time have the greatest potential for understanding the complexity and relevance of the long civil rights movement. I assign white folk singer and labor activist Pete Seeger's version of "We Shall Overcome" from the 1940s to encourage students to trace the shared history of social activism associated with the labor movement and the civil rights movement. Seeger learned a version of the song with roots in both black churches and white labor activism and eventually taught his reinterpretation to young black activists who made it an anthem of the civil rights movement.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, I use the version of "Which Side Are You On?" performed by the SNCC Freedom Singers in the 1960s to provide the students with an opportunity to uncover the older and slightly different lyrics sung by striking coal miners in Kentucky during the Great Depression.<sup>18</sup> In all three cases, songs as key primary sources allow students as historians to excavate the enduring connections between the struggles for racial and economic justice that have become, according to historian Nancy MacLean, "airbrushed from popular memory." Ironically, the rich sounds of American music might be the most effective way for students and the general public to rediscover the "quieter struggles" to expand democracy throughout the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Margolick, 11.

<sup>17</sup>Pete Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Singer's Stories, Songs, Seeds, Robberies* (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Publications, 1993), 32-35; Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-25.

<sup>18</sup>Timothy P. Lynch, *Strike Songs of the Great Depression* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

<sup>19</sup>Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2006), 341, 345.



Of course, the value of any course in historical methods also lies in its ability to help students develop as historians. When I asked students at the end of the term whether one should use music to teach historical methods, one commented that his assigned song made him "look at an exact moment in history. It allowed me to get a feeling of people's thoughts and reaction to the song, thus helping me understand that particular moment in history." Another student echoed the perspectives of many in the class when he claimed that "researching the song was difficult and I had to broaden my horizons in the researching area, and go outside my comfort zone to get information about it. This led me to a greater understanding of the work of historians." Still another added that she "analyzed more than for any other paper" and "I now feel better about using my own interpretations for my work." Although no student claimed the course was as powerful as being struck by lightning, many claimed that the potent combination of music and history changed them as students. Historian Lawrence Levine once argued that to overlook music was to "ignore a vital part of ourselves, our history, and our culture."<sup>20</sup> As one history major declared, analyzing the past through a song "forces you to become consumed by the material but as a historian."<sup>21</sup>

Note: The author would like to thank Vanette Schwartz of ISU's Milner Library for her assistance over the years with the methods course.

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<sup>20</sup>Levine, "Musical Odyssey on an American Historian," 18.

<sup>21</sup>Written comments from students in History 200, Fall 2006 and Spring 2007, in author's possession.