Review


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*Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* confronts the assertion (accusation?) that country music is white people’s music by attempting to show how much ‘black’ there is in this ‘white’ music. The strength of the book lies in its title—it is catchy and intriguing—but its weakness lies in the lack of a sustained narrative. That is an inherent problem with collections of essays, but this collection does not seem to have a strong thread that pulls together the African American presence in country music.

The most glaring weakness is in what the book leaves out. How can you have a serious book on African Americans and country music and not have a chapter on Charley Pride? Or DeFord Bailey? Granted, Pride is discussed in several chapters, particularly the chapter on ‘Alice Randall and the Integration of Country Music’ by Barbara Ching. Still, it would seem that Charley Pride should have a chapter of his own, perhaps even be a focal point of the book considering the fact that he became a country music star during the period when the issue of civil rights was roiling the country. Instead, Pride is, for the most part, invisible and ignored.

Still, the book has much to recommend it.

‘Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old Time Records’ is a strong chapter by Patrick Huber that documents a number of early ‘country’ recordings by black artists. Although the chapter asserts that there are numerous examples of many ‘country recordings [that] were done by African American musicians and performers’, the writer admits that ‘records featuring African American artists were far from common, constituting only about 1 percent of the approximately eleven thousand hillbilly records released in the United States before 1933’. The writer further asserts ‘their numbers are far greater than most country music scholars and fans have generally appreciated’ (p. 21).

Sounds in Country and Western Music from 1962 and laments the fact that Charles’s efforts weren’t considered ‘country’ by the Nashville country music community. Further, Charles’s efforts tend to be ignored by many country music historians. There is a reason for this: ‘country music’ is generally defined as the music that is accepted by the country music industry (radio, retailers, record and publishing companies) and community (musicians, fans, artists) and Ray Charles was never part of that, even though his albums were (and are) outstanding.

‘Why African Americans Put the Banjo Down’ by Tony Thomas is an interesting and informative essay that discusses why the banjo virtually disappeared from African American music and why it was embraced by bluegrass. The gist is that the sound of the banjo did not ‘fit’ the music evolving in the black community but did fit the sound of bluegrass, especially when played in the three-finger ‘Scruggs style’. Thomas debunks the theory—perpetuated by some historical revisionists—that blacks abandoned the banjo because it represented the racist minstrel show tradition. Banjoists are not sociologists nor are they academic critics—they are musicians who demand that the instrument fit the music and vice versa. Simply put, the banjo did not fit the blues.

Erika Brady’s essay ‘Contested Origins: Arnold Shultz and the Music of Western Kentucky’ is an informative piece on the development of the thumbpicking style of guitar playing. African American musician Arnold Shultz has been cited as an early and major influence on the style, but he never recorded and a limited number of people saw him perform. According to Brady—and others—the thumbpicking style owes its heritage to Kennedy Jones who, when his thumb was sore and swollen after a full night of pickin’, went into a music store and acquired some thumb picks, which were used by Hawaiian guitarists. Brady astutely observes that ‘thumbpickers’ should really be defined as ‘thumbpick-ers’ because the thumb pick is essential to that style of playing.

The chapter on Syd Nathan and King Records by David Sanjek discusses the importance of Henry Glover, the African American producer who recorded country music artists for King. Glover has certainly been overlooked by most scholars of popular music and he played an important, vital role for the Cincinnati-based label.

The chapter on ‘How Southern Soul Changed Country Music’ by Charles Hughes discusses the importance that the Muscle Shoals and Memphis music and musicians had for Nashville and country music. Unfortunately, this chapter is marred by a number of errors: Owen Bradley did not manage Patsy Cline; Harold Bradley was a session musician, not a label head; Billy Sherrill did not produce Conway Twitty or Loretta Lynn). However, the fact remains that a number of Muscle Shoals and Memphis studio musicians landed in Nashville where they
became part of the A-team of musicians who played (and continue to play) on numerous country recordings.

Barbara Ching’s chapter on ‘Alice Randall and the Integration of Country Music’ includes Charley Pride, O.B. McClinton, Tini Trigg and Stoney Edwards—who all had a presence on Music Row and who are not mentioned elsewhere in the book. Randall, an African American songwriter as well as a Harvard educated professor at Vanderbilt, has written a number of country songs (’XXXXXs & OOOOOs’ recorded by Trisha Yearwood is the best known).

Kip Lornell’s lively narration of his research on ‘old time’ music in North Carolina and Virginia is enlightening and perceptive. Jeffrey Keith’s essay on Bill Livers tells the story of an African American who played country fiddle with string bands. Adam Gussow’s essay on Cowboy Troy discusses the connections, as well as the wide gulf, between country and rap. Gussow notes that Cowboy Troy had a top selling album on the country album chart but did not receive radio airplay from country radio. This is a major red flag—but neither the essay nor the book addresses how and why this can happen. ‘Nashville’ is blamed for all the faults of country music, especially the country music that doesn’t reach the public. And yet it is radio that determines what is played and what is not and the country music industry must produce recordings that country radio will play in order to be successful. A chapter on country radio that examines why they would not play African American artists—specifically Cowboy Troy—should have been a key chapter in this book. It isn’t and therefore the title of ‘the African American Presence in Country Music’ is missing a key element.

This is a book by academics for academics. The emphasis is on sociological interpretations and field research. It is not for the ‘average’ country music fan. Neither is it a book for the insiders in the country music business; it does not deal with the business side of country music in a meaningful way. On the positive side it explores and analyses country music in a way that those involved in the day-to-day recording and marketing of country music seldom, if ever, do. Country music is part of our musical tradition and also part of our intellectual tradition. As the years go by, scholars are increasingly finding a depth to country music that shows it is a window to America. This book shows country music as a window to America, but there are places where the window is opaque.