SONGBOOKS

★ *The Literature of* ★ AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC

ERIC WEISBARD

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BUY

Refiguring American Music

A series edited by RONALD RADANO, JOSH KUN, AND NINA SUN EIDSHEIM

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Eric Weisbard

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This book is dedicated to anybody who
ever wrote for the *Village Voice*
music section or presented at the
Pop Conference. My people!
Even if—especially if—we have argued.

CONTENTS

★ *Part II* ★

THE JAZZ AGE

★ *Part VII* ★

TOPICS IN PROGRESS

Introduction

Popular music, that oddity of capitalism and the democratic rabble, has long made writers bend taste, language, and professional standards—anything to ping-pong back the relentless flow of smashes and spins. The industry, Isaac Goldberg punned in the 1930s, as he wrote the first history, was a racket: noise in the service of a hustle. Would you call Irving Berlin, king of the Tin Pan Alley sheet music trade, a composer? He could only play in one key. Yet he wrote hits, so authors wrote explanations. Algonquin Round Table member Alexander Woollcott heard in slurry come-ons like "Everybody's Doin' It Now" the city's "alarum of the street cars," slang's "idiom of the sidewalks," and song plugging's relentless sales beat, "as much a part of the pace and rhythm of Berlin's music as that music, itself, is part of the pace and rhythm of America." Seventy years later, musicologist Charles Hamm detailed how Berlin songs gained middle-class legitimacy, himself legitimizing a topic that his discipline had led him to view as akin to pornography. Meanwhile, critic Jody Rosen pondered how the former Israel Baline wrote "White Christmas" and "Easter Parade," gleeful to quote novelist Philip Roth on what Berlin's assimilation did to goy holidays: "He de-Christs them both!"

Songbooks: The Literature of American Popular Music aims to capture all of that sequence and more. It's a critical guide to the authors, artists, and topics accruing a catalog as far back as William Billings's 1770 *New-England Psalm-Singer*.

The range of books makes an argument for intellectual history, comparable to pop's implications for music history. You'll find a blues novel by Gayl Jones and folk ballad mysteries by Sharyn McCrumb, memoirs by groupie Pamela Des Barres and industry figures Carrie Jacobs-Bond and Clive Davis, Top 40 charts books by Joel Whitburn and ragtime-era clippings collated by Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, glossy prose by Gilbert Seldes and Tom Wolfe. The provisional status of popular music authors, due to identity, funding, or creative obsession, shaped their output. Enduring stuff came from outsiders: women and/or writers of color, authors displaced by sexuality or partial education, deviants from orthodoxy. Efforts to fix music's meaning by discipline or genre have often meant less than a glimpse useful enough to pass around the way DJs would a breakbeat, comparable to the verse a songwriter distills from experience to suggest a world.

I define popular music primarily around songs, America as both place and influence, literature as something that captivates as much as it informs. My entries are short: suggestive rather than definitive. And they proceed in the order of publication date for the book that launched the career or discourse, putting foundational texts near others in a period and letting them all quest forward. In popular music, new forms required new interpretations: think Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize and the Is-he-literature? debate. Music writing's preemptive verbiage line-cut more traditional scholarship. Since the 1990s, academics have created a more formal literature: studies that extended other studies, shared keywords, university press book series. That's here, too. But professionalizing should not mean dismissing earlier writing. Hybridity and patched-together methods are not a weakness of popular music literature—they're its essence. Rereading expansively can be as revisionist as wholly new exploration.

Books on music have come in a few dominant forms: collections of songs that showed a subject existed; critical, autobiographical, and fictional salvos attuned to the timbres of pop culture; genre and disciplinary codifications meant to set boundaries; and cultural studies revisionism challenging such norms. To taxonomize:

Collected works made a case even as they made a sale, arguments about value and immensity. *Slave Songs of the United States* credited Black musical originality. Morrison Foster's 160-song collection sanctified his younger brother Stephen. John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* alchemized "Home on the Range" into a Library of Congress folk division. Whitburn's chart tallies valued commercial multiplicity.

As glossy magazines arrived, popular culture a staple, **arts criticism** supplied a tincture of modernity. Seldes of *Vanity Fair* tackled music within the

"lively arts." Langston Hughes wrote for a trade publisher. The new journalism of Wolfe extended into rock and rap prose. A similar flair for language and encapsulation characterized the best **memoirs**, star turns of unexpected emphasis for Sophie Tucker, Charles Mingus, Chuck Berry, Bob Dylan, Jay-Z. Links between new sounds and shifts in the fabric were often first explored by **fiction writers**, from F. Scott Fitzgerald and lesser-known Dorothy Baker on the jazz age to Andrew Holleran's disco *Dancer from the Dance*. The desires of *Sister Carrie* met those of her later peers in *Rolling Stone* prodigy Cameron Crowe's novel *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Ethnicity got its thickest musical description in Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* and Los Bros Hernandez's comic series *Love and Rockets*.

Through **genre writing**, peer groups delineated estimable musical approaches. A jazz lingo solidified, as in the writers' collection *Jazzmen* or Nat Hentoff's multiartist synthesis *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya* creating collective oral history. Rudi Blesh decreed ragtime's worth. Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver foraged for blues. Charlie Gillett itemized rock and roll. Bill Malone put a honky-tonk-center on country music. Rock and soul countercultures stressed a more transgressive populism. Amiri Baraka's *Blues People* voiced a funky perspective extended by Phyl Garland, Nelson George, and Greg Tate. Rock criticism came together in the *Rolling Stone Illustrated History*, Greil Marcus's *Mystery Train*, and collections from Richard Meltzer, Ellen Willis, Robert Christgau, Lester Bangs, and Robert Palmer.

Academic **disciplines** separated popular music, too, but by methods of analysis. The contributors to H. Wiley Hitchcock's *New Grove Dictionary of American Music* revamped musicology. Lawrence Levine brought folk laughter into American cultural history and archive digging into popular music writing. Bruno Nettl tracked the upstart field of ethnomusicology, raising comparative questions. Howard Becker and Richard Peterson fostered a sociology of culture, stressing institutions.

With Reagan and Thatcher in power and populist tastes no longer assumed progressive, **cultural studies** arrived, under Stuart Hall's leadership. Dissecting assumptions rather than, as earlier, deepening them, the approach was brought into rock criticism by Simon Frith, folklore by Robert Cantwell, jazz academia by Robert O'Meally's Columbia cohort, musicology by Susan McClary, ethnomusicology by Steven Feld, the African diaspora by Paul Gilroy, hip-hop by Tricia Rose, metal by Robert Walser, minstrelsy by Eric Lott, sound by Jonathan Sterne, Latinx scenes by Frances Aparicio, country by Diane Pecknold, Broadway musicals by Stacy Wolf. Similarly, fiction augmented the funky with the fantastic: the cyberpunk of William Gibson, future/past jumbles

by Jennifer Egan. Post-boomer critics dug up once-deplored taste fringes: the poptimism of a Carl Wilson or Ann Powers, Alex Ross rooting classical in the popular sphere.

All of these approaches tended to overlap; another goal of this book is to put older work in conversation with those reworking it. William Billings was a young tanner when he self-published *The New-England Psalm-Singer*. In the 1955 *America's Music*, Gilbert Chase heralded Billings as "a natural genius, a true primitive." Richard Crawford, an early PhD in American music, recast that in 1993's *American Musical Landscape*, seeing a Billings who followed format rules. Those two scholars, getting U.S. popular sounds into music departments, left out the Billings who wrote sensationalist true-crime narratives akin to work by subsequent blackface minstrels like George Washington Dixon. Minstrels too had songbooks: a broadsheet of "Jim Crow" ran 150-plus verses. The dastardly versification obsessed the rock critic turned lore scholar W. T. Lhamon, who in staunch revisionism debuted the song's author-performer, T. D. Rice, on Harvard University Press more than a century after Rice's death. Lhamon also reprinted Constance Rourke's *American Humor*, 1930s speculation on minstrelsy as comic archetype.

Guthrie Ramsey Jr. worked at the junction of different traditions. His 2003 *Race Music* looked back to James Trotter's 1878 *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, the first take on Black music by a Black writer. Ramsey, pivotal in brewing up antidotes to essentializing non-Black perspectives, also celebrated white amateur Dena Epstein, a librarian who spent a quarter-century paging pre-1860s primary sources to create a compilation, the 1977 *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*. His scholarship involved considering his own family narrative, from the South to Chicago: why the funk Gap Band's "Yearning for Your Love," heard at his dad's funeral, pushed against a music department urging him to concentrate on bebop pianist Bud Powell; why that raised issues of respectability you might take back to Alain Locke's 1925 *New Negro* anthology, or put him in a contemporary conversation with the post-soul public sphere interventions of Mark Anthony Neal, the critical freaky-deke of critic Greg Tate, the abstruse but telling ontologies of poet-critical theorist Fred Moten.

These tales have the same moral. Professionalism was always in question, same as primitivism. That was American music. That was American music writing. And it's all a very long story. Popular music involves not so much music and lyrics as music and the entire social and cultural field that supports and frames it. Writing that found a new way to chart an aspect of this universe, letting a part illuminate the whole, did the most for our understanding. To ramble, haphazardly and gleefully, through books that predate us, is to realize that while such matters

as commerce versus creativity, novelty versus classics, Blackness versus "Blackness" constitute core dialectics, *popular* and *music* remain the most fundamental intersection. Each word subsumes a panoply of selves and note-taking practices.

THEMES AND VARIATIONS

Chronology rules the order of entries here, but a range of subjects recur. Nothing looms larger in American music than African American music—real, racially fantasized, and one-drop-rule conjoined, from blackface minstrelsy to spirituals, ragtime, jazz, blues, rock, soul, hip-hop, and EDM. Generalizing aggressively, I'd note through lines of discussion. First, a rhetoric that sought to humanize and institutionalize: Solomon Northup's memoir of slavery; Trotter's politic account as Reconstruction ended; James Weldon Johnson finding prose suitable to a songwriter-NAACP leader; Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, Eileen Southern, O'Meally, and August Wilson ensconcing Jazz at Lincoln Center, blues on Broadway. Second, a countertrajectory that signified with strategic vulgarity: Zora Neale Hurston partying in her blues ethnography; Billie Holiday transcending propriety like a bad lyric; Baraka insisting on what Ishmael Reed later called *Mumbo Jumbo*. Even Sammy Davis Jr.'s new ethnicity fit this anti-anti-essentialist strand, theorized by Paul Gilroy and his adversary Fred Moten. And third, non-Blacks who analyzed Blackness as determinedly as others commodified it: origins from Natalie Curtis Burlin to Levine and Epstein, minstrelsy via Lott, blues from Samuel Charters to Elijah Wald. Jazz Blackness lured Mezz Mezzrow and Jack Kerouac; soul Blackness David Ritz and Peter Guralnick; hip-hop Blackness Jeff Chang and Jonathan Lethem; diaspora Blackness Steven Feld and Charles Keil.

To skim my table of contents is to notice women only sometimes credited elsewhere and never together. *Slave Songs of the United States*, the first collection of African American song, existed because coeditor Lucy McKim Garrison's parents were abolitionists and gender egalitarians. Olive Dame Campbell persuaded the English folk revivalist Cecil Sharp to extend her songcatching. Alice Fletcher, Natalie Curtis Burlin, and Frances Densmore, a trio whose field recordings were uncredited ethnomusicology, idealized antimodern outsider culture. That influenced *Show Boat* author Edna Ferber, who balanced ephemeral stage lights and eternal river. Emma Bell Miles's cultivation let her categorize "Some Real American Music" for *Harper's* in 1904, then publish *Spirit of the Mountains* in 1905. Her hard isolation was addressed in journals and stories, the first published only in 2014, the fiction in 2016. Carrie Jacobs-Bond, first rich woman songwriter, diminished posthumously, but her memoir, *The Roads*

of Melody, now seems in a lineage with country songwriter Loretta Lynn's *Coal Miner's Daughter*. Baker wrote *Young Man with a Horn*, the first jazz novel; perhaps subsumed lesbianism gave her protagonists' "funny slant on things" a grounding, perhaps her awareness of race and class owed to fiction providing the critic's role jazz people would have denied her. Phyl Garland's *Soul* presented autoethnography as musicology before Ramsey; she'd pioneer cultural reporting at Columbia and still hasn't been fully anthologized.

Far more connections need drawing. One might link Lilian Roxon, writing herself into a male-dominated field with the *Rock Encyclopedia*, to Gina Arnold working through genre and gender with her alternative rock study *Route 666*; that common history was asserted in Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers's *Rock She Wrote*. Balance Garland's familial approach with Southern, her counterpart, who kept soul at a remove in *The Music of Black Americans* after years on the Black college margins but became Harvard's first Black woman full professor and original Afro-American Studies chair. Open the soul moment to the haunted blues of Gayl Jones, notice its absence in the acclaimed, brief rock criticism of Ellen Willis. The foundational figure for all of these placements and displacements would be Hurston, whose juke joint ethnography, *Mules and Men*, funded by university sources and an interventionist "Godmother," managed to both observe and observe herself observing in a manner we're still learning to appreciate. Hurston's influence lines led to Tricia Rose, the first hip-hop scholar, theorizing rupture and flow, to Lise Waxer's ethnography of salsa in the vinyl museum city of Cali, Columbia, to sociologist Tia DeNora's case studies of working women listening to songs to manage emotion.

The music business has been another perennial source of fascination and disgust, the pop perplex in a nutshell and a stand-in for shifting views of ethnicity, capitalism, aesthetics, and professionalism. Isaac Goldberg, finding "cosmopolitan culture" in what he contradictorily viewed as a "song factory," was not so different from Clive Davis calling his post-Monterey format juggling at Columbia Records "corporate nonconformity." Novelists and exposé journalists offered a more aggrieved barometer, including the lurid pulp original rock novel, Harlan Ellison's *Rockabilly*. A still different view came from how-to manuals, gushing in the early twentieth century, endlessly updated later as *This Business of Music*. In between decriers and celebrants, one found cultural studies–trained Keith Negus and former hip-hop bizzer Dan Charnas. Each captured outsider-insiders betting long and feeling queasy.

An ongoing approach here is to consider how literature collected around major figures, which Bert Williams turned out to be. He was considered liberal vaudeville in the wake of his 1922 death, viewed tragically circa the

counterculture as plastic opposite of rock and soul, then regained iconicity for his masked identity as a figure of Black Atlantic double-consciousness. Like others, from Ellington and Holiday to Dylan and Madonna, the literature shaped around him changed as values and methods did. A similar pattern included books by artists themselves—more or less. Whether Jelly Roll Morton speaking over piano to Alan Lomax, all of David Ritz's ghostwriter projects, or classics of composite origin by Armstrong, Holiday, and Lynn, autobiographies raised enduring questions about voice and notation.

American popular music has connected to seemingly everything: race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, class and capitalism, technology and modernity, theater and fashion, subculture and spectacle, Culture and culture. Similar questions came up even as the music changed. But it mattered if the askers changed, if topics were more canonical or conjunctural, if prose style in sentences shifted. Rereading the literature of American popular music entry by entry makes these issues acute. There isn't a subject in American popular music, from artist to genre, that hasn't dramatically altered its meaning over time. Confronting this through a display of examples (I can't pretend comprehensiveness) offers insights different from close-reading a particular work or era. JoAnne Mancini used "anthological modernism" to describe collections, like Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, LPs packaged to encompass the world in a document. There is something of that here. From Walt Whitman and his ever-expanding *Leaves of Grass*, how writers heard America singing has shaped what sort of book preserved the tale.

SENTIMENTAL AND VERNACULAR

But I have two more words to stress. Either "sentimental" or "vernacular" kept coming up as I read, so I started marking them down in entries as a heuristic device to see what connections might result. For sentimental, picture respectable women all feeling moved, emphasis on tears and the domestic sphere—the parlor. For vernacular, think regular guys talking shit, emphasis on laughter and the public sphere—the streets. We often simplistically narrate Victorian assumptions yielding to modern style, like one of those parlor women cutting her hair and going out dancing on the town. Embracing, in other words, the vernacular, which in American popular culture gets figured as the African American and immigrant, the urban and urbane, speckled with gay and working-class barroom touches, too.

Staying in overview mode, vernacular books started in the West with the Bible's translation into languages people spoke, a move connected to the

enlightenment and modernity. Move that to the New World and you have, as vernacular, the "Yankee Doodle Dandy" style of U.S. politics and pop culture: Billings's "Chester" sung in the revolution, Rice jumping Jim Crow as founding fathers yielded to a Jacksonian democracy of scurrilous caricature. Much classic writing on American popular music bought into the equation of the vernacular and democratic, in opposition to a stuffy, European "genteel tradition": Chase's *America's Music*, Gillett's *Sound of the City*, Malone's *Country Music, U.S.A.*, Marcus's *Mystery Train*—it's especially clear in the first editions, before each author learned more and recalibrated.

Plenty connected vernacular, African American idioms, and technology. With recording, from different levels of audio production to movies and YouTube clips, what Barthes called "the grain of the voice" could be preserved, disseminated, and made essential to a specific vision of music. Michael Denning's *Noise Uprising* called the 1920s arrival of electrical recording a "vernacular music revolution," felt worldwide, which from New Orleans jazz to Egypt's Umm Kulthum allowed sounds to ripple out in a subaltern surge. Denning judged this a "decolonization of the ear," noting that the word vernacular came into parlance after the boom, used to describe commercial recordings as what Charles Seeger, musicologist and father of folk legend Pete, called "the musical vernacular of the 'common man.'" Vernacular, Denning wrote, was a term less fraught with nationalism than folk, more musically diverse than jazz, emphasized the spoken, and built up from *verna*, meaning a home-born slave.

Skip ahead a generation, turn up the sound, and think of LeRoi Jones, on his way to becoming Amiri Baraka, conjuring James Brown's grooves played in a bank, making that white institution "a place . . . where black people move in almost absolute openness and strength." Vernacular popular music went through an amplification process after World War II, the difference between trumpet and electric guitar, one microphone recording and magnetic tape edits, urban vaudeville and rock and roll. Charles Keil delineated this shift in *Music Grooves*, George Lipsitz found its political valence in *Rainbow at Midnight*, and Christgau wrote about Chuck Berry in the *Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* as "heightened vernacular." Wolfe's pop art circus *Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* was a partner to Baraka in the explosive release of this later vernacular literature, prose reaching to match what Palmer once called "The Church of the Sonic Guitar." Slangy, mass-produced sheet music already purveyed vernacular, but the twentieth century electrified it, as pop globalized, Americans below the median were targeted as consumers, and collective pride greeted Hank Williams, Elvis Presley, Soul Brother Number One. It was romantic, engaging writers across the wide spectrum this book

surveys. Just as one revered funky Black music, not bland white pop or dead symphonic pomp, one wrote to uncover the kind of stories Jelly Roll Morton told.

But the rise of the vernacular, in music books and beyond, meant the purging of the sentimental. Try weeping to the "Murder Ballad" Morton chucklesang for Lomax. In books on American popular music, vernacular ideals rose as sentimental affiliations fell. Hughes and Hurston critiqued Harlem Renaissance respectability politics. Seldes, Woollcott, and Goldberg touted a sonic melting pot. Woody Guthrie built *Bound for Glory* around folksy address. Institutionalizers Marshall and Jean Stearns's *Jazz Dance* was subtitled *The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. Chase, urging musicology to embrace popular styles, thundered: "the American musical vernacular has been on the march through all these generations, and even our most academic composers are catching up with it, or being caught up by it." Levine stressed folk vernacular in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*: African American secular song, he wrote, "cut through the sentimentality that marked most popular music."

This was a constrained definition of sentimentalism, which could also involve political identification with the downtrodden, bourgeois self-reflexivity over managing mood, and an aesthetic commitment to form-advancing uplift. Not to mention strong women. Sentimentality sponsored True Womanhood, melodramatic theater, and ballads of Home and Mother. It could also be a force for modernization, as when Fred Moten cited its connections to abolitionism in his evocation of a "Sentimental Avant-Garde" and wondered if the energies summoned to abolish slavery might one day be revived to abolish commodities. In the heavily commodified, Céline Dion singing "My Heart Will Go On" in *Titanic* sense explored by Carl Wilson, sentimentality still shaped romantic notions and popular art forms. Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint* called this "the unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture," connecting genealogies of the novel and theater pieces *Show Boat* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to challenge Lott's cultural studies view of minstrelsy. Berlant insisted that sentimentality's adaptability made it as forceful as blackface: Ferber's teary Americana united traumas of race, gender, class, and, implicitly, Jewish religion.

When McKim, a teenager still, went south during the Civil War and discovered spirituals, publishing "Roll, Jordan, Roll" as a prelude to *Slave Songs,* she wrote a friend a sentimental account. "Kneeling in that poor cabin with those who suffered scourgings at our hands . . . I vowed that if I ever forgot them, so might Heaven forget me!" One understands why Benjamin Filene called his roots music study *Romancing the Folk*. Yet describing Black singing for the magazine *Dwight's*, McKim became musicological: her sentimentality was

adaptable to a professional discursive mode. Similarly, Fletcher, Curtis Burlin, and Densmore shuffled between sentimental and scientific, the way Ferber incorporated both sentimentalized climaxes (heroine Magnolia in white clutching the exposed as "passing" Julie in black) and the media savvy of her Algonquin peer Woollcott, mentioned in the novel.

Stephen Foster wrote blackface ditties, yet aspired to sentimental weepers and was valued for that in his day: friend Robert Nevin wrote in *The Atlantic* in 1867 that "his art taught us all to feel with the colored man the lowly joys and sorrows it celebrated." Berlin ragged "Swanee River" metaphorically in "Alexander's Ragtime Band," which Seldes called "utterly unsentimental" in his 1924 *Seven Lively Arts*. But we now value Berlin's utterly sentimental later songs, too: "White Christmas," again. Baker's jazz novel *Young Man with a Horn*, title from the *New Republic*'s working-class jazz critic, Otis Ferguson, associated sentimental and commercial: "There is music that is turned out sweet in hotel ballrooms and there is music that comes right out of the genuine urge and doesn't come for money." To see limit in this critique recognizes the baggage that came with vernacular assumptions.

Just as early writing on popular music was never purely sentimental, the writing of the 1920s to 1970s was not purely vernacular: these were modes that writers relied on but supplemented. If sentimental writers used scientific and media idioms to toughen up, the best writers on vernacular used popularization to loosen up. David Ritz, turning from academia to ghost writing, worked this, as did young rock critic Cameron Crowe, celebrating the taste of older sisters. Cultural historians like Lewis Erenberg, communications scholars like Susan Douglas, fiction writers like Gibson all strategically interspersed sentimental and vernacular, the way Kiss suspended "Detroit Rock City" to get the lighters going with "Beth."

One final twist. If the sentimental was purged by the vernacular, much smart writing next purged the vernacular. Ellen Willis, among her critic peers, drew on feminist critique to question rock as a grassroots art form. The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies writers considered belief in a counterhegemonic vernacular simplistic at a time of what Stuart Hall called "the great moving Right show." Simon Frith, joining Willis and Birmingham, knocked over rockism's house of cards, writing "It makes better sense to define pop as the sentimental song." DeNora analyzed *Music in Everyday Life* as professional women using sentiment as a tool. Jonathan Lethem urged that his fannish fiction and nonfiction be read for "impulses to beguile, cajole, evoke sensation, and even to manipulate." Wayne Koestenbaum used opera queens to revamp vernacular and sentimental altogether under the rubric of catharsis:

"the wish, condemned as effeminate, never to reassemble the socialized self, but, instead, to remain in tears forever, to stay where Puccini's *La Bohème* (1896) places us."

Ideas of sentimental and vernacular have pulled at each other over time, vernacular impulses purging the sentimental, then cultural studies and post-counterculture impulses purging the vernacular. That eternal reframing process has greatly affected lasting topics. Writing on African American music often at first turned on the sentimental: *Twelve Years a Slave*, for example. But every step toward Black Power added vernacular, through to 1970s Gayl Jones, who wrote: "The ballads were in the vernacular but they were oral. The 'people' made them, not 'writers.'" With Paul Gilroy's critique of hip-hop ghettocentricity as challenging to vernacular as Hughes or Baraka had been to sentimental uplift, a new wave valued Bert Williams's mask alongside Bessie Smith's realness. The film revival of *Twelve Years a Slave* readies us to reread James Trotter. And the revisionism of David Ritz, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and others position us to esteem the exaggerations in *Lady Sings the Blues* because, as Griffin put it, if you can't be free, be a mystery.

In particular, shifting views of sentimental and vernacular have turned on assumptions about gender and sexuality. When a Seldes or Chase attacked the sentimental, their figure of scorn was what Seldes called "the exact equivalent of a high-toned lady," Chase "the emulation of the elegant." The critique of the vernacular increased attention to such listeners and the music aimed at them. Feminists dissected rebellious masculine street identities as subcultural capital and celebrated bedroom fans. Eric Lott's revisioning of blackface minstrelsy abandoned the question of minstrelsy's truth as vernacular to present it as a contested terrain of sexualized cross-racial identification—the love that went with the theft.

The move from a jazz, rock, or hip-hop centered genre language of vernacular overcoming conservative constraints repositioned the music industry, too. Tin Pan Alley origins modernized via blackface minstrelsy, offering a slangy, theatrical mock-vernacular. It wasn't proper, but it sold. Then urbane taste flipped and what Karl Hagstrom Miller called the "folkloric paradigm" unquestioningly validated anti-genteel vernacular. Sentimentality became the doggie in the window: sweet sounds the most compromised. But rock and soul faltered in the wake of punk and disco, American populism elected Ronald Reagan, and the vernacular counterculture sparked in the Jazz Age, fused around midcentury icons of rebellion, found that the revolution was over. Cultural nationalist and not incidentally strong feminist Greg Tate complained: "Oh, the selling power of the Black Vernacular."

Noticing how sentimental and vernacular rhetoric thread through otherwise distinct music books can help us read and listen better. If a Céline Dion song is sentimental, and a Louis Armstrong scat is vernacular, Armstrong singing "What a Wonderful World" is a delicious hot toddy of a reminder not to assume purity in either category. (Speaking of Armstrong, whose entertainer side had to be reclaimed by critics such as Gary Giddins, let me note that while jazz factors heavily in this book, the goal is never to explain that genre as an art form set apart, always to view it as a category of popular music expression.) The vernacular is presumed to fight, thrill, and endure over time, recognized as art, while the sentimental fades, exposed as a kitschy fraud of well-meaning sanctimony. Figures like Armstrong or Elvis Presley have been thought to battle dual impulses, rebellious and conformist. This split was positioned as vernacular America against sentimental Europe, vernacular working class against sentimental middle class, vernacular Black—or Black *acting*—against sentimental white, and vernacular male against sentimental female.

That Whitman, Guthrie, Dylan, and Springsteen were overly gloried by this set of associations should not harden us to why popular music literature needed the vernacular to secure a position in American letters. To praise Armstrong's vivid, soloing genius over symphonic Paul Whiteman involved taste assertions useful in then esteeming blues. Chase needed the vernacular cudgel to turn American musicology upside down. But keeping the rhetorical nature of all this in mind illuminates why a jazz writer skeptical of vernacular claims might value Duke Ellington's *A Drum Is a Woman* television program, or why ideas surfaced in literary figures apart from at times stridently vernacular genre criticism.

The best approach would be to take more seriously what Ellington called tone parallels, the idea that music could evoke, however imperfectly, a Harlem airshaft. Or what Birmingham cultural studies writers called homologies, the way a leather jacket fit a rocker's subcultural outfit. In other words, the cultural epiphany produced by mixing music with something else. Books that managed to preserve, model, distill, flaunt, or critique some aspect of popular music, often at a cost to the writers, turned on these correspondences. They are at the core of this study, the works I have prioritized over others. Often, we interpret music by applying a framing model from far outside the world of songs to a specific performer or work. Here, in a method that brings me back to my days writing and editing "Riffs" for the *Village Voice*, I let a range of material bounce together, bring whatever I can hoist to the table interpretively, comment and quote freely. I won't pretend to the finer points of each Hurston, Adorno, or Moten essay, each wrinkle in ethnomusicology and sound studies. My hope is

to help connect the literature of American popular music and let readers hear the tone parallels.

Just as we might now regret the purging of the sentimental by champions of the vernacular, we should be cautious about writing that looks to purge the vernacular. That's critics identified as poptimists critiquing the taste assumptions of rockists. That's populism getting seized by Rush Limbaugh or Donald Trump, so vernacular looks like another bastion of *herrenvolk* democracy. But it's also university professors raising an eyebrow at hyperbolic sentences that overstate claims. Academic writing has been freeing topically but more constrained linguistically. We should continue to read what Frith, drawing on fanzine Socrates Frank Kogan, called low theory. We should also continue to write it. Confused statements, incipient forms, displaced intellectuals: these are at the core of the sentimental and vernacular half-syntheses, the loopy work, of our songbooks.

As I revise this introduction, I'm reading recent and forthcoming books. Brent Edwards, from jazz studies, makes the literary essential to jazz in *Epistrophies*: more about the scatology of Armstrong's scat than you'd have expected, to consider why that free flow was part of a syntax, a way of dropping words that also dropped sounds—he has to photograph the great man's own documents when transcription won't do. Matt Brennan's *When Genres Collide* compares *Down Beat* and *Rolling Stone*, querying why jazz and rock criticism embraced such different perspectives; old battles now, as we retrace popular music's changing same. But he turns up another lost woman writer, Ruth Cage, who wrote about R&B for *Down Beat* in the 1950s, then stopped and became a theater publicist; somebody should collect her stuff. My wife, Ann Powers, has a book outlined on Joni Mitchell, in whom everything collided, so she is planning multiple chapters: Beats, Laurel Canyon, soul songwriters, love languages, tribute acts. There's Christgau's *Book Reports*, a reminder that many entries here started with him dipping into a writer who gave the big question, how pop music made us rethink culture, a new tale or tone. Fast-forward a few months more to the copyedits coming back and there are upcoming books by Maureen Mahon, Daphne Brooks, and Danyel Smith, among others, to eagerly await, sure, like Mahon's take on the likes of LaVern Baker as a rock and roller, to amplify the role of Black women in the literature as both authors and artists—the combo striking a power chord.

All these books feel akin to mine: perhaps the shared project is to find the literary glimmering in unexpected places. Deafened and jaded by neoliberal spectacles of sanctioned resistance, we have lost faith in popular music, or any popular culture, as idiomatic rebelliousness. But the far-flung chronicles that

our songs have generated remain inspirational. Across eras and styles, wherever the story led, they constitute a great reckoning with the least ruly of cultural forms.

READER'S NOTE

Because this book surveys many other books across a large number of entries, the story it tells overlaps in many ways. You can read through or hopscotch. Here are some basic structural details.

If you see the name of an author or musician in this book in boldface, that means there is a separate entry elsewhere on that person. Go there for a fuller account of whatever is being referred to. The Works Cited list at the end should give full titles and publication details for all books and articles mentioned along the way.

Entries proceed chronologically from the publication date of the book that initiates the story being told in an entry. Within entries, however, the discussion often moves forward in time to survey how an author evolved, how views of a performer changed, or how opinions on a subject mutated.

Some entries focus on writers, some on musical figures, and some on key topics. The section breakdowns are purely chronological, but my titles for each suggest commonalities. And the titles for each entry in the table of contents can also help you figure out what to choose if you're pursuing a particular topic. Still, nothing is wholly contained. It can't be.