Markets, Genres, and Repertoire Communities in American Recorded Music, 1895-1950
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Abstract

The central question is: how did the media become “mass”? Before the rise of mass commercialized music, there were diverse musical cultures and audiences. When commercial recording and radio first appeared, they opportunistically included the music of different racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups. (See Roy, William G. 2004. "‘Race Records’ and ‘Hillbilly Music’: The Institutional Origins of Racial Categories in the American Commercial Recording Industry." Poetics 32:265-279.) But by the 1940s, a single musical world, known colloquially as “Tin Pan Alley” overshadowed all others. This was both an economic and cultural event. Although niche cultures never disappeared and were always more vibrant than often depicted, how did the culture of one group and region become identified by both its adherents and those marginalized by it as the “main stream”? I propose to answer this question by focusing on commercial music from 1890, before electronic media, to 1950, before the new plurality sparked by rock and roll.

There are two major sociological issues:

1. What is the relationship between markets and genres? More specifically what is the relationship between market dominance and the homogenization of culture? How does one genre become paramount enough to be considered a “main stream”?

2. What is the relationship between cultural, economic, and political/legal factors in shaping an economic and aesthetic field such as popular music?

Very little research has posed this as I have, but one can glean several hypothesized factors:

1. Consumption: Because the white middle class was the largest market, it was understandable that firms focus on them. A corollary is that the 1930s Depression drove specialized firms out of business. This can be tested through the sales of records: did consumption trends precede or follow other indicators of mainstream emergence?

2. Production: The white middle class controlled companies imposed their musical tastes. Evidence will include the race, ethnicity, and region of owners and artistic directors of record companies, radio stations, and publishing companies.

3. Legitimation: Those who controlled musical discourse created a sense of mainstream. Who was publicly interpreting music? Did discourse about the mainstream precede or follow sales trends? What point of view did regional and
ethnic presses take?

4. Economic Hegemony: Did large companies displace niche producers and distributors? If so, how and when? Were large companies doing all kinds of music? Were they making decisions to drop specialty types? Were there predatory practices or takeovers?

5. Aesthetic Hegemony: To what extent did everyone aspire to be modern, urban, and mainstream? Did regional, ethnic, rural performers aspire to the same standards as mainstream?

6. Nationalizing Project: Did a self-conscious cultural elite proselytize the white middle class and others to accept their particular vision of mainstream? What were the relationships among owners, artistic directors, networks, magazines, and academics? Is there evidence that their vision influenced decisions to record, distribute, promote, legitimize particular types of music, musicians, or genres?

My own hypothesis is that all these factors were refracted through institutional and technological structures, especially property relations, ownership structures, and interpretive organizations (magazines, Grammys, etc.). In order to document when the singular mainstream became dominant and the extent to which non-mainstream music persisted, I have been collecting basic data on recorded music from its birth before the turn of the twentieth century to 1950. Analysis includes the distributions of social characteristics and networks of repertoire communities (treating songs as links between performers to identify racial, ethnic, language, and regional clusters) to document the timing and extent to which a dominant mainstream evolved. The network analysis can also reveal who is in the mainstream, how many people move in and out, what companies are most central, and the relationship of mainstream member to sales? With the current Senate grant I have collected data on 210,834 record sides. For the 300 most prolific performers, race and gender information has been coded. To ensure that a broad range of musical styles are included, this will be expanded to the 1000 most prolific performers.

The first step of the analysis is estimating the repertoire communities and genre distributions. This will be done by network analysis of collected data, under the assumption that the more songs any pair of performers both recorded the closer they are musically. The analysis reveals clusters of musicians which can be interpreted both intuitively and systematically. For example, in the first years of recorded music (before 1909), there were two main clusters—classical music and march music. This analysis will document the timing, shape, and social basis (race and gender) of the emergent mainstream, that is, the project’s dependent variable.