

CURRENT BOOKS

SCHOLARS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows and staff of the Wilson Center

YANKEE BLUES:
**Musical Culture and
American Identity**
by MacDonald Smith
Moore
Indiana, 1985
213 pp. \$20.50

There are many parables, from the story of Aladdin to those of Huckleberry Finn and Jay Gatsby, about heroes who strove to achieve their fondest dreams only to realize, at the moment of achievement, that their dreams come true did not take the shape of their own hopes. It may be one of the oldest, and surely one of the saddest, stories in the world.

It is also, at least according to MacDonald Smith Moore's brilliant book, *Yankee Blues*, the story of American music in the 20th century and, by extension, of the still unfinished American attempt at self-definition. No country has ever more strenuously tried to *invent* itself—and none has found that auto-invention more perilous. This is the subtler point of Moore's study, which, in addition to treating early American responses to jazz, offers a clear profile of the American psyche in all its richness and divisiveness.

Moore, the president of New York Digital Recording, chronicles the careers of what he calls the "centennial composers"—those New England-born composers whose birthdates more or less coincided with the centenary of the Declaration of Independence. Particularly, he focuses on Daniel Gregory Mason and Charles Ives. Both men, like their colleagues, were patrician, classicist, and committed to, if not obsessed with, the creation of a native American symphonic music that would express the aspirations and ideology of the still-young Republic. Their characteristic heroes were not composers, as Moore points out, but American philosophers and writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Ashamed of the potentially "unmanly" profession of music-maker, they sought to make their art an expression of "redemptive culture," an art that would participate in the spiritual formation of the greatest society in human history.

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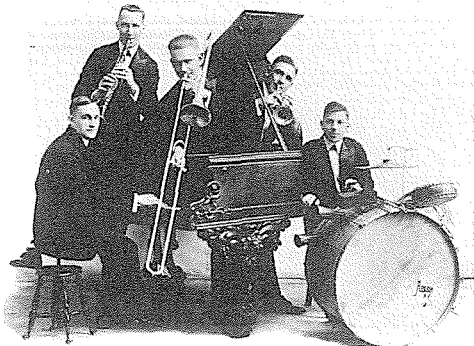
"Unlike romantics, who characteristically worshipped art, the Victorian Yankee composer worshipped culture," writes Moore. And the distinction matters: Culture is art staring at itself, and wondering what it is *for*. Mason and Ives, like their centennial cohorts, were disappointed in their attempts to reach the wide popular audience for which they longed and which would have validated their transcendentalist-democratic hopes. Mason ended up an influential critic, historian, and theorist of music. Ives, composer of some of the most original music in America (including the *Concord Sonata* and *Variations on America*), stopped writing: "Like a scorned lover, he daily tasted the acid indifference of an audience toward which he scarcely dared to reach."

And then came jazz. After years of laboring under what Moore calls the "nervous burden" of being cultural torchbearers, Yankee

composers found themselves confronted by an original, vibrant, fascinating music that Europe itself regarded as the truly *American* art form. Worse, this music came not from the Ivy League but from New Orleans brothels. Worse still, this music was played mainly by what used to be called "Negroes." Could this be American?

In the long middle section of *Yankee Blues*, Moore traces the meteoric rise of jazz in the favor of European intellectual circles, and its rather more reluctant acceptance by the Yankee composers and the white musical establishment in general. "A certain Dr. Beets," writes Moore, "warned that if American Indians heard jazz, they would go wild again." For its part, the Cincinnati Salvation Army feared that the construction of a theater next to a home for unwed mothers would insinuate "jazz emotions" in the minds of the babies born there. The devil's music, indeed—and its diabolism only underscored by the enthusiasm of such iconoclastic European composers as Stravinsky, Dvořák, and Bartók. Moore observes that much of the American animosity to pieces like Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* involves not just the challenging originality of the music itself but also the uneasy sense that that originality may partly derive from the "nigger music" (it was the phrase used) firmly ignored by Yankee classicists.

Moore's chronicle, in fact, is a kind of love story, involving betrayal and jealousy as well as finer things. Longing to produce an American music that could take its place beside the European masterpieces, longing for the approbation of the loved,



feared, and hated Continental culture, the centennial composers found the nation praised by Europe for just what they did *not* want it to be praised for: nigger music.

I have used that hateful phrase twice now because it is an essential part of *Yankee Blues*. Indeed, it is central to the book's very suggestive study of American racism. An explosively popular phenomenon, jazz was viewed—and attacked—from a curiously divided mindset by the white, predominately Yankee establishment. On the one hand, it was regarded as savage, erotic, and potentially corrupting "jungle music" (the very phrase, by the way, that Duke Ellington used to market his band during the 1920s). And on the other hand, its persistent and syncopated rhythm was described as an expression—or an incarnation—of the machine-like dehumanization of modern culture. Moore is nowhere more eloquent than when he examines the implications of these two attitudes: Jazz was bad, first, because it was played by blacks and, second, because it was written by Jews.

Aaron Copland and George Gershwin feature as prominently in

the third part of Moore's study as Mason and Ives do in the first. But where Mason and Ives were self-conscious, traditional, rural New Englanders striving for the popular audience they knew they deserved, Copland and Gershwin were urban Jews who found that audience almost without trying. For Yankee composers—and they were not evil men—the bitterness in watching this happen must have been almost unbearable. "As late as 1949," writes Moore, "a critic skewered Copland with a veritable litany of codewords and code images"; he goes on to quote one of the most funnily, or nastily, written pieces of anti-Semitism one has encountered.

"Oriental," Moore says, was the word applied most often to the Jewish composers and songwriters who completed the jazz revolution. And "Oriental," of course, meant "non-Yankee": hedonistic, acquisitive, opportunistic. That these were precisely the traits encouraged by white, middle-class capitalist culture only indicates the degree to which all societies are capable of projecting their worst features onto an "other" group and thereby distancing themselves from those traits.

As a history of American self-definition, Moore's book is indispensable. Along with Lewis Erenberg's *Steppin' Out* (1981) and Peter Conn's *The Divided Mind* (1983), it tells us about the ideals that spurred Americans during the opening of this century, the American moment, perhaps, when a people attempted to identify itself and direct itself according to its highest aspirations. More important, this fine book shows that the melting pot finally worked—perhaps even better than its stirrers could or would have hoped.

—Frank McConnell '78

THE NEW DIRECTION IN AMERICAN POLITICS

edited by John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson
Brookings, 1985
409 pp. \$26.95

CANARSIE: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism

by Jonathan Rieder
Harvard, 1985
290 pp. \$22.50

In 1968, the tide turned in American two-party politics.

With the debacle of the Democratic Party convention in Chicago and the subsequent defeat of Hubert Humphrey by Richard Nixon, the coalition that had dominated public affairs since the Depression began to disintegrate. The elections of 1980 and 1984 registered seismic changes in presidential politics, voter loyalty, party organization, and in the fundamental language of political debate.

As the economists, political scientists, and other contributors to *The New Direction in American Politics* demonstrate, by

1984 nearly every demographic, economic, ethnic, and geographical group had moved closer to the Republican Party, except for Jews, blacks, and the unemployed. Policies pertaining to defense, domestic