
BACKGROUND BOOKS

AMERICAN MUSIC

Sifting through the relics of lost empires, archaeologists have unearthed pictures of Sumerian lyres and harps, scraps of Roman musical notation, even vivid descriptions of musical performances in ancient Greece. Yet, as scholar Gerald Abraham writes in **The Concise Oxford History of Music** (Oxford, 1985), the music of the ancients will never be heard again: "We cannot re-create these sounds, feel the emotional excitement, or even faintly imagine what [the music] really sounded like."

Only during the ninth to 12th centuries A.D. did a comprehensible Western system of musical structure and notation begin to take shape. (The Chinese system was by then centuries old.)

The single most important development in the history of European music, according to Joseph Machlis in **The Enjoyment of Music** (Norton, 5th ed., 1984), was the emergence between 850 and 1150 A.D. of polyphony—the use of two or more melodic lines. Polyphony required ever more precise forms of notation. Music, says Machlis, "took a long step from being an art of improvisation and oral tradition to one that was carefully planned and that could be preserved accurately." And that increased the importance of the individual composer.

Even so, the compositions of the immediately succeeding eras—the Gothic (1150–1450) and the Renaissance (1450–1600)—are known today chiefly by connoisseurs. The more familiar works, such as the concertos of Bach and Handel, date from the Baroque era (1600–1750) and later.

In the New World before 1800, writes H. Wiley Hitchcock in **Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction** (Prentice-Hall, 3rd ed., 1974), composers scarcely distinguished between "cultivated" and "vernacular" music. "The music of the ballad operas

at New York and Philadelphia was also the music of broadsides and songsters."

During the 19th century, however, educated Easterners embraced the music of Europe, while others created new forms of popular music. Only after World War I, Hitchcock says, did the "cultivated" and "vernacular" traditions begin to converge again.

Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development (Oxford, 1986), the first installment of a planned multivolume history by a classical composer, Gunther Schuller, is one recent reflection of that convergence. **The New Grove Gospel, Blues and Jazz** (Norton, 1987) traces the roots (and branches) of jazz. The best general survey is James Lincoln Collier's **Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History** (Dell, 1986).

For vivid profiles of many jazz notables, see **American Musicians: 56 Portraits in Jazz** (Oxford, 1986), by *The New Yorker's* Whitney Balliett.

From Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1911) on, Tin Pan Alley eagerly absorbed and reinterpreted jazz influences. Isaac Goldberg's **Tin Pan Alley** (Ungar, 2nd ed., 1961), is an idiosyncratic (and occasionally misleading) insider's account of "the Alley," written in classic Broadway rococo style.

In his encyclopedic **All the Years of American Popular Music: A Comprehensive History** (Prentice-Hall, 1977), David Ewen notes the powerful influence of technology—the phonograph, juke box, and electric guitar.

In **Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll** (Summit, 1987), Ed Ward (along with Geoffrey Stokes and Ken Tucker) attributes the rise of rock in part to radio disc jockeys: "Here you were, an insignificant teen-ager . . . and here was this guy . . . playing weird records with sort of dirty lyrics, talking in your ear, like a

co-conspirator . . . It was your own secret society!"

Bill C. Malone's **Country Music, U.S.A.** (Univ. of Tex., 1985) is a no less affectionate chronicle of country and western music.

As Charles Hamm notes in **Music in the New World** (Norton, 1983), any

survey is likely to leave out somebody's favorites—the compositions of John Philip Sousa or Pennsylvania's Moravians, Polish polkas or Cajun zydeco. None of them is any less a part of the wide, turbulent, ever-flowing stream of American music, "continually producing new and fascinating pieces and styles."

DISCOGRAPHY

POPULAR MUSIC This is too vast a field—from bluegrass and folk to blues and rock—to permit a simple list of suggested records. The Smithsonian's anthology of **American Popular Song** (R031) is a good introduction to the music of Tin Pan Alley. New World Records has issued hundreds of notable albums charting the history of popular music, including titles as various as **Come Josephine in My Flying Machine: Inventions and Topics in Popular Song, 1910–29** (NW233) and **Country Music: In the Modern Era, 1940s–1970s** (NW207).

JAZZ Louis Armstrong, **Pops: The 1940s Small-Band Sides** (Bluebird 6378-2 RB). Count Basie, **The Essential Count Basie, Vols. 1 and 2**. (Columbia CK-40608 and CK-40835). Dave Brubeck Quartet, **In Concert** (Fantasy FCD-60-013). Charlie Christian, **The Genius of the Electric Guitar** (Columbia CK-40846). Miles Davis, **Kind of Blue** (Columbia CK-40579); **Miles Ahead** (Columbia CK-40784). Duke Ellington, **The Blanton-Webster Band, 1939–42** (Bluebird 5659-2-RB). Bill Evans, **At the Village Vanguard** (Riverside FCD-60-017). Benny Goodman, **Sing, Sing, Sing** (Bluebird 5630-2-RB); **After You've Gone: The Original Trio and Quartet Sessions, Vol. 1** (Bluebird 5631-2-RB). Lionel Hampton, **Hot Mallets** (Bluebird 6458-2-RB). Billie Holiday, **The Quintessential Billie Holiday, Vols. 1 and 2** (Columbia CK-40646 and CK-40790). Charles Mingus, **Mingus Ah Um** (Columbia CK-40648). Modern Jazz Quartet, **The Artistry of the Modern Jazz Quartet** (Prestige FCD-60-016). Jelly Roll Morton, **New Orleans Memories** (Commodore/Teldec 8.24062 ZP). Charlie Parker, **Bird: The Savoy Recordings** (Savoy ZD-70737). Fats Waller, **The Joint is Jumpin'** (Bluebird 6288-2 RB). All of the key figures in jazz are represented on the eight-disc **Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz** (R033).

CLASSICAL John Adams, **The Chairman Dances** (De Waart, San Francisco Symphony; Nonesuch 79144-2). Milton Babbitt, **Philomel** (Beardslee; New World 307). Leonard Bernstein, **Fancy Free** (Bernstein, New York Philharmonic; CBS MT-6677); **West Side Story** (Bernstein, Te Kanawa, Carreras; Deutsche Grammophon 415 253-2). John Cage, **Credo in Us** (Gageego; Opus One 90); **Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano** (Takahashi; Denon C37-7673). Aaron Copland, **Appalachian Spring, Billy the Kid, Fanfare for the Common Man, Rodeo** (Bernstein, New York Philharmonic; CBS MK-42265); **Music for the Theater, Piano Concerto** (Bernstein, New York Philharmonic; CBS MS-6698). George Crumb, **Ancient Voices of Children** (De Gaetani; Nonesuch 79149-2). David Del Tredici, **Final Alice** (Solti, Chicago Symphony; London LDR-71018). George Gershwin, **Rhapsody in Blue** (Siegel, Slatkin, St. Louis Symphony; Vox Cum Laude MCD-10011). Philip Glass, **Akhmaten** (Davies, Stuttgart Opera; CBS M3K-42457); **Einstein on the Beach** (Glass Ensemble) CBS M4K-38875; **Satyagraha** (Glass Ensemble; CBS M3K-39672). Charles Ives, **Songs** (De Gaetani; Nonesuch 71325); **Three Places in New England** (Davies, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra; Pro Arte PCD-140); **The Unanswered Question** (Bernstein, New York Philharmonic; CBS MP-38777). Steve Reich, **The Desert Music** (Thomas, Brooklyn Philharmonic; Nonesuch 79101-2); **Music for 18 Musicians** (Reich and Musicians; ECM 827417-2). Virgil Thomson, **The Plow that Broke the Plains, The River** (Marriner, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra; Angel CDC-47715).

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Many of the book and record titles in this essay were suggested by Howard Husock, Terry Teachout, and K. Robert Schwarz.*