Contributions in Black Studies
A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies

Volume 4 Article 3

8-25-2008

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Recommended Citation
Mitchell, James R. (1980) "THE MARKETING OF BLACK MUSIC," *Contributions in Black Studies*: Vol. 4, Article 3.
Available at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol4/iss1/3

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James R. Mitchell

THE MARKETING OF BLACK MUSIC

THE LATE saxophonist, Charlie "Yardbird" Parker, recording on the old Savoy label, was often paid for his recording sessions with a bottle of liquor. One of the best known 50's jazz labels kept musicians loyal to the company with a continuous supply of drugs. There is the story of blues singer, Big Mama Thornton. A tough lady with a wicked temper, Big Mama, in order to get paid for an evening's engagement, pulled a gun on a couple of promoters.

Black musicians created the style and the music with which white entertainers such as Sophie Tucker, Al Jolson, Elvis Presley and the Beatles made fabulously successful careers. But the black creators, blues singers such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Sam "Lightning" Hopkins, Bo Diddley, and Chuck Berry could never extend their careers beyond the "Chitlin' Circuit," traveling about under grueling circumstances to black night clubs to perform, at times, especially in the South, finding no place to eat or sleep for extremely long distances. For black musicians, great talent and great hardship are par for the course. They are the victims of bad contracts, unscrupulous management and, all too often, what appears to be a penchant for self-destruction. Critics, biographers, and historians of the music have picked up the term "paying dues" to refer to this exploitation and the resulting pain.

The irony is that most of the rip-off was legal. In exchange for a few dollars a Mississippi Delta blues singer might simply "sign his music away" to one of the small record companies specializing in "race music."* If the record company made money, they might give him special favors—small amounts of pocket money, or a used Cadillac. Although the artist had his car, someone else—the original record company or someone who bought the rights from them—always owned the music. Long after both artist and car were gone, someone still earned the royalties on the music he created.

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* *The term which surplanted "comic" as the designation for all recordings made by black performers. Bessie Smith's "Black Water Blues," a lyric telling of black suffering resulting from the 1927 flooding of the Mississippi, for instance, was designated "comic."*

Ed Bland, an executive producer with Vanguard Records and a music arranger, explains:

> Musicians simply were not equipped to handle their own business. At the same time, they were always easy to exploit. If they wanted to cheat someone, just discover their weak spots: no money, an addiction to drugs or alcohol, and ignorance. Some musicians suffered from them all.

It required talent and genius to make great money. But talent alone was not enough to enter and survive in the industry's socioeconomic jungle. Although few musicians today measure success in terms of used Cadillacs, and segregation no longer forces top entertainers to play only in sleazy bars along the chitlin' circuit, inadequate career management is still the rule rather than the exception.

The majority of music artists still do not invest in themselves. The average black entertainer is still impressed by the glamour of show business and would rather spend money on material goods than invest it in the development of his career.

Theoretically, the artist's manager does everything except procure engagements. That is the responsibility of licensed booking agents working under contract to an artist and earning 10 percent of the artist's bookings. The personal manager does everything else. Managing is more than negotiating contracts and protecting a client from bad deals. The manager handles all phases in the development of an artist's career. He approves bookings, and often invests his own money in order to help a new artist get started. Managers are financial advisors, confidants, and psychiatrists. It is rare to find a top white entertainer who has entrusted the management of his career to a black person. Many Blacks do not use black managers either. Most top black entertainers are handled by white personal managers. Their lawyers, accountants, and booking agencies are also white.

John Levy is a black manager who, contrary to the experiences of most black people in his occupation has both black and white clients. At one time he played bass with Billy Holiday and Ben Webster turning to artist management in the early Fifties. His first client was George Shearing, a blind white pianist from the West Coast who has performed with many of the great jazz artists and one of the first musicians to start his own recording company. Levy now manages singers such as Nancy Wilson, who has been recording on Capitol Records for the past eight years, has top flight tours and club dates, and has numbers of television engagements; Joe Williams, who performed with Billy Taylor's orchestra in May 1981 in a tribute to Duke Ellington and remains an active performer in New York City; and Randy Crawford, a new artist recording on the Warner

Brother's label. Other stars Levy has managed over the years include Ahmad Jamal, Ramsey Lewis, Dakota Staton, Sarah Vaughn, Roberta Flack, Les McCann, Donny Hathaway, and the late Julian "Cannonball" Adderly. As a traditional personal manager, John Levy stands as a paragon in the profession. Not only does he oversee his clients' business and artistic affairs, but also works for their best interest when they are dealing with lawyers and accountants.

Much of a performer's income goes to his manager, his booking agents, accountants and lawyers. A manager may demand fifteen to twenty percent of his client's earnings. Booking agents receive ten percent while a Certified Public Accountant takes between three and five percent. When one adds to these legal fees, the artist pays out approximately forty percent of his income. Given the demands of the music industry and the musicians' inclinations to and the necessity for him to place his interests and energies into his art requires, if he is to be well served, that his personal management be handled by specialists who have backgrounds including law, accounting, marketing and music production.

Such a specialist is Atlanta lawyer, David Franklin, who manages singer Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway and comedian-actor Richard Pryor. He provides his clients with all the traditional services—negotiating contracts and developing the performer's career. In addition, however, he gives them legal and financial counsel. One of his best deals was for Roberta Flack whose early earnings were over a million dollars. He negotiated a contract with the Atlantic subsidiary of the Warner Company whereby she will make five million dollars for a ten-album series. Her contract, negotiated for by Franklin in 1973, is among the top five at the Warner Company.

Franklin also protects his clients' interests by investing portions of their income in tax shelters, primarily apartment complexes and shopping centers in Atlanta, where—as elsewhere—real estate values are continually rising. His investment strategies have paid off well for his clients. For instance, Donny Hathaway, before his death, because of long-term illness, had been unable to work for at least two years. Ordinarily, such a situation spells disaster for all but the performing artists with the most well-established reputations. In this case, however, because of the sound financial deals set up for Hathaway by Franklin early in the singer's career, the pop star was able to support himself on the income from his investments. Under management as able as that of Franklin, black performers can know a security never known by those who were paid with whiskey, narcotics, used cars, or pocket change.

Good management and expert legal and financial counsel may be all that some artists require of a manager. For others, however, especially those whose music is directed to the large soul and rock audiences with whom trends come

easily and go fast, a manager who is an image maker—a genius, as it were, in packaging and marketing the performer and his music—can aid his client to adapt to new materials and new audiences thus extending a career which might otherwise have been cut short because his music or its presentation is outmoded or because of a lengthy absence from professional activity, finds himself in competition with younger performers who have made his original style their own.

Take as an example Isaac Hayes who had been a black super star. When Stax Records became bankrupt, Hayes, one of the company's best known recording artists and one of its executives, was unable to record or accept bookings for nearly two years. In that length of time, Barry White, another black singer of soul music, recording for 20th Century Records, established a career with a style and sound that were distinctly like those of Hayes. Now that Hayes is back in the business under contract to ABC Records, his black manager and promoter, Forrest Hamilton, is dedicated to helping him re-establish himself as a top ranking singer, writer and entertainer. Hamilton's strategy is to develop a new image for Hayes in order that he can be merchandised in new ways and to new audiences. Hamilton, who takes pride in the ability to create original ideas which sustain acts, introduced the *new* Isaac Hayes through a major concert tour teamed with Dionne Warwicke in a show called "A Man and a Woman." Bringing these two artists from apparently opposite poles of the musical sphere—Hayes best known for his adherence to traditional rhythm and blues, and Warwicke for her sophisticatedly presented lyrics—provided a vehicle through which Hayes' versatility as musical artist and entertainer might gain acceptance among an even wider audience than his following prior to the misfortune that befell Stax Records.

Packaging or presentation and promotion present untold problems for rhythm and blues artists, many of whom enjoy even the slightest commercial success only if their records become "hits on the charts," that rating of the top ten records, analogous in its importance to recording artists as the Neilson ratings to the various artists engaged in the production of television shows. Managing themselves or relying on "small time," unimaginative agents who are themselves merely on the fringes of the business, these performers—artists though they may be—presented only in gaudy, frequently tasteless, performances unsuited to serious concert presentations, can count themselves among their worst enemies where advancing their careers are concerned. All too often one can say of these performances, to paraphrase a familiar expression: "You can take an act out of the chitlin' circuit, but it's hard to take the chitlin' circuit out of the act."

Although some rhythm and blues performers have problems with their acts

and the manner in which they present them, this "image" problem, all too often, masks racial and cultural prejudices that require that all black musicians stay on their guard choosing as managers and lawyers upon whom they must depend who know not only the law but the inside workings of the music business. Many contracts demonstrate the differences between deals struck with black musicians and white pop artists. Not only do Blacks end up with second rate contracts, but for them even stardom is second rate. While it is great to be given the title, "America's Queen of Soul," it is not quite the same as being called "America's First Lady of Song."

While titles granted by the professional magazines and newspapers are out of the control of the artist, with good, trustworthy management, a performer can find a solution to the image problem where it affects widening his appeal and the deals he is able to make. For some acts the solution is to prove that they can be as successful in the Empire Room of New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, as they are on the stage of the City's less elegant Apollo Theatre. It involves having a style and a repertoire that is palatable in the white markets. In the music industry this is known as "crossing over." It is found in recordings when a single or album gets top ratings both on the rhythms and blues or soul charts popular among Blacks, and the rock or middle of the road listings favored by whites.

For some artists, such as Stevie Wonder, crossing over into other markets is natural and happens without dramatic changes in style or a loss of integrity. But for the many others, who must try too hard, crossing over is more an assault on the artist's cultural integrity than a means of developing his career. At its worst, crossing over is the music industry's equivalent to "passing," a denial of self.

Polishing up an image can help a rhythm and blues group win commercial success, but with jazz musicians, changes that would affect that success can come only in a more sensitive area, the art itself. Jazz has always had a limited audience. Some say the beat never made it as a commercial success simply because jazz performers were not properly promoted through the media. Others say that musical genius has become secondary to the engineering talents of record production and sound techniques that use electronic synthesizers. And still others say that the music is too far over audiences' heads—that they prefer danceable music or at least something to which they can snap their fingers. Whatever the reason for the music's commercial failure, mainstream jazz artists have a hard time finding economic security.

The music of Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, and the late John Coltrane—what afficionados call "pure jazz"—is still alive in small clubs, college and high

school jazz clinics and concerts and in Europe. But many of the great artists who remain true to the tradition are gradually fading into obscurity. John Coltrane, one of the innovators of "free music," had to change his music considerably before he could gain commercial success. It was not until 1961, when Coltrane recorded "My Favorite Things," a popular song which had a folklike simplicity, that he won widespread public recognition. As ethnomusicologist Richard Turner explains:

> In order to appease the disapproving public and Prestige Records as well, Coltrane put an end to his experimentation for a short time and recorded Ballads, with Johnny Hartman, in late 1962. John's playing on this album has such a mellow and gentle quality he seems to be consciously interpreting the lyrics of each ballad on his horn. The year 1963 saw the Coltrane Quartet at its apex in regard to both popularity and money. From this time until his death, Coltrane earned between $60,000 and $70,000 each year.

"Die-hard jazz buffs always get angry when a musician becomes commercial," asserts vocalist and guitarist George Benson, "but they never have any suggestions for ways so that the man can earn a living." George Benson—whose Warner Brothers record, "Breezin'," was one of this year's top selling jazz, soul, and easy listening markets—is one of the more recent jazz musicians to finally enjoy commercial success after making his sound more pop-oriented. Before signing with Warner Brothers, Benson had recorded for CBS (Columbia Records), A & M (Almo Music Corporation), and CTI (Creed Taylor Incorporated). In addition, he recorded with scores of other artists including Freddie Hubbard, Stanley Turrentine and Miles Davis. But as Benson puts it, "It simply became discouraging to do an album and have it sit around in a record store for three to four years."

Benson's talents as a recording artist were perfected while he was with the CTI label. Creed Taylor, CTI's president, is regarded as one of the geniuses in record production. While under contract with CTI, Benson had a number of albums that did well. One of them, "White Rabbit," was nominated for a Grammy award. Although Benson is indebted for the help he got from CTI, he says that his decision to sign with Warner Brothers in 1975 was based purely on wanting his career to grow. "I got a better contract, of course," notes Benson:

> but the major consideration was Warner Brothers' vast distribution power that extended into the countryside. Before, I could always play an engagement in New York's Carnegie Hall. But when you play in small cities, like Boulder, Colorado, and know that you'll have an audience, then you've become a success.

Not all black jazz musicians find it as easy to compromise their music for

commercial success as did George Benson. Music critic and columnist for the *Village Voice,* Nat Hentoff says:

> The new breed—new in their activism—has since worked to change the political economy of jazz. Some independent record labels, owned by Black musicians, have been started; and while they do provide essential outlets for diversely adventurous music which established labels would not be likely to record, these Black firms remain constricted because the white-run distribution system hasn't the slightest interest in so special a product. Accordingly, the Black labels make whatever deals they can, set up their own small distribution networks, or sell by mail. Meanwhile, although there are some Blacks working for the established record companies now, they are far from positions of control.

This so-called "new breed" of musicians, Hentoff speaks of, have managed to create and maintain some moderately successful record labels. Although these companies, such as Strata East, managed by trumpeter Charles Tolliver and pianist Stanley Cowell; Survival, managed by drummer Rashied Ali, and Black Jazz, a Black west coast label, are not able to offer luxurious contracts such as the one given to Benson by Warner Brothers, they do provide the serious jazz musician with an opportunity to record and most of all a chance to make a living while not having to compromise his music.

Many of today's black musicians are concerned not only with mastering their art, but also the business side of what has become a multi-million dollar consumer market. For most, the picture has changed only slightly since the days when talents were paid with liquor and Cadillacs, and black success stories are few. Some new groups and performers—Earth, Wind and Fire, Curtis Mayfield, Stevie Wonder, James Brown—have established their own production companies and music publishing houses. Each of these groups record on their own label. What is new is that their products are released by large record distributors. The young, learning from the mistakes of their elders, are managing to hold on in a treacherous marketplace.