Culture



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In the story of American music, many critics and casual listeners alike have become increasingly hip to the notion that Black musicians are, on the whole, the heart and soul of the narrative.

From gospel to jazz to blues to R&B, rap, rock 'n' roll and pop, African Americans have shone brightly from the earliest days of stateside recorded music, with their West-African-influenced sensibilities tracing back to the days before, during and immediately after the transatlantic slave trade.

What is less acknowledged, however, is the influence of religion in the story — and specifically Catholicism.

The Black church is known to have incubated many of music's most popular Black stars, but — as is often the case in U.S. ethnoreligious discourse — the Black Christian experience is largely reduced to Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals. And, to be sure, these three are one, and they do predominate. But hidden beneath the surface of the Black American music phenomenon is the presence of Catholics, many of whom never created religious music and who may not have received proper credit for their innovations either in life or in death. Even so, their pioneering work in a number of genres cannot be ignored in the conversation of popular music.

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Though the first recorded tunes were made across the pond in the United Kingdom, some of the earliest American recorded music was that of jazz, the well-known American genre based on the musical stylings of Black musicians in New Orleans — one of the most diverse and most Catholic cities in the U.S.

There, we find one Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton, a larger-than-life figure who made a name for himself with his virtuosic piano playing in the ragtime style, which would later be developed into the early forms of jazz. Morton would later claim to have invented the latter genre, though that claim is heavily disputed. Even so, his "Jelly Roll Blues," published in 1915, is indeed one of the first jazz compositions in history.

Morton would go on to write the better-known "King Porter Stomp" in 1923, as well as the song providing the melody behind the jazz standard "All of Me." Though never officially crowned as the inventor of jazz, by the time of his death Morton was recognized as the mind behind the developments of the "stride" style of piano

playing (a derivative of ragtime) and the early forms of boogie-woogie music.

Ironically, Morton's fame was fomented in the halls of brothels and speakeasies in New Orleans' infamous red light district known as Storyville, where lively music and dancing were paired with the most unsavory activities in town. Nevertheless, Morton was a man of a Catholic faith, a theme that rarely ever made its way into his music, but which adorns his grave — in lieu of any reference to his musical passion and successes. The "Original" Dixieland Jazz Band, a White ensemble that made the first jazz recordings in 1917, eschewed any explicit reference to Morton at all.

Radio music would continue to reign from the early 20th century until after the Second World War, an era in which jazz constituted much of the American pop music form, a notion foreign to most listeners of the genre today. That said, even the least jazz-oriented music fan knows names like Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte and Nina Simone, all of whom found success in the 20th-century music landscape. Holiday was baptized a Catholic, as were Belafonte and Armstrong, and Simone received a Catholic funeral upon her passing in 2003. Horne remained devout throughout her life.

Holiday, New York's vocalist supreme whose hits dominated the airwaves during her prime, was born into poverty and raised in a Catholic orphanage. She was influenced by priests and religious throughout her youth, including the Josephites and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, who ran the boarding school she attended as a troubled child. She, too, would avoid Christian themes in most of her music. Even so, a few of her tunes ("God Bless the Child," "Summertime") display a naked faith that would stay with her even in the most challenging of circumstances.

Though she would play to many segregated all-white crowds throughout her career, Holiday made headlines for her willingness to play for integrated crowds, which on at least one occasion drew the attention of a federal investigator. Her troubles with the law would follow for much of her life, culminating in her deathbed arrest by the authorities shortly before she received last rites from a priest.

Her fellow New Yorker Mary Lou Williams also played an undeniable role in the development of jazz and popular music, though her experience of the music world and of the Catholic Church differed wildly. A convert to the faith, Williams experienced a sort of epiphany midway through her career that caused her to stop playing music entirely, occasioning an infamous incident when she got up from the piano during a jazz festival and walked off the stage before a stunned crowd.

She wouldn't return to the bench for a number of years, choosing instead to immerse herself in her faith and in charitable works toward others in the genre who, like Holiday, were struggling with addiction and various personal issues.

Williams would later be influenced to return to music by one of her friends, a priest who was convinced that her musical talent involved a calling from God. After resisting for some time, Williams relented and began releasing religious and secular songs alike, some of which would become the most popular of her career.

One important work was her "Black Christ of the Andes" album, which included the haunting track "St. Martin de Porres," among various other unmistakably Catholic tunes.

Parallel to much of the early jazz era came the emergence of rock 'n' roll, which kicked off a secondary era of popular music. It is often considered a White genre, with superstars like Elvis Presley, Bill Haley and Hank Williams taking much of the spotlight. It was a Black Catholic artist, however, New Orleans' own Antoine "Fats" Domino, who lays — again, disputed — claim to having invented the genre, with his song "The Fat Man" recorded in 1949. It sold over a million copies and rocketed the Creole crooner to international fame. Elvis himself cited Domino as an influence in his early career.

Another white pop music phenom that explicitly credited its development to the impact of Black artists (and specifically Domino) was the Beatles, who enjoyed unparalleled success worldwide during the 1960s.

Simultaneously, other group acts began to emerge from within the States, including a number of popular female ensembles. One such Black group to find widespread

success was the doo-wop group the Chantels, who had roots in New York City.

Their name derived from St. Jane Frances de Chantal, a figure with whom the girls became familiar while attending Catholic school in the Bronx. Less influenced by Black gospel music than Latin polyphony, their tight harmonies and melodic records such as "Maybe" and "Look in My Eyes" made waves on the charts during a relatively brief heyday.

They returned to their childhood parish, St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church, in 2019 for a reunion and street renaming in their honor.

As the counterculture movement brought new sensibilities to American youth, a new wave of Black artists also brought new genres into the fore of the music world, with piano-driven styles giving way to bass guitars, drums, keyboards, and synthesizers.

The Meters, a New Orleans-based group made up of George Porter Jr., Leo Nocentelli, Joseph "Ziggy" Modeliste and brothers Art and Cyril Neville, began to experiment in the 1960s with what eventually became known as funk music. Their hits included "Sophisticated Cissy" and "Cissy Strut," part of a two-decade run that drew minimal commercial fanfare but garnered praise within the musician community.

Their rhythms were based on the "second line" style associated with Black ceremonial parades in the Crescent City, which themselves have deep Black Catholic roots. Unsurprisingly, each member of the Meters had similar beginnings, with Porter once considering the priesthood.

Yvette "Chaka Khan" Stephens, a Black Catholic songstress from Chicago, was dubbed the "Queen of Funk" after her career successes with the band Rufus, which carried over into her solo career. She had chart-toppers in successive decades, beginning in 1974 with "You Got the Love" and followed by "Sweet Thing," "I'm Every Woman" and the classic soft rock track "Higher Love" with the English musician Steve Winwood in 1986.

Closely following the booming era of funk was the boom-bap of hip hop and rap, which ostensibly emerged in the Big Apple in 1973 with DJ Kool Herc, a Catholic schoolboy from Jamaica who pioneered in spitting "raps" over a beat.

Another claimant, however, is the Watts Prophets, a Los Angeles collective formed in 1967 that delivered poems atop a percussive rhythm, a slight variation from the East Coast style. They delivered their second album, "Rappin' Black in a White World," in 1971. The Prophets' roots were partially in Louisiana, via fellow Creole members Anthony "Amde" Hamilton and Richard Dedeaux. Hamilton, raised a Catholic, would later become an Ethiopian Orthodox priest and perform a poem at the funeral of Bob Marley (who was himself reared as a Catholic in Jamaica).

The East-West rivalry in rap music would extend far beyond origin stories, with various figures butting heads in the larger hip-hop movement during the 1980s and '90s, most famously with the violent exchanges between Los Angeles' Death Row Records under Marion "Suge" Knight and New York's Bad Boy Records, led by the Catholic-raised Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs (now known as Diddy).

The clashes culminated in the death of two of the genre's biggest stars, 25-year-old Tupac Shakur in 1996 and 24-year-old the Notorious B.I.G. the next year, both of whom had feuded personally for months prior. Like DJ Herc, Biggie — born Christopher Wallace — had Jamaican roots and was educated in Catholic schools in Brooklyn, where he reportedly received the sacraments as a child.

One of Biggie's highest-charting track appearances, a remix of Craig Mack's "Flava in Ya Ear," featured another young rapper, a Queens native known to the world as LL Cool J. Unlike many others in the genre, his upbringing was somewhat more tame, including a strong affiliation to the Catholic faith via his grandmother, who had him sing in the parish choir. The theme of his 1991 hit "Mama Said Knock You Out" was in reference to her, as was 2002's "Big Mama (Unconditional Love)."

Another member of the "new school" of hip hop, Run-DMC ("It's Tricky," "Walk This Way"), also featured a middle-class Black Catholic in Darryl "DMC" McDaniels, also raised in Queens and attending parochial school with his future bandmates.

In more recent decades, the influence of Black Catholics has been notably muted, partially because of superstar artists' reticence to wade into religious matters that could draw unwanted attention, and because of the general trend toward secularism — even in the notably religious African American demographic.

Even so, relevant names in the pop music world include Beyoncé, whose reign atop the charts continues unabated; her background includes a partially Catholic upbringing in Houston, where her mother's Creole family migrated from South Louisiana. A fellow Creole in Christopher "Frank Ocean" Breaux, whose two universally acclaimed studio albums ("Channel Orange" and "Blonde") have pushed boundaries in modern music and topped charts, was also Catholic for a time in his youth.

Representing New York in the late stages of the 20th century was the young singer Aaliyah, who during a 12-year career — most of it during her teenage years — managed to top the Billboard charts multiple times. This included her 2000 hit "Try Again," the first-ever song to top the singles chart on airplay alone. She died tragically in a plane crash at the age of 22 and was funeralized at Manhattan's Church of St. Ignatius, having been a Catholic all her life.

Percy "Master P" Miller and Dwayne "Lil' Wayne" Carter, two of the biggest modern rappers to come out of New Orleans, have also been open about their Catholic faith, with the former famously ponying up half a million dollars in the late 1990s to save a trio of Black parishes and parochial schools in his hometown, including his alma mater and childhood church. Wayne has said in recent years that, during a prison sentence, he considered becoming a Christian rapper.

The could-haves of Catholics in modern Black music are ongoing, and the great exodus of Black Catholics from the faith in the 1970s onward has been of no help to the vision. Recent studies show that barely only a little more than half of African Americans raised Catholic remain in the church as adults, and this is by all means reflected in the landscape of Black artists in popular music. Even so, when one peruses the history of American music, the Black Catholic influence is, quite simply, off the charts.

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Editor's note: *A version of this article appeared in the latest issue of GIA Quarterly under the title "Black Catholics in Popular Music."*

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