

## BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE LIVRES

Brooks, Daphne A. 2021. *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 608 pp.

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In *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, award-winning feminist music critic Daphne Brooks asserts that Black women musicians are the creators of modern popular music. Brooks examines not only the work of Black women popular musicians but she also welcomes the work of women musicologists, playwrights, and journalists into the fold of music criticism. She laments that this work has been “perpetually undertheorized by generations of critics for much of the last one hundred years” (2). She disrupts the traditional notion of the archive as being “preserved by institutional powerbrokers” and locates it in the performances and recordings of Black women artists as “repositories of the past” (4). She asks: “Who gets to tell the story of Black women who were both performing and producing thought about popular music culture, and how will this story be told?” (81) For Brooks, Black feminist sound is the “musical experimentalism and invention that produces daring and lyrical expressions of Blackness and womanhood” (4). It encompasses not only the creators of that sound, but also those who think and write about it, whether they are journalists or an elderly aunt who wrote in journals now languishing in an attic. Brooks takes her inspiration from

the liner notes genre that were written either by critics or by the artist themselves, a genre of writing, she notes, that “women and especially women of color artists and critics rarely had access to” (6). At once lyrical and informative in its prose, *Liner Notes* is mandatory for anyone interested in a feminist reading of Black American Music history.

The book is cleverly divided into two sections using the format of vinyl 45 rpm records from long ago: Side A and Side B. I remember weekly trips to the record shop with my father as a child, looking for the latest hit single I had heard on the radio. The song I wanted was on Side A, while Side B usually consisted of a song that would never get airplay, or in the case of reggae music, the “dub” or extended instrumental version of the Side A tune. In *Liner Notes*, Side A consists of four chapters of the “main event” of the work: artists, critics, and journalists whose names will be recognizable to music scholars and dedicated fans. Side B presents two elusive characters from early blues history: Geeshie and L. V., and uses their queer history to introduce us to the world of die-hard blues fans and record collectors, often white men who go to great (and not unproblematic) lengths to unearth rare finds. In the final chapter, Geeshie and L. V. become a through line connecting 21st-century artists who continue archival practices in their work by keeping the music of early blueswomen alive in their repertoires.

After two lengthy introductions, one to the book and one to Side A, Chapter 1 traces the work of Black feminist music

criticism to a scene in the novel *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self* by author, journalist, and one-time vocalist, Pauline Hopkins. Brooks recalls Mary Lou Williams's efforts at creating a jazz history with the album, *A Keyboard History* and her famous "Jazz tree," which delimits musically the history of Black people from the time of captivity to the present. The archival impetus and action is folded in "phonographer" (or, aural stenographer), a role Brooks finds taken up by songwriter and vocalist Abbey Lincoln, who "slip(s) gracefully and purposefully into the shoes of the Mary Lou Williams-style phonographer" (102) during her participation in "The Negro Woman in American Literature," a 1965 panel discussion at the New School in New York City involving other Black feminist artists. The event coincided with the release of the congressional Moynihan report on the state of the "Negro family" in America, casting Black mothers as the cause of its delinquency. Beyond this live work of historicizing, Lincoln's song lyrics, public and private writings, and lectures on Black history, masculinity, and music position her not only as an avant-garde jazz artist but also an insightful cultural critic. The chapter ends with Janelle Monáe, who Brooks frames as an artist whose work "calls attention to its own incompleteness." Brooks illustrates how Monáe and her partners use "images, sound and material objects and disparate cultural iconographies" to create her Afro-futuristic persona. Monáe uses liner notes to "catalog and critique the material experience of Black folks' history" (115).

Chapters 2 and 3 highlight knowledge producers somewhat peripheral to the communities they sought to represent.

Chapter 2 examines Zora Neale Hurston's work as a collector of Black folk songs. Using a method now understood as performance ethnography, Hurston went on road trips to the southern United States, recording folk songs and, even though she was not a good singer, performing the songs herself. Her body became the site of her epistemology, "to reference and revivify the cultural and historical memory of the work song archive" (127). In Chapter 3 we meet Rosetta Reitz, a Jewish feminist activist, intellectual, and entrepreneur who was devoted to the early blues tradition of Black women. She founded the record label Rosetta Records and compiled the first album anthology of women's prison songs from the fieldwork of John A. Lomax and Herbert Halpert. Her greatest legacy was in the work of music criticism, "devot(ing) her life to Black women's sonic cultures, and produc(ing) some of the most extensive and trenchant critical thought and writing about Black women musicians that had ever been published" (160).

In Chapter 4, Brooks speculates on the influence that queer feminist playwright Lorraine Hansberry may have had on rock music critic Ellen Willis. Tracing the history of these relationships is not usually work that is considered by cultural historians, but Brooks argues for its potential to make connections between Black and white feminist cultural critique and the civil rights movement and the birth of "counterculture music criticism." Willis interviewed Hansberry, writer of the play *A Raisin in The Sun*, for *Mademoiselle* magazine in 1960, while the former was still a college student. Brooks found a photograph with a note attached as the only documentary record of the meeting,

and built the chapter connecting the work of both women.

Side B and Chapters 5 through 7 theorize the musicking of “women who have been overlooked or underappreciated, misread and sometimes lazily mythologized” (2). We meet little-known, gender non-conforming blues guitarists Geeshie and L. V., who travelled north to record for Paramount records as the popularity of women singers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey was beginning to wane. These chapters also position Black women as record collectors and archivists in their own right, and the author takes on the role of ethnographer when she uses her own mother to illustrate the subjectivity of Black women collecting, and thereby critiquing, the work of other Black women.

Chapter 8 rounds out the work with the introduction of musicians who are part of what Brooks calls the present “curatorial turn” in pop culture. The chapter opens with a description of a collaboration between visual artist Carrie Mae Weems and the late pianist Geri Allen that took place in Brooklyn in 2012. The work featured Weems’ images of Black women musicians who are “receding from cultural prominence,” such as Mahalia Jackson, Dinah Washington, and Lena Horne, but the work itself reflects the movement of emerging Black female artists who are reclaiming the work of their musical matriarchs. Allen led a group of jazz musicians, including Esperanza Spalding, Lizz Wright, and Terri Lyne Carrington to provide a soundtrack to the photographs. The retelling of this performance connects to the theme of the chapter: how are the next generation of Black women musicians continuing this critical and archival work in their own music? Brooks pro-

vides numerous examples throughout the chapter: artists such as jazz vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant and vocalist and multi-instrumental folk musician Rhiannon Giddens. Giddens and their band, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, delve into the rich history of African American folk music for contemporary audiences. Brooks regales the reader with an account of Salvant’s bold choice of Jelly Roll Morton’s “Murder Ballad” for a 2017 Lincoln Center performance. The song, filled with profanity, sex, and violence provoked the “audible discomfort” of the largely white audience while revealing Salvant’s subversive challenge to the jazz canon. Another notable example is classical avant-garde vocalist Julia Bullock, who staged a concert based on the poetry of Claudia Rankine during her 2018–2019 residency at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The work was a reclamation of Josephine Baker’s life and work from the “rapacious mythology” of the past century.

*Liner Notes* is a meticulous, insightful exposition in the field of Black feminist music criticism, an area that is critically under-researched. Brooks disrupts the notion of white male dominance in music, offering a dialectical counter narrative by highlighting the roles that Black women have played as musicians, critics, and cultural creators within American music history. 🌿