

The Business of Bling: How Hip Hop Makes American Music History (guest blog)

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David Hajdu at LSE

From the ‘ethnic minstrelsy’ of Tin Pan Alley in the early 20th century, to the bling culture of Hip Hop – American popular music has been both big business and a vital ingredient in the US cultural melting pot. Polis Intern Christine Flamsholt Jensen reports on a talk by Columbia University Professor David Hajdu about how outsiders made music that made money and helped create modern American identity.

David Hajdu has come to LSE to speak about his next book, which he tells us will be a “Pop’ history of popular music”, examining the “relationship between music and money” in American popular culture in roughly the past 100 years. He is taking a historical perspective on “new modes” of music production and management.

“American popular culture is a culture of immigrants”, says Hajdu. Transporting us to the “ramshackle”, sweatshop-heavy Lower East Side of the early 20th century – end point of many transatlantic journeys – Hajdu describes an emerging form of American popular entertainment: Vaudeville. A scene which revolved around the theatre known as the Bowery, it “reflected immigrant culture, dealt thematically with immigrant identity” and was characterised by a “cheeky sense of self-parody.” Variety line-ups “for and by” the immigrant community, dominant themes being “poverty; life without the benefits of material goods, without the benefits of education, life outside the established rules, outside the genteel tradition, outside the social hegemony.”

Dutch Act

Notable were the “Dutch act” routines of Polish Jewish duo Joe Weber and Lew Fields, a kind of “ethnic minstrelsy.” To Hajdu, minstrelsy is defined as “mimicry infused with ridicule and respect.” Thus, when Weber and Fields were sending up “not just German immigrants, but the way German immigrants were perceived,” there was more than one layer of meaning.

However, these “fathers of American entertainment” did not content themselves with the success of their on-stage double act. Hajdu tells us, “They did something even more significant: They became producers.” Weber and Fields took over management of the Bowery, from where they “groomed dozens of other performers” and so “they established a kind of self-reliance – a system of tutelage.”

A key aspect of Hajdu’s thinking is the resistance to thinking in unilateral terms. Accordingly, the impact of Weber and Fields cross-over, according to Hajdu, was not only far-reaching, but was two-directional: There were “two kinds of assimilation going on at the same time. The professional trajectory of Weber and Fields was “kind of an act of assimilation” in that the two men ascended in social class. Yet “something more interesting happened aesthetically: There was a challenge to mainstream propriety ... The larger culture assimilated into the Bowery... Tourists came...”

Hajdu is looking at the dynamics between celebrity, social power and political power. He is applying the early history of American popular entertainment as a paradigm, to compare and contrast with the emerging phenomenon of hip hop moguldom.

“Meanwhile,” back in early 20th Century Manhattan, “Joe Weber and Lew Fields developed a great hatred for each other, as so often happens with business partners.” So Weber and Fields split up but Lew had a daughter: Tin Pan Alley songwriter Dorothy Fields. She wrote a large number of songs in collaboration with Duke Ellington for the Cotton Club. This was the legendary and infamous Cotton Club which the boxer Jack Johnson “founded and lost in a gambling debt to the Irish mobster Owney Madden, who ran it from his prison cell in Sing Sing.”



‘Jungle Music’

The brief, for Ellington and the comprehensive production team of various specialists, was to produce “Jungle Music.” For all the racism that saturated the agenda of the Cotton Club— with blacks performing “jungle music” and ditto dance onstage, and the entrance policy being strictly whites only, Hajdu argues, the shows actually resisted racism from within. The work, says Hajdu was “a performance of exotica that granted performers a license to prey on the prurience of white people,” with “an embedded critique of social propriety.”

As with Weber and Fields, proposes Hajdu, “all at once, in this sphere a kind of exploitation of the larger culture and a challenge to larger culture” were taking place.

Four decades later, Berry Gordy founds Motown Records. Gordy “establishes a company that is vertically integrated,” complete with writers, performers and even “a charm school in-house”, signs Stevie Wonder, the Jackson Five and Diana Ross to name a few, and “makes a bazillion gazillion dollars.” With Motown, argues Hajdu, Gordy “was saying, we can make commercial music ...that it would not be fair to think of as black music,” the significance of Gordy’s achievement was that “he made white America a little black with Motown.” Gordy’s ambition was assimilation, racial equality.

Hip Hop Aesthetics

“Hip hop was seeking out something different: Sovereignty.” While “white rock in the ‘60s and ‘70s is absorbed with a certain narrow definition of authenticity,” Hajdu posits “hip hop rejected white rock, including its cynicism of everything to do with business.” Hip hops aesthetic is “centred on prowess. “

In an era where performing artists are “laying claim to narrower and narrower categories, because there is a collapse of traditional musical infrastructure,” Hajdu’s argument is that the hip hop milieu is way ahead of the game, citing Russell Simmons, Jay-Z and Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs as some of richest performing artists.

In terms of organisation, “most of the hip hop moguldoms (can I say fiefdoms? I’ll say fiefdoms) are very much like Motown – vertically integrated.” However, Hajdu points out, there are also significant departures from the paradigm: “The mastery with which the moguls have branded and diversified themselves has made them models of equity as opposed to production.” Hajdu cites how Diddy has leveraged his income from music with shares in Ciroc Vodka, which now constitute 12% of his net worth.

The pressing question, of course, as David Hajdu puts it is, “If anybody figures out what is the equivalent of derivatives in hip hop, would you let me know so I can steal your idea?”

This report by Polis intern Christine Flamsholt Jensen

