

The PHI BETA KAPPA Society

VISITING



SCHOLAR

PROGRAM

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PUBLIC LECTURE
OFFERINGS

**ALL RHYTHM, BUT NONE OF THE BLUES: BLACK MUSIC, BLACK WOMEN
AND THE DE-MYTHOLOGIZING OF POST-RACIAL AMERICA**

In the wake of Barack Obama's election in 2008, political pundits and cultural critics began declaring that the election of the first African American President was representative of America moving into a period of post-racialism. This notion of post-racialism was not simply based in political ideology, but also in the continuous globalization of black culture, especially black music. First through playlist and later through performances at the White House, Obama used music as a means of cultivating a form of nationalistic unity that was multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and intergenerational. On the surface, he had seemingly created a soundtrack for post-racial America. However, just as Obama prepared to launch his re-election campaign, a series of violent events began to undermine this notion of post-racialism. This resulted not only in the awakening of new social movements, but also new forms of protest culture. This presentation looks at four key events that occurred between 2012 and 2016 as a lens to understanding the current wave of protest and socially conscious music. It will specifically focus on the music and cultural responses of black women as a method of illuminating the long and varied history of black women musicians in shaping and promoting a public rhetoric of social change.

TAMMY L. KERNODLE

WHO RUNS THE WORLD?: POPULAR MUSIC, THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE GIRL, AND THE MAKING OF GIRL POWER

2023 could easily be deemed the year in which girls proved that they “run this mutha.” From the paradigm shifting concert tours of Beyonce and Taylor Swift to the box office hit film Barbie, the economic and cultural power of “the girl” and girl power were on full display. The concept of the girl and girl power have been so indelibly embedded in our contemporary consciousness, it is difficult to remember a time when those words were not tied to or used to characterize female empowerment, strength, and agency. Using various forms of popular music as a theoretical lens, this lecture explores the history of the “girl” both as a cultural phenomenon constructed through the popular media and the evolution and expansion of that concept into a marketing demographic designed to tap into the buying power of teenage girls. Lastly, through analysis of selected musical performances, this lecture will explore the intergenerational, sonic genealogy of girl power.

I’VE GOT A STORY TO TELL: MARY LOU WILLIAMS AND THE RE-IMAGINING OF JAZZ’S HISTORY

At the time of her death in 1981, pianist/composer Mary Lou Williams was celebrated as one of the only jazz musicians to have played through each of the eras of jazz (1920s-late 1970s). This distinction was not simply based on Williams’ proximity to specific jazz communities that have been essentialized as part of the general understanding of genre’s progression, but symbolized her direct contributions to the evolution of jazz’s sound. During the last decade of her life, Williams began promoting through live performances, lectures, and recordings her version of the “history of jazz.” Although she did not claim overtly any allegiances to the faction of intellectuals and creatives that promoted cultural nationalism as part of the Black Power ideology, there are correlations that permeate Williams’ framing of jazz and its history. This lecture discusses how Mary Lou Williams’ shift away from the common mythologies/themes and canonical repertory that are often advanced in telling jazz’s history reflected how female jazz musicians challenged the exclusionary and narratives of jazz’s history.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION TOPICS



1. MY SONG IS MY WEAPON: WOMEN, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE ACT OF FREEDOM SINGING

This lecture explores how women musicians from various ethnic/racial backgrounds created and used music as a means of advancing social change, promoting social movements, and mass-mobilizing their communities.

2. YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE: BLACK WOMEN AND THE HIDDEN SONIC NARRATIVES OF ROCK HISTORY

In the mid-1950s, Rock & Roll entered America's cultural consciousness as music that encapsulated the angst, rebellion and pursuit of personal freedom that framed the lifestyle of the American teenager. Though mostly marketed and branded as a new sub-genre of music, Rock & Roll extended out of a musical genealogy that included country, blues, jazz, and gospel music. Of these genres, the blues, especially variant forms of urban blues that emerged in the decade following World War II, had the most direct influence on early rock culture. Although we often equate the musical experimentation and social rebellion reflected through the rock idiom with male musicians, there were also women who were significant in contributing to the progression of the genre. Through an examination of the musical and professional lives of guitarists Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and vocalist Big Mama Thornton, this lecture will explore the role black women played in creating the performance aesthetic and repertory that defined early Rock culture in America, and later served as the foundation of blues and rock idioms in the U.K. during the 1960s.

3. YOUR FRIEND LANGSTON: LANGSTON HUGHES' COLLABORATIONS WITH BLACK WOMEN MUSICIANS

Writer/activist Langston Hughes is largely known for his expansive and highly influential oeuvre of writings that contextualized the Black experience. Throughout his four-decade career, Hughes collaborated with several composers and musicians including William Grant Still and Kurt Weill. However, little has been written on or discussed about his collaborative relationships with women musicians and composers. This talk explores these through an examination of the collaborations Hughes produced in the 1950s and 1960s with folk singer Odetta, jazz musician Nina Simone, and composer/pianist Margaret Bonds. This discussion not only addresses Hughes' vast legacy, but considers the scope of the intellectual labor of Black women musicians contributed to the mid-century Black civil rights movement.