

Music and Migration: Presentation to Middle School Teachers at Carnegie Hall

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During the last 100 years, American society has been completely reshaped by both immigration and migration. Not only have immigrants come to the United States from every continent and almost every nation, but our social fabric has been transformed by internal population movements. Of these internal migrations, none has been more significant than what scholars have called “The Great Migration,” the movement of African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the “South, the West, and the North.” Between 1910 and 1970, six and a half million black Americans moved from South to North, making it, according to Nicholas Lemann, “one of the largest and most rapid mass movements of people in history- perhaps the greatest not caused by the immediate threat of execution or starvation. In sheer numbers, it outranks the migration of any other ethnic group-Italians, or Irish or Jews, Or Poles- to this country.”

This extraordinary mass movement has had a tremendous impact on the political, economic and cultural life of the United States, and it is on the cultural impact of this migration –especially its impact on music- that we will be turning much of our attention today.

But in studying the Great Migration, we must make sure that we understand that there is not one single model that works for every time period, or every region. Studying black migration during World War I gives only limited guidance for studying black migration during the 1950’s and studying Black migration to Chicago may not be that helpful in studying Black Migration to Boston, Los Angeles or New York. Although the Carnegie Hall staff has done an amazing job showing how the mass movements of Blacks from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago have shaped the development of one of America’s greatest cultural products- the urban blues- this model has to be modified in studying how Black migration has shaped the development of popular music in New York City.

In the remarks that follow, I am going to give you some general guidelines for studying all migrations, both to the United States and within it, and then talk about the specific conditions that shaped Black migration in different time periods and to different places. I will then move on to a presentation, based on my own research , about how migration and immigration shaped the creation of popular music in the Bronx and conclude with an introduction to some of the new music being developed in our city by recent immigrants.

Dynamics of Migrations

Scholars who have studied population movements around the world emphasize that there is no single explanation for why people choose to uproot themselves and move to another part of the world, or another part of their own country. Sometimes, such movements are a response to political upheavals, famine, or the rapid transformation of traditional economies; sometimes they are a response to the opening of economic or

educational opportunities in another region or another. But what most scholars emphasize is migrations are rarely random. While individuals may set out to explore opportunities in a new place, large population movements only take place when people have access to informal networks, and occasionally formal institutions, which help them find housing, employment, and the opportunity to live with people who speak their language and have similar customs and traditions. Whether people are coming to New York from Bangladesh or Birmingham, from Southern Italy or South Carolina, from Puebla or Pensacola, they are usually coming because a relative, or someone from their hometown, is already living here and can help them find a job and a place to live, and upon arrival, direct them to stores where they can shop, and religious institutions they can worship, which offer some of the comfort and familiarity of “back home.” Understanding how such networks are created and how they work is key to understanding any large scale migration. Whether they are built around extended families, hometown associations, religious institutions, or social clubs, restaurants and dance halls, these formal and informal institutions are what allow people to feel some measure of comfort after risk laden journeys, and it is within these networks where the process of creating new cultural forms –including music- take place.

Thinking About the Great Migration --Part One—Time Matters

When thinking about Black Migration to the North, it is important to understand how much it was in response to the opening of new job opportunities in the North, and how much by economic upheaval and labor displacement in the South

The first phase of the Great Migration, during World War I, was almost entirely provoked by a labor shortage in Northern industry as a result of the cutting off of immigration and of wartime military mobilization. Labor recruiters from stockyards and steel mills actually encouraged this migration by going into the South and handing out flyers announcing job openings. Although the tightening of Jim Crow restrictions in the Southern States and a boll weevil blight in cotton agriculture also encouraged this population movement, it was the availability of jobs in spheres of industry blacks had largely been excluded from and which paid three to four times more than what they could earn in the South that drove this “mass exodus.”

This type of migration-motivated by job availability- was uniquely conducive to institution building and cultural creativity. Because the migrants had immediate access to disposable income, and in much larger amounts than they were accustomed to, not only did they have money for food and rent, they had money for leisure and recreation, which translated into money for music- both live and on record. The rise of urban blues in Chicago is not only as a result of a concentration of musical talent, it is a result of an emerging market for such music rooted in a community of Southern born black folk who had jobs and money to spend on a type of music that spoke to where they came from and who they were.

This is the classic model of the relationship between music and migration, and it is the one featured in the afternoon session today. But not all Black migration to the North was inspired by economic opportunity. Of the 6.5 Million Black people who moved North in the 20th Century, more than 5 million moved after 1940, when the mechanization of Southern agriculture may have been a more important force causing Black people to move North than job opportunities in Northern Cities. Although the period from 1940-1950 saw a significant expansion of job opportunities for Blacks in basic industry and government employment, as a result of which Black per capita income in the US went from 44% to 57% of the white total, after 1950, most Black migration to the North and West was a result of blacks being pushed out of agricultural areas where their labor was not needed, not by the availability of high paying unskilled and semiskilled jobs. In this later period, roughly 1950-1970, the relationship between Black southern migration and musical creativity is much less clear cut than during the World WAR I and World War II periods when blues, and later rhythm and blues flourished in Northern cities. The post 1950 migrants were much less economically secure than their earlier counterparts, has less disposable income, and less job opportunities and family connections, and their influence on popular music is far more difficult to trace

Thinking About Black Migration-Part Two- Place Matters

The classic model of music creativity relating to the Great Migration involves the movement of people from the Mississippi Delta- where Blacks experienced sharecropping, peonage, and Jim Crow restrictions in their most naked, brutal form- to Chicago, where the migrants found jobs in stockyards and steel mills and lived in almost completely segregated neighborhoods. Three of the most important blues and rhythm and blues artists of the Post World War II era, Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, and Bo Diddley- all of whom recorded for Chess Records in Chicago-, were part of this population movement, and cut their teeth in clubs and music halls where their core audience came from a similar background.

However, the Mississippi Delta to Chicago experience doesn't really prepare us for the dynamics of Black migration to New York City, for the kind work they did, the kind of neighborhoods they lived in, or the kind of music they created

First of all, most Southern Black migrants to New York City came from the Eastern seaboard states of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina and Georgia, not from Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana. In those states, especially Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina, there was little cotton agriculture and race relations tended to be less brutal and oppressive than they were in the Mississippi Delta. Many of these migrants came from towns and cities where Blacks owned property and businesses; some of them had excellent educations in segregated schools. As a result, the musical traditions they brought with them reflected access to pianos, horns and string instruments rarely available to impoverished sharecroppers. It is no accident that big band jazz was the most famous musical manifestation of Black Migration in New York in the 1920's and 1930's and that Rhythm and Blues, which involved a vocalist performing behind a band with horns and piano, or urban harmonic vocal singing, which drew upon gospel

music and barbershop quartets, were the major musical forms emerging in New York's Black communities after WWII. When you look at Music and Migration in New York City, the pacesetters are people like Billie Holliday and Ruth Brown, who moved to New York from Baltimore, or Duke Ellington, who moved to New York from Washington DC, not blues singers like John Lee Hooker or Lightning Hopkins.

Secondly, New York Black migrants, for the most part, didn't get jobs in basic industry like steel mills and stockyards. Most Blacks in New York worked in light manufacturing, the service sector (hotels, restaurants, domestic service) or transportation. While their incomes were on the average no higher than that of their counterparts in Chicago, their jobs involved more interaction with the public and less physical danger, and they tended to gravitate to music which displayed musical and vocal artistry rather than raw passion.

Third, most Black Southern migrants moved into communities which were more diverse and less segregated than their Black counterparts in Chicago. The first wave of southern migration, to New York, most of which went directly into Harlem, coincided with a smaller migration from the British West Indies, giving Black New York communities a multiethnic flavor that has persisted to this day. From World War I to the 1940's, Blacks from North Carolina, Virginia and South Carolina lived on the same blocks as Blacks from Jamaica, Barbados and Antigua and people from Cuba and Puerto Rico lived in nearby communities. During and after World War II, an even more complex dynamic ensued as both Southern and Caribbean blacks moved into the Bronx, joined by a wave of new migrants from Puerto Rico. This secondary migration, bringing together Southern Blacks with Anglophone Caribbeans and Puerto Ricans in Harlem and the Bronx created a mingling of cultural traditions which shaped a very different set of musical traditions than the one developing in Chicago. We see this in the creative fusion of jazz and Afro Cuban music in the work of Machito and Dizzy Gillespie, in the use of Latin Beats as a backdrop to urban harmonic group singing (e.g. The Drifters classic "This Magic Moment"); in the creation of New York hybrid musical forms like salsa and Latin soul; and in the emergence of Hip Hop.

New York, the quintessential immigrant city, has created a cultural crucible where African American musical traditions have fused with other musical traditions of the African Diaspora in ways which differ significantly from what occurred in Midwestern cities which were the crucible of Blues.

I hope to show this in the next two parts of my presentation, the first of which explores the musical traditions of the Bronx from 1945 to today, and the second of which describes the contribution of New York's most recent immigrants to the development of popular music.

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NOTE: One student project might be to compare Chess Records in Chicago with Atlantic Records in New York City