

## **Music in American Life: An Encyclopedia of the Songs, Styles, Stars, and Stories That Shaped Our Culture**

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### Intercultural and Interracial Music

The history of the United States has been greatly shaped by encounters among people of varying races, ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures. The music of the nation is thus heavily marked by the artistic conversations and convergences of a diverse range of people. There are many U.S. traditions that openly reflect a racial or cultural mix. There are also a number of styles that have been marketed and consumed as belonging to one racial or cultural group but that are in actuality the product of hybrid roots. A number of social, political, and economic forces have given rise to and influence intercultural and interracial music in the United States, including immigration, diaspora, social movements, multiculturalism, and the popular music industry. Listening to this music with an ear toward its complex historical legacy illuminates key issues in U.S. American music and ongoing debates over the definition of U.S. national identity as a whole.

#### Migration and Immigration

President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) called the United States a “nation of immigrants” and indeed, the majority of the population migrated to the country from elsewhere. (Those who did not include Native Americans and Mexicans whose land was annexed by the United States in 1848.) The first large numbers of European immigrants arrived in the seventeenth century and established the first permanent settlement in 1607. They were joined by the first documented African slaves in 1619, then people from various Asian countries starting in the late eighteenth century. Immigrants brought with them a variety of musical forms from their native lands, which began to develop in distinct directions due to the new cultural environment. Most markedly, as various immigrant groups began to encounter one another, they incorporated pieces of each others’ musical traditions into their own. This dynamic gave rise to a host of uniquely U.S. American forms that blend styles from around the world.

Early African American spirituals are a good example of this cultural mix. Spirituals were songs first created and sung by blacks during the era of plantation slavery (approximately 1619–1865), blending African and European elements. Enslaved Africans brought a variety of instruments, musical forms, and ritual practices to the Americas. As they became indoctrinated into the Christian church and grew to learn European song forms, harmonies, and the English language, they incorporated these elements into their native traditions. Spirituals often told biblical stories about struggle and resistance, providing a means of emotional release and, sometimes, coded directions for how to escape to freedom in the north. These messages were supported by African vocal techniques (use of melisma and heterophonic group singing), rhythmic sensibilities (heavy use of percussion and use of polyrhythms), and the call and response form. Spirituals were originally sung a cappella or with the accompaniment of hand claps and foot stomps. Percussion was an important element in many African styles; slaves in the United States were forbidden to play drums and instead used their bodies (called “pattin’ Juba”).

#### Diaspora

As immigrants came to the United States, their relationships to their native countries changed.

The concept of diaspora helps to explore this dynamic. A diaspora is a “scattering about” of people from a central “homeland” to other places of the world. For example, enslaved Africans were brought to many places in the Americas, and all of these places are considered part of the African diaspora. Music performed in African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latino cultures shares some basic African features at heart but also diverges based on local contexts. Diasporic groups maintain varying degrees of tangible contact with their homelands and in some instances only have a symbolic attachment to it. Important in the United States is the overlapping of

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various diasporas from around the world, particularly within urban spaces.

Bhangra, a contemporary electronic music performed and consumed by desis (South Asians), indicates how cultural materials change in contact with other cultures in the diaspora. A desi is a South Asian (primarily Indian and Pakistani) living outside of the homeland. Bhangra was originally a folk tradition of drumming, singing, and dance from the Punjab region of India. Starting in the 1980s, the children of desi immigrants in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada began to remix the traditional bhangra instruments and vocals with electronic drumbeats and synthesized instruments found in popular Western genres such as techno. Bhangra is now often played by DJs in clubs that cater to young desis and is a musical symbol of the confluence of their Indian and U.S. American identities. Bhangra is also greatly influenced by hip-hop, showcasing the musical overlapping of the South Asian and African diasporas.

#### Social Movements

The incorporation of so many different races and cultures into one nation has been an ongoing challenge in the United States. The civil rights era (mid-1950s through 1960s) was one moment of intense struggle as various minority groups fought to gain stronger representation in politics and the dominant white society. Organizations for people of color (African Americans, Chicanos, Asian Americans, etc.), women, and gays and lesbians held massive protests, boycotts, and other actions to gain rights. The combined actions of these social movements resulted in the passage of momentous legislation, including the 1964 Civil Rights Act, 1965 Voting Rights Act, and 1968 Fair Housing Act.

Music was an important part of these social movements and was often used in political protests and marches. Many people of color rediscovered the music of their ancestors and reworked it—often in lyrics—to express their current political concerns. Though many civil rights era organizations focused on issues for one racial or cultural group, much interracial and intercultural political organizing took place. Similarly, the various groups also shared musical material. The song “We Shall Not Be Moved,” for example, started as an early African American hymn (called “I Shall Not Be Moved”), was used in labor struggles in the 1930s and 1940s, was resurrected in the folk revival and southern African American rights struggles in the 1950s and 1960s, and was used again during the Chicano farmworker movement in the 1960s (sung in Spanish: “No Nos Moveran”). Music became a tool to proclaim pride in one’s heritage, display it to the rest of the nation, and provide a means to learn more about people from different backgrounds.

In the 1970s and 1980s a number of Asian American jazz artists began creating work inspired by the Asian American, African American, and other social movements. Artists such as Jon Jang (1954–), Mark Izu, Francis Wong, Anthony Brown, and Fred Ho (1957–) experimented with ways to express their various Asian cultural heritages and antiracist politics, using what they considered the politically radical voice of African American jazz (or “creative music”). The result was a variety of interracial and intercultural blends of Asian instruments, techniques, and pieces with jazz instruments, harmonies, and free improvisation. In further interracial conversation, several of these artists started Asian Improv Records, a label and organization modeled after the African American–run Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians

(AACM).

#### Multiculturalism

The civil rights struggles also resulted in the establishment of multicultural educational and arts programming. A remedy to hundreds of years of civic exclusion, multiculturalism promotes the incorporation of work by minority artists into school curricula and mainstream performance venues. In music education, these shifts resulted in the incorporation of jazz, other U.S. minority traditions, and a variety of world musical traditions into courses of study formerly focused primarily on Western classical music. The surge of academic interest in these styles fed into the growth of the field of ethnomusicology and the comparative study of cultural traditions. In multicultural arts programming, a variety of concert series, music festivals, and tourism campaigns—often supported by government or corporate sponsorships—began to showcase an array of music traditions. These venues have provided increased visibility and economic opportunity for minority musicians, as well as a chance for audiences to experience the racial and cultural variety that exists within the United States and beyond. Some critics of multiculturalism, however, believe that these kinds of performances promote simplified versions of culture and favor artists who adhere to what might be considered “traditional” versus newer or experimental forms. Detractors also claim that multiculturalism promotes cultural separation by presenting artists and culture with strict demarcations that highlight their differences rather than similarities or hybrid roots.

#### Popular Music Industry

This same struggle between artists’ opportunities and the cultural, aesthetic, and economic demands of the business that supports them is evident in the music industry. The emergence of the modern U.S. popular music industry can be traced to the early twentieth century, during which companies began to mass produce and

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Ozomatli performs in Los Angeles, May 6, 2011. (AP Photo/Katy Winn)

market recordings (first sheet music, then records). As the industry consolidated, the interracial and intercultural practices of many U.S. artists began to be obscured in the mainstream as the industry used monoracial/cultural markers to label music. For example, despite the intense African American, European American, and Afro-Caribbean dialogue that produced styles such as blues, bluegrass, country, and early jazz, black artists were marketed as blues or jazz and white as bluegrass or country. Afro-Caribbean artists and traditions (as well as Asian and Asian American) were mainly purveyed as “exotic” or “tropical” and rarely as a part of “homegrown” U.S. culture.

Artists who might have been fluent in a variety of “black” and “white” styles were required to record solely material that fit a limited industry portrait of their racial identity, as well as that of their target audiences. Starting in the early 1920s, labels began to sell “race records”—recordings by black artists to sell to black listeners—and “hillbilly records,” music for rural white audiences by whites. By creating these racial recording and marketing distinctions, “much of the richness and variety of cross-cultural assimilations disappeared from the records as musicians worked, seemingly without undue effort, to fit their music into their employers’ categories” (Kenney 1999, 135). This practice of racially segregating and labeling music genres has remained entrenched in the industry despite the continued practice of intercultural and interracial music making.

The contemporary genre of fusion music highlights the racially demarcated space of the popular music industry in a different way. “Fusion” does not refer to any particular racial or cultural combination, but is rather a catchall name for contemporary artists who blend traditions and explicitly highlight this mix in their marketing and performances. Groups such as Ozomatli (active 1995–present), Balkan Beat Box (active 2003–present), Red Baraat (active 2008–present), Funkadesi, and Dengue Fever showcase the long-running intercultural and interracial dynamics of U.S. music, in that their members are conversant in multiple traditions, often ones not associated with their personal cultural heritage. The artists in these groups have

grown up in the overlapping diasporas of the urban United States during the era of multiculturalism. They have thus been exposed to a variety of musical styles and had the opportunity to study traditions from all over the world. These bands make the hybrid nature of U.S. culture explicit and present the racial boundaries of the industry as flimsy constructions. Some scholars, however, suggest that the

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“fusion” label works against this potential and indicates the tendency of the music industry to co-opt and simplify complex cultural engagements.

Music and U.S. American Identity

Music has been an important stage for the negotiation and expression of U.S. national identity. Throughout the history of the country, the question of how to find unity amid such great diversity has marked debates over who belongs and what music best represents the citizenry. Rather than the music of a single population, intercultural and interracial music is perhaps the best indication of the centuries-long conversations, conflicts, and negotiations among the variety of people residing in the nation.

**See also:** [African American Influences on American Music](#); [Asian American Music](#); [Blues](#); [Bluegrass](#); [Country Music](#); [Ethnomusicology](#); [Fusion](#); [Hip-Hop](#); [Immigrant Music](#); [Improvisation](#); [Jazz](#); [Social Causes of Musicians](#)

Further Reading

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