

BOOK REVIEW

Soul Music: Tracking the Spiritual Roots of Pop from Plato to Motown

JOEL RUDINOW

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The idea that music can ‘heal the soul’ is a commonplace in many spiritual and cultural traditions, but what does it amount to? In *Soul Music*, Joel Rudinow examines a particular musical genre as a means of addressing some broad and difficult questions about the relationship between music and spiritual well-being. Rudinow’s focus is ‘soul music’—American popular music of the mid-twentieth century that grew out of a merger between gospel music and various strains of popular secular music. The term ‘soul music’ replaced the label ‘rhythm and blues’, which in turn had replaced ‘race’ music. Deeply rooted in African-American traditions and performed mainly by African Americans, soul music became extremely popular among both blacks and whites. Rudinow argues that soul music holds a special place in the history of American popular music. It is widely understood to have been the ‘soundtrack’ to the American civil rights movement and its prominence during President Barack Obama’s presidential inauguration in 2009 was not likely to have been a mere fluke or reflection of the new president’s musical taste.

Rudinow maintains that, although the claim sounds extravagant, it can be said ‘in all seriousness’ that soul music has played an important part in healing America’s troubled soul. The difficulty of what it means, exactly, to say this is one of the major questions at issue in the book. This question is closely related to another: namely how to explain the connections between soul music and spiritual dimensions of life, both individual and collective. These are difficult questions, to be sure; difficult to formulate clearly let

alone to begin to answer. Rudinow tells us that writing this book was an exercise in ‘soul searching’ and that it was born out of his efforts to integrate crucial interests in music and philosophy. It is informed by a deep knowledge of and appreciation for music, and a real sense of just how difficult philosophical questions about music can be. Rudinow warns us at the outset and throughout that philosophy requires patience, tenacity, and humility, and that engaging in philosophy requires a high tolerance for unanswered questions.

Metaphysical intricacies begin in the first chapter which brings together the soul and soul music. Rudinow discusses the difficulties in defining ‘soul music’ without falling into a rigid and ultimately arbitrary essentialist definition, and he understands the term broadly rather than narrowly. He never shrinks from metaphysical questions but addresses them squarely. Tricky as it is to write about music and the soul without either sounding precious or taking refuge in a crude materialism, Rudinow manages to avoid both extremes. He employs a minimalist conception of the soul, understanding it as a name for the locus of awareness and agent of voluntary action in any conscious or sentient being.

The next two chapters examine metaphysical issues inherent in two of the antecedents of soul music – blues and gospel. The relationship between blues and gospel, and between both of them and soul music, is very complex. Admirers and detractors alike have been puzzled that soul music draws on musical traditions, in particular on the blues and on spirituals and gospel, that are said to be by nature spiritually incompatible. How did it come to be that ‘devil’s music’ contributed to the emergence of gospel as a musical form? Rudinow reminds us that early audiences, especially African Americans, were well aware of the influence of gospel in soul music and could be offended by the reminder of the sacred in music that was often

unabashedly carnal. These chapters address the question of why the blues has been called the ‘devil’s music’ and what we might make of the legend (recurring in different performance traditions) of instrumentalists selling their soul to the devil in exchange for technical mastery. Appropriately the legend surrounding bluesman Robert Johnson is taken to be paradigmatic.

Before the publication of this book Rudinow was widely known for his 1994 article, ‘Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?’ published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. This ground-breaking article on performance and racial identity was widely read, discussed, and anthologized. It continues to read well today and is still a required text for anyone interested in these issues. In that article, Rudinow had argued that the authenticity of a blues performance turns not on the ethnicity of the performer, but on the degree of mastery of the idiom and the integrity of his/her use of the idiom in performance. In chapter 6 of *Soul Music* Rudinow revisits his earlier article and speaks with disarming and admirable frankness about what he has come to see as its shortcomings, and the deficiencies in his earlier replies to critics. He now sees the problem as less one of technical mastery than of personal and artistic integrity and authenticity in the face of culturally unfamiliar material. He has also come around to the view that the significance of performances in culturally identifiable idioms such as the blues may well have something to do with the ethnic identities of both performers and audiences.

Chapters 4, 5, and 7 deal, in different ways, with philosophical problems inherent in the interpretation of music. Chapter 4 uses ancient Greek understandings of tonality to expose some of the limitations of formalist approaches to music. The primary problem here is music’s emotional power, or what Rudinow calls the ‘arousal and movement of emotional energy in the audience’ (88). In the last two hundred years or so this problem has been reformulated and is now expressed as the puzzle of music’s emotional expression. The problem had thus shifted from the listener’s experience of music to properties inherent in the music: in other words, what can we be legitimately

taken to mean when we discuss music in emotional terms? This newer project is no less difficult than the older one, and just as recalcitrant to explanation. Formalist analysis has not been fruitfully applied to the understanding of the rhythmic concepts and phenomena so important in many genres of popular music. Chapter 5 focuses on rhythm and explores the promise of a pragmatist approach to understanding music’s emotional power. We are taken from the work of John Dewey through Suzanne Langer to the ‘somaesthetics’ of contemporary pragmatist Richard Schusterman.

Rudinow offers a sophisticated and subtle reading of Plato on music and on censorship of the arts, paying careful attention to methodological hazards inherent in interpreting a thinker renowned for irony. Much of the scholarly discussion of Plato on the arts overlooks his irony. Rudinow starts (or restarts) an important discussion, and I would have been happy to see a more extended discussion here. Rudinow tells us that he grappled with the problem of Socratic irony before hearing the name ‘Leo Strauss’ with whom it is now widely linked. He finds a resonance between the idea of covert communication in the blues and Strauss’s interpretive principles. Strauss argued that thinkers such as Maimonides, Spinoza, and Hobbes wrote under conditions of political and social oppression and shaped their texts with this in mind. Careful readers would note gaps and inconsistencies in their texts and look under the surface for a deeper meaning. Rudinow offers an even-handed presentation of Strauss’s ideas that seeks to save him both from his detractors and from his neoconservative disciples. This is no mean feat, as even a cursory glance at the contemporary discussion of Strauss’s ideas will reveal. Rudinow’s chapter is valuable in itself for his presentation of Strauss’s central ideas. I wish that the book had had more space for a more detailed application of these interpretive principles to the blues.

The final chapter, ‘Music as a Healing Art’, considers the metaphysics of music as a healing art. Rudinow argues that the current dominant explanatory models of music are psychopharmacological; that is, they treat music as a drug. While this model has some strengths, Rudinow contends that a more fruitful approach

would be one informed by the physics of sound. Of course, the potential for quackery is high here, as Rudinow clearly realizes, and much of the chapter is devoted to a careful review of the scientific literature.

Soul Music is a very thoughtful work in which there is a lot going on. I learned many things in reading it, from episodes of blues history, to the social conditions of the piano players in New Orleans brothels, to the significance of the tritone. Although the focus is restricted to a particular musical genre, the implications of this book are more general and it should be relevant to anyone with a philosophical interest in music. Rudinow's style is clear and engaging, and he draws on his personal experience as a professional musician

as well as on academic philosophy. My only serious criticism is that the book lacks a final section where all of the various philosophical insights are drawn together, their implications spelled out, and some final conclusions presented. Nonetheless, the book's clarity of thought and expression would work well in the classroom, even for students with little background in either philosophy or music. Each chapter is accompanied by suggestions for watching and listening, further adding to the book's usefulness as a teaching resource.

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