Popular music: ecumenicism among equals

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the seventh of 15 articles on popular culture in American life. The series was written for Courses by Newspaper, part of the extension program of the University of California, San Diego. The articles constitute the text for an Oakland University course taught by Prof. Jesse Pitts. The views are the authors'.)

By NAT HENTOFF

When a member of the Chinese delegation to the United Nations asked an American friend not long ago if all American popular music sounded the same—as he supposed from listening to the radio—the friend arranged for the Chinese official to hear an evening of jazz.

He listened with great absorption and then said, "I believe I understand. This is American folk music. It has your own kind of spirit. Are there other original American musical sounds and forms?"

Many, he was told, and in a wide variety of popular as well as folk music. The man from the Chinese delegation has since been looking into this unexpected news about America.

AMONG THE performers I have suggested he hear, to broaden his sense of our diversity, is James Talley. Not a jazzman, but rather a 33-year-old, Oklahoma-born, popular singer-composer who is a favorite of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter and millions more Americans.

Talley's music—a blend of country and blues from the South and Southwest—celebrates working people, from truckers to "black lung" miners, telling of the plain, every-day valor that enables them to survive. Just as jazz began by telling of every-day black valor. And like black music, James Talley's has deep American roots.

He comes from a long tradition in American popular music—going back to Woody Guthrie and Jimmie Rodgers ("the Singing Brakeman"),

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and beyond them, to the music-makers of the American frontier who sang of independence and of the hard work, with some whiskey on the side, that might make their dreams talk palpable shape.

DREAMS POWER all forms and idioms of popular music. Different dreams nourished by people of profoundly different backgrounds. In what came to be called country and western music, the early dream was of unending spaciousness, always somewhere unspoiled to travel.

Johnny and June Carter Cash, performing at Mississippi Memorial Stadium, symbolize the dream of the self-made person and open spaces.

And Americans now, so many of them still on the move or at least fantasizing a move to a last big strike, are still attracted to traveling music and the dauntless loners who create it. Kris Kristofferson, for instance, and Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, Charlie Rich.

These present-day songsters are seen as perhaps the last of the frontiersmen, needing no college degrees or professional licenses to reap large rewards as they roam the land, riding their guitars.

In an age of corporate envelopment, they keep alive the dream of the self-made American whose success comes not from "selling out" but just from being himself.

THERE ARE other kinds of dreams. Black music, for instance, was eventually to color all popular sounds, even white country. In the "cry" of Charlie Rich's voice are echoes of the black work and religious songs he heard as a white boy in a small Arkansas farming town.

But the foundations of black music are obviously built on centuries-long experiences largely unknown to other Americans. So viscerally unknown still that the televising of Alex Haley's "Roots" was a shock to millions of his fellow white citizens.

From the beginning of slavery here, black music was nothing less than a way of psychic survival.

Field hollers were used to send messages; religious songs both shared the spirit and, in code, prophesied freedom. And the blues, as novelist Ralph Ellison has pointed out, were "one of the techniques through which Negroes have survived and kept their courage."

The blues were not only about hard, shattering times, but were also ironic, defiant, proud. There was triumph in the blues, with heroes who had gone so far down they had nowhere to go but up. And up they came.

IT IS NO wonder that the blues have never lost their strength, having been tested so much. And so the textures of the blues continue to pervade the "soul" music that now reaches huge numbers of white as well as black listeners.

More showy than classic blues, rhythmically driving, and mixed with gospel, "soul music" distills the black urban experience while also projecting young dreams of love and power.

From Aretha Franklin to Stevie Wonder, both soul "super stars," black music still propels a directness of emotional force that no other American musical language has yet equalled.

Although blues recordings and performances were once limited to black communities, except for a few white aficionados, since the 1950s the blues and other black music have "crossed over" to all other popular audiences. Accordingly, the Top 40 lists are not only thoroughly integrated but also contain records by white singers and musicians who are heavily influenced by black sounds.

In fact, there is not a single white rock band unaffected by the blues. Rock music began in the early 1950s as a white version of what was then called black "Rhythm and blues." As white and black strains merged more completely than ever before in American popular music, ecumenicism became the rule.

In the 1960s, rock—mirroring the "counterculture's" impatience with restrictions and categories—fused country cadences, jazz, blues and various styles of pop music, from ballads to simple "good time" songs.

Significantly, the most widely influential figure in the history of American rock, Elvis Presley, was himself sylistically an amalgam of what used to be heard as opposites—white country music and what he called "the real lowdown," black Mississippi blues singers.

ONE KEY reason so many of the young have been drawn to rock has been its seemingly egalitarian nature.

That is, in previous generations, it was generally felt that the making of popular music was limited to such highly skilled and sophisticated specialists as George Gershwin and Cole Porter. Even the singers, from Bing Crosby to Frank Sinatra, with their difficult big-band experience and coolly urbane manner, appeared to belong to a distant aristocracy.

Rock, on the other hand, has given status to thousands of singers and instrumentalists who look and act very much like their fans; who write their own songs; and who, in many cases, have skills not too far removed from those of a dedicated amateur.

Reviewing such a rock combo, Big Brother and the Holding Company, the group that featured white blues singer Janis Joplin, a counterculture critic wrote in the 1960s:

"It's probably the secret dream of every kid everywhere to just do things they dig doing and be rewarded for it. America—as only America, the land where dreams come true, could—is making that dream come true for Big Brother."

AND SO, from the 1960s to the present, more of the young have been enthusiastically immersed in popular music than at any other period of our history. It is, after all, their music.

Unlike the popular songs of earlier decades and centuries, rock is not primarily directed at grown-ups.

It's about freedom from grown-ups; freedom to leap right into the middle of experience, without having to lay back for fear of what some parent or teacher may think.

Elvis Presley did indeed succeed Porter and Gershwin. And in turn, he was at least partially dislodged by a more outspoken rebel, Bob Dylan, who in the 1960s spoke for and to a whole generation of listeners who were, like him, anti-war and anti-all-establishments.

In the 1970s and beyond, more lone stars in their early 20s will inevitably continue to speak to the dreams and nightmares of each new generation. There still remains, however, ample popular music for new and even for older adults.

They still listen to the musical survivors of the 1950s and 1960s; and as James Talley says, they listen to remember the values of their quicksilver youth, as contrasted, if there is a contrast, with their values now.

Popular music always speaks, among other things, of dreams—which change with the times.

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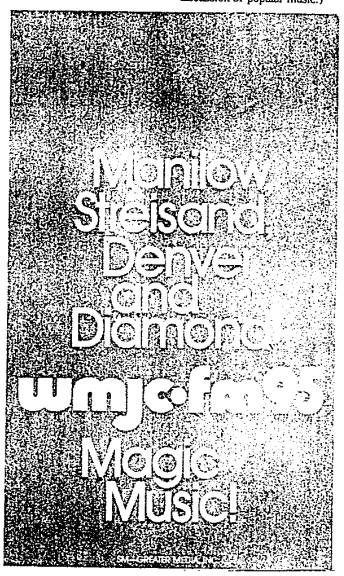

Media news: herd instinct or plot?

By JESSE PITTS
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I am going to give some examples of media power—especially TV power—which raise the issue of how this power might be countervailed or made accountable to the public.

In 1974 there was a rumor among "people in the know" that Sen. Ted Kennedy had an unseen but powerful influence in pushing the Watergate scandal to its ultimate climax.

Whether that was true or not, he seemed to be the obvious beneficiary of a political struggle where the Republican Party had been weakened, perhaps irremediably.

The new president, Gerald Ford, would not very likely have the "organizational weight" that would normally benefit the candidate campaigning from the vantage point of the incumbency. The coast was clear for a Kennedy bid for the presidency in 1976.

BUT STRANGE things started to happen.

Something that had been "known" for quite some time suddenly surfaced—to wit, that his wife was an alcoholic.

A trashy book, written by a person claiming to be an ex-husband of Marilyn Monroe and which had rather mean things to say about the role of Robert F. Kennedy in the tragedy, was reviewed by elite newspapers.

A long piece about Chappaquiddick was published, in Harper's, I believe. Time Magazine announced it was creating an investigative team to reopen the Chappaquiddick affair. CBS let it be known that a "Sixty Minutes" special would be shown on the same subject.

Result: A firm announcement by Kennedy that he definitely would not be a candidate for the presidency in 1976, although during the Wisconsin primary it seemed for a moment that the 1974 announcement did not preclude the possibility of his running as vice-president to Hubert Humphrey.

Further result: The Chappaquiddick team at Time was disbanded, and we never saw the "Sixty Minutes" special.

HOW COME? Was it because the objective of the mass media leaders was to discourage Kennedy's candidacy rather than give us "all the news that's fit to print"?

What of the coordination between Time, CBS, Harper's and the elite newspapers? Coincidence, a game plan or "osmotic conspiracy," to use Victor Gold's felicitous phrase?

My hypothesis is that the big media blackmailed Kennedy out of the candidacy in 1976, and that was an illegitimate and dangerous use of media power.

FROM THE MIDDLE of 1975, national TV began a campaign to show Gerald Ford as a bungler, and great stress was put upon his propensity to fall down or bump his head.

Symbolically, it was effective and foolproof. The president could hardly make an issue of it without digging his media hole deeper.

Actually, he was probably the best athlete in the presidency since Theodore Roosevelt. More than IQ, the presidency requires character, and in the Nixon pardon, Ford had proven that he had it.

Regardless of whether it was the right or wrong decision, it took a lot of courage on Ford's part.

Was it mulled over and dissected as was Ford's "Polish blunder?" ("Ethnic purity" was probably not a blunder, but a calculated risk that paid off.)

Yet it must be said that, for all the TV favoritism shown Carter, Ford started a comeback from the day of his nomination that would have probably carried him over, had the campaign lasted a week more. He probably would have won, had media coverage been more even-handed.

TV TODAY is the campaign medium, and it pays to have the cameramen and the commentators in your corner.

Although it is not as decisive as both contemptors and partisans would have it, in close elections it probably makes the difference. Within limits, paid advertising can make up for some media bias.

Another example of TV power—and we must remember that, for close to two-thirds of the American public, TV is the only source of news—is the capacity of the networks to determine what is news and what is not news.

Although there are three national networks, the consensus among them as to what is national news is amazing—and unhealthy. Here is an example.

RECENTLY THERE was an article in The Detroit Free Press about Hubert Humphrey's children being the beneficiaries of a million-dollar trust fund created by a sugar magnate.

Mrs. Humphrey could not be reached for verification of the story because she had entered a clinic just as the story broke.

If false, the story should have been retracted and apologized for, since it blackens the reputation of a man the Democratic Party was in the process of canonizing.

If true, the story opens up a big can of worms, since Humphrey chaired a senatorial subcommittee on agricultural affairs that had jurisdiction over two of the most under-played scandals of the last few years—the sugar price gouge of 1974 and the wheat shipping scandal (remember those three silos blowing up within a couple of weeks?).

Where are the investigative reporters? If the children involved had been Nixon's or Sen. Griffin's, would the same silence have prevailed?

Is this a cover-up—either of slander by newspaper or of senatorial indiscretion? Or was this trust fund the only known example of a million-dollar free lunch?

As far as the networks are concerned, nothing has happened.