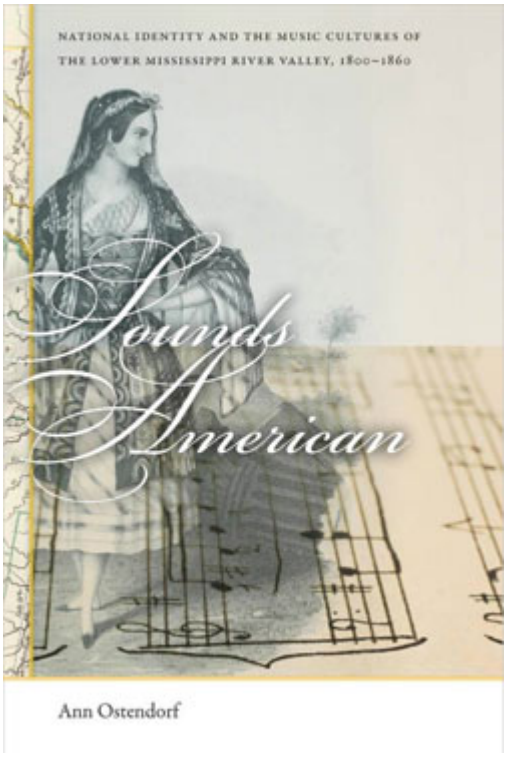
The Difference in Musical Nationalism



The early American quest for a national culture, a distinctive music, literature, and art, was much like Thomas Jefferson's for mammoths. Jefferson had seen the colossal beast's bones and was certain mammoths continued to roam out West. In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, many saw bits and pieces of what could create an American national music. The possibilities ranged from the tunes of Native Americans and slaves to the sounds of nature, especially those heard on the farm. While Jefferson looked for a large mammal—which had been around, he held, since time immemorial—boosters looked for an American national music—a culture, they held, about to appear for the first time. There was a hope that music somehow deemed national would unify the young country across diverse geographic and demographic divides, signal American genius to foreigners, and provide a cultural buttress for the democratic experiment then underway. In the end, Jefferson and American cultural nationalists found skeletons, but failed to find a whole, living thing.

Ann Ostendorf, Sounds American: National Identity and the Music Culture of the Lower Mississippi Valley, 1800-1860. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. 272 pp., $24.95.

In *Sounds American*, Ann Ostendorf launches a search for an American music in the lower Mississippi River Valley. Here she explores how music framed in the early American republic "was intimately connected to what today would best be called race or ethnicity," and was, in commercial form, a safeguard from the

very racial and ethnic types it solidified (2). The national music culture sought after by early Americans, Ostendorf concludes, existed in "the experience of categorizing difference" (7). Through an endless exercise to define what American music was not—Swiss, African, or Native American, for example—white Americans nurtured a shared cultural sense.

In 1803, President Jefferson completed the Louisiana Purchase, which brought the region in Ostendorf's study under American control—the official transfer took place on December 20. One key event for *Sounds American* happened at a public ball two weeks later in New Orleans. Tensions flared when supporters of a French and an English quadrille entered the dance floor at the same time. The two sets were at odds over which dance the band should support. "When an American raised his walking stick at the fiddler," Ostendorf writes, "bedlam ensued" (73). Calmed by William Claiborne, the new American governor, the dancers commenced with a French quadrille. But soon an American cried out for an English one. Amid the jostling, the women, in a time-honored ritual that has killed everything from elegant socials to school proms, walked out. Claiborne reported the "fracas," which he believed had a "political tendency," to Secretary of State James Madison (74).

Though hard to fathom in a twenty-first century devoid of such an entrenched dance ethos, in 1804, the French and Americans continued to battle over the form and shape of public musical life. The measures the Americans put in place after the initial fray—an increased police presence and a published dance order—only heightened the conflict. At the next public ball, the two groups stood at odds and, once again, the women left to defuse the situation. The "War of the Quadrilles," as Ostendorf titles the chapter, beautifully highlights the interplay between politics and culture. Claiborne and the Americans learned that political control does not provide cultural authority, that cultural authority may be the route to a more efficient political control, and that women wield significant cultural capital.

Ostendorf sets up the War of the Quadrilles as an instance of political power and an "example of ethnocultural conflict" (82). What's at stake in her interpretation, however, is the very thing she has set out to explain. Nationalism, whether cultural, political, or economic in form, is a process by which one of several diverse expressions achieves widespread acceptance. To be understood as music emblematic of the new nation, an English quadrille, for example, would need to speak not only for the political and social elites who battled in New Orleans, but a spectrum of the city's population, from servants and musicians to those in the middling class. Whether or not such a development took place, though, is not explained, and the volatile mix of culture and politics is largely left alone.

That Ostendorf opts to leave the details of such change unexplored is one of the great frustrations of *Sounds American*. The reader learns that Louisianans "integrated their previous identity into their understanding of what it meant to be American;" however, a careful look at the transformation of the public

ball is missing (105). In its place are a series of broad gestures that rush through time—an 1828 celebration for Andrew Jackson, the 1844 presidential election, noted for its campaign songs, and an 1850 newspaper article on "national music." To situate ethnicity, race, and music in historical context opens the way to track change over time in the musical life of the lower Mississippi River Valley. After all, in 1804 Claiborne moved into a West fraught by French colonial tradition, Native American hostilities, and a growing domestic slave trade. By 1860, New Orleans was the largest city in the South and an active hub of one of the largest slave societies in human history. How did music here transform in this tumultuous time?

Ostendorf is strongest in her analysis of a national music culture. The differentiation among racial and ethnic music genres was an important rite for those concerned with music and nation. Perhaps even more so, the buying and selling of tunes from church hymns to minstrel songs shaped a unique national music, too. Of course discomfort with the impulses of the market revolution ensured that almost no American would dare admit to it. So while the commercialization of music broke down the elitist barriers characteristic of the European concert hall tradition, the standard upheld for many American musicians, at the time few noted its democratic tendencies. They continued to look for an American music as defined by Romantic understandings of creativity—artists developed a national culture in their relationship to the American landscape, the nation's farms, lakes, mountains, deserts, and streams. The suggestion that an American national music generated from one's wallet held much less appeal.

Sounds American opens an historical inquiry into the music of a region important as a political, social, and cultural crucible in the American past. The book would prove a challenging read for undergraduates, who would be well rewarded, though, in making the effort. For historians, this book fills a glaring gap in American music history. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, New Orleans jazz culture has been well documented. From 1800 to 1860, however, when the Crescent City and its environs were central to the greater national dialogue on slavery, expansion, and the market revolution, the region's rich musical life was, until now, largely unexplored.

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