

Soul Music: Tracking the Spiritual Roots of Pop from Plato to Motown. By Joel Rudinow. Tracking Pop. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. ISBN-13978-0-472-05108-3. Softcover. Pp. xiv, 250. \$28.95.

Joel Rudinow's study of music that has "played a significant part in healing America's troubled soul" is a thought-provoking contribution to the literature on African American popular music from within the academy (2). Rudinow himself witnessed the rise of soul music as a Berkeley graduate student during the late 1960s, has performed as a blues musician for several decades, and experienced early in his academic career the difficulties of reconciling his understanding of Plato and Aristotle with a love of Robert Johnson and Michael Bloomfield. *Soul Music* relies heavily on Rudinow's own remembrances and experiences as both a musician and fan and follows a peripatetic journey of discovery. A philosopher by training, and a semi-professional pianist who is able to contribute a wealth of life experience to complex questions surrounding American music, Rudinow chronicles in *Soul Music* his own search for an understanding of the nature of soul in popular forms.

The book appears under the University of Michigan Press's relatively new Tracking Pop series and fits well into the series' goals of providing interdisciplinary foci while appealing to general readers. Rudinow's study encompasses a wide range of approaches to facilitate an understanding among artists, fans, and academics of the many ways in which soul underpins African American popular music. Reflecting Rudinow's own background, the majority of primary sources are philosophical writings and first-person musician accounts. The topics addressed are weighty, and have undoubtedly perplexed many scholars of both popular music and African American traditions. Focused on such laudable goals, Rudinow's work greatly illuminates the intersections between metaphysics and music. He also acknowledges from the outset that in order to properly circumnavigate the concept of the soul in music, he needs to consider a much wider range of music than that usually labeled "soul." Consequently, the opening chapter argues for a broader definition of soul music than that typically offered in studies such as Peter Guralnick's *Sweet Soul Music*, which uses region to determine inclusion into the soul pantheon.¹ Rudinow quickly broadens his investigation into the soul music of the 1950s and 1960s by introducing issues of metaphysics and the soul, leading into a series of philosophical questions about the existence of the soul and how various traditions understand the concept. On one hand, it is important that this investigation is incited by questions stemming from the soul music repertoire. On the other hand, readers hoping for discussion of this musical style will not find much of note in the remainder of the study.

In line with Rudinow's performance interests, five of the book's eight chapters assess the soul in the context of the blues tradition. Focusing on the myth of Robert Johnson, the second chapter considers how the soul might be intertwined with good and evil, especially in regard to age-old claims of blues musicians who have "sold their soul to the devil." The narrative of chapter 3 revolves around the story of gospel pioneer Thomas A. Dorsey, untangling the many similarities and differences between the sacred and secular forms of gospel and blues. Chapter 4 explicates the role of dissonance in what Rudinow calls "blues tonality" (80–81, 97–98), which actually considers the dissonance of the tritone from the perspective of Pythagorean harmonics. The issue of authenticity in African American

performance traditions forms the basis for chapter 6, much of which staunchly defends guitarist Michael Bloomfield from critical charges of inauthentic interpretations of blues and soul music. After a lengthy semi-autobiographical recollection of a decades-old conflict with a philosophy mentor about reading irony in Plato, chapter 7 argues that blues, too, may include powerful ironic content. Ultimately, then, in spite of Rudinow's early claim that the book is about "soul music, along with its vernacular antecedents: the spirituals, the blues, gospel music, and rock & roll" (2), the musical foundation of the book is actually the blues, creating discrepancies between the title, the introductory material, and the manner in which the argument unfolds. Nonetheless, the chapters that focus on the blues are among the strongest in the book.

Although Rudinow's study is clearly useful, there are notable omissions and overgeneralizations throughout the book. It seems odd, for example, to discuss authenticity in African American music without engaging the scholarship of Ronald Radano and Guthrie Ramsey.² In another instance, Rudinow claims that, "spirituals are older than the blues, but the blues are older than gospel music" (63)—a problematic statement not given much explanation or grounding. Similarly, in a later discussion Rudinow writes, "in the teaching of composition [the tritone] is still widely discouraged" (97). A compassionate musically trained reader might be able to glean what Rudinow means; however, inexperienced readers may well get the wrong message. In the long run, each of these instances seems symptomatic of a larger problem with the book: an overextension of academic range. There is simply too much ground covered in this brief study to gain much scholarly traction. Writing for a mixed audience of scholars, performers, and enthusiasts, Rudinow introduces an enormous range of topics, providing basic primers on disciplines and approaches such as philosophy, ethnomusicology, music theory, aesthetics, music and meaning, emotion and music, tuning, poetic meter, music therapy, and music and torture. As a book based in philosophy, Rudinow apparently intended these disciplinary précis for nonmusicologists. Thus, readers with a working knowledge of these issues may find Rudinow's discussion lacking in depth and critical commentary.

Still, *Soul Music* is an important study. While its scope is at times unwieldy, the attention that Rudinow gives to the connection between metaphysics and music yields a book that is informative and insightful, and serves as a valuable resource to music scholars seeking to better understand the interrelations between African American music and the soul.

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NOTES

1. Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1999).

2. Ronald M. Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., "The Pot Liquor Principle: Developing a Black Music Criticism in American Music Studies," *Journal of Black Studies* 35 (November 2004): 210–23.