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Stomp And Swerve: American Music Gets Hot, 1843–1924



Synopsis

The early decades of American popular music are, for most listeners, the dark ages. It wasn't until the mid-1920s that the full spectrum of this music -- black and white, urban and rural, sophisticated and crude -- made it onto records for all to hear. This book brings a forgotten music, hot music, to life by describing how it became the dominant American music -- how it outlasted sentimental waltzes and parlour ballads, symphonic marches and Tin Pan Alley novelty numbers -- and how it became rock 'n' roll. It reveals that the young men and women of that bygone era had the same musical instincts as their descendants Louis Armstrong, Elvis Presley, James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, and even Ozzy Osbourne. In minstrelsy, ragtime, brass bands, early jazz and blues, fiddle music, and many other forms, there was as much stomping and swerving as can be found in the most exciting performances of hot jazz, funk, and rock. Along the way, it explains how the strange combination of African with Scotch and Irish influences made music in the United States vastly different from other African and Caribbean music; shares terrific stories about minstrel shows, 'coon' a motley collection of performers heretofore unknown to all but the most avid musicologists and collectors.

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Customer Reviews

Hot American music, says Wondrich, has drive and swerve. Drive is the strong rhythmic component that gets the feet stomping. Swerve is the spontaneous bending of tempo, swinging of the beat, and embellishment of the musical line. Beginning with the minstrels who played "Negro" music on stage

in blackface in a spirit of parody, Wondrich traces the evolution of hot music into ragtime ("Coon" music, it was called), blues, and jazz. Scottish and Irish music influenced minstrel music, just as Afro-Caribbean music influenced the blues and jazz--the acme of hot music. Unknown rural people and people in the (noncriminal) "Underworld" developed these musical styles, and the "Topworld" embraced this music as it came to reflect on general social conditions. Much later hot music is preserved on sound recordings, which Wondrich references while discussing major performers and composers (a CD containing some of the music will be released simultaneously with the book). Aside from his use of vernacular expletives to express strong opinions, Wondrich provides good guidance as the music gets hotter. Alan Hirsch

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"A cool book . . . bringing alive the deepest roots of American rock, R&B and rap." -- Discoveries
"A hot book about hot music . . . with a rare ear for its subject." -- Seattle Weekly
"A lovingly written account." -- Esquire
"Appealingly irreverent." -- Chicago Reader
"Entertaining and engaging" -- Library Journal
"Groundbreaking." -- Robert Christgau, The Believer
"Highly logical and entertaining . . . No other author has done a better job of putting all the pieces together." -- The New York Sun
"Music book of the year? Probably Stomp and Swerve." -- Austin American-Statesman
"Saucy." -- The Village Voice
"Wondrich's own passion is infectious enough to make the reader retrieve the old marching band horn from the attic." -- Shepherd Express

I own about 300 books on American music, and this one is solidly in my top 10. Wondrich can be a bit annoying at times, but his insights are invaluable.

If you love music, you'll love this book!

American music didn't get hot suddenly in the 1950's with the arrival of Rock 'n' Roll. It didn't get sexy when Jazz provided the soundtrack to hi-jinx in the back seat of a Model A Ford in the 1920's. American music, with serendipitous blend of African and Celtic influences, has been scaring church folk and turning good girls bad since the 19th century. David Wondrich, with great wit and careful research, tells the quintessentially american story of our funky popular music.

This was a gift. My musician friend was intrigued and is looking forward to reading it on cold Winter

nights in upstate NY when he doesn't have a gig.

This book was a real disappointment, particularly because it covers some important ground and has, occasionally, some flashes of insight. But it is plagued by such major flaws that I cannot recommend it. The basic premise is outrageously reductive and simplistic, and the author uses this flawed approach as a means to pass judgment sweepingly on all sorts of music and musicians. Underlying his entire argument is the notion that black music and musicians properly belong to the "Underworld," and that anytime they display associations with "Topworld" white mainstream America, it is some kind of artistic and cultural travesty. Like so many of the late 19th and early 20th century figures he derides, this author wants his black musicians to be musically "black," and denigrates anybody and anything else that stands in the way of his offensive viewpoint. The book is also plagued by flat-out misinformation (William Shakespeare Hays was black, really??), faulty reasoning, shoddy research, cheap shots left and right, and the most annoying, smart-alecky, and off-putting writing style I think I've ever encountered in a non-fiction book. The author uses profanity as if he earns points for slipping it in at every opportunity. Clearly he thinks by doing so he connects himself to the "underworld" characters he so romanticizes. The result, though, is simply obnoxious. His desire to be smugly hip becomes downright offensive at times. After pointing out Irene Castle's frustration at having to work with the "Topworld" music direction of John Philip Sousa instead of her previous bandleader James Reese Europe, the author concludes that "once you've had black, you never go back." If you want to read a freewheeling and irreverent dissertation on similar subject matter, check out Nick Tosches's "Where Dead Voices Gather," an infinitely better and more rewarding book. For a level-headed, scholarly, and brilliant account of this material, read Tim Brooks's excellent "Lost Sounds."

This is the first book I have read that really tries to explore American popular music in the years before the known heroes made their collective (recorded) mark. This book delves into the weird worlds of minstrelsy (white, and then black performers, playing banjoes and fiddles in "blackface") and medicine shows informatively, and with a necessary combination of humor and reverence for the music and musicians. Wondrich takes us through the "Brass Band Craze" that followed the Civil War (and gave us the like of Stephen Foster and John Phillips Sousa) and Ragtime (which had its debut in the whorehouses around the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893) with witty, literate prose, and dozens and dozens of names (and when possible, the original catalog numbers of their recordings). The real aim of Wondrich's search into the annals of old American music is to

find the stuff that's "Hot". "Hot" music, by his definition, contains two ingredients: Drive and Swerve. He, of course, defines these terms too (and a handful of others, which he, quite affectively, makes his own). This lens through which he looks at the old music is what really makes it such an entertaining read (and gives such promise to all the recordings he mentions - the writing is hip, and for that reason I trust that all these 100 year old recordings he mentions will be too). In his preface, Wondrich mentions the Sex Pistols and Robert Johnson in close order. Having discovered the Blues after Punk, he realized that the edginess of Punk was not entirely new. And any investigation of the Blues will reveal that it wasn't either - at least not at the time when white folks finally started recording it. So this book digs into the "Hot" American music that was happening before, and during the years when the Blues and Jazz became commonly known as such. A wonderful, informative read.

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