



John F. Szwed. *Crossovers: Essays on Race, Music, and American Culture.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. ix + 283 pp. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3882-2.



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The Genius of Black Culture

In this collection of thirty-one short articles, essays, and reviews written over a thirty-six-year period, John Szwed consistently displays the extraordinary imagination and ingenuity that have made him one of the most respected scholars in African-American and Afro-diasporic Studies. Szwed's recent well-reviewed and influential biographies of Miles Davis and Sun Ra demonstrated his great gifts as an analyst and interpreter of the brilliance and beauty of Black culture.[1] This volume explains where, how, and why the informing logic of those books originated. *Crossovers* is both a revealing intellectual history of Szwed's development as a scholar and critic, and a unified and integrated argument on behalf of the aesthetic, moral, and political genius of the African diaspora.

Szwed's objects of inquiry range widely, crossing countries and continents, cultural genres and generations. He analyzes the anti-racist writings of Lafcadio Hearn, a nineteenth-century Irish immigrant to Ohio, and the contemporary postmodern francophone fiction of Patrick Chamoiseau from Martinique. Szwed surveys the anthropology of Black Atlantic religion, medicine,

and music; reviews performances by Sonny Rollins, Ornette Coleman, and Peter Apfelbaum; and recovers the hidden histories of jazz criticism in Czechoslovakia, the legacy of Yoruba speech in Cuba, and the dispersal of pre-jazz African-American music to India, Finland, and South Africa in the nineteenth century. Yet these diverse objects of study cohere brilliantly around a consistent set of research questions about the links between expressive culture and social identities.

With a discerning appreciation of the uses and effects of culture, Szwed demonstrates that seemingly ordinary and commonplace practices can contain significant social and historical dimensions. Some of his best insights and arguments emerge from studies of objects with little critical prestige but great cultural significance, like jump rope rhymes and dance instruction songs. From the rock musical to the middle of the road ballad, from the Lounge Lizards and Lydia Lunch to Latin jazz, from revivals of tap dancing to the censorship battles over the hip-hop group 2 Live Crew, Szwed looks beneath the surface appearances of popular culture's products and performances to find the long fetch of Afro-diasporic history in what often

seem like the most unlikely places.

Yet for all of its astounding breadth, the true significance of this book lies in its depth. Szwed traces the origins of his own positions to the anthropology of Melville Herskovits and its insistence on the survival of African forms in the Afro-diasporic world. He draws on Alan Lomax's intuition about the links between expressive culture and social structure, and turns to the rich body of evidence about art and music contained in the scholarship of Robert Farris Thompson, Marshall Stearns, and others.[2] But the most important "source" for Szwed is Black culture itself. He offers particularly original and instructive arguments about how Afro-diasporic cultures generate approaches different from Euro-American cultures to the distinctions between "work and play" on the one hand, and between "public and private" spheres on the other hand. Szwed explains how the collective creation of the blues by Black people in the United States forged an important site for a personalized view of the world, for a standardized form that prized small individualized differences. Szwed compares the blues in North America to calypso in the West Indies, noting the functions each musical form served in easing, explaining, interpreting, and influencing transformations from societies based on fixed agrarian labor to societies structured around mobile urban wage labor. His work on Sun Ra is unparalleled, unique, and essential for understanding the basic tensions within Black expressive culture and Black history.

Szwed bases his claims for the African influence on Black expressive culture on observation, archival evidence, and analysis. He makes no attempt to connect cultural creations to biological inheritance or phenotype, instead explaining clearly and precisely how cultural labor in dispersed locations has both preserved and advanced Black culture. Szwed offers, for example, a fascinating description of the presence of the Yoruba language among Santeria practitioners in Cuba, not as pristine retention of some anterior authenticity, but rather as a syncretic creation in the New World of dialect forms that had been separated by hundreds of miles in West Africa, but were "reblended" together under conditions of unfree labor in the Caribbean.

Crossovers contains so many innovative, intriguing, and generative observations and ideas, that it is difficult to do justice to them in a short review. One especially generative argument, however, appears in a piece co-authored by Roger D. Abraham about plantation culture. This essay examines the roles that acting, masquer-

ade, parody, and play fulfilled within slave and free black communities in the Caribbean. It helps explain the popularity of the "bad man" stories and the practice of "playing bad" in many forms of Afro-diasporic folklore, fiction, and songs, from the blues to hip-hop, from *rara* to reggae. The chapter offers insights into the links between carnival and insurrection in the Black Atlantic world, and in the process presents an approach to Black popular culture with enduring relevance for the present.

John Szwed has not been the only exponent of the importance of Africa in Afro-diasporic culture. His generous citations to and engagements with the work of others make it clear that he participates in a rich circle of scholarly conversation, especially among anthropologists and musicologists. The historical contexts and trajectories of black expressive culture get less attention in Szwed's work than they do in the writings of Sterling Stuckey, Theophus Smith, and Robin D.G. Kelley, but his ideas and evidence are completely compatible with the most careful historical studies.[3]

Crossovers is an unusual book, one authored by an unconventional scholar about largely understudied—and certainly under-theorized—forms of expressive culture. It is, however, an extraordinary scholarly achievement, a reliable, and even indispensable, guide to the genius of Black culture. Szwed does not just "add on" new evidence to what we already know about Afro-diasporic art, music, and dance. Instead, he organizes his analyses and critiques of artistic production in such a way as to compel us to ask different kinds of questions and to develop new ways of knowing commensurate with the complexity of the culture he so skillfully makes accessible to us.

Notes

[1]. John F. Szwed, *So What: The Life of Miles Davis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002); John F. Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998).

[2]. Among the many publications by these authors that Szwed cites, these are included: Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press [1941] 1958); Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Cycle and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1968); Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953); Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: MacMillan, 1968); Robert Farris Thompson, "The Song that Names the Land: The Visionary Presence of African-American

Art,” in *Black Art: Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art*, ed. Alvia J. Wardlaw and Robert V. Rozelle (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art; New York: Abrams, 1989).

[3]. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); Kelley,

Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Sterling Stuckey, *Going Through the Storm: The Influence of African-American Art in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

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