John Burdick


John Burdick’s The Color of Sound: Race, Religion, and Music in Brazil is an analysis of three genres of Brazilian gospel music—rap, samba, and gospel—and an exploration of “the linkages between (this) musical activity and ethnoracial consciousness” among evangelical black musicians in Brazil (17, 14). Centering his study among Brazilian Protestants (historical, Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal) in Brazil’s largest and most ethnically diverse city, São Paulo, Burdick carefully maps out the formation of identity in his ethnographic study using temporal narrative, place, and the body as primary foci (19).

Burdick’s methodological approach as an anthropologist and ethnographer is commendable. Intentionally engaging in a kind of research as praxis, he hopes his work will affirm practices that build stronger senses of black identity which in turn may contribute to the work of movements like the movimento negro evangélico (mne) and ultimately to a more equitable Brazil. He finds, with some disappointment, that only one of the musical scenes—black gospel—cultivates a strong sense of black identity. In contrast, gospel rap—as practised by practitioners from the periferia (poor urban areas)—is instead focussed on emancipating all poor residents regardless of race or ethnicity; what ties the genre together is a strong sense of place and solidarity among the poor. And finally, despite its Afro-Brazilian roots, Burdick finds that gospel samba similarly does not produce a strong sense of black identity. Gospel sambistas are instead focussed on cultivating a positive image of samba as a Brazilian music/dance which celebrates the miscegenation of the nation and reclaims the image of samba music from those who see it as both too erotic and negatively associated with Afro-Brazilian religiosity (111, 116).

As he weaves together narrative descriptions of places, friendships and experiences along with necessary contextual information about Brazil and São Paulo, Burdick is candid about his limitations as a non-ethnomusicologist. He is also aware that his own identity as a white North American (who was raised Jewish) may be seen by some as a drawback to a proper understanding and analysis of both the racialized and the Protestant religious contexts of his study. Yet, these potential impediments rarely surface; Burdick writes with an evocative clarity that allows the context and voices of his informants to shine through. His commitment to them and his passion for racial justice drive the account of his research. Still, there are a couple of instances when his use of musical terminology is jarring, for example, in his inaccurate use of “shattering melismatic fugue” (55) or his imprecise use of coloratura and melisma (141).
Nonetheless, these small glitches do not take away from his remarkable ability to effectively describe the three musical scenes, even from a technical musical point of view.

Burdick also effectively navigates the tricky terrain of interdenominational and inter-religious tensions in Brazilian Protestant settings. Without being judgmental of any particular religious practices or attitudes, he names the complexity of the differences between denominations, especially in relation to the acceptance of the musical practices he is writing about and particularly the association between samba and Afro-brazilian religious practices.

At the same time, a deeper exploration of some of the theological tensions and themes that emerge in the course of his study could have been enhanced by an engagement with other religious/theological voices that wrestle with issues of race and liberation. By drawing a little on the rich body of work on these topics by theologians from Latin America and Latino/a North America, as well as from powerful and influential African American voices, the book might have an even wider reach as well as a little more political oomph.

When Burdick does find the “music-racial theology” (148) he is looking for—in North American inspired black gospel music—it revolves around the notion of an essentialized black voice which performs black ethnoroacial identity. Burdick’s informants use black gospel as a means to: articulate black history, reread biblical sources with a black lens, strengthen a positive sense of black identity, resist racist practices inside and outside the churches, participate in projects designed to assert a positive black ethnoroacial identity, and contribute to “the collective pro-negro movement” at large (172). Admirably, Burdick allows the authority of his informants to speak clearly by not judging their approach which focuses on a strong sense of essentialized black vocality that emphasizes “physiological differences between negro and white vocal apparatuses” (142) and goes beyond phenotypical differences, arguing for fundamentally different physical attributes between races. It would have been helpful to put this kind of problematic argumentation in the context of wider highly controversial racialized discourses including prior white pseudo-science that argued that only white voices could perform certain kinds of music. Then, an essentialized black vocality—especially in miscegenated Brazil where notions of race are very complex and highly constructed—could be fruitfully understood as an inversion, subversion and reappropriation.

In the conclusion, Burdick himself identifies the limitation of this kind of essentializing approach even as he longs to make racial justice a top priority. He poses provocative questions which are appropriately self-critical but also open out possibilities for exciting collaborative and interdisciplinary research in the future. Here, the work of the Holy Spirit may be discerned in the strug-