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## MOVIN' THE MOUNTAINS: AN OVERVIEW OF RHYTHM AND BLUES AND ITS PRESENCE IN APPALACHIA

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JERRY ZOLTEN

Think of Appalachian music and, initially, the associations are likely Anglo. Terms like “bluegrass,” “country,” “old-timey,” “string band,” “hillbilly,” and “mountain music” spring to mind. However, given the enormous sweep of Appalachia—from the northeast corner of Mississippi across northern Alabama, through northern Georgia to the western corner of South Carolina, then on north through adjacent sections of North Carolina and Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky, all of West Virginia, across to Ohio, and into Pennsylvania before finally trailing off in southern New York State—logic dictates that African-American music in all its manifestations, rhythm and blues included, must have been a part of the historical regional mix. Indeed, rhythm and blues was and continues to be a viable presence in the Appalachian cultural region.

Whereas older genres of African-American music—blues, jazz, gospel—blossomed early in the twentieth century, rhythm and blues flowered at midcentury, a time when mass media sources, especially radio and records, afforded access literally to any ears that cared to listen. Riding in on the airwaves, rhythm and blues from its inception reached every corner of Appalachia. As a result, while it was initially a black performance genre marketed to black audiences, rhythm and blues rapidly developed cross-ethnic appeal, as Hugh Gregory (1998, 7) observed, “to include a young, white audience” and in the process achieved “a wider

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... influence," opening the way for early rock and roll. In fact, the two genres—rhythm and blues and rock and roll—were for a time virtually synonymous when in the early 1950s, Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed began playing rhythm and blues for white teens, calling it "rock and roll."

### Early Rhythm and Blues as a Genre

Rhythm and blues, or more familiarly, R&B, arguably had a "pure" period, according to the late musicologist and producer Arnold Shaw (1978, xv), in "the era, post-swing to pre-Beatles (1945–60), when the style flowered and established itself as an identifiable sound." Later, Shaw (1986, 166–167) defined "pure" R&B as an "indigenous black music played by small combos," and he distinguished three principal characteristics: "'The beat' (rather than the accented downbeat of pop music, accent on upbeats or afterbeats), singing style (rather than the 'resonant vibrato of pop,' a more 'raw, shouting style'), and instrumentation (electric guitar and saxophone in the spotlight)."

But the music was always more than a mere genre. "Rhythm and blues," wrote Stanley Booth (1991, 73), "is the music of the Negro masses." According to Nelson George (1988, x), R&B is a style of music but also a cultural demarcator. R&B, he wrote, has "been an integral part of (and . . . a powerful symbol for) a black community forged by common political, economic, and geographic conditions." It is not simply R&B, he contends, but a "rhythm and blues world." Indeed, R&B would be the primary music of the post-World War II generation of African Americans who fought victoriously on the domestic front for equal rights under the law.

In the years immediately following World War II, when the music began to be identified as a genre, R&B was indeed an eclectic mix centered on small combos, groups of four, five, six, or so in number. Rather than rising up out of any particular geographic region, R&B was a cumulative amalgam, bringing under one umbrella a diversity of black musical styles from across the country.

Some of the late-1940s R&B hits were straightforward instrumentals performed by combos primarily made up of drums, bass, electric guitar, acoustic piano, and saxophone. Others, the majority in fact, featured combos fronted by blues-based singers, both male and female; some were "shouters," to use Arnold Shaw's term, while others were more mellow.

Another facet of R&B was the vocal harmony group. These groups "jumped" the rhythm and infused stage performance and lyric with sexuality and innuendo, reflecting the liberated tastes of a younger genera-

tion free from the weight of war. Their most popular recordings often featured daringly suggestive titles such as "Sixty Minute Man," "Lemon Squeezin' Daddy," "Work with Me Annie," and "It Ain't the Meat, It's the Motion."

To fully appreciate the stylistic range of early R&B, one need only reference the early-1950s chart listings in *Billboard*, the music industry magazine. A scant sampling embraces electric guitar virtuosos T-Bone Walker, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, and B. B. King; Chicago- and Detroit-based bluesmen Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and John Lee Hooker; blues shouters Big Joe Turner, Wynonie Harris, and Roy Brown; mellow crooners Percy Mayfield, Charles Brown, Arthur Prysock, Al Hibbler, Billy Eckstine, and Tommy Edwards; West Coast rockers Amos Milburn, Joe and Jimmyiggins, Johnny Otis, and Roy Milton; "harder" female vocalists Ruth Brown, "Big Mama" Willie Mae Thornton, and Little Esther; "softer" vocalists Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Della Reese, and Dinah Washington; vocal harmony groups the Orioles, the Ravens, the Dominoes, the Five Keys, the Du Droppers, and the Crows; instrumental combos of Lionel Hampton, Jack McVea, Buddy Johnson, Red Prysock, and Sil Austin; boogie pianist Cecil Gant; and rock and roll pioneers like Jackie Brenston with Ike Turner's Delta Cats and—the man hailed by many as the "Father of Rhythm and Blues"—Louis Jordan with His Tympany Five. All were categorized as rhythm and blues in the years between 1950 and 1955.

### Pre-World War II Roots of Rhythm and Blues

R&B, of course, did not materialize whole cloth following the war. It was, in fact, a continuum of African-American musical styles that had, thanks to advances in media technology, risen to the fore from various geographic pockets prior to the war. R&B in the late 1940s through the mid-1950s was a synthesis of blues, territorial jazz, and gospel that found sonic distinction in technical innovations like electric instrumentation and vocal amplification.

From early country blues, R&B absorbed good-time dance rhythms, earthy lyrics, and guitar-centered instrumentation. In Appalachia, guitar blues was exemplified by brilliant purveyors of the ragtime "Piedmont" style, including Blind Boy Fuller, Gary Davis, Pink Anderson, Simmie Dooley, and Josh White—to name only a few of those who promulgated the taste for blues in the eastern mountain country.

Perhaps part of the explanation of why the guitar came to have a central role in the blues and later, the R&B of southern Appalachia lies in William Barlow's (1989, 81) observation that "the black Piedmont folk tra-

dition—instrumentally—can be traced to African slaves from the Wolof and Mandingo tribes, who brought the banjo and the kora playing style with them to America.” While the proclivity for strings may have, for this reason, been inherent to the region, the post-war popularity of the guitar may also be attributable to the allure in the flash and complexity of later Piedmont blues guitar masters. Besides those already mentioned, other itinerant East Coast guitarists—Georgia-born Buddy Moss, Floridian Blind Arthur Blake, and the guitar-harmonica duo of Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry—traversed the whole of Appalachia, playing in clubs, at social gatherings, on streets, and with traveling medicine shows, further popularizing the sound of guitar-based blues through the region.

Ira Tucker—influential lead singer of the gospel group the Dixie Hummingbirds—remembers seeing Simmie Dooley in the 1930s on the streets of his Appalachian hometown, Spartanburg, South Carolina. “Blind Simmie stayed around a little street called Short Wolford. . . . [He] would be outside in front of those juke joints. He would play his guitar and sing and then stop for maybe a half-hour and eat some peanuts. He had peanut hulls everywhere!” (Zolten 2003, 57).

The tremendously influential guitarists Blind Blake and Texas native Blind Lemon Jefferson also traveled the region extensively and are vividly remembered by whites and blacks alike from appearances in Appalachian towns like Bristol, Tennessee; Charleston, West Virginia; and Saltville, Virginia (Barlow 1989, 85; Conway 1995, 141).

The “classic” blues women were also a key influence on early R&B—performers like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, the “Mother of the Blues,” born on the fringe of Appalachia in Columbus, Georgia, and her protégée, Bessie Smith, Appalachian-born in Chattanooga, Tennessee (Albertson 1974, 24). These women and others like them put the blues on stage, where they were decked out in rhinestones and sequins and appeared in full “empress” regalia. Their songs were minidramas about love gone wrong, bad behavior, hard times, excess, and sexual celebration, ingredients that would all find their way into the R&B canon decades later.

Also a wellspring for R&B were the territorial jazz bands of the 1930s and 1940s, bands with big-beat rhythm, horn instrumentation, and full-voiced singers. Of all the territorial styles, the one most central to R&B was the “stomping” Kansas City sound, pioneered on record by the Benny Moten band with tracks like “Vine Street Blues,” “Moten Stomp,” “Kansas City Squabble,” and “Break a Day Shuffle.” When Moten died in the mid-1930s, Count Basie, a Kansas City transplant originally from Red Bank, New Jersey, inherited the band. By “swinging the blues” and featuring horn players like saxophonist Lester Young, trumpeter Buck Clayton, and vocalist Jimmy “Mr. 5 X 5” Rushing, Basie rose to fame

through the 1940s and helped establish the groove and instrumental sound that would characterize many early R&B combos. Also out of Kansas City came Big Joe Turner, stylistic successor to Jimmy Rushing, who in 1954 had one of the genre-defining hits of early R&B, "Shake, Rattle, and Roll."

By the postwar era, big (ten to twenty instruments) swing bands began to go the way of the dinosaur, too lumbering and large to be economically sustainable, especially in the face of changing tastes. With technical innovations like electrically amplified guitars and "miked" voices in combination with smart instrumental arrangements, small combos learned how to sound "large" and complex. A leader in this new direction was Louis Jordan, who, as vocalist and lead saxophone, guided his Tympany Five to the forefront of early R&B. Among the Arkansas-born Jordan's many hits was "Salt Pork, West Virginia," which reached the number-two position on *Billboard's* "Harlem Hit Parade" in 1946 (Whitburn 1996, 235).

Another vital element in the evolution of R&B was African-American gospel. Vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, veteran of the Benny Goodman band and, like Louis Jordan, a pioneer of postwar small-combo R&B, described how gospel informed his sound: "I was brought up in the holiness church . . . where I'd always try to sit by the sister who played the big bass drum. . . . I always had that beat in me. That heavy backbeat is pure sanctified, Church of God in Christ" (quoted in Palmer 1995, 47). Hampton (Bessie Smith's husband's nephew) incorporated that gospel rhythm into his R&B sound.

Also drawing heavily from gospel, particularly the southern a cappella quartet variety, were the early R&B vocal groups. They adopted quartet gospel's approach to harmonizing, but also its coordination of stage movements, use of uniforms, and esteem for impassioned vocals—"doo-wop," as it came to be known, because of the generic syllables the singers used as a vehicle to drive the rhythm of the song.

A cappella quartet gospel has strong roots in the traditions of southernmost Appalachia in Birmingham, Alabama, and the surrounding countryside. There in the 1920s, groups like the Birmingham Jubilee Singers, the Bessemer Sunset Four, and the Famous Blue Jay Singers helped change the face of African-American religious music performance. They sang a cappella, used syllables like "boom-a-clanka-lanka-lanka" to propel their songs, and in the process, solidified the vocal group configuration: lead voice out front, call-and-response back-up harmonies in support behind. Role models of elegance in fine matching suits, they did not, like their forebears, stand flat-footed as they sang but rather coordinated their moves and worked the audience, the lead singers

pleading, growling, shouting, dropping to their knees—anything to take it over the top and drive the audience to a spiritual epiphany.

These Alabama groups made phonograph records, and their style spread north and east. In time, cities and towns throughout southern Appalachia developed their own distinct styles of soulful quartet gospel, turning out singers who would be important to later R&B vocal styles. An excellent case in point are the sister cities of Spartanburg and Greenville, South Carolina, home to both Julius “June” Cheeks, who would find fame with Philadelphia’s Sensational Nightingales and influence soul singer Wilson Pickett, and Ira Tucker of the Dixie Hummingbirds, who coached Bobby “Blue” Bland and was emulated by R&B singers like Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson, and Stevie Wonder. Also hailing from Spartanburg was Hummingbird’s bass singer William Bobo, who mentored Melvin Franklin of the Temptations.

The northern Alabama emotive lead-vocal gospel style also influenced a number of important soul vocalists who in the 1960s emerged from Appalachian Alabama. These include Arthur Alexander and Jimmy Hughes (Florence); Eddie Kendricks, C. L. Blast, Frederick Knight, Shorty Long, and Nell Carter (Birmingham); Percy Sledge (Leighton); and Candi Staton (Hanceville) (Alabama Music Hall of Fame n.d.).

### Changing from “Race Music” to “Rhythm and Blues”

At its inception, the music that came to be known as rhythm and blues was an amalgam of blues, territorial jazz, and gospel, an extension of African-American music marketed by the record industry as “race records” from 1920 to post–World War II. Producer Jerry Wexler, then working as a reporter for *Billboard*, claimed credit for coining the term “rhythm and blues” as a replacement for “race”: “‘Race Records’ didn’t sit well. Maybe ‘race’ was too close to ‘racist.’ In 1949, my suggestion for change was adopted by *Billboard*; I came up with a handle I thought suited the music well—‘rhythm and blues’” (Wexler and Ritz 1993, 62).

Starting in 1950, *Billboard* began publishing both a “pop” and an “R&B” chart. “Rock and roll” was not yet a category, and at that time, few African-American artists ever appeared on both the pop and R&B charts; they were truly separate worlds. *Billboard*’s top pop year-end single in 1950 was a rendition of songster Leadbelly’s “Goodnight, Irene” by the Anglo folk group the Weavers, featuring Pete Seeger. Other top pop artists included Guy Lombardo, Red Foley, Sammy Kaye, the Andrews Sisters, and Kaye Starr. The only two African Americans to chart were Billy Eckstine and Nat King Cole, stylistically both more in the category of smooth crooners than rougher-edged R&B.

The R&B 1950 year-end chart, on the other hand, was an entirely different matter, as few of the African-American artists were even known by the Anglo mainstream. Nat King Cole's "Mona Lisa," number two in pop, only charted at fourteen in R&B. Top R&B spots went to the instrumental "Pink Champagne" by Joe Liggins; "Double Crossing Blues" by Little Esther, Mel Walker, and Johnny Otis; "Hard Luck Blues" by Roy Brown; "Blue Light Boogie" by Louis Jordan; "Everyday I Have the Blues" by Lowell Fulson; "I Wanna Be Loved" by Dinah Washington; "The Fat Man" by Fats Domino; and "Teardrops from My Eyes" by Ruth Brown (Edwards 1974, 15–16).

Given his stylistic distance from R&B, it is ironic that Nat Cole would be singled out for an anti-rock-and-roll attack by a racist group in southern Appalachia, indicative perhaps of an acute misunderstanding of the music in the region at that time. Cole was assaulted onstage during a 1956 performance at the Birmingham, Alabama, Municipal Auditorium by members of the racist North Alabama Citizen's Council, who were motivated by fears that "animalistic" R&B music was becoming too popular with white teenagers ("The South" 1956).

### The Changing Face of R&B

Over the next few years, vocal groups began to dominate *Billboard's* R&B charts—the Dominoes, Clovers, Five Keys, Four Blazes, Orioles, and by 1953, the Five Royales, the first R&B group with Appalachian roots to chart nationally.

Centered around three brothers, Clarence, Curtis, and Lowman Pauling, the Five Royales began as a gospel group, the Royal Sons, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. They performed strictly gospel until they moved to New York City and signed with Apollo Records. A series of secular releases began in 1951, but they did not chart until 1953, with "Too Much Lovin'."

The Five Royales—lead vocal up front, backing voices behind, electric guitar, drums, and bass—had continuing success through the 1950s, eventually leaving Apollo for the King/Federal labels out of Cincinnati and in time seeing two of their gospel-inflected 1957 releases, "Dedicated to the One I Love" and "Think," become important R&B/rock and roll hits for, respectively, the "girl" group the Shirelles (1961) and soul pioneer James Brown (1960).

More by coincidence than by design, the King/Federal labels had a few chart successes in the 1950s with R&B artists with Appalachian ties. Hank Ballard of the Midnighters, for instance, was raised on gospel in Bessemer, Alabama, before moving to Detroit and generating a string of



R&B hits that included "Work with Me Annie" (1954), "Annie Had a Baby" (1954), "Finger Poppin' Time" (1960), and "The Twist" (1960), an all-time classic that he is credited with writing. Ballard also found inspiration in the singing of fellow Appalachians the Dixie Hummingbirds. "I was hooked on the Hummingbirds," he says. "I would use their melodies. . . . I was so crazy about 'em, I would . . . take their songs and re-lyric it. Instead of saying 'God,' I said 'baby'" (quoted in Zolten 2003, 263).

King Records also factored into the career of Nina Simone, born Eunice Kathleen Waymon on February 21, 1933, in the Appalachian mountain resort town of Tryon, North Carolina. She was the sixth of eight children; her father was John Divine Waymon, a song-and-dance man turned truck driver turned barber, and her mother, Mary Kate, was a church elder and a Methodist minister (Simone 1991, 15). Place was integral to the musical evolution of Nina Simone. In 1929, her parents moved to Tryon from Inman, South Carolina. Simone's father had been plying the Carolina mountains as a freight hauler until he heard from a friend that Tryon needed a town barber. He took the job in hopes of saving enough money to start his own trucking business, but the barbering took, and the business soon expanded to include dry-cleaning. The Waymon family settled into Tryon just as the Great Depression began.

Tryon, named for a nearby mountain peak, was a small town on the border between the Carolinas, about thirty miles southeast of Asheville and about the same distance north of Greenville, South Carolina. Simone remembered the "special nature" of Tryon compared with other southern towns of that time and place. "As a resort town," according to Simone, "Tryon had developed in an uncommon way." For instance, there was not a black side of town: it was more like a series of circles around the center with blacks or whites living in these circles. And a few blacks lived near the center, almost in the white areas. It was a checkerboard type of living, with areas that were totally white and a few pockets of blacks. According to Simone, "The place existed mainly by taking care of the needs of visitors, so in their everyday lives black and white townspeople mixed together all the time. . . . However, in the schools, hotels, restrooms—all the places people come into intimate contact—Tryon was like any other southern town at that time—segregated" (4).

Nevertheless, Simone recalled, blacks and whites did intermingle in some social circumstances—athletic competitions, community events, church services, and the like. In those arenas, she remembered, "relations between the black and white community were always very cordial" (5).

Tryon had its ups and downs as a resort town, far less populated in the cold months and, as a luxury destination, more vulnerable to economic

downturns. The depression took its toll, and after a few years of relative prosperity, the Waymon family fell on hard times and moved from a large house in town to a shabby “tiny house in Lynn, a small settlement about thirteen miles east of Tryon” (11).

The Waymons, including all of the children, were a musical family, with both parents playing piano and singing in the church choir. By age six, Eunice Waymon had also begun playing piano in church. She was considered a prodigy by the townspeople and was supported in her musical studies through the “Eunice Waymon Fund,” established by Muriel Massinovitch, an Englishwoman émigré and Eunice’s piano teacher, whom Eunice affectionately called “Miz Mazzy.”

From Miz Mazzy, Simone learned the classics, but gospel was in her heart. She viewed gospel music as “mostly improvisation within a fixed framework, . . . part of church, . . . part of normal life.” According to Simone, “gospel taught me about improvisation, how to shape music in response to an audience and then how to shape the mood of the audience in response to my music. . . . I learned valuable lessons in musical technique. . . . A time would come when I would start to look for my own musical voice, and the lessons I learned from gospel music would help me find it” (19).

In time and with the help of the fund, Simone left Tryon to develop her musical skills, a path that ultimately led to New York City and study at the Juilliard School of Music (37–38). By the early 1950s, Simone had parlayed her credentials into a teaching position in Philadelphia before turning to the East Coast club and cabaret circuit, where she transformed herself into a blues, jazz, and rhythm-and-blues professional. In 1954, she took a regular gig at the Midtown Bar in Atlantic City, New Jersey; to conceal her identity from her religious mother, she adopted the name Nina Simone—“Nina” from Spanish for “little,” “Simone” from French actress Simone Signoret (Nathan 1999, 47).

Simone developed her broad repertoire—material ranging from spirituals and gospel to folk ballads, show tunes, and R&B—in the context of her nightclub act. Whatever she sang, she stamped with her folksy, blues-inflected voice, distinctively resonant with a quavering vibrato that revealed in turns the dramatic highs and lows of her vocal timbre.

Her entrée into professional recording came in 1958 with a long-playing album—*I Loves You Porgy*—on the Bethlehem label. Bethlehem, a prestigious jazz imprint started by Gus Wildi in the early 1950s, had a roster that included vocalists Carmen MacRae, Chris Conner, Mel Torme, Bob Dorough, and Billy Eckstine and instrumentalists Dexter Gordon, Roland Kirk, Charles Mingus, Herbie Mann, Art Blakey, Milt Hinton, Errol Garner, Zoot Sims, and Duke Ellington, among others. By 1958,

Bethlehem had come under partial control of King Records. Simone recalls being signed by King label founder and R&B production pioneer Syd Nathan. Nathan, she remembers, "turned up at my house" and after a back and forth in which she rejected Nathan's ideas of what she should record, Simone signed and recorded the *Porgy* LP, essentially consisting of the set she had been performing in East Coast supper clubs (Simone 1991, 59). The Gershwin track, "I Loves You Porgy," was a break-out hit for Simone and placed at number thirteen on the *Billboard* year-end R&B chart (Edwards 1974, 92).

Simone continued to evolve as an artist, over the years recording for a succession of labels: Colpix, the Columbia Pictures subsidiary, from 1959 to 1963; the Phillips label in 1964; and RCA records starting in 1966. At times, her demeanor could be gruff, her behavior enigmatic, but her talent, spirit, and political resolve were beyond reproach, her work in the name of civil rights superlative and the inspiration for some of her most powerful original recorded work. In 1963, Simone made an impact with the controversial "Mississippi Goddam," her response to the murders of Medgar Evers in Mississippi and the four children who died in the Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing. She made the R&B charts in 1969 with "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black," a song inspired by friend Lorraine Hansberry's play of the same name.

Over the years, Simone made other notable excursions into R&B. She hit in 1960 with the blues standard "Trouble in Mind," and in 1961, she recorded "Come on Back, Jack," an answer to Ray Charles' "Hit the Road, Jack." "Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," recorded in 1964, was written for Simone by one of the legendary Motown "Funk Brothers," drummer Benny Benjamin. A tepid cover version became a hit for British rockers the Animals in 1965, much to the chagrin of Simone (1991, 116). The 1966 Phillips LP release *High Priestess of Soul* included Simone's versions of Chuck Berry's "Brown Eyed Handsome Man" and Nat Adderly and Oscar Brown Jr.'s "Work Song."

Perhaps Simone's most memorable foray into R&B material is her 1965 cover of Screamin' Jay Hawkins' 1956 classic, "I Put a Spell on You." Simone's version features a lush horn and string background, sparse tinkling single notes on the piano, a stuttering R&B sax solo compellingly at odds with the orchestral backdrop, and a vocal that builds to a crescendo of pleading scat cries before winding down to a velvety resolution.

Over the decades, Simone achieved international renown, moving to Bouc-Bel-Air in southern France in 1993. Musically active until the end of her life, she died on April 21, 2003, in Carry-le-Rouet, France.

In a sense, Nina Simone's legacy has been carried forward through the work of another important R&B figure from the Carolina Appalachians—

Roberta Flack. Born on February 10, 1939, in Black Mountain, just above Asheville, North Carolina, Flack shares a number of parallels with Simone. Like Simone's, Flack's mother was a church pianist; her father was a secular player, a "very primitive Art Tatum," Flack said in a 1972 interview (Nathan 1999, 319). Flack was also considered a prodigy, in her case, playing self-taught piano in church by age four. And, like Simone, Roberta Flack achieved fame as a pianist/vocalist with a distinctive style and a broad range of material that made her difficult to categorize.

Roberta Flack lived in Asheville until the age of five, when her family moved first to Richmond, Virginia, and then to Arlington, just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. Despite her frequent moves, the music of the church remained her bedrock influence, although not necessarily the music of her family's African Methodist Episcopal denomination. Flack professes to have been drawn to the more "raunchy, wide-open, free, spontaneous, full-of-life thing that you would hear at the Baptist church down the street," and she recalls going to programs where she could see gospel diva Mahalia Jackson or Sam Cooke fronting the Soul Stirrers (320).

Like other R&B artists of the period, Flack was impacted as much by music via media as by in-person performances. She especially remembers her parents' 78-rpm record collection. Later in her career, Flack covered some of the 1940s pre-R&B sides that she heard as a child at home, tunes like "I Don't Care Who Knows (Baby I'm Yours)" by Buddy and Ella Johnson and "Cottage for Sale" by Billy Eckstine.

Studying piano formally at a young age, by the 1950s, Roberta Flack had moved more fully into the sphere of classical music. Enrolling early as a student at Howard University in Washington, D.C., Flack would in a short time change her major from piano to voice. At Howard, she involved herself in numerous musical activities that included assisting the conductor of the university choir and accompanying a variety of operatic, pop, and jazz vocalists (320).

Graduating from Howard at age nineteen, Roberta Flack began her professional career, again like Nina Simone, as a public school teacher. After a particularly trying few years in Farmville, North Carolina, a town that Flack described as "very segregated, very backward," she returned to urban Washington, D.C., initially teaching in the school system but gradually finding work as a performer in local nightspots. By the late 1960s, her broad set list included Sinatra's "All the Way," Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne," Oscar Brown Jr.'s "Afro-Blue," and Bacharach and David's "A House Is Not a Home," mixed with R&B classics like Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" and Marvin Gaye and Tammy Terrell's "Ain't No Mountain High Enough."

Performing in Washington, D.C., Roberta Flack caught the notice of keyboardist Les McCann, who, recently signed to the label, introduced her at Atlantic Records, one of the important early R&B independents. With a roster that at the time included Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin, Atlantic Records was a growing corporate powerhouse in rock, jazz, and R&B. Flack's initial Atlantic album release, *First Take* in 1969, established her signature sound: a jazz sensibility and sophisticated musicianship combined with an understated emotionality. In terms of R&B, rather than letting the genre define her, Flack drew from the genre, transforming the material into her own satiny warm sound.

Flack's first R&B chart breakthrough came in the form of a duet with the late Chicago-born Donny Hathaway, a student friend from Howard University whose credentials included a stint with R&B master Curtis Mayfield. The track, recorded at the suggestion of Aretha Franklin's producer, Jerry Wexler, was a cover of Carole King's "You've Got a Friend" and peaked at number nine on the R&B charts in 1971 (Edwards 1974, 333).

Flack's second solo album release, *Chapter Two*, in 1972 placed in the top-ten on both the rock and roll and R&B charts, while a single from *First Take*, Ewan McCall's "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face," placed at forty-four on *Billboard's* year-end R&B chart and at number one on the year-end rock and roll chart (355–357). That same year, another of her collaborative efforts with Donny Hathaway also charted. From the album *Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway*, "Where Is the Love" spent fourteen weeks on the *Cashbox* "black contemporary singles" chart, peaking at number one and outperforming, at least in R&B, her solo single, "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" (Albert and Hoffman 1986, 166). In 1973, Flack's move to pop stardom was assured with the release of a fifth album, the title track emerging as her signature tune, "Killing Me Softly with His Song."

Roberta Flack has performed and recorded continuously since the 1970s. In the 1980s, she scored a number of hits with another Appalachian R&B artist, Peabo Bryson, born in 1951 in Greenville, South Carolina. Bryson credits an unheralded hometown R&B star, Moses Dillard, with giving him his start. "He was the first person I knew," says Bryson, "who actually . . . made records and had success with records. . . . I worked with him for many, many years. . . . Moses Dillard was a guitar virtuoso, . . . one of the most famous unfamous people that I knew of. Led Otis Redding's band for a while. Led Al Green's band. You name it and he's done it" (quoted in Jacobs n.d.). Flack and Bryson first cracked the R&B charts in 1980 with "Make the World Stand Still" and again in 1981 with "Love Is a Waiting Game" (Albert and Hoffmann 1986, 166).

Roberta Flack last charted in 1982 with "I'm the One" and "Making Love." In the mid-1990s, she commented on the state of R&B: "It's not the sound of the voice," she said, "it's the truth in the performance that counts. . . . You have to live the song. . . . I'm not gonna try and stop these kids from making millions. . . . That's not something black people, who've been responsible for making the biggest difference in American music, have enjoyed. Our young people are making money that Nat Cole should've made, that Bessie Smith and Smokey Robinson should've made" (quoted in Nazareth 1995).

In 2004, Roberta Flack continues to tour and perform worldwide at arts centers, jazz festivals, theaters, civic auditoriums, and college campuses, often in the company of past collaborators and with the backing of symphony and pop orchestras.

Without equivocation, the most important R&B artist to emerge from Appalachia was James Brown, born in South Carolina (Barnwell, May 3, 1933) and raised in Georgia (Augusta). His entrée into professional R&B came through the generous intercession of the Byrd family—Bobby Byrd in particular—of Toccoa, Georgia, a small town "near the South Carolina border in the Appalachian foothills" (Brown 1986, 44), almost straight north from Athens and southwest from Greenville-Spartanburg, South Carolina. By the early 1950s, Toccoa, also the birthplace of classic blues singer Ida Cox, had a lively R&B and gospel scene (Georgia Music Hall of Fame n.d.).

James Brown took a nefarious route to Toccoa. In his teens, Brown was involved with a gang of petty lawbreakers. When he was sixteen, Brown was sentenced to prison, where, to lift his spirits, he joined a gospel quartet. In 1951, Brown was transferred to the Boys Industrial Institute, a prison camp near Toccoa. There, inmates had a modicum of supervised freedom, especially in the realm of sports, where the "camp boys," as the locals called them, had opportunities to play baseball and basketball against outside teams. It was in this context that James Brown first met local keyboardist Bobby Byrd. Byrd, born in Toccoa on August 15, 1934, remembers well their first encounter:

He played ball for the camp. When we played baseball, we had a little run-in, because I was headin' for one base and he was tryin' to catch me, and we run into each other and knocked each other down. He extended his hand and I got up, and we talked a little while. And he said if he had someone to speak for him—that and a job—then they would let him out. And, of course, me and my family rallied. I brought him to my house and he lived with me. (Byrd 2003)

Byrd at the time had two groups going—one gospel, the Gospel

Starlighters, and the other secular, the Avons. The Starlighters began “in school and at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, where I was the keyboard player and minister of music for the choir.” In time, as the boys matured and as R&B became more the fashion, the Starlighters evolved into the Avons. “We started out singing the old blues,” remembers Byrd, “straight-up blues—B. B. King and Jimmy Reed. That kind of thing. I used to do Joe Turner’s ‘Shake Rattle and Roll.’ Used to have a ball with that one” (Byrd 2003).

Eventually, Byrd invited James Brown to join the Avons. After his entry, the group shifted focus and began emulating the top R&B groups of the day, performing covers of, among others, the Moonglows, the Dells, and the Five Royales. For the most part, the Avons heard their favorite groups on radio or recordings, but sometimes they traveled to see them in person.

In his autobiography, James Brown recalls traveling “sixty miles to the Greenville Textile Hall” (Brown 1986, 62), where he and Byrd heard all the hottest R&B acts of the day, including the Clovers, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, Bill Doggett, and Faye Adams. Little Richard, from nearby Macon, also performed frequently in the area.

Radio was also influential. Brown recalls tuning in to late-night stations that drifted into Toccoa from around the country. WLAC in Nashville, Tennessee, was a particular favorite. WERD, the first black-owned radio station in the country, was in nearby Atlanta, Georgia. What did not come via radio came instead from coin-operated jukeboxes, a popular medium for R&B at that time.

With an R&B set list culled from media and in-person sources, Bobby Byrd, James Brown, and company toured the region initially as the Avons, then as the Toccoa Band, and finally as the Flames. As their reputation spread, the Flames expanded their touring range. “We played the colleges down in Athens, the fraternities,” recalls Bobby Byrd (2003), “American Legion clubs, and high school gyms and proms. Gainesville, Georgia, had the best American Legion club, and in Atlanta, we played the Royal Peacock. Albany was good and in Macon [home base of Little Richard and Otis Redding], Adam’s Lounge.”

In 1956 at a Macon, Georgia, radio station, the Flames recorded “Please, Please, Please,” a gospel-infused R&B original loosely based on the blues classic, “Baby, Please Don’t Go.” Lead singer James Brown delivered a tormented vocal performance, each pleading cry in turn more heartrending than the last. King/Federal talent scout Ralph Bass heard the recording a few months later and immediately signed the Flames. With that signing, the group was now positioned to extend its reach and influence

beyond Appalachia, ultimately shaping the sound of R&B into the 1960s and beyond.

In fact, ten years later in 1965 and 1966, James Brown and the Famous Flames charted two progressive “funky” precision-rhythm R&B hits, “Poppa’s Got a Brand New Bag” and “I Got You (I Feel Good),” which would establish the rhythmic underpinning for rap and hip-hop, the styles that dominated R&B as the genre moved into the twenty-first century.

Bobby Byrd (2003) saw the transition of the Flames from soulful doo-wop to funk as a matter of foregrounding the group’s syncopated weave. “I was a pretty good rhythm man,” he says, “and had real good ideas about rhythm.”

Most of the things the drummers would do was straight up back beat, and me, being pretty good with rhythm, we would double up those beats, . . . and while everybody else is doing the straight back-beat, we had the most funk. What we did, everybody played a different part. Like the bass player, you play this lick; the guitar, you play this; drummer, you do this; piano/keyboard player, you do this lick. And we would have two guitar players and they would do two different lines. And that brought the rhythm together and no one else was doing that. Other groups would do the whole thing at one time, but we had ours separated and James would come in—and with those horns. That’s the way we put that funk together.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Bobby Byrd/James Brown aggregation helped shape the future of African-American music. During that same period, Johnnie Johnson, another African-American R&B artist with Appalachian roots, would, with his partner Chuck Berry, help shape the sound of Anglo rock and roll exemplified by later groups such as the Beach Boys, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones.

Pianist Johnnie Johnson spent his formative years in West Virginia. Born in Fairmont on July 8, 1924, Johnson, one of three children, was raised by an aunt following the death of his mother. His father, Johnnie Johnson Sr., had moved to West Virginia from West Point in Appalachian Mississippi to work in the coal mines, not an unusual circumstance as thousands of other African-American families had done the same in the 1920s and 1930s.

Johnson recalled that the predominant music both in person and on the radio was “hillbilly.” In fact, the WWVA Jamboree, one of the Nashville-based Grand Ole Opry’s prime on-air competitors, originated from nearby Wheeling, West Virginia. Nonetheless, Johnnie Johnson still had numerous opportunities to hear African-American musicians, most often on radio and records but also through live performance (Johnson 2003).



West Virginia's sizable African-American population made coal country a popular destination for touring gospel quartets like the Dixie Hummingbirds and the Heavenly Gospel Singers. Claude Jeter, leader of the Swan Silvertones, based his group for a time in West Virginia, making his home in the town of Coalwood. Black gospel quartets usually performed for black audiences but also occasionally for whites and were often paid not in cash but in "scrip," redeemable only at the mining company stores (Zolten 2003, 77).

Johnnie Johnson (2003) remembers seeing some of these gospel groups but also secular groups, most notably the swing combos of leaders like Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, and others. While the gospel groups appeared at smaller venues like churches and high school auditoriums, the swing bands, because they had "crossover" appeal, would play segregated shows in larger auditoriums and theaters.

Johnson's early musical development was largely in the context of school: "The schools were separated—black and white. My school was Dunbar. They were teaching us regular tunes like 'Stardust,' 'Sunny Side of the Street,' 'Stardust on the Delta'—just the songs that were popular back in those days" (Johnson 2003). Johnson left Fairmount in 1941 to join the military. Following the war, he settled in St. Louis, where he began playing piano professionally.

In 1953, Johnson was the leader of a blues combo, Sir John's Trio, when he invited electric guitarist Chuck Berry into the group. It is interesting to note that, with Berry in the group, they occasionally played blues with a "hillbilly" rhythm, attributable in part to Berry, who was a country and western fan, and in part to Johnson, who, of course, knew the style from West Virginia. Their unusual amalgam of blues and country and western would become the signature of Chuck Berry's R&B/rock and roll sound.

Chuck Berry and Johnnie Johnson broke onto the *Billboard* charts with "Maybellene" in 1955, the year the magazine first introduced a rock and roll, as distinguished from a rhythm and blues, chart. "Maybellene" peaked briefly at number three in September on the rock and roll chart but rose to number one that same month in R&B and stayed there through the end of October. "Maybellene" was the first of a string of Chuck Berry/Johnnie Johnson classics that extended well into the 1960s, including hits like "Roll over Beethoven," "Sweet Little Sixteen," and "Johnny B. Goode." In every case, the song charted higher and remained longer on the R&B charts than on the rock and roll charts.

In the early 1970s, Bill Withers, another important R&B artist with West Virginia roots, broke into the *Billboard* charts. "Ain't No Sunshine" peaked at number six on the R&B charts in September 1971, faring a little better at number three in the rock and roll top ten. The next year,

Withers charted twice more with "Lean on Me" and "Use Me," both placing higher in R&B than in rock and roll and firmly establishing him as an R&B star.

Bill Withers was born on July 4, 1938, in Slabfork, West Virginia, and raised in nearby Beckley, one of the region's largest coal-mining towns. Like Johnnie Johnson, Withers' father was a coal miner. Also like Johnson, Withers found his musical *métier*, in his case as a singer/songwriter, after leaving Appalachia to serve in the military. In 1967, following a nine-year navy hitch that took him to the Far East, Withers moved to Los Angeles to be close to the music business. There, he caught the attention of talent manager and Sussex label owner Clarence Avant, who on the advice of Stax producer Al Bell, connected Withers with Booker T. Jones (of the MGs), who was looking to expand his career into record production.

Withers' storytelling ability was one of his qualities that impressed Bell and others. "Just about every song was a story," said Al Bell of Withers' demo tape. "Bill Withers is a genius storyteller," said Avant, who compared Withers to African-American writers like Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and Maya Angelou (quoted in Waller 2003, 69). His storytelling could just as likely be traced to his Appalachian childhood, evident in hit songs like "Grandma's Hands," in which Withers captured both the plaintive expressiveness of an African-American hymn and the sentimentality of an Appalachian hill country ballad.

Grandma's hands clapped to church on Sunday mornings,  
Grandma's hands played the tambourine so well,  
Grandma's hands used to issue out a warning,  
Grandma's hands, they keep on calling me.

As Withers himself acknowledged, his appeal lay in "his own duality—he enjoyed a rural childhood and blossomed as an adult in an urban-international environment" (Bill Withers Music n.d.).

### R&B in Urban Appalachia

As the Appalachian range angles to the northeast out of West Virginia, it cuts a broad swath through Pennsylvania that includes the region's largest city—Pittsburgh. Thousands of African Americans moved to Pittsburgh from the South during the period between World War I and World War II to work the steel mills, which were then hiring without discrimination to meet the increased demands brought on by the war. The result was that by the beginning of the rhythm and blues era in the mid-1940s, Pittsburgh had long been home to a vibrant African-American community, the Hill District, just east of the city's Golden Triangle.

During R&B's heyday, Pittsburgh's total population ranged from 677,000 in 1950, dropping to just above 600,000 by 1960; African Americans composed between 10 and 15 percent of the population throughout that period.

In those days, the Hill District and smaller African-American communities in nearby cities—McKeesport, Duquesne, Homestead, and Wilkesburg—were rich with talent in every genre of black music. The gospel community, in addition to numerous local quartets and choirs, which then included Claude Jeter and the Swan Silvertones, relocated to Pittsburgh from West Virginia. The city was also an important jazz center, with small clubs like the Crawford Grill, theaters like the Roosevelt, and a roster of homegrown talent that included artists of national renown, including Earl Hines, Errol Garner, Mary Lou Williams, Roy Eldridge, Art Blakey, Ahmad Jamal, Ray Brown, Dodo Marmarosa, Stanley Turrentine, Billy Eckstine, Maxine Sullivan, Dakota Staton, and Eddie Jefferson. Some of these artists dabbled in R&B, and local jazz favorites such as Harold Betters and Walt Harper fronted bands that backed up local and touring R&B acts on stage and in the studio.

Pittsburgh's postwar African-American community also had its own media, most notably in the *The Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper, established in 1910 and distributed nationally by 1930, and a number of radio stations, especially WHOD, whose call letters were changed in 1956 to WAMO. Radio and print media helped make R&B a mainstay in the steel city. The newspaper published profiles of favorite artists and publicized when and where R&B acts could be seen locally, and radio stations played the music all day and into the night. WAMO disc jockeys, such as Bill Powell and Sir Walter, were African American, but the station also featured a white program host, Craig "Porky" Chedwick, the self-proclaimed "Dad-dio of the Rad-dio."

Affecting an on-air "black" persona, Chedwick jive talked in rhyme, playing R&B vocal and jump groups for a primarily Anglo teen audience. In the late 1950s and into the early 1960s, the Porky Chedwick Show aired during primetime after-school hours. On weekends, Chedwick appeared in person at racially mixed teen record hops held at school gyms, church social halls, VFWs, and small clubs throughout the Pittsburgh area.

Chedwick's R&B play list, ranging from Big Joe Turner to Professor Longhair to the Moonglows, grew so popular that in the early 1960s, a record shop, Parkway Records, specialized in Chedwick selections. Displayed on the wall behind the counter were Porky's top 45-rpm R&B favorites, each title pinned to the wall and assigned a number. Record buyers, mostly white teens, would peruse the display and order by number, paying a sliding scale depending on the rarity of the record. It is

interesting that Chedwick never disclosed on air the original release date of a record. Most of his white teen fans had no idea that many of the titles that they bought were already half a decade or more old. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the culture of R&B was so removed from their own that every record seemed fresh, exciting, and attractively rebellious relative to the mainstream pop fare of the day.

Pittsburgh itself was home to numerous R&B performers, but only a handful achieved national fame. One who did was Tommy Hunt of the R&B vocal group the Flamingos. Hunt grew up in Perrysville, a small town north of Pittsburgh, where he learned to sing "in a little Baptist church out in the country" (Zolten 2003, 152). By his teens, Hunt had moved to the Hill District, where he was turned on to R&B by one of WHOD/WAMO's African-American disc jockeys, Mary Dee, née Dudley, who began working at the station in 1948. She mentored Hunt and eventually helped him make the connections that led him to the Chicago-based Flamingos; he joined them in time to record R&B ballad classics like "I Only Have Eyes for You" and "Lovers Never Say Goodbye" (151–152).

Most of Pittsburgh's R&B artists who achieved lasting success on the local scene failed to break through nationally. The La Rells and the Five Mellows/Four Dots are typical. The La Rells, from the Homewood section of Pittsburgh, made their debut in 1956, inspired by the recording success of fellow Pittsburgher Dakota Staton. In late 1957, the group appeared on a talent show at the Holy Cross Church in Homewood. On the bill with them that night were the Links, an R&B group from Penn Hills with a standout lead singer, Frank Avery. Avery jumped ship and joined the La Rells. The revised group auditioned for Lennie Martin, the arranger of "Since I Don't Have You," a major rock and roll hit by a white Pittsburgh group, the Skyliners.

The La Rells signed with Martin's new Pittsburgh-based label, Robbee, and they cut two tracks, "Please Be Fair" and "Everybody Knew," written by seasoned R&B songwriters Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman. The record failed to chart nationally, but the La Rells pressed on. They continued to release records over the years and in 1962 landed a deal with a national label, Liberty; however, those sides also failed to chart. The La Rells never attained national success, but they became a mainstay of the Pittsburgh R&B scene, where they occasionally reunite for oldies shows (Janusek 1991).

The Five Mellows started in the early 1950s with members from Homewood, the Hill District, and East Liberty, emulating the mellow R&B ballad style of their vocal group favorites, the Five Keys, the Cardinals, and the Moonglows. They performed at venues typical for

R&B groups in Pittsburgh at that time, places like the Diamond Skating Rink on Market Street, the Bonange Club on Route 51 south of the city, and hotels like the Blue Ridge and the Cobe. Over time, the group underwent personnel changes, eventually changing its name to the Four Dots on the advice of a manager who thought the new name would make people think of the Ink Spots, thereby leading to better bookings at supper and nightclubs. WAMO disc jockey Porky Chedwick introduced the Four Dots to the New York City independent R&B label Bullseye. Their first record, "Rita" and "He Man Looking for a She Girl," was released in March 1956. Despite airplay by Chedwick and Bill Powell, the record failed to take off. Subsequent Bullseye releases also failed to produce a national hit, and the label dropped the act from its roster. In 1958, the Four Dots tried again, this time as the Four Troys on a Liberty Records subsidiary label, Freedom. The name change was to avoid confusion with another Four Dots signed coincidentally to the same label. Even as the Four Troys, though, the group failed to break onto the R&B charts and soon fell apart.

Other Pittsburgh R&B performers had more success. The El Venos on RCA's Groove label and the El Capris on Bullseye had minor hits. The Del-Vikings, one of R&B's first integrated groups, scored major success with two vocal group classics, "Come Go with Me" in 1956 and "Whispering Bells" in 1957. The Altairs, although they recorded for the New York-based Amy label, never achieved national success as a group, but their lead singer/guitarist, George Benson, emerged as a 1970s R&B superstar in the wake of his jazzy sounding "This Masquerade."

Perhaps the most successful R&B group to come out of Pittsburgh was the Marcells. Named after a popular hairstyle of the day, the group made their start in 1959 on the city's north side. They primarily worked high school hops with a repertoire that consisted of covers of groups like the Harptones, the Spaniels, the Cadillacs, Little Anthony and the Imperials, and the Del-Vikings. The Marcells debuted on record in 1961, recording for the Colpix label, a division of Columbia Pictures. With a novelty bass intro—"bomp ba ba bomp, ba ba bomppa bomp bomp, ba ba bompa a bomp bomp, da dang a dang dang, da ding a dong ding"—the Marcells, under the guidance of seasoned producers, transformed the 1935 chestnut "Blue Moon" into a crossover rock and roll/R&B number-one hit, launching a career that carried them through decades as R&B oldies favorites.

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### R&B and Appalachia Today

Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century with radio and, more important, satellite television, twenty-four-hour-a-day video programming, and the Internet, the limited accessibility once inherent in the geography of the Appalachian region is no longer an issue. In terms of music, the divisions of place and time have largely disappeared. Although Appalachia still abounds with Anglo-oriented bluegrass and country music, especially evident in live-performance warm-weather festivals that draw fans from around the world, R&B in its current incarnation—predominantly rap and hip-hop with a mix of soulful contemporary gospel-influenced vocalists and groups—is available to anyone anywhere in the region, at least via the media, and occasionally through festival events such as the annual Johnny Johnson R&B festival in Fairmont, West Virginia.

These are apparently times when skin color matters less and style matters more in determining what constitutes R&B. In Appalachia today, Anglo and African American coexist, albeit sometimes in unusual combinations. In Whitesburg, Kentucky, on the western edge of central Appalachia, stands a prison that houses whites and blacks from across a multistate region. In an attempt to reach this diverse audience of inmates, radio station WMMT program host Nick Szuberla provides a weekly show, "From the Holler to the Hood," featuring side-by-side bluegrass and hip-hop.

In 2002, Szuberla took the combination even further, presenting a live on-the-air collaborative performance between a bluegrass banjo picker from Ohio and a hip-hop artist from Richmond, Virginia. "Some," says Szuberla, "call the unusual blend of rural and urban music hillbilly hip-hop. Others call it hick-hop." It was music, reported the *Jefferson City News Tribune*, "that lends itself to both clogging and break dancing." According to Rich Kirby, head of a local recording label, June Appal, "This is the first instance I know of where traditional mountain musicians and hip-hop artists joined forces. . . . Both musics have deep roots in tradition, and if you go back far enough you will find the same roots." "The mix of genres" explains Nick Szuberla, "is meant to show that urban and rural cultures need not clash" ("Blend of Hip-Hop" 2002). The whole history of rhythm and blues, it seems, has been laced with important influences from Appalachia's African-American community, and indeed, music is at its best when it cultivates unity and cross-cultural understanding. In contemporary Appalachia, it would seem that these possibilities are still literally in the air.

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