

BLACK MUSIC, SKEPTICISM, HUMANISM AND SECULARISM

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

June is African American Music Appreciation Month. (It was originally designated as Black Music Month on June 7, 1979 by President Jimmy Carter. President Obama gave it the present designation in 2009. By the way, June is also LGBT Pride Month.)

African Americans have contributed greatly to music. They were among the founders of blues, jazz, rock and roll, disco, rap and other genres. Musicians such as Little Richard heavily influenced the Beatles. Musicians such as Muddy Waters heavily influenced the Rolling Stones. (In fact, *Rolling Stone* magazine and the Rolling Stones are both named after Waters' 1950 hit "Rollin' Stone.")

The blues might be the best place to start a discussion about black music and secularism. Indeed, blues music is secular, and some of it has been downright blasphemous, even questioning the very existence of God. Religious Blacks used to call it devil music.

There have also been some popular songs with secular or skeptical themes in other genres. Stevie Wonder's hit song "Superstition" has been popular among skeptics. Stevie talks about "writings on the wall," the number 13, the idea that breaking a mirror brings seven years of bad luck, and even mentions the devil, as though there might be reason to be skeptical of the great demon. His most memorable line in the song is: "When you believe in things that you don't understand, then you suffer. Superstition ain't the way." Paul Kurtz couldn't have said it any better.

Speaking of Kurtz, the late philosopher and humanist giant used to love the song "We Are the World," written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie. The song was performed by Jackson, Ritchie and other popular American musical superstars making up USA for Africa, in order to combat starvation on that continent.

Kurtz considered the song to be a humanist anthem because it is completely secular and human-centered. Human beings are told that it is up to them to make a choice to save the lives of their fellow human beings. This is consistent with the

humanist saying that no God will save us, we must save ourselves. Or as Robert Ingersoll said, “Hands that help are better far than lips that pray.”

Another favorite song of skeptics is the rap group Public Enemy’s “Don’t Believe the Hype.” Though the song does not deal with religion or skepticism of paranormal claims, it advises listeners to be skeptical of mainstream media and to question what they are told by the powers that be.

There have been great Black secular musicians. In 1900, James Weldon Johnson penned what has become known as the Negro National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” Though the song is religious, Johnson was a humanist. However, like the humanist poet Langston Hughes and other nonreligious Black artists, Johnson was strongly attracted to the drama of Black religion.

The great jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker was also nonreligious. Parker, who used to practice on his horn for up to 14 hours per day, was one of the creators of bebop. He and master trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie combined to form one of the greatest horn duos of all time.

There have been many outspoken atheist rappers throughout the U.S. They include Greydon Square, the Freethought MC, Charlie Check’em and many others. In the 1990s, there was an atheist rap group in northern California that used to attend organized atheist gatherings. The Lifesavas is a humanist rap group from Portland, Oregon that has been around at least since 2003.

Among the big-name rappers, KRS-One has called himself a humanist. However, Black humanist scholar Anthony Pinn does not agree with this position. In his book *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, Pinn relates:

What KRS-One offers...is a human-centered theistic orientation. Such an approach involves tension between divinity and humanity whereby the accountability shouldered by humans for the furtherance of human fulfillment is highlighted – but within the context of a divine presence in the world. (p. 89)

Pinn goes on to say that the rapper actually embraces a “radical humanitarianism, based on a fundamental appreciation for humankind, as opposed to humanism.” (p. 90)

In his book *Writing God's Obituary: How a Good Methodist Became a Better Atheist*, Pinn discusses the blues:

Blues figures and church figures both encountered injustice and adverse circumstances, but while church figures seek assistance from God or find a way to make their predicament a source of inspiration and even joy, blues figures “keep on keeping on.” The blues sees nothing special, no cosmic plan expressed in human misery. It's just the shit we encounter and that we have to move through.

Conservative religionists are always at the forefront of attacks against music – even gospel music that they do not consider to be sacred enough. However, musicians will continue to unapologetically make great music for the masses. There's no turning back now.