



Boogaloo: The Quintessence of American Popular Music

Arthur Kempton

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Boogaloo—the synonym of choice among the cognoscenti for rhythm and blues—is a stylish and profound meditation on the art, influence, and commerce of black American popular music. At once deeply knowing and keenly observant, Arthur Kempton reveals the tensions between the sacred and the profane at the heart of “soul music,” and the complex centrality of “Aframericans” in the evolution of our mass musical culture. What that culture is all about, who owns it, and who gets paid—these are issues of moment in his epic narrative.

Kempton brilliantly traces the interconnections among a century’s worth of signal personalities, events, and achievements: from Thomas A. Dorsey, the so-called Father of Gospel Music, whose career (“Got to Know How to Work Your Show”) sheds light on Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown, among others, to the rise of that “handsome Negro lad,” Sam Cooke (perhaps the greatest of soul singers) and his definitive crossover dreams; from Berry Gordy Jr.’s infatuation with Doris Day and his sharp business plan to capture and exploit the sounds of young America through Motown (“It’s What’s in the Grooves That Counts”) to the founding of Stax Records and Memphis Soul by a white farm kid who grew up dreaming of being a country fiddler; from the visionary funk of George Clinton to the ascendancy of hip hop (“Sharecropping in Wonderland”), the murders of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, and the story of Death Row Records.

Boogaloo is a monumental work, informed by a rare fierceness of intellect, which debunks many a myth and canard about our popular music heritage even as it enlarges our understanding of its quintessence.



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