Journal of the Society for American Music (2017), Volume 11, Number 1, pp. 93–95.
 doi:10.1017/S1752196316000547

BOOK REVIEWS

How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement. By Ruth Feldstein. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

> "In the age of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter it is easy to document the ways in which politics is shaped, if not supplanted, by technologies of entertainment and popular culture that circulate in just seconds across national boundaries."
>
> —*How It Feels to Be Free*, 194.

Ruth Feldstein's *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers in the Civil Rights Movement* aims to remind us that decades before today's technologies, entertainment and popular culture shaped and were shaped by politics. The book redirects, enriches, and complicates a commonly overwrought narrative that is frequently attached to the civil rights movement: that the movement was led and directed solely by "Great Men" whose work was straight-forwardly political or religiously motivated. A corollary narrative situates women of the movement behind the men in the role of helpmate—that is, it puts them in their proper (i.e., subjugated) place during these turbulent, often dangerous fights for racial equality.

Turning this thesis on its head, Feldstein instead asks what six black women entertainers—Lena Horne, Miriam Makeba, Nina Simone, Abbey Lincoln, Diahann Carroll, and Cicely Tyson—brought to the development of black activism during this timeframe. All six were heavily engaged with and indebted to the relatively new technologies of music, film, and television. What, then, were the ways in which politics and performance managed to elide in their professional careers and private lives? Ultimately, she asks us to consider mass entertainment as crucial to helping define the civil rights, Black Power, and second-wave feminist movements using the lives of these six women as evidence. Feldstein's strategy is to home in on her subjects' individual reception histories, allowing journalistic details, autobiographic interviews, and critical reviews to construct and refine narratives that have been previously lost or are as yet untold.

Through expanding the foci of what it means to enact "political activity," Feldstein highlights the importance of performance for these six black women entertainers via a collective yet loosely constructed network of influence. Feldstein shows how each woman alone embodies overlapping and intersecting agency positions, enacting both individual and symbolic meanings of freedom. In doing so, she justly describes how each woman's public performance of civil rights was, in effect, creating a political history as well. In shrinking the distance between performance and protest, she demonstrates how, by doing one, each woman also did the other. Thus each, both collectively and individually, practiced a doubled, and double-voiced, agenda: each woman performed civil rights by drawing attention to gender and racial oppression in onstage performance, by daring to speak out publicly for civil rights, and by choosing to accept certain roles while rejecting others. In addition, each realized a particularized brand of feminism, which occurred simultaneously with what we now call feminism's second wave. Thus, their performance strategies

engendered political positions that signified well beyond the frames of mindless mass entertainment.

Feldstein deploys Lena Horne as the seminal figure throughout the book. Horne's long career, coupled with her middle-class upbringing, her refusal to play domestic roles in film, and her aloof, yet glamorous, cabaret persona upset the terms of what it meant to portray black womanhood from the 1940s until her death in 2010. Her staunch political position as a race woman, combined with her undeniable beauty, earned her the label of America's first black pin-up girl. Feldstein weaves Horne's story deftly, using her career highlights as a touchstone. Because she draws Horne as a kind of pioneering figure, it is against her that Feldstein refracts the other five women's lives and careers.

Each of the other women, in her own vein, is susceptible to an "exceptional woman" narrative pigeonhole, and yet, by grouping them together, Feldstein defies this narrative and reveals one that is much more dynamic and strategic, if not collaborative. For example in the late fifties, Miriam Makeba, "Africa's musical ambassador to the United States" (53), redefined Horne's respectability politics by performing an exotic African folk blackness for mixed race audiences. By accepting the role of "Mama Africa," Makeba helps others draw political connections between southern Jim Crow segregation and South African apartheid. Nina Simone's repertoire turns toward movement politics not solely because of her rejection from the Curtis Institute, but particularly in response to the 1963 Birmingham church bombing that killed four black girls. How? Because it was in that moment that she began to take up protest music in earnest, quickly penning the anthem "Mississippi Goddam."

While readers of *JSAM* are likely to be familiar with Abbey Lincoln as a jazz vocalist who married bebop drummer Max Roach, Feldstein groups her with actress Diahann Carroll for their on-screen work in *For Love of Ivy* (1968) and *Julia* (1968–71), respectively. In *Ivy*, Lincoln plays a domestic worker (something that Horne said she would never do) but in such a way as to imbue her with a dignity and freedom of thought not found in stereotypically mammy portrayals (something Horne would not have been allowed to do). She and her co-star, Sidney Poitier, were one of the first couples to portray on-screen romantic love in an African American relationship. Carroll, as the lead actress in the television series *Julia*, helped to reflect middle-class blackness to white and black audiences as mainstream and ordinary. Finally, Feldstein's book ends with a consideration of the lengthy life and career of Cicely Tyson, who through her work in *Sounder* (1972), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman* (1974), and *Roots* (1977), became the black American "everywoman"—someone who is righteous, rural, and wholesomely family oriented, someone who embodies a natural beauty that supersedes glamour and glitz. Taken in toto, these on-screen depictions of black womanhood are pioneering and important because they foreground the value of entertainment—television, music, and movies—for shaping an audience's political perspectives.

In *How It Feels to Be Free*, Feldstein centers these six women entertainers in the movements of their time. Moreover, for the first time that I am aware, she considers the ways in which each woman negotiated and expanded the normative definitions of glamour and entertainment into the realm of serious political work. Nevertheless, although the book is strong on multiple fronts, it is not perfect. For

example, when Feldstein discusses her subjects in relation to second-wave feminism, her argument seems more forced than is necessary. It is important to acknowledge the tension between black and white women in the 1960s, women whose definitions of feminism were often drawn at cross-purposes. Feldstein infers this early, saying, "These women did not necessarily call themselves feminists . . . but they offered critiques and demands that became central tenets of feminism generally and of black feminism specifically" (6). Of course, the truth is much more complex, with the tenets of second-wave feminism and 1960s black feminism often being more incongruent than compatible. To note such incongruencies is not to deny that Horne, Makeba, Simone, Lincoln, Carroll, and Tyson enacted their own versions of feminist acts; however, it is important that we hesitate before we place them under an inclusive rubric called second-wave feminism, which did not want or accept the challenges faced by women of color.

Another weakness in the book is the lack of attention and deep analysis given to certain, now well-known details about Simone and Tyson and the intimate partner violence they endured during their marriages. The omission begs questions that could undermine the strength of Feldstein's argument. What are we to make of what we now know about the abusive marriages between Simone and police officer Andy Stroud in the sixties, or Tyson and the jazz great Miles Davis in the eighties? In a book titled *How It Feels to Be Free*, I should think that one would want to seriously consider how the thorny instances of intimate partner violence affected the lives and careers of these women.

Despite the two limitations mentioned above, *How It Feels to Be Free* is worth reading if one has an interest in the intersections between media and the civil rights movement or any interest in one or more of the six women entertainers discussed. What I found most helpful was the way in which Feldstein's unexpected questions, aimed at an entrenched (some might say ossified) historical and cultural narrative, manage to elicit surprising results. She allowed me to rethink the significance of "mere entertainment" and its importance to political frameworks, and, in doing so, reinforce my understanding that sometimes even trivial events manage to be far more important and meaningful than we assume.

Maya C. Gibson

• • •

Journal of the Society for American Music (2017), Volume 11, Number 1, pp. 95–101.
 doi:10.1017/S1752196316000559

Irving Berlin's American Musical Theater. By Jeffrey Magee. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

The Irving Berlin Reader. Edited by Benjamin Sears. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Over forty years ago, Richard Crawford deemed the state of American musicology to be "fragmentary" in comparison with that of Europe: "Missing are the major