



Texas Jailhouse Music: A Prison Band History

By Caroline Gnagy (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2016).

Though contemporary Texas thoroughly marginalizes inmates housed in its prison system, author Caroline Gnagy highlights a period in which this group of men and women entertained hundreds of thousands of Americans, allowing these prisoners moments of humanity and hope. *Texas Jailhouse Music: A Prison Band History* relates the “stories of the inmates: the music they made, the music’s impact on their lives and the lives they touched.” The radio show *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, broadcast from the prisons on WBAP from 1938 into the 1950s, made redemption possible, although the tradition of music as a therapeutic mode began years beforehand.

State prisons’ use of inmates as entertainment took on many forms, however all forms were beneficial to the inmates because of their rehabilitative qualities. Before the initial 1938 episode of *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, the Texas Prison Rodeo held the status as the largest event for inmates to showcase their talents for other inmates and the general public. These events were significant enough to involve all inmates, including African-American women. Although they participated in the rodeo, it was in contests to catch greased pigs—not a musical act. By 1939, one year after the beginning of the radio show, African-American women singers were also star attractions of the rodeo’s musical acts.

An important pair of inmates that Gnagy examines are more widely known, not only for their talent, but for the man that helped to make them famous. Both “Iron Head” Baker and Lead Belly were recorded by Alan Lomax, the music historian who set out to chronicle true American folk music. Although Lomax viewed Lead Belly as the true embodiment of American folk music, Gnagy criticizes Lomax for maintaining a paternalistic view and method of dealing with African-American artists. With

his release from prison, ostensibly because of the popularity of his music and the Lomax recordings, a mystique formed around Lead Belly. His status as a legend allowed him to become “an archetype of sorts for African American social elevation during the Jim Crow era.” Without the publicity surrounding his two releases from prison and the popularity of his music recorded by Lomax, the author asserts that Lead Belly would not have gained fame, but would have likely only been a regional artist, playing and recording what was then called race music. Gnagy argues that without the experience of prison, Lead Belly may not have experienced the level of notoriety that he did. This notoriety, both inside and outside of prison, contributed to the mythology that Lead Belly’s talent and fame secured his freedom. That potential to free themselves from their shackles acted as motivation for rodeo musical acts, as well as the acts that would appear on the radio.

For some participants in the *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls* music program the possibility of gaining freedom always loomed large. Even without the possibility of gaining freedom because of their musical abilities, performing on the show provided opportunities to prisoners that would not have been available otherwise. Despite a consistent practice schedule after a ten hour workday, working as a musician did provide opportunities to travel, giving inmates temporary relief from the prison’s food and uncomfortable living conditions. This desire for freedom seeped into the prisoners’ music. While the Rhythmic Stringsters started well in advance of the radio show as a source of entertainment for prison events, they performed string ensembles that gained them great notoriety. Most importantly, the group had a solid foundation in country and western music, the most played genre on *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls*, which featured themes of freedom that were popular with both inmates and a wider public. While segregated to minstrel-type performances Mexican Americans and African Americans received limited performance time, whereas Anglo artists performed regularly on the show. However, the performers endured because of the

possibility of earning a pardon and gaining freedom.

Another group, the Goree All-Girl String Band, were largely marginalized by society and the prison system, however they became one of the system's most popular acts. The Goree Girls provided a way to change society's view of female prisoners. The Goree Girls' performances at rodeos and on the radio show "changed the way they were treated, both as prisoners and in society at large...their musical accomplishments eventually allowed them to maneuver themselves out of a bleak and confining existence," otherwise known as prison.

Gnagy focuses on several former prisoners and how they rehabilitated themselves with the music programs. A prime example is Reable Childs-Sapp, who held a prominent position in the hierarchy of prisoners. Although a member of the female musical group, Childs also held the distinction of being a friend to the prison manager, Captain Heath, and his wife. This relationship with prison management allows the author to infer that a single female inmate received preferential treatment, possibly resulting from the fanfare surrounding her trial. Subject to all the other degradations of prison, Childs was one of few women who left the Goree Women's Prison with the ability to give birth to a child. This permits the author to engage in supposition that the prison system forcibly sterilized female inmates in Texas prisons.

Although the radio show lasted well into the 1950s and the rodeos until 1986, music remained a large aspect of rehabilitation efforts in Texas prisons. With later increases in prison populations and a growing carceral state, rehabilitative programs such as the music performances at rodeos, concerts, and the *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls* radio show provide an instructive example to prison officials. *Texas Jailhouse Music* provides an insight to the potential of prison inmates and the benefits of music to promote hope in bleak conditions like incarceration.

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