

Como Now?: Marketing “Authentic” Black Music

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Abstract

With all the excitement over the new release of Mavis Staples’s *You Are Not Alone* (Anti-, produced by Wilco’s Jeff Tweedy), I can’t help but be skeptical of the outpouring of Indie love for the album, even as I have been spinning (and enjoying) it myself.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Music History and Culture (Topic), Advertising, Aesthetics, Archival, Article, Black Studies

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With all the excitement over the new release of [Mavis Staples’s *You Are Not Alone*](#)



(Anti-, produced by Wilco’s [Jeff Tweedy](#)), I can’t help but be skeptical of the outpouring of Indie love for the album, even as I have been spinning (and enjoying) it myself. It isn’t the positive reaction to Staples’s talent that is surprising—at 70-plus years, Mavis has been exquisite for quite some time now—but rather the way in which critics have freighted her newest record with the “uplift” ([AV Club](#)) of a whole lot of souls that haven’t ever been to church (at least not in a good long while). Her voice is described as alternately “raw” ([Paste](#)) and full of a “depth, power, and warmth that seem increasingly rare in music today” ([hear ya](#)); [Consequence of Sound](#), who cites Tweedy’s hand at the boards as the reason for all the current music blog attention, calls her voice “empathetic. . . powerful. . . soulful. . . touching” and “wise.” If the blogosphere is to be believed, Staples’s voice, “as authentic as it gets” ([buzzine](#)), could really save us all in these tough times. Come to think of it, the fervor of (white) faith in “authentic” black music shouldn’t be that surprising either, given the way in which race has always been entangled with popular music history in the United States.

Authenticity and the immediacy of experience it implies, have had a long history in the music industry—especially in reference to black artists—stemming back at least to the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the 1870s, an all-black acapella troupe celebrated for



powerful live performances whose breakthrough concert also happened to be for a crowd of hipsters: the wealthy congregants of Henry Ward Beecher’s Brooklyn church in 1871. Beecher gave the band his enthusiastic support, namely because he felt their sound gave listeners direct access to “the inner lives of slave hearts expressed in music” even after slavery had formally ended.

While the sound of *You are Not Alone* differs greatly from the Jubilee Singers, the reviews of the record belie and inflame a similar desire for unmediated access to the emotive qualities (a)historically associated with black life and sound in the U.S.: namely suffering, faith, and catharsis. And Staples’s record is indeed not alone in this. Many of the sentences from the Staples reviews could easily have been lifted from those of another recent gospel record to capture the indie imagination, [Daptone Records’s](#) 2008 release [Como Now](#). Starkly different from the breezier, countrified sounds of *You Are Not Alone*, *Como Now* is an acapella gospel recording made in a small town in Panola County, Mississippi. The record was a risky release for Daptone, a Brooklyn-based label that has consistently produced new funk and soul records since its inception in 2002 by the likes of [Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings](#) and [The Budos Band](#). Although old school sound has always been a part of the label’s ethos—its engineers use primarily analog equipment, for example, a major reason [Amy Winehouse](#) recorded her throwback [Back in Black](#) album at [Daptone studios](#) in 2006—marketing stripped-down gospel to its audience of predominately white hipsters would nonetheless prove a daunting task. Treating *Como Now* as a labor of love and a paying of dues, Daptone attempted to spark interest in the release by relying on the familiar marketing strategies of immediacy, authenticity, and nostalgia.



While *Como Now*'s tagline boldly proclaims that the music was “Recorded Live at Mt. Mariah Church on July 22, 2006”—and, thus, emphasizing the *Now* of the title—the cover's vintage civil-rights era design evokes the *Como* of yesterday, or more accurately, encourages listeners to hear *Como* now and *Como* yesterday as one and the same through the vehicle of “raw gospel testimony.” *Como Now*'s depiction of the sounds of the past as echoes within the present is as ambiguous as it is uncanny, a sonic window thrown open to simpler times happening somewhere out there, “deep in the heart of Mississippi” right now.

The introductory promotional video from *Como Now*'s [website](http://www.comonow.com) (also uploaded on Youtube) represents the record as an aural time machine to a land and a people isolated from and largely unchanged by technology, modernity, and history.



<https://youtu.be/HzVgxazqALE>

Producer Michael Reilly's voiceover locates rawness, emotional release, and “real religion” in the sound of black voices, in no small part because the video places his measured Yankee pacing in sonic tension with the song that accompanies it, Mary Moore singing “When the Gates Swing Open.” Over Moore's impassioned singing, Reilly assures listeners in a muted deadpan that they

will hear “no pretty piano playing or clever guitar picking, just voices. Pure soul stirring fire from the heart.” Reilly’s sentiments not only evoke the gushing Jubilee Singers’ press, but also the ethos of the infamous folklorist [John Lomax](#), who made field recordings in Southern prisons in the 1930s because he sought “negro singers untainted by white musical conventions” (as he wrote in 1934’s [“Sinful Songs of the Southern Negro”](#)); singers in Como were actually recorded by John’s son [Alan](#) in the 1940s. Reilly’s voiceover goes on to frame the Como singers as practitioners of what the senior Lomax called “the real art of simplicity,” as stripped-down, natural singers who are artful mainly in their artlessness. While Reilly’s webcopy mentions how “children and grown folks alike have been *living and breathing* gospel for as long as they can remember,” for example, he fails to mention how the residents of Como have also been writing, rehearsing, and performing it.

Thus, *Como Now*’s marketing disavows the real artistry of the Como singers, even as it seeks to celebrate it. The simple, natural quality endowed to the singers of Como is visually accentuated by stark imagery representing the town as a down-at-the-heels, living museum of the black life of yesteryear. In the youtube clip, Moore’s soaring and spirited singing animates stills of blooming cotton fields, vintage RCA microphones, and splintering upright pianos. *como now* still Save for the album cover and one blurry still of a child, there are no shots of the people of Como in the introductory promo, effectively isolating Moore’s voice from her corporeal and historical body. This isolation allows listeners to supply their own fantastic imagery and forces them to rely on historical stereotypes about the naturally sonic qualities of black people. By choosing to disembody Como’s voices, the promotional video represents the album’s music as emanating from, and even haunting, Panola County’s lush green fields and battered strip-malls rather than showing it to be a hard-fought creation of the residents themselves. To quote Lomax again: “[The Negro’s] songs burst from him, when in his own environment, as naturally as those of a bird amid its native trees.”

Although the impulse to make the album reflects a progressive desire to respectfully pay tribute to the black gospel tradition in American popular music—and to provide quality artists like The Como Mamas with critical renown and monetary compensation—*Como Now* relies on well-worn racial tropes to do so. It also points to the continued presence in American culture of an essentialized “black voice” that is naturalized as more emotive, truthful, and soulful than other voices. While this phenomena is socially constructed and the sounds thought of as “black” have shifted considerably—when I play early recordings of the Jubilee Singers my students consistently tell me that they sound “white” like a “glee club”—I find it fascinating that the language used to describe them has largely remained the same. While *Como Now*’s producer at least acknowledges that, in Como, “no one has to pick up cotton anymore, thankfully,” the marketing trades on the possibility that, while slavery and sharecropping have ended, its sonic labors have not only endured, but are readily available for download.

