

I Will Always (Sonically) Love You: Whitney Houston on the Radio

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Abstract

"Whitney Houston Central Park, NYC September 1, 2009" by Flickr user asterisk611 under Creative Commons license I knew Whitney Houston's voice before I knew her face. She was a constant record on deck in my house, setting off a family get together or a typical Saturday night at home where I begged to stay up a little bit longer to listen to records—for-real records, vinyl—like the grown folks.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Black Studies, Listening, Memoir, Music



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"Whitney Houston Central Park, NYC September 1, 2009" by Flickr user asterisk611 under Creative Commons license

I knew [Whitney Houston](#)'s voice before I knew her face. She was a constant record on deck in my house, setting off a family get together or a typical Saturday night at home where I begged to stay up a little bit longer to listen to records—for-real records, vinyl—like the grown folks. Houston's voice represented 'grown folks talking' but had enough effervescence that I could relate to as girlish charm. Houston's vocal range relayed feelings and representations of sugary sweet to straight, no chaser. She could sing about loving a married man—definitely grown folks' business—but still maintain the innocence of a school girl crush. My mom and I would dance around our great room lip synching her songs, her asking me who I loved, me declaring my name was not Susan. It was Gina and Whitney Houston's voice was magic. Alongside [Michael Jackson](#), she was the playlist of my childhood.

Sadly, it was my mom and me again as we listened to [Houston's funeral](#) on the radio. We were stuck in traffic. It had to be fate, me listening to Houston one last time in the same way we were introduced: through the radio. Listening to the funeral instead of watching it on television or as it streamed across the internet triggered a nostalgic ache for Houston in the pit of my stomach, returning me to the same place as a five-year-old child who fell in love with the pretty voice from those Saturday nights.

For me, listening to Houston's records and funeral on the radio resituated Houston as a vocalist. Detached from Houston's [well-documented shortcomings](#), listening to her funeral removed the static of her life that filtered her mastery of song and sound. In the last years of her life, Houston's image was far removed from her stellar singing career. Houston's personal conflicts and battles situated her as a fallen celebrity, quickly associating her with ill fitting jokes of drug abuse and

caricatures of her former glory. Removing Houston from her sonic legacy strips her of the complexities of her persona that she highlighted and acknowledged using her voice, or as [Dr. Guthrie Ramsey](#) points out, [her “instrument.”](#) It is important to note Houston attempted to make her way back to music, slowly creeping back into public spotlight as a vocalist instead of a wayside star. Celebrity overpowered Houston’s humanity and it is unfortunate that her funeral reclaimed it. Thus, sound provides a space for rehabilitating Houston’s bruised reputation, providing an alternative, nonparodic reading of her life.

While listening to Houston’s funeral, I realized the significance of her sonic legacy, a reaffirmation of Houston’s mastery of song and voice through unending playlists and funeral performances. The radio provided a sonic space of reconciliation between Houston and her fans, uninterrupted by the visual whirl and the busyness of pomp and circumstance of a televised celebrity funeral. By listening to Houston’s funeral, the radio became a discursive space of performance, simultaneously retaining and (re)shaping Houston’s iconicity using sound as favorable space of reflection. Strictly listening to the funeral situated the listener in a position to recontextualize Houston’s legacy within sonic discourse and think about her against a musical backdrop which she constructed.

In considering Houston as not only a music but cultural icon, one must understand the significance of her prominence as a singer. Her career maps the trajectory of a post-Civil Rights black (women’s) experience, framing struggles of seeking out and validating new black identity markers within situating herself as a ‘black voice.’ Her catalog blends the secular with the sacred, effortlessly moving between gospel and pop music, frequently collapsing and creating a complex humanity within sonic soundscapes often restricted by industry and consumers alike. It is around these hybrid sonic-scapes that Houston’s funeral revolved.

Also, Houston’s funeral negotiated reconsiderations of the black church in the current popular cultural imagination, personifying grief and healing through sound. In a word, Houston’s funeral “took folks to church.” On display were prominent tropes of black cultural and musical tradition, parlaying call and response between speakers and attendees and improvisation of performers. In particular, [Kim Burrell](#)’s redressing of [Sam Cooke](#)’s “[A Change Is Gonna Come](#)” caters on numerous levels to intersection of Houston’s narrative and the role of spirituality in her life. Burrell used her voice and spirituality as a reflection of Houston’s spirituality while dictating how Houston’s life and image are redirected through song. Burrell’s retelling of Houston’s life pivots off Cooke’s original song as an acknowledged site of struggle and redemption. She improvises Cooke’s song to align with Houston’s literal birth (“She was born in New Jersey”) and the understanding of spiritual rebirth and death (“a change gonna come”).

<https://youtu.be/LvS9JFbRHqg>

In similar fashion to a church revival, Burrell performs her rendition of “A Change Gonna Come” as a testimony, pulling from her audience’s familiarity with the intonations, vocal runs, and whines of Sam Cooke’s performance. Burrell’s ‘remixing’ of Cooke’s song is, to an extent, an innovative form of sampling. By borrowing the familiarity of Cooke’s sound, Burrell is able to create a new sonic accompaniment. Overarching tropes of faith and redemption hinged upon the black oral tradition

are intensified through using them to aurally frame Houston's funeral. By strictly hearing Houston's funeral, the listener becomes privy to not only the intersections of the black church and oral traditions but the unique interventions of sound and identity frequently understated in visual culture and discourse.

A fitting close to Houston's funeral was the recording of her popular rendition of [Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You."](#) Houston's voice rang out in the perfect intonation that solidified her place in music and cultural history, situated as a fitting goodbye to fans and this world. The tenderness of Houston's delivery personifies the somberness of her funeral, a self-eulogy that harnesses its power from not only the moment but the untimeliness of her death. Houston's last performance of "I Will Always Love You" detaches her from the paparazzi and scandal that suffocated her life. It is through sound that Houston's legacy is revived.

As my mother dabbed tears away from the corners of her eyes while listening to the funeral, I silently hoped she would ask me who I loved. I would tell her I wasn't Susan. And that I loved Whitney.

<https://youtu.be/PKi5tyUnDik>

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