

Sound Expertise Season 3:13 –

Curating Black Musical History with Dwandalyn Reece

Dwandalyn Reece 00:00

I think Music and Performing Arts, and I may be preaching to the choir, have tremendous power to open us up to diversity and difference in culture. And I think the kind of approach that we take, as a museum and working with material culture and thinking about music in broader ways, it's just a natural evolution. You can't help learn about another culture or another way of life or another sexual orientation, or another experience, if you really get behind the weeds of what music is all about.

[Music] 00:39

Will Robin 01:01

Welcome back to Sound Expertise. I'm Will Robin, your host. And this is a podcast where I talk to my fellow music scholars about their research, and why it matters. As a musicologist, I think a lot about the potential impact my job can have. And I don't think I'm alone in this, I think it's pretty common. There are these very measurable things like okay, my journal article was downloaded by X number of people, usually not a lot of people, or I taught X number of students this semester. Or, you know, there's the immeasurable things like I received a kind of a letter from a former advisee or someone cited my dissertation for their own research. I think that folks in my field like to think what we do is important, but I think we are also hopefully acknowledging that our contributions to the world can be relatively modest. But, as I've said before, sometimes we can have a significant impact. And in recent years, I've come to realize that one of us in particular, might be making more of an impact than most of the rest of us combined. Even though chances are you haven't heard of her — Dwandalyn Reece, curator of Music and Performing Arts at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Dr. Reece has perhaps the most important job one can have as a scholar of music, providing a framework for understanding African American history, musical history at an extraordinarily high-profile Museum, at a time in which black history and culture are under a nationwide assault. Many, many more people will come into contact with Dr. Reece's work at the museum's permanent musical Crossroads exhibit than will sit in one of our classrooms, or attend one of our conferences. The decisions she has made setting the stage for what music and the performing arts can be at the museum have huge ramifications. So I was very excited to talk to her today about her work at the museum. And I hope you enjoy this rich conversation with Dr. Dwandalyn Reece on sound expertise.

[Music] 3:04

Will Robin 03:18

So I'd love to start by going way back to the lead up of the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2016, and your role in curating the music and performing arts collection. What did it look like to begin imagining what the performing arts wing of the museum would look like and acquiring items for a museum with such significant ambitions?

Dwandalyn Reece 03:45

Well, it first looked like a very daunting task, because there's a lot of history to cover, and to communicate that story to our visitors. So that first week, I was sitting here — how am I going to do this? I was going to do an exhibit, I was going to build a collection. And it was up to me to design and to conceive — what have you. So the breadth of the topic was a little bit overwhelming. And I knew immediately I had to have some guidelines in my own mind about what was important to me about telling that story, and what I could do that was somewhat comprehensive, but within a given square footage, knowing that you can't do everything but you want to give our average visitor some additional knowledge about African American musical history and performance. And so I thought long and hard about that in alignment with my own research and my own interests, and came up with five themes that I use to really guide me. The first was — for me it was, it is important that this was an exhibit that was about African American music, but from a large scale about African American music making. What was important to me is that we weren't leaving out genres that were not necessarily originated in the Black community. So many times when people talk about African American music, they immediately go to jazz or blues and hip hop, and there's music making across the spectrum. And that is part of the history. So that was really important to me. And then along with that was — what makes African American music unique? Every musical genre that comes out of a nation, country, or what have you, or community has something unique about it, and there are the commonalities about music. And for me, in thinking that through it really is the specter of race that was created when the first enslaved were brought to these shores, that traumatic separation rupture, was the baseline for creating what would be an African American identity that was defined by race and that rupture, and people separated from themselves and their culture and creating something of their own to survive and sustain that. So, whether you're talking about the blues, or talking about hip hop, or talking about opera, the specter of race, even though it's a social construct, still looms large, even today, in our conversations. So I went with that, and then had five themes to help me think about the types of objects to look for, and the types of themes that we could explore. And they were looking at the African roots, whatever those roots might be, whether they'd be performance techniques, musical instruments, or the roots, the framework and the conception of what an African American music is, what are those themes? The second one, hybridity, which all musical performance, there's a hybrid of influences, and particularly in the United States. Agency, and this is more about self-definition, not just about social activism, but the liberatory practice of defining yourself for your own self, and being your own person and being allowed to be your own person musically and in the world. The overwhelming influence of mass media, starting with the first popular entertainment in minstrelsy, and in magazines, and then all the technologies that we have gone through, up to this point, that really did a lot to spread African American music, Black music around the world. And finally, the global impact and influence. I remember hearing from scholars who say that a lot of times, people around the world, their linkage to America is through Black music, and that's where they learn about America. But we know with all the genres, from jazz to hip hop to spirituals and gospel to classical musicians traveling around the world, that there has been that impact and a perception about the United States. So those were my five guiding posts, so to speak.

Will Robin 08:37

And so you're sitting down with these guiding posts, you've got some square footage of space. Was there one thing where you're like — I know that is an item I want to have? What was the early acquisition phase like, thinking about — I want to have this thing and this thing? The Mothership is certainly one we'll talk about because I'm curious about it.

Dwandalyn Reece 09:02

We just wanted to find objects. You had some designs... I think it was also important that this was about African American music, that it wasn't a Hall of Fame. So it wasn't just about the big artists or the big names. We wanted to get at the community level, we want to get the local level. And all of this is about storytelling, and how music has functioned in the African American experience. So we were lucky to have people coming to us with stories, with objects that they were aware of. We certainly did our own outreach, reaching out to people, a combination of that. And we were pretty open — to me, if something helps us tell a good story, that gets at some of those themes, then it deserves to be in a national museum to help flesh that out. And that's part of our mission to do that too — tell these stories, these real stories, and also the ones that haven't been heard as much. And those stories about music, we hear more about the celebrity of it, rather than the, on the ground, what's going on in the community of it, and all of that, I see it as a real whole, and part of the pieces. So anything was game.

Will Robin 10:32

Can you give a couple examples of things you did acquire early on that were representative of that more “on the ground” versus “celebrity” musician, perspective?

Dwandalyn Reece 10:42

Oh, I wish I'd had my little cheat sheet here.

Will Robin 10:46

[Will laughs] You want to take a minute to find that go for it.

Dwandalyn Reece 10:49

I'm trying to think of some. I think a lot of local musicians and local communities across the nation that will have even regional or tangentially some national importance. I've learned a lot of jazz artists that have played with well-known jazz artists, local educators, who have contributed to the scene and doing their own music programs. Learned about a composer, Hazel Harrison. It was just as much a learning exercise for me as anybody else. I'm trying to think of some of those early collections. You're catching me off guard, because now...

Will Robin 11:33

[Will laughs] I'm asking about the early stuff. Well maybe expand that out from the early stuff, what are some of the most interesting objects that you acquired in the course of building this collection of materials, or ones that are particularly important for you?

Dwandalyn Reece 11:54

Well, there are interesting objects and there are interesting stories. And they go hand in hand, there's one object a gentleman from Atlantic City donated, it was his father's trumpet, and the plate for making his business card. And he was a street performer, evangelical street performer on the streets of Memphis. And so you tie religion to this story and how people made their careers and reached out to people and built community. This is a man that doesn't have any national notice. But this is what was happening in real communities. So his trumpet is on display, has been on display since we've opened,

we have — let's see, the Marian Anderson outfit that we have was one of those things... It's interesting, when I started my career, there weren't a lot of music museums. So collecting in this area was not as popular. You know, you flash forward 30 years later, a lot of the stuff is housed someplace. So a lot of things I didn't... I knew this library had it here, this museum had it here or American history or a neighbor across the street already had it. So it was trying to find where were those niches. And so I didn't think — the University of Pennsylvania has Marian Anderson's collection. So I just assumed there was nothing to bring into our collection. And this one was, and this is the interesting story, it's just by word of mouth or talking to the right people, or you find a story. So Denise Graves donated a dress that Marian Anderson gave her. So many of our contemporary and older classical artists revered Ms. Anderson and would meet with her and she was very generous with her time and would sometimes give out a dress. So Denise Graves who performed at our groundbreaking ceremony told us she had this dress that she wanted to donate to the museum and we were happy to have it. And once we acquire an object, we do a lot of research on the object from its condition to who was its maker, where was it used. This gown Denise Graves did perform in at the 75th anniversary of the concert at the Lincoln Memorial, so it had that additional significance in addition to belonging to Marian Anderson. So in doing the research, we found that there was a little drama with the dress when it was sent to the cleaners before that event, that 75th anniversary event, and it came back in shreds in some areas. So Denise Graves was alum of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. There was a seamstress costume maker there who worked at the school who helped, and salvaged what she could, and it looks great, she put it back together. And so in researching that, and having an intern research that story, we also tried to find some information about the maker. And she was Russian. And we found that she'd make costumes for other ballets and things like that. And so the next line of inquiry was to talk to the family. So the intern had connections to the family and reached out to the family. And they told her what they could, there wasn't a lot, but they did mention that Jeanette DePreist, who is James DePreist's widow, and James DePreist was a conductor, and Marian Anderson's nephew. She did mention to the intern that Ms. DePreist had a few more objects and things that she may be willing to donate. So I made a cold call, introduced myself and about the museum. And she was familiar with the museum. And she mentioned she did have this outfit, and she was interested in donating it to the museum. So I went from zero to 100 in one fell swoop and it's one of those — a little bit of serendipity, but making those connections in this zigzag kind of way to get to something with historical significance that just happened to be sitting in someone's home. And that was so much of our collection, that it wasn't necessarily out there in institutions, people had saved these things, recognizing their importance and their cultural significance. Either some of them were waiting for a place to give it to or just felt when they knew this museum was being built, that this was the right place to tell that particular story.

Will Robin 17:01

The process through which you got this dress seems very elliptical in a way. But in other cases, did you put out a big call? How did you find these attics with stuff in them for the most part?

Dwandalyn Reece 17:14

A lot of times people found us. I think the museum... I joined in 2009. And our founding director started in 2005. So there was four years of work of getting the word out about the museum and very consciously, we wanted people to know that the museum was active, even though we did not have a building. So there had been exhibits, there had been programs, there had been town halls so much of

getting the word out, we were always acting as a museum, even though we may not have the exhibits and the building, and that word of mouth, that publicity really went far in reaching out to people. Some people knew about the Museum, some people didn't. But so much of curatorial work these days is pounding the pavement so to speak, making cold calls, introducing yourself to people what you're doing, why you're doing it, how what they have, or what talent they have, how that might fit into what you're doing, and serving a larger mission, which is really to tell the histories and perspective of African Americans in this country.

Will Robin 18:28

One of the I think most striking objects in the exhibition is the Parliament Funkadelic Mothership and I think that's one of the most ... Can you talk a little bit about how that came to be at the museum?

Dwandalyn Reece 18:40

Well, that gets zigzaggy too. Because when looking, we leave no corner unturned. There was an article in the Post, like a small little column-nette, about the Mothership being buried in in Suitland, Maryland, one day, and I had a colleague who was working on this exhibit with me, Kevin Strait. And he, I mentioned it because we looked for leads. I said — do you know some people, could you look into this and see if there's anything to it, if we have to dig it up, and find the mothership, maybe we'll do that. He had his own contacts. And he managed to get connected to George Clinton — that first mothership did... it was built as a prop. So it wasn't built to last, did fall apart, didn't exist, but George Clinton had rebuilt one that he brought on tour with him, and it was sitting in his living room in his home in Tallahassee. So Kevin went down there and met with George Clinton, and he was on board, he understood what we were doing, where he fit in the history, and was excited to see the Mothership at the Smithsonian. And when we got ... when it arrived and there was some press and publicity about it, I was really taken how excited people were about it. It told me a couple of things. First, that they saw that their popular culture, popular history, their experiences with the Mothership as a fan of Parliament Funkadelic, the whole Chocolate City thing in Washington DC, that it meant something to them, to have this come to the Smithsonian. So the Smithsonian still had this separation with the local community. And it told us we were on the right track. It's validating these stories and these histories. Twenty years ago, would there be a mothership in the Smithsonian exhibit? No. And so it also changed the game of how people see museums themselves and what stories they tell, and with music it's rife with examples of that, because so much is dealing with popular music and the like, and it does not necessarily ... or did not necessarily serve the vaunted halls of what should be in a museum. So I was really... I was taken by not only the object itself, but the dialogue around it.

Will Robin 21:34

So you acquire this stuff, how do you decide what goes on display, how to organize the exhibit? How did the curatorial part begin to emerge out of the themes that you've created and the stuff you've acquired?

Dwandalyn Reece 21:50

It becomes a real collaborative process. Once you bring on the designers and you talk about ... you're collecting collecting collecting, like mad. And then you think about — what do you have? How do you want to tell the story, and what are the most important parts to tell the story, and then you think about

— what are the most not only exciting or iconic objects, but you're going to give people a little bit of what they're looking for and what they want to see. But also it's an educational enterprise, you want to tell people about things and learn facts and knowledge that they haven't heard before. So it really is a dance with all those things. There's some iconic things we knew we were going to use, we knew we were going to use the mothership, we knew we were going to use Chuck Berry's Cadillac. Because those are big, iconic, people make instant associations with things. And then as far as telling the story — I had my issues with genres because they're a product of the music industry and create these borders and boxes. But at the same time, we operate in society with genres and the music industry. So that's something our visitors remember and can relate to. So I didn't want to be locked into that. So purposely we picked — we have about 12 or 13 sections. So we picked several genre stories to tell, but also several thematic stories to tell, so that we could get to the lived experience of what this music was all about. So we had thematic areas such as global impact and influence, music on stage and screen. We had another theme about the music industry, and the neighborhood record store, which is my favorite, my brainchild that I really love. So that once again getting away from the Hall of Fame — the Hall of Fame has its place. We wanted this to be something more than that and more substantive in a way that people really understood where music fit in the culture and society. And then you talk, you bring in the stories, we had a long list of the potential stories based on objects we had. And when you work with the designers, they come with their own ideas and there's a lot of conversation back and forth, sometimes some disagreement of what their view, what they think the story is, and we really fought hard, my team and my colleagues who are working with me, to stay true to our sense of purpose, and being more holistic in our treatment of those stories, and it's a mix of interesting objects. Obviously, they were instruments, costumes, ephemera. As well, what I like about what we do with our collecting is that it's not strictly — you think music, you're just going to collect instruments and scores. We think about music... Anything can be about music in so many ways, it can be a record, it can be a fish toy, marketing Fish Bone's latest album, it can be a scribbled note on a piece of paper. And so what I am really intent in doing is that music to me is just a network of circles and activations that bring to life and are brought to life by people and community. Nothing exists, even if you're going up on stage and performing a song, without your audience. There's nothing unless you're just performing for yourself. So those networks are very important in a social, cultural political scheme. And that's the beauty or espousing why music is so valuable to us in our daily lives. It's music and, not music but. It means everything to what we are, it activates so much. So our collecting is built around that ethos. And the same thing is what I talk about in my book, which I hope we get to talk about a little bit.

Will Robin 26:47

Yeah. I want to ask you about your book soon. [both laugh] So tell me a little bit about — you mentioned the mothership helping you understand — the response to that helping you understand what was valuable about this. But how did it feel when this opened? What was the response like? How much validation of the exhibit as it stood did you feel versus — I want to think about this differently, that kind of thing.

Dwandalyn Reece 27:18

It was a little bit of both. It was exciting to see it all pull together. The grandeur of it all. And to see all these stories on an even playing field, though it wasn't just Chuck Berry's Cadillac, but it was Elder Hunter's — Roosevelt Hunter's horn, still on the same floor. And my greatest sense of pride is how

people really received that, how they connected with the objects and the stories in a variety of ways. Particularly from intergenerational conversations, point of recognition, and even understanding some of the substance, for instance, some of our genre stories, it wasn't just a retelling of how many gold records you have. With our genre stories, we wanted to talk about issues about regionality and sense of place, a sense of agency, identity, all these issues, institution making, community building. And so we intentionally told our stories from those different points of view, just really to show audiences that music, your favorite song is so much more than what you hear on the radio. Did you know that the Motown artists went on these trips in the South and Motortown Revue and couldn't stay in the hotels or use the gas station facilities? That is also part of the story. It's not just the part that you enjoy. And that, to me, is the biggest educational opportunity and teaching people to appreciate what African American music is, and about the African American experience.

Will Robin 29:21

Can you talk a little bit about your personal trajectory, how you came to be interested in scholarship and museum work in this area and eventually ended up at the Smithsonian?

Dwandalyn Reece 29:33

Yeah. This crystallized for me in two ways. In my undergrad years, I took a course — I majored in music and American Studies. And I took a course called Music, Mirror of society. And we were looking with Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart, and I think Schubert. But it wasn't a strict musicology course, we were actually looking at the society they worked under. And you know, instead of doing just theory or musicology it really opened a door for me that this was just as much of their cultural output, their musical output, the stories of the patrons and all of this, that really kind of crystallized for me music in a social and cultural framework, how fascinating that was, and how much you could learn not only about the musicians, but of a given time period. So I was really excited about that. And then I got to Michigan, and I was doing a master's there, still doing American culture, but also doing a lot with the music school, and a professor there, Richard Crawford. And I just got more excited about it and started doing my own research on a lot of music topics, civil rights songs, Joan Baez, that's where I got interested in Ethel Waters, that ended up being my dissertation topic. But they also had a museum practice program. And I liked the idea -- for me, education was important for my family, but I always thought, if you have the privilege to be educated, you should also give back and share what you're learning. I mean, if it's not getting out to the public, what kind of impact is it really having. And I saw museums as a way as having real world impact in real time, and taking scholarship and communicating it to general audiences. So I was a real novice there I was with a bunch of art people, and me interested in doing in music, but that's where I really, that's where it crystallized for me. And I ended up doing an internship here at the Smithsonian. So that's when I first got familiar. I was at the National Portrait Gallery in their education division for a semester. And then I came over to American history, and worked with John Hassy. a curator Emeritus, but just when they acquired the Duke Ellington collection, and getting front row seat, hands on work doing that, I did some work for Mercer Ellington copying scores and things like that. But that's what really whet my appetite that this could be a career or something to do. And there was a place, American history really led the way in collecting particularly in jazz, in doing that kind of work and finding a place for music and museums.

Will Robin 32:48

And how did you get from there to where you are now?

Dwandalyn Reece 32:52

Back to the zigzag, I worked in a combination of music related museums and history museums. A lot of times it was staying gainfully employed. When I finished my internship at the Smithsonian, I went back to Michigan for a while and ended up at the Motown museum. So I was their first professional museum staff person. This was a museum started by Berry Gordy's sister, Esther Gordy Edwards. And so I was there for a year, I cataloged all the collection. So bringing all my freshly minted knowledge in museum practices to the fore. And then from there, I dovetailed into some history museum work, and I actually ended up doing a lot of community-based work. So a lot of my ethnographic experience was working on the ground. This was a time when museums were just starting to think about their audiences outside of the usual people who come to their building. And so I worked on several projects, looking at African American communities, also Chinese American community, so I worked in New Jersey. And then I made my way to the Brooklyn Historical Society, worked on West Indian Day carnival and a variety of projects there. And then decided to go back to school because I wanted to get back into my music stuff and went to NYU and did a degree in performance studies. And so I picked up my research on Ethel Waters, kind of fleshed that out and did my dissertation there. And in that interim period, I also continued to consult and got interested in grantmaking, got some internships there. And once I was finished with my doctorate, I made my way to DC via the NEH, National Endowment for the Humanities, as a program officer. And I was there for nine years. And the museum was building and then this position for a curator of Music and Performing Arts. And I felt like I had come full circle. And I applied, and I got the job. And so I've been here some going on 14 years.

Will Robin 35:23

So tell me a little bit about the book. So the book is called Musical Crossroads

Dwandalyn Reece 35:28

Musical Crossroads: Stories Behind the Objects of African American Music. And the book is ... there are two things I wanted to accomplish. The first thing is really to talk about a material culture of music. Material culture is a discipline and methodology. It's well used in history, archaeology, folklore, but there hasn't been a lot of discussion about it in music. And what we do with in museums and a lot of our libraries is that we're dealing with the material culture of music. And when I say that, that includes archives, so we're not using just photographs and scores as illustrations, we're actually looking at the object as a primary source, a source of study. So I wanted to introduce and flesh out that idea with our collection. So that was my goal too. And then what I talked about earlier, these networks of activations that I talk about, these concentric circles of talking about music in society, and how the music story is related to the record store owner who lives in the neighborhood, or the piano teacher who lives there, I really wanted to show how music stretches beyond the immediate as listener or viewer. So it's a deeper dive than the exhibit because you can just use more words. But it tells... it shows how you can take an object and locate stories, and also quite often unknown stories that you wouldn't have even thought about to come across in telling stories about music.

Will Robin 37:16

How much has the exhibit changed since the museum opened in 2016? And how much is the book reflecting that aspect of evolution of the museum's Performing Arts?

Dwandalyn Reece 37:32

Well, from logistical process, we change, we do rotations about once a year, where we'll rotate maybe 15 to 20 objects, and those decisions are guided by loans or conservation needs, or just sometimes an opportunity to tell a different story. We got behind with COVID, of course, when the museum was closed. Things are rotated out. So we'll have a new rotation. Our rotations are usually in the summer, where we bring in new objects. And we've done that over the last six years. And the next question, how it aligns with ... the book allows us kind of to go in a different direction. You're limited with ... the exhibit is 6200 square feet. And you get 75-word labels. What can you do with that? This, we can have stories of 500 words, (laughs) things like that. And then I reconceptualized that because I wanted to mix up the cups on the table a little bit, just to show the connections and the ripple effect of these stories and how they relate to other stories. So the book really takes you deeper in different ways than the exhibit does. And we talk about, eventually, we will have something called the Searchable Museum, where we're bringing all our exhibits on digital. And that is going to allow us to really make connections in ways that you couldn't in the book or on the floor, very excited about that.

Will Robin 39:24

I don't know how much you can speak to this as a federal employee, but there's currently an ongoing, dangerous assault on the teaching of Black history and culture in this country. And I'm wondering how you see the museum responding to this in some way, and what the role the performing arts represents in that conversation as well.

Dwandalyn Reece 39:49

Well, I see the museum's response as doing what it always does, which is affirm and teach the history and culture of African Americans, all our programming is that content, and we're lucky. And we're a place for audiences to come get that content and come learn those stories. And we will continue to do that as part of our mission, not only as this museum but as part of the mission of the Smithsonian for the diffusion, and education of all people. I think Music and Performing Arts, and I may be preaching to the choir, have tremendous power to open us up to diversity and difference in culture. And I think the kind of approach that we take, as a museum and working with material culture and thinking about music in broader ways, it's just a natural evolution. You can't help learn about another culture or another way of life or another sexual orientation, or another experience, if you really get behind the weeds of what music is all about. And I think you see that... I hope you definitely see that in our exhibitions, and in our institutions, and here at the Smithsonian, some of our other units as well. But it's also part of where are the arts and music in our curriculum today. And why it's so important that that's part of our life, and how much it speaks to our daily lives in a way that shapes who we are. It's one of those things, that the things that are most important we take for granted. And I think music and art are two of those things that we do.

Will Robin 41:49

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for speaking with me. I really appreciate it.

Dwandalyn Reece 41:53

Yeah, this was fun.

[Music] 41:55

Will Robin 41:58

Many thanks to Dwandalyn Reece for that fascinating conversation. You can read more about her work over on our website soundexpertise.org. And I hope you attend the museum if you haven't already. As always our inbox is open, email us at soundexpertise00@gmail.com if you have any questions or thoughts, or find me on Twitter and Insta @seatedovation. If you have the opportunity, please also leave a review of our show on Apple podcasts so we can get some more eyeballs and ear balls. I don't know if earballs are a thing but you know, get more people listening to the show. Many thanks to D. Edward Davis for his production work, you can check out his music on SoundCloud at [warm silence](https://www.soundcloud.com/warm-silence). And thank you to Andrew Dell'Antonio for transcribing our episodes to make them more accessible. This episode of sound expertise was recorded at the National Foreign Language Center with support from University of Maryland School of Music. And next week on sound expertise ... and our season is almost at an end ... the science of silence.

Unidentified Speaker 42:55

It would be a bit hubristic of us to think that it's just with some experiments we could resolve this millennia old question about whether we perceive silence, but if we change the question a little bit, but still respect its origins, maybe we can make some progress on it.

Will Robin 43:08

See you then.

[Music] 43:10