

Eileen M. Hayes. 2010. *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women's Music*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

### Reviewed by Jalylah Burrell

Eileen M. Hayes's ethnographic study of women's music festivals includes this simple testimony from African-American, festival-circuit stalwart Mary Watkins: "A triad is a triad" (54). The pianist and composer was intervening on the tendency to tether "musical structure" to "gender identity" in appraisals of the women's music festival circuit: a loose network of festivals that emerged in the mid-seventies (54). The festival circuit was produced by and primarily for lesbian women, many of who evinced strong feminist sensibilities. Contemporary women's music festivals are the sites for Hayes's escorted road trip in *Songs and Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics and Women's Music*.

Less a confluence of particular triads than a convergence of musicking women who wave the lavender triangle, women's music festivals provide an opportunity for Hayes to call attention to the black lesbian women within the predominantly white women's music community. For black lesbian women, the lavender triangle of lesbian identity is always framed by the black background of their African American identity. It is because this intersection has gotten so little traffic in African American Studies, Women's Studies, and Music Studies, that Hayes, a festival veteran and feminist activist, spotlights its contours and suggests further avenues of inquiry. "The persistent and disabling equation of black feminist identity with the physical appearance of 'the revolutionary sweethearts' of the Black Power movement" is one of many assumptions informing popular and scholarly reception of black women's music that *Songs in Black and Lavender* disrupts through research in an obscure black women's musical community (7). In a subject riddled with gaps, scholars of black feminist music have often been driven to archival alchemy or been forced to cede black women musicians to mystery's dark vestibule. Hayes plugs one of those gaps and contests the overdetermined influence of the heavily treated black female musical figure, the blues woman (27).

The University of North Texas ethnomusicologist writes against the "persistent inaudibility of women's music" to a variety of constituencies by raising the volume on its lowest frequency (45). Black women, Hayes claims, battle "subjugation . . . in the discourse of women's music" and unfamiliarity in "Black expressive culture" (45). Black women's involvement in women's

music festivals is presented as a “contemplation on race and the politics of sexual identity in the women’s music festival community” (50) that in its novelty is emblematic of the neglect of black feminist and black lesbian experiences in scholarship. Leaning little on historiography and musicology, the “interpretive study” instead privileges a survey of black feminist consciousness within women’s music festival communities (6). Hayes’s “theoretical exploration of issues raised by black women’s presence in women’s music” works by utilizing first person and informant accounts that help her sketch out a series of suggestive vignettes that stake black women’s shared ownership of women’s music festivals, aesthetics, and culture from the iconic and well-attended Michigan Womyn’s Festival and the National Women’s Music Festival to the newer, niche-targeted Serafemme and SistaHfest (175). Hayes diffuses her attention between performers, festival goers, and organizers and relies on the tools of contemporary musical ethnography: interview data and participant observation. She puts her ethnographic work into dialog with a wide variety of black feminist and music scholarship such as that of black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins, Robin D.G. Kelley’s work on radical movements, Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson’s work on music scenes, Christopher Small’s concepts of “musicking” and “ideal relationships” and, more broadly, leisure studies and US voter theory.

African-American vocalist Linda Tillery writes in her two page foreword to *Songs in Black and Lavender* that it is an “ambitious undertaking” with “something for everyone” in its 200-plus pages (ix–x). Tillery’s text confers an authority to the ethnography and Hayes’s insider status as well as providing an indication of its breadth. Her nine relatively short chapters leap from black women’s early participation in women’s music festivals as performers and patrons (chapter 3, “After the Golden Age: Negotiating Perspective”); to the implementation and impact of idealistic platforms and multicultural practices at women’s music festivals (chapter 5, “Ideal Relationships: Women’s Music Audiences”); and to the alternate spaces provided by black women and black lesbian exclusive festivals (chapter 6, “Redistricting: Gay and Black Outdoors”). “After the Golden Age” considers black women’s involvement in women’s music festival circuit following its 1969–84 “golden age.” Hayes attempts to model a way of looking at black women’s involvement “without positioning their participation as supplemental to a narrative in progress, or even tangential” (47). Hayes quotes musicians such as Mary Watkins and Nedra Johnson reflecting on their making music in black traditions (e.g., the spiritual) in festival spaces where those sounds were associated with patriarchy and their feeling that the women’s music aesthetic disallowed their cultural backgrounds. With “Ideal Relationships,” Hayes riffs on ethnomusicologist Christopher Smalls’s argument that “ideal relationships” are enacted through music making (78), invoking women’s music festivals’

ham-handed attempts to inject their proceedings with multiculturalism from an uncaptioned photograph of the iconic black lesbian activist Ruth Ellis on the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival web site to that festival's programming directive to include an "ethnic act" on every bill (82, 84). In contrast to the virtual monochrome of the Michigan Womyn's Festival, "Redistricting: Gay and Black Outdoors" finds Hayes surveying black women-targeted women's music festivals Sistahfest and Serafemme through interviews and journal entries interspersed with an extended exchange with a Serafemme-featured, lesbian-rapper Miss Money. Where Hayes stops short of suggesting that either festival achieves an ideal, she distinguishes them from the predominantly white festivals in their "engagement of multiple axes of oppression and positionalities" (107).

Hayes work details common and often uncomfortable scenes in the memory banks of those who frequently attend black women's music festivals (6–7). One example is the failure of Sisterfire, the short lived festival founded in 1982 by African American acapella ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock and frequented by black women artists, after the withdrawal of women's music festival community support for not conforming to the narrower political agenda of its white feminist membership (68). Another is black women's underrepresentation at outdoor festivals being attributed to the stereotype of blacks' aversion to camping as opposed to a relationship to the natural world informed by the "memory of racialized terror in wide open spaces" and attendant confluences of black life with fauna in chattel slavery (85).

These chapters are contextualized by the final and lengthiest of the book (chapter 9, "Guys Like Us: Community Membership Revisited") on the reception of drag king performances on the festival circuit and the debate over trans women's attendance at women's music festivals. Surfacing the challenging tenure of black women in women's music festivals, Hayes advances the study and her scholarly stance by detailing the response to screenings of the 2005 drag king documentary *The Aggressives* at women's music festival and the anxieties about trans admittance to women-born women only women's music festivals. The concerns of inclusion, which power *Songs in Black and Lavender*, are approached from another vantage through that pivot, a pivot that again surfaces subjectivities not just black, feminist, or lesbian, but also trans. Yet *Songs in Black and Lavender's* extended look at drag king culture reads as an extended digression that provides little insight into black women's roles at women's music festivals and affirms Linda Tillery's "something for everyone" characterization to a fault.

The ambitiousness of *Songs and Black and Lavender's* scope is tempered by Hayes's belief that scholars "must remain humble in [their] claims" (147) as black women's lives are perpetually painted with broad strokes. But Hayes's disjointed reflections lack a cohesive argument and her rendering

## Current Musicology

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of the women's music festival scene is self-consciously incomplete. Wary of cutting too confining a silhouette for the diverse community of festival artists and attendees, *Songs in Black and Lavender* does not supply a basic understanding of the women's music festivals, nor does it provide productive portraits of popular black women's music festival artists like Watkins or Tillery for whom basic biographical information is not easily accessible—this methodological choice might frustrate and confuse readers not already familiar with the community's participants. Similarly, Hayes provides a list of key African-American female musicians in the appendix, but given the dearth of circulating information available and Hayes's command of the material, it is a curious restraint.

Given that the subject is so understudied, Hayes's attempt to represent a large number of topics is admirable but ultimately causes the book to suffer in terms of organization. Hayes well refutes the all-inclusive rhetoric of women's music through self-ethnography and through ethnography of her black female informants, but women's music-festivals' failure at diversity communicates none of what is compelling about this niche community for the black women who continue to perform and patronize these festivals. Hayes's wandering prose, which often finds her chapters digressing from their subject and features snippets of disjointed observations from her extensive research, begs discipline even as it works its interstices. What fractures the work is, in part, also a result of women's music festivals' small scene and motley membership. The black musicians of women's music festivals do not adhere to a specific genre, and black festival patrons are as diverse. *Songs in Black and Lavender* lacks the architecture to house the innovative and interdisciplinary research Hayes endeavors.

Hayes also imposes her own limits. She envisions her audience as undergraduates and *Songs in Black and Lavender* as a supplementary text in music and sexuality studies courses that integrate the black lesbian experience and black feminist epistemologies into the curricula (176). By opting to feature expressions of black feminist consciousness women's music festivals, Hayes forfeits the opportunity to thoroughly represent black women experiences on the festival circuit, but as a first generation work of scholarship, *Songs in Black and Lavender* points to a variety of extended research possibilities, from black women in women's music festivals, to sonic analyses, to the dynamics of labor, to the negotiations of race and the outdoors, and advances an intersectional black feminist approach to pursuing them.