

# Up From Darien

## **URBAN BLUES**

**By Charles Keil**

**University of Chicago Press**

## **TIV SONG**

**The Sociology of Art in a Classless Society**

**By Charles Keil**

**University of Chicago Press**

## **POLKA HAPPINESS**

**By Charles Keil, Angeliki Keil, and Dick Blau**

**Temple University Press**

## **MY MUSIC**

**By Susan D. Crafts, Daniel Cavicchi, Charles Keil, and the Music in Daily Life Project**

**Wesleyan University Press**

## **MUSIC GROOVES**

**By Charles Keil and Steven Feld**

**University of Chicago Press**

The Darien where Charles Keil grew up wasn't yet the punch line of a joke about stockbrokers. It was just the place his family was from. His grandfather raised pigs where later the country club would stand, and his father worked his way through Yale only to graduate mid-Depression, his best prospect a lumberyard back home. But Fairfield County proved a lucrative location for a building materials business, and in 1948, when he was nine, Charlie moved from a tiny working-class enclave of cops and handymen to a four-acre plot in the real Darien--the ritzy one.

By then he was already into stride and boogie-woogie, which his Connecticut Yankee mom played on the family piano, and soon he was studying with John Philip Sousa's bass drummer at a Darien High that was open every Saturday for music lessons. Keil did not have to work his way through Yale, where he

majored brilliantly enough in American studies to get a Woodrow Wilson in anthropology at the University of Chicago. He lost the fellowship for submitting a Marxist paper about fieldwork-as-praxis that was accounted insufficiently serious and too damn smooth--belletristic, as the cant goes today. But since anthropology was basically an excuse to study music anyway, Keil took up with the great Indiana ethnomusicologist Alan Merriam for a year, then returned to Chicago for a master's thesis based on interviews in blues clubs that focused on two stars all but unknown outside of Afro-America: B.B. King and Bobby Bland. In 1966, Chicago published a slightly polished revision as *Urban Blues*.

It would be difficult to overstate how significant *Urban Blues* was for rock criticism and popular music studies, neither more than a gleam in a nerd's eye when he wrote it. Jazz had some academic credibility, most of it via English-prof fans like Marshall Stearns and Barry Ulanov, and supposedly folkloric musics were tended in their specialist niches. But for Keil to embark upon a serious study of *currently popular entertainers who earned good livings with electric guitars* was a radical departure that heartened a generation of like-minded listeners back when it still took chutzpah to admire James Joyce and James Brown in the same lifetime, much less the same sentence. Keil hardly invented this attitude, which was built into the experience of the countless individual college kids who were trying to make sense of it. But he proved they had allies in high places, and he set an intellectual standard few of them were equal to. Laying out scholarly debts, pinpointing the mouldy-fig fallacies of the gullible blues buff Samuel Charters and the sacrosanct amateur culture theorist LeRoi Jones, offering up a credible phylogeny of blues and a knowledgeable account of the then uncodified concept of soul, and--crucially--paying detailed, candidly enthusiastic attention to both artists and fans, Keil not only broke academic ground but wrote more eloquently than all but a handful of the thousands who followed. And if many of the younger ones have never heard of him, that mainly proves they've got a lot to learn.

As he explains in an afterword to the 1991 edition, Keil wrote *Urban Blues* as "a true believer in African humanism" who was, among other things, the first regular white essayist in *Muhammad Speaks*. His theoretical inspiration was Janheinz Jahn's 1961 celebration of African expression, *Muntu*. Today, he favors a green nationalism that aspires toward the precapitalist diversity of small, cantonized nation-states suggested by Andrew Bard Schmookler's 1984 *The Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution*. The canton model suits Keil's musical sensibility, which is by now a familiar one: attracted to the warmth and manageable size of so-called folk cultures, too smart and too hedonistic to hem itself in with pastoral nostalgia. What led him to it was field research in Nigeria, "where a massacre of Igbo citizens and the smell of decaying bodies by the side of the road suddenly punctured my belief that black ways were better and more beautiful than white."

The two-and-a-half years Keil spent in Nigeria with his wife, Angeliki, and his daughter, Aphrodite, ended just before the Biafran War exploded in 1967. The doctoral thesis that eventually resulted, a study of the singular song culture of the million Tiv scattered in virtually classless communities over urban and rural central Nigeria, wasn't published until 1979. By then Keil had been teaching in SUNY Buffalo's American studies department for 11 years. Until it was a lost cause he campaigned ceaselessly for the same Biafran independence many Tiv, who are renowned warriors as well as musicmakers, were fighting against in the Yorubas' Nigerian army. Energized by Keil's traumatized ideas and the surprising twists of the Tiv imagination, *Tiv Song* is a passionate, oddly shaped ethnography that suffers only slightly from war-foreshortened fieldwork. Keil is right to fret that it's not in a league with Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People*. But what is?

*Tiv Song* took a lot out of him, however. After pouring forth a major contribution to cultural theory when he was 25, Keil published no other books until he was 52. He wrote for journals, got tenure, parented two kids, helped turn his department into a multicultural bastion, presided over a famous course that teaches participatory democracy to undergraduates who need an

easy B by making them play drums three hours a week, started several local bands he anchored on bass, and got very interested in, of all things, polka. He remained active on the left, and in 1990 cofounded an organization called MUSE, Musicians United for Superior Education, devoted to delivering Keil's drumming theories to elementary schools, especially in the inner city--to get kids early the way Keil believes the Athenians did when they based education on music, the way he himself was energized by the surplus value accruing to ritzy Darien's well-funded music program. "Paideia con salsa," he calls his version of free-your-ass-and-your mind-will-follow, and MUSE is plainly his great passion. In the '90s, however, he also started putting out books again, three so far: *Polka Happiness*, just now finally in paperback, with Temple in 1992; *My Music* with Wesleyan/New England in 1993; and *Music Grooves* with Chicago in 1994.

What unites these remarkable books is that Keil didn't write any of them alone. *Polka Happiness* is a mostly descriptive collaboration with Angeliki Keil and Wisconsin photographer Dick Blau, *Music Grooves* a mostly analytic dialogue (published essays, correspondence, taped conversations, and last-word-in-edgewise "further comments") with MacArthur Fellowship-winning ethnomusicologist Steven Feld, and *My Music* a genuinely collective work: under the direction of Keil and doctoral candidates Susan D. Crafts and Daniel Cavicchi, two undergraduate classes and three graduate seminars winnowed 150 '80s interviews with Buffalo-area music users into a lively whole comprising 41 of them. Academics often flaunt double bylines, but Keil, with his lifelong political- pedagogical commitment to cooperation, isn't just chalking up entries on his c.v. Like many precursors, he has observed the advance of academia's poststructuralist cultural studies movement with mixed relief and alarm. It's obviously about time people's arts got more respect, but he's suspicious of the new guys' focus on superstructure: "you can't eat symbols of resistance and cultural inversions won't keep out the rain." And unlike his old ally George Lipsitz, for instance, he's not a star in the cultural studies world, which regards him as a mite old-fashioned when it pays him any mind at all. So it's a nice irony that, surrounded by young

careerists who trumpet the death of the subject, Keil has had the guts and humility to actually do away with his own, renouncing authorial authority (and defeating writer's block) in three distinct, formally provocative guises.

*Polka Happiness* is a university-press coffee-table book whose topic scandalized Keil's African-humanist admirers in academe, where his polka articles began to surface in the early '70s. In fact, when the book was vetted, several readers declared the parity it hypothesized between Polonian happiness and Afro-musical spiritual release insulting to black Americans, and Temple's version includes barely half of what the Keils submitted; among the omissions are a cowritten essay comparing ethnic modes of ritual ecstasy and a long account of Paris in 1844, when this urban, working-class, obscurely eastern European dance swept the continent on its way to becoming indigenous from Mexico to Indonesia. Charles's chapters outline a complex history--definitely Polish American, polka is almost as definitely *not* Polish (polka accordion started here, as did many of the village-derived usages recent immigrants loved), with black influences dating back to World War I New Orleans--and pay vivid tribute to such widely unknown musical innovators as Walt Solek, Li'l Wally Jagiello, Eddie Blazonczyk, and Happy Louie Dusseault. Angeliki's focus is fan culture: the social structure of a self-regulated, barely-for-profit family affair in which adults become as children while kids show off their grownup skills. And Blau's photographs firmly situate all this creative ferment in a community whose heedlessly declassé visual style complements its voracious appetite for pleasure and release.

One point of *Polka Happiness* is that not every Polonian enjoys the participatory gratifications of polka's ready-made ethnomusical ritual. So it makes sense that none of *My Music's* Polish American subjects is a polkaholic, although several are off-and-on fans. In fact, despite a slight, justified bias toward such adepts as the high school student who flies out every weekend to study violin at Juilliard, the 33-year-old bus driver who claims to like everything but opera and proves it, and (I infer) Aphrodite ("Abby") Keil, who at 19 plainly knows more pop than her dad, there are other

respondents who use all music casually. But whether they think it's occasional background, the meaning of life, or some unique amalgam of both, few of these informants (and Keil swears the selection wasn't rigged to prove it) pigeonhole neatly into one of those taste subcultures beloved of marketers, programmers, sociologists, and rock critics. Spontaneously and unpretentiously, one likes rap and Elvis, another rock and roll and "vernacular music," another Broadway shows and Polish village styles and Chopin, another Neil Diamond and Willie Nelson and Neil Diamond and Liza Minnelli and Neil Diamond. With the most uncommitted users attesting to some degree of saturation, what comes through is how uncontrollably each bends music to his or her own semiconscious needs or well-conceived purposes.

"Do these unique voices make you want to shout 'hooray for American individualism!'" Keil asks in his introduction. "Or are there underlying negative themes running through the interviews that spoil the celebration?" And although I say the total effect constitutes a powerful progressive-populist statement, Keil is less optimistic. He suspects that "my music" will get in the way of "our music," and like more misanthropic mass culture theorists, he fears passivity and addiction.

In *Music Grooves*, by far the most difficult of these books despite Keil and Feld's skill at opening it up, he develops these ideas. "A bind we have in doing this in book form is that we're trying to break free of an essentializing, objectifying, text-obsessed university for which all books and knowledge are about putting things in rows and sequences and segmenting the continuum, chopping things apart," one typically self-deflating aside confesses, yet in fact *Music Grooves* (which just won the 1995 University of Chicago Folklore Prize) exploits the essay collection's naturally segmented form to its own purposes. Its apparent incoherence is simply a refusal of closure. All those photos and footnotes and dialogues in which the two scholars occasionally try on each others' far from identical positions evoke an intellectual continuum they never get to the end or bottom of.

The key theme stems from a 1966 essay in which Keil takes issue with his teacher Leonard Meyer's concept of "embodied meaning," which according to Keil overemphasizes syntax, reducing music to an object when it is better understood, especially outside the Western canon, as performed process. Keil's counterconcept is "engendered feeling," which he later links to another paradigm, "participatory discrepancy." This in turn is analagous to what Feld renders "lift-up-over-sounding," the closest Papua New Guinea's Kaluli come to a term for music (the Tiv have no word for it either), which Feld says requires "collaborative autonomy" or "anarchistic synchrony as a nonoxymoron": the cultural-political paradigm that magically arises when harmonies don't quite mesh, when polka dancers follow their own rhythms, when a jazz drummer or bassist swings slightly on top of or behind the beat (now a critical commonplace, although Keil got there first and describes it as well as anyone). This ideal is pursued through Keil's "People's Music Comparatively: Style and Stereotype, Class and Hegemony," a blues-and-polka essay that's the most complexly credible sociohistorical analysis of "ethnic" musical style ever written, as well as in less astonishing treatments of Aretha Franklin, karaoke, the idea of world music, and other manifestations of the "commodified groove."

As in *Polka Happiness*, where his academically informed, pedagogically informal prose is richer and more pleasurable intellectually than Angeliki's, he outwrites his collaborator, an inspired fieldworker who can be Latinate, prissy, and obtuse at his worst. I'm not claiming they're typical, but not many tenure victims could come up with the aphorisms that keynote Keil's "On Civilization, Cultural Studies, and Copyright" (*italics in original*):

*Civilization is the crap that culture leaves behind.*

*Civilization, as a whole, piles up; culture gets smothered.*

*Being more civilized means having more museums and libraries; culture is giving yourself to prime and present time.*

*Conversation is culture; writing is civilized.*

*Culture is yeasty, fermenting, a single germ or seed generating a growth*

*process; civilization is the wine bottled, labeled, and corked.*

*Improvising is cultural; following the letter of the law or the law of the letter is civilized.*

*Civilization is all grasp; culture is reach.*

In addition to showcasing his prose, these slogans sum up the ideological bias that powers Keil's humanism, which is not without its Luddite side.

Ultimately, he's so anticapitalist, so unimpressed with embodied meaning, and so committed to the groove as music's prime purpose that he's insensible to the artfully engendered feelings animating all manner of mass-mediated music, which saddens me in a godfather of rock criticism. But nobody articulates this usually myopic and sentimental position with more vision, realism, scope, or margin for error. Since Keil is certainly right to charge that 40 years of mass-mediated rockgrooves haven't showed much political efficacy, the truth value of his analysis gets down to whether the current world crisis in fact creates a stark part-of-the-problem/part-of-the-solution dichotomy. In a more gradualist scenario, I say these grooves they do more good than harm--and that they're so inevitable and substantial that honest work on them is never wasted.

Keil's writing is enough to make one believe that academic publishing could really prove literacy's last chance rather than a prison-house of jargon. So I eagerly anticipate two mostly completed works-in-progress with publishers pretty much set: *Polka Perspectives*, including a projected essay that connects Zulu choirs to the theme, and a Keil-Keil-Blau study of the music of Greek Macedonia, with Feld doing the field recording. And I know they wouldn't be as promising if Keil weren't so excited about MUSE's new \$18,000 grant. Not many writers in any realm work harder to put praxis into practice--or have so many strong words to show for it. True, they're materializing a little later than one would have hoped in 1966. But as with almost any 1966 hope, better late than never will be plenty good enough.

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