

Rockin' the Jazz Biopic: Changing Images of African American Musicians in Hollywood Biographical Films

Simone Varriale¹

Post-print; final version published in *Jazz Research Journal*, 6(1): 27-46, 2012.

Abstract

Mixing facts and fiction, Hollywood screen biographies have told the lives of popular music icons at least since *The Jazz Singer* (1927). However, biopics construct narratives that deal problematically with issues of race. This article aims to describe how representations of African American musicians have changed from 1970s 'black jazz biopics' (Gabbard 1996) to more recent films on rock, hip hop and rhythm 'n' blues acts. On one hand, I analyse the way 1970s music biopics constructed a peculiar new narrative about race and popularity. On the other hand, I show the extent to which films such as *Tina* (1993), *Ray* (2004) and *Notorious* (2009) have subtly modified the racialized distinctions of former biopics, placing black musicians within a cinematic mythology which historically had been reserved to white subjects. The shift from jazz to other music genres, thus, is related to significant changes in biopics' narratives and visual strategies. However, I argue that music biopics still deal with a distinctive notion of 'the popular' (Williams 1983), which frames blackness as otherness and whiteness (Dyer 1997) as just 'human nature'.

1. Introduction

Despite some decades of neglect within academia, as well as predictions about its decline on cinematic screens (Custen 1992), the so-called biopic is still a successful product among Hollywood film genres (Anderson and Lupo 2008), with films about popular music celebrities being well received by audiences and critics.² In this article I will examine the changing representation of African American musicians in biopics through the analysis of specific films ranging from 1970s jazz biopics, like *Scott Joplin* (1977), to more recent examples which deal with music genres other

¹ Doctoral Researcher, Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, UK. Email: s.varriale@warwick.ac.uk; simone.varriale@gmail.com

² According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), recently released biopics like *Walk The Line* (2005), *Ray* (2004) and *Notorious* (2009), received good critical recognition and did consistently well at the box office.

than jazz, such as *Notorious* (2009) on Notorious B.I.G.. The analysis of films dealing with different music genres, indeed, makes possible to highlight the extent to which, during the last forty years, the image of African-American musicians constructed by Hollywood biopics has changed. Music biopics are analysed here as a peculiar kind of historical narrative about American popular music. More specifically, I argue that such a narrative constructs a certain image of 'the popular'. Drawing on Frith (1998), the popular can be defined as a discourse about the social and cultural value of music. I will argue that music biopics shape a narrative about popular music that *negotiates* two different definitions of the popular: popular as mass, industrially produced culture, and popular as unmediated cultural expression of a 'folk' community (Middleton 1990: 127-145). The term *negotiation*, hereafter, is used to indicate that the aforementioned definitions, historically understood as conflicting (Williams 1983: 236-238; Shiach 1989: 19-34), are blended together in a peculiar way by music biopics. I will first discuss the extent to which this narrative in biopics has been historically associated with white musicians and subsequently, I will analyse the way it has been reshaped in films about black musicians. I will draw on Richard Dyer's study of 'whiteness' to better understand this new narrative model (Dyer 1997). Also, I will show the extent to which the films produced since the 1990s problematise Krin Gabbard's distinction between 'white' and 'black' biopics (Gabbard 1996: 35-100). Indeed, such a classification might be no longer useful to understand the subtle ways in which more recent films construct a racialised narrative about popular music.

In looking at music biopics I share an interest with Ian Inglis (2007), namely the way they present themselves as reliable and truthful historical documents. However, it is not a comparison between films and other biographical sources that I am going to tackle. My attention is instead focused on the historical narrative shaped by biopics and its underlying notions of cultural value. From this perspective, they are considered as a 'strategy for reconstructing the popular past' (Thornton 1990: 87-95), and I will analyse how such a strategy has changed in relation to the representation of African-American musicians. For this reason, I will make just few references to the official sources

of films (like paper-based biographies),³ both because most of them indicate no official source at all, and because my perspective is in line with those contributions that have analysed the biopic as an inter-textual narrative form (Custen 1992, 2000; Milton Miller 1983; Elsaesser 1986). I will look therefore at the way music biopics shape life-stories systematically, underlining how they have constructed consistent images of the black musician as a cultural hero. This essay will address only issues of representation, without tackling questions related to the films' reception. Also, it does not intend to be an exhaustive contribution. I will deal exclusively with cinematic biopics, excluding the huge number of 'made for TV movies' produced at least since 1964 (Custen 1992, 2000). Furthermore, for matters of space, I will analyse films that are based on a true story - the ones which make explicit 'claims of truth' (Custen 1992: 51) - rather than films implicitly based on the lives of music celebrities.

2. Approaches to the study of music biopics

Despite a fragmented but recognisable line of research on music biopics, the series of contemporary productions has been rarely studied as a coherent historical narrative about popular music. Some articles, like Babington (2006) and Garber (1995), deal with films related to specific music genres (see also Bufwack 1983), but without recognising the way in which genre definitions are actually used to construct a more general narrative about music as popular culture. Several contributions, then, are focused on specific problems: like the representation of the studio recording (Creekmur 1988) and the structural similarities between recently produced music biopics and the musical (Schlotterbeck 2008). Single films have also been analysed in depth (Garber 1995; Hanson 1998; Inglis 2003) and as part of wider promotional strategies (Kooijman 2003). In contrast, a more general assessment of American and British music biopics produced between 1970s and the early 1990s has been provided by Atkinson (1995). However, he merely expresses a negative value

³ On biographies and autobiographies as narrative forms which entail certain tropes and conventions, see Swiss (2005), Perchard (2007), and Strachan (2008).

judgement about the films, failing to recognise the distinctive way in which music biopics shape a consistent image of popular culture. Different films like *Sweet Dreams* (1985) - a biopic about the country singer Patsy Cline - and *The Doors* (1991) are taken by Atkinson as indicators of a deeper sociocultural crisis (i.e. the inability of people to recognise the distinction between fiction and reality) (Atkinson 1995: 31). However, such a totalising picture has not much to say about the music biopic as a cinematic narrative about popular music.

More convincing studies have been carried out on Hollywood music biopics released between the 1920s and 1950s, with some authors dealing with later films as well (Gabbard 1996; Milton Miller 1983). Here, biopics on classical composers (Tibbetts 2005) and entertainers more generally (Milton Miller 1983) are analysed looking at underlying notions of cultural value, national identity, and race (Gabbard 1996). Along with Custen (1992), these authors note that although a romantic notion of individual 'will' tends to be crucial in biopics, the films also construct the main character as representative of a broad (sometimes explicitly American) community. This is an issue to which I shall return. Indeed, the idea of individual will, and the fact that individuals are characterised as 'ideal' representatives of a community, are pivotal features of contemporary music biopics as well. Overall, despite some systematic examinations of music biopics produced during the first half of the twentieth century, the strategies through which contemporary films frame music *as culture*, and the ways in which the representation of black musicians has changed since the 1970s (Gabbard 1996: 64-100), remain to be explored.

3. After the jazz biopic: putting 1970s music biopics in their place

According to Krin Gabbard (1996), from the late 1920s to the end of the 1950s the idea of a 'jazz culture' was addressed by different film genres. More specifically, in what Gabbard calls the 'white jazz biopic', jazz was represented through the life stories of American white bandleaders as well as Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths. These films, with *The Jolson Story* (1946) and *The Benny Goodman Story* (1956) being among the most successful ones, shaped jazz as mainly white, urban and middle

class culture. In both films, a brief encounter with black musicians in New Orleans (*Jolson Story*) or on a riverboat (*The Benny Goodman Story*) disclose the possibility of understanding how to play music with 'feeling' for the main characters. The rest of these narratives suggest that the simple intuitions of the black 'folks' are then developed and popularised by the main characters (Gabbard 1996: 35-63). In this way, white jazz biopics scarcely recognised any contribution of African American musicians to American popular music, their image being confined to scenes which emphasise the creative capabilities of whites.

The white jazz biopic can be considered the last outcome of an older tradition, which during Hollywood's Golden Age had encompassed various music genres including European classical music and Tin Pan Alley songs (Tibbetts 2005). Films on white jazz musicians declined at the end of 1950s, *The Gene Krupa Story* (1959) being the last film based on the life of an American bandleader. During the 1960s, *Your Cheatin' Heart* (1964) - about Hank Williams's life - was the only popular music-related biopic released (Milton Miller 1983: 188-191), and more generally 'Hollywood made fewer and fewer biopics after 1960' (Custen 2000: 131). Despite the genre's low profile in terms of releases, however, the subsequent decade saw black musicians properly addressed as main subjects for the first time.⁴ After the huge success of a biopic about Billie Holiday (*Lady Sings The Blues*, 1972), Motown Records tried to exploit a similar narrative with *Scott Joplin* (1977). Starring one of the main actors of *Lady Sings The Blues* (Billy Dee Williams) the film was released in theaters despite having been produced for television, but was apparently unsuccessful (Milton Miller 1983: 193-194). Following a similar destiny, a film about Leadbelly was produced in the same period by Paramount Pictures (*Leadbelly*, 1976), while new films on white musicians - like *The Buddy Holly Story* (1978) and *Bound For Glory* (1976) - started addressing rock music and other music traditions rather than jazz. During the 1970s, in sum, black

⁴ The only pre-1970s exception is *St. Louis Blues* (1958). However, Krin Gabbard (1996: 58-60) considers the film a 'white jazz biopic', and argues that the *star-personae* of Nat 'King' Cole, who played the main character, was important to construct the life-story of William C. Handy in line with the ones of white bandleaders of the swing age.

musicians became the main subject of music biopics, rather than being depicted as sources of inspiration for white musicians.

Hollywood's interest in African American musicians need to be placed in a wider context. On one hand, the crisis of Hollywood's 'studio system' opened a space for the entrance of new production companies on the market (Custen 2000), like Motown Records. On the other hand, during the 1970s, Hollywood started targeting African Americans as a new audience for its products. In this context, 'blaxploitation' movies - i.e. films made between 1970 and 1975 by both black and white directors to address the black audience (Lawrence 2008: 18) - provided new models of black masculinity, which emphasised an overt sexuality and asserting personality in contrast with former ways of depicting black people as secondary and passive characters (Guerrero 1993: 69-112; Bogle 2001: 231-266). Along with changes in film production, then, a changing political and social context needs to be considered. According to Ed Guerrero (1993), blaxploitation was made possible also by 'the rising political and social consciousness of black people (taking the form of a broadly expressed black nationalist impulse at the end of the civil rights movement), which translated into a large black audience thirsting to see their full humanity depicted on the commercial cinema screen' (1993: 69). However, since the 1974 the production of blaxploitation movies was already decreasing (Guerrero 1993: 105), and the genre was progressively replaced with 'crossover films' which aimed to reach a wider audience encompassing different class and ethnic backgrounds (Guerrero 1993: 105-111).

Films like *Scott Joplin* and *Leadbelly* - both released after the heyday of blaxploitation - display the same assertive masculinity of blaxploitation movies; especially *Leadbelly*, which depicts the main character as an impulsive and violent individual. Along with *Lady Sings the Blues*, these films feature a romantic narrative about black musicians being incapable of managing their own creativity, which is depicted as naturally related to inner and body-driven feelings. In this respect, they match with the description of 'black' jazz biopics provided by Gabbard, who under this label places *Lady Sings the Blues*, a later film like *Bird* (1988), and a range of other productions on

fictional black jazz musicians (Gabbard 1996: 64-100). However, another important feature of *Scott Joplin*, *Leadbelly* and *Lady Sings The Blues* is the way they portray black musicians as incapable of achieving or managing their public recognition. Indeed, they are all stories about an unaccomplished negotiation between the popular as cultural expression of a folk community (which in 1970s biopics is a 'black' community), and the popular as music industrially produced by a culture industry for a wide and racially undefined community. In the following section I will define the process of negotiation performed by 'white' biopics in order to analyse, subsequently, the 'unaccomplished' negotiation of 1970s black biopics.

4. Negotiating the popular: the cultural and racial politics of the music biopic

According to George Custen (1992), the Hollywood biopic is a particular version of an individual-based history, which stresses 'the will' of the main character in spite of social and economic inequalities. At the same time, Custen finds that the biopic gives as much importance to what he calls 'the people': the great individual must be acknowledged as such by 'the will' of a community. This community, then, encompasses both real people (potential moviegoers) and the narrative (mostly American) community constructed by the film. These features can be easily recognised in music biopics produced since the 1970s. However, such films also present conflicting views about the meanings of music and the social groups it is supposed to represent. These oppositions are frequently addressed in characters' dialogues, but also through the visual construction of different audiences and contexts. It is possible to say that the music biopic depicts a conflict between different 'genre worlds' to use Simon Frith's notion (1998: 75-95) based on the social and ideological construction of genre-labels. Firstly, the films shape music genres as social worlds, making a straightforward - almost homological - connection between 'kinds of music' and the kind of people that music is supposed to *naturally* represent. Secondly, such genre cultures are framed as opposing each other. An example of this strategy can be found in *The Buddy Holly Story*, which

shows an opposition between country as a conservative and countryside-related sensibility, and rock 'n' roll as a youth culture which is both morally and aesthetically challenging.

However, in stories about white musicians, this kind of conflict is eventually 'resolved' with the closure of the narrative, so that the musician represents a unique and wide community. This happens, for example, in *The Buddy Holly Story* and *La Bamba* (1987). In the latter film, the 1950s performer Ritchie Valens is shown as able to 'rearrange' the Mexican traditional *La Bamba* into a successful rock 'n' roll single. As a result, Valens performs a negotiation between the 'folk' culture related to his family and ethnic heritage, and American rock 'n' roll (which the film describes as produced by the music industry for a broad audience of American teenagers). In this way, music biopics shape a narrative about the popular value of music that negotiates between the notion of popular as mass, industrially produced culture, and the notion of popular as shared values and beliefs of a community (which has been a concern of different definitions of 'folk culture').⁵ As a result, these narratives stress the ability of the main character to overcome certain dual oppositions. Discourses about music and its cultural meaning are dealt with in terms of oppositions among kinds of music (and kinds of people) that will be eventually negotiated. This process, I argue, can be represented as happening along three levels:⁶

⁵ There is a wide literature on the ways folk music has been ideologically constructed in different social and historical contexts. For a general discussion, see Middleton (1990: 127-145).

⁶ There is another genre similarly concerned with folk ideology. According to Jane Feuer (1981), Hollywood 'self-reflexive' musicals represent the production of musical shows as a collective enterprise, so that the musical 'become a mass art which aspires to the condition of a folk art - produced and consumed by the same integrated community' (168).

Folk culture - Mass culture

(also 'genre culture' and national culture)

Local community - 'The people'

(also 'black people' and American people)

Private - Public sphere

The last opposition is the one that structures the whole narrative. The public sphere is the place where music business is conducted and the individual risks losing both a sense of identity and belonging to a community. The private, by contrast, is characterised as site of authenticity and truth about the self and the creative process. Of course this opposition is not specific to biopics: it is a feature of the broader way in which celebrity has been encoded through the media and as public discourse throughout the twentieth century (Dyer 1998, 1986). On the contrary, what is peculiar to music biopics is the fact that their narratives are concerned with finding a 'balance' between the two realms; a balance that black musicians, according to 1970s biopics, are unable to accomplish. *Scott Joplin*, for example, represents the unresolved conflict between Joplin's public life as composer, and his private problems deriving from a life spent playing music in 'black' bordellos. *Lady Sings The Blues* is based on a similar conflict between Billie Holiday's public life as a musician and a private life affected by heroin addiction. In *Leadbelly*, then, public recognition is not even shown in the narrative: it is framed as 'prospective' by concluding captions, while the film is solely focused on the main character's troubles and inability to limit his bodily 'appetites'. In all these films, as a result, a range of troubles situated in the private sphere, and related to the main characters' behaviours and bodies, undermine their public lives as musicians and potential celebrities.

4.1 Music biopics as historical narratives

From the perspective described, the music biopic can be considered a particular 'modernist narrative' about popular music (Hamm 2006). As with other modernist narratives, music biopics are concerned with establishing a 'truth' about the value of music and the social groups involved with it. Also, they retain certain 'popular ideas' about music, which make them similar to a myth (for example, the romantic idea that the individual can shape history regardless of any social and economic pressure). More specifically, the music biopic is reminiscent of what Hamm calls 'the narrative of classic and classical popular music', because it constructs a canon of great (American) popular artists (Hamm 2006: 17-21). However, music biopics do not stress the cultural value of the musical 'text', but the moral and ethical values of individuals. This happens both in white and black music biopics, even though the latter are mostly concerned with 'negative' moral values. As result, cultural value is always constructed as rooted in individuals' conduct and actions.

Emphasising the value of individuals, music biopics, as other modernist narratives, tend to avoid 'contextual explanations'. However, 1970s black jazz biopics provide a more ambiguous strategy. They use 'contextual explanations' to show the social causes of black musicians' difficult lives (e.g. racism), but at the same time, they retain the biopic's usual emphasis on individuals' responsibility. Overall, biopics' differences in representing white and black musicians can be related to another feature of modernist narratives, namely, the fact that they are 'hierarchical': their notions of truth always imply some hierarchy of values. Music biopics have been hierarchical at least in two ways in relation to African American musicians. Firstly, black musicians have been excluded as a main subject up to the 1970s (and then again between the late 1970s and the early 1990s). Secondly, as I will show, black musicians are portrayed as racially different individuals, both in 1970s music biopics and in the ones produced more recently.

5. Displaced popularity: 1970s biopics and the difference of 'being black'

Some features of the black jazz biopic were introduced by *Lady Sings The Blues*. Although making references to this film, in this section I will mainly analyse how biopics like *Scott Joplin* and *Leadbelly* contributed to shape a consistent image of black musicians, underlining the way they construct a particular narrative about music as popular culture.

In *Scott Joplin*, the notion of popular is addressed through the conflict between a distinctive and somehow 'closed' black community, and the wider American community that the main character might represent as a music icon. The black community is also a musical one, so that the conflict is also about what 'ragtime' is supposed to be. On one hand, it is framed as an all black and bordello-related culture (the one from which Joplin consciously tries to escape throughout the narrative). On the other hand, it is a new form of American popular music, which potentially might represent the wider national community usually constructed by music biopics. This second possibility is made explicit in the dialogues of John Stark, the publisher of Joplin's rags. In the film, this character is the main 'ideologue' of the popular as a cultural category. He embodies a figure that can be found in other music biopics who represents an 'honest' approach to the music business: the one that negotiates the quantitative notion of popularity (popular as well known and achieving high sales) with a qualitative one (popular as cultural expression of a community). Stark, in fact, acknowledges that Joplin's music *must* be sold, but as a new and 'genuinely American' art form. On the contrary, the other music entrepreneurs depicted in the film define ragtime as 'a passing fad', which should be exploited as soon as possible (i.e. they stress its potential 'popular value' only in terms of high sales). Moreover, Stark acts as a moral adviser, supporting Joplin's life style as a bourgeois 'professor of music' engaged with regular music practices (teaching and composing) and regular social practices (being a good husband, being a good father). Through this character, the narrative connects the popular value of music to the moral value of its creator. A successful business is therefore framed as the result of the qualities (moral and ethical) of the man. In this way, the biopic provides a magical solution to the potential opposition between the public sphere, which demands

commitment to the music business, and the private, which demands commitment to the musician's family and marriage. The moral value of the main character comes from his role as good father and husband: only an individual with such a 'balanced' private life can represent a broad American community as a musician.

This range of conflicts is common in biopics on white musicians, but what differentiates *Scott Joplin* and other black jazz biopics is the fact that the negotiation described above is only a temporary one. The second part of the narrative stresses disruption and the impossibility of achieving popularity in the present. In 1970s black jazz biopics this happens for two reasons. First, because the musicians live in a highly racist society (contextual explanation). Secondly, because they, as individuals, are unable to manage their deepest drives and feelings (individual explanation).

5.1 The contextual explanation

The second part of *Scott Joplin* makes clear that John Stark represents a minority of the American music industry. Indeed, the film shows that in the context of a strongly racist society and music industry, Joplin and Stark can represent the values and culture of a broad American community only *posthumously*, because of discrimination in the present. In both *Scott Joplin* and *Leadbelly* this posthumous popularity is best articulated through films' closing captions: few lines of text which suggest that the people able to acknowledge the main characters' talent are contemporary moviegoers (and obviously producers), rather than a fictional American audience portrayed as part of a racist and unequal society. As a result, the cultural negotiation that is the main feature of stories about white musicians is not accomplished: black music remains a form of 'folk music' in the narrative world. However, the negotiation is *displaced* rather than denied. Both *Scott Joplin* and *Leadbelly* represent the time between 1960s and 1970s as the one when the characters' talent was eventually recognised. In this way, a new kind of community is constructed on a moral ground that encompasses both contemporary audience and producers. Also, it implies a moral distinction between the American past and present. In this way the music biopic retains the inclusive appeal of

its message, while implying that racial inequalities are no longer an issue in the United States in the 1970s.

A similar strategy can be observed in *Lady Sings the Blues*. Here, the closing scene shows a successful Billie Holiday performing at Carnegie Hall rather than a declining musician. However, the captions contradict the images and cast a gloomy destiny: we apprehend that Holiday will continue to have problems with heroin, her cabaret licence will be revoked, and she will die at the age of 44. As in the other films analysed, a distinction is suggested between the racist society portrayed in the narrative and the one which makes possible to produce the film itself. Also, there is an emphasis on the 'unaccomplished balance' between the main character's private problems and her public image, so that the contextual explanation is combined with the individual one.

5.2 The individual explanation

The inclusion of African American musicians in the canon of Hollywood biopics is also related to their characterisation as different individuals in racial terms. On one hand, the films analysed present themselves as stories about the 'historical difference' of black musicians (i.e. the contextual causes of their life troubles are emphasised). On the other hand, despite being more or less accurate in describing certain historical settings, these films suggest that there is a deeper, natural level of difference in black musicians and in the black communities to which they belong. As a result, a 'black culture' is defined as both morally and biologically different.

A moral notion of difference is pursued particularly in *Scott Joplin*. Several scenes, in fact, emphasise the distinction between an all-black and morally dangerous culture and the 'bougous culture' embodied by Stark and Joplin himself. The film's dialogue obsessively addresses this distinction: Joplin is a professor rather than an entertainer (like other black piano players), and he can 'read' music rather than just play it. Sexuality, according to a well-known stereotype, becomes the key feature which defines black culture: it is a sexually unrestricted culture and a culture of the body, in contrast to Joplin's rationality and 'regular' marriage (which also implies a regular, as well

as unrepresented, sexual life). Indeed, it is significant that the second part of the film relates Joplin's professional and physical decline to an out-of marriage sexual relationship, in this way decreasing the distance previously established between him and the bordellos' black culture. To sum up, the film constructs a morally specific notion of black culture. At first it represents Joplin according to the narrative tropes of white jazz biopics. Subsequently, as in other black jazz biopics, the film shows that the main character's music cannot represent a broad American community. This happens not only because of racism, but because Joplin and his background are proven to be 'dangerous': unrestricted and body-driven.

The theme of the 'unruled' body is even stronger in *Leadbelly* and *Lady Sings The Blues*, which suggest a notion of difference charged with biological connotations. In *Leadbelly*, the main character's body is both at the centre of several dialogues and the subject of the film's visual strategies. The opening scene best summarises the theme of the body as unruled: Leadbelly is a prisoner engaged in hard labour, and someone advises the authorities that he is 'a very bad nigger'. He is the only character who works with a naked chest, so that his figure is sharply distinguished from the other prisoners. The whole film underlines Leadbelly's violent behaviours. Such reactions are framed as excessive but related to true cases of racism and exploitation. For example, after having concluded a concert in a public place, Leadbelly and Blind Lemon Jefferson are harshly asked to play again by a white man. Blind Lemon would start playing anew, but Leadbelly stops him, and then crashes a chair on the white man's back. The scene, as others in the film, relates the main character's fading destiny to contextual causes, but also to his extreme physical reactions.

5.3 Flashbacks as markers of difference

In both *Leadbelly* and *Lady Sings The Blues* flashbacks are used as 'markers of difference' and to emphasise the main characters' physicality, while in biopics produced during Hollywood's Golden Age flashbacks were used to frame life stories from the point of view of their current significance Custen (1992: 182-184). Also, narratives frequently began *in media res*: the main character is

shown at a later stage of his/her life, so that the rise to success is portrayed as not influenced by particular socio-cultural backgrounds, but as resulting from the character's inherent nature. All the films analysed so far on black musicians (and even a later film like *Bird*) still open showing a later stage in the life of main characters, but it is a declining stage: the one that represents a problem in the career and personal life of the protagonist. Thereafter, a flashback carries the story back, so that the whole narration is framed through a melodramatic lens: the narrative's main aim is to show the origins of extreme life troubles, rather than of unusual success and talent. Moreover, two films out of three (*Scott Joplin* being the exception) show an excessive and out-of-control body in their opening scenes, which strongly connect the declining narrative to the alleged nature of main characters. In this way, 1970s biopics on black musicians provide a specifically cinematic device to emphasise the racial difference of the main characters.

Overall, framing black culture as culturally and, to some extent, biologically different, the films analysed suggest that there is a sort of ontological level of otherness in the main characters, despite any historical accuracy in reconstructing racial segregation as contextual explanation for their condition. From this angle, 1970s black biopics still retain the individual as the main maker of his (or her) own destiny, but it is a different kind of individual. Because of this difference, then, the main negotiation that fails is the one between the private life and the public *personae*. Whether their lives are affected by drug addiction (*Lady Sings The Blues*), violent behaviours (*Leadbelly*), and an illness contracted from spending time in black bordellos (*Scott Joplin*), the main characters are not able to sustain public recognition.

6. New narratives on black musicians: *Tina*, *Ray* and *Notorious*.

The narrative tropes of 1970s black jazz biopics can be still found in *Bird*, which appears to be the last American biopic (excluding TV-movies) explicitly about the life of a black jazz musician.

However, few years after the release of *Bird*, the film *Tina: What's Love Got To Do With It* (about the life of Tina Turner) represents the first example of a new way of depicting black musicians on

the cinematic screen. Along with *Ray* (2004) and *Notorious*, it shows that the narrative model of the white jazz biopic is no longer inaccessible for African American musicians. Also, several biopics on white rock musicians released since the late 1980s, such as *Great Balls of Fire!* (1989) and *The Doors*, have emphasised the conflict, rather than the reconciliation, between the main character and American society, celebrating the idea of social and cultural difference which has historically characterised rock ideology (Frith 1981; Keightley 2001). As a result, since the late 1980s the distinction between white and black narratives about popular American musicians appears as less straightforward. However, as I will show, new narratives on black musicians combine certain elements of the white and the black jazz biopic, rather than replicating what has been the 'white model' for several decades.

The ideological perspective of the films on Tina Turner, Ray Charles and Notorious B.I.G., can be partly summarised through the opening captions of *Tina*. They state: 'the lotus is a flower that grows in the mud. The thicker and deeper the mud, the more beautiful the lotus blooms'. Similarly, a recurring sentence in *Notorious* is 'we can't change the world unless we change ourselves'. Both sentences point to a troubled image of the musicians' private lives, but also to the necessity of 'changing' oneself (i.e. private problems) before being able to change 'the world' (i.e. achieving popular recognition). The opening captions of *Tina* even suggest that 'bigger' problems are resolved by a 'greater' individual. Indeed, these films share with 1970s biopics a melodramatic and troubled image of black musicians' private lives. However, rather than being overwhelmed by contextual problems and/or their racial diversity, the main characters are able to succeed in the new biopics. As result, achieved popularity is depicted as the natural consequence of a natural talent despite 'extraordinary' life struggles.

6.1 Elements from the 1970s jazz biopic: the 'black' world and the body

In *Tina* this process is related to a celebration of the music industry which emphasises its democratic attitudes. Moreover, this visually white 'rock industry' is praised for being open-minded

and inclusive in contrast to an all-black rhythm 'n' blues world (represented by Ike Turner and his entourage). Here, it is possible to find the dichotomy already analysed between a closed, morally corrupted community, and a wider American community represented by the rock industry. In the latter context, the growing success of Tina Turner without Ike is described as 'just success' and natural recognition of her talent. This happens particularly when Phil Spector produces the song 'River Deep, Mountain High' for her. In the film, this moment marks the main character's first step far from the 'black world' of Ike Turner, with the song being described as a popular success. However, reaching the position eighty-eight in the Pop Chart, the song was not particularly well received in the US, becoming a successful single only in UK (Turner and Loder 1987: 124). Representing 'River Deep, Mountain High' simply as a popular success (without mentioning its national boundaries) the film constructs Tina's popularity as the direct result of the people's will. Rock music is then framed as naturally representing this vast and racially non-categorised community. On the contrary, Ike Turner's attitude toward music is charged with racial prejudices. For example, he rejects the British Invasion, considering English bands as 'negro music with an accent'. Also, when Tina achieves some individual recognition with 'River Deep, Mountain High', she is accused by Ike of singing for 'the white man'. As result, the film constructs a strong opposition between rhythm 'n' blues as black and 'racially charged' music, and rock as a popular, inclusive realm.

A negative image of the main character's background (or past) is a common feature of the new biopics on black musicians. The black world to which he or she belongs is portrayed as 'cheap' and exploitative (in *Tina* and *Ray*) or dangerous and engaged with criminal activities (in *Notorious*). However, these films also express a sexual politics which implies the ontological difference of the black body. The protagonists are all characterised as *forces of nature* with a strong sexual connotation. Also, according to a significant gender bias, Tina Turner is sexually provocative on

stage but described as a 'good mother' and faithful partner in the private sphere,⁷ while Ray Charles and Notorious B.I.G. cannot help but have sex with different women, struggling to keep in place their 'regular' partnerships. As in 1970s black jazz biopics, out-of-control bodies and 'colored' social roots are the main troubles the main characters have to solve in order to become popular icons.

6.2 New elements: the successful black musician and the narrative of whiteness

The racial assumptions of these films, however, can be seen from a different perspective. In both *Tina* and *Notorious* there is a scene which shows that main characters are able to handle their old problems in a more 'rational' and self-conscious way. In *Tina*, the main character affirms her individual and artistic autonomy from Ike during a trial which follows their break-up. She leaves to Ike all the money they earned together, but decides to retain her stage-name since it represents both her artistic autonomy and the 'hard work' behind it. Similarly, *Notorious* shows a meeting between Notorious B.I.G. and his producer (Sean 'Puffy' Combs) during which the main character affirms that his life has changed (i.e. he is a father, not a drug dealer anymore), so his music has to change accordingly. These scenes mark a balance reached between the private and the public sphere, and in both of them the protagonists wear a stunning 'white' suit: it contrasts with Ike's black dress in *Tina*, while in *Notorious* the main character is literally surrounded by daylight. As argued by Dyer (1997), this kind of visual strategies have a strong symbolic power in cinematic narratives. They can be produced (and received) without recognising any racial connotation, as long as 'white power reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and good will [...] because it is not seen as whiteness but as *normal*' (10, my emphasis).

The scenes just described show that Hollywood music biopics share some important features with the ways in which 'whiteness' has been encoded in terms of 'human nature' in other film genres.

⁷ There is no extensive study about biopics' gender politics. The question is partly addressed by Babington (2006), Bufwak (1983), Custen (1992: 104-107) and Milton Miller (1983: 181-188). Anderson and Lupo (2002: 92) show that women are still underrepresented in American biopics released between 1990 and 2000.

Moreover, the narratives of recent biopics about black musicians resemble in several ways the narrative of 'whiteness' as defined by Dyer. Three aspects of this 'grand narrative' are particularly employed by the films discussed. Firstly, the idea that the individual can not be reduced to his/her body, but must possess 'something more' related to their identity. Dyer notes that this additional attribute has been, for example, the *spirit* in the Christian tradition (14-18): something that elevates the crudeness of the body. Secondly, whiteness is normal in the sense that it is invisible, being never addressed as such, but as 'humanity' in general. It is, more precisely, an idea of humanity that has been historically discriminatory and exclusive of certain people. Finally, whiteness implies a notion of 'enterprise' (30-40), which is defined as one's active will or spirit. The 'enterprising character' is a one that takes initiative and is able to actively 'change' the world. These three features indicate the main lines of contradiction along which narratives about white identities have been articulated (mind-body, humanity-race, active-passive) (Dyer 1997: 1-40).

As I have shown, Hollywood music biopics deal with similar oppositions, but they tend to 'solve' them in a specific way. Recent biopics on black musicians are largely concerned with the contrast between body and rationality: 'blackness', as related to a morally or biologically different culture, is something that has to be uplifted through the spirit of the main character, which here is characterised in terms of talent or strong will. This did not happen in 1970s black jazz biopics, because the excessive behaviours of main characters made the negotiation between mind and body impossible. Furthermore, the narratives of music biopics tend to construct 'genre worlds' in order to demonstrate the crossing of boundaries. This clearly entails a notion of enterprise. One of the main characters' first problems is properly to transcend a social and musical context that limits their potential. At the same time, music communities are always represented in terms of non-musical values: the rhythm 'n' blues community is *also* a black community in which Tina Turner can neither be recognised for her talent, nor be a good mother nor have a 'proper' marriage. Similarly, in *Notorious* a range of moral distinctions between being a good father—being a drug dealer, being a good partner—being violent and unfaithful, are related to the conflict between a narrower vision of

hip hop culture, as split between East and West Coast, and a more 'mature' approach to both music and extra-musical issues. Finally, *Ray* emphasises Ray Charles's ability in transforming different music genres in his own personal style, but also his successful battle against drug addiction. As a result, Charles is represented as a 'balanced' public celebrity: an excellent composer and musician, but also a good father and husband.

7. Conclusions: change and continuity

I have shown that 1970s black jazz biopics represent black musicians as racially 'different' individuals and as members of a racially different black community, providing a narrative about the popular closer to the definition of folk. Indeed, 1970s biopics like *Scott Joplin*, *Leadbelly*, and *Lady Sings the Blues* frame black musicians as incapable of sustaining the demands of music business and success, because of personal troubles which are related to their blackness (i.e. a body-driven and unrestrained behaviour). As a result, they do not represent a broad and inclusive 'American community', but only the black community to which they *naturally* belong. The biopics produced in the 1990s and 2000s - like *Tina: What's Love Got to Do With It*, *Ray* and *Notorious* - still represent the main characters as racially different. However, black musicians are here able to achieve success and to deal with the demands of music business. In this way, they become representative of a broader community, a one that in music biopics has been usually represented by white musicians. The notion of popular music (and more generally popular culture) that we receive from these films is therefore profoundly related to the ways in which white culture has been historically defined (and made 'just culture') in Western societies and popular entertainment. The popular, as defined by music biopics, embodies a wider range of assumptions about human nature and the place of the individual in society. Indeed, in suggesting that anyone can accomplish the American Dream, music biopics still deny the weight of social and racial inequalities, constructing a reassuring narrative about a timeless, class-less and eventually *race-less* national popular culture. Furthermore, my analysis of the image of African American musicians in Hollywood biopics shows clearly the extent

to which the music biopic has been an exclusivist and, in the sense of Hamm (2006), modernist narrative. To sum up, black musicians have entered the narratives of music biopics only at a later stage in Hollywood history (since the early 1970s). Also, their representation has been largely related to implicit notions of cultural and racial difference, even in more recent films that deal with 'successful' stories.

However, one should not underestimate the changes described. Dyer's perspective, indeed, seems to consider whiteness as almost impossible to question, because even the strongest critiques imply the centrality and power of the cultural model questioned. Despite being a useful starting point for more specific analyses, this perspective relies on a very systematic and 'structured' conception of culture, which seems to underestimate the way meanings are reshaped by both audiences and specific instances of cultural production (i.e. specific films and media productions).⁸ However, my analyses show that a well established way of representing popular musicians has not been immune from broader social changes and changes in the film industry. Despite retaining an image of black musicians as naturally different from white ones, music biopics are clearly less exclusivist than some decades ago. Overall, this cinematic narrative about popular culture has undergone significant changes while showing signs of continuity. Both aspects need to be considered in cultural and historical analysis.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Carolyn and Jon Lupo. 2002. 'Hollywood Lives: The State of The Biopic at The Turn of The Century'. In *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale, 91–104. London: British Film Institute.
- Anderson, Carolyn and Jon Lupo. 2008. 'Introduction to the Special Issue'. *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36/2: 50–51.

⁸ For a critique to this way of conceiving culture in cultural studies, see Couldry (2010).

- Atkinson, Michael. 1995. 'Long Black Limousine: Pop Biopics'. In *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music and the Movies Since the 50s*, eds Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wootton, 20–31. London: British Film Institute.
- Babington, Bruce. 2006. 'Star Personae and Authenticity in the Country Music Biopic'. In *Film's musical moments*, eds Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell, 84–98. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bogle, D. 2001. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films*. New York, London: Continuum.
- Bufwack, Mary. 1983. 'Coal Miner's Daughter, Honeysuckle Rose, The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia: Taking the Class Out of Country'. *Jump Cut* 28 (April): 21–23.
- Couldry, Nick. 2010. 'Sociology and Cultural Studies: An Interrupted Dialogue'. In *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, eds John R. Hall, Laura Grindstaff and Ming-Cheng Lo, 77–86. London, New York: Routledge.
- Creekmur, Corey K. 1988. 'The Space of Recording: the Production of Popular Music as Spectacle'. *Wide Angle* 10/2: 32–40.
- Custen, George F. 1992. *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Custen, George F. 2000. 'The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961-1980'. *Biography* 23/1: 127–157.
- Dyer, R. 1998 (1979). *Stars*. London: British Film Institute.
- Dyer, R. 1986. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Dyer, R. 1997. *White*. London: Routledge.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. 1986. 'Film History as Social History: the Dieterle/Warner Brothers Bio-Pic'. *Wide Angle* 8/2 (April): 15–31.
- Feuer, Jane. 1981. 'The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment'. In *Genre, the Musical: a Reader*, ed Rick Altman, 159–174. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

- Frith, Simon. 1981. ' 'The Magic That Can Set You Free': the Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community'. *Popular Music* 1/1: 159–168.
- Frith, S. 1998. *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gabbard, K. 1996. *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Garber, Frederick. 1995. 'Fabulating Jazz'. In *Representing Jazz*, ed. Krin Gabbard, 70–103. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Guerrero, E. 1993. *Framing Blackness: the African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hamm, C. 2006 (1995). 'Modernist Narratives and Popular Music'. In *Putting Popular Music in Its Place*, 1–40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanson, Cynthia A. 1988. 'The Hollywood Musical Biopic and the Regressive Performer'. *Wide Angle* 10/2: 15–23.
- Inglis, Ian. 2003. 'The Act You've Known For All These Years: Telling the Tale of the Beatles'. In *Popular Music and Film*, ed. Ian Inglis, 77–90. London: Wallflower Press.
- Inglis, Ian. 2007. 'Popular Music History On Screen: The Rock/Pop Biopic'. *Popular Music History* 2: 77-93.
- Keightley, Keir. 2001. 'Reconsidering Rock'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, eds Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street, 109–142. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kooijman, Jaap. 2003. 'Triumphant Black Pop Divas On The Wide Screen: Lady Sings The Blues and Tina: What's Love Got To Do With It'. In *Popular Music and Film*, ed. Ian Inglis, 178–192. London: Wallflower Press.
- Middleton, R. 1990. *Studying Popular Music*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Milton Miller, R. 1983. *Star Myths: Show-Business Biographies On Film*, Metuchen: Scarecrow Press.

- Perchard, Tom. 2007. 'Writing Jazz Biography: Race, Research and Narrative Representation'. *Popular Music History* 2/2: 119–145.
- Schlotterbeck, Jesse. 2008. "'Trying to Find a Heartbeat": Narrative Music in the Pop Performer Biopic'. *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36/2: 82–90.
- Shiach, Morag. 1989. *Discourse on Popular Culture: Class, Gender and History in Cultural Analysis, 1730 to Present*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Strachan, Robert. 2008. ' "Where Do I Begin The Story?": Collective Memory, Biographical Authority and the Rock Biography'. *Popular Music History* 3/1: 65-80.
- Swiss, Thomas. 2005. 'That's Me in the Spotlight: Rock Autobiographies'. *Popular Music* 24/2: 287–294.
- Thornton, Sarah. 1990. 'Strategies for Reconstructing the Popular Past'. *Popular Music* 9/1: 87–95.
- Tibbetts, J. 2005. *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography*. Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Turner, T. and Loder, K. 1987. *I, Tina*. New York: Avalon.
- Williams, R. 1983. *Keywords*. New York: Oxford University Press.