

# BLACK VOCALITY II

## Cultural Memory, Identities, and Practices of African-American Singing Styles

The main objective of the symposium Black Vocality is to nurture a discussion - among scholars, singers, and vocal performers - on the ways in which singing voices have shaped, defined, chronicled, and continuously recontextualized the black experience.

As popular music scholar Simon Frith explains, “we have to approach the voice under four headings: as a *musical instrument*, as a *body*, as a *person*, as a *character*.” The symposium takes in consideration these four headings, but at the same time recognizes the importance to look at the intersections of them. Listening to Lou Rawls’ voice, for instance, means to be exposed to a sound that is simultaneously an instrument, a body, a person, and a character. In addition, in order to fully comprehend interrelations among cultural memory, identities and practices, we need to examine the kind of narratives that have shake our understanding of black vocality. Questions that the symposium addresses are: ‘how do we listen to a singing voice that is defined as black?’, ‘how blackness is recognized and esprese through singing voices?’, and ‘what are the values and the potential of a black singing voice?’

The first [Black Vocality Symposium](#) took place in September 2013 with the goal to create a dialogue among scholars and vocalists on ideas of black voices and black singing styles. The discussion positioned this specific vocal tradition at the intersection of gospel and popular music, jazz improvisation and cultural memory, and storytelling and free forms. At the same time, practices of black vocal styles - as analyzed in presentations, lectures, and audience discourse - examined possibilities to re-sound that tradition through the power of spoken word and using resources provided by new technologies.

The 2013 symposium engendered wide interest. Not only musicologists and vocalists, but also poets, students, videomakers, and performers of different kinds participated with enthusiasm. They generated a wide and ongoing discussion that can be deemed a polyphonic search for a broad definition, as any interpretation of black vocality requie new analytic approaches to understand the traditions, meanings, and how they have developed into contemporary practice. CBMR Executive Director Monica Hairston O’Connell commented on the necessity of analyses of this sort in her introduction of the symposium: “In a historical moment when the American dream plays out on *American Idol*, only the deep listener, the culturally aware, and the sonically literate will be able to understand - and appreciate - the difference between Mahalia and Mariah.”

By continuing the dialogue among scholars and performers, Black Vocality II will also delve into vocal gestures that are revealing as markers of black identities. In Paul Gilroy’s words, “the screams, wails, grunts, scattin and wordless singing that appears in all these black cultures as both indicative of a struggle to extend communication beyond words and as a commentary on the inadequacy of language as a means for expressing certain truths.”

Of particular relevance will be the many ways in which black vocality still signifies and embodies a means of empowerment and commitment. The power of black voices is the ability to create a space where people, regardless of their ethnicity, eventually listen. Sounds uttered in that space convey new messages and express the desire to strive for economical as well as social and political advancements. By exploring the mesrelated to African-American singing voices in popular culture, and issues of identity and mentorship, Black Vocality II will expand both those spaces and these notions.

In particular, the symposium - using *12 Years a Slave* as case study - will explore how a distinct vocality has been shake through the experience of slavery as we understand it. Then, the discussion will look at the act of being vocal, and being vocal artist, as a political gesture. By trying to understand the different interrelations between voice and identity, papers will aim to shed a light on the many ways identities can be embrace and expressed: from playing to planning, developing styles is a complex choice. Finally, we want to address Nina Simone's role in the making of a vocality that is black. In order to do so, we focus on her influence in different aspects of creativity and agency.

In addition to sessions and discussions, two styles of black singing will be further explored. They can be deemed as extremely different, but they share two important factors: the voice as instrument is essential, and its power goes further beyond the limit of language. Beatboxing will be here explored through a workshop and the screening of a documentary that tells the story of this technique and art. Then, the final performance will be based on voices that sing a cappella, it aims at highlighting the evocative and visionary imaginary that such voices can unfold.

**Gianpaolo Chiriaco**  
Curator and organizer

