Music was a professional avenue for Brazilians of African origins after the abolition of slavery in 1888. Despite the obstacles set by an emerging cultural industry they did not control, a small segment of talented black musicians attempted to own the rights of their songs as well as a symbolic share of what came to be considered “Brazilian” music through samba, the local music style. Marc Hertzman’s *Making Samba: A New History of Race and Music in Brazil* adopts the perspective of samba practitioners (sambistas) as professional musicians to tell a passionate and exhaustive history of Rio de Janeiro’s music scene, expanding the literature on samba in a new direction.[1] The book focuses on the emergence of an “entertaining class,” and specifically a group of entrepreneurial black sambistas located at the bottom of a white (male)-dominated industry. Hertzman’s reconstructs with great detail how sambistas composed, sold, recorded, and claimed their rights over their songs, and how they organized themselves as a professional group. Likewise, the author explores the limits they encountered to make a living from music, especially the legal and economic structures set by local and foreign capital under the Republican regime (1889-1930) and the manipulation by both populist (1930-64) and military (1964-85) cultural policies. The book is thus less about the making of samba than about the disputes around owning it. It shows how ethnic and legal structures shaped an urban music market, at a time when national and international capital flows and audiences created the modern popular music business.

How did black artists attempt to become professional musicians in a supposedly egalitarian republic that in fact restricted the economic and legal rights of the majority of the population? The introduction focuses on the “missing middle,” a small fraction of black musical entrepreneurs. The key word “middle” designates perhaps too many different things: middle-income population, middle-class identity, socially mobile individuals, in-between whiteness and blackness, and cultural mediation. And we miss a description of the groups situated above and below the “middle” once the cultural industry took off. Rio de Janeiro’s puzzling cultural articulations, between social groups across a diverse ethnic range, produced structural racism and ethnic mixture, social inequality and social mobility, so one wonders what is the peculiarity of sambistas within that larger picture. In any case, the author convincingly approaches them as commercially driven economic actors, reflexive about their music, seeking social and professional advancement.

After describing the diversity of musical life in nineteenth-century Rio in the first chapter, Hertzman superbly analyzes the limits that the 1890 Brazilian Penal Code article on vagrancy imposed on popular life. One finds here a splendid work on judiciary records and a thorough statistical reconstruction that reveals, contrary to the samba mythology, that sambistas were never oppressed as musicians, but as part of the “dangerous” population of black folks targeted by police surveillance. Chapter 3 is a tour de force on the economic dimension
of music making. It reconstructs the economic choices faced by black sambistas when transitioning from their underworld performances to the emerging recording industry. A detailed series of tables compare the immense gap between the artists’ earnings and those of the pioneer recording firm Casa Edison. Most artists perceived incomes below the poverty line, with the exception of a tiny, mostly white fraction. But commercial recordings allowed sambistas to create a public image different from the opposing stereotypes of decent worker and dangerous malandro (rogue): that of “the audacious entrepreneur, who embraced wealth, capitalism, and the promises of inclusion within the republic” (p. 82). Hertzman suggests that these musicians, “and the music industry itself,” were ‘something of a threat, or at least an alternative, to the established … order,” the promise of a capitalist music industry equally open to black and white artists (p. 91).

Chapter 4 analyzes the actual and symbolic ownership of music by these professionalizing artists. (The Italian fascist labor and copyright legislation admired by some Brazilian artists was perhaps less a “totalitarian” inspiration, as Hertzman suggests, than a progressive model for intellectual and creative workers, more favorable to artists in some regards than U.S. “liberal” legislation, which favored impresarios). Here we see the definition of popular music as “folk” challenged by the claims of ownership from the part of sambistas as a group (“our music”), as well as by individual, legal claims over specific compositions. The chapter masterfully reconstructs the interplay of media, music, bohemia, and literature that supported those claims. It shows an ethnically complex array of popular music actors forming themselves through modern journalism in the 1920s and 1930s, in opposition to samba’s mythology that presented them as simply victims of market relations they did not understand. The portraits of the urban chronicler and music critic Vagalume, and of the internationally famed Oito Batutas orchestra, reveal a subtle tension between the musicians’ interests and the stereotypes of the press. Whereas the Oito Batutas’ tours, for instance, were interpreted as either idyllic, pastoral examples of rural Brazil, or as expression of its modern and cosmopolitan traits, for its leader, Pixinguinha, music was simply a way of expressing the “popular soul” and a professional avenue that connected the orchestra with audiences at home and abroad.

These artists, like the ones described in chapter 5, were cultural mediators. The historiographic conversation here feels unfair toward the previous scholar-ship’s attention to the role of mediating actors foreign to the Afro-Brazilian musical culture, the sambistas’ social marginality, and their romantic picture as oppressed heroes. In fact, this book somehow confirms those images, by describing the crucial mediation of white impresarios and journalists, how poorly paid black sambistas were, and the racial and legal obstacles to their professional goals. But Hertzman provides also new and richer insights, through accounts such as that of Pixinguinha’s family and formation, which presents foreign immigrants next to prosperous black families, European repertoires linked to circus performances, and Carnival parades next to conservatory training and religious events—in sum, a creative and heterogeneous world around Rio’s popular music, that the ethnocentric gaze of the cultural elites approached, as chapter 6 shows, with increasing interest but dismissing popular musicians as legitimate owners of Brazilian music.

Chapters 7 and 8 are an important contribution that bridges music and labor history. They describe the Brazilian Society of Theatrical Authors (SBAT) and its failure to represent the interests of black sambistas (most of their members were semi-literate white men, and less than 3 percent of them were black), while an effervescent variety of musical practices invigorated Brazilian popular music, to the point that the “vibrant exchanges among circus, theater and music suggest that there existed at one time the potential, however tenuous, for the emergence of a larger, more democratic entertainment class” (p. 193). A growing and centralizing state promoted the institutionalization of social and economic interests, and chapter 8 narrates the creation of the Union of Brazilian Composers (UBC) in 1942, the first serious self-organizing attempt by local musicians. Between 1943 and 1951, UBC multiplied its revenue ten times and expanded itself nationally (twenty states and regions, six hundred agencies by 1948), with two thousand officers representing eight thousand composers. Part of the revenue was channeled to foreign partner associations as payment for their affiliates’ songs performed in Brazil, which suggests (although the book does not follow this global link) that the local music market functioned, to a certain extent, as a foreign enclave. But the union itself retained a larger amount for “social” funds—judiciary support, health, funerals—and Brazilians composers would typically receive a third of the total. A superb statistical work shows that music was not a full-time profession for most UBC musicians and that most of its top-earning composers in 1944 were white. And, on the other hand, a fine reading of samba lyrics and press arti-
cles shows that sambistas were no longer considered malandros, but workers that made money singing about an idealized life of happy and lazy social marginality. By the 1950s, as São Paulo displaced Rio as the center of the musical business, sambistas became legitimate artists, no longer a dangerous class.

Chapter 9 is an epilogue to samba’s golden age. In 1960 the state improved the legal protection and tightened the regulation of musicians’ labor rights, treating them separately from authors’ rights. But then a discourse of samba as a nonprofessional, pure musical form became hegemonic. The nostalgic portrait of sambistas promoted by the 1962 National Samba Congress and Rio’s Museum of Image and Sound was joined by both Marxist sociologists and conservative writers who considered Afro Brazilians as lacking economic autonomy. Under the 1964-85 military dictatorship Brazil’s music market experienced a boom, but the official discourse had frozen the image of samba as Brazil’s “authentic” and therefore anticommercial musical roots. The old samba entrepreneurs became invisible.

The book’s major contributions are the reconstruction of the music’s economy—income, copyright, professional organizations, and relations with state and impresarios about performing, recording, publishing, and broadcasting their music—and the close reading of lyrics, press coverage, and memoirs that reveal how popular musicians experienced those economic challenges. Both popular and professional, Marc Hertzman’s sambistas embody the links between music and modern capitalism in urban Latin America.

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