

# A TRIBUTE TO CHARLES HAMM— COMPOSER, HISTORIAN, EDUCATOR

By Janice Giteck on May 30, 2007



Charles Hamm (left) with John Cage

In 1984, Charles Hamm's seminal book, *Music in the New World*, fell into my hands while I was researching at the Library of Congress. At the time I was looking for clues for scoring a documentary on women and textiles during America's 1800s. Like most concert music composers twenty years ago, I was still mostly focused on European trends and a few famous American minimalists.

From a first reading of Hamm's text, I became acutely aware of my general ignorance of the music of our nation. Nevertheless, to my delight, the author's seductive storytelling style gave me a quick

jumpstart to an understanding of the enfolding story of American music. In particular, I was taken by Hamm's discussion of the ongoing hybridization brought about by exchanges between musicians of oral and written traditions. This is traced from the nation's beginning with raucous improvising during church meetings in the colonies, right up to the blurring of music genres over the past few decades. What was confirmed for me by Hamm is that truly American music is always just coming around the corner (or the mountain!) It is founded in a tradition of change: immigration, migration, ethnic, and racial intermingling. Most potently, Hamm articulates that a great deal of American music is a byproduct of the monumentally complex relations between white and black cultures.

*Music in the New World* at times seems like a political mediator between popular culture and so-called "high art" music. At every turn, Hamm illuminates the intertwining of diverse musics: mountain music with church psalms, African slave rhythms with barnyard fiddling, the odd mixtures that produced the great American composer Stephen Foster, the banjo, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, minstrel shows, the business of Tin Pan Alley, Papago "chicken scratch" bands, Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, and Laurie Anderson. Hamm also gives place and story to the rugged individualism that has "America" stamped all over it, such as the lineage of Ives, Cowell, Partch and Cage.

As a result of my film-composing project twenty years ago, as well as Hamm's words prodding me to fully claim America as my homeland, I developed a college level music history course employing *Music in the New World* as the central text. While the course has certainly undergone changes of materials and approaches over the years, (recently there's more class participation, films, and guests), the core text has remained Hamm's book. I have yet to find another book which is as accessible and as visionary.

To this day, my students continue to be inspired by reading Charles Hamm. They become curious about their own personal musical cultures. They talk with their grandfathers about family sing-a-longs of yesteryear, memories of gathering around the parlor organ, piano, guitar, and accordion. For young Americans living in this very stressful present time, it is a boon to have a generative study of music made in America.

[Ed. Note: The American Music Center has awarded Charles Hamm its first Music Educator Award. In celebration of this award, we have put together a slightly-modified version of the “InPrint” Section of NewMusicBox. Typically, “InPrint” features an excerpt of a book about music that has been published in the past year and a brief interview with the book’s author. Here, in addition to a brief interview with Hamm, we offer several sections from his landmark 1983 text *Music in the New World*, since offering a single excerpt would not give readers unfamiliar with the book an opportunity to experience its broad range. Even still, the selections we are featuring only hint at the remarkable depth and breadth of Hamm’s writings about American music. On this page, we feature composer, educator, and AMC board member Janice Giteck’s personal thoughts on what Charles Hamm’s writings have meant to her and her students at Seattle’s Cornish College of the Arts. – FJO]