

# THE *Current*

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## **Black Studies Scholar Examines the Life of Music Legend Johnny Otis**

By any measure, music legend Johnny Otis has lived a remarkable life. Considered by many to be the godfather of rhythm and blues, he has been a musician, music producer, disc jockey, artist, writer, entrepreneur, pastor, and a tireless fighter in the battle for racial equality.

In a new biography titled "Midnight at the Barrelhouse -- The Johnny Otis Story" (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), George Lipsitz, professor of Black Studies and sociology at UC Santa Barbara, tells the largely unknown story of a towering figure in the history of African American music and culture.

Born to Greek immigrant parents in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1921, Otis developed strong ties to the black music and culture that was so much a part of his integrated neighborhood. He began his musical career as a drummer with Count Otis Matthew's West Oakland House Stompers, and in 1943 took Nat "King" Cole's advice and moved to Los Angeles. There he went on to lead his own band and opened The Barrelhouse, a nightclub in Watts that was the first to feature rhythm and blues exclusively. Between 1950 and 1969, his own R&B band had 17 Top 40 hits, including "Harlem Nocturne" and "Willie and the Hand Jive," which sold over 1.5 million copies.

As a producer and talent scout, Otis discovered such rhythm and blues legends as Etta James, Jackie Wilson, Big Mama Thornton, and Esther Phillips.

Otis also wrote a column for the Sentinel -- one of Los Angeles's leading black newspapers -- became pastor of his own interracial church, and hosted popular radio and television programs that introduced huge audiences to music by African American artists. Throughout his career, however, his driving passion has been his unyielding opposition to racial injustice, whether on the front lines, exposing racism and championing the accomplishments of black Americans, or promoting African American musicians.

"Johnny felt conflicted about being a white man in black music," Lipsitz said. "He felt the imitators got more credit than the originators. And he believed that if he was going to draw from the well of black creativity, he owed something to the black culture that created it. It would have been easy for him to coast, but his conscience and beliefs wouldn't let him do that."

Although Lipsitz has known Otis for more than two decades and was acquainted with many of his friends, he was surprised to learn how complicated every facet of Otis's life had been. "In every world he was a part of -- and sometimes triumphed in -- he had to adjust to something else," Lipsitz said.

"He grew up in a comfortable family that was shattered by the Great Depression," he continued. "He was at his peak with R&B in the 1950's, when that got wiped out by rock and roll. And the 1965 Watts riot and the 1992 rebellion destroyed communities that he'd been working in for decades."

In telling Otis's story, Lipsitz also explores the complicated nature of race relations in the United States. "If you follow Johnny's life, you learn a lot about the dividing line between blacks and whites from the 1920's to the present," he said. Although Otis's commitment to black culture transcended racial boundaries, there were limits to what he could accomplish.

"What I discovered in writing the book is the extreme difficulty a person faces in trying to be sincerely anti-racist in a society where so many institutions, practices, and processes structure life opportunities along racial lines," Lipsitz said. "There are limits to good will due to structures that get built and rebuilt every day. There's something admirable about Johnny's deep commitment to want to oppose racism, but how sad it is that it's so difficult for one person to do that when so many social institutions are stacked against him."

Lipsitz is also the author of "Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music," "Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture," and "American Studies in a Moment of Danger." In addition, he wrote the foreword for the recently reissued edition of Johnny Otis's book, "Listen to the Lambs."

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