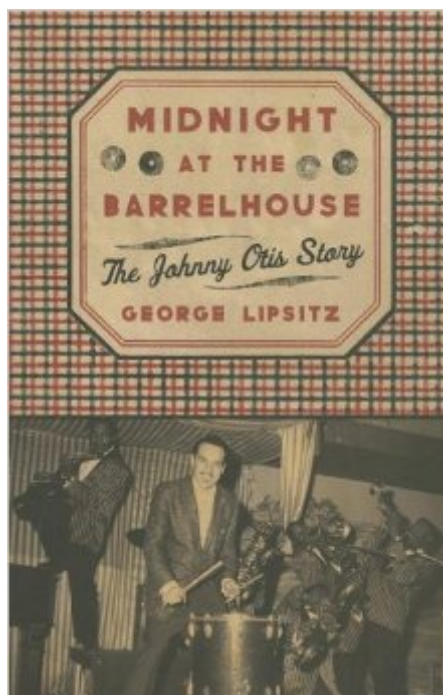


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Midnight At The Barrelhouse: The Johnny Otis Story



Synopsis

Considered by many to be the godfather of R&B, Johnny Otisâ™ musician, producer, artist, entrepreneur, pastor, disc jockey, writer, and tireless fighter for racial equalityâ™ has had a remarkable life by any measure. In this first biography of Otis, George Lipsitz tells the largely unknown story of a towering figure in the history of African American music and culture who was, by his own description, âœblack by persuasion.â• Born to Greek immigrant parents in Vallejo, California, in 1921, Otis grew up in an integrated neighborhood and identified deeply with black music and culture from an early age. He moved to Los Angeles as a young man and submerged himself in the cityâ™s vibrant African American cultural life, centered on Central Avenue and its thriving music scene. Otis began his six-decade career in music playing drums in territory swing bands in the 1930s. He went on to lead his own band in the 1940s and open the Barrelhouse nightclub in Watts. His R&B band had seventeen Top 40 hits between 1950 and 1969, including âœWillie and the Hand Jive.â• As a producer and A&R man, Otis discovered such legends as Etta James, Jackie Wilson, and Big Mama Thornton. Otis also wrote a column for the Sentinel, one of L.A.â™s leading black newspapers, became pastor of his own interracial church, hosted popular radio and television shows that introduced millions to music by African American artists, and was lauded as businessman of the year in a 1951 cover story in Negro Achievements magazine. Throughout his career Otisâ™s driving passion has been his fearless and unyielding opposition to racial injustice, whether protesting on the front lines, exposing racism and championing the accomplishments of black Americans, or promoting African American musicians. Midnight at the Barrelhouse is a chronicle of a life rich in both incident and inspiration, as well as an exploration of the complicated nature of race relations in twentieth-century America. Otisâ™s total commitment to black culture and transcendence of racial boundaries, Lipsitz shows, teach important lessons about identity, race, and power while encapsulating the contradictions of racism in American society.

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Customer Reviews

This thoughtfully written, carefully constructed and multi disciplinary work is the definitive biography of a 20th century musical polymath. An artist, visionary and activist whose contributions to American Music place him high among the ranks of our most important and treasured cultural innovators. Lipstiz chronicles Johnny Otis' more than 60 year career, showing how some of the greatest triumphs of that career were often played out behind the scenes, with Johnny as a producer, mentor and cultivator of other performers talents. He further portrays the life of John Otis as a "Life well lived" looking beyond his significant performing and recording achievements to documenting the community based activism, print, pulpit and broadcast punditry that Johnny's sensitivity and his sense of justice forced him to undertake, often at the expense of his own musical carer. The book rightfully extols Mr. Otis' work as a cultivator of new talent and an angry champion of those many forgotten and shamefully discarded (black) creators of american popular music. Though this book is no mere biography. It is an examination of 20th Century American Society. A look at how culture, race and economy have been negotiated thru and transformed by, African Americans. In that way it is an analysis similar to the work of Ken Burns but orders of magnitude deeper, more thoughtful, less saccharin and more damning then Mr. Burns' work. Midnight at the Barrelhouse will explain much to any american who asks, how did we get here, and it should be required reading for those many insular, self absorbed "artist" who populate today's "music industry"

Midnight At The Barrelhouse is a fascinating look at a complex and talented man. Johnny Otis, born of Greek-American parents, was so enamored of black music and culture that he more or less "became" a black person. His concerns were those of the African-American community, his political consciousness was formed by his experience within that community, and his musical career in jazz and rhythm & blues saw him promote and contribute to a vital cultural heritage. Otis spent his life promoting and celebrating Black culture and this book follows him through his career touring with jazz acts, acting as impresario to blues and r&b shows, discovering young talent, and promoting respect and equality. Stories of Los Angeles' Central Avenue scene, the clubs, the record companies and the touring bands all provide an opportunity to illustrate the racism that musicians,

and all black people, faced in the period covered. Especially welcome are Professor Lipsitz's examinations of the social and economic trends that favored white acts, led to the disintegration of vital Black neighborhoods, and replaced thriving cultural centers with tv and suburbs. If allowed a minor quibble, I might suggest that some of Otis's musical heroes who didn't receive national recognition were limited as much by their talent as by racism. The argument that racism held them back is difficult to sustain in the face of the sales and recognition achieved by Chuck Berry, Duke Ellington, James Brown, Otis Redding, Miles Davis and many more. That is certainly not to suggest that racism didn't hurt many careers, only that it wasn't the only possible explanation, as Otis and Lipsitz sometimes seem to suggest. That's a minor point in an otherwise excellent look at the struggle, the oppression and the triumphs of the people and the music that Johnny Otis celebrated.

Johnny Otis was a unique person. I have a singularly special interest in him. Mainly forgotten by all except a handful, I am one of those who remembers Willy and the Hand Dive as a current hit. How delightful it was to learn more about Johnny behind the scenes. Thanks for helping me become more familiar with this great man. I do recommend this book as a starting point for the Johnny Otis journey.

I knew the name "Johnny Otis" but I didn't know much about the person. After reading this book I feel like a slacker! Is there anything this man hasn't done?! He was a musician, a composer, a producer, a talent scout, a DJ, an activist, a painter, an author, a preacher, an all around entrepreneur, and a devoted family man. He seems like the kind of person that can get more done in one day that most can in a week! Even more remarkable is that he accomplished all of this in a time of segregation, during which he deliberately picked a side. He explained this in one of his earlier books stating, "As a kid I decided that if our society dictated that one had to be black or white, I would be black." In this book it's written about him that, "Although considered to be a white man by the standards of a white supremacist society, Johnny Otis chose to become "Black by persuasion." His decision to embrace and inhabit an identity rooted in the collective, cumulative, and continuing struggles of Black people has enabled him to live a life replete with moral purpose and profound connection to others (p. 178). "Throughout his life, Mr. Otis was at the beginning of several different cultural trends, as well as jumped in and added his energies to various existing movements. I appreciate all his music, the incredible performers he discovered and nurtured, and most of all I appreciate that he ". . . insisted on justice, love, and personal responsibility . . ." and that he ". . . believed in teaching by example, in treating other people right (p. 110)." The book is an easy

read and full of positive messages. To me, one of those messages was not about becoming rich and famous, but to follow your passions and give back along the way. Mr. Otis has given our country so much and I hope someday he receives a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, a National Medal of Arts, and a Kennedy Center Honor!

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