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Middle Eight

Charles Edward Hamm (1925–2011)

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I knew who Charles Hamm was – everyone knew who Charles Hamm was! – and I'd spied him around the University of Illinois campus, but the first time I had a conversation with him was in early May, 1970. Richard Nixon had recently announced to the world that the US military was invading Cambodia from bases in Vietnam. An already volatile student body exploded in national protest. Strikes were called for by campus leaders to boycott a system perceived to be an extension of establishment attitudes that sent young American boys overseas to kill young southeastern Asian boys, and to die themselves in the process. At the University of Illinois School of Music protests were kicked off by a rally at Smith Music Hall. Speeches were given by representatives of the undergraduates (a petrified me), the graduates, and the faculty (who was Charles). All I knew was to be fiery and I gave it my best Abbie Hoffman shot (with some success, if I remember correctly). Charles, to the contrary, was quiet, dignified, analytic in his approach, precise in his language, compelling in his argument, and absolutely spellbinding. He sought me out afterwards – I was much too intimidated to seek him out – and we talked for some time and agreed we'd made a pretty good team. We must have made our cases because the School of Music joined the strike. All 'legitimate' classes were cancelled for the rest of the semester and, in place, a schedule of informal 'Liberation Classes' was announced. Sure enough, Charles was again in the middle of it and offered 'Rock and Rocks', which so far as I know was the first course (liberated or not) taught anywhere on rock music: no exams, no papers, no attendance sheets, no grades; just hundreds of hungry, interested, young minds arrayed around the ideas and knowledge of this great man.

The Hamm-lifeset manifest in my early encounters never wavered over the next 40-plus years. Charles always analysed quietly and carefully and then offered pithy, reasoned understandings that kept the rest of us on our toes and made us bigger than we were because he was bigger than anyone we knew. He had the gift of a deep peripheral vision that saw things just almost out of reach and brought them into central focus, changing everything. He'd had this ability from the first, we learned. Charles began PhD dissertation work at Princeton on the life and music of Amzi Chapin, an itinerant singing schoolmaster and shape-note composer from Ohio; what was central to Charles was much too peripheral for Princeton in that era though, so he nimbly switched topics to Dufay and wrought a methodology for dating his music that

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stands even today as a path-finding musicological moment. There was not much overlap between those topics to anyone but Charles, who saw them both as points on a continuum of human musical and social experience, thus both worthy of serious, loving study.

Charles' Rock-and-Rocks approach gave us touchstone books like *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (1979, and still the best full history of American popular music), *Music in the New World* (1983), *Putting Popular Music in its Place* (1995), *Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot* (1997); scholarly editions of the music of Irving Berlin, Igor Stravinsky, Kurt Weill, Leonel Power; articles on *Porgy and Bess*, Paul Simon, 'The Last Minstrel Show', and dozens more. Students were turned around (and on) at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, Tulane, Illinois, Dartmouth, and at institutions where Charles held visiting appointments (University of KwaZulu-Natal, Harvard, Texas, etc.). He earned high honours, awards, and elected office from the American Musicological Society, the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (a founding member), the Society for American Music, the Guggenheim Foundation, and others.

If it was music and life that mattered to people, then it mattered to Charles: Dufay, country music, Weill, Chapin, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Gershwin, Cage, Stephen Foster in China, Irving Berlin, minstrel shows; the last time we listened to music together it was to Beethoven's String Quartet, Op. 130.

Charles Hamm showed us how to be open minded, engaged, precise, gentle, and liberated. His was a model life, remarkably well lived.

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