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The Sound of Resistance: Music, Space, and Cultural Appropriation in Sinners

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how music and space in Sinners construct Black communal memory and bring it into conflict with the threat of cultural appropriation.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative, interpretive audiovisual analysis compares four scene and sequence clusters: the opening of the juke joint, Sammie's central performance, Annie's protective knowledge, and the vampires' call at the threshold. It traces sound source, spatial direction, camera movement, embodied response, and boundary markers.

Findings: The arrival of patrons, exchanges at the door and bar, and live music establish the juke joint as a shared social space. Sammie's performance connects bodily participation to intergenerational memory through a montage of musicians and dancers from different periods. Annie's knowledge defines belonging through agency and ties to the ancestors. The vampires' call erodes the boundary through familiar voices, invitation, and a coercive demand for access. The ethical distinction between the two musical communities lies in the conditions they place on participation.

Research limitations/implications: The analysis is limited to a single film text. It does not examine the production process, audience reception, box-office performance, or music sales. The findings therefore concern the film's textual organization.

Practical implications: The observational framework may help film sound scholars examine sound source, spatial boundaries, and embodied responses together.

Originality/value: The article advances discussion of cultural appropriation in Sinners by comparing the blues inside the juke joint with the vampires' call outside, focusing on the threshold and terms of participation.

Keywords: *Sinners*, sound, juke joint, Black music, cultural appropriation

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Introduction

Film sound shapes how viewers perceive on-screen space and the emotional course of relationships between characters. When music, speech, ambient sound, and silence interact within a scene, the social world of the narrative becomes audible. Chion's (2019) account of the audiovisual contract and Buhler and Lewis's (2020) concept of the integrated soundtrack both call for an analysis that does not detach music from the image. Accordingly, the study begins by asking where sound comes from, how it moves through space, and how bodies respond to it, instead of taking musical genre as its starting point.

Ryan Coogler's Sinners sets its story in the Mississippi Delta in 1932 and draws on the blues, Black horror, and Southern Gothic. The juke joint that the brothers Smoke and Stack open in a former sawmill anchor both the plot and the film's sonic world. The arrival of patrons, the way entry is managed at the door, live performance, and dance give the building its social character. The plantation economy and racial boundaries constrain this gathering. The Ku Klux Klan gives the surrounding threat of white supremacist violence a direct presence in the story.

The historical role of the juke joint gives this transformation a more concrete meaning. Hazzard-Gordon (1990) describes jooks as institutions in which the Black working class created spaces for entertainment, economic exchange, and a measure of autonomous social life. The former sawmill in the film likewise becomes functional through the shared use of workers, musicians, and patrons. Who may enter, which sounds mingle inside, and how the crowd joins the performance determine the space's terms of belonging.

The fragility of this order becomes clear when the vampires approach the juke joint. Black horror has long used supernatural figures to examine the continuing force of racial history and present-day power relations (Means Coleman, 2022). In Sinners, the threat is first heard as song, praise, a promise of equality, and a request for invitation. The present article focuses on the threat of exploitative cultural appropriation. It examines an attempt to take control of a community's cultural practices and the relationships that sustain them under unequal conditions of power (Rogers, 2006).

The first scholarly studies of Sinners have addressed the film's engagement with blues history, racial objectification, and cultural appropriation. Bowles (2025) reads the juke joint as a space of freedom created within Jim Crow and links the vampire threat to consumption and appropriation. D'Agostino (2025) considers vampirism in relation to artistic appropriation and assimilation. The present article develops that discussion by comparing the sound inside the juke joint with the vampires' call from outside as elements of the film's staging. The door, the threshold, the location of sound, and embodied participation provide the observable basis for this comparison.

The study asks the following main question: How does Sinners use the relationship between music and space to construct Black communal memory and bring it into conflict with the threat of cultural appropriation? Three sub-questions guide the analysis. How is the social meaning of the juke joint produced through sound, bodies, and spatial organization? What forms of belonging are created by

Sammie's performance and by the vampires' call? How does the film's concentrated audiovisual representation bring together different strands of Black music history, and what tensions arise in the process?

The present study examines how music helps turn the juke joint into a shared space and how that space gives Black communal memory a public form. Its focus is the relationship between the people making music, the histories recalled through performance, and the conditions under which others may participate. The vampires' interest in Sammie brings these relationships into a struggle over access and control. Comparing the blues inside with the call from outside makes it possible to follow that struggle through the location of sound, the threshold, and the crowd's response. The analysis draws on auditory space, embodied communal memory, and the threat of cultural appropriation to explain how these scenes are connected.

The study is limited to the film text and examines the tension between giving cultural memory a visible form and presenting it as an aesthetic object. It does not examine production, distribution, box-office performance, or audience data. The discussion therefore makes no claim about the film's industrial effects and does not classify Sinners itself as an instance of cultural exploitation.

The first section establishes the conceptual relationship among film sound, spatial belonging, Black musical memory, and cultural appropriation. The method section explains the selection of scenes, the unit of analysis, and the observational criteria. The findings address the opening and filling of the juke joint, Sammie's performance, Annie's protective knowledge, and the vampires' call at the threshold. The conclusion assesses what these four clusters reveal about belonging, memory, and appropriation.

1. Sound, Space, and Cultural Appropriation: Theoretical Framework and Position in Literature

The theoretical framework is organized around three related lines of inquiry. The first concerns how film sound produces a sense of space and belonging. The second approaches Black music through communal memory and embodied participation. The third connects the vampire figure in Black horror to cultural appropriation and exploitation. These concepts serve as focused analytical tools for explaining the arrangements of sound, bodies, and space in the selected scenes.

Recent scholarship on Sinners treats the film's relationship to blues history, racial violence, and appropriation primarily at a thematic level. Bowles (2025) and D'Agostino (2025) establish that the vampire threat can productively be read through consumption, appropriation, and assimilation, but neither study specifies how that threat is organized audiovisually within individual scenes. The framework assembled here is designed for that task. Theories of film sound and auditory space identify where sound comes from and how it marks boundaries; scholarship on Black music explains how performance carries communal memory; and work on Black horror and cultural appropriation clarifies what is at stake when access to that memory is demanded at the threshold.

1.1. Film Sound and Spatial Belonging

Music, speech, ambient sound, and silence operate as part of a shared system in film. Chion (2019) uses the audiovisual contract to explain the meaning produced by image and sound together. Buhler and Lewis's (2020) integrated soundtrack likewise directs attention to the joint organization of sound, speech, and image. The analysis therefore considers where a melody is heard, which image it accompanies, and how characters respond to it alongside the question of genre.

Ambient sounds make the boundaries and social character of a space audible. Chattopadhyay (2021) emphasizes the formative role of the auditory environment in the perception of cinematic space. Recent work on sound and space likewise shows how acoustic organization shapes distinctions such as proximity and distance, inside and outside (Gaudin & Roche, 2025). In this article, "auditory space" refers to the social field produced through the source, direction, and intensity of sound and the embodied responses it elicits.

Lefebvre's (1991) account of the production of space helps situate this relationship at the level of social practice. Space is not a passive setting in which the narrative happens; it is produced through the interplay of what Lefebvre distinguishes as spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. In the film, the sawmill's converted architecture and the plantation economy that surrounds it correspond to representations of space, the planned and economic ordering of the building, while the patrons' labor, dancing, and gathering constitute the spatial practice through which the venue functions. On the night of the opening, the juke joint approaches what Lefebvre calls representational space: a space appropriated through use, symbols, and lived experience. The analysis draws on this triad to explain how music, dance, labor, and social contact turn the juke joint into a communal space whose meaning cannot be read from its architecture alone.

In horror cinema, space can become a structure in which historical relations of power take material form. Saylor (2023) discusses racialized urban spaces in Black fiction and cinema through the spatial effects of white supremacy. This perspective helps explain why the divide between the inside and outside of the juke joint is more than architectural. The door and threshold operate as narrative boundaries that determine who may enter and under what conditions the community can be protected.

The historical context of the juke joint is also essential to this spatial distinction. Hazzard-Gordon (1990) treats jooks as institutions through which the Black working class created entertainment, economic circulation, and relatively autonomous forms of social life. This history permits a more precise reading of the former sawmill's transformation than the broad label "space of resistance." The venue is established through its owners' economic initiative, but it acquires meaning through the shared use of musicians, workers, and patrons.

Belonging involves both an attachment to a community and recognition as one of its members. Yuval-Davis (2006) approaches it through social positions, emotional attachments, and ethical and political values. Her account of the politics of belonging also draws attention to who can define the boundaries of a community. This distinction helps explain the juke joint, where sharing a space or

responding to a song does not settle the question of membership. Family histories and everyday relationships influence who is welcomed. Decisions at the door make these ties visible and expose disagreements over who has the right to speak for the group. In the analysis that follows, belonging is traced through these acts of recognition and the conditions placed on participation. The characters' ability to make choices becomes particularly important when vampiric transformation is offered as a way of joining a family.

Within this framework, the juke joint's interior is treated as an auditory field in which rhythm moves among bodies and participation becomes visible. The exterior is marked by silence, distant sounds, and calls directed toward the door. The threshold is where two forms of belonging meet. The analysis traces how shifts in the source and spatial position of sound affect the characters' behavior.

Auditory space is thus more than an abstract description of atmosphere. The analysis considers whether a sound belongs to the story world, whether its source is on-screen or off-screen, how characters respond bodily, and how sound emphasizes boundaries such as doors and windows. Together, these indicators make it possible to compare the construction, protection, and violation of the juke joint.

This approach follows spatial transformation within the scene and examines how the building takes on liberating or threatening functions. The same building can serve at one moment as a site of celebration, work, and solidarity and at another as a site of siege and violence. The analysis examines this shift through the organization of sound and the positioning of bodies in space.

1.2. Black Music, Embodied Memory, and Community

Musical meaning in Sammie's performance develops through the interaction between the performer and the audience. Ramsey (2003) places Black music within everyday experience, shared memory, and the transmission of knowledge across generations. This perspective shifts attention from Sammie's skill alone to what happens around him. People turn toward him, move closer, dance, and respond to the performance with their bodies. Their participation turns the song into a shared event within the juke joint.

Baraka (1980), Davis (2011), and Gilroy (1993) provide the historical context for this reading. Baraka links the blues to Black labor and social life shaped by slavery and migration. Davis examines the blues as a space in which desire, protest, and self-definition could be voiced. Gilroy places Black music within diasporic movement and emphasizes how it changes as it travels across borders. Their work presents the blues as a historical practice shaped by labor, migration, racial violence, desire, and mourning. Baraka and Davis inform the discussion of Sammie's introduction to the crowd. Gilroy becomes especially relevant when the montage connects his performance to musicians and dancers from different periods and places.

The film's engagement with Black musical history does not make sound itself racially inherent. Eidsheim (2018) argues that listeners learn to recognize a "Black voice" through socially formed habits of listening and classification. The article therefore approaches "Black voice" as a category produced

through listening rather than as a natural property of the body. Its concern is with the specific ways *Sinners* links sound to Black musical memory. Historical references, performance practices, spatial arrangements, and the crowd's response all contribute to this association.

Embodied response refers here to the actions visible during a performance, such as dancing, turning toward a voice, or moving with a rhythm. These actions provide evidence of participation. To interpret them as expressions of memory requires a further connection to practices learned and carried across time. Connerton (1989) describes how bodily habits and skills can preserve the past through their continued performance. In Sinners, the case for communal memory rests on the relationship between bodily participation and the historical references supplied by the narrative and montage. Sammie's account of his life places the song within an experience of work and faith. The appearance of musicians and dancers from different periods then gives that performance a wider history. Together, these features allow the sequence to be read as a representation of intergenerational memory. Annie's account of the ancestors later brings the continuity of those relationships into the community's response to danger.

1.3. Black Horror, Cultural Appropriation, and the Vampire Allegory

Sinners belongs to a broad tradition of Black horror cinema that connects monsters and supernatural events to the continuing effects of Black history. Means Coleman (2022) examines the representational history of Black horror in relation to racial anxieties, spectatorial positions, and conditions of production. Recent collections in the field likewise show that this cinema cannot be reduced to a single aesthetic or political tendency (Means Coleman & Lawrence, 2025). The vampire is therefore examined as a narrative device operating within the film's organization of sound and boundaries rather than as a direct equivalent of historical exploitation.

The vampire's survival through the consumption of another's life has made it a powerful image of exploitation in modern criticism. Moretti (1982) associates the vampire with capital accumulation, while McNally (2011) links it to capitalism's destruction of bodies and social relations. Sinners reworks this image around a desire for musical talent and communal energy. The article tests this connection through the film's own staging of the relevant scenes.

Rogers (2006) uses cultural appropriation as a broad term for the use of one culture's elements by members of another. He distinguishes cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural exploitation, and transculturation. These categories describe different conditions of contact. Cultural dominance includes the use of an imposed dominant culture by a subordinated group. Cultural exploitation concerns a dominant group's use of a subordinated culture's elements without meaningful reciprocity, permission, or compensation. This distinction places power and the terms of cultural use at the center of the present discussion.

In the present article, cultural appropriation refers specifically to the threat of exploitative control over a community's music and the relationships that sustain it. Exploitation identifies the unequal use of that cultural capacity for another's benefit. Assimilation concerns the loss of difference and agency as

people are absorbed into a dominant collective. Domination describes the power to impose those terms, including through threats and physical violence. These processes overlap in the vampire scenes. Remmick seeks Sammie's gift, promises membership in a shared family, and uses force when access is resisted. The analysis follows how these actions develop into an attempt to control cultural life. It also distinguishes this threat from Lefebvre's account of a space being appropriated through everyday use, which describes the juke joint's transformation by its community.

D'Agostino (2025) offers a detailed discussion of vampirism in Sinners through the lens of artistic and cultural appropriation. This article extends the existing debate on the vampire allegory by showing how the threat of appropriation becomes audible and spatially organized within the scene. The melody the vampires sing together outside the door, their search for permission to enter, and their interest in the blues performance inside are examined as parts of the same analytical sequence.

The commercial circulation of Black music has long been entangled with questions of copyright, ownership, and exploitation (Morrison, 2024; Springer, 2007). This history helps situate the film's appropriation allegory. The analysis follows how control over cultural expression becomes a question of access to the juke joint and the people gathered there.

2. Method

This study offers a qualitative, interpretive audiovisual analysis of Sinners (Coogler, 2025), treating it as a single film text. It does not seek to classify the film's music according to technical compositional features. Guided by the research question, the analysis examines how sound constructs spatial boundaries, embodied participation, and the threat of cultural appropriation. Image, dialogue, music, ambient sound, and silence are treated as components of the same scenic arrangement (Buhler & Lewis, 2020; Chion, 2019).

The entire film constitutes the corpus of the study. Purposive selection was used to identify four interrelated scene or sequence clusters for detailed analysis. Each selected cluster had to address at least two dimensions of the research question. These dimensions were a pronounced relationship between sound and space, an observable bodily response to sound, and the narrative importance of the cultural boundary between inside and outside. The criteria are met by the opening and filling of the juke joint, Sammie's central performance, the scenes in which Annie identifies the vampire threat and participates in the community's defense, and the vampires' musical call at the threshold.

The unit of analysis is a segment of a sequence in which a particular sound source accompanies spatial action. A unit ends when a new sound source enters, the action moves across the boundary between inside and outside, or the characters' collective response changes substantially. This procedure divides broad labels such as "the juke joint scene" into comparable segments, including the crowd's arrival, participation in the performance, and the call at the door. The events and sound transitions that mark their beginning and end are recorded alongside approximate timecodes in Table 1. The timecodes refer to the HBO Max streaming version, whose player displays a running time of 2 h 17 min. They use elapsed playback time in hh:mm:ss format. Separate ranges identify passages that

recur within a cluster. The descriptive cues help locate these passages if timing differs in another version.

Table 1.

Scene or Sequence Clusters and Observational Criteria

Scene/sequence cluster	Scene cues and approximate timecodes	Recorded indicators	Relation to the research question
Opening and filling of the juke joint	Arrival of patrons through the start of stage performance 00:45:11–00:53:20	Ambient sound, entry into the venue, crowd density, and the arrangement of the stage and door	How do sound and bodies produce spatial belonging?
Sammie's central performance	Sammie called forward through the end of his central performance 00:53:26–00:59:40	Sound source, framing, gaze, dance, gesture, and rhythmic synchronization	Through which audiovisual relationships is communal memory produced?
Scenes associating Annie with protective knowledge	Diagnosis through the explanation of ancestral ties 01:30:09–01:32:15 Annie's request to Smoke 01:33:00–01:33:40 Collective garlic test 01:36:13–01:38:13	Warning, protective action, silence, gaze, and decisions made at the threshold	Which practices are associated with the protection of memory?
The vampires' musical call at the threshold	First encounter and invitation 01:01:44–01:04:55 Rocky Road to Dublin 01:34:00–01:36:00 Final demands through entry 01:40:00–01:47:10	Off-screen/on-screen sound, group singing, the door, invitation, and the response inside	How is the threat of cultural appropriation made audible and spatial?

(**Source**: Created by the authors.)

The analysis proceeded in three stages. The first recorded the sound source, its relationship to the frame, spatial direction, shot scale, camera movement, bodily response, and boundary markers without adding interpretation. The second compared the four scene or sequence clusters in terms of spatial relations across the threshold, movement from individual performance to collective participation, and patterns of call and response. The final stage interpreted these patterns through the concepts of auditory space, embodied communal memory, and cultural appropriation. Descriptive observations and interpretive notes were kept separate so that theoretical concepts would not predetermine what was seen and heard. The film was viewed in full three times, and the selected scene or sequence clusters were revisited repeatedly throughout the analysis, with the descriptive record checked against the film before interpretation.

Four indicators guided the analysis of sound: whether the source belonged to the story world, whether it appeared on-screen or remained off-screen, changes in the sound's direction and intensity, and its relationship to dialogue, ambient sound, or silence. At the level of image and body, the analysis considered how framing established spatial boundaries, the direction of characters' gazes, dance and gesture, and whether the crowd moved together or dispersed. Doors, windows, and the stage were recorded as boundary markers. An interpretation was included only when supported by a relationship between at least two observable indicators. Claims about belonging were grounded in who was admitted, how membership was recognized, and who could set the terms of participation. Dialogue and actions at the threshold made it possible to consider whether an invitation expressed a choice or was made under pressure. Interpretations of communal memory required a historical or narrative connection alongside the bodily response. Sammie's account of his life and the montage of performers from different periods provide such connections. Dance and gaze on their own were treated as evidence of participation.

The comparative reading was designed to move beyond a simple opposition between the blues inside and the vampires' call outside. Melodic appeal, collective participation, and invitation were recorded separately for each sonic arrangement. The distinction between them was established by asking whose consent the sound sought, which spatial boundary it affected, and how it positioned the characters. Annie's role was assessed through the place of her warnings, protective actions, and decisions at the threshold within the film's audiovisual organization.

The method is limited to the film text. It does not include an analysis of harmony, notation, or instrumentation. The study also presents no data on audience reception, production, marketing, box-office performance, or soundtrack sales. Its findings therefore cannot be generalized to viewers' actual responses or the film's industrial impact. The discussion of commodification remains confined to the tension represented at the audiovisual level. Interpretive transparency is supported by clearly identifying the selected scene or sequence clusters, the observational indicators, and the steps of comparison.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings are organized around a comparison of the four scene or sequence clusters defined in the method section. The analysis begins with the opening and filling of the juke joint, tracing how voices, music, and movement establish its social use. It then turns to Sammie's performance and the relationship between embodied participation and memory across time. Annie's protective knowledge demonstrates how musical exhilaration is accompanied by practices that guard the community's boundaries. The final cluster shows how the vampires' musical call brings questions of invitation, belonging, and cultural appropriation into focus at the threshold.

3.1. The Juke Joint: Arrival, Exchange, and Shared Use

The building first appears during the brothers' purchase of the former sawmill (Coogler, 2025, 00:06:18–00:07:55). Its former use gives a material history to the place they are about to open. A brief transition brings the venue into operation, and the arrival of patrons gives it a public life. The analysis follows this opening and filling of the juke joint through the exchanges at the entrance and bar, the growing crowd, and the music heard inside (00:45:11–00:53:20).

As patrons enter, greetings at the doorway connect the space outside to the gathering within. Conversations at the bar bring individual arrivals into the social life of the room. People previously seen in fields, shops, and along the roads now gather in the same interior. Voices and music share this space as the crowd grows. These interactions give the former sawmill its character as a juke joint and establish the setting for Sammie's performance.

A later discussion of the evening's takings reveals the economic limits of this gathering. Smoke and Stack assess the money received and realize that much of the payment consists of coupon-like tokens issued by plantation owners in place of legal tender. The film calls them "plantation money." The distinction between actual currency and plantation scrip, a form of noncash payment redeemable at plantation stores, prevents the crowded venue from serving as straightforward evidence of economic autonomy. The juke joint provides the community with a place to gather, yet it remains tied to the plantation economy surrounding it. The social and economic functions that Hazzard-Gordon (1990) attributes to jook venues converge here within a single scene, producing a palpable tension.

The principal finding from this cluster is that spatial belonging develops through the venue's shared use. Greetings at the door, exchanges at the bar, and the gathering around live music show how people take part in the place. These interactions establish the communal setting that Sammie's performance will intensify. Lefebvre's (1991) account of space as something produced through practice is made visible in the film. Walls mark the physical limits of the juke joint. Its social meaning emerges through who works within those walls, who is admitted, and which sounds are brought into relation. In Lefebvre's terms, the plantation economy and the scrip circulating at the bar belong to the representations of space that constrain the venue, while the night of music and dance briefly establishes a representational space appropriated through lived use. The distinction keeps the scene's economic contradiction and its communal achievement within the same analytical frame.

3.2. Sammie's Performance: Embodied Memory and Time

Sammie's central performance does not separate a fixed stage from a passive audience. When Delta Slim calls him forward, Sammie raises his guitar and moves through the crowd to the center of the dance floor. The patrons turn toward him and draw closer, placing the performer within a circle of bodies. During the guitar's opening phrases, the crowd remains poised. Once Delta Slim urges them to move, listening gives way to dance. The simultaneous changes in the sound source, the direction of the crowd's gaze, and the movement of their feet show that the performance's communal force emerges through the exchange between performer and audience (Coogler, 2025, 00:53:26–00:59:40).

Sammie opens the performance by introducing himself as a sharecropper and a preacher's son. He frames "I Lied to You" through his strained relationship with his father, connecting the blues to his experiences of labor and religion. His identity on stage carries the imprint of the body that works the fields by day, his relationship with the church, and his musical aspirations. "Preacher boy" thus becomes more than a ready-made character label. It offers a concise expression of the intersecting social positions that shape him. His framing of the song through labor, family, and faith echoes Baraka's (1980) account of the blues as a register of Black working life, and the confessional address of the performance recalls Davis's (2011) description of blues singing as public self-definition.

The crowd's response expands the meaning of the performance. Anticipation on their faces gives way to smiles, while still bodies begin to move together. Smoke watches in astonishment, while Stack looks on with pride. Annie leaves the kitchen to dance with Smoke. Mary and Stack draw closer amid the crowd, and Pearline joins Sammie. The camera brings these responses into a shared event. Gaze, dance, and proximity show how the crowd participates in the performance. The interpretation of memory develops through the connection between this participation, Sammie's account of his life, and the historical figures introduced in the montage that follows. Ramsey's (2003) work helps place that connection within the social experience of Black music.

The surreal montage extends this embodied participation across a historical continuum. Around Sammie appear a Senegalese musician playing the xalam, a West African plucked lute, Black guitarists from different periods, griots, a disc jockey, and dancers from the past and future. A Zaouli dancer and a dancer from the future performing Memphis jookin, a street-dance style that emerged in the city in the 1980s, appear within the same visual flow. The camera carries the scene beyond the walls of the hall, opens the ceiling onto a fiery sky, and places the crowd in an expansive space populated by figures from different eras (Coogler, 2025). The sequence does not function as a history lesson. It condenses the intergenerational transmission of Black music into a vivid audiovisual image.

The montage is significant because it avoids presenting "Black sound" as an immutable essence. The same musical gift travels across instruments, historical periods, and bodily techniques. Eidsheim's (2018) argument that vocal meaning emerges through social practices of listening and classification helps illuminate the scene's plurality. Memory endures by changing through new performances, dances, and modes of listening. The montage thereby gives visual form to Gilroy's (1993) diasporic account of Black music, in which tradition is sustained through movement and transformation rather than the repetition of a fixed origin.

The camera movement at the end of the montage connects this openness to an emerging threat. As the camera pulls beyond the walls, Remmick, Joan, and Bert approach the juke joint with their instruments. Remmick watches the performance inside with evident hunger. Sammie's voice generates a communal energy that exceeds the walls and draws attention from outside. The spread of musical power and the growing vulnerability of the boundary are conveyed through the same visual movement. The performance offers no protection in itself. The reach of its sound connects the juke joint to a broader history while making it audible and exposed to those outside.

3.3. Annie: Protective Knowledge and Boundary Practice

Annie joins the dancing and participates in the shared rhythm of the juke joint. When the trio first arrives at the door, however, she senses a threat that differs from the racial suspicion voiced by the other characters. Cornbread's later inability to cross the front threshold, followed by his attempt to reach across it to collect his money, turns her intuition into testable knowledge. Despite his familiar voice and appearance, Annie notices the change in how he behaves at the threshold.

The use of pickled garlic allows Annie to identify the threat (01:30:09–01:32:15). As Annie explains, a vampire retains the former person's appearance and voice, but the soul cannot return to the ancestors. Within the film's account of ancestral continuity, her explanation gives cultural belonging a temporal dimension. A familiar appearance and voice can survive the loss of the person's agency and ancestral ties. Annie's account makes the terms of a person's return to the community part of the question of belonging.

The preparations for defense are organized as collective work. Sammie, Smoke, and Delta Slim shape pieces of wood into stakes, while Annie, Grace, and Pearline gather garlic. Annie reads the bones to understand the approaching danger. Her request that Smoke release her body if she is turned (01:33:00–01:33:40) shows that she does not equate protection with biological survival. What must be preserved is the person's agency, spiritual bond, and possibility of joining the ancestors.

The collective garlic test (01:36:13–01:38:13) shows how protective knowledge can provoke suspicion within the group. As everyone undergoes the same test, suspicion grows. Smoke draws his gun and places Pearline under pressure. The practice of protection soon erodes trust within the group. Annie's knowledge makes the threat visible, but it cannot determine how the community will respond. The scene presents the cultural boundary as a relation that extends beyond keeping outsiders away. The way the boundary is defended also transforms relationships inside.

Annie's protective work grows out of the musical gathering in which she has taken part. Her dance with Smoke places her within the shared life brought into focus by Sammie's performance. As his voice travels beyond the walls, that gathering also attracts the attention of those seeking entry. Annie's warnings concern the conditions under which the community can continue to share its music and maintain its ties to the ancestors. Her actions connect the pleasure of participation to the need to preserve the choices and relationships that sustain it. The voices at the threshold will put those conditions under increasing pressure.

3.4. The Vampires' Call: Sound from Outside, Invitation, and Appropriation

The vampires' first contact with the juke joint does not begin with an attack. At the door, Remmick, Joan, and Bert introduce themselves as traveling musicians. They say they heard the blues and Sammie's voice through the walls and offer to spend money on food and drink. Their praise of Sammie's voice establishes a clear connection between the performance and the desire gathering outside. Smoke's decision to step in front of Sammie suggests that he perceives their interest as more targeted than a general search for entertainment (Coogler, 2025, 01:01:44–01:04:55). Smoke then asks

the visitors directly whether they belong to the Klan. Remmick rejects the suggestion and answers with a declaration of belief in equality and music before offering to demonstrate it. The exchange places the encounter within the forms of racial violence the characters already expect at the door. It also marks how the vampires distinguish themselves from that violence. Where the Klan announces exclusion, Remmick offers inclusion. His promise of equality thus enters the scene as an answer to a question about racial terror, and the performance that follows serves as its proof.

The trio's performance of "Pick Poor Robin Clean" (01:03:00–01:03:48) wraps the threat in melodic appeal. Cornbread, Pearline, Stack, Mary, and Annie briefly respond to the music with pleasure. When Smoke stops the performance, the vampires turn to a rhetoric of money, equality, and shared entertainment. The song's associations with stripping someone bare and leaving nothing behind create tension with their polite request for entry. Cultural appropriation in this scene cannot be reduced to the presence of a musical genre associated with outsiders. The problem lies in using music to generate trust and gain access to Sammie.

The exchange at the door also reveals who has the authority to define belonging. When Remmick questions Mary's presence inside on the basis of her skin color, Annie explains that she belongs there through family ties. Remmick responds with a promise to make everyone part of one family. The same word conceals two different forms of relationship. Annie's understanding of family rests on history and concrete bonds. Remmick's version absorbs bodies into a single collective once an invitation has been secured. Mary's recognition through family ties shows how belonging is established through relationships and negotiated at the door (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Remmick's offer makes transformation a condition of entry into his family. Read through Rogers's (2006) account of cultural exploitation, this condition gives the offer an unequal basis.

Later in the film, "The Rocky Road to Dublin" (01:34:00–01:36:00) makes the structure of this collective visible. The transformed patrons of the juke joint form concentric circles around Remmick. From the center, he leads the song, breaks into an Irish dance, and establishes an emotional connection with a suppressed cultural past. The scene grants the vampire community its own history and sense of loss. It shows that their memory, too, bears the scars of colonial domination. This historical injury does not erase their violence against the Black juke joint. The film suggests that an experience of victimization grants no right of access to another person's body or voice.

The blues inside and the vampires' song share several surface features. Both involve bodily participation, collective singing, and a connection to the past. Their forms of unity distinguish them. Within the juke joint, different kinds of work, desire, and response coexist in the same space. Among the vampires, transformation incorporates individuals into a shared consciousness centered on Remmick. This absorption gives the threat of assimilation a specific form. D'Agostino's (2025) reading of appropriation and assimilation helps explain how the loss of individual agency accompanies the demand for access to cultural life. The staging also gives the distinction a spatial form. The dispersed, polycentric dance floor confronts the concentric circles organized around a single figure outside.

During the final siege, the vampires' voices travel from the door to the windows and address those inside through familiar bodies. Remmick's threat against Lisa and Bo's song to Grace from the window intensify the pressure during the final demands for entry (01:40:00–01:47:10). When Grace invites them in, the large doors open. Before overt force is used, sound redirects attention and activates bonds shaped by loss. The threat narrows the conditions under which a choice can be made. Cultural appropriation therefore takes form through familiar voices, intimacy, and coercive demands for access, alongside the physical assault from outside.

3.5. Comparative Findings and Representational Tension

Read together, the four scene and sequence clusters yield a first finding: belonging is produced gradually through the film's soundtrack. The arrival of patrons and the voices heard at the door and bar give the juke joint a social life. Sammie's performance intensifies the crowd's participation. When the performance creates an image of memory that exceeds the walls, it also becomes audible outside. Annie's protective knowledge and the vampires' call reveal how the same boundary is regulated, tested, and eventually dissolved.

The second finding concerns the encounter between two distinct musical communities. Their difference does not rest on an inherent hierarchy between the blues and an Irish tune. Both forms of music generate historical connection, dance, and collectivity. The social life of the juke joint allows differences to coexist, while vampiric collectivity binds individuals to a single consciousness through transformation. Remmick's rhetoric of equality and family therefore carries a promise of assimilation alongside its language of inclusion. Bowles's (2025) discussion of racial objectification and appropriation helps explain this form of relationship.

The third finding concerns the object of the vampires' interest. They seek Sammie's ability to connect past and future, and the communal life gathered around his performance. Their demand extends to the people who make that cultural connection possible. The threat of exploitative appropriation takes shape as an attempt to control this capacity and the conditions of its use. Vampiric transformation would enable that control by absorbing individuals into a shared consciousness. The film thus connects cultural appropriation to assimilation and coercion through a sequence of actions whose effects on agency can be followed within the scenes.

These findings also allow the film's representational tension to be discussed within clear limits. Sammie's performance is staged with intense audiovisual force and transformed into a memorable spectacle that merges different historical periods into a continuous flow. This aesthetic density offers a vivid and readily recognizable representation of Black musical history, yet it risks compressing historical differences into a single moment of pleasure. The film does not fully resolve that risk. It nevertheless works to retain the music's historical grounding by placing sharecropper labor, plantation scrip, the racial boundary at the door, and violence within the same narrative. Studies of ownership and exploitation in the commercial circulation of Black music clarify the history behind this tension (Morrison, 2024; Springer, 2007). Because the present study offers no production or reception data, it draws no conclusions about the film's industrial impact.

The Ku Klux Klan makes the surrounding racial violence explicit. During the sale of the mill, Stack adds money for what he calls Hogwood's Klan associates, and Hogwood replies that the Klan no longer exists (00:06:18–00:07:55). The payment identifies the seller with an organization whose denial does not remove it from the transaction through which the brothers acquire the venue. Hogwood's return with armed men after the vampire siege shows that the threat persists beyond Remmick's defeat (Coogler, 2025, 01:58:31–02:02:51). Between these two moments, Smoke's question at the door brings the same concern before the visiting musicians. The encounters give different forms to the struggle over the juke joint. Klan violence enforces white supremacy against the brothers' attempt to establish a place of their own. Remmick uses music and promises of equality to seek entry into the communal life created there, then resorts to coercion and violence. The Klan's presence grounds that promise in a world where racial exclusion is already a daily condition. It also shows why inclusion can be appealing even when it places the community under another form of control.

Comparing Annie's protective knowledge with the vampires' demand for an invitation clarifies the role of agency at the boundary. Annie does not identify the threat solely from the appearance of a familiar body. She reads Cornbread's behavior at the threshold and uses garlic to identify the threat before calling the community to prepare a collective defense. Her knowledge does not create perfect trust and even intensifies suspicion inside. It nonetheless defines what must be protected through the person's capacity for choice and bond with the ancestors. Remmick, by contrast, joins the language of equality and family to a promise of transformation. His threat against Lisa and Bo's familiar voice prevents Grace's invitation from constituting freely given consent. Rogers's (2006) distinction concerning cultural exploitation under unequal power is particularly relevant here. The formal existence of an invitation cannot by itself establish ethical conditions of access. The film deals with the pressures under which agency is exercised as part of the cultural boundary.

This comparison also makes it difficult to assign music a fixed ethical meaning on the basis of genre. "Pick Poor Robin Clean" and "The Rocky Road to Dublin" enable collective singing, dancing, and remembrance. Their origins do not generate the threat in these scenes. The tunes become instruments of access and control within an order of transformation centered on Remmick. Sammie's blues offers no automatic guarantee of safety either. As the performance brings the juke joint together, it draws stronger attention from beyond the walls and turns the space into a target. The analysis therefore avoids assigning fixed moral values to musical genres. What matters is the relationship through which sound circulates, whether participation preserves agency, and whether collective belonging allows differences to endure.

Conclusion

Sinners gives communal memory a form through the relationship between performance and the histories recalled around it. The arrival of patrons and the exchanges at the doorway and bar establish the venue as a gathering place. Dance and responses to Sammie's voice show their participation, while the performance montage connects that participation to musicians and dancers across time. Belonging takes shape through the relationships recognized within this space and the terms on which people may

enter. The vampire threat brings those terms under pressure by seeking control over the music and the community that sustains it.

Across the four clusters, sound both gathers people and carries their presence beyond the walls. Annie's knowledge makes the preservation of choice and ancestral ties part of the community's defense. Remmick offers a form of membership that absorbs people into a shared consciousness, and his threats narrow the possibility of a voluntary invitation. Cultural appropriation is understood here as the threat of exploitative control over cultural expression and its social context. The performance montage also raises a question about representation. Its compression of different periods into one musical event can obscure historical differences. The references to sharecropper labor, plantation scrip, and Klan violence keep the conditions of that musical life within view. These conclusions concern the film's representation of community and do not establish its effects on audiences or the music industry.

The article contributes to discussions of cultural appropriation in Sinners by grounding them in formal features that can be traced within individual scenes, including sound source, threshold, and embodied participation. Comparing the four scenes and sequence clusters shows how belonging is established and how coercive demands for access erode it. Because the study examines a single film text, it draws no conclusions about production intent, audience reception, or industrial impact. These limitations suggest several directions for further research. Audience studies could examine how different social groups interpret the blues inside and the vampires' call outside. Production research could explore the decisions linking musical consultation, choreography, sound design, and historical representation. The circulation of the film's music through albums, concerts, short-form video, and digital platforms also warrants separate study. Comparative research could investigate how sound organizes boundary spaces such as doors, homes, clubs, and neighborhoods in contemporary Black horror. Such studies would help establish how the textual relationships identified here operate within reception and production.

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