Jazz and the African American Literary Tradition

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Music musicians played to free themselves from standard styles. For nearly the first half of the twentieth century, from about 1915 to 1955, jazz was the dominant form of popular dance music in the United States. Dance music and dance bands existed before jazz and, after the rise of jazz, there were still many dance bands that did not play jazz or used jazz elements only sparingly. And although for a certain period of its existence, jazz was dance music, jazz musicians were probably not attracted to this style of music primarily for this reason. From its earliest days, jazz seemed to have been music that, in part, musicians played for themselves, as a way to free themselves from the rigidity of standard dance or marching bands or other forms of commercial or popular music, which they found repetitive and unchallenging to play.

Jazz originated early in the century with small bands of five-to-seven players in a style that became known as New Orleans, named after the place where the music, in its first iteration, codified itself. That style is now called Dixieland. Jazz was propelled commercially mostly by 12-to-15 piece big bands, usually with both a male and female vocalist, in a style that became known as swing during the 1930s. Swing was built around highly rhythmic riffs with strong soloists providing "breaks" or moments of spirited improvisation against backdrops of arranged composition. With the rise of Jazz evolved from New Orleans style music, now called Dixieland, to more commercially successful swing music, which featured improvisation against a background of arranged composition.swing, band arrangers became as important as band soloists and it was much more necessary for musicians to know how to read a score than it was in the earlier days of jazz. Some swing bandleaders became noted celebrities during jazz's heyday like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Jimmie Lunceford, the Dorsey Brothers, Stan Kenton, Artie Shaw, and a score of others. Jazz also produced its share of star soloists by the 1930s including trumpeter Louis Armstrong, saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, clarinetist and saxophonist Sidney Bechet, saxophonist Lester Young, pianist Art Tatum, pianist and singer Fats Waller, drummer Gene Krupa, and trumpeters Harry James, Roy Eldridge, and Bix Beiderbecke. It is clear that despite its humble origins among the lower classes, immigrants, and African Americans, jazz was never really a folk music; it professionalized and standardized itself fairly quickly, becoming highly sophisticated show and stage music within a half-dozen years of its initial arrival on sound recording in 1917. By 1924, bandleader Paul Whiteman was sponsoring a history of jazz concert that featured the premiere of George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," as an example of symphonic jazz.

Although jazz has made use of many musical structures including blues, tango, African and Indian music; its most basic form is the 32-bar format of the American pop song, many of which by such noted composers as Harold Arlen, Jerome Kern, the Gershwin Brothers, Rodgers and Hart, Vernon Duke, and others, constitute the foundational repertoire of jazz. Gershwin's "The Man I Love" is a standard example of such a song with its A-A-B-A typology. This song and most of Gershwin's most popular tunes are standard fare for jazz musicians even today.

It was the commercial success of swing and its rampant formularized sound that led dissatisfied musicians to more experimental, much less dance-oriented post-World War II forms of jazz: Bebop, cool jazz, progressive jazz, and, eventually, the avant garde or highly atonal, seemingly structure-less jazz. The major jazz musicians who emerged after World War II—saxophonists Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, Stan Getz, and John Coltrane, Dissatisfaction with the commercialization and familiarity of swing led to the development of jazz, music that was more than mere entertainment.trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis, pianists Thelonious Monk, Horace Silver, and Oscar Peterson, drummers Max Roach and Art Blakey, trombonist J. J. Johnson, and arranger Quincy Jones were all innovators of or highly influenced by chord structures that were far more virtuosic and modernistic than swing. Indeed, while jazz was always a form of music where the ability of exceptional soloists was one of the major features of the music, after World War II, with its preoccupation with velocity and complexity, jazz became a musical form much more self-consciously consumed with the idea of virtuosity for its own sake, so that the music would not be mistaken by the public as mere entertainment.

Both blacks and whites (as well as Latinos) in the United States performed jazz and the audience was diverse, although in large measure now, the audience for this music is mostly white. Historically, jazz was largely the creation of black Americans as they have figured disproportionately among the major innovators of this musical expression. This has created two forms of tensions within jazz: first, among some white performers who feel Black-white tensionsthat whites have not been given sufficient credit for their contributions to this art which has had white participation since its earliest days; and, second, between black performers and the whites who mostly constituted the critics, writers, venue and record company owners who described, analyzed, promoted, publicized, recorded, and distributed this music. This latter tension was especially felt during the 1950s and 1960s, when racial discord in the United States was more pronounced because of the civil rights movement, the violence it spawned, and the intensely politicized battle over the re-definition of race and the end of white hegemony in the United States and around the colonized world at the time.

But jazz was more than just music; at the height of its influence, jazz was a cultural movement, particularly influencing the young in dress, language, and attitude. It was, in this respect, a prototype for both rock and roll and hip hop because it was so viscerally hated by the bourgeoisie Jazz inspired writers and visual artists but was hated by the bourgeoisie largely because of its association with sex and drugs.and the musical establishment of the day. Jazz was associated with interracial sex (many jazz nightclubs were open to patrons of any race) and with illegal drugs, in the early days, marijuana, and during the 1950s, with heroin. Visual artists and writers were frequently inspired by jazz, many thinking its sense of spontaneity, its dissonance, its anti-bourgeois attitude embodied compelling aspects of modernism. Jazz deeply influenced artists such as Romare Bearden and Jackson Pollock. Many filmmakers, both in the United States and Europe—from the 1930s through the 1960s—used jazz in either nightclub scenes, as source music, or as part of the musical score in films and animated features. Jazz was used extensively in film noir and crime movies, and occasionally in psychological dramas.

Jazz's roots are in the city: New Orleans, Chicago, New York, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Detroit have at various times been major incubators for jazz. Jazz has always been an urban music, tied to urban nightlife, Prohibition, vice zones, dance halls, inner city

neighborhoods, and concert stages. Its history coincides not only with the urbanization of America itself but particularly with the urbanization of African Americans, dating from their movement from the South starting around the beginning of World War I when job opportunities in industry opened up for them.

Jazz broke on the scene at the same time as the arrival of the New Negro Renaissance, also known as the Harlem Renaissance, a period covering from 1919 to 1939. This period in African American life featured a self-conscious attempt by black leaders Jazz became prominent during a period of broad artistic and political ferment among African Americans.like W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, and Alain Locke to create a school of black literature because they firmly believed that in order for blacks to achieve greatness as a people, they had to produce great art. But it must be remembered that this period was not just about art: important black political leaders were spawned during the Renaissance including black nationalist Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association, A. Philip Randolph, an agitating socialist who became the head of the Pullman Porters union, and Du Bois himself who, through his editorship of *The Crisis*, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, continued to push for civil rights and a form of Pan Africanism that was antagonistic to Garvey's.

The African American response to jazz during this era was mixed. For many middle class, educated blacks, jazz was considered low class, secular (the devil's music), played Considered the devil's music by many middle class blacks, jazz had little literary influence in the 1920s and 30s.in dives and joints that morally disfigured black communities. The only black writer of the Renaissance who was truly taken with jazz was Langston Hughes (1902-1967), who, during the course of his career, not only wrote many poems about it but also on occasion read his poems against a jazz backdrop, even recording with bassist Charles Mingus, a creative partnership that Mingus found unsatisfying. Frank Marshall Davis (1905-1987), a poet and journalist from Chicago, also voiced a fondness for jazz in his writing. Jazz figured in two Claude McKay (1889-1948) novels: *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929), which is about a roving seaman who is also a musician, a banjo player, an instrument still played by African Americans at the time and frequently featured in small jazz bands. Considering the impact of jazz, it is surprising how little impact the music had on African American letters in the 1920s and 1930s.

Jazz's literary influence comes after World War II. Jazz became much more prominent in black letters after World War II, when the music became much more self-consciously an "art" music designed for listening rather than for dancing. Many consider Ralph Ellison's monumental novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), winner of the National Book Award, to be one of the most successful "jazz" novels ever written, although the book is not about a musician and music does not figure in it a great deal. Ellison himself studied both composition and trumpet as a student in his hometown of Oklahoma City and at Tuskegee Institute, where, in fact, he majored in music. So, unlike most black writers, Ellison actually knew music technically. He also felt that music was central to understanding race in America: "The music, the dances that Americans do are greatly determined by Negro American style, by a Negro American sense of elegance, by an American Negro sense of what the American experience should be, by what Negroes feel about how an American should move, should express himself."[1] But he also understood music, black music particularly, as something equally metaphorical, historical, and cultural. This is evident in his

essays on jazz such as “Living with Music,” “The Charlie Christian Story,” and “On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz” that were collected for his 1964 volume of essays, *Shadow and Act*.

Invisible Man as a jazz novel. Louis Armstrong’s recording of “What Did I Do (To Be So Black and Blue” figures significantly in the beginning of *Invisible Man* and is, in some ways, one of the major themes of the novel; the other being how the Negro is a central figure and actor in American cultural life, that the black American is indeed American in a vital sense. The scene where the protagonist listens to Armstrong sing this song conveys this symbolically as he eats vanilla ice cream (white) drenched in sloe gin (red) while the blues play on his phonograph. This scene also emphasizes how significant the creation of African American art is to Ellison’s act of creating his novel.

But generally most critics think of the novel as jazz-like in its experimental structure, the sense of improvisation that the prose of the novel suggests, particularly the increasing improvisational nature of the Invisible Man’s speeches, the slightly weird, off-kilter way that the characters relate to one another and to the narrative itself. Was the entire novel the narrator’s hallucination? The novel certainly suggests that jazz is a part of a larger tapestry of black creativity, founded in black folk life, including black speech and sermonizing, black styles of dress, and black eating habits. And this thread of black creativity has had largely a liberating effect on American life even as it, ironically, represents a form of discipline on the part of its inventors.

Other novels dealing directly with the lives of jazz musicians that appeared a few years after *Invisible Man* were John A. Williams’s *Night Song* (1961), based loosely on the life of saxophonist Charlie Parker (in 1967 a film version was made entitled *Sweet Love, Bitter*, starring Dick Gregory), and William Melvin Kelley’s *A Drop of Patience* (1965), both novels prominently feature interracial romances between black male musicians and white women. Poet and painter Ted Joans (1928-2003) also arrived on the scene at this time, achieving notoriety as a graffiti artist spray-painting “Bird Lives” on city walls immediately after the death of Charlie Parker in 1955, he spent his entire career writing poems about jazz or that imitated jazz playing. His most famous jazz poem is “Jazz is My Religion.” In this brief excerpt, devotion to a pure, non-commercial jazz is seen as a form of piety, the purity of the commitment matching the purity of the art, a common feeling among many jazz fans and musicians of the post-World War II era:

Jazz is my religion and it alone do I dig the jazz
Clubs are my houses of worship and sometimes the
Concert halls but some holy places are too commercial
like churches) so I don’t dig the sermons there

Also emerging at the same time as Joans was Beat poet Bob Kaufman (1925-1986), whose poetry was often improvised on the spot, frequently not written down, in much the spirit of the jazz musician. This excerpt from “Crootey Songo,” one of his most famous poems, shows how he fashioned the words to resemble or imitate a scat singer’s or a saxophonist’s improvisation and also to suggest a distinct language or linguistic system, not unlike the speech of the jazz hipster:

DERRAT SLEGELATIONS FLO GOOF BABER,
SCRASH SHO DUBIES WAGO WAILO WAILO
GEED BOP NAVA GLIED, NAVA GLIED NAVA,
SPLEERIEDER, HUYEDIST, HEDACAZ, AX---, O, O.

Jazz was compatible with African American protest in the 1960s. The 1960s was the era of the Black Arts Movement, when younger black writers, fired by both Black Nationalism and Marxism, wrote passionately for race solidarity and denounced not only racism but virtually everything white. Many of these writers were poets and a good many jazz poems were written in homage to specific jazz artists, especially saxophonist John Coltrane, who was probably the most popular jazz musician among the black intelligentsia at this time, or in imitation of the flow and spontaneity of jazz. This was probably the last time in American society when a significant portion of young people were still taken by jazz, in part, because it was now an art music with intellectual and spiritual pretensions. Unlike rhythm and blues or 1960s soul music, jazz at this time, seemed a music that took itself seriously, and was not merely a diversion, and jazz was, in good measure, passionately anti-commercial. Poet, playwright, and essayist, former Beat Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) was the leader of this school of writing, a long-time jazz aficionado, who began his jazz writing career providing notes for jazz albums. Baraka produced an important study of black music entitled *Blues People* (1963), which is partly about jazz. His collection of essays, *Black Music* (1967), is devoted almost entirely to avant-garde jazz and was instrumental in introducing a young audience to this music. Baraka produced a number of noted jazz poems including "AM/Trak," a poem for John Coltrane, and "Pres Spoke in a Language," for saxophonist Lester Young. Other noted Black Arts Movement poets who wrote jazz poetry include Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, and Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee). Other African American poets of the 1960s and 1970s who were known for writing jazz poetry but were not directly associated with the Black Arts Movement were Michael S. Harper, Quincy Troupe, and Al Young.

Jazz and contemporary literature Among the black writers on the scene today, essayist and novelist Stanley Crouch, poet and fiction writer Nathaniel Mackey, and poet Yusef Komunyakaa are the most associated with jazz, a music whose presence and influence has diminished over the last 35 years, especially among young people. Crouch has written many first-rate essays about jazz and is considered to be the nation's leading jazz critic; in addition, his novel, *Don't the Moon Look Lonesome* (2000), about a young white jazz singer and her African American saxophonist husband, offers the reader an insider's view not only of the jazz world but of the intricacies of music-making from the point of view of a professional musician. The book, in some ways like *Invisible Man*, is built around several speeches or speech-acts delivered or performed by various characters, lessons in creative improvisation and creative narrative that suggest music, which intensifies the book's extraordinary jazz sensibility. Komunyakaa, a Pulitzer Prize winner, has not only written a number of jazz poems but also co-edited with Sascha Feinstein *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991) and *The Second Set: The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1996). Mackey, an avant gardist, editor of the magazine *Hambone*, and radio DJ, has written a number of jazz poems. Indeed, jazz particularly and music in general is the main inspiration of his writing. He has also written four novels as part of a series about a fictional Los Angeles musical collective called *The Mystic Horns*.

Guiding Student Discussion

Students will be unfamiliar with jazz. The most difficult aspect of teaching students about the impact of jazz on African American literature is the fact that most young people have heard very little jazz and have little interest in it. Most of them think of it as old people's music, as some sort of muzak or some sort of highly dissonant music that seems overly elitist and intellectual. Do not think that African American students will have some greater sympathy for or cultural identification with this music because of the number of African American artists who have made it. They are no more likely to respond favorably to Wynton Marsalis, Ornette Coleman, or John Coltrane than any other student. One major problem is that jazz is largely an instrumental music that prides itself on strenuous virtuosity, which means that it will seem dense and abstract to casual listeners and especially to students who listen to nothing but the current popular music, which is largely vocal and usually simpler and more accessible in its technical execution. You must, of course, play jazz for your students if you are to succeed in teaching them about the relationship between jazz and African American literature. But you cannot play it for them without providing them with some aid in how to listen to it; otherwise they will simply feel bewildered and helpless in confronting it. Part of the aid you should provide in teaching students how to listen to it is to explain to them what the music is and what the musicians are trying to achieve by playing it and what devoted audiences get out of listening it. You should remind students that nearly all jazz musicians started out very young as professional musicians and most made their marks while they were still in their twenties and most continued to play the same style of music for their entire careers. You might also emphasize that this is true in other fields of popular music and is true of hip-hop and rap today. When the current artists are fifty or sixty years old, they will very likely be making music that is similar to what they made while in their 20s and 30s. (Think about the Rolling Stones, Paul McCartney, Stevie Wonder and other older popular artists to prove this point,) Also, during its heyday, jazz had an enormous appeal to teenagers and young adults. Perhaps you might ask them if fifty years from now if the music that is popular today be considered old people's music. You might point out to them that research has shown that people form their musical taste in adolescence and that by early adulthood the taste one has in music is, by and large, complete and will remain the same for the rest of your life with very little change and very little openness to new music.

Questions to ask. It is good to begin by asking students if most people like music, if so, why do they like it. If most people like music, why don't they all like the same music or why is not all music equally pleasing to people? What sort of purpose does music serve in human life? Does it have a practical purpose? How does music affect human emotions? Does music affect the musicians who are making it differently than the audience that is listening to it? What makes one style of music different from another and what makes music the same? How does music change over time and why has it changed? How have technological innovations like the microphone, the sound recording, radio, and the Internet changed music? How does music affect watching a visual image?

Starting out with jazz vocal recording would be the best way to ease the students into this music, by giving them lyrics to latch onto. Jamie Cullem's "Twenty-something," Mose Allison's "Your Mind is on Vacation," and Les McCann's performance of "Compared to What" would be good as starters. The tunes are attractive and highly listenable and the lyrics are clever, witty, and

satirical. Other jazz songs that would be good are Louis Armstrong's "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans," Nina Simone's version of "Pirate Jenny," Oscar Brown Jr.'s "Brother, Where Are You?" or "Dat Dere," Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" or "Swing, Brother, Swing," Leon Thomas's "The Creator Has a Master Plan," Gil-Scott Heron's "The Bottle" or "Lady Day and John Coltrane," Ella Fitzgerald "A-Tisket, A-Tasket," and The Mills Brothers' "I Got Swing for Sale." There would be much to discuss about these performances: who the artists were, when the piece was recorded, who were the songwriters, the meaning of the lyrics, the instrumentation of the piece.

It would be then be useful to give students some elementary music theory: teach them to clap in time to the record, to recognize the time signature, to think about repetition in the song so that they might begin to understand the structure of the piece.

Then, you can proceed to instrumental jazz music starting with highly accessible pieces like swing band favorites such as Benny Goodman's "Sing, Sing, Sing," and "Christopher Columbus," Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade," Duke Ellington's "Take the A-Train," "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)," and "Dancers in Love." More modern pieces might include Miles Davis's "So What" and "All Blues," Dave Brubeck's "Take Five," Vince Guaraldi's "Cast Your Fate to the Wind," Charles Mingus's "Good-Bye, Old Pork-Pie Hat," Keith Jarrett's "Country," and John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things." You might even consider during an early phase of this stage to play some selections of "smooth" jazz, pieces by George Benson, Kenny G, Kirk Whalum, Earl Klugh, Grover Washington, Jr., and others associated with this school. Pains should be taken to consider the instrumentation of the various pieces, the time signature, whether the piece was bright or sad, why people may have liked this particular piece of music. Some more challenging pieces like Thelonious Monk's "Brilliant Corners" and "Well, You Needn't" might be introduced at this point.

You may then go on to try more dissonant pieces of music: Cecil Taylor's version of "This Nearly Was Mine," Albert Ayler's "Truth is Marching In," Miles Davis's "Bitches' Brew," Ornette Coleman's "Congeniality," John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" or pieces by Gato Barbieri, Don Cherry, Sun Ra, or the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Students should be prepared carefully before the piece is played so that they may have some idea of what to expect and have sense of what to listen for. Why would musicians be interested in making dissonant music? Is there some sort of melody? How is this music supposed to make me feel as a listener? Is the music trying to tell some sort of story or is it some sort of narrative? Should I think of the different instruments as characters in a tale or a poem? Do musicians feel better or freer playing this sort of music than playing more traditional music? Are audiences supposed to feel freer? Can noise be music? Or is music, after all, really just noise? Why is some music noise to us but other music isn't?

In dealing with the influence of jazz on African American literature, the most pertinent question is why is this music a muse for some writers? What do these writers see in this music? Is it necessary to be a musician or to know music technically in order to write about it or use it in poetry and fiction? In teaching Langston Hughes and other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, it would be good to make sure that jazz of the era is played and explained to the students. Albert Murray is a big fan of Count Basie and Duke Ellington; whereas Amiri Baraka loved Coltrane,

Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, and other "free" players. That helps to explain why jazz is used so differently in a story like Baraka's "The Screamers," about a honking saxophonist performance in a nightclub as compared to Albert Murray's novel *The Seven League Boots* (1995), about a traveling jazz band during the swing era. Both are distinct from James Baldwin's celebrated short story "Sonny's Blues," about the relationship between a teacher and his drug-addicted musician brother. Baldwin liked jazz but not in quite the informed, passionate way of either Baraka or Murray. Baldwin, in fact, knew more about gospel music and wrote about at far greater length in his novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979).

Some Helpful Reading

1. Ted Gioia's *A History of Jazz* is a very good, well-written and well-researched, one-volume history of jazz that not only provides solid social and cultural contexts for the creation of this music but excellent musical descriptions that are accessible to the non-musical person.
2. Walter Dean Myers's *Harlem Summer*, James Lincoln Collier's *The Jazz Kid,* and Christopher Paul Curtis's *Bud, Not Buddy* are three jazz novels written for junior high school students that are useful no matter what level a teacher you are.
3. Amiri Baraka's *Blues People* is still a classic work on the history of black music in the United States, particularly how the music was transformed from African to African American and how the music represented more authentically the feelings and aspirations of the black masses than, say, African American literature.
4. Louis Armstrong's *Swing That Music* and *Satchmo*, his two autobiographies, are among the best such books in jazz. Also recommended is *Louis Armstrong, In His Own Words: Selected Writings*, edited by Thomas Brothers. From a woman's perspective, Anita O'Day's *High Times Hard Times* is a noteworthy autobiography. Billie Holiday's Lady Sings the Blues is also an important autobiography by famous female jazz performer.
5. John Gennari's *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and its Critics*, and Eric Porter's *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* are excellent studies of the history of jazz criticism and the uneasy relationship that black jazz musicians have had with the white critical establishment that writes about this music.