Self-Ethnography - My History with Jazz

Music has played a major role in my life since I was first introduced to the creative possibilities of musical performance at the young age of 8. At that age, my older brother joined his middle school band and brought home the first instrument that I have ever held in my hands: a cornet. Although at the time my brother did not allow me to play it, I was still entranced by the instrument and its ability to transform breath into sound. Coincidently, later that same year I received my first mp3 player, a black USB stick with a tiny screen that held roughly 60 songs, which I quickly filled to the brim with the latest hit pop songs that my 8-year-old self remembered hearing on the radio. These two events combined and led to my deep delve into the world of music, not only as a consumer but also a player.

Upon entering middle school, I quickly followed in my older brother’s footsteps and joined the school’s band program as a trumpeter, throwing myself into learning the instrument and musical concepts surrounding it. I learned how to read music, how to identify rhythms and notes, and a little bit of the history of music as a subject. Playing the trumpet quickly became a hobby that I spent a considerable amount of time devoted to, and yet until my 2nd year of high school I had not truly been exposed to African or African American music. Upon entering my sophomore year of high school, in addition to being a member of the wind symphony which focused primarily on classical and modern western music, I joined the Carroll Jazz Band directed by David Lown, a saxophone player who played for the One O’clock band at UNT, among many other accolades. My time spent learning and playing jazz under his direction shaped my understanding of the African American music scene, and is the basis of my knowledge on the topic.

Being a jazz student at my high school provided several opportunities to further my grasp on not only the music that we played, but also the culture and ideas behind said music. When given a new chart to learn, we were often tasked to go out and find a recording of the piece, as well as look up any history that we could regarding the composer and the famous musicians who played the piece. Through this process of investigative playing, I learned about the advent of jazz in New Orleans, the numerous sub-genres of jazz that emerged like ragtime, bebop, modal jazz, and jazz fusion, and the multitude of jazz icons that put the genre on the musical map.

Being a trumpet player, I naturally gravitated towards jazz trumpeters such as Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, and Wynton Marsalis. By playing pieces of music that these jazz legends had also played, while simultaneously filling my music player with their versions of improved solos and group recordings, I submerged myself in the musical culture of what I would argue as being the largest African American genre of music that was readily available to my high school self.

One of my most listened to jazz recordings during my time as a student was “All of Me”, a jazz staple that has been recorded, rerecorded, and reimagined throughout its long life. This song stood out to me during my time listening and playing to jazz due to such reimaginings. It amazed me how one song could be interpreted in such varied ways, and thus evoke such a different emotional response when listening. For example, Billie Holiday’s slower, almost haunted sound that conjures images of a smoky, low-lit bar late at night contrasts sharply with Ella Fitzgerald’s more upbeat rendition that elicits a livelier scene of dancing and swing. This song epitomizes what I believe is a key factor of jazz, and African American music in general: that it can be taken from its original form and molded into something almost completely new and unique, while still maintaining the cultural African American backbone that it sprouted from.

While I don’t have a very long or very deep first-hand experience with African American music, and only a few years of experience with it in the form of jazz, my limited teachings have lead me to the conclusion that African American music is unique from other genres in that it is malleable while retaining its unique flavor. Additionally, African American music’s evocative nature is unparalleled in comparison to other musical styles.