

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

REVOLUTIONS OR REVOLUTION?

METHODS WITH WHICH JAZZ TRANSCENDED TONALITY
TO UNITE WITH THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

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December 12, 2016



Night has descended upon Manhattan and has brought with it an ambiance all too familiar to its inhabitants. A stroll down West 52nd Street promises the scents of Cajun food and cocktails and sounds of fleeting melodies of *Freedom Jazz Dance*, one of saxophonist Eddie Harris' recently released compositions. Birdland, not unlike many other jazz clubs of this era, has closed its doors due to skyrocketing rent fees, but jazz is still alive and well in New York. The bustle of music-accompanied nightlife and joviality of jam session hopefuls has immortalized jazz as a staple of the city; it has made its language universal and immutable. The past couple of months, however, have harbingered a distinct shift in the undercurrent of the community. Martin Luther King, Jr. had just delivered a speech at Stanford University before addressing New York the next day, April 15th, 1967 (King); Malcolm X's assassination was still shrouded in controversy and uncertainty. Between sets, musicians discuss the signal winds of the approaching 1968 presidential primaries, noting rumors of what an eventual President Nixon would later coin "the Silent Majority" (Lassiter 2). Barside patrons engage doggedly in small talk and personal conversation, coyly courting the elephant in the room that is the most recent development in the struggle for civil rights. Still, in the midst of such societal tension, jazz brings people together; it sparks conversations, it encourages discourse, it opens minds. This is indeed a time of apprehension and struggle, but jazz gives its congregation and creators hope and renews their resolve: a resolve that has taken them this far, a resolve that will give them the strength to fight the good fight until The Dream is realized.

Jazz musicians of this time not more than a century ago used this cerebral, soulful artform to express their sentiments about and push towards true liberation--liberation from a society that had ostracized and oppressed them for their entire lives. Indeed, jazz music was birthed from hardship, it was crafted in a crucible of struggle. Its creators were activists and influencers, its audience a congregation. Jazz fostered an environment in which individuals could speak their minds through their instruments as well as their words and observers could feel empowered to add their own voices. It became an enabler for discourse about civil rights that was unprecedented in the American society of the time. Through the activism and influence of jazz musicians like Nina Simone, Max Roach, and Charles Mingus, the jazz artform left the United States with more than simple revolutions on a record player--it became a revolution that was

integral in exposing the desperate need for African-American civil rights to a culture that was reluctant to consider it. In this paper, we will consider the development of the Civil Rights Movement before examining the advent of jazz to realize the beginnings and motivations centered around injustice and adversity they share. We will notice that even individually, each's history speaks of the other: they are yin and yang. We will then explore into the intertwining relationship they shared, as articulated by prominent figures of the jazz community and historians.

The Struggle for Black Liberation::

Recursive Efforts of Influencers to Advance Racial Justice in 1900s America

i. Roots of the Civil Rights Movement

Before its name was even conceptualized, the Civil Rights Movement was conceived just as many other movements are: at the grassroots. Initiated by the racially-motivated violence, segregation, disenfranchisement, and injustice of the late 1800s, many of the first ideals of racial justice were conceived in community centers like churches and schools. Writers like W. E. B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington laid the foundation for what was to become a conscious struggle for racial equality, forming organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Niagara Movement (Foner and Garraty). 1917 was a pivotal year in the struggle for justice: activist Hubert Harrison founded the New Negro Movement, along with The Liberty League organization and The Voice newspaper, each dedicated to reinvigorating race-conscious demands for political equality.¹ This idea of The New Negro was birthed from the violence, disenfranchisement, and segregation that was present in Harlem for as long as its residents could remember. It called for African-American self-expression and was an assertion of African-American agency in culture and politics. This surge prompted the advent of the Harlem Renaissance--a movement that, along with creating an

¹ "NAACP: A Century in the Fight for Freedom - The New Negro Movement." *Library of Congress*. The United States Government, n.d. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.

influx of visual art and spoken word, catalyzed many musical artists to lay the foundation of the jazz that would later support the Civil Rights Movement.

With a newfound encouragement to express itself, the African-American community quickly began to leverage its momentum towards poetic and documented resistance, and by the end of the Harlem Renaissance in the late 1920s, The Great Migration had spread the ideals of the Renaissance across the nation.¹ Organizations began to lobby Congress for the passage of basic human protection and rights: “Evoking the “New Negro,” the NAACP lobbied aggressively for the passage of a federal law that would prohibit lynching”². African-American musicians and bandleaders created many of the famous big bands and jazz orchestras of the Swing Era, one of the most notable being the great jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong himself. This momentum quickly “triggered an explosion of jazz improvisation: electrical recordings of Jelly Roll Morton’s Red Hot Peppers in the fall of 1926 and the spring of 1927 were followed by OKeh’s first electric session with Louis Armstrong’s expanded Hot Seven in May 1927, the session that produced the famous stop-time trumpet solo on “Potato Head Blues”, a landmark in “playing the changes.”” (Denning 213). Creativity and activism were seeing new highs among the African-American community, and this activity left an indelible mark on art and history as we know it.

However, even with all of this progress taking place within the African-American community, the struggle continued for many decades to come. Violence and segregation against African-Americans were still rampant in the 1950s--even against more passive members of the community. In his biography of acclaimed bebop piano master Bud Powell, jazz historian Guthrie Ramsey muses that while “to be a black man in the mid-’40s where people were still working on or beginning to work on civil rights for all Americans, [Bud] was focusing on what could only be thought of as a craft at the time” (Ramsey). However, Powell’s career and life were shortened by a mental instability that sprung from “brutalization at the hands of white authorities” and “a [consequential] history of alcohol abuse” (Ramsey). This experience determined much of Powell’s musical direction and prevented him from realizing a possibly

² "NAACP: A Century in the Fight for Freedom - The New Negro Movement." *Library of Congress*. The United States Government, n.d. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.

long-lived, successful career and life. The Civil Rights Movement continued, fuelled by ideals and speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, achieving victories like *Brown v. the Board of Education*, *Buchanan v. Warley*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the full Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act (Foner and Garraty). These achievements of over a decade of major Civil Rights Movements, however, were only won after many arduous years of uphill battling, and the struggle continues today.

ii. Roots of Jazz

Jazz had its beginnings in the bluesy roots of hymns and work songs. It was also motivated by hardship, adversity, and injustice, and when translated into organized music, it quickly gained ground, becoming the primary musical form in the United States. However, its inception did not immediately conceive a purpose to demand civil rights; “approximately thirty years elapsed between the birth of jazz music and the beginning of its mobilization as a political resource within the Black Liberation Struggle” (Gaffney 36). Indeed, the artform remained an introspect into the human condition for a long period of time before it even became mainstream and influential within American culture. Urbanization of communities in New Orleans and the advent of recording and radio technologies allowed jazz to finally gain momentum in the US, and as it became more popular, it began to present its true purpose to its audience. When the Great Migration took place [*Appendix*, fig. 1], jazz, taking the form of Dixieland at the time, went where its creators went, evolving along its journey until it finally reached Chicago and New York. Here, just after World War I, the role of jazz in the Civil Rights Movement blossomed through the Harlem renaissance (Foner and Garraty).

This kind of momentum was not always met with open arms; contrarily, a great deal of societal pushback was involved. Some opined that jazz was simply a vehicle for dancing, carousing, and generally engaging in unruly and obstreperous behavior, devoid of any deeper meaning. One 1922 magazine article [*Appendix*, fig. 2] from *The New York American* overtly criticized the onset of the growing popularity of jazz: “In Chicago alone, the association's representatives have traced the fall of 1,000 girls in the last two years to jazz music” (Duque 1).

This comparison of jazz to some sort of disease is a clear indication of how they viewed the emergent artform. While not as driven racially as much as religiously, this article still stands as an example of the hostility a portion of conservative America had against jazz. The resultant connotations that jazz carried were of promiscuity, eroticism, and moral misconduct (Duque 1); these connotations prevented society from opening up to a true and intentional aim of jazz: the call for civil rights. Some even saw jazz as a disease that the nation needed to be cured of. One Sacramento Union editorial, reporting from a National Education Association in Atlantic City, New Jersey, quoted an educator claiming that ““Jazz music was invented by demons for the torture of imbeciles,”...“The state has the same right to protect its citizens from deadly art as it has to prohibit the carrying of deadly weapons. But I do not think the law can reach the matter. It is spiritual...Nudity in art has done less harm than nudity of the language in which it is sometimes discussed. There is, a difference between the nude and the undressed.”” [Appendix, fig. 3]. This outright indictment of jazz is indicative of the conscious and unconscious feelings that people of this kind held. Musician and civil rights activist Max Roach would have asked the reporter and educator to take a closer look into the aims of the jazz realm: jazz at this time was primarily played as dance music, and dance has been an integral part of humanity since before history has been recorded. Likewise, other forms of dancing were just as liable to create a promiscuous environment for their engagers--ultimately, people, not musical genres, make choices for how they live their lives. Roach may have posited that the true meaning behind this repulsion was the knowledge society had of the roots and purpose of jazz: it is an expression of Black culture itself, a child of the African Diaspora and Great Migration (Roach 6). Furthermore, Roach proposes, the overall sentiment of conservative America towards jazz was reflective of the overall sentiment of conservative America towards the Civil Rights Movement.

As jazz grew, so did its influence, and as its influence grew, it became increasingly attractive to organizations like the NAACP and Urban League, which were centered around the fight for civil rights. Artists like Louis Armstrong, a father of jazz, still took a subtle approach to the issues surrounding the Civil Rights movement--some even criticized Armstrong for playing into the “Uncle Tom” archetype by performing primarily for Caucasian-American audiences--but the gradual shift was unmistakable. Beginning in the mid- to late-1920s, more organizations

began to mobilize jazz as a resource for the advancement of the Black Liberation Struggle, and musicians began becoming more involved in the Civil Rights discourse. Duke Ellington, a composer and bandleader who was one of the most prolific musicians of his era, was “exceptionally articulate, sophisticated, and self-confident, in part because of a financially privileged upbringing” (Blanning 301). This allowed him to reach a wide, multi-cultural audience through both his music and his writing. Duke Ellington was a deep thinker in his verbiage as well as in his music. In 1931, he wrote:

“The music of my race is something more than the “American idiom”. It is the result of our transplantation to American soil, and was our reaction in the plantation days to the tyranny we endured. What we could not say openly we expressed in music, and what we know as “Jazz” is something more than just dance music...I think the music of my race is something which is going to live, something which posterity will honor in a higher sense than merely that of the music of the ballroom today.” (Duke Ellington, qtd. Blanning 301).

Jazz helped the African-American community to find a distinctive voice, forge their own cultural identity, and demand justice and equality from the society that had denied them it. In doing so, jazz thereby became synonymous with the Civil Rights Movement and all of the Black Liberation Struggles that had preceded it. As jazz advanced, so did the struggle for civil rights. By the time Duke Ellington had come to international fame, the evolution of jazz was indubitably bringing about a new evolution in the movement for civil rights: one that would soon be brought to the center of American politics.

The Dance Commences:

A Glance at the Reciprocal Relationship Shared by Jazz and The Civil Rights Movement

Let us return to the late 1950s to early 1960s, a time that finds itself at the climax of the Civil Rights Movement and at the emergence of a wildly expressive new genre of jazz: bebop. Bebop, commonly associated with New York and synonymous with the term “East Coast Jazz”,

was far more improvisatory than the styles that had preceded it. Moreover, as a vehicle of personal expression, it allowed musicians to see themselves more as artists than as performers. Consequently, bebop became an affirmation of individual rights, creativity, and personal identity--attributes that were key to the conception and progress of the Civil Rights Movement (Berry). The conditions for bebop musicians at this time were very poor--“the union wages for a Black musician who did not have the stature of Miles Davis or Dizzy Gillespie or Duke Ellington, or a record album, the scale was so low that I hesitate to mention it. It was \$90 a week” (Roach 4)--and this led to a further dissatisfaction with the system of American society. In addition to low union wages, the Theatrical Owners Booking Association (TOBA, nicknamed “Tough On Black Artists”) took measures to segregate entertainment venues and performers. Black musicians were typically limited to playing for Black clubs, and White musicians had the privilege of playing the best gigs, usually in wealthy, White venues (Berry). Jazz, according to legendary bebop drummer and activist Max Roach, had come to mean the “abuse and exploitation of [African-American] jazz musicians”, and in that, the abuse and exploitation of an entire demographic. He realized that something had to give, and the blistering indictment of the situation drew much-needed attention to the matter at hand. Indeed, the music industry, a \$20 billion industry at the time, had been built and sustained largely by the talents of African-American musicians--Max Roach being one of them. Roach posited a “decolonization of the mind” and proposed that African-American culture “rename and redefine itself” (Roach 5). He argued that this transformative thinking should start at the individual level, with jazz musicians becoming actively engaged in the struggle for civil rights, whether through musical creativity, daily resistance to racial injustice, or becoming informed and literate regarding the history and current issues of equality and racial justice. While the large organizations of the Black Liberation Struggle did have an invaluable role in the advancement of the Civil Rights Movement, musicians had a vital role of their own.

It was also around this time that the music of the era truly began to reflect the sentiments of the activists who created it. Politically charged albums began to emerge, denoting a distinct rise of musician individuality and of the demand for equality (Berry). The struggle continued throughout the 1960s, when musicians like Charles Mingus were universally recognized as the

primary masters of jazz at the time. Jazz historian Jessie Wright-Mendoza recounts that “Charles Mingus’ 1959 album, *Mingus Ah Um*, contains a song meant as a damning rebuke of Arkansas governor Orval Faubus’ treatment of the Little Rock Nine” (Wright-Mendoza)--the ‘Little Rock Nine’ referring to the group of nine African-American students who tried to enter a newly desegregated school, causing Orval Faubus to act completely out of turn by calling in the National Guard to remove them. This song, *Fables of Faubus*, was released on a different record label than Mingus’ typical Columbia, as Columbia Records thought that the lyrics were too incendiary. The record, nonetheless, brought to light the prevalent presence of racism of 1960s America. This kind of exposure paved the way for Nina Simone to “get up in front of a lily white audience at Carnegie Hall and sing “Mississippi Goddam” – which starts off as a jaunty musical tune that the audience laughs along to before it evolves into an documentation of racial inequality in the South. In the recording, you can actually hear the atmosphere in the concert hall change as [the audience] realizes the true intentions of the song” (Wright-Mendoza).

This exposure was just one of many which demanded awareness of racial injustice and supported the Civil Rights Movement. Concert promoters and record producers like Norman Granz required that there be no “white seating” or “colored seating” at their concerts--this was a huge change from the paradigm that had existed prior to the rise of jazz. Artists like Miles Davis would choose on occasion to perform exclusively for an all-African-American audience, reflecting on the brutality that he, like Bud Powell, had suffered at the hands of White police officers (Wright-Mendoza). These conscious urgings of society toward the direction of racial equality were the beginnings of the transformative late-1960s Civil Rights Movement which would catalyze even larger cultural shifts to come.

In retrospect, historians view this interplay as symbiotic. One wouldn’t be the same without the other, and the grand scale of the events that transpired have left participants with the realization that each component was critical to the machine of the Civil Rights Movement. In her book *Musical Democracy*, Nancy Love recalls conversations she has had with individuals who were involved in the movement. She states that “the testimonies of civil rights activists repeatedly stress the continuity between organizers and song leaders, leaders and followers, individuals and movements. In Guy Carawan’s words, ‘The music became a part of

everything--you couldn't tell who was a singer and who was an organizer, because the organizers sang and the singers organized' (quoted in Seeger and Reiser 1989, 39)" (Love 104). As a result, oral history and stories have become a staple in uncovering the intricacies of the history of the Civil Rights Movement as paralleled with the history of jazz. Many of these stories are lost to time and live only through their legacies, but in 2002, an NPR interview uncovered one of these stories in a conversation with the Mitchell-Ruff Duo, a jazz duo active around the Eastern Coast of the United States. Returning to Charles Mingus, Willie Ruff, a lecturer and professor of music at Yale University, also recalled one day in 1972, when a Yale gathering of jazz legends was interrupted by a bomb scare. "Mingus decided that he was not going to evacuate. He got on the microphone and he says, 'All y'all follow what the police say. Y'all get out. Get Duke out first, and then Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle and Cootie Williams. Get all of them out of here first,' he says, 'but I'm going to stay and I'm going to play "Sophisticated Lady."'" (Ruff, NPR). In particular, Charles Mingus' spirit was unquenchable. He had a fire for justice and was one of the most outspoken activists of his time. In fact, his temperament earned him the nickname "The Angry Man of Jazz"--Mingus would stop at nothing to see his cause reach its goals. Ruff went on to recall that Mingus was "talking all the time that the people are going out. He says, 'It's a beautiful afternoon. All my heroes are here. It's a great day to die.' Yeah, that's what he said, you know? 'It's a great day to die, and I'm staying right here.' That's protest; that's struggle music" (Ruff, NPR). Willie Ruff and Dwiki Mitchell were primarily active after the time that the Civil Rights era had seen its peak, but they were heavily involved in the struggle and had witnessed firsthand the power that the jazz artform had over the direction the movement went.

In order to clear up any semblance of ambiguity regarding whether or not the jazz artform and Civil Rights Movement were deeply intertwined, I set up a telephone interview with Professor Frederick Berry, director of the Stanford Jazz Orchestra, active jazz musician in the Bay Area, former Jazz History professor at Stanford University, and former trumpet player for the Count Basie Orchestra, Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, and many others. During the interview, Professor Berry recalled a unique personal experience he'd had while playing regularly at the Regal Theatre with Stevie Wonder in Chicago:

FB: One day, we found out that Martin Luther King was giving a speech at Soldier's Field. Now, Stevie Wonder was pretty active in the Civil Rights Movement...when he found out Dr. King was giving a speech at Soldier's Field, he called the band to the location...so we packed up, went over, and played for the rally!

JP: That must've been incredible...what was the experience like? Were there a lot of people present?

FB: Yes, Soldier's Field is a stadium, like a football stadium. There must've been thousands of people there. Now, I didn't have a personal experience meeting with Dr. King...he did come over after the speech and thank the band, though....At every one of those [Civil Rights Movement] events, there was music.

As argued by Nancy Love, Professor Berry noted that jazz, as the music birthed of struggle and adversity, was always an element of the Movement that rallied, unified, and encouraged people-- "‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’, often referred to as the Negro National Anthem," he recalled, "was a song that was commonly played at these kinds of events...it was a rallying song" (Berry). He then went on to confirm that as the Movement gained ground in the society of 1960s America, the music began to more openly reflect it. Coltrane's 'Alabama', Billy Taylor's 'Do You Know What it Means to be Free', and the work of Nina Simone, Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye, and Harry Belafonte were among the top of his list of musicians who were active in the Civil Rights Movement. Upon further research, I found that these musicians had another common denominator as well: while they were each active in their writing and speaking, they also let the movement influence their music, allowing it to shape the lyrics and tonality of many of their musical works. For example, the song "We're A Winner" (Curtis Mayfield and The Impressions), became highly popular with the NAACP and other organizations fighting in the Struggle for Black Liberation, because of its uplifting lyrics. One of the choruses of the tune reads as follows:

We're a winner

And never let anybody say

Boy, you can't make it

*'Cause a feeble mind is in your way
 No more tears do we cry
 And we have finally dried our eyes
 And we're movin' on up (movin' on up)
 Lawd have mercy
 We're movin' on up (movin' on up)*

This lyrical forward-motion was both took influence from and drove the momentum of the Movement--it is logical, then, to assume the desire for community organizers to integrate jazz into their events.

To close my interview, I invited Professor Berry to prospect on the future of jazz and its continued impact on post-Civil Rights Era movements. Though to a non-performer his answer may seem cryptic, he summed up the nature and ramifications of this artform in one phrase: “Jazz is a forum for performers to spontaneously create” (Berry). The reason why it would be difficult for non-performers and those at a lower level of performance to grasp this concept is because a high level of mastery of improvisation is required to know what it truly means to improvise. To clarify, I once attended a clinic given by Gary Burton, an international jazz vibraphone legend and master improviser. Burton defined four stages of improvisation: the first stage is one in which the musician is consciously selecting and playing each note, certifying that each note fits in the scale or chord in the progression of the tune. The second stage is one in which the performer utilizes memorized patterns, or ‘licks’, which fit the musical context. In this stage, muscle memory is heavily relied on, but creative expression is limited. The third stage is one in which the musician becomes a composer, consciously creating mature musical melodies and ideas on spot and utilizing the conventions of the first and second stage unconsciously. Finally, the fourth stage is a zen-like state in which the performer can essentially ‘watch’ his/herself improvise, creating musical ideas with little to no conscious effort. It is in this stage where the subconscious motives and emotions dictate the direction of the music--only performers who achieve this stage can exhibit their true selves through their improvisation. Why was this tangent relevant? Because the music of the Civil Rights Movement era was unprecedentedly

independent, individualized, and deeply emotional; ergo, the mindset of the musicians of this era was indubitably affected by the developments of the Civil Rights Movement. In applying this method to Professor Berry's cryptic response, we can ascertain that the jazz of the future will, in Berry's own words, "always be reflected by the times of the society: it is constantly evolving, as is our own society". To address the second part of my query, Professor Berry noted that hip-hop and rap (which are children of the jazz genre) often reflect the sentiments of modern-day movements (eg the Black Lives Matter movement) and are in turn frequently used by these movements to communicate their ideologies and mantras.

An examination of the progression of history reveals that everything is intertwined. In the case of 1900s America, when we examine the timelines of each, we can see clear correlation between the history of Civil Rights and the development of jazz. [*Appendix*, figs. 4, 5]. Activists like Max Roach, Charles Mingus, and Nina Simone had the same dream that Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned. Dr. King used his pulpit, they used their concert halls. Dr. King spoke through a microphone, they spoke through musical instruments. Jazz is an expression of longing for true liberation, an echo of the struggles of the past. The poignant melodies from Mingus' *Self Portrait in Three Colors* were not simply unfounded inspirations springing from a weekend writing session--they are an introspection into the human condition and an declaration of the need for racial equality. The jazz artform is by no means an unfounded and shallow art; it is an homage to struggle, to adversity, to hardship. But it is also more than an homage: the testimonies of its creators have revealed that, to quote Johnny Mercer, it was "An irresistible force...an immovable object", capable of directing the destiny of history itself. With this context, we can realize that whenever we spin the proverbial record, its revolutions carry a meaning that transcends that of their lyrics and musical structure: they were the bedrock, echoes, and theme song to a revolution of racial justice that redirected the course of world history and left a powerful legacy that will last for countless years to come.

Appendix

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