FREE JAZZ
A Reflection of Black Power Ideology

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Black music, like other forms of African-American expression, is a reflection of African-American life during any given period of time. The work songs and field hollers reflected the conditions of slavery. The Jubilee spirituals reflected the optimism of Reconstruction, whereas the blues reflected the uncertainty of post-Reconstruction and the depression. During the mid-1960s, a different form of music had developed that would reflect the times—it was the beginning of the Black Power movement—and the style of music was called "free jazz."

The term *free jazz* was primarily used by jazz enthusiasts, whereas the critics called it "avant-garde jazz." The musicians, who developed the music, preferred that it be called "the New Thing" or "the New Black Music." Whatever it was called, it was different than anything that had preceded it, which caused much controversy in the jazz world.

In this article, I will discuss the connection between the New Thing and the Black Power movement of the 1960s. During the Meredith March across rural Mississippi in June 1966, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Chair Stokely Carmichael revealed the new battle cry of the Civil Rights movement—replacing the strains of "We Shall Overcome" with the new slogan "Black Power." If the Harlem Renaissance was the era of "the New Negro," the Black Power movement was the era of "Black People for Black People." Carmichael and the other young activists had become disenchanted with nonviolence and with the organizations led by conservative, older leaders. The students felt that these organizations were more concerned with middle-class

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issues and that their techniques were too cautious. They also felt that Whites had taken control over the movement and Black concerns were not being addressed. Portia Maultsby (1983) says,

> Leaders of this movement encouraged the rejection of standards, values, beliefs and goals of the white society while they advocated the self-awareness or self-pride concept. The objective of the Black Power Movement as explained by Stokely Carmichael was to gain full participation in the decision-making process affecting the lives of black people. (p. 52)

William McClendon (1976) says, "As black people became more immersed in social concerns and developed greater political activism, noticeable changes began to occur in their music" (p. 23). The musicians of the New Black Music felt a close connection to the Black Power movement and felt that it was their duty "to serve as messengers who would communicate the philosophy of the Black Power Movement to the masses" (Maultsby, 1983, p. 54).

The musicians adopted many of the ideologies of the movement—one being the rejection of White-imposed identifications. The Black nationalists wanted to reestablish ties with their African heritage and formulate new cultural identities in this country. As Blacks began to look toward Africa, they began to adopt African names and to renounce the names given to them at birth. Not only did they renounce their so-called slave names but they refused to be known by the terms *colored* or *Negro*. They wanted to be known as *Black*. C. Eric Lincoln (1973) states, "The word 'Negro' was alleged [by the Nation of Islam] to be an invention of the white man designed to identify his victims better and to separate them from their Asian and African brothers" (p. xxv). The creators of the New Black Music had similar views toward the word *jazz*. The term *jazz* has been used to describe and categorize a musical style developed by African-Americans in New Orleans during the 1920s.[1] No one is quite sure of its origin, even though some believe it is an African word.[2] During the mid-1960s, the term *jazz* began to symbolize something different to the musicians. Many of the musicians rejected the term because it was a term they had not developed. Archie Shepp said, "If we continue to call our music jazz, we must continue

to be called niggers. There, at least, we know where we stand" (Wilmer, 1980, p. 23). Percussionist Max Roach (1972) said that the term *jazz* had become a word that meant abuse and exploitation of Black musicians; it had come to mean cultural prejudice and condescension:

> We must cleanse our minds of false categories which are not basic to us and which divide us rather than unite us. Regardless of what they are called, (jazz, R&B, blues, etc.) are various expressions of black music, black culture itself, the expression of Africans in the diaspora. Yet black musicians are placed in these categories . . . and they face financial success or failure depending upon their classification at a given time. (Parks, 1976, pp. 62-63)

Shepp subscribed to Roach's theory about categories. He believed that they contributed to the exploitation of the Black community. He felt that the establishment used this technique to split the Black community musically so that it would be impossible for Blacks to unite and to free themselves from the economic chains that existed in the music business (Patterson, 1973).

Lee Morgan, a trumpeter associated with the "hard bop" style, felt that the word *jazz* was frequently used to block the exposure given to the music. Some of the other musicians had different reasons for wanting to change the name of their music. Beaver Harris said, "Jazz itself is only a mixture of all the music before your time. This is the reason why I prefer calling it Black Music because this way you have all of your history to draw from" (Wilmer, 1980, p. 23). The Art Ensemble of Chicago had a similar viewpoint: "It's Great, it's Black, and it's music." They believed, "in using the term they are not only referring to that music previously designed as jazz, but to church music . . . and the drum choirs of Africa as well" (Wilmer, 1980, p. 23).

The desire to change the name of their music was not consistent with all the musicians, just as many African-Americans refused to change the name of their race from Negro to Black. Rashied Ali, one of several drummers for John Coltrane, always wanted to be a "jazz musician":

> At one time it was a very proud thing to be called a jazz musician, but it's just like how at one time to call somebody "black" in this country was a terrible insult. . . . But now if you call them any thing else but Black, then you're ready to fight! So like the name [jazz], it really doesn't matter to me. As far as I'm concerned, "jazz" is cool. It was named "jazz," now everybody talking about "I don't like that word." I really don't think it matters what you call that music because it exists and it's here. I'm not trying to rename it anything, but we do know without a doubt that it is a Black art form. . . . So if there's anything to be written about jazz, it should be stipulated that it's a Black art form. (Wilmer, 1980, p. 23)

The term *jazz* was used, by some in the music world, to emphasize the music's illegitimacy. It was considered "popular music," lacking in any artistic value. Because, if a musical form is art, then it would not be performed in the venues characteristic to the music. Jazz came to mean a music that is performed in places such as nightclubs and sleazy dives rather than in the concert halls. Some have said that the New Black Music was "antijazz" because it was very different from the styles that preceded it. It is my opinion that these musicians should have felt euphoric about the antijazz tag. If the New Black Music was not considered jazz, then maybe it could have avoided the racism that accompanied the term.

A major component of the Black Power movement dealt with economics and the control of these institutions within the Black community. The Black nationalists came to the conclusion that the capitalist system of the United States was a colonial system in which the colonized people are the Blacks. Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) state, "Exploiters come into the ghetto from the outside, bleed it dry, and leave it economically dependent on the larger society" (p. 17). They believed that Blacks should gain control of the economic institutions in their community to build a Black economic power base. This way they could avoid exploitation and control their own economic destinies.

The musicians had been aware of their colonized status for several years—working for the interest of others (such as nightclubs, record companies, booking agencies, festivals, magazines, and radio stations). Archie Shepp put it like this: "You own the

music and we make it" (Kofsky, 1970, p. 12). Most African-American musicians owned nothing but their talent.

Frank Kofsky (1970) refers to the jazz clubs as "Cockroach Capitalism." These establishments were viewed by the musicians as the "plantations of the new slavery." Shepp viewed them as "crude stables where black men are run [*sic*] until they bleed, or else are hacked up outright for Lepage's glue" (Kofsky, 1970, p. 145). The musicians of the New Black Music were tired of the owners of these establishments, the absurd working conditions, and their music being stifled artistically.

Music as art was of no concern to the club owners. They viewed the musicians and their music as a means to bring in patrons to the club. The owners made their money by requiring a minimum number of drinks per set per customer. The more sets a group played, the more drinks could be sold. The shorter the sets, the better off the owners.

The New Black Music was very much unlike the music that preceded it. The compositions tended to be elongated due to lengthy improvisations. The system of performance sets, designed by the owners (45 minutes with 15-minute breaks), were not long enough for the completion of some compositions. Buell Neidlinger, former bassist with Cecil Taylor, explains the situation:

> Trying to make a living playing with Cecil is absolutely unbelievable, because there is no economic advantage to playing music like that. . . . We'd be playing along for an hour or so and I'd get the old radio signal—the hand across the throat. Cut 'em off! Cut 'em off! (Kofsky, 1970, pp. 147-148)

Another situation in the clubs the musicians objected to was the high price of drinks. Blacks, students, artists, political radicals—who were primarily the people most interested in the New Black Music—usually could not afford the drink prices. Kofsky (1970) gives us an inside look at the workings of the system (at the New York Club Five Spot in 1966).

> There is a three-drink minimum per person per set . . . with each drink $1.20. Assuming 150 people per set and five sets a night, this

> means the owner grosses an amount equal to: $3 \times \$1.20 \times 150 \times 5 = \$2400$ in a single evening. What do the musicians take home for their night's work? It would be nice to believe that the musicians received \$500 for the night; I suspect that \$300, however, is considerably closer to the mark. Now for Termini's [Five Spot's owner] other expenses. Payroll for two bartenders, two waiters, and a cook—\$250 at most. Cost of liquor and food consumed, utilities, and rent—about \$250. Total expenses I estimate as follows:
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> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Musicians | \$300 |
> | Payroll | \$250 |
> | Other overhead | \$250 |
> | Total expenses | \$800 |
>
> Net profit = gross income – expenses = \$2400 – \$800 = \$1600 profit. (Kofsky, 1970, p. 148)

As you can see, by the above example, the major portion of the profits go unequivocally to the club owners. The musicians felt the whole system needed to be revolutionized in their favor. One of the ways in which the musicians avoided this exploitation was by refusing to play in the clubs.

The "loft jazz" movement was established as an alternative to the club scene. The movement primarily consisted of musicians playing in their lofts (oversized apartments) and charging an admission price.

> For the concerts, very little advertising is used due to the extremely limited finances at the sponsors' disposal (and the sponsors are in a great many instances the musicians themselves); one small ad placed in the *Village Voice*, and a few hand-lettered signs are posted in important places all over downtown area. But there are almost always very enthusiastic and empathetic, if not crushingly huge, audiences who respond. (Jones, 1967, p. 96)

This is reminiscent of the "rent parties" of the 1920s and 1930s.[3] This was a way for the musicians to reap the fruits of their labor, rather than the club owners. A large proportion of the audience were cultural nationalists. Larry Neal (1987), a Black writer, gives his perspective of the concerts:

> This music had a very definite, piercing, passionate sound, and for some weird reason we connected with the sound because, I guess, it was sound and abstract. We connected with it. We laid on this sound a certain kind of attitude and meaning. We said it was out of the African mode and it was revolutionary. It was formalistically revolutionary. It broke with all of the previous ways of improvisation. (p. 15)

> Everybody came to these parties, and at the parties you met all of the writers who were trying to get the thing together—the painters, the musicians coming in to hear this new music. You could run into anybody in this context. And 27 Cooper Square [LeRoi Jones's loft] was one of the places along the way where a lot of ideas took shape, a lot of discussion, a lot of listening, a lot of comraderie. (pp. 15-16)

The lofts, along with the coffee shops, became a necessity to many musicians playing the New Black Music. The number of clubs that would hire these "contempory musicians" were few. Many of the clubs that hired these musicians were being closed by the police for several different reasons.[4]

The musicians developed another means of changing their circumstances—the development of cooperatives. Organizations such as the Jazz Composers Guild, Detroit Artist Workshop, and Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians used boycotts of clubs, promoted concerts, and debilitated the club owners by presenting concerts at prices that common people (low income) could afford.

The record companies were considered another exploitive institution by the musicians. The relationship between the musicians and the companies was reminiscent of the sharecropping system developed in the South after Reconstruction. The musicians were expected, by the record companies, to pay for all production costs. If the recording made a profit, the charges were deducted from the artists' royalties; in many cases the musicians would end up owing the companies. Wilmer (1980) says, "With the leader paying for all production charges—studio hire, tapes, sidemen's fees, liner-notes, cover photographs, pressing, etc.—the company's expenditure is limited to the cost of promotion, administration and distribution" (pp. 236-237).

To go even further, the record companies were unwilling to promote and advertise the New Black Music. This music, being considered by many as "art music" or avant-garde, was not a high priority to the record companies. "The record companies [were] not prepared to put up the money to promote New Black Music, they [were] only interested in records that stand to sell a million," according to Wilmer (1980, p. 236).

Another dimension of the relationship between the musicians and the companies was that most of the musicians did not own the rights to their own music. To get their music published, they often were compelled to use the companies' publishing facilities. They would lose all rights to their compositions, except for the occasional royalties, which never amounted to much. Also, the record companies assumed all rights concerning the production of all recordings. The musicians had very little or no voice over the final production. Many times the record companies would overdub a performance of one musician with the performance of another without notification to the contracted leader of the session. This is another case, in the words of Archie Shepp, of "You own the music and we make it."

To avoid the "musical sharecropping system," those who could afford it developed their own recording and publishing companies. Organizations such as the Jazz Composers Orchestra Association (JCOA) arranged for sidemen to receive 1.5% share of the total royalties rather than only the union scale. The JCOA provided distribution services for musicians who owned their own record labels (Wilmer, 1980).

> In spite of these facilities, musicians continue to make their own tapes and sell them to any established company that can meet their price, but that such alternatives do exist, saves them from being forced into the exploitation/humiliation pattern that can confront the Black artist forced to deal with the established recording industry. (Wilmer 1980, p. 237)

Another aspect of the Black Power movement that was adopted by the musicians, was the idea of developing a "Black aesthetic." The idea of a Black aesthetic had existed for some time in the Black

literary world. According to Hoyt Fuller (1971), "The black aesthetic is a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperative of black experience" (p. 9). The primary principle behind the Black aesthetic was that only those who were empathetic to their cause could judge their works. Their "cause" was to promote Black life, Black history, and Black unity. Above all else, it was important that Blacks stop using White models and looking to them for approval. James T. Stewart (1968) says,

> The black artist must construct models which correspond to his own reality. The models must be non-white. Our models must be consistent with a black style, our natural aesthetic styles, and our moral and spiritual styles. In doing so, we will be merely following the natural demands of our culture. (p. 3)

The musicians felt jazz critics were not to be trusted because many were White and part of the music establishment. Because the revolution in music was against the musical hierarchy, the musicians knew the critics would do everything in their power to defuse the musical revolution.

The musicians were calling for complete control over their music, which would undermine the record companies' position. The record companies and the critics had, as Kofsky (1970) related it, "a peculiar relationship" in which, "what was good for the record companies was good for the critics."

> If the critic's name appears often enough in the right magazines or on the jackets of enough LP records, that establishes his legitimacy. Hence it is all the more essential to make the point explicitly that only a very small fraction of the men known as "critics" derive the major portion of their income from criticism; the remainder are, in one fashion or another, dependent for their livelihood on the recording industry. (Kofsky, 1970, p. 75)

Kofsky (1970) authenticates this claim by stating that in 1962 critics received $4 for a single record review for a major magazine, such as *Down Beat*; however, payment for a set of notes for the back

cover of an LP was around $75 (p. 76). As one can see, it would be in the best interests of the critic to censure a Black nationalist musician, who was calling for an economic revolution, by giving him a negative image in the press.

Martin Williams, famed jazz critic, wrote in *Down Beat* (June 30, 1966) about alleged "black supremacists," who encouraged "the unthinking, gut-level white racism that we should be at great pains to extirpate" (Kofsky, 1970, p. 82). Leonard Feather, world-renowned jazz critic, in *Cavalier* (December 1966), tried to convince his readers that Archie Shepp and other musicians who had the same ideology were racists. Feather implied that "(1) Shepp is a phony who plays and dresses one way in public, another way in private; (2) that his poetry is part and parcel of Shepp's efforts to 'find more work and sell more records'; and (3) that he is antiwhite" (Kofsky, 1970, p. 83).

The assault was not only on the musicians but on the music itself. Through their reviews, the critics tried to persuade listeners not to support these musicians. The critics labeled the music as raw, shrill, repulsive, and antijazz (which I submit was an honor to the musicians). The assaults were ineffective; the music attracted many followers anyhow.

Many of the critics disputed that a connection existed between the music and the movement occurring in the Black community (even though Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X spoke at several of the musicians' concerts). Those who finally became convinced that a connection existed began a campaign to convince readers that music should be "devoid of content, apolitical, divorced from all social reality" (Kofsky, 1970). Archie Shepp, one of the most vocal of the musicians, viewed the situation in a different light.

> The Negro musician is a reflection of the Negro people as a social phenomenon. His purpose ought to be to liberate America aesthetically and socially from its inhumanity. The inhumanity of the white American to the black American, as well as the inhumanity of the white American to the white American, is not basic to America and can be exorcised. I think the Negro people through the force of their struggles are the only hope of saving America, the political or cultural America. (Kofsky, 1970, p. 9)

Black writers, such as Addison Gayle, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Ron Wellburn, and others, saw it impossible to sever the connection between the music and society.

> Black culture cannot be separated from economic and political considerations; nor can black music be separated from its related creative/expressive forms. For the 1970s and beyond, the success of political, economic, and educational thrusts by the black community will depend on both an aesthetic that black artist formulate and the extent to which we are able to control our culture. (Wellburn, 1971, pp. 132-133)

The White critics, to prove their case further, enlisted the aid of Black critics who shared their point of view. The purpose of this was to give a false validity to their argument—because the critic is Black, and he perceives no connection, thus there is no connection. This "Fridayism" (as in Robinson Crusoe), a word coined by Gayle (1974), resulted from a Black critic wanting acceptance in the White world of criticism so badly that he would say or do anything asked of him to fit in, even if it resulted in him betraying his own kind.

> Once Crusoe and his brood [White critics] are attacked, from whatever source, the Fridays salivate in college journals, the *New York Times* Book Review, badly written books on Black authors, and public forums. They have concluded recently that the greatest threat to Crusoe comes from Black Nationalists . . . they have rushed to his defense. Their line of defense is varied and concerted, including not only the Black cultural movement, but the political and social movements as well, and their objective . . . is to return Black people to the romantic, myopic era of the "We shall overcome" years and "integration now." (Gayle, 1974, p. 33)

In fairness to the critics, sometimes they were repressed by the magazines they worked for. The magazines knew the probability of losing advertisers if they appeared sympathetic to a militant group of musicians. The editors' responsibility was to keep possibly inflammatory material out of the magazine.[5]

The New Thing of the 1960s has become an accepted form of jazz in the 1990s. Musicians like John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman,

and Cecil Taylor are now considered the masters of the art form. Their music, which was supposed to be the music for the "Black Revolution," never became widely accepted in the Black community. The music's lack of appeal to the Black community might be contributed to the music's abstractness or its lack of a steady pulse.

Ethnomusicologist Dr. Billy Taylor says, "Many musicians were experimenting with abstract techniques and they played music that was not accessible" (Marshall, 1988, p. 98). Jazz stylist Betty Carter subscribes to Taylor's theory. She believes the New Black Music contributed to the Black community abandoning all forms of jazz.

> Some of the music turned off Black listeners, because it had no beat or pulse. But this is what Black people love: to pat their feet and move their heads. I can't blame this [the movement away from jazz] on the audience. I blame it on the music, which didn't have any Black rhythms. We had people thinking they had to be intellectuals to understand the music. (Marshall, 1988, p. 98)

Two comments on Carter's statement: (a) As for the music not containing any "Black rhythms": Because of its polyrhythmic nature, this music was closer to the African tradition than any other forms of African-American music. The audience's ears had been corrupted by the European influence in other forms of African-American music. (b) The statement "We had people thinking they had to be intellectuals to understand the music" is ironic, because it was the intelligentsia who was drawn to the music—especially college-educated, White males. Thus there is some validity to Carter's argument.

Karl Marx (1859/1970) said, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (p. 21). African-Americans, through their music, have been proving this throughout their existence in this country.

For over 300 years, African-American society has been reflected in African-American music. From the field hollers, work songs, and sorrow songs of slavery through rap music of today, African-Americans have expressed their feelings of sorrow, hope, anger, and joy.

They have used their music to protest their place in society and to promote change. We can hear it in the lyrics, through vocal expression, through the way a note is played, and even through the actions of the musicians. As long as African-Americans continue to make music, they will continue to reflect their place in American society and a desire for change.

NOTES

1. Valerie Wilmer (1980) in *As Serious as Your Life* says,

> As far as most recent sources are concerned, the word is indelibly associated with usage in the turn-of-the-century New Orleans . . . as a colloquialism for sexual intercourse. It is, therefore, apparent that it was used by whites to identify a music of the Black subculture which was a world to which they could only relate to in senual terms. (p. 22)

2. Wilmer (1980) also states,

> It is generally accepted among etymologists that the word "jazz" is African although its exact origin is unknown. It may well have come from Wolof—the language spoken by some coastal people of Senegal, Gambia and Guinea who were among those who acted as slave dealers. (p. 22)

3. Many Southern African-Americans who moved North during the "Great Migration" of the 1920s found no employment. Rent parties were a method of raising rent money through having a party and charging money for admission. Food and beverages were sold on the premises, and entertainment was provided.

4. See LeRoi Jones's (1977) *Black Music* (pp. 92-98).

5. Frank Kofsky (1970, pp. 87-89) mentions an incident between *Down Beat* and Ralph Gleason in 1960. Gleason wrote a column drawing a favorable comparison between the political winds of change, as represented by Fidel Castro, and the musical ones, as represented by Ornette Coleman and others. The word came down to Gleason from the management: "No Commie shit!" Gleason was later forced to resign because of censorship.

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