



The "Blues Aesthetic" and the "Black Aesthetic": Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture

Author(s): Amiri Baraka

Source: *Black Music Research Journal*, Autumn, 1991, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 101-109

Published by: Center for Black Music Research - Columbia College Chicago and University of Illinois Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/779261>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of Illinois Press and are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Black Music Research Journal*

THE "BLUES AESTHETIC" AND THE "BLACK AESTHETIC": AESTHETICS AS THE CONTINUING POLITICAL HISTORY OF A CULTURE

AMIRI BARAKA

The term "Blues Aesthetic," which has been put forward by certain academics recently, is useful only if it is not depoliticization of reference. So we can claim an aesthetic for Blues, but at the same time, disconnect the historical continuum of the Blues from its national and international source, the lives and history of the African, Pan-African, and specifically Afro-American people.

The Blues Aesthetic is one aspect of the overall African-American aesthetic. This seems obvious because the Blues is one vector expressing the material historical and psychological source.

Culture is the result of a "common psychological development." But the common psychological development is based on experiencing common material conditions which are defined, ultimately, politically and economically.

The African-American culture comes to exist as the living historical experience and development of the African-American people, a Western hemisphere people [!] whose history and heritage are African and The Americas.

By the nineteenth century, this new people had become consolidated, and "Back to Africa" no longer represented the escape of captives and was replaced by either the psychological and political *submission* of a small sector of that people or the mass mainstream ideology of "Stay and Fight."

The Blues arises as a late nineteenth-century/early twentieth-century secular thrust of the African-American musical culture, whose oldest musical and lyrical heritage was Africa but whose changing contemporary expression summed up their lives and history in the West!

AMIRI BARAKA is a writer, teacher, and political activist. His best-known works include *Blues People* (William Morrow, 1963) and *The Dutchman and the Slave, Two Plays* (William Morrow, 1963). *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991) is his most recent publication.

The Blues reflects earlier developments of an African-American speech and continuing musical experience now given new forms as reflection of the post-Civil War African-American culture that was no longer limited as severely to religious reference or the social restraints of slavery.

The Blues is secular; it is also post-chattel slavery. The drumless African choir sound of the Sorrow Songs (much like Ladysmith Black Mambazo) gives way to a sassier—actually “more” African and more contemporary—American. The later gospel style reflects this as well.

By the nineteenth century the diverse Africans had become African Americans and the Blues, from spiritual and work song, through hollers and shouts and arhoolies, jumped out to celebrate black entrance into a less repressive, less specialized world—less harsh, more uncertain, but still tragic and depriving in too many ways.

The Blues as a verse and musical form is one thing, but what needs to be gotten to here is the whole, the aesthetic overview, the cultural matrix that the Blues is but one expression of. Particularly, the Blues is African-American secular—country or city. The former is older, relating even to chattel slave society. The various city and other urban forms reflect that social and historical motion: black people first moving from plantations to southern cities from the Civil War on and then by the late 1880s beginning to go up north, fleeing the destroyed reconstruction, the KKK, and looking for the new world.

The Blues Aesthetic must emotionally and historically carry the heart and soul of the African antiquity, but it is also a *Western Aesthetic*, i.e., expressing a western people, though an African-American one. (Finally, Europe is *not* the West, the Americas are! Head west from Europe you come to Jersey! West of the Americas is the East!)

So the Blues itself must express the human revelation of life outside, or “post” the plantation—though I guess we ain’t got very much “post” that bad boy yet! It is regional, or southern, or urban, etc. Its instrumentation changes to reflect the level of the people’s productive forces and the social, political, and economic structure of those peoples’ lives.

But that is the particularized yet constantly altering changing form of the Blues qua blues. Yet it is deeper and older than itself as this self.

If we study Equiano, Du Bois, Douglass, Diop, Robert Thompson, and LeRoi Jones we will see that the single yet endlessly diverse African cultural matrix is the basis not only of what’s called the Blues Aesthetic, but any Black Aesthetic.

First, the Africans are the oldest humans on the planet and all aesthetics on the planet, relating to human society, must use them at least as a point of departure!

Even the European so-called "Apollonian" aesthetic mode (formalism and restraint) that characterized the Athenian Attic culture is so significant because it emerges only in contradiction to the older, once world-dominating "Dionysian" (expressionist, emotion-characterized humanistic) philosophical and aesthetic mode.

It is a redivision of human sensibilities and priorities as epoch creating as the flood that divided the world as the Mediterranean. We are still dominated by those tribes that emerged north of this biblically referenced waterway.

In capsule, the African Aesthetic, in its seemingly most ancient projection, first is an expression of the Animist world view of our earliest ancestors. That is, to the classic African sensibility, everything in the world was alive, but even more important, everything that exists (as present—because both the past and the future only exist in the present and as speculative continuum of the is—the African "Goddess" Is/Is) is part of, connected as, the same thing!

Everything is one thing, one living thing. In this case you can see how even so-called Monotheism is like "Rock & Roll" (my term for the Bourgeois culture north of the middle of the world). The idea of "One God" is already jive decrepitude of the philosophy of the antiquity. It is not "One God," as opposed to many, the qualification for savagery—but that every thing is one—All is All—everything is everything! Allah means literally All-everything is part of the same thing. Like the donut and the hole are both space!

So the continuity, the endlessness, the myriad multiformed expressiveness of "The One"—what is . is/is.

The continuity of even later African religion carried a fundamental relationship as in its continuing call and response form. That is Priest to Congregation. The one and the many are one thing. Like the heart-beat—beating is sound and not sound (where *be* is *at*—at least now then, when) they are not disconnectable as existent.

Evidence, Monk says (scat) the African celebrates. His life is meant, consciously, as evidence—it is in that sense *material*. (E.g., natural evidence—like it is, rather than artifacts, i.e., formalism.) Everything is in it, can be used, is then, *equal*—reflecting the earliest economic and social form, *communalism*.

Above the Mediterranean what it *looked like* was more important than what it was or what it did. In the Southern Cradle what it did, its practice, its *content* was principal.

The African religion (see Du Bois on "The Sorrow Songs" and "The Faith of the Fathers" in the *SOFB*) had Priest and Congregation as Call and Response ("Two is One" says Monk and Marx) . . . Dialectical character of what is, negation of the negation, the unity of opposites. The religion must also have music, since "The spirit could not descend without song."

Spirit is literally *breath* as in in/spire or ex. Where you aspire is where you (go be at) headed, like the church spire. No breath No life. But the drum replicating the first human instrument keeps life, the sun replicating itself inside us. Its beat. Night and Day. In and out, the breath. Coming and Going, the everything. The Pulse, the flow, the rhythm carrier. (Time is formal, it is the reverse of expressionist sensibility, i.e., "emit" vs. "time.")

So, as Du Bois explains, Priest, Congregation, Music; which brings the Spirit down (from where? the soul is the invisible influence of the Solar—what life means, the smallest I, the largest Eye).

It is the *Frenzy*, the soul possession, that the African thought scientifically as a result of historical cultural perception, rationale, and use, the re-combining of the *two* (the single with the all), the atonement, the Gettin' Happy, which is the music's *use*. A way into consciousness of the whole, transcending the partial understanding of the single self.

The ecstasy is the being, the is/life. So jazz is *jism*, come music, creating music. Coming is the spiritual presence of the all-existent one focused, we can see, inhaling.

The northern aesthetic has never assimilated sexuality, to it sex is dirty or embarrassing. But the sexual experience is as explicit a reflection of the One is Two dialectic as well. This is also a reflection of the overthrow of Mother right (the matrilineal social relations of ancient Africa) and the enslaving of women. The anti-woman character of the northern cradle, whether Salem witch burning (specifically to totally eliminate Dionysian survivals) or anti-ERA, is historically consistent.

So the revelation, the "going out" quality of African-American culture as music or anything else is constant and evident—from religion to social relations.

The polyrhythms of African music are a further reflection of this animist base of the culture. But not only music, the clothes, body or hair adornment, graphic or verbal arts of the people, as a consistent means

of characterizing the Pan-African culture and its international significance.

The bright colors of the Pan-African culture are reflection of those same polyrhythms. Acknowledgement of several levels or sectors or "places" of life *existing simultaneously*.

So the historically traceable *Cosmopolitanism* of the African people. Open and welcoming, intrigued by diversity and the "other." Ironically, in this sense, Diop points out the essentially non-African essence of Nationalism. Again, the recognition of all as All—everything is everything.

The attempt to denigrate Pan-African people with the stereotypes of racialism by claiming that the only things Pan-Africans can do is sing and dance—O.K. with me—just let us be in charge of it! (How many people can we house and educate just with Michael J's 93 million albums sold?) Equiano points out in his narrative, "We are almost a nation of singers and dancers." The socialization of the people was song and dance. As expressions of being. On all occasions. (Like America's stereotype as sports fans.) The Africans were socialized around song and dance and the participation, contribution by everyone in that. Art itself was a collective and communal expression. It was also functional and social.

Even the Blue, the color, from our own proto-Krishna faces, so black they blue. Diop says people in Southern India are the blackest people on the planet—like Krishna they blue. But also Equiano tells us that "Blue"—that beautiful Guinea Blue—was "our favorite color."

The Italians, though dark, don't like to be called Black Slaves. We, of course, are the *real* Guineas, our head was on the English gold coin of that name gotten from the old "Gold" or Guinea Coast.

The Blues as the expression of sorrow should be obvious—a reference to our sad African slave lives here as well. It is also, after Black Mama Is/night a sign that the sun gonna be at our door directly. So a poem of mine says, "Blues came/even before Day/Got here."

So the Blues Aesthetic is not only historical and carrying all the qualities that characterize the African-American people, but social in the same way. It must be how and what black life is and how it reflects on itself. It is style and form but it is the continuum of the content—the ideas, the feelings' articulation—that is critical as well as the how of the form. Yet form and content are expressions of each other.

As verse form, the typical AAB Blues form is, by its structure and dynamic, given to emphasis (repeated first lines) as well as change and balance (the new rhyme line, the AA BB rhyme scheme).

The flatted thirds and fifths, the slurs or bending of notes of singer or instrumentalist, is from the antiquity of Kamite cultural character and summation of reality. KAM or HAM means change (the changes, the chemistry—the Chemists or Kamists); Hamites were the first chemists. The change from one quality or element to another. The dialectic of life itself. One is two, as Lenin said, explaining the dialectic in *The Philosophical Notebooks*. Everything is itself and something else at the same time, i.e., what it is becoming.

Twelve bars are the four quarters of the 360 (4 arcs, i.e., seasons) of the trinity—past-present-future—the pyramid of dimension and motion itself, rhythm *not* time—dancing, *not* those Arthur Murray footprints which is advertising, finally, and money, not dancing at all.

And the Blues is not even 12 necessarily; the insistence on that form is formalism (as say Martin Smithsonian is guilty of when he says that Billie Holiday wasn't a Blues singer because her songs weren't 12 bars!).

But Blues is first a feeling, a sense—knowledge. A being not a theory—the feeling is the form and vice versa.

John Coltrane could turn Julie Andrews's "My Favorite Things" into our real lives. The CAMIST—going through changes—rhythm & changes and rhythm and blues—about feeling, not counting. (Goin' through Changes is the Blues.)

Roll over, Beethoven, we cry, and relate it to us over and under any way. We blues or jazz up, syncopate any and every. We are incumaters and syncopaters. One is Two. One Breaks into Two.

The black woman is everyone's mother and the domesticater of the human being from the animal, the black man is the second domesticated animal. His wife done it!

The key to the distortion of the so-called xtian trinity is there is no woman in it, so it is a cross sign. The ankh in-dicates. The head and nuts are missing from the Christian cross, hence neither reproduction nor creativity—a death sign.

So the northern culture hangs on to the memory of the old blue black church with fragments of the Black Madonna. But Roman church is rock and roll. Jesus (Jesse-I am) evolves (Christ) crosses to higher ground, re-birth or continuum of human development.

I am hip is what Jesus Christ means—I am become Hip. As Fred said, "No progress without struggle." It is not the flattened distortion of Betty Wright and Negro politicians "No pain no gain." It is not *pain* indicated but *struggle*. As in "the sun's gonna shine in my back door one day."

The past (black night's your mother) is also the future (What is nigh is coming—Eve before Am). The Present was here before it was the past and after it was the future.

The world is a tragedy, i.e., it is a carrying, the weight, the changes—not time, rhythm, not counting, feeling.

Any and Every—All are related as the *one*, part of a whole, whole of a part. The hole and what goes in and out, the creatingingining (as it was in the beginning and ever shall be, world without end, etc.). What is *funky* is history, what comes goes.

The Blues is the first come from Black—Red, the last, going out to re-come. The cycle the circle. The Red what reading did re-adding re-producing revolution, red, old going out into black and coming black through blue Mood Indigo.

So blues is the past, the blown all what got blew; the expressive, i.e., the blowing; the loss, the blown, the blowing. The known gone, the unknown coming all the non time.

We are sad about what was that is not and about what is that should not. And we are glad just to be feeling. G the name of expression, La the sixth birth, joy, the reaffirmation and are, is out, is Dee, is worth what everything exists as a whole, holy.

Being and Changes Coming and Going Happy and Sad. It is life's feeling, and the rising restay of revelation, evolution, raise on up, rah rah rah we say to our sol above and first cheer leader Rah Rah Rah alive is holy the consciousness which ultimately combines KNOW & HOW is Conscience (raised consciousness) perception, rationale, use, as Mao laid out explicating the Marxist theory of knowledge.

Love ultimately we feel (the upgrading of the fuck mode—Anglo-Saxon word "fuck" means to hit, imagine then what "fucked up," i.e., pregnant, implies for this culture). Love is the necessity even as sex for our continuation. When Love is the Law and The Consciousness—The Holy Family will be what it is anyway like Every thing is Everything.

The Holy Family of human world, not exclusive but inclusive, no separation, e.g., form and content or form and feeling. Hamlet is the northern opposite, to be or not—the liberal—not even sure life is worth while.

We seek Wholeness. Atonement.

Not Nietzsche saying feeling made it hard for him to think. For us what cannot feel cannot think. They say Dr. J, Magic, Michael Air are "instinctive." Boston Larry B, etc., intelligent. The highest intelligence is dancing, not the Arthur Murray footsteps advertising! The highest thought is a doing, a being, not an abstraction.

Hence the *improvised*, the spontaneous, the intuitive, the felt are so valued, like the B line AAB—that rising B is the recognition of form but the primacy of content, Be. Like the revealed ecstasy of the congregation, enraptured, gettin' happy, funky, high, moved, what is and what will, what was . . . is where we coming from, our story, our tail just like that snake crawling into its own mouth.

Calling our selves tale we can admit of no "Blues Aesthetic" that tried to hide from the politics of wholeness like the recent retrograde trend of Buppie/Yuppie trying to cop the "style" of Black without the substance, struggle, the changes. As Fred said, "they want the sea without its awful roar." And for the Negro who is using this to sidestep the politics of liberation for the economic and social advancement of the Pimp. The people who make the authentic Blues *have* the blues, it is not something out of a school book, the vicious and laid-back pimps of dawning compradorism can tout to enrichen without endarkening.

It is black life historically, politically, and socially, the form and content of the Blues, as Langston says, the *signifying* is what revealed us as higher forms of animal, and yet as we were the *first* to raise up off all fours, it appears humanity is still some ways off. But without the signification, the meaning, the tale to swing, the story of the seeds, where we come from and where we going loses its significance. The signification is what makes the monkey, man. Remove the words (past, pass that baton runner, run it, beat it out on wood or skin, even your own, rapper) the signs Breath and Change and everything is a design without a key the Man Key he opened it up.

There is a current retrograde trend of black artists who see black life as caricature; there is another part of the same trend, the so-called "new black aesthetic," which tries to disconnect black art from black life and make it simply "a style" (e.g., the *Village Voice* coven of young Negroes [*sic*]), but this is certainly not the mainstream currently or the real world, just as any so-called blues aesthetic would necessarily be, as well.

Held in the forms and content of the black aesthetic, in any of its cultural or historical elements, there is the will, the desire, the evoked "name" of *freedom*. What Monk was talking about. Freedom! Bird. Trane. On Higher Ground. Duke. Count. Lady. Sassy. Bessie. Monk, etc., etc.

The retrograde Bup/Yup trend can't handle the African-American Aesthetic because it signifies, it "talks shit" from Rap (Brown) to Rap (Black), from Fred to Big Red. The Black Aesthetic, as communal, revelational and ecstatic, expressionistic, content focused, first signifier, sig-

nifies freedom (new life, revelation, evolution, revolution) always. Songs, dances, clothes. Freedom Now, Freedom Suite, Free Jazz!, etc., etc. Asked about jazz, Monk said, "It's about Freedom, more than that is complicated."

It cannot be an authentic reflection of the main thrust of the African-American aesthetic without dealing with the Question of Freedom. As person or as part of the One.

Its Afro-American symbols contain the freedom expression whether Brer Rabbit, who *lay on symbol* and got over through guile (showing in American culture as Bugs Bunny) or the other side of the dialectic, e.g., Stagolee or John Henry or Jimmy Brown, who dealt with force and power. Our history is full of such dialectically contradictory heroes and heroines.

To depoliticize the African-American Aesthetic is to disconnect it from the real lives of the Afro-American people and instead make an offering to the seizers, that is—we must understand that not only our history aesthetically is contradictory to the so-called northern cradle, but certainly as slaves and now an oppressed nation, the slave/slave master contradiction is the most serious of all.

Without the dissent, the struggle, the outside of the inside, the aesthetic is neither genuinely Black nor Blue—but the aesthetic of submission—whether for pay or out of ignorance or ideological turpitude.

Blues People Addenda

Actually, in deepening an understanding of American culture (really Pan-American culture), Bruce Franklin's observation "African-American culture is central to American culture not peripheral to it" is a key element. When I talked (in *Blues People*) about surviving Africanisms in Afro-American culture, I did not take into consideration that *American culture itself* is historically partially constructed of continuing and thematic Africanisms!