How do Afro-American Musical Practices Apply to the Music of Jon Batiste?

An attempt at examining how Jon Batiste relates to other famous jazz musicians and utilizes musical elements in his music to create social music.

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Introduction

Jon Batiste is a famous and talented musician, singer, composer, and educator who grew up in Kenner, Louisiana. Probably most known by today's generation from his work in Disney and Pixar's movie Soul, Jon Batiste has played a crucial role in spreading a positive message with social music. His family, most notably a distant relative of his, Alvin Batiste, has played a large part in influencing the jazz community. In order to understand Jon Batiste's implementation of signifyin' and how his upbringing influences his music, we first need to understand the testimonies of famous jazz musicians and understand the musical background of New Orleans. This essay will attempt to explore how Jon Batiste's musical techniques and decisions are influenced by jazz and also how he as an artist relates to other famous jazz musicians.

Echo of Ellington

"If we look in it [a limpid mirror], what we see is the reflection of ourselves, just as we thought we looked…we suddenly realize that just below our mirror, there is another reflection that is not quite so clear, and not quite what we expected…there is still another mirror reflecting another of our selves, and more" (Ellington 1973: 35-36).

The multiple selves that Ellington refers to is the different personas that people have in his case being a critic, performer, composer, listener, etc. The existence of multiple selves causes

you to observe and think about things from a different point of view which in many cases causes self-reflection and a constant desire for improvement. Jon Batiste mentions some semblance of this in his interview with Lizzy Watson, an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) staff attorney. Given the many social and political events that have occurred from 2020 to today such as: the death of George Floyd, protests over racial injustice, and the United States leaving Afghanistan, it prompts for the ACLU to get an insight on how others feel about current events before and after the height of the pandemic. A clear example of Batiste and Ellington sharing the same viewpoints can be seen in the following excerpts:

"Q. What are your major interests?"
"A. Well, I live in the realm of art and have no monetary interests."
"Q. What do you think of people who have monetary interests?"
"A. I doubt whether art could survive if business and such people did not subsidize it in some form. I do not concern myself with other people's business, because I have enough problems of my own." (Ellington 1973: 36)

"...if you look before we sold music and it was a part of this ecosystem of business, there were many hundreds of years, thousands of years of music used in community use as part of spiritual practice and used as something to transform and translate every generation, translating wisdom and transforming as time goes on." (Batiste 2022: 20:28-20:40)

Indeed, noted singer and folklorist Bessie Jones explains how games that involved both music and dance were used to pass down morals and stories of the past to different generations.

“Pa taught me a lot of riddles and a lot of stories about what happened in slavery to different ones, and some of it was fun and some of it was sad.” (Jones 1983: 61)

Ellington and Batiste share the recognition of the intersection of art and commerce when it comes to music. In Batiste’s excerpt, the subsidizing of music could be people using it “as part of spiritual practice and used as something to transform”. Looking at Ellington’s answer from a simpler perspective, he is essentially saying that art could not survive if people did not find meaning or use in it. From this perspective, I think both Batiste and Ellington would come to agree that the purpose of music is not for monetary gain but for expression, relatability, and most importantly, for the people. Both artists express making music as a responsibility they have for the people.

“Q. Well, do you ever get tired of playing those old perennials night after night?”

“A. No, this is a responsibility we owe the people” (Ellington 1973: 42).

The concept of using the intent of music as something that is owed to the people is a concept that shares many similarities with social music.

Social Music

Sidney Bechet, a famous saxophone jazz musician, elaborates upon social music. In the last chapter of Sidney Bechet’s *Treat it Gentle*, he talks about music being second and business being first. “The men who are doing the business part of the *presenting*, they won’t let the music be” (Bechet 1960: 210). “He gets up there to play, but they won’t let him be a musicianer: they haven’t got him up there to be a musicianer, he’s an *attraction*” (Bechet 1960: 212).

It's important to note that Bechet, Ellington, and Batiste share these same views. Although Batiste also shares these views, he has a slightly different approach as to how his social music is made.

Social music has many different meanings and interpretations depending on the musician that makes the music. The best way to describe social music is music that is decentralized from commerce and goes back to its purest form…for the people and away from commerce and the industry. The concept of social music goes as far back as the creation of music but in this case it's important to limit the scope to understand the origins of social music in jazz.

[Insert audio clip of I Need You]

Jon Batiste has utilized musical elements such as the walking bassline, harmony, call and response, and dialect to convey messages through social music. Jon Batiste's *I Need You* utilizes both musical and lyrical aspects to bring people together. He explains this in his music documentary clip and says [insert other video here].

The musical practices Batiste mentioned have been utilized many years prior as Frederick Douglass recalls "The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirits, and filled my heart with ineffable sadness…they dance and sing, and make all manner of joyful noises–so they do; but it is a great mistake to suppose them happy because they sing." (Douglass 1855: 84). This is his reaction to blue notes and bent notes that many slaves would utilize when singing on plantations or for their owners. Batiste also references the barn dances which very well echo

characteristics of the Ring Shout, a tradition in which people gathered in a circle and would dance and sing. As Samuel Floyd, a Black Music Researcher describes the Ring Shout practice:

"These included elements of the calls, cries, and hollers; call-and-response devices; additive rhythms and polyrhythms, heterophony, pendular thirds, blue notes, bent notes, and elisions; hums, moans, grunts, vocables, and other rhythmic-oral declamations, interjections, and punctuations; off-beat melodic phrasings and parallel intervals and chords; constant repetition of rhythmic and melodic figures and phrases (from which riffs and vamps would be derived); timbral distortions of various kinds; music individuality within collectivity; game-rivalry; hand-clapping, foot-patting…underlies all Afro-American music" (Floyd 2002: 51-52).

Oftentimes in the ring shout and in many practices regarding Afro-American music, musicians would signify as a method to create duality in meanings and convey messages with different metaphors, tones, pitch bending, etc. Floyd describes signifyin' as: "figurative, implicative speech; it is a complex rhetorical device that requires the possession and application of appropriate modes of interpretation and understanding on the part of listeners" (Floyd 2002: 54).

One of the characteristics that makes Batiste's social music is also the lyrics. In his music, he takes a straightforward approach in what he has to say.

"[Pre-Chorus]
In this world with a lot of problems
All we need it a little loving

Thank you, thank you, oh, you make me

Thank you, thank you for your love

[Chorus]

We done a lot of living

We working overtime…" (Batiste 0:42-1:00).

Batiste's approach differs from the signifyin' nature of music that used to be heard on plantations as Douglass describes the singing of:

"'O Canaan, sweet Canaan,

I am bound for the land of Canaan,'

something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the *north*–and the north was our Canaan.

'I thought I heard them say,

There were lions in the way,

I don't expect to stay

Much longer here.

Run to Jesus—shun the danger—

I don't expect to stay

Much longer here,'

…

In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but, in the lips of *our* company, it simply meant a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery" (Douglass 1855: 87).

The main difference between both sets of lyrics is that Batiste's lyrics do not have as many hidden meanings or metaphors— it's direct; whereas slaves on plantations had to find ways to interject messages and duality into their music because it was the only way they could communicate in regards to freedom and hope. The messages and duality of the slaves' music is them *signifyin'* on the lyrics which meant different things to different people. In other words, if you were not in on the true meaning of the lyrics, you would not have been able to decipher the message.

On the other hand, Batiste's message is direct because he is writing the music directly to the people. He is not worried about the restrictions of trying to make music of a certain genre. He does not try to cater to a specific genre. "It's not about genre; it's about the intent of the music" (Mandel 2013: 22). He also is not worried about the influence and pressure from record labels, nor monetary interests. Batiste's lack of metaphors and his intentionality of being direct *is* signifyin' on its own because he is recognizing and expressing that he does not have to succumb to industry standards and that he has a decentralized and liberated view of music.

Miles Davis' Social Music

Another musician who utilized social music was Miles Davis. He utilized his influence and music to advocate for equity and equality in regards to paying musicians and royalties.

"...but Davis did what he could to advance the call for freedom for black people…Davis tried to point the way to a fairer jazz, or social musical environment, where black jazz musicians were paid equitably for their recordings and other artistic endeavors. This is to say that Davis advocated for *profit sharing* for exploited jazz musicians" (Bracey 2021: 54).

Miles Davis also used his music as a symbol of defiance and activism for the civil rights movements. "...at the height of the civil right movement, 'it [the Lincoln Day Concert in February 12, 1964] was a fundraiser to benefit projects of the voter Education Project in Louisiana and Mississippi'" (Bracey 2021: 52).

Battle Hymn of the Republic (Original)

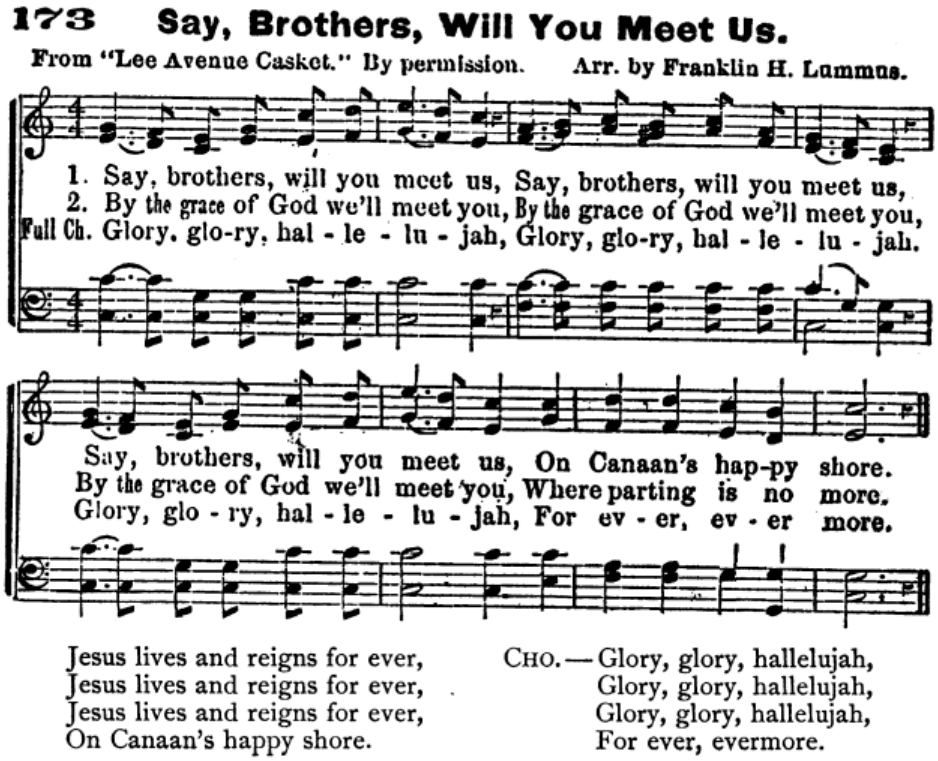
Social music was also used for the civil rights movement by the abolitionist writer Julia Ward Howe. Known for writing the lyrics for *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, Howe drew inspiration from *John Brown's Body* which drew inspiration from *Say, Brother, Will You Meet Us*. "By the time of the Civil War 'John Brown's Body' had become a very popular marching song with Union Army regiments" (Library of Congress 2002).

[Insert audio of Say Brothers, Will You Meet Us?]

[Insert audio of John Brown's Body]

[Insert audio of Battle Hymn of the Republic]

Listening to all three songs above, it is evident that they share the same melody and all have other musical elements in common that portray the patriotic nature of the song. Because of this, it became very popular and influential in regards to people's rights and activism towards equity and equality.



173 Say, Brothers, Will You Meet Us.

From "Lee Avenue Casket." By permission. Arr. by Franklin H. Lummus.

1. Say, brothers, will you meet us, Say, brothers, will you meet us,
2. By the grace of God we'll meet you, By the grace of God we'll meet you,

Full Ch. Glory, glo-ry, hal - le - lu - jah, Glory, glo-ry, hal - le - lu - jah.

Say, brothers, will you meet us, On Canaan's hap-py shore.
By the grace of God we'll meet you, Where parting is no more.
Glory, glo - ry, hal - le - lu - jah, For ev - er, ev - er more.

Jesus lives and reigns for ever,
Jesus lives and reigns for ever,
Jesus lives and reigns for ever,
On Canaan's happy shore.

CHO. — Glory, glory, hallelujah,
Glory, glory, hallelujah,
Glory, glory, hallelujah,
For ever, evermore.

As seen in the sheet music above, the lyrics reference "Canaan's happy shore" and we know from Douglass' testimony mentioned prior that Canaan was another way of representing the north. Once again, the act of signifyin' on words and the duality of meanings can be seen. In the revised and actual lyrics of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, the lyrics have changed to maintain the religious and spiritual aspect as before and make many biblical allusions.

Batiste's Battle Hymn of the Republic

In 2017, The Atlantic, the American magazine publisher asked Batiste to reimagine the piece for it to be used as their podcast theme song. Batiste mentions that he purposely added voice wails and other musical elements to represent the hardships and struggle of the people of the nation.

"...rendered with some dissonant notes and vocal wailing to add a hint of anguish. That is the sound of our struggle" (Batiste 2017).

Furthermore, Batiste recognizes that freedom is never a constant guarantee and unfortunately is always something that people will be fighting for. "Freedom is a constant struggle. It's a constant fight." (Batiste 2022: 8:19-10:57)

Yet, he also finds other ways to convey unity simultaneously.

"The United States itself is a melting pot of influences and cultures harmoniously coexisting under one umbrella, just as many musical styles can harmoniously coexist in one song. So I reimagined the "Battle Hymn" using just one instrument–the piano–to represent our one nation…" (Batiste 2017)

Conclusion

Evidently, Jon Batiste's music has drawn inspiration from many different points throughout history, cultures, practices, etc. His upbringing in the melting pot of the United States and the extremely musically, culturally, and historically diverse area of Louisiana has given him many different perspectives on music and its purpose. Additionally, the extensive influence of the Batiste lineage and the influence of many famous jazz musicians as mentioned above, have

given him a unique view on how to create his own social music and convey a message. Batiste has shown that Afro-American musical practices are interwoven into society in many different ways. He shows that the very improvisational nature of jazz allows for it to be the perfect carrier for social music which is why jazz as a genre is very diverse and has many subgenres within it.

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