Exploitation, sexism, and oppression in jazz through art and commerce

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"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).

Here, Ellington describes how people have multiple selves and a layer of masks that they choose to put on. The idea of these masks alone have many implications on signifyin' and what it means to be a musician. For example, is a musician playing as a form of self-expression or are they playing as a means to make money? In other words, is a musician an artist or are they a businessperson? To understand the role of art and commerce in exploitation, it is important to first understand that the answers to both questions are not binary. The intersection between art and commerce is a gray area and the lines between both blur into one another.

In Ellington's self interview, he says:

"Q: What are your major interests?"

"A: Well, I live in the realm of art and have no monetary interests" (Ellington 1973: 36).

This gives a glimpse into Ellington's view on art and commerce…he has a binary point of view that is most focused on the performance side and not commerce. Many musicians at this time shared this perspective which made it easy for publishers to take advantage of them due to a lack of commercial knowledge. However, Ellington's claim that he also shared this perspective might not be entirely true. Ellington was a very successful businessman as Britannica says "Ellington led his band for more than half a century, composed thousands of scores, and created one of the most distinctive ensemble sounds in all of Western music." So what does he mean when he says he has no monetary interests? Perhaps during this interview, Ellington could be asking the questions as one of his selves and answering them as a different self.

One of the things many street musicians agree upon is that you have to feed yourself with your horn. Essentially, you have to make a living by performing. Looking at street performers' performances from this perspective, it might seem as if they are performing as a means of commerce and not as a means of signifyin'. On the other hand, considering that many street performers perform selflessly – playing regardless of their earnings – it might seem as if they are performing as a means of expression and not commerce. Ellington's idea of multiple reflections/masks provides a great answer to understanding the intersection of art and commerce. Both art and commerce co-exist in the same way that a musician simultaneously wears multiple masks. A musician plays to express themselves and because their performances are in-demand, commerce happens to be a byproduct of their art. An example of this can be seen in a portion of the selection The Big Apple from Ellington's autobiographical *Music is my Mistress*. Ellington recounts a time where he writes a show, sells it to publisher Jack Robbins for five hundred dollars, and Jack Robbins becomes a millionaire off of Ellington's music (Ellington 1973: 33-34). Another similar experience can be seen in the Basie reading where Basie recalls a time

where he agreed to record twelve records a year for $750 a year. Hammond later informs Basie about how bad the contract was and works out a better deal (Basie 1985: 141-142). These are just a few examples in which the lack of clear copyright laws and royalties made it possible for black musicians to be taken advantage of. However, the exploitation was not only prevalent in the commerce side, but it was also occurring within bands. Holiday elaborates on her pay when in the Basie band: "And I knew what a hassle it was to keep your foot out of your mouth on the road on the salary that chick was making" (Holiday 1956: 147). The gender wage gap was still an issue and women were heavily stereotyped.

Women were also taken advantage of and heavily discriminated against because of the stereotypes in regards to their appearance and performance. Women were often criticized to a harsher extent than normal and were correct to play things the *right* way. Mary Lou Williams, an influential pianist, composer, and arranger in jazz history, recalls a time where she played for Jelly Roll Morton and was told to play it the *right* way:

"Almost immediately I was stopped and reprimanded, told the right way to phrase it. I played it the way Jelly told me, and when I had it to his satisfaction, I slipped in one of my own tunes. This made no difference. I was soon stopped and told: 'Now that passage should be phrased like this'" (Williams 1954: 94).

Women were constantly being critiqued and told they looked wrong or played something wrong simply because they were women. The standards were set unfairly high compared to those of men and male musicians did not view women in jazz as equals. Marian McPartland speaks about the remarks that the International Sweethearts of Rhythm received from male musicians:

“And the typical remark from male musicians was, ‘You certainly couldn’t consider them in the same league as any good male band.’ Yet musical director Maurice King was enthusiastic. ‘You could put those girls behind a curtain and people would be convinced it was men playing.’” (McPartland 1980: 640).

The biases of men toward women in jazz in regards to their play was evident and it showed that although they were equal in every regard both musical and not, men viewed them differently simply because of their gender. There is a sense of irony here to be talked about. Male jazz musicians were willing to put race aside and use music as a way of creating a community, yet they weren’t willing to put gender aside. There are many reasons for this, but the shift of womens’ gender roles in jazz during this time and as a result of World War II could be a contributing factor. Men also had their own preconceived biases on what a woman in jazz should look like. Women often needed to look a certain way such as having a certain hairstyle, skin tone, revealing clothing, etc. To not be a part of this stereotype was to be viewed as strange and unprofessional. To not be a part of this stereotype was to not be viewed as a woman. “All of them, including Sarah, wore some damn uniforms and they were a mess…if I had to work like she worked, I’d have died of shame.” (Holiday 1956: 147). Here, Holiday elaborates upon how she would’ve felt if she did not meet the stereotypical views of how a woman should look or fell into the same stereotypical occupations for women. Holiday also elaborates upon exploitation and sexism when she says “You can be up to your boobies in white satin, with gardenias in your hair and no sugarcane for miles, but you can still be working on a plantation.” (Holiday 1956: 144). In other words, what Holiday could be saying is that regardless of how much black women tried to meet the appearance stereotypes during the time and regardless of how hard they worked,

they were still being exploited in both pay and social equality and equity. They were still being discriminated against and were paid poor wages as a result of the gender wage gap and race wage gap.

Art and commerce was essentially the trojan horse used as a means to exploit, oppress, and unfairly treat musicians because of their lack of knowledge in the commercial space. Jazz musicians, more specifically women in jazz, were the most affected by this trojan horse. The effects of this are still seen today in the jazz community with women still being misrepresented.

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