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Reading Jazz

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How the evolution of jazz served different purposes

In the early 1900s, jazz was starting to take shape in New Orleans and along the Mississippi River. It started to become mainstream due to the appropriation by white people and also because of the cultural diversity of the region. Jazz evolved from forced expression to freedom of expression which served different purposes for black people throughout the path to freedom. To understand this, we first need to explore the practices of slaves on plantations, the opposition against segregated ideologies, and how jazz came into practice in New Orleans.

Originally, jazz was not accepted by white people because of its association with black people. In other words, it was not accepted by white people because it was viewed by them as “black” music. Yet, white people would require slaves to sing while on plantations. This was done as a means to let their owner know where they were. “A silent slave is not liked by masters...’Make a noise’” (Douglass 1855: 83). The early practices of slaves in regards to music, dealt with the idea of slaves pleasing their owners and caused their music to be forcefully catered. Douglass describes the music as “...mostly of a plaintive cast , and told a tale of grief and sorrow” (Douglass 1855: 83). These songs had a second meaning within the slaves and were associated with the mockery of white people. The duality in meaning was important because it allowed for secret communication and storytelling with each other. For example, Bessie Jones

mentions a verse from a song ‘The bull cow kicking off the milk cow’s horn...the negro man is the milk cow; the white man is the bull cow’ (Jones 1902: 50). This reference offers a glimpse into the duality of the forced expression of slaves. Although the slaves were forced to sing, they began to incorporate their own practices in *how* they sang.

Black people’s musical practices began to evolve from being made by stomping, clapping, and shouting to music being made with brass, woodwind, or percussive instruments. The music evolved because black people were finally able to use these instruments as a way to freely express and differentiate themselves. For example, the bent notes, scoops, call-and-response, etc from the Ring Shout were translated from their voice to the instruments that they now had access to. Samuel Floyd, a black music researcher, describes the Ring Shout as “the main context in which Africans recognized values common to them” and defines the Ring Shout as “an early Negro ‘holy dance’” (Floyd 2002: 50). During the Ring Shout, many of these bent notes, scoops, and call-and-response elements were present as well as “‘jerking,’ ‘hitching’ motions” that Floyd describes. Furthermore, the evolution of the music also correlates to the evolution of different dances such as “breakdown, buck dance, and buzzard lope...[to] Charleston, and Lindy hop” (Floyd 2002: 52). These dances originated from characteristics of the Ring Shout which share many of the same characteristics as Floyd describes. With this, it becomes evident that a culture is beginning to take shape and black people are beginning to establish a different identity for themselves with their music, dancing, and other practices. It is important to note, however, that their culture and identity are still viewed through a segregated lens and are not accepted by white people.

In the late 1900s, Sidney Bechet, a revolutionary Saxophone player from New Orleans, offers an insight into how his father aided in the development of black musicians’ identity.

Bechet's father publicized black people's musical practices and went against traditional standards when he put a colored band on a boat (Bechet 1960: 10). After slavery, these practices were a secret to many people and white people were not initially accepting of black peoples' developing musical identity. This is because of white peoples' aforementioned segregated ideologies and also because most musicians at the time were white. Over time, many people began to develop a craving for black peoples' musical practices (now called jazz) as it was becoming a trending genre and "a whole lot of people were feeling mad about it...a lot of business was going to be taken away" (Bechet 1960: 10). Jazz was then endorsed and attempted to be played by white people which discredited the feeling and reason behind why the music was made. This appropriation caused the segregated views on the music to dissolve over time and white people started to no longer view black people in a narrow-minded perspective as *just* slaves; they began to develop an identity as musicians.

One could argue that the identity of black people stayed constant from the plantations to New Orleans not as musicians but as entertainers for white people. With this perspective in mind, the evidence mentioned from Douglass can be interpreted as slave owners wanting to be entertained by the singing of black people. However, this is not the case because an entertainer is actively trying to please the crowd. Black people originally sang in plantations because their owners *required* them to. Throughout the evolution of their musical practices, they began to play jazz as a way to express themselves freely and because it eventually became part of their identity, they were able to make a living performing in New Orleans. Because black people were marginalized, yet trying to make a living as musicians, this creates ambiguity in distinguishing if they are musicians or entertainers. Perhaps they are both. The duality of jazz and performers

could very well allow black people making a living to be entertainers, yet allow the same people to be musicians when they improvise or perform.

Overall, jazz was a means for black people to express themselves through song, dance, and storytelling. It became part of the developing cultural identity of black people. Instead of them just being identified as enslaved and peculiar, they began to be viewed as musicians. The duality in the music and traditions passed through generations allowed for a community to be established between slaves which wouldn't have been possible otherwise due to the extreme surveillance and oppression that they faced.

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