Music of the Common Tongue

Christopher Small

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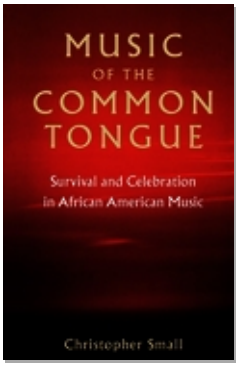

INTRODUCTION

I have been prompted to write this book by two impulses, one public and general and the other personal and specific, which are inextricably intertwined with each other. The first is a conviction that the time has come, if it is not well overdue, for a recognition, a celebration even, of the central contribution which Africans and people of African descent scattered over the face of the earth have made to the very mainstream of human culture, that is, to the human race's awareness of itself and of the way in which we relate to the world in which we live. That the principal medium through which this contribution has been made is not words but music and dance is itself important and, indeed, part of the message, and there can be very few people living in industrial societies who do not owe something, whether they admit or even realize it or not, to the power of the African vision of the world. A scholar has called African music and dance 'nonverbal formulations of philosophies of beauty and ethics';[1] the way in which, all unacknowledged, those philosophies have passed into the culture of Europeans and Euro-Americans is a story of endurance and ingenuity which forms much of the substance of this book, since the medium of their passing has been that music and dance of African descendents in the Americas, and elsewhere, to which we can only give the awkward name of 'Afro-American'.

The more personal reason I have for writing is in order to acknowledge, and even perhaps to return something of, what I owe to musicians of the Afro-American tradition, both black and white. As a musician and teacher of entirely European descent, trained in the most academic tradition of European music, I have nonetheless believed ever since I started giving thought to such matters that the gift of music was for everyone, as natural and universal a part of human endowment as the

gift of speech, and I have sought for ways to make this belief an actuality. In my early years as a school music teacher, in New Zealand, I believed — or rather, assumed — that it was possible for the European classical tradition to satisfy the musical needs of my pupils, and I tried, as I had been trained to do, to inculcate in them a love of the great European masters, and something of the foundations of their art. The fact that my successes were at best patchy challenged me to look further afield, and when during my studies in London I encountered the European and American avant garde, and the claims of its practitioners that a radical rethinking of the whole musical process was taking place, I tried to bring my pupils and, later, my students to participation in, and understanding of, something whose real nature I now realize I myself understood only dimly. But at the time it seemed that here was a fresh start, which would allow all to take part without the prior need for formal training in all the skills of traditional classical composition and performance. A series of educational experiments took place at that time, in which I played a minor part, which were designed to bring school pupils into the culture of the avant garde, not only as listeners but also as performers and even composers. I suppose, looking back, that any practical experience in music is worth while, but the fact remained that while my amiable pupils were willing to go along with my enthusiasm, they showed nothing of that real commitment which might impel them to make a lifelong practice of music. At any rate, I do not know of any of them who continued either to perform or to compose such music after leaving school.

That was in the 1960s, a time of general loosening of bonds and a tremendous outpouring of creative energy in popular music. It is fashionable to sneer today at the sixties, but at their best they were characterized by an awareness of the social and political power of music, even if most of us did not understand the nature of that power. It was at that time that I started to become aware, at first dimly but then with increasing clarity, of the existence of a music that had been all around me but which I had hardly noticed other than as light entertainment or as a rather intrusive noise from juke-boxes. One key moment was when, inquisitive about the nature of what was

then the still quite new phenomenon of rock music, I attended the last great Isle of Wight festival in August 1970; another was meeting and talking with the drummer John Stevens in London and taking part in his spontaneous music workshops in Ealing College of Higher Education, where I was teaching in the early 1970s. From these and other beginnings, I started to explore more widely, if initially quite indiscriminately, across the whole spectrum, or at least as much of it as a middle-aged music lecturer could gain access to, of Afro-American music in both its contemporary and its past forms. As I explored further, and made my first hesitant attempts at playing jazz (the experience of finding myself, after thirty years or more as a pianist, once again a fumbling beginner was both chastening and enjoyable), I was struck increasingly with the profound differences, in both the musical and what I can only call the social assumptions of the music, from the tradition in which I had been brought up, as well as by the coherence and consistency of the culture. It seemed, and still seems, to me (it is in fact a major part of the argument of this book) that such seemingly disparate musics as, say, country-and-western, reggae, jazz, punk rock, Broadway popular songs and calypso were all in fact aspects of one brilliant tradition, which resulted from the collision in the Americas, during and after the times of slavery, between two great musical cultures (perhaps one should say, groups of cultures) that of Europe and that of Africa, a tradition which partakes of the nature of both but is not the same as either. I found increasingly that the music of this tradition fulfilled in me not only an emotional but also an intellectual and a social need which European classical music, however much I loved and admired much of it, did not, and if I was honest, never had fulfilled. I decided to try and investigate what it was in the music that could produce so many kinds of satisfaction and joy, while at the same time disturbing, if not disrupting, the comfortable ways in which I had been accustomed to listening to, performing and thinking about music. The desire to do so was strengthened by encountering the warmth, sophistication and humour of those Afro-Caribbean friends whom I had at that time begun to meet, and by the way they seemed to view the world from an angle that was intriguingly different from

my own. This book, then, is a thank-offering to the untold numbers of musicians who created the music and an exploration of my own feelings about it. If I say that whatever understanding I now possess of my experience began with that feeling of 'rightness' in the music which was only later confirmed by thinking about it, it may perhaps suggest something of that unity between mind and nature which is one of its lessons.

My training and background in classical music have obliged me in writing this book to attempt a task which most of those who write on Afro-American music do not as a rule attempt: to consider the position of the music in modern western society, especially vis-à-vis the socially dominant European and Euro-American classical tradition. The one major attempt that I know of to fill this curious gap, and to confront the nature of the European classical tradition as it exists today from inside the tradition itself, is a trio of books by Henry Pleasants.[2] But Pleasants was more interested in the classical tradition than in the Afro-American, and in any case his books were published nearly thirty years ago, and thus antedate most of what has been called the Rock Revolution of the 1960s, which changed the popular-music scene radically. Nevertheless, I do acknowledge here my debt to those brave books, even if I am not setting out to emulate them.

What I am setting out to do is simple, even though I find the magnitude of the reversal from the musical values in which I was brought up unnerving; it is to show that, by any reasonable reckoning of the function of music in human life, the Afro-American tradition is the major music of the west in the twentieth century, of far greater human significance than those remnants of the great European classical tradition that are to be heard today in the concert halls and opera houses of the industrial world, east and west.

To this purpose I need to carry on two discussions simultaneously: first, an examination of the various aspects of the Afro-American tradition in both its contemporary and its historical forms, in an attempt to show them all as aspects of the one great and coherent culture, and, second, a study of what seem to me some important aspects of the art of music in general, in an attempt to understand something of what it is that gives Afro-American music its power in the lives of so

many people across the whole world in our century. As music does not take place in a social vacuum, but springs from the ways in which people regard themselves and their relationships with their fellows, I cannot carry out such an investigation without looking also at the social components of music, and especially at the encounter between people of African and of European origins as it has taken place over the centuries; I can only ask black readers of this book to pardon my impertinence in my attempts, obviously made from outside, to understand what seem to me important aspects of their culture.

It is not easy to write about the Afro-American tradition as a whole, perhaps because, as a music that does not in the main rely on written or printed notes, it is not only decentralized but it also does not reveal itself in that linear manner which is characteristic of the notation-dependent tradition of European classical music. Blues, jazz, rock, and so on, are not separate musical categories, however much the analytical temper of Europeans would have it so, but are constantly shifting and interacting facets of the great tradition, meeting and flowing into one another, grouping and regrouping with dizzying rapidity, and without regard for the labours of specialists or archivists. In writing this book I have been obliged by the nature of the printed word to follow some of the streams as if they were separate, and I can only ask the patience of the reader as I attempt to make the connections plain. For me, it is this persistently anarchistic resistance to classification of both the musicians and their music that is one of the enduring delights of Afro-American music; I have therefore no wish to tidy it up, but rather hope that I can convey something of this anarchistic delight, which is, I am sure, part of the profoundly pluralistic inheritance that black people carry around with them still, not as a set of beliefs but as a style of thinking, feeling, perceiving — and of playing, listening and dancing.

It may then be thought that I am trying to write two books at once, but my purpose will only have been achieved if I can show that they are in fact one. To this end, I have interspersed chapters from one 'book' with those of the other, so that discussion of one or another aspect of the Afro-American tradition alternates with more general discussion of music as a

human social activity. It is through this discussion, notable for its absence in most accounts of classical music, that I shall try to show the primacy of Afro-American music in the west today, and to establish that this is so on several levels, not just in the simple appeal of the music to vast numbers of people, (though this is not without importance, however much the clerics of the classical tradition may protest) but also in its openness to development, its universal accessibility and the ability of its musicians to evade capture by the 'official' values of the industrial state, which has proved the ruination of the classical tradition in the present century.

I am aware that my free use of the words 'classical' and even 'Afro-American' for the two traditions causes problems. It should be clear, of course, that I am not using the former term to signify that period in European music, between about 1770 and 1830, which music specialists know by that name; rather, I am using it in the vulgar sense, to mean the music of the European concert, church and opera tradition since about 1600 (since it is essentially a dramatic tradition, the date of the first real opera, performed in that year, sets its beginning neatly) as performed today by symphony orchestras, concert soloists and chamber ensembles as well as by opera companies, and including the music of the post-world war two avant garde and its offshoots and successors. I shall use it in this way in the knowledge that not only would it have meant little to the masters of the tradition in the past but also that it is used today mostly by those who are not in sympathy with the music; those who do subscribe to its values feel no need for the qualifying adjective, since to them it is, *tout court*, music, and it is other styles of music making that need qualification: 'popular', 'folk', 'ethnic', 'contemporary' (an odd one, that) and so on. We know what to expect when we open the pages of *The Musical Times*, *Music and Musicians* or *Musical America*, or any number of *Histories of Music*. Similarly with classes in Music Appreciation, while Music Departments in schools, colleges and universities, not to mention conservatoires of music, mostly direct their attention entirely towards the one tradition. I am only too aware, however, that the boundaries of what is meant by 'classical music' are maddeningly difficult to define, the more

so as I believe the meaning of the music — or, rather, the meaning of performing it — has changed considerably over the past sixty years or so.

It would probably not be necessary to define it at all were it not for the disastrous pulling-away of the classical tradition from the vernacular over the last hundred years. I shall have more to say about that later, but note here that the disaster (and it *has* been disastrous, for both traditions) can be laid more at the doors of classical musicians and of critics, scholars, teachers and those who are responsible for the financial support of classical music than at those of the musicians of the Afro-American tradition who, as we shall see, have always possessed an easy mastery of classical styles; if they have played in the style we know now as Afro-American, it has never been because they could not play in the European manner but because they have preferred to play in that way.

I shall have to leave to a later work a discussion of the very interesting question of the boundaries of classical music, and ask the reader to accept my rough-and-ready definition as sufficient for the present book. At the same time we might keep in mind that what is and what is not regarded as classical is often as much a matter of performance style as of the actual musical content, and also that classical music can be distinguished from vernacular in that it gives more attention to the musical work in itself than to its social meaning.

For music that does not come under the rubric 'classical', I prefer the term 'vernacular' to either 'popular' or 'folk', both of which have become loaded with secondary meanings and are involved in their own demarcation disputes. The basic meaning of the word, of course, has to do with speech, and its use in respect of music does remind us that the ability to take part in a musical performance is as natural and universal a part of the human endowment as is the ability to take part in a conversation. It can subsume both 'folk' and 'popular' (although I shall use both these words on occasion when their meaning is clear) to mean music of the common tongue that is made for *use*, with little pretension to Art and its high social status, but by no means unselfconscious pipings either; like virtually all music everywhere and at all stages of human

history, it is made by musicians who, even if they do not verbalize it, are well aware of what they doing and who work hard to do it. An outside observer of music as a whole in western society would conclude that classical and vernacular music represent different and even opposed values, but this has not always been so; indeed, it would seem as if during the greatest period of European music its practitioners did not think of themselves as in any way separate from the vernacular of their day but both drew on it (after all, the Viennese classical style even at its most elevated has its roots firmly in Austrian folk music) and actively contributed to it. They strove to reach the widest possible audience (Mozart was delighted to find that everyone in Prague was whistling the airs from *Figaro*) and if they made music sometimes for the broader and sometimes for a more exclusive audience they did not feel impelled to make any break in their style; Beethoven remains as recognizably Beethoven in his ballroom dances as in his last string quartets.

I was reminded of this not long ago when I heard a fine British jazz quartet on three successive evenings, on the first evening playing to an audience of connoisseurs in a concert hall, on the second blowing up a storm and setting all the teenyboppers, much to *their* surprise, dancing at a local hop, and on the third playing discreetly for the entertainment of the patrons in a pub, all without any dislocation of style or the slightest hint of condescension or of playing anything but their best. It is possible that Afro-American music has developed its own kind of classical music which, unlike today's European or Euro-American classical music, remains in close touch with its vernacular, both feeding on it and feeding back to it. To my knowledge, the last European master of the classical tradition who was able to inhabit that kind of unified musical universe without strain was Erik Satie, who died in 1925; appropriately, he was one of the few major musicians of the tradition who really did die in poverty — and voluntary poverty at that.

One might say, perhaps tautologically, that vernacular music, 'the music of the common tongue', is, like vernacular speech, the normal experience of the human race. Classical musics are comparatively rare; they seem to need for their

existence not only a leisured class able to command a quantity of surplus resources but also a situation where that class is to some degree isolated from the majority of the people and possesses the social power to represent its own tastes as superior. Thus classical musics developed not only in Europe but also in India and China, though not, despite the equal richness and sophistication of the culture and the music, in the African kingdoms or in Bali, in both of which the royal courts and their music were accessible to all. If jazz is today acquiring some of the characteristics of a classical music we might be able to discover comparable social factors at work — but that must wait for a later chapter.

There is another pair of terms that I am going to have to use extensively in this book: 'black' and 'white' as applied to people. The absurdity of these terms when used in this way can be seen from the start by anyone who cares to look, in that those who are labelled 'white' may be anything from greyish pink to mid brown in skin tone, while those labelled 'black' may be anything from pale brown to rich dark brown; not only is literal blackness of skin colour rare but also many of those who are labelled 'black' may be lighter in complexion than many who are labelled 'white'. The two terms, when used to mark off two genetically separate human groups, make no sense at all; what they amount to in terms of human relationships is a highly asymmetrical form of classification which assigns all those who bear the slightest visible sign of African descent to the category 'black', and thus automatically to inferior status, even though, to the unprejudiced eye, they may appear more European (or, to put it, pseudo-scientifically, Caucasoid) than African (or Negroid). In societies that are dominated by European values, European appearance is the norm and taken for granted, becoming in this way invisible, while African is the aberration, and thus highly visible, even, as in the Americas, after nearly five hundred years of daily interaction. The asymmetry requires that only those with no visible sign of the 'aberration' can qualify as 'white'. This paradox of racism compounds its absurdity through the fact that while to be 'black' carries considerable social disadvantage throughout Europe and America, to be 'white' does not carry, as any number of unemployed white people

can testify, any balancing advantage, other perhaps than the dubious advantage of being able to look down on a fellow human being. In the long run the only people who derive any real benefit from the whole sorry business are those who have an interest in dividing and ruling.

If 'white' means having exclusively European ancestry while 'black' means possessing any mix of European, African and, indeed, any number of other ethnic backgrounds from one hundred per cent of the latter to ninety-nine per cent of the former, then 'black' has any real significance only as a cultural term. It is worn thus, as a badge of pride, by those who have historically been obliged to accept a definition of themselves by reference to European norms — that is, they have been defined as contravening in their very existence the society's norms of Caucasian racial purity. Black culture, and especially black music and dance, have over the past five hundred years or so been tools by means of which people so defined have struggled, and continue to struggle, to assert their own definition of themselves. If this has necessarily entailed compromises and accommodations with the prevailing definition (and, as we shall see, Afro-American music and dance are shot through with, and indeed have their origin in, such accommodations) and an at least outward acceptance of them, nonetheless the self-definition of those who are classed as 'black' has for the most part been affirmative rather than negative, proud rather than humble, self-assertive rather than self-effacing. And thus, while to label such great American musicians as Charles Mingus, Duke Ellington and Jelly Roll Morton as 'black' may be a genetic absurdity, given their very visible genetic makeup, it does, given the ethnocultural situation, make a certain kind of sense, since they, and countless others, found their cultural roots among those who had been similarly defined. It makes it possible to find a liveable sense in a situation that is essentially nonsensical.

One need not assume from this that 'black' culture is monolithic — far from it. One of the distinguishing features of the culture of the people of the African diaspora has always been an openness and an adaptability which, as I hope to show in due course, is a part of the African cultural inheritance. This is why the variety of Afro-American music is

so astonishingly wide, representing as it does any number of different accommodations to the dominant white culture, as well as to other cultures. It is, if anything, white culture that through its exclusionist tendency can be said to be impoverished. We can see this in the music of the classical tradition in our own time; by comparison with the musical whirlwind which is Afro-American music the so-called 'new music' which is associated with the names of Schoenberg and Stravinsky and later of Messiaen, Boulez, Stockhausen and Cage is a mere breeze, imprisoned in its luxurious concert halls and quite possibly heralding the end of the tradition in a state of isolation, solipsism and spiritual anorexia. There seems to be a kind of rule in these affairs, that whenever a policy of exclusion is practised, it is the excluders who are the ultimate losers.

If it were a matter of the mere cultural survival of black people, that would be a remarkable enough achievement, given what they have endured for five hundred years. But there is more. Despite their exclusion, black people in the Americas and elsewhere have been during the present century at the heart of an outburst of creative energy surely unparalleled in the known history of the human race. Its vigour has taken it beyond the shores of the Americas and caused it to become acclimatized throughout most of the world, usually over the dead bodies of the guardians of the official musical culture, but its power to seize the imagination and the sensibilities of so many different kinds of people, most of whom have no direct contact with the black experience, is a phenomenon which still lacks a satisfactory 'official' explanation — understandably so, for the only explanation that makes sense would not be good news to those guardians. So it tends either to be taken for granted, like a force of nature, or to be attributed to the pressures of cynical media manipulators. Neither explanation is anything like adequate — even though it is obviously true that commercial forces have played a considerable (though perhaps less than is generally assumed) part in its development and dispersion. Rather, it is a ceaseless and spontaneous activity of countless human beings, all of them living within, responding to and trying to make sense of, certain social, political and economic situations. But the

question of why this music has not remained simply the property of an underdog group in the Americas (after all, there are many such underdog musics the world over, but most of them stay firmly within the societies from which they came), but has instead moved out to transform the musical sensibilities of a large part of the human race, is an important one, to which I propose addressing myself in this book.

How, then, do we define Afro-American music? At first sight, the question seems easy enough; we know about jazz, yes, and blues, we are possibly aware of the debt owed to the blues by all those varieties of music that are collectively called rock or pop and which are the most audible kinds of Afro-American music to be heard today. There is also disco perhaps, and there are styles that seem to have remained mostly the province of black artists, such as gospel and reggae and soul, although there are white artists who have made soul, if not gospel, their own. There is also calypso and the steel band, among its more exotic manifestations, and rapping, scratching and hip hop. We should also include styles which, although shot through and through with black idioms, are almost exclusively the domain of white musicians, such as country-and-western in all its considerable variety, and Cajun music from Louisiana — in fact not much vernacular music of our time has escaped its powerful presence. And we have not yet mentioned the beguines, the merengues, the sambas and rumbas, the mento and salsa, the reggae and soca, that come from South and Central America and the Caribbean, or the riotous proliferation of styles that has taken place in the various parts of Africa to which the music has returned. We could continue enumerating for a long time, through the ramifications of rock, for example, and it might be possible to compile a catalogue that had some claim to completeness. Possible but pointless, for by the time it was completed it would be obsolete; the art is in such a state of headlong development and change that cataloguing it is rather like painting the Forth Railway Bridge — the job gets finished just in time to start it all over again.

But the key to all this magnificent confusion lies in any case not in a catalogue at all, however complete, since catalogues enumerate objects and music is not an object, or even a

collection of objects, but an activity. Afro-American music making (I should prefer, for reasons which will become clear in Chapter 2, to use the word 'musicking', the present participle of the regrettably non-existent verb 'to music') has resulted, seemingly, in the production of innumerable music-objects — and we have the records and the tapes and the sheet music that we can hold in our hands — but as we examine these objects we find that they are not as stable as we thought, but are mere stages in a process of creative evolution, caught for a moment on disc, tape or paper.

The other trouble with the simple enumeration of various styles of Afro-American music is that many of them are merely the creation of those commercial and marketing interests which have intersected at so many points with the musical process, and were often invented either to give the appearance of something new to a way of musicking that has had a long subterranean history or to evade reference to that racism which has also intersected in a significant way with the music. Categories in any case are *never* watertight, but flow ceaselessly into one another; certainly the musicians who play it, the listeners who listen to it and the dancers who dance to it rarely allow themselves to be neatly pigeonholed but move freely across categories according to their own inclination at the time — as well as according to who is paying. Categories are only convenient abstractions, and useful in discussion if we understand that there is, for example, no such thing as jazz, but only musicians who play in a certain manner and listeners who like to listen to them doing so (for that matter, there is no such thing as music, only musicking). The musician who plays in the manner we call jazz is himself also a listener, and does not confine his listening to other musicians who play in the same or similar ways to himself (he may feel a greater sympathy, of course, with such musicians) but will feel free to listen to, and to use, any kind of musicking from any performer who he feels will help to make his own performance more interesting, more satisfying. That such listening is not random in its focus but depends on a measure of social and cultural empathy is a matter which I shall discuss in due time.

What we call Afro-American music, then, is not a collection

of sound-objects, or a repertory of pieces, or even a group of musical styles narrowly considered, but an approach to the act of music making, a way of playing and of responding to music, which derives from those two great ways of making music which came together in the Americas. It is this way, or rather, it is these ways, since there is no one way, which I mean to celebrate in this book. I make no claim for it as a comprehensive survey of either the history or the present of Afro-American music; that would require whole libraries. Rather, I hope to present what seem to me important aspects of both that history and that present in order to suggest an approach, a conceptual and historical framework, in which listeners, and indeed performers, may place the experience of the music, to find out a little of what it can have to say to us on the important concerns of human life, and how it can help us in constructing an identity that is appropriate to ourselves and our time. At the same time I hope that this book may suggest something of the richness and complexity of both the culture and the history, which have been so fraudulently denied by the majority culture, of black people in the Americas.

In order to keep my study to manageable proportions I have had to confine it to those aspects of the music which originated in the United States, with brief glances only toward Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa. But while this restriction does represent a loss of scope, it does not really affect my argument, which is that Afro-American music is a unified culture through which are explored and celebrated aspects of human experience and identity that are not dealt with in either the European or indeed the African tradition.

Let us now, without more ado, look at what it was that the people from each of the two continents brought with them to America in the way of human social and musical values.

NOTES

1. THOMPSON, Robert Farris: 'An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance', *African Forum*, Vol 2, Part 2, Fall 1966, p. 85.
2. PLEASANTS, Henry: *The Agony of Modern Music*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1955
   : *Death of a Music?* London, Victor Gollancz, 1961.
   : *Serious Music — And All That Jazz,,* London, Victor Gollancz, 1969.

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