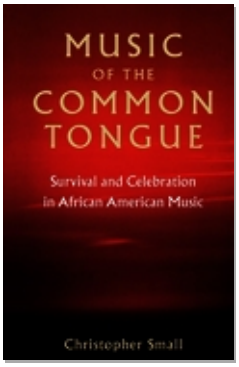
Music of the Common Tongue

Christopher Small

Published by Wesleyan University Press



Chapter 16

CONFRONTING THE RATIONAL GOD

It is common among white people, not only among those who admit to being racist, to think of black people as somehow simpler, 'closer to nature', more instinctively musical (especially when it comes to rhythm), and certainly less 'serious' than people of entirely European descent. The liberal may explain those qualities as not of black people's making (after all, the terrible system of slavery brutalized them and destroyed every vestige of culture they may once have possessed, did it not?) but nevertheless such liberals are as deeply in error as the most unredeemed of racists; none of the above notions will stand up to the most superficial acquaintance with black people or to the most cursory study of black history or culture. The fact is that Afro-American culture as it has developed over the last five hundred years is a strategy which has been evolved by a highly creative and socially sophisticated people, using remembered, and indeed consciously and carefully transmitted, African ways of thought and perception as well as whatever elements of European and Euro-American culture came to hand, in order to make life worth living in a situation that was at best difficult and at worst desperate.

It should be understood that those Africans, and their descendants, who were enslaved in the New World were the first of the world's peoples to experience the full dehumanizing impact of modern industrialism. The system of chattel slavery as practised in the Americas (a very different system, as we have seen, from that of Africa — or indeed of medieval Europe) was in every aspect save one a fully-formed industrial system, the only difference from that to which European

peasants were later subjected being that the actual mechanical technology did not yet exist. It was the slaves themselves who were required, not just to serve machines, but actually to *be* machines; as far as the slavemasters were concerned all the slaves' human attributes were nothing more than a nuisance, and only their labour power was of value. It was on the plantations of the Americas that the new capitalists not only accumulated the wealth that made European industrialism possible but also learnt the techniques of industrial organization that they were later, as the technology became available, to transfer to the factories of Europe and of North America, and they applied them in a most ruthless and thoroughgoing way, which far exceeded anything they dare impose later in Europe. That they were able to do to the Africans what they could not do to European peasants and artisans was due to the successful implantation in European minds of the idea of the formers' innate inferiority. The development in recent decades of machines that are as intelligent as the slaves were required to be in their work seems likely to prove the final fulfilment of the capitalist dream of an intelligent and wholly submissive workforce; this is surely the real industrial revolution to which the man-machine pair that has existed in the factories of the last two hundred years has been only an unsatisfactory prelude. It does not require too perverse a reading of history to see the eventual failure of American slavery as having provided the impetus for the development of machines to do the slaves' work; and the reason for slavery's failure in the long run to deliver the goods as planned lay in the obstinate humanity of the slaves themselves, expressed in rebellion and flight when possible, and as passive resistance, sabotage and affected stupidity when they were not.

In the struggle not only to survive but also to make survival worth fighting for (the indigenous populations of South America and the Caribbean apparently thought it was not) the slaves possessed powerful psychological weapons, not dependent on material objects, which they inherited from their African forebears: a firm but flexible identity based on community, the ability to adapt and to improvise, a sense of the sacredness of life which permeates all aspects of living, and, not least, the great performance art of music and dance

by means of which that sense of who they were could be affirmed, explored, and, yes, still, celebrated. It was, and remains, that strong sense of identity which has, for example, enabled black people in the Americas not only to face the need both to dissemble before the master, and, later, 'The Man', and to remain at the same time true to the community, not being torn apart by the contradiction, but also to search out and take from the American environment what was needed for living, and to blend it with what was remembered of the old.

The various phases of Afro-American musicking, as outlined in this book, show that that great performance art is no mere entertainment, but a vital tool in the building and the maintenance of identity. It is a weapon for the imagination in bringing to being, at least for the duration of a performance, a society which is richer and less coercive than that which today we know in reality, where individual and community enhance and complement, rather than oppose, each other. We need not look for the survival in Afro-American musicking of specific African techniques, but we need be in no doubt that the attitudes that lie behind the musicking derive from Africa. The culture itself has greatly changed over the centuries of the encounter with Europe, but the style of its change and adaptation is itself unchanging. The strength of any culture lies, not in any resistance to change, but in the ability to adapt to new conditions while always enabling individuals to say, This is who I am, and This is where I belong, against those who would say, That is who you are, and That is where you belong. It is the combination of a specific kind of cultural inheritance with a situation which ensured that that inheritance was selected (in a sense that is quite analogous to Darwinian natural selection) as an aid to survival which has formed Afro-American music as we know it today. It is neither 'simple' nor 'natural' in any of its phases but the complex and sophisticated art of a people caught in a particular historical situation. That the response to that historical situation has been, even at times of the most ruthless oppression, not a withdrawal from, but a reaching-out to, and engagement with, the dominant Euro-American culture must be recognized as an achievement of the first magnitude.

Let us briefly recapitulate some of the characteristics of

Afro-American music as we have seen them in our investigation; they are generalities only, to which any number of exceptions can be found, but they do nevertheless represent the main tendencies of the ways in which Afro-American musicians work. In the first place, it is not exclusive; the gift of musicking is open to all. It is not necessary for aspiring musicians to undergo any extended process of formal instruction, let alone to be examined or certified, before they can begin to make a contribution; they simply start with what they can do, just as in the arts of speech (also much cultivated among black Americans), and build upon it. In this the imitation of admired masters and mistresses of the art plays a major part. We need make no mistake, however; Afro-American musicians work just as hard at their art as do those of the European classical tradition, even if not so much time is spent in solitary practising. Groups spend rather more time cultivating that empathy and instantaneous response which are essential when not all the information required for a performance is available from a score; in any case, there is not much point in practising alone what can only be done in a group, and Afro-American musicking is essentially a communal occupation. Technical virtuosity for its own sake is not much sought after; it is what the performer does with what he or she has that is valued.

Secondly, all performance carries within it an element of original creation, however modest; it is not just the recreation of another person's composition. If the final music-object should turn out to be less complex and developed than a work of classical music that is not really significant, since, as John Blacking points out, 'apparent simplicity of sound produced may conceal complex processes of generation.'[1] Even more important, the relations that are established between the participants during a performance in which 'thinking and performing music simultaneously' takes place are much richer and more complex than those established when a player is realizing a score, since the listeners (and the dancers, should there be any) are not mere witnesses at a spectacle but active participants in that human encounter which is the performance. It is thus silly, on the one hand, to ask what the Afro-American tradition can offer to match the splendour of

Bach's *B Minor Mass* or Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and equally silly, on the other, to try to set up John Lennon and Paul McCartney, as did one injudicious music critic in the 1960s, as the greatest songwriters since Schubert. It is not just that both concentrate on the sound-object, which in Afro-American music is relatively unimportant (even a record represents no more than a stage in the development of a performance), but also, they depend on the assumption, derived from classical music, that music originates from the top downwards, being handed down from Great Composers (or Great Songwriters) via Great Performers to the ordinary music lover. In Afro-American music, as we have seen many times — it is without doubt its greatest strength — new musical styles originate at the bottom of society and work their way upwards, reaching the ears of the middle and upper classes, generally through the medium of records, and often in diluted form, quite possibly around the same time as their anonymous creators (anonymous to us maybe, but not to their community) are abandoning them for something new.

Thirdly, relationships between the participants in a performance are not hierarchical; the performers do not dominate the audience, nor are they dominated by any outside person such as a composer or conductor. Nor is the performance dominated, or the relationships mediated, by a written score; where notation is used it tends to function more as a guide or a set of promptings to performance than as a set of prescriptive instructions. Performance itself is more concerned with the exploration of relationships between the participants than it is with the feelings or spiritual adventure of any individual, more concerned with being than with becoming, with present enjoyment than with either the past or the future. The question often asked by lovers of classical music: 'Yes, but will it stand the test of time?' is another silly question (I believe it to be an equally silly question to ask of classical pieces); if the performance serves the moment and the participants' sense of who they are, what more ought one to ask of it?

As a tool for self-definition and for the building of community, Afro-American musicking is an activity of profound seriousness and significance, even at its most

frivolous and lighthearted. But that leaves us with the question posed in the Introduction to this book: why is it that it has reached out beyond an underdog population in the Americas to become an important element in the self-definition of so many millions of people, most of whom have no contact with the experience of black people in America or elsewhere, and has transformed the ways in which they make and respond to music? After all, there are many such underdog populations throughout the world, and virtually all of them cultivate their own styles of musicking, by means of which they affirm and celebrate their sense of who they are to themselves and to anyone else who will listen, but mostly those styles remain just that, little known outside the communities that gave them birth, exotic oddities at best and appreciated among outsiders only by enthusiasts and musicologists. In the United States alone, every ethnic minority has its own music, which may well serve for its people something of the same function as that which we have noted for Afro-Americans; many of these musics are exciting and beautiful, yet they remain minority tastes. And even they have been infiltrated by Afro-American styles; I heard in Buffalo a fine Polish-American dance band whose front-line players embellished their polka music with exuberant blues licks.

There are also the rich and complex musical styles of non-industrial countries such as those of India, Bali and even of traditional Africa, all of which celebrate values which are not those of the industrial state; they have been the objects of many attempts,none of which has 'taken', to graft them on to western music. What was it, then, that caused the musicking of this initially enslaved and still despised and underprivileged people to spread out, first through the Americas and then across the world, to become what is clearly the major music of our time? There can be no doubt that it is the *majority* form of musicking of the west today; if the European classical tradition numbers its adherents in millions, mainly in those societies that have a large enough and wealthy enough middle and upper class to support the expensive apparatus of symphony orchestras, concert halls and so on which the creation and performance of this music requires, the Afro-American tradition numbers its own in tens, if not hundreds of millions,

extending from the poorest inhabitants of Africa, South and Central America, the Caribbean and Asia, to the poorer members of the wealthy societies and even into their middle and upper classes.

There would of course be no need to state the antithesis thus baldly if the two cultures were in a state of peaceable coexistence and collaboration, with each accorded equal status and importance within our society. But we know that this is very far from being so; the devotees of the European classical tradition assume at every turn the inherent superiority of their art, regarding it as the highest achievement of the human race in the art of sound and as the norm and ideal of all musical experience, while the overwhelming weight of state and private subsidy goes towards the support of those who make that music, as well as of those who teach it, research it, criticize it and act as its guardians. The devotee of classical music is of course inclined to disregard statistical criteria as irrelevant; if the mass of people, despite all the efforts made to educate them, still do not recognize the evident superiority of classical music, so much the worse for them. In any case, privately, he is inclined to believe that the music is not and never has been a matter for the masses; this attitude has the support of no less a figure than Arnold Schoenberg, who has written: 'If it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art.'[2]

The appeal of Afro-American music, despite its 'obvious' inferiority, has to be explained somehow, and it is generally attributed to the effect on a bemused and ignorant populace, whose ability to judge quality has atrophied during two centuries of proletarianization, of the machinations of cynical and unscrupulous media operators, especially record companies and radio and television networks. One need not follow the arguments through the maze of contradictions which rest on the assumption that most people are incapable of telling 'good' from 'bad' music without the aid of professional critics, and even that the masses have a kind of homing instinct for all that is worst (an assumption which is remarkably similar to that made by the guardians of public morals, who, like the critic quoted in Chapter 14, exempt themselves from the general incapacity). This means that the worse a musical

performance, on or off record, the more successful it will be and the more it will profit those bogeymen, the record companies and the entrepreneurs. Marxist critics, at the head of whom is Theodor Adorno, have their own variant on this thesis: that the whole of Afro-American music is a gigantic capitalist conspiracy to keep the proletariat in a state of passive acceptance of its lot; jazz, in Adorno's world, is especially singled out for condemnation for its ability to make 'the inescapable easier to bear' and to encourage the listener to 'develop a taste for' the attitudes of subordination required of them in ordinary life. That such views can be quoted, straight-faced, in an authoritative survey of Marxist aesthetics published in 1984[3] shows the continuing hegemony of European high-cultural assumptions and of racism over those who would change society; indeed, the dominance of such assumptions over both the author of the book and those whose views she discusses engenders serious doubts concerning the clarity of their thinking on other matters.

While one cannot but agree that there are those who seek to use the musicians and their musicking for their own purposes, including political ones, or that the quality (which is to say, the human value) of the musicking has suffered from their manipulation, we still have to confront the basic question. The fascination that black culture, and especially black music, has exerted over white people in the Americas since early colonial times, and the mixture of attraction and fear it has engendered in them, has too long a history to admit of such lazy and self-serving explanations as those which the high-culture critics, whether Marxists or double-dyed political conservatives, in remarkable unanimity offer us.

We can see this mixure of attraction and fear in white people as far back as the beginnings of the encounter between the two peoples in the Americas. We see it in the genuine empathy which seems to have existed between slaves and poor whites as fellow-sufferers under a colonial aristocracy, which brought about the beginnings of a fusion of cultures; we see it in the minstrel show, which defused fears of the very attractive black culture and of its subversive potential by presenting it as laughable; we see it in the commitment to jazz of many young middle-class whites in the 1920s and in the panic-stricken

response to it of the guardians of public morals and public music; we see it in the similar response in the 1950s to the advent of rhythm-and-blues under the name of rock'n'roll; we see it in the way in which rock musicians are treated by passport and customs officials when moving from one country to another; we see it in the attitude of educational institutions to Afro-American music and in their efforts to control it when they cannot exclude it; we see it in the persecution of rock musicians in totalitarian countries. The list could go on, but the pattern is too clear and consistent to be accidental. The greater the commitment to the values of industrial society and its associated high culture, the greater is the fear of Afro-American culture and Afro-American music. The pattern of that commitment *tends* to lie, as many social surveys show, along class lines, but it is by no means thus determined; it can be found at all social, economic and educational levels, as can its absence. Where the division between the two attitudes does *not* seem to lie to any great extent, is along a line drawn between left-wing and right-wing political orientations; the commitment to high culture is as common among the former as among the latter — which seems to me to point to some serious conceptual weaknesses on the left.

The history of individual musical styles in the Afro-American tradition shows generally an upward social drift, from a beginning in poor black or white communities, and acceptance in the lower reaches of society through performance in places that are generally not frequented by 'respectable' people (as we have seen, the empathy between groups at the bottom of the social heap can sometimes transcend the hostilities of racism). At any point in its history a style may reach the limits of its acceptance and remain purely local or communal; this must be an everyday occurrence which passes unrecorded, in both senses of the word. A musician who is skilled enough, ambitious enough and lucky enough to catch the eye and ear of an astute manager or an influential tastemaker can carry it into the wider society, often at first the hip demi-monde, and get it recorded. If it attracts enough attention (again the help of influential people is needed at all stages), it will be taken up by white musicians,

whose motives will be either genuine enthusiasm for the music or the desire to get on a bandwaggon — or, as usually happens, a mixture of both. Genuine enthusiasm will inspire some other musicians to play it regardless of rewards, most likely bringing their own playing habits to the performance and changing it in subtle ways which they themselves may not even recognize, adding a new turn to the creative spiral. The bandwaggon effect will bring even greater changes, mostly in the direction of European values, generally diluting the style to make it more acceptable to those for whom Afro-American values are too subversive, too disturbing. All of this activity will bring about a number of variants to the style, most of which will be recorded by either large or small record companies (the larger tend to use the smaller ones, which are more flexible in their response and have their ears closer to the ground, as scouts for new talent or a new style, snapping up the style as it becomes popular). A glance through the bins in any large record shop will suggest that there is someone who is prepared to issue a record of practically anything, no matter how unlikely it may appear. But, as our glance at the San Francisco scene showed, even this quantity and range represents only a small proportion of the musicking that is going on at any one time.

By the time the new style reaches the consciousness of the broad public, and in particular of middle-class 'music lovers', it is likely to have become considerably diluted, and indeed it is interesting to see how often the latter, when 'slumming' among Afro-American music, will zero in on innocuous or even tasteless versions of the music; in the case of jazz, for example, they are likely to favour versions by The King's Singers, The Swingle Singers, Jacques Loussier, even Yehudi Menuhin in duet with Stéphane Grappelli — anything to avoid the direct confrontation with those issues which jazz raises, and the dangers it presents to comfortable feelings of superiority.

For the majority of people, the principal medium for the encounter with Afro-American music is the radio. It is not altogether surprising that middle-class lovers of classical music should find their worst preconceptions confirmed when listening to a pop radio station, since not only is the

choice of what is played there extremely limited (one might compare it to a classical station which played an endless diet of ballets by Delibes and Massenet, operas by Gounod and Donizetti and piano music by Hummel and Mendelssohn, with a few warhorse concertos thrown in) but also it is presented in such a relentlessly mindless atmosphere of asocial and ahistorical triviality that even the most genuinely inquisitive may be put off. The BBC's pop radio channel, Radio One, which blankets the whole of the British Isles, was recently described in a newspaper article as 'a vital promotional outlet for the record companies, an imperturbable daytime sedative, and forever terrified of saying or doing anything that might galvanize a cortex or bring a blush to the cheeks'.[4] The fault lies neither in the musicians nor in their musicking but in the way in which radio broadcasting is organized. It is difficult to perceive in the record industry, which is simply interested in short-term profits, anything that would give support to conspiracy theories such as that proposed by Adorno; as Simon Frith says, 'All A & R [artist and repertoire — who plays and what they play] decisions are basically financial and the calculations have to be precisely made... The answers depend on one single consideration: How much is the act going to earn?'[5] In the structure of radio programming, on the other hand, it is possible to perceive, if not a conspiracy, at least the operation of a number of self-serving assumptions on the part of the guardians of the official culture to bring about a defusing of the challenge presented by Afro-American music. It is worth a digression to show how those assumptions and values operate in Britain to determine what is allowed to be broadcast on radio, and how it militates against a true picture being presented of what musicians are really doing.

The first public broadcasts in Britain, twice-daily half-hour transmissions begun by Marconi in 1919, were quickly banned by the Government of the time, in accordance with the obsessive distrust of their own people held by successive British governments at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Acts of Parliament in 1922 and 1925 established the British Broadcasting Corporation and gave it a monopoly of the airwaves; no-one else was allowed to broadcast. The BBC was from the beginning run by an

oligarchy appointed by the government in the same way as was, twenty years later, the Arts Council of Great Britain. Its motto, inscribed on the walls of Broadcasting House in London, was 'Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation', which expresses better perhaps than they knew the priorities of its creators, since the idea of abstractions speaking to abstractions has been the source of many of the vices as well as the undoubted virtues of the BBC. In any case, the people have rarely had the chance to speak peace, or anything else, to the people, the BBC having operated from its origins on the assumption that it knew best what the people ought to have spoken to them.

As we have seen in the case of the Arts Council, the important consequence for music of that top-downwards distribution of power which pervades all the political institutions of Britain, has been that middle-class tastes and, equally important, middle-class assumptions about lower-class tastes, dominate the BBC's music programming. Initially the BBC broadcast on one channel only, a single programme that by 1930 was covering the country; this was later augmented to two, called, cosily but significantly, the 'Home Service' and the 'Light Programme', the former broadcasting a mixture of news, features, documentaries, plays and classical music, the latter playing 'light' music, which was a compromise between what the BBC management thought the populace wanted (their notional listeners were housewives over the kitchen sink and workers on the production line) and what it thought they ought to hear. Such slumming could only be disastrous for vernacular-music broadcasting in Britain, allowing only the most mediocre of performances to be broadcast; it was even more disastrous for the state of British popular music generally between the wars, especially for those musicians, of whom there was a considerable number, who were genuinely interested and skilled in Afro-American styles (there were also in Britain between the wars many fine West Indian musicians who might have brought a new vitality to British music had they ever been given a chance). 'Needle-time' agreements with the Musicians' Union resulted in severe restrictions on the broadcasting of records, so that little American music reached the ears of British listeners; jazz was

represented by the staid all-British band of Henry Hall, and the airtime was filled out with cinema organs, palm court orchestras and showbands. Even in the rock'n'roll era, as Charlie Gillett observes, 'most of the music shows were family-oriented request programmes, which invariably concluded with a presumably educative extract from a classical music composition.'[6] It is not clear what happened in the 1950s to requests, which must have been sent in, for Elvis Presley or Little Richard, but they were not to be heard on the BBC's Light Programme. The BBC's monopoly was partly circumvented by commercial stations whose offices and studios were in London but whose transmitters were on the continent; the principal stations were Radio Luxemburg and Radio Normandie, which lived on revenue from British advertisers, largely the major record companies. Their coverage was, however, limited, as was their repertoire, the latter being dominated, predictably, by the majors' own offerings.

During the second world war, a third radio channel was established by the BBC to cater for the devotees of minority high culture, with a diet of classical music, highbrow plays, talks and discussions. Within its narrow compass it was excellent (today, as Radio Three, it has degenerated into a cosy middle-class club) but the channel's managers, either at that time or later, have never regarded Afro-American music as sufficiently 'serious' to warrant the attention of its listeners, with the exception of a few hours a week of jazz in ghetto slots. Up to 1961, then, there was no way in which British listeners could hear played on British radio what had become the dominant form of popular music, let alone other kinds of Afro-American music.

The vacuum was bound to be filled sooner or later, and in 1961 the first 'pirate' broadcasts began from a ship anchored outside the twelve-mile limit, followed by a fleet of others surrounding the British Isles. The best-known of these, Radio Caroline, anchored in the North Sea, claimed to have a full million listeners only three weeks after starting broadcasting. It was pop music, of course, that was played, a wildly eclectic selection from the music of the day, whose choice was dictated simply by the tastes of the disc jockeys who introduced the

programmes. The quality of the programmes was variable, but they were personal, and there was a human identity behind them that could be sensed by the listeners. Commercial they certainly were; dull they were not, and certainly not as dull as the BBC Light Programme. Action was finally taken against the pirates (the very word tells us that the official mind was never in doubt who had the right to control the ether) which were run off the air by mid-1967. At exactly the same time, coincidentally, the BBC reorganized its services into four channels, of which Radio One was the popular-music programme, complete with some of the disc jockeys who had been thrown out of work by the demise of the pirates; up to that point the BBC had had announcers, who made no attempt to identify with their working-class listeners, but patronized them in plummy voices, in a way which to my colonial ears seemed to verge on the offensive. These are still to be heard on Radio Two, which has inherited the mantle of the old Light Programme; to listen to Radio Two today is to imagine oneself caught in a time-warp at around 1947.

Radio One had, and still has, a difficult if not impossible brief; as one writer has put it: 'It had to stave off all the moans and groans of the pop kinds left in the lurch by the crushing of the popular pirates, capture the Luxembourg listeners, suck in and flirt with the housewives, and provide a steady stream of hits, flim-flam, time checks and ninety-second news spots for factory and other workers.'[7] The writer continues: 'In order to maximize Radio One's audiences, few risks were taken; the aim was to serve "the centre of the market", at the expense of minority tastes. *It didn't matter if a consensus fun-loving middle group didn't actually exist*'[8] (My italics). Quite so; in trying to capture the whole audience for vernacular music the BBC ended up by not actually representing anyone. Only a member of a middle-class bureaucracy such as that which runs the BBC would have failed to recognize that, in using the word 'pop' as a blanket label for the whole of modern vernacular music, he is ignorantly conflating a large number of different ways of musicking, a large number of levels of seriousness, all of them valid for different social purposes, into one monolithic figment of his imagination. Trying to cater for the entire popular-music public at once is doubly

impossible, first through the very real diversity of identities and tastes which it represents, and secondly through the impossibility of any member of the management bureaucracy of a radio network knowing what those identities and tastes are, or even what is going on among the musicians, especially in view of the new developments that are always taking place. The addition, in the mid-1970s, of local commercial radio stations, authorized by the businessmen's government of the day, has added little; in their attempt to deliver as many listeners as possible to the advertisers, to whom commercial stations owe their first responsibility, they follow virtually identical policies to Radio One, forcing both into absurd and destructive ratings battles.

In these battles the choice of records is thought to be too important to leave to the deejays who actually introduce and play them, and this task is carried out by a committee of network executives who meet periodically, listen to all likely-seeming new records and decide which may be played on the air and which may not. Their criteria relate not only to what they think listeners are likely to enjoy but also to what might be too disturbing, too politically subversive, too sexually explicit and so on, and from these meetings emerges a 'playlist' of acceptable records. As Simon Frith points out, there is a good deal of circular argument in the compiling of playlists, since a record that does not get on to it is likely to be severely handicapped in the struggle for popularity and sales:

> 'Radio moulds as well as responds to public taste, and record companies respond to as well as mould the playlist. Field promoters may not be able to persuade programme directors to use airplay deliberately to benefit their company, but they can persuade them that their company is producing the sort of records that are *a means to the programme director's own ends*. The plugger's task is to convince a radio station that a record is right for its shows, *fits its ideology of entertainment*, meets the needs of its audience; and even if record companies have no direct control over the "gatekeepers" of the airwaves, their guesses at the pass-words are, nevertheless, well informed and routinely accurate'[9] (My italics).

We notice that in this process, not only are neither musicians nor listeners consulted, but also that decisions are made on what is played on the basis of criteria that seem to have little to do with the actual quality of the performances on the records. In the circumstances it is remarkable how much good music does get played on pop radio, even if one has to listen past the endless stream of mindless prattle, silly jokes and pointless phone-in competitions that are the deejay's stock in trade. It is scarcely surprising, considering that they have no say in the choice of records, to learn that most deejays have come to think of the records as mere interludes between episodes of their own self-presentation; in any case, they have probably learned to regard the job as only a stepping-stone on the way to the more glamorous task of hosting television shows. Only on obscure late-night programmes is one likely to encounter anything that sounds as if it is the result of genuine enthusiasm for the music itself, or any evidence of musical taste, of whatever kind, as opposed to guesses concerning the likely popularity of a record.

The effect of this has been to vitiate that social transaction which, as I have maintained throughout this book, is the real function of the musical act. It is not the musical performances themselves that are bad — on the contrary, it is surprising how often one's ears are caught by striking and often intense performances when one really listens to pop radio — but that there has been introduced into the transaction a third person, the deejay, whose relentless self-presentation, just as in a conversation, constantly gets in the way of the establishment of any real relationships, and of any exploration of values or of identity. The deejay's world is ahistorical, eventless except for rock concerts, sporting fixtures and the premieres of films and musicals, and populated by 'the stars' and their doings; it is impossible for human encounters of any significance to take place, or for social or political values to be expressed other than the most conventional of majority prejudices. It is a free-floating world, with no anchor in the real stuff of living — or of musicking — and it functions effectively to cancel out any reality in the encounter between the listeners and the records played. What official radio in Britain has done to the musical performances it presents is much like what the British food

industry has done to the products it purveys: it has removed anything that might make the encounter with them either nourishing or truly pleasurable, and in the attempt to make them look good has added elements that are actively detrimental in effect.

In this circular way, Afro-American musicking has been trivialized and rendered innocuous, its subversive potential defused, and even turned, as have the works of the older classical tradition in today's concert halls, to the service of the values of the modern state. Those who have assumed control of the airwaves, either for purposes of profit or because they believe it to be the state's right and duty to do so, have created a self-validating system to neutralize the fear with which those with a stake in the values of European industrialism and high culture regard Afro-American music. They call it 'giving the people what they want' but in fact it is a matter of giving the people all they are thought to deserve. It is not what they want but, rather, like convenience foods and denatured bread, it is all there is on offer; like those products, it still does offer something, even if it is only a relief to the tedium of a day's employment, or unemployment, and the counterfeit of community to soothe the loneliness of the citizen in the modern industrial state.

That it is not what people really want can be seen from the extensive musical culture, or, rather, network of cultures, that thrive without recourse to radio at all, but through the passing of news by word of mouth. As will be obvious, only a small proportion of the records that are issued are played on the radio; the Top Twenty, or Thirty, or Forty, production line which dominates the airwaves represents only a small segment of the total number of performances on record. Whole genres and styles, each representing a community and a set of values, are unrepresented, misrepresented, or only minimally represented, and the fact that among these can be found some of the best-selling records of their time testifies to the existence of an extensive network of enthusiasts, whose nature even the record companies' own distribution organizations do not fully understand.

When the music lovers themselves do take control of the airwaves the quality of the broadcasts is transformed. The

development of new technology in the last few years has meant that a VHF (FM) transmitter of reasonable power and quality can be bought for less than two hundred pounds, and need be no larger than a suitcase; this has meant that a new generation of pirates, operating very cheaply indeed with portable equipment from council flats and the roofs of high buildings, have braved the severe penalties for unauthorized broadcasting laid down by three acts of Parliament since 1948, in order to transmit programmes of their own choice. The official argument for such penalties, that too many stations will disrupt the workings of the emergency services, will not wash; in New York City alone there are over one hundred legal stations, seventy of them on FM. Those who engage in pirate broadcasting risk, at the very least, confiscation of their equipment; one community station in London had its transmitter confiscated thirty times in fifteen months, while another was raided nine times in five months. It requires a high level of commitment to continue broadcasting under such circumstances, and the motives of the broadcasters are various. Purely commercial motivation is rare, except among those who operate offshore stations, where the possibility of raids and shutdowns, which might deter possible advertisers, is remote; more common are the desires to broadcast alternative political viewpoints, to provide something for immigrant and foreign-language communities, or even to cock a snook at authority, but by far the commonest is enthusiasm for musical styles that are neglected or misrepresented by official radio. Most of the enthusiasts are broadcasting one form or another of Afro-American music — jazz, funk, reggae and associated styles, soul, soca, juju and hip hop — and they do it mostly without thought for profit. One such enthusiast describes the beginnings of their South London station thus: 'I loved the music and joined up with Tony from there. In the early days pirate radio was a lot different from now. There was no advertising and we all had a whip around of about 50 pence per week. We did it because we enjoyed doing it and liked entertaining people — there was no profit motive.'[10] There is, of course, no such thing as pure, contentless 'entertainment'; identity and values are always involved, even in the most mindless of television quiz shows,

and the extent of the commitment of this and other groups to the values affirmed by the broadcasting of their music shows through accounts of raids, arrests, fines, and confiscations of equipment, not to mention the hazards that are inherent in running a station on a shoestring. The operator I have just quoted added a significant comment, which shows how the action of the authorities serves to perpetuate the situation the pirates are trying to break: 'I feel the station went downhill when we started to take adverts in the late 1970s, *but we had to because we were being raided more often*.'[11] (My italics).

There was a freshness and a vitality about those stations after listening to conventional BBC or commercial radio which transformed the whole experience of radio listening; while their presentation was, given the conditions, mostly surprisingly professional there was an amateur enthusiasm which showed through whatever was broadcast, and they introduced this listener, at least, to new kinds and styles of music. While some of the exhilaration must have come from the pressures of working without proper technical backup on ramshackle equipment, not to mention the constant anticipation of the bang on the door, the principal pleasure came from hearing the recorded performances in a context that did not reduce them all to homogenized pap. But perhaps the main value of the pirate stations has been to enable a culture to speak to itself and for itself, rather than being spoken to and about, to say, This is who we really are, and not who you tell us, through official radio, that we are.

The struggle for the control of music radio is thus an aspect of a larger struggle in which all the media of information are involved; it is for the right to define oneself rather than to be defined, to speak for oneself rather than to be spoken about. That is the most basic of civil rights, from which all others stem, and it is that with which Afro-American musicking has been concerned from the moment whan an enslaved African first made a song in the new homeland. It is, of course, a question which is of concern not to black people only; we are all, black and white alike, coming under pressure from a state which is increasingly given to the imposition of identity upon its citizens, increasingly given to disrupting human relationships, increasingly able to impose its values on us. These are

ordeals which black people have been enduring for centuries, and the manner of their resistance has a liberating lesson for us all.

Those brought up in European and Euro-American culture find difficulty in particular with two of the fundamental assumptions of African culture which I mentioned in the first chapter: first, the idea that what Davidson calls 'the art of social happiness' is the supreme human art, to which all other arts, and the sciences also, must contribute, and secondly, the idea that the arts, and especially that great performance art of music-dance-drama-masking-costume for which we lack a name, are vital means by which human identities and relationships are explored, affirmed and celebrated, and human societies criticized. From the first of these two major ideas flow others: in particular, first, the unity, rather than the opposition, between the natural world and human life and action, that unity which unites opposites without the need for dialectical struggle, and, secondly, the importance of the community not just as a forum for individual striving but as the very origin and essential nourishment of individual identity and development and as the point of origin of all political power. Such ideas, were they to take root in Europe and America, or indeed anywhere else, would result in the dismantling of the great superstructures of power and their supporting structures of abstract knowledge and relentless competitive individualism; they thus present us with a powerful alternative to the values which support the modern state and which militate so grievously against the social happiness of most of the world's population. The second assumption, of course, is not unique to Africa, but it is without doubt there that it is most highly developed and best understood; it is the unique and precious contribution of Africans to human culture.

But African societies, though they have endured the depredations of the slavers and the ravages of colonialism, and finally the imposition by the retiring colonial powers of nation-state divisions that may have suited the latters' own convenience but have little to do with indigenous social realities, have not been subjected to the rigid disciplines of industrial development — except in the Republic of South

Africa, where, once they regain control of their country and of their lives, Africans may yet amaze the world. There is for that reason no way in which the musicking of Africans, even though in all its variety it presents such vivid images of community, of unity in opposites and of reciprocity, can engage with the concepts and concerns of the industrial state, its hierarchies, its rigid time sense, its competitiveness, its loneliness, its conformism and its denial of the body.

On the other hand, the people of the African diaspora have been intimately acquainted with the rational god for nearly five hundred years, far longer, as we have seen, than any other of the world's peoples, and their musicking and their dancing have been tools by means of which they have learned to confront the god and his monstrous system, and to survive. The history of musical development that I have sketched out in this book is the history of a people who have not merely attempted to preserve ancestral values but have engaged constantly with that system and its associated culture to find what they could use of it and what they could not. The answers to their probing, through the media of music and dance, have never been final or absolute, but always adapted to the time and to the situation, changing as circumstances changed, always in some degree oppositional (for total acquiescence meant spiritual death) and always based to some irreducible degree on African values and ways of musicking and of dancing. It would seem as if every single member of the African diaspora must work out his or her own accommodation to the dominant white industrial culture, and that accommodation can never be final or complete, but must be improvised day by day, like a musical performance, following the rules of the African inheritance. Many white people find that power of improvisation, and that inheritance, in life as in music, enviable.

We can now, finally, arrive at an answer to the question posed earlier, concerning the appeal possessed by this music of an underdog people which could make it reach out and span the world. The answer which I offer is that black people in the Americas, North and South, and in the Caribbean, have found ways of engaging, through their musicking and their dancing, with fundamental human questions of identity and

community which, as industrial states in our time become more oppressive, have become the vital questions which all of us must confront if we are to keep our power to say, This is who we are, and to explore, affirm and celebrate our sense of who we are, in relationships with our fellow humans that are not just the crude instrumental and exploitative relationships of industrialism. The tradition of western classical music, whatever it might once have been, can no longer serve us in this task, for its values have become completely identified with those of the state, and its musicians have become dependent for their livelihood on the very institutions which their art ought to criticize. Nor can the folk traditions of Europe or America, even those of the urban working class, provide the tools for the encounter with those great concerns of our time, for they are either ignorant of industrialism or else are so absorbed in its values that they can point to no alternatives but only protest, even if eloquently, at the injustices of the status quo.

We can see also the reason for the mixture of attraction and fear which each Afro-American musical style has in turn inspired in many white people, as well as for the love and joy it has inspired in countless others who have accepted the music's values and have been content to allow, as Albert Murray says, black American musicians to become 'models and ancestor figures'. Even those who have no direct contact with black people or comprehension of black experience have been able to find in the music an idiom and a set of values which they can encounter directly, without intermediaries. If the very openness and inclusiveness of the music has sometimes proved its undoing, rendering it, like the musicians who play it, liable to ruthless commercial exploitation, if some have grown rich and famous through abusing its values and offering to their listeners a mere counterfeit of the community which it celebrates, and if it even looks to some as if the whole tradition is submerged in money and in corruption, one can only point out, first, that no part of our society today is free from corruption (certainly not the classical tradition) and, second, that all the commercial activity, so visible, and audible, to the onlooker, in fact represents only a tiny fraction of the musicking that is going on at any time, not only in record

studios but in cafés, bars, living rooms, nightclubs, draughty garages, open spaces, dance halls, prisons, churches, by musicians professional and amateur, skilled and unskilled, formally trained and unschooled, famous and obscure, rich and poor, all working to bring into existence, in collaboration with their listeners, that ideal society, those relations between human beings, that can enable each one to feel, in a literal sense, in tune with all the others and with the world, to know the presence of a supporting community without which survival is not only not possible but not worth fighting for. Afro-American musicking is, in a word, about surviving; it may well be needed by all of us in the years that are to come.

NOTES

1. BLACKING, John: *How Musical Is Man?*, London, Faber & Faber, 1976, p 113.
2. SCHOENBERG, Arnold: 'New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea', in STEIN, Leonard (ed): *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, transl. by Leo Black, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, p 124.
3. quoted in JOHNSON, Pauline: *Marxist Aesthetics: The Foundations Within Everyday Life for an Emancipated Consciousness* London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p 91.
4. SWEETING, Adam: 'The Longest Players of Them All', *The Guardian*, Saturday, 18 January, 1986, p 13.
5. FRITH, Simon: *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock'n'Roll*, London, Constable, 1983, p 104.
6. GILLETT, Charlie: *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll*, London, Souvenir Press, revised edition 1983, p 153.
7. HIND, John and MOSCO, Stephen: *Rebel Radio: The Full Story of British Pirate Radio*, London, Pluto Press, 1985, p 15.
8. *ibid.*, p 16.
9. FRITH, Simon: *op. cit.*, p 120.
10. HIND, John and MOSCO, Stephen: *op. cit.*, p 22.
11. *ibid.*, p 22.

This page intentionally left blank