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what is in a sound?

the metaphysics and politics of music in The Amen Corner

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This ferment, this disturbance, is the responsibility and the necessity, of writers. It is, alas, the truth that to be an American writer today means mounting an unending attack on all that Americans believe themselves to hold sacred. It means fighting an astute and agile guerrilla warfare with that American complacency which so inadequately masks the American panic. —*James Baldwin*

My models—my private models—are not
Hemingway, not Faulkner, not Dos Passos, or indeed
any American writer. I model myself on jazz
musicians, dancers, a couple of whores and a few junkies.
—*James Baldwin*

"The Blues Is Man"

In almost all his work, James Baldwin aspires to become what he views as the supreme artist, namely, the musician—in particular the blues singer.[1] Further, Baldwin seems to have felt a link between his vision of himself as "the incorrigible disturber of the peace" ("The Creative Process," 316) and music, the medium traditionally perceived as the ideal subversive art, the one that eludes the control of mind and

rationality to appeal directly to passions and emotions, even instincts, in order to liberate them. Baldwin's crusade against the established moral order and the ideological apparatuses that support it, with music as his primary weapon, does not seem a lonely crusade or an isolated incident if examined in the broader context of the traditional hostility between the philosopher, the statesman, the ideologue, or the doctrinaire on the one hand, and the musician, the singer, the dancer, or the artist on the other. This hostility is articulated in Plato's *Republic,* where the philosopher declares his distrust of music, primarily due to its uncontrollable effect on human passions and emotions.

In this chapter, I will examine Baldwin's concept of music and its power, as depicted in his 1955 play *The Amen Corner,* in the broader context of the philosophical debate over the uneasy relationship between music and ideology or religion.[2] Before discussing the role that African American music plays in *The Amen Corner* in subverting repressive realities and ultimately liberating the major characters, I will situate Baldwin's concept of music in the traditional philosophical battle between music and ideology. Two confluent themes in *The Amen Corner,* white oppression and repressive religious puritanism, seem to make music the only medium that constantly eludes the reach of repression for Baldwin. In this context, it is illuminating to read Baldwin's characterization of music as subversion in the clash between music and proscriptive systems of morality and ideology. At the same time, this broader context will help highlight the universality and existentiality of Baldwin's vision of music as the archetypal medium of boundless humanity.

In his seminal work *The Philosopher and Music: An Historical Outline,* Julius Portnoy concludes his systematic study of traditional philosophical views of music and the musician by emphasizing the moral philosopher's perennial fear of the effect of music:

> The philosopher has persistently believed throughout history, with few exceptions, that music without words is inferior to music with words. It is the embodiment of emotion in tone and rhythm that awakens in us feelings that the composer felt to some degree when producing the music. But the philosopher is never sure that feelings can be trusted. He insists that words added to music conceptualize feeling, make the indefinite definite, and move the art of music from the lower level of emotion to the exalted plane of reason. (5)

Moral philosophers, ideologues, religious leaders, and doctrinaires—including Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Luther, Kant,

Descartes, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Cotton Mather, William James, and Allan Bloom—all rationalize, in distinct ways, their fear and distrust of music and the musician.[3] Aware of music's power over humans, Plato in the *Republic* distrusts pure melody, which he sees as lacking specific meaning. According to Plato, the danger of music lies in its very nature. Rhythm and harmony "most of all insinuate themselves into the innermost part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it in bringing grace with them; and they make a man graceful if he is correctly reared [in music], if not, the opposite" (80). Significantly, Plato warns the overseers of the Republic of music's decisive political power: "For never are the ways of music moved without the greatest political laws being removed." In order to contain music's unwanted effect, Plato insists on imposing words on music to make it make sense (90; 101–2; 77–78). Naturally, the act of making sense, the choice of words, the very nature of meaning, and the established concept of reason are all symptoms of the dominant ideology that ultimately determine the acceptable discourse. Likewise, Aristotle is keenly aware of the unlimited power of music in his *Politics* and he raises doubts and fears concerning music and its spiritual and educational value. "Music," he says, "has a power of forming the character, and should therefore, be introduced into the education of the young." But because music can affect all human passions, whether noble or ignoble, he distrusts its unrestricted effect in education (1306–12). More significantly, the father of Western theology, Saint Augustine, in his *Confessions* (c. 400), warns the faithful against the inherent sexual and erotic appeal of even religious music and songs (261–62).

In *The Amen Corner,* more than in any other of his works, Baldwin captures this rivalry and hostility between religious leaders and church musicians, let alone secular musicians in the street. As far as I know, no evidence exists that Baldwin was aware of the debate between the moral philosopher and the musician that permeates Western philosophy and culture. But that is not relevant, as many thinkers and critics have shown convincingly that writers are naturally influenced by cultural, historical, and even archetypal forces that they may be unaware of. In this context, Roland Barthes's concept of intertextuality in his *Image, Music, Text* (1977) proves illuminating: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing theological meaning (the 'message' of the 'author-God') but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (146). Accordingly, Baldwin's quarrel—and that of his musician- or his music-

loving characters—with the established ideology is in fact one battle in the ongoing war between the musician and the ideologue. The clash with the church, reason, mind, conventions, morality, and rationality can be seen as one front in the struggle of the spirit, or the soul, as it is fully reflected in music, against the tyranny of rationality and ideology. Baldwin's well-known experimentation with bluesification or jazzification of fiction and style thus may be understood as genuine and ingenious attempts at liberating the soul from what he views as one of the ideological grids, the prison-house of language.

Baldwin's titles indicate how much his vision is informed by his interest in music, especially African American music. Titles such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *The Amen Corner* (1955), "Sonny's Blues" (1957), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1979) all, with their evident allusions to traditional African American songs, inform the faith and trust Baldwin has put in the subversive, liberatory, and counter-spiritual power of African American music. In many of his essays and interviews, Baldwin underscores the spiritual role that music plays in sustaining and empowering African Americans in their struggle. In the 1951 essay "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin points to the multifaceted power of music as a mask, as a subversive weapon, as a narrative for a story that language cannot grasp, and as a system of symbols and signs:

> It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear. As is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence; and the story is told, compulsively, in symbols and signs, in hieroglyphics. (*Price of the Ticket* 65)

This masking that music provides—simultaneously a subversive technique and a liberating force for the silenced—later is accentuated by Baldwin in a 1972 interview with Nikki Giovanni:

> What we call black literature is really summed up for me by the whole career, let's say, of Bessie Smith, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, because that's the way it's been handed down. . . . We had to smuggle information, and we did it through our music and we did it in the church. (Giovanni and Baldwin 75)

Another essential component of the ideal condition of the blues, as Baldwin defines it, is its ability to make people learn, mature, and ultimately gain wisdom from suffering, which may be seen as the blues connection to the Biblical concept of suffering as a way to wisdom. The problem with religion, according to Baldwin, is that it frightens people and forces them to hide in a self-deluding myth of eternal safety. "There is something monstrous about never having been hurt, never having been made to bleed, never having lost anything, never having gained anything because life is beautiful and in order to keep it beautiful you're going to stay just the way you are and you're not going to test your theory against all the possibilities outside" ("The Uses of the Blues" 131–32). By contrast, the blues experience, as Baldwin sees it, is clear-eyed and sardonic in the face of harsh realities. Baldwin's blues artist, in many ways reminiscent of Nietzsche's subversive Dionysian musician,[4] is not afraid that he has no hopes. "Ray Charles, who is a great tragic artist, makes of a genuinely religious confession something triumphant and liberating. He tells us that he cried so loud he gave the blues to his neighbor next door" ("The Uses of the Blues" 241).

Even before he lost faith in formal religion and left the church in 1942, Baldwin discovered that he was a natural verbal improviser when he gave sermons:

> I would improvise from the texts, like a jazz musician improvises from a theme. I never wrote a sermon—I studied the texts. I've never written a speech. I can't read a speech. It's kind of give and take. You have to sense the people you're talking to. You have to respond to what they hear. (Sandley and Pratt 234–35)

Moreover, it was music—not religion or literature or the consolation of philosophy—that helped Baldwin reconcile himself to his African American heritage and eventually inspired him to write his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain:*

> There [in Switzerland], in that absolutely alabaster landscape, armed with two Bessie Smith records and a typewriter, I began to try to recreate the life that I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight.
>
> It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and her cadence, who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny, and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep. I have never listened to Bessie Smith in Amer-

> ica (in the same way that, for years I would not touch watermelon), but in Europe she helped to reconcile me to being a "nigger." (*The Price of the Ticket* 172)

On many other occasions, Baldwin describes his performance as a writer of fiction in terms of music, especially African American music. Without claiming any knowledge of music as an art, Baldwin nevertheless continues describing himself as a "blues singer" or "jazz musician" and hopes that readers receive his fiction as they would hear black music. "I would like to think that some of the people who liked it [*Another Country* (1962)] responded to it in the way they respond when Miles [Davis] and Ray [Charles] are blowing" (Campbell 181). With the typical hostility of the musician toward ideology and intellectuality, Baldwin often protests "I am not an intellectual . . . and do not want to be" (Campbell 181). Literary critics, Baldwin once declared, can make sense only "[w]hen I understand that they understand Ray Charles" (Giovanni and Baldwin 84). In an interview with Quincy Troupe a few months before Baldwin died in 1987, he states that in his last novel, *Just Above My Head* (1978), he attempts to face his "own legends," that is, the deep down spaces he has been scared to venture into. And in this Orphic descent into hell, music acts as both his guide and guardian: "The key to one's life is always in a lot of unexpected places. I tried to deal with what I was most afraid of. That's why the vehicle of the book is music. Because music was and is my salvation" (Troupe 26).

In Baldwin's mind, as his statements suggest, music is associated with liberation, security, mystical power, self-reconciliation, a more democratic divine power, unrestricted humanism, and sexuality that is inseparable from spirituality. Early in his life when Baldwin was under his religious father's control, secular African American music seems to have heightened his awareness of his individuality, of the world outside the church and Harlem, and thus legitimized his rebellion against father and church and any stifling ideologies, whether religious or nationalistic (Leeming 18). His new love was art, not religion:

> Beauford Delaney's small studio with a black stove and paintings everywhere and music always playing—the kind of music Baldwin's stepfather would never have in the house was part of the Harlem culture—Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, all the greats of the twenties and thirties—became a second home for Jimmy Baldwin. (Weatherby 30)