

"The Expressiveness of African-American Music"  
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## **JAZZ AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE:**

### **THE EXPRESSIVENESS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC**

**Bill E. Lawson**

#### ***CIVIL RIGHTS AND CIVIL ARTS***

In the mid to late 1960s, expressions of unity and racial solidarity became the hallmark of the civil rights struggle in the United States. Young black activists began to see the political struggle in nationalistic terms.<sup>1</sup> Groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party put pressure on various segments of the African-American community to cite their contribution to the political struggle in the United States. African-American artists were not exempted. They were called upon to explain the value of their "art" in these "revolutionary" times. Black artists faced two difficulties: first, artistic standards historically have been set by the larger white community and these most often had been antithetical to the experiences of black people. Second, many black artists had adopted the view that art should be separated from politics.<sup>2</sup> That is, art should not be conceived of as an ideological weapon.

As the civil rights struggle surged forward the position of "art for art's sake" was replaced with the view that black art should and could make either a statement about the black experience and/or raise consciousness through cultural awareness.<sup>3</sup> This challenge was picked up by visual artists such as Dana Chandler, Akua McDaniel, David Hammonds, Bill Walker, Faith Ringgold, and groups like AFRO-COBRA. We find this approach in the works of poets such as Don Lee, Sonja Sanchez, Mari Evans; novelists like John L. Williams, Toni Cade Bambara, and Ishmael Reed; and singers like Nina Simone, Terry Callier and Oscar Brown, Jr. What the visual artists, poets, writers and singers shared was the ability to communicate certain images (or information) through their work. Thus, much of the art by black Americans in the 1960s and 1970s was seen in part as an attempt to foster a sense of transcendent identity by raising the black American's self-image and awareness of cultural roots.<sup>4</sup> Was the jazz musician part of this cultural awareness process?

As early as the mid 1940s, young jazz musicians - Parker, Miles, and Monk - attempted to challenge the musical status quo. With the spread of black nationalism in the 1960s and the rise of the avant-garde jazz movement, jazz was also seen as challenging the political status quo as well.<sup>5</sup> As a part of this challenge, many of the compositions of

Archie Shepp, Grachan Moncur III, and Pharaoh Sanders, for example, used elements of the African-American musical style.<sup>6</sup> While the music lacked visual images or lyrics,<sup>7</sup> one of two claims were often made about the music. First, one could use the music as a spring board to discuss the African-American experience. That is, one could play a recording of Charles Mingus and learn something about the black musical tradition or at least some of its basic elements. For example, if we listen to Mingus's "*Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting*", we could cite the elements of the black musical tradition embodied in the piece: field hollers, call and response, and a strong bass line. We could even talk about the socio-logical and historical context out of which the composition arises. For this composition we could cite the history of the black church and its role in the black community. We could even discuss the black gospel tradition in all forms of black music. All of the above, of course, presupposes that the person discussing the composition has the necessary musical/historical/sociological background to articulate the various musical and sociological elements. Mingus's music and much of jazz, according to this view, expressed the black experience.

There is another much more controversial claim made about the music: that just by listening to the music one can have one's consciousness raised or that one can come to know something about black culture. Thus one could hear persons claim that if you want to know about the black experience listen to recordings of the music of Coltrane, Charlie Parker, or Miles. In an interesting article in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Robert Francesconi writes that while there is an absence of lyrical content, the Free Jazz Movement played a distinctly rhetorical role through its conscious development of associations between the community and the cultural and musical heritage of the victims of colonial power around the world.<sup>7</sup> Non lyrical jazz communicates cultural awareness and/or it raises consciousness. The claim is often made that even without lyrics, jazz can communicate information about the black experience to someone who has little or no knowledge of the experience. We are never told how the music communicates this "knowledge" and that is the issue I want to explore in this essay.

### ***COMMUNICATING THE BLACK EXPERIENCE***

Two questions immediately come to mind: First, what is meant by raising consciousness and second, what aspect of African-American culture is represented in the music? It is this second question that will be the focus here.

Can non-lyrical jazz compositions give cultural awareness to the uninitiated listener? But what do we mean by cultural awareness? It could mean a number of things but let us consider two possible meanings. First, by listening to the music one gets a greater appreciation of the culture of African-Americans. Second, the music provides knowledge and/or information about some aspect of the African-American experience.

Let's consider whether Sonny Rollin's **Freedom Suite** has this ability. This composition is important in the history of jazz. It is often cited as one of the earliest tunes that captured the changing perspective of jazz musicians in the civil rights movement. It serves our purpose well because it is well known by jazz lovers, but obscure enough that

younger listeners would have a difficult time identifying it. What does this piece communicate about the African-American experience? Suppose we were to play this recording for a group of college students who had never heard it. What information would they get about the black experience just by listening to it? We could provide background information about the composition and in that way give them some information about the black experience. but they will not be getting it from the music.

Suppose we slowly give them bits of information about the recording. The first bit of information we give them is that the leader of the group is Sonny Rollins. Unless they were jazz fans that information would not direct their attention to some event in the black experience. They might even ask if Rollins was black.

Next we tell them that this particular session was recorded on the **Riverside Record** label. Jazz buffs will no doubt know that in the late 1950s and early 1960s Riverside Records recorded some of the greatest jazz musicians. Thelonious Monk, Wynton Kelly, Kenny Dorham, Ernie Henry, Abbey Lincoln, Art Blakey, Cannonball Adderly, and Johnny Griffin all recorded on Riverside. But would our students know this? If they knew some jazz history they might know that Riverside was an important jazz label.

Does the composition of the group give them any more information about what the music is supposed to communicate? The group consists of tenor saxophone, drums and bass. One inquiring person might want to know why is there no piano and which instrument does Rollins play. We tell them that Rollins plays tenor saxophone and has recorded well-known albums: **Way out West**, **The Bridge**, and **Tenor Madness** with John Coltrane. We could tell them that Rollins had played with Max Roach and Clifford Brown. We now add that this record was recorded in 1958. They could ruminate about events that took place in 1958 and then try to guess which event is supposedly depicted by the music. But how would they know if they had the right event? 1958 was four years after Brown v. Board of Education and Ghana had become the first independent African state. The year before (1957) President Eisenhower had sent troops to Little Rock. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been stabbed in the chest by a crazed woman in Harlem. Would they be able just from listening to the music alone to know more about the black experience? I don't think so.

Proponents of the "jazz as communication" position could, of course, propose that it did not express any event of 1958. Could this piece really be about the total history of African-Americans and not about one particular event? Would more information about the recording be helpful?

Perhaps the title would help? We now tell them that the composition is titled "**The Freedom Suite**." Have they been misled? Does Rollins mean artistic freedom, political freedom or freedom in the context of the civil rights struggle? Perhaps Rollins' words on the liner notes will help. He wrote on the liner notes to the Freedom Suite the following short paragraph:

"America is deeply rooted in Negro culture: its colloquialism, its humor, its music. How ironic that the Negro, who more than any other people can claim America's culture as his

own, is being persecuted and repressed, that the Negro, who has exemplified the humanities in his very existence, is being rewarded with inhumanity." Is the music supposed to express this thought? It might be objected that since Rollins' composition is about his feelings about the "black experience", we might have difficulty knowing what he meant. What we need is a piece that draws from some cultural event in the black experience.

There are, it must be admitted, numerous recordings, that have titles that draw on some event in the black American experience. John Coltrane's **Song of the Underground Railroad** comes immediately to mind. Would our college students know that this composition drew its title from the underground railroad just by listening to the music?

We have the same problem with Coltrane's recording that we have with the **Freedom Suite**. Upon hearing the recording, we still don't know to what aspect of the black experience our attention should be directed. Once told the title one may be able to by conjecture hear Elvin Jones' drum work as the driving sound of a train. In order to make such a claim, one must assume that one does not have direct awareness of music as much as one has awareness of an event or experience which is brought to mind by the music serving as the intermediary between one's awareness and the event. Furthermore, one must assume that an event, say, the "black experience" and the music serving as its representation "resemble" each other. Thus, one can also make the "black experience" the intermediary representation of one's awareness of the music, such that one's awareness of the music is dependent upon how the music is figured or configured by means of the "black experience".

But what happens if two persons disagree about what the recording represents. Is there some third person that can tell them how it is that they both missed the message? Those persons who want to do sociology of music think that there is a clear perspective from which to view or hear the music. They will tell you that the music expresses the struggle of blacks in America. Accordingly, you can hear the black experience in the music. Jazz, on this view, draws on the experiences of blacks, captures these experiences and represents them in music.

Clearly, all of the following compositions draw on events from the black experience: Albert Ayler's **Drudgery**, Max Roach's **Driva Man**, Charles Mingus' **Meditations on Integration**, and Billy Harper's **Trying to Make Heaven My Home**. But the claim is not that the composers drew their titles or even their inspiration from events in the black experience, but that their music alone gives us information about the "black experience".

### ***OPPRESSION AND RACISM IN MUSIC***

Let's suppose that what is meant is that the music communicates "the struggle of blacks against political oppression and racism." That is, any piece of music by a black composer expresses this struggle. Thus, we should hear this struggle in Curtis Fuller's composition **Alamode** recorded by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. We should hear this struggle in Chico Freeman's **For the Peaceful Heart and the Gentle Spirit** and Miles Davis'

**Milestone.** When I listen to these recordings I don't hear the struggle against political oppression and racism. I hear good music played by Blakey, Freeman, and Davis. Well, it might be countered that I really don't appreciate these pieces or that I don't know how to listen to them or what to listen for. My response would be: tell me how to hear "the struggle against political oppression and racism" in **Milestones**.

There are different aspects of the "black experience". Can all of the various aspect of the "black experience" be expressed in each piece? I don't think so. Thus, not every piece could be expected, e.g., to express oppression. Further, I doubt that these pieces express racism.

Those persons who want to do sociology of music will claim to know what the music represents or does not represent. These individuals are often thought to be giving the politically correct perspective from which to listen to the music. One can, of course, suggest a sociological perspective from which to judge music. One can claim that the music expresses "the struggle against political oppression and racism" and that's how we should approach our listening of all black music. It is clear, however, that this is taking a perspective to the music. It is not hearing it expressed by the music. We still do not get the perspective just by listening to the music.

### ***ETHNICITY AND RACE IN MUSIC***

It may be objected here that while I am correct about the music not expressing an experience, what one hears is the ethnicity or race of the performer. That is, you can hear the blackness in the playing (performance of the piece). I find this claim interesting, but after having listened to Japanese and European musicians play jazz and not knowing the race or ethnicity of the performer until someone told me, I have given up on trying to "get" race from the performance. I am not claiming that someone might not be able to hear "race" in the music. There may be persons who can pick out musicians by race just by listening to their playing of an instrument. These individuals have the ability to hear musically race in the way a Japanese chicken sexer can identify the sex of baby chicks by sight. Most of us, unfortunately, lack this ability.

### ***BLACK AND EUROPEAN STYLES***

What is really meant, it might be claimed, is that it is the structure of the music that expresses the black experience. There is white or European classical music and then there is black music. Not only are their musical styles different, but black musicians (particularly free jazz musicians) say something all together different with their music. Francesconi thinks that the methods in which black musicians used harmony, melody, nature of the instrumental selection, and rhythm provide a counter to western musical traditions.<sup>8</sup> He, for example, writes about harmony and melody that "through the system of chords and their tonic relationship, harmony was the dominant characteristic of European art music from 1650 until the early twentieth century. On the other hand, African and other non-western music place an emphasis upon the development of melody uncontrolled by any necessary harmonic system.

This seemingly simple statement of opposites defines the nature of this musical dialectic."<sup>9</sup> He contends that "as black nationalist rhetoric defined the black American community in terms apart from the white world, free jazz adopted this stance in musical terms by associating the unfamiliar stylistic elements of their music with non-European musical practices."<sup>10</sup> Yet, he notes that to understand the meaning in instrumental music "presumes some familiarity with the stylistic conventions of that music on the part of the listener."<sup>11</sup> Thus our students would not know what the music meant if they were not familiar with the jazz or classical idiom at all.

Perhaps, what is meant is that there are notes that express the black experience. Which musical notes express the black experience? Is there a note that expresses political oppression or racism? Rahsaan Roland Kirk plays only the black piano keys on his recording of his composition **Blacknuss**. Is there some special relationship between the black keys and the black experience? We may be able to tell a story about Kirk's view on the relationship of jazz to the black experience, but we will not hear it just by listening to his non-lyrical music.

Kirk does, however, tell us at the beginning of **Blacknuss** that he was only going to play the black notes. What the artist has to say about a composition can, of course, give some of us insight into what inspired the artist to compose a certain composition. We are given this type of information in the liner notes of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers recording **The Freedom Rider**. Blakey plays an extended drum solo which Nat Hentoff tells us is meant to "represent" "the defiance of racism and pride in the persistence of "the movement" to end segregation through mass, direct action". I must admit that I did not hear all of this in Blakey's drum solo, while I did know that the composition was Blakey's homage to the Freedom Riders. I do not think that our college students would know (given the sad state of secondary education) what the piece represents or expresses even if they were told the title or just heard the recording.

### ***OTHER CONSIDERATIONS***

Two other concerns arise in any discussion of jazz expressing the black experience: First, jazz, as most music, can be appreciated for itself without any understanding of the history of the piece or the intention of the composer. For example, one can enjoy **A Love Supreme** by John Coltrane and know nothing about the life of John Coltrane. I met a young alto saxophone player when I was in grad school who had never heard Charlie Parker play the alto saxophone. I took him to the school's record library and played **Parker's Mood** and **Ornithology** for him. He straight away appreciated Parker's playing. Yet he knew nothing about Parker's life or the impact of Parker on the history of jazz. His appreciation of the music was presentational rather than representational. That is, he had access to the music directly not as an intermediary. This signifies an aural awareness and appreciation of the music on its own terms alone. Charlie Parker's playing on alto sax is just excellent playing. Second, what does the role of improvising in jazz play in communicating the black experience through music? Improvising is often cited as the heart of jazz. Improvising is performing according to spontaneous fancy, not from memory or from written copy, though often a performer improvises 'on' (i.e. round about)

a given tune. Since in theory, no improvised piece should sound the same each time it is played, one wonders if it would "express" or "represent" the same act, event, experience or evoke the same emotional response at these different performances. Are we to conclude that the different versions of Coltrane's **My Favorite Things** give different information about the "black experience"?

### *THE INFORMATION IN MONK'S MUSIC*

I find Thelonious Monk's music very expressive. When I listen to Monk's music I often smile or chuckle. Listen, for example, to Monk's choppy version of **Smokes Gets In Your Eyes** or his own compositions like **Misterioso** or **Rootie Tootie**. When I hear these compositions, I think of a man willing to break what some people thought were the musical rules. Monk was a man who took chances with his music. Monk was also criticized for playing the same tunes for 40 years. Monk died in 1982. He had played in the early 40s with Dizzy, Bird and Kenny Clarke at the formation of bebop. At his death, he was still playing his compositions that were written in the forties. He did play the same tunes over and over again. So what! Monk had style. When Monk died I took a tape player and some recordings of Monk's music to my philosophy class and talked about his importance to the development of modern music. I even took piano lessons so I could play **Straight, No Chaser** and normally when I am at work in my office there is some tune of Monk's playing. I like Monk's music and I like the feelings his music evokes in me. I think that Monk's music is expressive. I find Monk's playing humorous. His music evokes a humorous response from me. It causes me to smile. And this response to the expressiveness of his music has nothing to do with my knowledge about Monk's life. When I think of his life I am disheartened and become sad. His music is not his life. People often claim that we can't separate the two, but that is not true. It is true that the background information we have about an individual's life can affect the response we will have toward his or her music and the effect the music will have on us. Sometimes so much background information and faulty sociological assumptions are given, which it is claimed is needed to understand the social significance of the music, that the beauty of the music as music is destroyed.

In the case of Monk's music, I have background information that enables me to understand Monk's playing in a certain way. I know about his so-called eccentric behavior. I know about his sense of humor in his social dealing and, having read literature on his compositions, I know what skill went into writing them. Thus, my claim that Monk's music evokes a certain response from me could be understood by understanding my relationship to Monk's music. But I enjoyed listening to Monk's music well before I had any knowledge of his life and musical abilities. I liked the way his music sounded and that was it. I did not learn about the black experience by listening to Monk's music. Nor was I driven to learn about the "black experience" by listening to his music.

There is no rhetorical information about the "black experience" in Monk's music. His musical compositions are just that, musical compositions. His musical compositions are not literary texts. One does not read them in the manner one reads a book and as such

they don't communicate any information. Writers on the black experience may want to view the music as a communicational system, but this is misguided. To talk about the music expressing some truth or communicating some information is to talk metaphorically. These metaphors have never been fleshed out.. Let's cite one more example: John Coltrane's "**Alabama**" on his *Live at Birdland album*. The liner notes read:

If you have heard Slow Dance or After the Rain. then you might be prepared for the kind of feeling that Alabama carries: I didn't realize until now what a beautiful word Alabama is. That is one function of an, to reveal beauty, common or uncommon, uncommonly. And that's what Trane does. Bob Theiele asked Trane if the title "had any significance to today 's problems." I suppose he meant literally. Coltrane answered, "it represents, musically, something that I saw down there translated into music from inside me." Which is to say, listen. And what we're given is a slow delicate introspective sadness, almost hopelessness, except for Elvin [Jones], rising in the background like something out of nature . . . a fattening thunder, storm clouds or jungle war clouds. The whole is a frightening emotional portrait of some place, in these musicians' feelings. If that "real" Alabama was the catalyst, more power to it, and it may be this beautiful, even in its destruction. 12

If we put the piece in a historical context, we will remember that the recording was made after a church bombing in Alabama left four young black girls dead. The culprits have never been brought to justice. Coltrane was saddened by what happened in Alabama.

The liner notes were written by Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones). Baraka thinks Alabama will evoke the emotion of sadness. That Baraka thinks that this composition has the potential to evoke the emotional response of sadness tells us more about Baraka than it does about what the music is thought to impart about the black experience. It is not surprising then that "Alabama" would evoke the emotion of sadness from Baraka. He knows the history of the piece and relates it to what happened in Alabama. Would our college students feel sadness and think about what happened in Alabama when they hear this composition? In some listeners it may evoke a response of sadness, in other listeners it may not. Without some background information it is unclear that their attention would be directed towards the state of Alabama or some negative aspect of African-American history. Without the relevant background information, it is unclear that our college students would have a greater appreciation of the culture of African Americans or have information about some aspect of the African-American Experience.

### ***CONCLUDING REMARKS***

Finally, nothing said here should be taken to imply or should be inferred to imply that black music is not important in the lives of black people. Nothing said here negates the fact that black music has been one of America's many cultural gifts to the world. Neither does it follow that because non lyrical music does not convey information, it has no value as an element in the black experience. Non lyrical jazz pieces, even if they do not give direct information about the black experience, still perform an important function in the

lives of blacks. Indeed, jazz had tremendous impact on the evolution of the music of the world. In the end, black music can be enjoyed solely for its musical qualities alone and need not be the messenger of the black experience. This important fact should always be remembered by those persons who attempt to do both sociology of music and aesthetics.<sup>13</sup>

Dr. Bill E. Lawson  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Memphis  
Memphis TN 38152

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## NOTES

1. Alphonso Pinkney, **Red, Black, and Green: Black Nationalism in the United States**

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2. Ibid., pp. 76- 80.

3. Ibid., chapter 7.

4. The Black Panther Party denounced cultural nationalists, calling them "pork-chop" nationalists. Ibid., p. 123.

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6. Kofsky, Frank. **Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music** (New York: Pathfinder

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7. Robert Francesconi, "Free Jazz and Black Nationalism: A Rhetoric of Musical Style", in

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8. Ibid., p. 40.

9. Ibid., p. 41.

10. Ibid., p.40.

11. Ibid., p, 40,

12. John Coltrane **Live at Birdland Impulse** AS 50.

13. An earlier version of this paper was read at the Oxford Centre for African Studies, Oxford,

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