

Who Put the “I” in Jazz? Understanding the Cultural Frontiers of Jazz Music

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the binary oppositions that have played key roles in shaping Jazz music. These include black/white, individualism/collectivism, oral/written traditions, and commodification/tradition. By identifying these dichotomies as important points of cultural intersection, this paper aims to demonstrate that jazz music has remained a relevant art form because it has evolved from discords that have been constantly at odds with one another, and have forced one another to move into new directions. This paper intends to demonstrate that jazz music cannot be narrowly defined as the product of one culture, but rather is the product of cultural hybridity.

Keywords: jazz, music, cultural dichotomies, cultural hybridity, oral and written traditions, cultural intersections, African-American culture, American culture

Introduction

From the books, paintings, films, and numerous other genres it has influenced, jazz music has created a profound cultural influence that can be found throughout the world. The significance of this influence derives from the fact that it has never evolved from one voice, but rather a symphony of influences that have traditionally coalesced between Euro-American and African-American cultures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This unique byproduct has always been a dynamic musical genre with multiple cultural influences, which have often circulated around each other, forcing the other to adopt new shapes and move into profoundly new dimensions. The intent of this paper is not to explain the history of jazz music in America—certainly more thorough accounts have already been written. Instead, it involves attempts to explain the significance of these multifaceted interrelationships by identifying and examining

the key points of intersection, or binary oppositions, that have played important roles in shaping this relevant musical form. While the complicated relationship between black and white cultures is certainly the most obvious point of entry into examining this interrelationship, this paper will also scrutinize how smaller dichotomies like individualism/collectivism, oral/written traditions, and commodification/tradition operate within the greater black/white discord to make jazz music a momentous contributor and reflector of American culture.

Individualism/Collectivism

Since its inception, individualism has played a key role in shaping the political, social, spiritual, and economic institutions of American society. At the time of its formation, European settlers fled from what they believed to be political, economic, and religious oppression in Europe. They were inspired by the concept of individual liberty that thrived during the French Revolution and framed many of their political and social institutions to protect the rights of individual autonomy and self-reliance. While it would be naïve to assume that all Euro-Americans were homogeneous and adopted the same individualistic identity, individual freedom became a key theme in many of the philosophical writings, literature, music, and art that shaped American culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Therefore, it is important to note that the concept of individualism is synonymous with the white, occidental philosophical tradition because it “consist[s] of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent collectives... [that are] motivated by their own preferences, needs, [and] rights” (Triandis, 1995, p. 2).

Like Euro-Americans, African slaves did not come to America with a cultural blank slate, and they were not a homogeneous group. They brought centuries of culture and tradition with them from the *Ashanti*, *Baoule*, *Fanti*, *Fon*, *Hausa*, *Jolof*, *Mandingo*, and *Yoruba* people (Floyd, 1995, p. 38), and spoke a multitude of languages and dialects (Lee, 2007, p. 17). Communication must have been difficult but not impossible because many slaves had already learned a form of pidgin English at slave trading posts in the British West Indies (Lee, 2007, p. 18). This desire to communicate and share a common bond derives from the collectivist attitude, which emphasizes communal identity and gives priority to the goals of the collective over those of the individual (Triandis, 1995, p. 2). It was this sense of collectivist identity that drove African slaves to create new rituals and music that, while sharing some common characteristic with West African culture, was completely original.

Congo Square in New Orleans is arguably the birthplace of jazz music because as early as the eighteenth century, slaves were given Sundays off to congregate with free

slaves and dance, sing, and make music as a form of celebration and community solidarity. Although many witnesses claimed the music to be African in nature, the music itself was a hybrid of African, Caribbean, and European sounds. When French architect Benjamin Latrobe heard this “miserably dull” music for the first time he claimed that it was “in some African language for it was not French” (as cited in Burns, para. 9), but what Latrobe failed to grasp was that this music was not of any specific location. It was, in fact, the music of displaced people who were in the process of creating their own sound and ritual. The music was so negatively received by most of its white audience that it is rare to find a positive description of the scene, as most accounts describe the practices as “uncouth” and “savage” (Lee, 2007, p. 12). According to Jones, the source of this intolerance to the music does not stem from the fact that its participants possessed any less technical skill than European musicians, but rather the white audience was using European standards to judge the validity of the music (Jones, 1970, p.17).

One of the most obvious of these differences would be the performers’ use of the circle shuffle in their music. The circle is a very important shape among collectivist cultures, as it not only represents community and strength, but also inclusion and equality in the ritual. The dancers who surrounded the musicians were not dancing in passive response to the music, but instead were participating in its creation because, as Ben Sidran (1971) points out, African cultures made “no distinction between the ‘artist’ and the ‘audience’” (p. 8); the two were, in fact, one cohesive and inseparable unit. As the dancers began to increase their rhythms, the musicians quickly responded; if the musicians slowed down their tempos, the dancers seamlessly reacted to the variation. Western audiences could not make sense of this chaos because the concept of the artist as a working professional who sold his skills to his audience was a Western phenomenon. Furthermore, the notion of collective improvisation could not exist in an individualistic culture, because the idea of improvised music, like Beethoven’s and Paganini’s, was considered to be the art of the most skilled composer. Slave music, however, like African music before it, was a “community enterprise” (Lee, 1997, p. 22) that held very few similarities to Western art because the music was seen as a creation of the group rather than one skilled individual.

Although many of the traditions found in Congo Square have changed through time, the concept of community in African-American music continued through the use of the call and response, where a leader would introduce a line and the chorus would respond with a familiar refrain. This tradition can be commonly found in work songs, spirituals, and, eventually, jazz music. In work songs, for example, the worker with the strongest voice would call out a common phrase that the remaining workers responded to in chorus. Slave masters noticed that this form of singing would increase worker

productivity and often paid more at the auction block for singers with strong voices (Floyd, 1995, p. 50). Of course, slaves didn't use the call and response to increase their owners' profits, but rather used it as a form of communication since socializing was strictly prohibited. These songs shared a wide range of emotions that allowed slaves to communicate their pain, make jokes, insult their masters, and, most important, develop a communal culture and group identity.

Work songs were mainly secular in nature, since slave masters would suppress any reference to the African gods for fear this would provoke a riot (Jones, 1970, p. 19). However, the spirituals, which appeared shortly after the work songs, were of a purely Christian context and reflected a time when African-Americans began to accept Christianity as the dominant religion. While the spiritual certainly contained many of the same traditions such as circle dancing and the call and response, they consisted of new elements that had evolved into the culture as African-Americans slowly assimilated into white America. These new elements derived from the concept of freedom, which, by no coincidence, was granted to slaves around the same time. As Samuel A. Floyd (1995) explains in *The Power Of Black Music*,

[s]piritual[s] are... folk songs of freedom and of faith in the inevitability of freedom. They are quasi-religious songs of longing and aspiration as well as chronicles of the black slave experience in America... for they record the transition of the slave from Africa to African-American, from slave to freedman, and the experiences that the African underwent in the transition. (p. 40)

This “transition” marks a time in African-American history of great assimilation of black collectivism into Euro-American individualism, a time when many of the musical, social, and spiritual elements of the past were abandoned in exchange of further integration into American society. It was a time when African-Americans began “to turn their backs on Africa” (Sidran, 1971, p. 16) and embraced the long-standing American tradition of individualism and self-reliance.

Compositionally speaking, African-American spirituals set the foundation for individualism in black music. While the songs remained true to the collective improvisational traditions of African and African slave music, spirituals opened a small window of opportunity for individual creativity and uniqueness. American folk music, which was mostly adopted from the English traditions, followed a trochaic structure that stressed every other beat (first, third, fifth and seventh), while African-American spirituals reversed this tradition by not only stressing the weak beats (the second, fourth, sixth and eighth), but often delaying them to create “far greater elasticity and irregularity” (Lee, 2007, p. 8) in the call and response structure. It was through these delays that the chorus was given the opportunity to individualize their words. The leader, for example, would use a signal phrase, which could be responded to in an

infinite number of ways (Lee, 2007, p. 9). This may seem small, but it is the foundation of the jazz soloist and the first instance of individual freedom in the collective improvisation tradition.

It is no coincidence that the rise of the jazz soloist coincides with the age of African-American modernism, as this was a time when African-Americans made a “gradual shift from a cosmos controlled by black mythology and African-American community to one dominated by individual determinism” (Floyd, 1995, p. 91). In this period of post-emancipation, African-Americans began to participate in the heightened alienation that was felt throughout white America by rejecting social institutions such as the Church in exchange for personal solitude. As Floyd (1995) points out, “community no longer determined most... [of African Americans’] associations, values and judgments” (p. 91) because it was the spirit of individual autonomy that permeated American culture that created the desire for secular self-determination. By alienating themselves from the foundations of their cultural heritage and by continuing to operate on the outside of the white status quo, African-American musicians were able to forge ahead with the creation of the purely American art forms of blues and jazz music.

While the blues singer was the first black soloist to merge Western chord structures with the African-American vocal style, the jazz musician was not far behind in introducing individual creativity in collective improvisation. Early New Orleans superstars like Buddy Bolden and King Oliver may not have developed the lengthy solos that can be heard in the music of Louis Armstrong or Sidney Bechet, but they did introduce “breaks or small solo-like statements” (Jones, 1998, p. 156) within the collective improvisational process. In fact, it was not until 1926 when Louis Armstrong and his Hot Fives began to produce music with lengthy solos and “impromptu countermelodies” (Jones, 1998, p. 156) that true individual expression began to flourish in the collective tradition. As Sidran (1971) explains, “Louis Armstrong was most notable for the equipoise, the visceral balance between western and Negro musical styles of his playing. Perhaps no one walked the fence between the two cultures better than he did” (p. 60).

Oral/Written Traditions

In continuing to unpack the black/white, individualism/collectivism dichotomies, the next logical binary opposition to be addressed is the differences between oral and written cultures. If we return to Benjamin Latrobe’s comments that the music of Congo Square was “miserably dull,” we may find that his dissatisfaction with slave music went far beyond his ignorance of collectivist cultures, and occurred because his perception and understanding of communication were attuned to a very different medium. For the past few thousand years, Western society has valued the intervention of technology

(i.e., written language) as a pivotal component of everyday life. African cultures, on the other hand, were oral cultures that did not rely on written communication and thus formed a very different perception of the world around them. As Marshall McLuhan (1964) explains in *Understanding Media*, “The literate man or society develops the tremendous power of acting in any matter with considerable detachment from the feelings or emotional involvement that a nonliterate man or society would experience” (p. 85). In short, McLuhan depicts the oral tradition as “free from intervention of a medium,” which allows a participant “to behave in a spontaneous manner, to act and react spontaneously” and to be “emotionally involved in, as opposed to intellectually detached from, his environment through the acts of communication” (Sidran, 1971, p. 3).

When one considers this, it is understandable why jazz music has undergone more changes in its mere 120 years of existence than has European classical music in its 1,500-year history. This is because classical music has bound itself to resistance against dynamic change as it has remained a mainly textual art form that exists through a medium (mainly paper) rather than through the “collective unconscious” (Sidran, 1971, p. 3). Jazz, on the other hand, has constantly shifted its shape not only to reflect the turbulent history of African Americans, but also to maintain its spontaneous and transcendental traditions. Therefore, saxophonist Archie Shepp refers to the jazz musician as an “aesthetic journalist of America” (as cited in Jones, 1998, p. 155) who constantly changes their sound to reflect the cultural complexities of American society. Shepp contends that the jazz musician, like a reporter who must always keep up with the ever-changing political climate, must keep up with the times in order to “liberate America aesthetically and socially from its inhumanity” (Jones, 1998, p. 154).

Of course, to say that jazz music is a purely improvisational style that exists only in the collective consciousness would ignore the long-standing written tradition that it has absorbed from Western culture. There are, in fact, hundreds of songs in a jazz musician’s repertoire that are referred to as “standards.” These are songs that are performed by countless artists in the same contrived manner, and which have obtained a highly formalized structure and lyrical content. This is, more or less, a “jazz canon” that has lumped jazz music into many of the same musical categories as formally composed music. Not surprisingly many jazz musicians and critics alike have criticized the music for its stagnancy and lack of development in the past thirty years because of its alienation from its improvisational roots. Consider the following article from *The Walrus*, entitled “Life After the Death of Jazz:”

Assigning blame for this lack of forward momentum has become a popular pastime in Jazz circles. Some point to the death of Jazz venues where young musicians can experiment with new sounds... Still others rail against the

proliferation of university Jazz programs that produce hordes of clones... And there's always the argument that trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and his fellow neoclassicists have sucked the life out of the music. Besotted by the classic Jazz produced from the 1920s to the 1960s, musicians like Marsalis... are routinely accused of devoting more time and energy to reconstructing historical styles than inventing new ones, and of sacrificing innovation on the altar of ancestor-worship. (Gefland, 2006, para. 3)

Many discouraged jazz musicians and critics have described jazz music as a dead art form for quite some time. They have expressed frustration at its lack of forward momentum and political and social commentary. Essentially, they have charged that jazz musicians are no longer “aesthetic journalists of America” because the music no longer reflects the cultural conditions of America. When one considers this contention, it becomes clear that the reason is because jazz music no longer seems to confront the binary opposition of oral and written traditions, as it has mostly surrendered to the written form. Whether this is true or not remains to be seen, but it does indicate that the relationship between these binary oppositions plays a significant role in the music's progression and influence on American culture.

Commodification/Tradition

One of the remarkable impacts of African-American modernism is not only the beginnings of a black middle class, but its marking of the introduction of the African American into the predominantly white capitalist system; within this period, jazz and blues musicians began to understand the potential for their art to be a commodity that could be bought and sold in the marketplace. In turn, musicians discovered the significance of competition and tested each other's “personal and economic strengths” (Sidran, 1971, p. 43) in a form of competition that was not much different from the practices of the marketplace. This competition was driven by the need for jazz musicians to have their own sound, which promised them a unique corner on the market and allowed them to thrive amid vast competition. Richard M. Jones's description of a battle between jazz legends Freddie Keppard and Joe Oliver illustrates the significance of this competition:

Freddie Keppard was playin' in a spot across the street and was drawin' all the crowd. I was sittin' at the piano, and Joe Oliver came over to me and commanded in a nervous harsh voice, "Get in B-flat." He didn't even mention a tune, just said, "Get in B-flat." I did, and Joe walked out on the sidewalk, lifted his horn to his lips, and blew the most beautiful stuff I have ever heard. People started pouring out of the other spots along the street to see who was blowing all that horn. Before long, our place was full and Joe came in, smiling, and said,

"Now, that ----- won't bother me no more." (As cited in Shapiro, 2008, Ch. 4)

This significant level of one-upmanship and jealousy between artists had a dramatic effect on the evolution of jazz music. It not only forced musicians to be constantly aware of their competition and to experiment with new sounds in order to offer their audience something different, but it pushed jazz music even closer to the individualism continuum because it allowed individual superstars to emerge in a genre that traditionally celebrated the group. As a result, jazz musicians' christening of their idols with names like "Duke," "Count," and "King" demonstrates how quickly the music abandoned its collective traditions in order to assimilate into the individualistic culture of America.

Conclusion

When its significance and impact on American culture are examined, it is clear that jazz music is one of America's great indigenous art forms because it reflects its dynamic and constantly unstable culture. It is a vibrant and transformative art form that has remained a vital influence in American culture because of its ability to reflect the significant cultural intersections and hybridity of American culture. While these binary oppositions have constantly been at odds with one another throughout its tumultuous history, jazz music has remained a relevant and innovative art form by reflecting these cultural tensions and constantly reinventing itself. By identifying these points of intersection, this paper intends to provide some insight into jazz music's influence in the American consciousness. It is not, as some critics and musicians have suggested, the creation of a singular culture or people. Instead, it is a product of the complex interrelationships that were created when African Americans began to carve out their own legacy within the complex sphere of America's cultural diversity.

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