

Self-reflective essay on jazz

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November 11, 2011

Before our musicology course, jazz was merely a music style for me with no particular grasp of the melodies involved. Now jazz is played more often on my music player than a month ago. I can even recognize jazz musicians by their style; maybe I would never have thought about it, if it hadn't been for this particular class.

Earlier I had just a general idea of what jazz is, and why and how it was created. I didn't know that it was born in New Orleans, where people hailed from different cultures and came in search of new opportunities; that musical traditions from all over the world began merging African American rhythms with European tunes; that jazz came from people with different ethnic and cultural traditions and different skin colors, whose differences were not wrecking but harmonized and creative.

Jazz has been called African American music, the music of the African American life experience. It is a voice of African Americans fighting for freedom and equality, of a race constantly restrained by racism, discrimination, segregation, and hostility; it is a song telling how it felt like to be a black in a white society. African Americans tried to cast off this burden, nevertheless celebrating aspects of African American life and culture. Jazz was a spiritual and cultural expression, the aesthetic and social vision of black musicians, and, at the same time, a politically expedient course of action for them. In music they theorized the relationship between jazz and its social context. In my opinion, only these people, who were oppressed for a long time and suffered so much, were able to bring about this musical revolution and thus express through melodies their anger and pride, fear and disappointment, joy and happiness. The fact that jazz is an art of improvisation can evoke a feeling of chaos; the act of making up music on the spot can confuse a listener and seem to him crazy and formless. Listening to jazz, one can stir up diverse and discrepant emotions such as sadness or delight, excitement or anxiety, sympathy or protest.

If you know about emotions and the ideologies of the musicians that created jazz, you change the way you think about history and life; it forces you to think out of the box.

Stories that we heard in the classroom about the lives of jazz musicians, many of which faced racism and poverty, showed how these people attained success with a strong will and character, and how they were not afraid to reflect in their music their dissatisfaction with the African American position in society. Sharp lyrics and expressive melodies attested to their pride in being black.

The jazz artist that had the strongest influence on me was Billie Holiday, a daring black singer with an emotional, powerful, and poignant voice who inhaled the resentment towards African Americans and exhaled poetry and bold lyrics. One can feel the sorrow, bitterness, and romantic disappointments of her life in her rugged and vulnerable voice. The inimitable phrasing and acute dramatic intensity elevated her to the level of the most outstanding jazz musicians.

Jazz is a unique cultural phenomenon, with African, European, Latin American, and North American cultural roots; it has been a means for identity creation for members of diverse cultural communities; its development has been conditioned by race, migration, gender, and class. But what does it mean for me? This is a difficult question to answer and I fall short on finding words to explain it. You know it when you hear this music that sets you thinking, that stirs up emotions of every sort and kind, sends you back in the history, introduces you to the social and political conditions of racism, and gives you a close picture of cultural implications of African Americans; the creation of jazz became a mirror of 20<sup>th</sup> century America. I assume that no other musical tradition could produce the same or at least similar effect. It is more than music. It is a way to express the emotions that trouble one's soul and the ideas that stir a nation. It is a celebration of life, good and bad, rich and poor, happy and miserable. Jazz is just a union of the heart with the intellect.