

SELF-REFLECTIVE ESSAY

MUSICOLOGY- INTRODUCTION TO
JAZZ

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REFLECTIONS ON JAZZ

I had no exposure to jazz prior to this class, unless you count my mother's off-tune singing of Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World." I grew up in an environment surrounded by hip-hop and rap. The "Introduction to Jazz" class has opened a new sphere of experience to me.

Most jazz musicians operated in an environment of hostility and racism. Musicians would play in clubs where they weren't even allowed washrooms services. But this did not stop them from becoming the best they could be. I am inspired by these personalities.

Jazz emanated from a group of oppressed people who learnt to cope with their problems through song – the blues. I have grown to respect jazz, not only as a genre of music but as a genre with the potential to soothe and heal. In some cases, there isn't even a need for words; just the instruments are enough to transport you to an entirely new world. People like Thelonius Monk thrived in this imaginary world and thus were perceived as "mad." But I can understand how passion drives people to become an enigma to others.

I have discovered that each of the people touched by jazz was transformed somehow to be the best and worst they could be. It is no wonder that the Civil Rights Movement flourished in the era of jazz. Bessie Smith was one of those transformed by jazz. I see a woman who rose against all odds to make a life for herself. She lost both parents by the age of nine as well as a brother, and thus was raised by her sister. She had to go about singing to help raise money for the family. She grew into a strong and fearless woman. She faced the Ku Klux Klan and single-handedly scared away a group of men. She didn't cower in the face of imminent danger; she faced it head-on even when her life was in danger. Another admirable woman is Billie Holiday, who ushered black people into the era of civil rights through her song "Strange Fruit." She also had to deal with a husband who could not accept that his wife was more successful than he was. These women made names for themselves at a time when women had to fight for respect in society. As a young woman, I look up to such women as role models.

I have discovered that there is something deeply inspiring about jazz. I realize it especially in the character of Charles Mingus. Charles Mingus was a person I would describe as a passionate genius and a fighter, even to the end of his life. He was diagnosed with

amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, rendered him paralyzed. Yet, he persisted in composing music because he still had creative energy in him. He did not become a hermit, cooped up in a hole, feeling sorry for himself. Instead he recorded his music into an audio recorder. This would become his great “Epitaph,” which was performed after his death – a fact Mingus believed in, hence its title. “Epitaph” has been called the greatest composition since Duke Ellington’s “Black, Brown, Beige.” This gives me hope and a desire to fight against all odds. I see in Charles Mingus’ life a miracle – the miracle of resilience and the power to be the best one can be even at the point of death.

I also reflect on the beginnings of jazz, when it was not a widely recognized genre of music carried places by renowned musicians, but rather a communal form of expression that engulfed every aspect of a particular people’s life because it gave them hope and a temporary means of escaping their present life. It amazes me that music could have such power. Listening to the blues, though, has helped understand how this was possible.

It is a pity that jazz is no longer as widely listened to as it once was. If everyone could have the experience I have had after being exposed to jazz, they would realize that it indeed is a kind of music to be celebrated.