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Musicology

Personal Essay

Before our musicology seminar on jazz, my knowledge of this particular music was quite limited. Despite the fact that I was fortunate enough to have received an exceptional education back in the United States, my knowledge of jazz was still essentially limited to Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. I had no knowledge of such a diverse and vibrant group of artists such as Bessie Smith, Thelonius Monk, or Billie Holliday. Furthermore, I had no idea of the evolution that the art of jazz had undergone with Charlie Parker, or how the style had developed into the phenomenal fusion of Miles David. The experience of the course has opened my ears and mind to a beautiful American cultural aspect that had been hidden from me.

Without our seminar in jazz, I would still today remain ignorant of the brilliant pianist Cecil Taylor. Sometimes it is both a frustrating and time consuming effort whilst working on a presentation to find just the right video clip to demonstrate what one wishes to convey to the audience, but that was not the case with Taylor. It has been a long time since I've legitimately enjoyed perusing through a plethora of different clips and been able to admit that I genuinely liked each and every one for the astounding uniqueness that is Taylor's remarkable piano style.

The seminar itself opened my eyes to the unique role that many jazz artists and musicians played during the Civil Rights Movement. The Ken Burns documentary, of which we were privileged to enjoy several episodes during the Enjoy Jazz event at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies, served to further open my eyes to the devastating effects of segregation in the United States' past. Being from the South, and having had the fortune to have the family I have, I consider myself lucky to have had a lifelong education in the unjust system that was segregation. I can still remember driving with my grandparents and parents throughout Biloxi, Mississippi, and being shown the utter poverty that many African Americans still live in today. This is a result of a system that deprived them of their rights as Americans and as human beings. I will never forget the stories of the segregated coffee shops, restrooms, and water fountains which served as manifestations of an unjust social order. But Burns' documentary served to enlighten me about another story of segregation, the tale of Bix Beiderbecke. In America, you're always

taught about how awful segregation was for African Americans, but the story of Beiderbecke encapsulates the fact that segregation was terrible not just for African Americans, but for all men and women, regardless of skin color. It was a unique lesson that I will not forget.

This seminar has, in my opinion, served me quite well. Not only did I gain knowledge of a plethora of musicians whose work I actually now listen to, such as Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, and Cecil Taylor, but I have gained an added appreciation for my country and what it has to offer the world in terms of artistic culture. Europe blessed the world with some of the most beautiful music that will ever exist, and it only seems fitting that America has returned the favor with jazz. I went into this seminar with little knowledge nor appreciation of jazz as an art. Yet, I will conclude this seminar with both knowledge and appreciation for jazz as an art, and for this I consider it time well spent.