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Self Reflective Essay

Jazzing Up My Perception of Jazz

Years ago during junior high band class, I remember watching my teacher snap his fingers to the beat as I pieced together my clarinet. This was really my only exposure to jazz before taking Professor Broecking's introductory course to American jazz. I was never interested in jazz music; for me, there were always other genres of music that were much more appealing. However, after taking this class, watching Ken Burns' documentary on jazz, and performing research on Billie Holiday, I realized that there is so much more to jazz than the music itself. I have now come to better understand how jazz was a historically important medium for social activism and civil rights in the United States.

Before the course, I simply perceived jazz as a musical genre that did not interest me. Since I merely thought, "I do not like the way this music sounds," I never cared to learn more about it. I was unaware of the fact that jazz music has so much history, specifically the fights for social justice and equality in the African American community. Professor Broecking and other students informed me of many jazz musicians' roles in early social activism and racial expression. I am ashamed that I did not know this, especially since I am American. Listening to jazz clips in class exposed me to the struggles of African Americans conveyed in the music. I now perceive jazz not solely as a type of music but as something much more. It is a musical history of the race struggle in America.

I especially liked that in the documentary Ken Burns does not only focus on the musical themes and terminology of jazz, but also on the history surrounding the music. Coming into this course and its content, I was afraid that I would be learning bland musical terms and phrases and would be bored by the documentary. But Burns took an approach that placed the music into its historical context. In addition, I am very passionate about social rights and activism, so the angle that Burns took in examining jazz really caught my attention. I enjoyed hearing the stories of the African American artists, their experiences with racism, and how they used jazz music to express this to the public and to unite against injustice.

My selected artist of research, Billie Holiday, emphasizes even more the role jazz had in history and the struggle for civil rights. When I chose to research Holiday, I had no idea who she

was or what she contributed to jazz music. When I started researching her, I realized that I made the perfect selection. Not only is she considered one of the greatest jazz vocalists ever, but her song “Strange Fruit” was one of the first songs of political activism. The song was especially interesting to me because I am passionate about equality and human rights, and “Strange Fruit” vocalized and spoke out against lynching. My perception of jazz exclusively as an entertaining music was completely transformed when I heard this song and the way Holiday portrayed her emotions in it. Jazz is much more than simply instruments and sheet music; it was and is a fight for equality, freedom, and human rights.

Overall, this course has changed my perception of jazz completely. At the beginning of the course, I thought jazz was a musical genre and nothing else. I learned over the past few weeks that I was wrong. Jazz is so much more than the music; it is the stories behind the music that really make the difference. I realize now that jazz music is an important part of American history, especially concerning the fight for equality in the African American community. When I hear jazz music on the radio in the future, I will not be quick to change the radio station, but I will actually listen to the song and ponder the history behind it. I might already know or will question what obstacles the singer faced and what the deeper meaning of the lyrics is. Not only did Professor Broecking’s course, Ken Burns’ movie, and my personal research expose me to a whole new side of jazz that I had been oblivious to, but it helped me realize that I should not be so quick to judge something just from the look or sound of it. I came into the course thinking jazz music was only melodies, and I am leaving the course with a whole new appreciation for its significance in American history.