

Self Reflection of Jazz

By

Bryce Taylor

To be honest, before the beginning of this musicology class, my impression of jazz was narrow. I tended to focus on the musicianship and influence jazz had within the musical community. Being myself a musician, it was impossible to ignore the impact jazz had within my specific genre of composition, namely rock and folk music. Before my acquaintance with this study, I never equated jazz music with that of the Civil Rights Movement, and throughout my scholarship no professor discussed the connection. I therefore was constricted to a perusal of Martin Luther King Jr., the NAACP, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Malcom X. All of which are necessary to understand the movement, but the lack of instituting jazz into the discussion, I have come to realize, leaves out an element necessary to the discourse.

As I read the various materials for the course coupled with my own studies, I came to the conclusion that jazz may well have been the symbol for what I call "organic integration." Music provided the opportunity for people to come together, dance together, sing together, and appreciate the talents of individuals in such a way that egested the color line. Segregation was completely eliminated, at least in the jazz clubs, not because of a specific law, demonstrations, or sit-ins, but simply by individuals acting out natural behavior in a free environment. Musicians did not look at black or white as the determining factor for their musical kin, but at an innate impulse based on endowment. "As long as he/she can play" was all they cared about, race be damned. This euphony provided the atmosphere for liberty, striking a chord amongst the casual listener and musician alike.

As we watched the first presentation on Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, I saw two geniuses at work. The comparison of Bach and Mozart struck me as musical blasphemy; how could somebody compare jazz musicians to these classic figures? But, upon further study of the compositions the equivalence became rational. It was remarkable, as I listened to numerous opuses by Armstrong and Ellington, how I sat back and simply thought, "These guys are geniuses." The notes they strung together, and the timeless melodies they produced will for millennia be exalted into the canon of musical classics.

Studying the various individuals within the jazz community has left an impression on me that will not leave my mind or heart. Hearing Lady Day's "Strange Fruit" cemented the oppression of blacks in a few short minutes. Understanding the historical context of when the song was released and the risk Billie Holiday was taking, both physically and economically, was powerful. The voice of rebellion never sounded so lovely. Holiday was voicing her views in the medium she knew best, and when I heard the song coupled with the historical context the imprint was finalized.

John Coltrane or "Trane" encompassed my own belief in music, that of complete musical autonomy. His compositions continued to evolve into pieces unbearable to the untrained ear and even musicians alike but exhibited an individual continuing to find his sound. The apex was always in sight but not yet attainable. It was no wonder that both the pacifist camp of the Civil Rights Movement and the "Freedom Now!" cohorts intertwined their ideologies to Trane's music. Though Trane himself was never outspoken in regard to either movement within the black community, his pieces encapsulated the times. Free Jazz was not just one musician's dream, but the rallying cry among a host of black Americans demanding their freedom from governmental oppression.

The study of jazz is really a comprehensive survey of the sociology of the American black community. Every aspect of the jazz movement can be paralleled with the frustrations, contentions, and triumphs of a folk ostracized from a country based on principles of equality. To understand jazz provides an opportunity to view the Civil Rights Movement in a different light, thus providing scholarship unattainable from other methods. I was unaware of the profusion of connections between jazz and social change. The musicians at the Lincoln Center and others continue to beat the drum that to understand the Civil Rights Movement one must also understand jazz.

I understand now how jazz music in many ways was a stronger motivator and inspirer in the Civil Rights Movement than the spoken or written word. Jazz provided at times an entertainment outlet from the troubles of society but used perhaps a subtler, more powerful form of altering the audacious assumptions made about blacks during the early and middle 20th century. In jazz, equality came to fruition without force of arms. In order to fully understand the

Civil Rights Movement one must be exposed to America's music. To negate it is to negate an essential part of perhaps the greatest single achievement in the natural rights of humanity.