

Old and New Dreams: The History of Afro-American Jazz: Personal Essay

Can jazz be categorized? Can a music genre so diverse, erratic, vivid, dynamic, individualistic and spontaneous be pinned down? Some jazz icons have tried. Wynton Marsalis, for instance, called jazz, "...music that swings." Others, such as Pat Metheny, have used more technical terms for the genre, stressing the typical, "...deliberate distortions of pitch and timbre..." for which jazz is known.

As a musicology novice I can't add much to the technical discussion of jazz. Even if I could, I perceive music at large as an emotional interplay of the senses rather than a set of sound waves, notes or specific chords. Music evokes emotions in me rather than technical fervor.

In many ways, jazz is like a layer cake. A layer cake, which throughout time has heaped on new stacks such as Bebop, Latin jazz or Big Band jazz. Each layer has added to the unique taste and flavor of jazz and the way in which we enjoy it. The layer cake analogy fits especially the Big Band era, which somewhat defied the notion of jazz being individualistic. Only with the right foundation and ingredients could a harmonious interplay evolve out of a Big Band; each layer had to be in sync with the other in order to ensure a sweet interplay. The results were harmonic and melodic tunes, which made one daydream. It is for good reason that the Big Band era was criticized for strengthening social conformity in the United States. It was a grand conservative interlude broadcasted over the radio which highlighted the sweet American homogenous life. Bombshells such as Peggy Lee proclaimed in their subliminal soothing voices "You' were so right" in referral to women's mistaken blame against her husband. In addition Peggy Lee upheld the social voluptuous feminine image as she softly declared on air, "I am proud that my silhouette is curvy."

The Big Band era is a time-travel vehicle for me; listening to it makes me daydream about a society so different from today's. It takes one back to the affluent 1950s. The gentlemen convened at the country club, whilst the ladies meet for drinks and chat at home. Social and family life was clear-cut and devised. As I drink my coffee on a Sunday morning and listen to Peggy Lee's "Black Coffee," I picture myself next to a fireside in a three-piece suit with a stiff drink. Big Band jazz has painted a distorted romantic picture in my head and in that of millions of Americans

who flocked to their radio sets. I personally today reminisce about jazz icons such as Benny Goodman and Peggy Lee, who were a living example of times in which popular music was good and good music was popular.

On the complete contrary lies Blues and the melancholic tunes of Blues mastermind Muddy Waters. Unlike glossy Big Band jazz, the Blues of Muddy Waters is temperate jazz straight from the soul. As we listen to "The Stuff You Gotta Watch," we feel the radiating heat which this southern and vibrant jazz conveys. The real life sorrows of Muddy Waters are directly conveyed to the listener; there is no façade, no smooth interplay. It's Muddy and his guitar; it's rigid, it's hot and its full of life. "She spends your dough, she drinks your gin..." these are not the social conformist accounts of the Big Band era but real stories of misery about abusive girlfriends and female acquaintances. Looking at his life, Muddy Waters was assured that "...if I don't go crazy I will surely loose my mind."¹

I appreciate jazz for exactly the criticism it received as it emerged in the aftermath of the Civil War. Jazz at the time was "...denounced as discordant, uncivilized, overly accessible, and subversive to reason and order."

¹ Muddy Waters, "Mean Red Spider," *Top Of The Boogaloo* (New York, 1995).