

Full Length Research Paper

Playing out loud: Jazz music and social protest

Ricardo Nuno Futre Pinheiro

Universidade Lusíada de Lisboa, Portugal.

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This article addresses the historical relationship between jazz music and political commentary. Departing from the analysis of historical recordings and bibliography, this work will examine the circumstances in which jazz musicians assumed attitudes of political and social protest through music. These attitudes resulted in the establishment of a close bond between some jazz musicians and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s; the conceptual framing of the free jazz movement that emerged in the late 1950s and early 60s; the use on non-western musical influences by musicians such as John Coltrane; the rejection of the “entertainer” stereotype in the bebop era in the 1940s; and the ideas behind representing through music the African-American experience in the period of the Harlem Renaissance, in the 1920’s.

Key words: Politics, jazz, protest, freedom, activism.

INTRODUCTION

Music incorporates multiple meanings¹ shaped by the principles that regulate musical concepts, processes and products. Over the years, jazz music has carried numerous “messages” containing many attitudes and principles, playing a crucial role as an instrument of dissemination of political viewpoints. According to writer Amiri Baraka, it is a music that, in its most profound manifestations, has been completely divergent with North American white cultural standards². In fact, some of jazz’s most prominent personalities in the fifties and sixties, like Charles Mingus, Max Roach, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, or John Coltrane, were very active in terms of associating jazz music with personal standpoints of disagreement, first, with the way the music industry was operating (dominated by European-Americans in charge of criticizing, writing, editing, promoting, analyzing, recording, and distributing the music), and second, with the white

supremacy that prevailed in the United States and the colonial world³.

Civil rights and political messages

Historically, attitudes of protest took shape not only through the participation of jazz musicians in protest concerts, as for example the 1964 concert at the Philharmonic Hall of the Lincoln Center in support of voter registration in Mississippi and Louisiana, that originated Miles Davis’ album *The Complete Concert* (1992) for Columbia Records⁴, but also through the composition and recording of music containing political messages that appealed in most cases for civil rights.

Charles Mingus’ “Fables of Faubus”, released in its instrumental version on the record *Mingus Ah Um* (1959),

¹ Meaning can be seen here as a construct by the individual within the particular society the music originates in and is experienced.

² Baraka (1968: 15-16).

³ Mingus (1971), Monson (2001a), Monson (2001b), Henry (2004), Kofsky (1998)

⁴ Columbia Records first released the music recorded at this concert in two separate albums: *My Funny Valentine: Miles Davis in Concert* (1965) and *Four & More Recorded Live in Concert* (1966).

and in its version with lyrics on the record *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* (1960), written as a reaction to the exclusion of nine black children from Little Rock Center High School by the governor of Arkansas, contains one of the strongest political messages that jazz music ever produced. At that time, Columbia Records prohibited the inclusion of the lyrics in the *Mingus Ah Um* recording, so the composer saw himself forced to change the name of the song with lyrics to “Original Faubus Fables”, and to release it on a smaller record label – Nat Hentof’s, Candid Records. The lyrics are as follows:

Oh, Lord, don't let 'em shoot us!
Oh, Lord, don't let 'em stab us!
Oh, Lord, don't let 'em tar and feather us!
Oh, Lord, no more swastikas!
Oh, Lord, no more Ku Klux Klan!

Name me someone who's ridiculous, Dannie.
Governor Faubus!
Why is he so sick and ridiculous?
He won't permit integrated schools.
Then he's a fool!

Boo! Nazi Fascist supremists!
Boo! Ku Klux Klan (with your Jim Crow plan)

Name me a handful that's ridiculous, Dannie Richmond.
Faubus, Rockefeller, Eisenhower
Why are they so sick and ridiculous?
Two, four, six, eight: They brainwash and teach you hate.
H-E-L-L-O, Hello.

Many other jazz pieces bear a strong political content, namely John Coltrane’s “Alabama” (Live at Birdland, 1964 – recorded in October 1963), written as a reaction to the Ku Klux Klan racially motivated attack on the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, which killed four African-American children. This building had been a center of multiple Civil Rights activities during 1963, functioning as a meeting point for activist leaders such as Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy (Muhammad, 2011). Actually, it was at this time, after this event and Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, that Coltrane became involved with the Civil Rights Movement and its struggle for racial equality, even though he was not an outspoken activist. For example, in 1964, John Coltrane participated in eight concerts with the aim of supporting Martin Luther King and the movement. In his performance of “Alabama”, one can argue that Coltrane’s phrasing recalls Martin Luther King’s speech at the

memorial service that followed the Birmingham incident. The progressive intensity of the piece echoes Luther King’s speaking, shifting the discourse from this particular incident to the larger Civil Rights Movement. The lament like calmness and space utilized in the beginning of the piece contrasts with the energy that bursts at the end, embodying a crescent cry for justice.

Even though historians and listeners often neglect this record’s cultural and political impact, Sonny Rollins’ album *Freedom Suite* (1958) introduced social commentary in jazz records as a core conceptual framework, also stimulating the creation of works such as the record *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* (1960) by Max Roach, among many other politically oriented musical pieces that later emerged. Even Rollins’ Mohawk hairstyle, used long before the punk culture that appeared in the mid 1970’s, represented a political statement on the difficulties Native Americans were experiencing, serving as a corollary for denouncing white supremacy, and thus alerting for the African Americans’ struggle for Civil Rights.

We insist! Max Roach’s *Freedom Now Suite* (1960) is a joint work by composer and drummer Max Roach and lyricist Oscar Brown that contains five tracks that relate to Abraham Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and the emerging African Independence Movements of the 1950’s. The liner notes begin with a A. Philip Randolph’s quotation:

A revolution is unfurling—America’s unfinished revolution. It is unfurling in lunch counters, buses, libraries and schools—wherever the dignity and potential of men are denied. Youth and idealism are unfurling. Masses of Negroes are marching onto the stage of history and demanding their freedom now! (Also see, Monson 2001a).

The five movements of the suite function as episodes of the African American history, from slavery to the civil rights struggle, and with the contribution of Roach’s wife at that time and singer and activist Abbey Lincoln, the music renders perfectly the hostile atmosphere of that era. Two other Max Roach’s record titles undoubtedly relate to civil rights: *Speak Brother Speak* (1962), and *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (1971).

Civil freedom and free jazz

The violence that followed the political and racial climate in the U.S. in the sixties, besides stimulating the discussion around the redefinition of race, was responsible for the continuing use of jazz music as a privileged medium for showing the injustices the “American dream”

E-mail: rfutrepinheiro@gmail.com.

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masked. In fact, by assuming this attitude, jazz musicians underlined the importance of “civil freedom” as a key factor in the development of North-American society. The free-jazz and avant-garde movements in the beginning of this decade had as their leading archetypes not only the promotion of freedom within music, through the abolition of the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic pre-determined structures, but also the application of these principles to daily life, through the use of musical experience as a “test tube” for society functioning. This is to say that this new model, as applied to jazz performance, had meanings that exceeded the music itself: it represented the main philosophies of the Civil Rights Movement. According to Henry (2004) recordings such as John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* (1965) and Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz* (1961) transcend the renouncement of specific ideas and happenings. They constitute works of tremendous historical significance, serving as this movement’s “official soundtrack”. Other works worth mentioning are Oliver Nelson’s 1962 recording, *Afro/American Sketches*⁵, and the song “Malcom, Malcom, Malcom” from Archie Shepp’s 1965 record, *Fire Music*.

Non-western influences

Also, the use of modal and static harmonies and other musical elements such as drones, open forms, or pentatonic improvisation inspired by African and Indian music in the 1960’s visibly demonstrates jazz musicians’ interest in nonwestern aesthetics. John Coltrane’s musical approach in pieces such as “Africa” (*Africa/Brass*, 1961) and “India” (*Impressions*, 1963) unmistakably show the significance nonwestern music represented, not only as a source of musical inspiration for musicians, but also as a way of protesting against North-American mainstream cultural and social values. Coltrane’s interest in nonwestern music also had spiritual implications. According to Berkman (2007: 44) “By the early 1960’s, John Coltrane’s ‘universal spirituality’ became increasingly fused with his interest in world music, and he developed a multicultural theory of musical transcendence”. In the liner notes of the album *Live at The Village Vanguard* (1962), Coltrane affirms: “I’ve already been looking into those approaches to music as in India in which particular scales are intended to produce specific emotional meanings”.

It is understandable that African-Americans’ interest in musical and spiritual aspects of nonwestern cultures was part of a broader plan of building a new black culture, alternative to mainstream American values, such as Christianity. According to McAlister (1999):

The attempt to construct a new black culture was deeply

⁵ This was Oliver Nelson’s first big band album as a leader and contains songs with suggestive titles such as “Emancipation Blues”, “Freedom Dance” or “There’s a Yearning”.

intertwined with the search for religious alternatives to mainstream Christianity, a search that included not only Islam, but also a renewed interest in the signs and symbols of pre-Islamic and traditional African religions (such as the Yoruban religion) and the study of ancient Egypt. These influences were often mixed together, (...) as elsewhere, in an eclectic, sometimes deliberately mystical, mix (McAlister 1999: 638).

Bebop and the “entertainer” stereotype

The music that emerged in the bebop era also served as a symbol of protest against the creative restrictions that jazz musicians were facing in the context of the Big Bands of the swing period. In fact, one can argue that the 1930’s typical aesthetic and performative settings favored written music and pre-determined arrangements over improvisation. At this time, a new generation of musicians such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, and Thelonious Monk, among others, were experimenting with new tools and concepts, based on instrumental virtuosity, new melodic and harmonic ideas and substitutions, privileging improvisation over arrangements.

According to several authors (DeVeaux, 1997; Dinerstein, 1999), through this new attitude, musicians were also protesting against racism that prevailed in the white mainstream society at large, especially the entertainer role jazz swing musicians assumed. Dizzy Gillespie, in his autobiography *To Be or Not To Bop: Memoirs of Dizzy Gillespie* (1979), points out how young bebop musicians felt about the attitudes of established people like Louis Armstrong that reinforced the stereotype of the “entertainer” and “noble savage” (also see Ted Gioia’s “Jazz and The Primitivist Myth” [1989]), and subsequently legitimated the subjugation of African-American artists. According to Gillespie:

We didn’t appreciate that about Louis Armstrong, and if anybody asked me about a certain public image of him, handkerchief over his head, grinning in the face of white racism, I never hesitated to say that I didn’t like it. I didn’t want the white man to expect me to allow the same things that Louis Armstrong did (Gillespie, 1979: 195).

Miles Davis also criticized Armstrong’s attitudes evoking minstrelsy show business discriminations. Davis, in his autobiography (1990), states: “But I didn’t like the way he [Louis Armstrong] was portrayed in the media with him grinning all the time” (*ibid*: 318). “I wasn’t about to kiss anybody’s ass and do that grinning shit for nobody” (*ibid*: 181). Also according to Davis:

I didn’t look at myself as an entertainer like they both did. I wasn’t going to do it just so that some non-playing, racist, white motherfucker could write some nice things about me. Naw, I wasn’t going to sell out my principles for

them. I wanted to be accepted as a good musician and that didn't call for no grinning, but just being able to play the horn good (*ibid*:84).

Harlem renaissance and the African-American experience

Nevertheless, the use of jazz music as a privileged platform for political reflection is not confined to the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s decades. Significant politically oriented music also emerged during the "Harlem Renaissance" in the 1920's. The ideas that served as foundations for this cultural and political movement such as a more assertive political notion of racial pride and identity, leading to the elaboration of subsequent serious representations of the African-American experience and the establishment of the concept of the "New Negro" coined by the writer and philosopher Alain Locke (Gates, 1988; Gates and Jarrett, 2007), shaped various musical works. In this period, several African-American artists explored their African heritage and the subsequent trajectory of the Negro in America, from slavery, to the emancipation and migration to northern cities, rejecting thus the misrepresentations created and performed by whites, especially in minstrel shows. For example, James P. Johnson wrote *Yamekraw: A Negro Rhapsody*, a portrait of the black community in Savannah, Georgia. This piece was orchestrated by composer William Grant Still, also a leading figure in the "Harlem Renaissance" movement, and was presented live for the first time in 1928 at the Carnegie Hall. Still also composed the tone poem *Afro American Symphony* in 1930, as well as other significant musical works focused on the theme of African American experience.

With the ambition of representing the African-American experience through jazz, other composers followed this example. Duke Ellington wrote *Black, Brown and Beige: a Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America*, premiered in 1943 at the Carnegie Hall. This event symbolized an important milestone in the historical narrative of the African-American trajectory from Africa to Harlem (Tucker, 2002: 69). According to DeVeaux (1993), Ellington wanted to question "the common misconception of the Negro, which has left a confused impression of his true character and abilities", through his (Ellington's) representation of modern black America (DeVeaux, 1993: 129). The fact that this piece was premiered at the Carnegie Hall was also decisive in raising the status of African-American music, providing it with the significance it needed in order to gain access to other important U.S. concert halls.

Years before the premiere of *Black, Brown and Beige*, the famous song "Strange Fruit" interpreted by Billie Holiday, written by Abel Meeropol and released in 1939 by Commodore label (Columbia Records had refused to release the song), was one of the first and most vivid

condemnations of racism against African-Americans (Margolick, 2000). The lyrics, extremely explicit, strongly condemn the lynching of African-Americans in the south of the United States.

*Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!*

*Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.*

From 1969 on, the group Liberation Music Orchestra, created and led by bassist Charlie Haden (this band had among its members musicians of different generations such as Carla Bley, Dewey Redman, Paul Motian, Mick Goodrick, Chris Cheek, or Tony Malaby), recorded mostly music containing well-marked political views. The subject of these songs is nearly always the protection of human rights and political liberation. In fact, Charlie Haden devotes a great deal of his effort interpreting Spanish, South African and Latin American revolutionary anthems. This music served as a weapon against European colonial power, the Apartheid, the Vietnam War, and other twentieth century conflicts, such as the civil struggles in the Spanish and Portuguese diaspora. The titles of the songs such as "Song for Che", "We Shall Overcome", "Not in Our Name", *El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido*, or "This is Not America", illustrate the political atmosphere of this music.

More recently, musicians such as Aaron Goldberg have devoted special attention to the performance and recording of political pieces. The inclusion of Pablo Milanés' "Canción Para Lá Unidad Latino Americana", in his 2010 record *Home*, demonstrates Goldberg's social and political concerns. In fact, this song symbolizes the struggle against the Latin American dictatorships of the seventies, and has become a socialist hymn that pays homage to the accomplishments of men like José Martí, Simon Bolívar and Fidel Castro.

(Excerpt)

*No one can erase whatever shines with its own light
Its glow can reach the darkness of other coasts
Who will pay for the sorrow of the time that has been
lost?
Of the lives it cost, of the ones that might cost?
Will pay the unity of the peoples involved
And history will condemn the ones who deny this reason.*

(our translation⁶)

Conclusion

Jazz has been unmistakably attached to strong social and political meanings. Its relationship with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s; the conceptual ideas behind the free jazz movement that appeared in the late 1950's and early 60's; the use on non-western musical influences by several musicians; the refutation of the "entertainer" stereotype in the bebop era in the 1940's; and the ideas behind representing through music the African-American experience in the period of the Harlem Renaissance, in the 1920s, are significant examples of this close connection. Despite the fact that jazz historiographical discourse has contributed significantly to implement the modernist idea that artists should not be concerned with parameters other than music itself (for example, authors like Schuller (1968, 1989), Tirro (1974), Williams (1970), Owens (1995) and Feather (1960, 1987) tend to disregard the political, economical and social aspects, with the goal of separating the "art of doing" jazz from the musical industry, politics and the racial imagination), it's a fact that throughout history, jazz musicians' attainment of recognition has also been a result of the social processes through which the great masters have been heard, evaluated and identified with, gaining through those processes symbolic power within the scene (Monson, 2007). According to Ingrid Monson (2001b), "Miles's voice became larger than itself, not simply because he always chose the right notes, but because large numbers of people have wanted to sing along with his most poignant, militant, and uncompromising moments" (Monson, 2001b: 95).

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⁶ *Lo que brilla con luz propia nadie lo puede apagar
Su brillo puede alcanzar la oscuridad de otras costas
Quién pagará este pesar del tiempo que se perdió?
De las vidas que costó, de las que puede costar
Lo pagará la unidad de los pueblos em cuestión
Y al que niegue esta razón la historia condenará.*

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