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African-American Music as Rebellion: From Slavesong to Hip-Hop

Beginning in the seventeenth century, a burgeoning slave trade saw Africans captured and brought to America in bondage, separated from their relations and sold, leaving individuals with no point of familiarity: forced into slavery, on a new continent, without kin or social contacts. Out of this desolation came the unfortunate liberty for Africans to develop a new culture from their abrupt change of situation and the remnants of their old lives carried in their minds and bodies with them to the New World. Subsequent generations of Africans gradually became African-Americans as a rich culture infused with music developed under the harsh conditions of slavery. White Americans considered African-Americans separate and unequal for centuries, going to extraordinary lengths to keep Negroes oppressed and apart. Yet behind the strict, segregating curtain hung between “Black” and “White,” African-Americans created a distinctive music that sank its roots deeply into their American experience and drew from it an amazing evolution of sound that has penetrated that racist fabric and pervaded the entirety of American culture. Music became a way to remain connected to their African heritage while protesting the bleak conditions African-Americans faced throughout history. Musical protest took on assorted forms and functions as Blacks strove to advance their social station while simultaneously retaining their cultural heritage. To unconditionally adopt the culture imposed—typically demanded—by the dominant White society was to admit defeat. By working within sociocultural constraints, innovating and adapting musical styles, African-Americans created a musical tradition distinctively their own, and that in itself was a form of defiance.

Music was critical in the organization of early slave uprisings. When brought to America, drums were used as they had been in Africa: for communication. Using drums to spread messages in a rhythmic language undeciphered by Whites, slaves could orchestrate revolts on land and on slave ships as well.¹ The connection between drumming, communication, and resistance was eventually made: “It is

absolutely necessary to the safety of this province that all due care be taken to restrain Negroes from using or keeping drums.”² The subsequent ban on African drums and drumming contributed to the slaves’ cultural disorientation by weakening ties to the music that had filled their African existence. In order to replenish the void left by the ban on drums, slaves developed ways to imitate drumming’s complex polyrhythms by contriving new means of creating rhythm. They began using whatever means of rhythm-making were at hand: European instruments, household items such as spoons, jugs, and washboards, or even their own bodies used as percussive surfaces in a style that came to be known as “patting juba” or “slapping juba.” Intricate vocal rhythms and styles developed to imitate the drum patterns, even seeking to capture the essence of multiple drums into a single vocal line. Although Whites removed a vital instrument from their lives, slaves did not surrender their musical heritage by abandoning African rhythms, but retaliated by preserving those rhythms through adaptation to new instruments.

Slave owners in the United States sought to completely subjugate their slaves physically, mentally, and spiritually through brutality and demeaning acts. African-Americans frequently used music to counter this dehumanization—to boost morale and toughen themselves psychologically. An example of the humiliation slaves had to endure was the forced eating of juba (or jibba, jiba), a stew containing a week’s leftovers from the plantation-owner’s house, at times poured into an animal feeding trough for consumption. In protest and for mental fortification, African-Americans made songs to steel themselves against the debasement of eating juba:

Juba this and Juba that
Juba killed a yella’ cat
Get over double trouble, Juba . . .

Juba up, Juba down,
Juba all around the town.
Juba for Ma, Juba for Pa.
Juba for your brother-in-law.

These verses are an example of the disguised meaning often hidden within the lyrics of early African-American song. The words of the first stanza indicate the eclectic nature of the slop made from “. . . this and . . . that,” and express the expectation of proper food once

slavery (“trouble”) is over. The last stanza alludes to the widespread practice of being forced to eat juba, that nobody was excluded.³ By mentioning the pervasiveness of the problem, the song elicits a sense of common experience among slaves, that nobody was alone in their humiliation. Evoking a sense of unity among oppressed people is perhaps the most important way music was used by African-Americans to resist their abhorrent treatment and bolster the strength to continue fighting against those conditions.

Double entendre within the lyrics of many slave songs was used to express discontent and resentment at the inequity of their position:

The big bee flies high
The little bee makes the honey . . .

In select instances, lyrics became forthright in their disapproval. The final lines of the above song were most likely not intended to be vocalized publicly, as they would have incurred dire retribution for the singer if heard by the “big bee” (slave owner):

The black folks make the cotton
And the white folks get the money.⁴

Similarly, under the guise of innocent dancing, African-Americans were able to parody White dance styles even in the presence of those they were mocking, using Whites’ blinding racism to play them for the fool. One former slave woman commented that after observing White folks dancing, “we’d do it, too, *but we used to mock ’em*, every step. Sometimes the white folks noticed it, but they seemed to like it; I guess they thought we couldn’t dance any better.”⁵ With concealed parody, both in lyrics and dancing, slaves could take pride in duping slave owners, using their oppressors’ myopic ignorance to their own advantage.

A form of music emerged among African-Americans that was deemed acceptable and even encouraged by slave owners—the African-American spiritual. To slave owners it appeared that African-Americans were converting to Christianity and singing the praises of their new-found religion. Slave owners welcomed this apparent conversion, as embracing Christianity represented submission to European-based ideology. In addition, “the ‘Negro’ spiritual was less overtly African than other African-American music, and therefore less threatening to mainstream America.”⁶ African-American spirituals were allowed

relative freedom as a musical expression which superficially praised a Christian God, but developed meaningful undertones that served to communicate, without detection by Whites, subversive messages of support, unity, and revolt, and even directions to the Underground Railroad. Slave drivers were convinced that “their tunes are all psalm tunes, and the words are from hymn books,”⁷ causing them to hear nothing but the Christian longing to be closer to the Lord when the slaves sang:

Deep river, my home is over Jordan,
Deep river, Lawd, I wan’ to cross
over into camp ground.⁸

Professor Lemuel Berry offers another interpretation, suggesting that the lyrics defiantly express escape to the North (“home” and “camp ground”) by crossing over the Ohio River (“Jordan”).⁹ Spirituals’ hidden meanings were based on analogies between the Biblical themes and the conditions of slavery, such as using the Promised Land to indicate the northern nonslave states or Emancipation, and by paralleling the Jews’ bondage in Egypt to their own plight. They even acquired menacing currents, as in “Go Down, Moses”:

Go down, Moses.
Way down in Egypt land
Tell ol’ Pharoah
To let my people go!
Thus spoke the Lord, bold Moses said,
Let my people go.
If not I’ll smite your firstborn dead.
Let my people go.¹⁰

The central theme in African-American spirituality, whether it was Christian or not, was that of striving towards freedom, escape from slavery. This basic tenet is evidenced in the content and titles of their spirituals: “O Freedom,” “We’ll Never Turn Back,” “Steal Away,” and “Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” Indeed, Gayraud Wilmore asserts that “the great Negro spiritual ‘O Freedom’ reveals . . . what is really at the heart of black religion.”¹¹ African-Americans focused upon the concept of freedom, distilled it into music and created the spiritual to protest the injustice of their lot. Black preachers recognized the power of music to bind people together and gather power from their numbers, with the

potential to direct that united energy towards a common goal such as emancipation. With spirituals, they could encourage resistance to slavery, spread discontentment, bolster morale, elicit the endurance to persevere, and otherwise engage in clandestine warfare against their oppressors under the strictest surveillance. Slave owners eventually realized the volatile possibilities inherent in African-American religion, as with African drumming, and instigated tight restrictions on slaves congregating for any reason. In essence, spirituals encouraged slaves to claim as much personal sovereignty as possible and solidified their determination to rise above domination. At times this musical guidance alone was threatening enough to slave owners, but once engrained, the power of the spiritual could not be supplanted.

Throughout much of the slave era, African-American music making was relegated to slave quarters, fields, and the occasional performance for plantation owners and guests. Excluded from the general public, slave music diverged from White musical style by combining elements from African and European traditions into a creation uniquely African-American. In the early part of the nineteenth century, some European-American performers began impersonating “Negro” stereotypes of speech, movement, and music in minstrel shows. The blatantly racist performances became popular among mainstream American audiences, and gave rise to a profitable genre based on such derision of African-Americans. During this time, there was little chance African-American musicians could find work unless they subjected themselves to the degrading expectations set forth in the minstrel shows. Ironically, African-American performers gradually superseded their European-American counterparts in notoriety, presumably because they were better at depicting the crude portrayals of themselves.¹² There may seem scant reason to pay homage to these African-American performers who, by acquiescing to public demand, perpetuated demeaning prejudices. Yet these musicians pioneered African-American public performance, taking advantage of early opportunities to gain public exposure, albeit under unfortunate circumstances.

The music they performed was derogatory “coon songs,” which in style were essentially watered down, Europeanized imitations of African-American songs. As certain Black performers gained a substantial degree of fame in the latter half of the 1800s, they garnered the ability to influence the content of their shows and include their own

compositions. With this meager power, some artists edged away from the coon song precedent by writing lyrics that hinted at the universality of emotions and subtly broaching the concept of desegregation. In this way African-American minstrel performers met some success within the constraining stereotypes and at opportune times could very cautiously nudge those boundaries outward using their lyrics as a lever for social change.

The musical style of minstrel songs was still largely entrenched in the European tradition; it was not until ragtime gained popular attention around the turn of the twentieth century (despite having been within the African-American community for years) that an African-American influence can be readily noted. On a European instrument—the piano—ragtime syncretized European harmonies with characteristically African-American right hand syncopation.¹³ This innovation marks another stage in African-American music's continual evolution towards establishing a distinct style, with ragtime representing the rejection of bland European-based rhythms for African-Americans' own, inspired syncopation. As this evolution proceeded towards a new variant known as the blues, the lineage of antecedent stylistic influences can be traced:

As a by-product of minstrelsy, ragtime was an art form that reflected the forced acculturation of a sector of African-American society. The blues and early “jazz” styles, on the other hand, reasserted a greater degree of the African tenacity to maintain its cultural uniqueness.¹⁴

The blues flowed out of the bitter hardship following the Civil War and the disheartening realization that although slaves were granted emancipation, African-American equality was by no means also guaranteed. Blues vocals vented African-American frustration and disillusionment. They intoned disappointment and melancholia, perhaps giving rise to a sense of shared adversity, similar to that expressed in the juba song that helped unify slaves against the ordeal of eating the master's leftovers. The blues were not merely for entertainment; in a way reminiscent of African *griots*, singers and storytellers who orally purveyed information, “the bluesman or blueswoman was the accepted community spokesman (or spokeswoman) on social and political issues.”¹⁵ During the Reconstruction years following the Civil War and on into the early twentieth century, bluesmen and blueswomen made known the concerns of immediate social relevance by voicing disappointment in

politicians, disparaging the half-hearted attempts of local relief agencies to aid the destitute and criticizing the ineffectiveness of Roosevelt's depression-era New Deal.¹⁶ One of the many tragedies that arose during Reconstruction and afterward was the fate of the sharecroppers, often ex-slaves essentially trapped by debt in a legal form of slavery. The sharecroppers' options were grim: remain where they were, hopelessly in debt, or move on to another area, risking the chance of making a living elsewhere. The sharecropper's dilemma was captured in blues lyrics, although not necessarily in a straightforward manner. Double-entendre was again employed, harking back to the slave era when African-Americans feared revealing their intentions, demonstrating how little the social climate had changed:

I'm gonna leave you, baby,
And I won't be back no more.¹⁷

Forced to stay and work for a landowner in order to pay his way out of debt, this sharecropper was not singing about his wife. Indeed, "the language of blues is a cultural code."¹⁸ It is not necessarily one of intentionally hidden meanings as with spirituals and early slave songs, but it is a code that developed from the prolonged segregation between African- and European-American cultures. African-Americans evolved a set of colloquialia expressions and references that were cryptic to anyone unfamiliar with their cultural context.

This cultural code extended beyond blues lyrics into the stylistic language of the music itself. Frank Kofsky proposed that the blues and early jazz hold sound patterns resembling Negro speech, a logical development from the segregated evolution of speech and music, considering that most musicians around the turn of the century were "self-taught and largely unlettered men, excluded from white culture since the time of their early youth."¹⁹ Not only did the blues lyrics and musical speech-sounds emanate from the experience of simply being African-American, but the blues harmonic construction, too, grew from that cultural source. At its best, this result of a centuries-old symbiosis between music and social environment became the musical rendering of a people's dream denied. By using that musical expression, African-American musicians testified to years of unjust marginalization. Bluesman Robert Johnson made some of the most searching musical inquiries into what it meant to be African-American in the 1930s, creating songs that were

so successful at reaching for and touching impossible chords and inexpressible emotions, that they seem to echo the promise and the possibilities held out by a society that claims everyone can rise to the top and be anything they want.²⁰

Yet to most African-Americans, the path to the top was made inaccessible by deliberately placed roadblocks designed to keep African-Americans in a lower social status. Such exclusion was largely true within the music industry; African-American music was categorized as “popular” and unworthy of serious study and appreciation. The industry created a distinction between high and low art, and allotted room for African-American music only within the lower tiers. Just as the antebellum Whites’ inflated sense of cultural superiority made them ignorant of the double-entendre of slave songs and spirituals, so was the European-American dominated music industry blind to the complexity of African-American music. It sought to keep African-American music separate and unequal, but some brilliant African-American musicians were able to break through the restraints placed on their careers. Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington established himself as the preeminent jazz orchestra leader, composer, pianist, and deserving master of twentieth-century music. His enduring career spanned the big bands of the ’20s, ushered in the booming Swing Era, and continued as he performed domestically and abroad well into the ’50s. Ellington achieved a great degree of attention and respect—not without struggle—and once secure in his fame, used his works as “social-significant thrusts” to reveal racist inequities, denounce segregation, and educate audiences in history and culture from an Afrocentric vantage.²¹ During the 1940s, with works such as “New World A-Coming” and “Black, Brown and Beige: A Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America,” Ellington strove to blur the distinction between “high” and “low” art, refusing the classist and racist suppositions inherent to those classifications. In effect, he was continuing the task begun by minstrel show performers to allude to unjust stereotypes and advance African-American social standing through musical protest. Ellington composed pieces that were consciously grounded in the African-American heritage, in its rhythms, melodies, and harmonies, so that the musical essence arose from the hardships and triumphs of the African-American people. In his own words: “Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part.”²²

As a distinct yet integral entity, African-Americans were affected by the same political forces that acted upon all American citizens while

also experiencing a unique set of repercussions. When the U.S. engaged in World War II, the entire nation was presented with a host of unfamiliar conditions, which played out in African-American communities as unprecedented opportunities and challenges. The U.S. entrance into World War II created a revitalized economy after the difficult Depression years, while simultaneously depleting its labor force by drafting eligible young men. The resulting shortage in manpower opened wide the formerly locked and guarded doors of employment possibility to African-American workers, as well as women. A vigorous manufacturing industry needed labor, and African-Americans' labor was accepted in quantity, with Black workers admitted to more skilled positions than ever before. The draft also siphoned eligible musicians into the military, leaving vacancies in house bands to be filled either by attracting musicians from other bands or by inducting teenagers into the professional ranks.²³ This atmosphere created a seller's market for the remaining skilled, experienced soloists, who could operate more as freelance musicians, exchanging one job for a more lucrative offer. The dearth of qualified male musicians allowed skilled female musicians to achieve an unparalleled degree of notoriety, both individually and as all-women bands like the International Sweethearts of Rhythm.

The prospect of military induction clearly delineated Whites' and African-Americans' disparate cultural situations. For most White Americans the military represented the force of democracy. To many Black Americans, the supreme hypocrisy of fighting foreign oppressors was intolerable while segregation, institutional racism, Jim Crow laws, and lynching shaped the American social landscape. The new generation of talented young musicians that stormed onto the New York jazz scene either were too young to be drafted or had escaped the draft, often citing ideological objections and using creative tactics to avoid their military "duty." These young musicians who were able to remain and pursue careers during the war held a profound distrust for authority and a willingness to undermine prevailing paradigms. These musicians had mentors in the Swing Era, who grounded them in the African-American improvisational tradition, which, combined with a propensity towards innovation and a relatively unrestrained social setting, created a great impetus for aesthetic experimentation. The timing was significant:

The war was stirring up the sediments of racial and class hierarchies. Black men had once again been asked to die for a democracy that declined to treat them as

full citizens. Musicians may not have been overtly political, but they sensed their responsibility as African Americans with a rare opportunity to act freely.²⁴

Auspicious conditions led to the rapid evolution of a new form known as bebop—faster melodies, intense harmonic construction, employing arrays of notes rather than emphasizing each individually. With a focus on improvisational solos, the characteristically bold, youthful energy of bebop’s progenitors is evident. The advanced technique and intellectual approach of innovators such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Max Roach, Bud Powell, among others, caused bebop to develop a “unique musical elite based on an individual musician’s knowledge and ability to negotiate the newly evolved musical vernacular; musicians who didn’t fit that musical criteria were excluded.”²⁵ Along with a new musical aesthetic, the performers of bebop introduced an entire artistic mode that included a formal manner of address and cosmopolitan fashion, which were at the same time both parody and truly respectful. The net effect created a distinction between “us” and “them” using newly emerged vocabulary, image, attitude, and music to draw the exclusionary boundary.

Wartime conditions account for other factors that had lasting impacts on the music industry. A shortage of raw materials needed to produce records, such as shellac, which was used for ammunition manufacture, caused the virtual cessation of new recordings and distribution.²⁶ This put a major dent in the music industry’s profitability, and so profits had to be maximized in other endeavors. This motivation, along with imposed limits on automobile travel, caused house bands to shrink in size and performance venues to migrate gradually from African-American communities like Harlem into areas that were easily accessible and enticing to the more affluent White population. This meant relocating music clubs to urban centers such as New York City’s 52nd Street, where there was a greater concentration of patrons, primarily White patrons. In these sometimes-hostile performance spaces, the necessity of an insulating distinction between “us” and “them” becomes apparent. With the dislocation of improvisational music from the African-American community, musicians lacked any sort of common rapport with the audience and so turned towards fellow musicians for support. The bebop’s exclusionary measures were an easy way to identify sympathetic peers and unify musicians into a cohesive community now that their work estranged them from the support of the broader African-American community. The change in

performance location and audience composition was also apparent in the increasingly introspective nature of the music. Dislocated from their greater community, musicians sought to distance themselves from the audience, to create an insular world within a disagreeable environment. In order to defy ignorant and disrespectful audiences, musicians eroded all visually flashy elements and artist-audience interaction from their shows, making it clear that the music itself—not entertainment—had priority.²⁷

The 1940s was a watershed decade during which a fundamental schism emerged in African-American music which divided post-swing artists into one of two orientations: those who aimed to fill popular commercial demand and those who no longer acted according to the dictates of employment and salary.²⁸ The commercially oriented branch combined urban blues with a prominent vocal line to achieve the highly successful and influential rhythm and blues (R&B) style, which later gave rise to rock and roll, disco, and funk. The independently oriented branch sought personal expression through innovation. It first evolved from swing to bebop, then to a myriad of subsequent styles whose main thrust was exploring tonality or a lack thereof, searching for ever-greater degrees of expressiveness. The latter musical lineage of innovation and expression will be examined in greater detail, as it remained closely aligned with the socioeconomic concerns of the African-American communities and thus was more accessible to musicians seeking an artistic or political voice.

At the conclusion of World War II, GIs returned home to resume their former lives, which involved, for skilled White GIs, displacing whatever worker had filled his vacancy during the war. The many African-Americans and women who had been enjoying relatively high-paying jobs for the first time suddenly found that employment opportunities had reverted to the pre-war precedent of exclusion. The combination of dispossessed workers, the overall hypocrisy of the war effort, and the stunning racism that affronted returning African-American soldiers were enough to foment bitter impatience with discriminatory U.S. policies. From the seeds of this resentment, along with escalating racial injustices, threats, and violence, the Civil Rights Movement developed. Challenges to segregation sprouted up throughout the mid and late '50s: *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education* overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine as it pertained to education (1954); the arrest of Rosa Parks triggered a thirteen-month boycott of

buses in Montgomery, Alabama (1955); and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) dedicated to the nonviolent realization of equal rights (1957).²⁹ As the movement intensified in the early '60s, the church again became a key element, as a location for mass meetings and as a safe haven. Civil rights activists Guy and Candie Carawan explained that

the churches were the meeting place for the movement and singing was a central ingredient of mass meetings which took place night after night. . . . The meetings started with old time unaccompanied singing and prayer. The older people expressed years of suffering and hope through their songs. The young people followed with newly adapted freedom songs.³⁰

The crucial involvement of religious leaders and song in the Civil Rights Movement echoes historical trends in which African-American ministers took on a subversive role during the slave era, using sermons and spirituals to inspire pride and patience. Because the African-American church had long been associated with advancing equal rights, it was not surprising that it once again became the catalyst for civic emancipation. Spirituals were already widely known among churchgoers and were easily recognized as a source of inspiration and unity, fitting to be used for the secular struggle. With modified lyrics, spirituals became a powerful tool to rally diverse civil rights activists together into a united front, as well as to provide strength when progress became frustrating and dangerous. Many of the early spirituals were adapted to specific local conditions and protests; this increased the songs' abilities to inform and protest particular circumstances. For example, in 1961, in Albany, Georgia, the Chief of Police, Laurie Pritchett, enforced segregation on interstate transport despite an Interstate Commerce Commission ruling to desegregate. Pritchett ordered the arrest of over 1,200 peaceful demonstrators, causing a united African-American community to peaceably pressure the local government until all public facilities were desegregated and voting rights secured.³¹ Members of the Albany movement adapted the lyrics of the spiritual "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round" to the determined pronouncement:

Ain't gonna let segregation turn me round . . .
Ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn me round . . .³²

Also in Albany "Go Down Moses," which was used as a spiritual during the slave era, was altered to suit the demonstrators' demands:

Go down, Kennedy
Way down in Albany
Tell ol' Pritchett
To let my people go.³³

One marked difference between the original spirituals and their modified forms was that in the revised lyrics messages were forthright rather than disguised within double-entendre. This testifies to several differences between the social conditions during the separate struggles. The relative security of African-Americans in the late twentieth century allowed direct pronouncement, deliberately left unmasked so that antagonists could hear their message, their unity, and their strength. In contrast, slaves could not afford to risk having their true meaning interpreted, lest the slave owner understand and act within his legal right to harshly punish or kill the rebelling slave. This is not to say that by singing protest songs, civil rights activists had no reason to fear retribution from White supremacists acting outside the law to silence vocal protesters. In the late '40s, Billie Holiday became the target of raging Ku Klux Klan members as she toured with the otherwise all-White-male Artie Shaw band through the South, insisting on singing "Strange Fruit," which recounts tales of the lynching of African-American men.³⁴ To those who opposed equal rights, Holiday's interaction with Shaw's band and emboldened singing were a direct attack on the status quo, the White supremacists' perceived dominion of America.

Overt violence was not the only tactic used to silence outspoken African-American musicians; economic control was common as well. After composer, bassist, and pianist Charles Mingus recorded the scathingly comical *Original Faubus Fables* in 1959, his contract with Columbia Records was discontinued, due in part to the controversial nature of the recording's lyrics:

Name me someone ridiculous.
[response] Governor Faubus.
Why is he sick and ridiculous?
[response] He won't permit integrated schools.
Then he's a fool.

Boo! Nazi Fascist supremacists!
Boo! Ku Klux Klan!³⁵

With recording, distribution, promotion, and all other aspects of the music industry controlled by White executives, African-American

musicians often found themselves at the mercy of executives catering to the profitable, conservative taste of mainstream White America. Aware of their frequently duplicitous situation as skilled musicians who were servants to the music industry, African-American musicians sought autonomy over their recordings to resist corporate control and circumvent corrupt reporting of sales figures. As the Civil Rights Movement was intensifying, African-American artists began acting against the constraints of the European-American music business by establishing individual recording labels. These early endeavors were not met with open arms by the industry. African-American musicians achieved a greater autonomy over their recordings and creative direction, but the mainstream channels of distribution remained blocked by an industry greedily clinging to its control over profitable musicians such as Randy Weston, Charles Mingus, Sun Ra, Horace Silver, and Dizzy Gillespie. When asked about the future course for musicians regarding production, Weston unwaveringly explains:

I believe the musician of today and of the future has to own everything. . . . I am convinced that it's the only step for us to take now. Considering our experience and how artists are exploited, particularly black artists, we must forget about working for other people.³⁶

This display of artistic independence represents a tendency among many African-Americans to shift from European-American-based models towards a larger degree of self-determination. This tendency can be found within the musical aesthetic itself in the avant garde style of jazz. Leaving its bebop roots behind, avant garde jazz musicians such as John Coltrane, Ornette Colman, and Cecil Taylor probed the possibilities of complete abandonment of the diatonic scale. Such departure from the very basis of Western musical convention has been ardently cited as a deliberate rejection of Western civilization and the so-called American Dream. Black Nationalist scholar Frank Kofsky proposes that such a rejection “possesses obvious social implications above and beyond the artistic ones. In point of fact, it mirrors the larger decision of the Negro ghetto to turn its back on an exploitative and inhumane white American society.”³⁷

Further innovations based on bebop continued throughout the '60s, giving rise to cool jazz, hard bop, quasi-modal jazz, and free jazz. Perhaps the political turmoil of the decade, along with accelerated social change, compelled musicians to search for the most perfect

musical expression in various artistic directions. African-American music has never remained static, undergoing a constant evolution from slavesong origins to the array of sophisticated forms observed in the '60s. The drive behind such tremendous musical exploration and creativity may have been a survival technique in a voracious White music industry, so that the protagonists had to innovate continually upon existing forms, lest the music stagnate and be subsumed by White imitators.

Although jazz has evolved, no entirely new African-American jazz forms have emerged since the '70s. In the meantime, styles have been merged, as in fusion jazz, and recombined with disparate influences into a wide range of outcomes. This suspension in the evolution of completely new forms corresponds historically with, and may be strongly influenced by, the hyperconservative atmosphere of national politics, beginning with Richard Nixon, as a backlash against the rapid, progressive changes of the '60s. As with every creative artistic form, periods of high productivity alternate with times of dormancy. Jazz has proven to be exceptional in its inventive duration:

Unlike no other music, “jazz” transformed its musical elements dramatically at least once a decade for the first seventy years of the twentieth century. It is inevitable that a momentary reprieve from such an intense era of experimentation and discovery would occur at some point.³⁸

While jazz entered a temporary suspension, African-American music was propelled into an entirely new dimension by a form that was discontinuous with the jazz lineage—rap. Rap represents the volatile musical response to a series of transgressions against the African-American community. Rap, also called hip-hop, emerged at a time when the voices of African-American leaders—political, popular, musical, and otherwise—were distinctly lacking and violations against the African-American community passed largely uncontested. The conservative, often covertly racist, policies of the government administrations during the '70s and '80s caused crisis in the inner city: thousands more people fell below the poverty level, educational spending dropped, and unemployment skyrocketed. The illegal economy blossomed, as one solution to widespread unemployment. The subsequent “war on drugs” incarcerated a grossly disproportionate number of young African-American men, making it evident that this population had become the nation’s scapegoat.³⁹ From this unforgiving social

environment, replete with police brutality and high homicide rates, rap was born. It was unlike previous music, with only loose rhythmic ties to funk and disco. Hip-hop stripped away melodic and harmonic elements; cut down to just rhythm and vocals, it focused on rhymed wit intoned over a beat. For many African-American youths, “rap is a form of political, economic, and ideological empowerment.”⁴⁰ Exasperated and enraged by sociopolitical conditions, rappers used their new-found voice to call attention to the inner-city plight, criticize political figures, express ambitions, and promote themselves. Hip-hop artists served a role very similar to that of African griots and to the Reconstruction Era blues singer by transmitting their perspective on important issues to their audiences. In a way similar to the emergence of blues from the hard, post-Emancipation realities, rap came about in a time when worsening conditions contradicted the hopeful social climate following the Civil Rights Movement and expressed the resulting disappointment. Rap artist Ice Cube rhetorically exposes the attitude of many young African-Americans when he asks:

Do I have to sell me a whole lot of crack
For a decent shelter and clothes on my back?
Or should I just wait for President Bush
Or Jesse Jackson and Operation PUSH?⁴¹

A strong link to the African oral tradition is readily apparent in hip-hop’s rapid wordplay, complex rhyming, and storytelling, and in its sensitivity to aural patterns. Although unlike other African-American musical forms in terms of style, hip-hop’s shared African heritage is evident: like rap, early blues, and griots, it expresses themes of discontent and relies on instrumental inventiveness. Rap and other African-American musical forms also share common themes of maltreatment, such as the constant exploitation of African-American musicians by the music industry, the spread of watered-down versions of African-American songs to the mainstream White culture, and the condemnation of African-American music as “low” art unworthy of study. The list of ways in which mainstream America has misunderstood and maligned African-American culture and music is shamefully long. Although hip-hop is musically distinct from other African-American musical lines, in their treatment by mainstream culture and media and in the music industry’s colonial relationship with them, all forms of African-American music share a common fate.

The dynamic of the dominant European-American class seeking to subordinate the African-American minority has been the prevailing force in shaping the African-American musical evolution. The response of African-American music was to confront European-American attempts to eradicate Black culture and subjugate their race. Using music as a means to unify themselves, keep spirits high, and maintain cultural integrity, African-Americans endeavored to bring the hope of equality into reality. Even music played simply for entertainment, without conscious political aims, had a role in fighting social domination by providing relief from exhausting conditions. Such morale boosting led to a greater ability to endure hardship, allowing African-Americans to keep their eyes on the prize, whether freedom from slavery or freedom from discrimination. Music's unifying function was able to bind African-Americans into a cohesive community, which subsequently conferred greater strength to its members—the power to make demands or revolt against oppressors—and the assurance that one was not alone in troubling times. Relying on hidden meanings, music became the secret language among oppressed African-Americans, whether that hidden meaning came in the form of the spirituals' Biblical analogies, the blues vocals' double-entendre, bebop's vernacular, or an esoteric cultural reference in the musical aesthetic itself. As a way to maintain cultural integrity, music was a constant outlet for African-Americans to sound their rebellion against forced acculturation and social inequality. African-Americans established a musical tradition that incorporated European instruments and tonal models, innovated distinctly African-American techniques and styles, and emerged a triumphant tribute to the resilience of a people unwilling to acquiesce to an unjust culture forcing itself upon them.

From violent beginnings, African-Americans persevered in carving a place for themselves in America and formed a unique culture reflecting that process. Music was inextricably linked to African-American culture throughout its emergence. As African-American music developed, it served the social purpose of rebelling against constraining bigotry, so that finally every African-American could realize the dream presented in many spirituals:

Spread my wings and
Fly, fly, fly.⁴²



Notes

¹ Karlton Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call "Jazz"* (Ithaca, NY: Herteric Records and Publisher, 2000), Ch. 2, pp. 3–4.

² Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), p. 62.

³ Beverly J. Robinson, "Africanisms and the Study of Folklore," *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1990), pp. 214–16.

⁴ Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977), p. 72.

⁵ Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Da Capo, 1994), p. 22.

⁶ Hester, Ch. 3, p. 6.

⁷ John Storm Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), p. 173.

⁸ Mary Ellison, *Lyrical Protest: Black Music's Struggle Against Discrimination* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), p. 50.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Go Down Moses" (traditional)—performed by Bill McAdoo, vocal; Folkways, *Bill McAdoo Sings: Volume 2* (FA 2449).

¹¹ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), p. 73.

¹² Hester, Ch. 3, pp. 16–17.

¹³ Hester, Ch. 3, pp. 19–20.

¹⁴ Hester, Ch. 4, p. 4.

¹⁵ Ellison, pp. 53–54.

¹⁶ John S. Otto and Augustus M. Burns, "'Welfare Store Blues'—Blues Recordings and The Great Depression," *American Popular Music Volume 1: Tin Pan Alley*, ed. Timothy Sheurer (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State UP, 1989), pp. 134–37.

¹⁷ Charles E. Cobb, Jr., "Travelling the Blues Highway," *National Geographic* vol. 195, (4), p. 58.

¹⁸ Hester, Ch. 4, p. 9.

¹⁹ Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism & the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 135.

²⁰ Ellison, p. 55.

- ²¹ Mark Tucker, “Uneasiness as Popular Tastes Shift,” *New York Times* (January 17, 1999), section 2, p. 32.
- ²² Tucker, p. 32.
- ²³ Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1997), p. 242.
- ²⁴ DeVeaux, p. 251.
- ²⁵ Hester, Ch. 8, p. 11.
- ²⁶ DeVeaux, pp. 239–40.
- ²⁷ Hester, Ch. 9, p. 4.
- ²⁸ Hester, Ch. 8, p. 10.
- ²⁹ Hester, Ch. 10, p. 32.
- ³⁰ Guy and Candie Carawan. Liner notes accompanying *Sing for Freedom*. Smithsonian/Folkways, SF 40032.
- ³¹ Guy and Candie Carawan. *Sing for Freedom* (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Corporation, 1990), p. 60.
- ³² “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around” (traditional, recorded by Folkways in New York)—performed by the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee Freedom Singers, vocal; Smithsonian/Folkways, *Sing for Freedom* (SF 40032).
- ³³ Hester, Ch. 8, p. 26.
- ³⁴ Hester, Ch. 9, p. 23.
- ³⁵ Hester, Ch. 9, p. 22.
- ³⁶ Arthur Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interviews* (New York: Da Capo, 1993), p. 20.
- ³⁷ Kofsky, p. 140.
- ³⁸ Hester, Ch. 12, p. 2.
- ³⁹ Clarence Lusane, “Rhapsodic Aspirations: Rap, Race and Power Politics.” *The Black Scholar*, vol. 23 (2), p. 39.
- ⁴⁰ Lusane, p. 39.
- ⁴¹ Ice Cube, “A Bird in the Hand,” *Death Certificate*, Priority Records, 1991.
- ⁴² Lyrics from traditional spiritual, as printed in Mary Ellison’s *Lyrical Protest* (New York: Praeger Publishers), p. 50.