

THE BLUES AESTHETIC:



BLACK CULTURE
AND MODERNISM

White folk don't understand
about the blues
They hear it come out but
they don't know how it
got there
They don't understand that's
life's way of talking
You don't sing to feel good
You sing 'cause that's a way
of understanding life.¹

Playwright August Wilson, in his fictional re-creation of the famous Classic Blues singer Ma Rainey, captures the poetry, pathos, and power of the blues. Although some might care to debate whether or not "white folk understand the blues," there is no question that there is more to the blues than singing to feel good, or to feel bad, or indifferent. The blues represents a particular worldview—a way of looking at life and of understanding life. Most important, it represents a way of participating and interacting with life. It is ironic then that the blues, a music which so many feel familiar with, is probable the most misunderstood product of African American culture; it's only rival being the *misunderstanding* of the African-American himself.

This short polemic offers a word of encouragement as well as some words of caution to any ambitious soul interested in the complex issues of African-American culture, aesthetics, and critical theory. In addition, this essay offers an alternate point of departure which might be helpful for those interested in rethinking the fundamental assumptions of these subjects. One must be encouraged by the present proliferation and perpetual *re-creation* of Black² culture in virtually every area of the arts; including literature, music, dance, the visual arts, film, and a myriad of new and emerging forms. Many of the innovators presently setting the tempo and, in some areas,

the direction of the contemporary art world, are deeply indebted to the principles and precepts set forth in the blues; although it seems that to acknowledge or not to acknowledge such a debt is as much a political issue as it is an artistic one. Suffice to say that a significant relationship exists between the contemporary western art world and what many understand to be elements of African-American culture.

Just as we are encouraged by the level and scope of an African-American presence in these artistic activities, we should also be aware of the inherent difficulties in formulating a blues aesthetic. The term itself is not without some problems; the first being; why a blues aesthetic? Why not a Black aesthetic or an

FROM BLACK TO BLUES

—by Dwight D. Andrews

African-American aesthetic? The answer, at first glance, seem obvious; the term "blues aesthetic" avoids or circumvents the problematic issue of race. But the answer is more complicated than that. It would be ridiculous to base an aesthetic model simply on race. To do so would inevitably lead to the same ludicrous assertions and conclusions of other racist cultural theorists and demagogues. The Aryan movement (past and present) in Germany and elsewhere serves as an adequate example of the futility of such attempts. However, racism so thoroughly permeates every aspect of Black life in America that to extract it from the grid of forces which have helped to shape Black culture would be to distort the aesthetic model at the outset. Part of our challenge, then, is to differentiate between race and racism. We must acknowledge the limitations of race as an appropriate criteria for the formulation of an aesthetic while simultaneously asserting the necessity of keeping racism in the paradigm.

However, maintaining racism as a factor in the formulation of a "blues aesthetic" does not alleviate the difficulty in determining how to interpret it. For example, though most would agree that racism is a negative social reality, it has not necessarily been a negative value in the creation of Black culture. If racism had been a negative value, one could argue that the resultant Black culture is itself negative. Or, one might suggest

that Black culture has been so completely dependent on racism as a counterweight that the resultant culture lacks its own discrete integrity. Although these propositions have their advocates, this author is not one of them. Had the African-American not had racism to respond to, African-American culture would have evolved in quite a different way. It is doubtful that the blues or jazz could have ever come into existence without the particular encounter with racism and the varying degrees of "citizenship" of its African-American creators. Jazz historian Marshall Stearns notes: "Ironically, the fact that the Negro was partly accepted and partly rejected forced the fusing and resulted in a new music."³ Although Stearns was referring to jazz, his description of the African-American status is also appropriate to the development of the blues. Philosopher Cornel West suggests that black music (and, by extension, the blues) is the best example of what he calls the "Afro-American humanist" tradition. He describes this tradition in terms of the breadth of black musical expression: "The rich pathos of sorrow and joy which are simultaneously present in spirituals, the exuberant exhortations and divine praises of the gospels, the soaring lament and tragicomedy of the blues, and the improvisational character of jazz affirm Afro-American humanity."⁴

Given these observations, perhaps the term "blues aesthetic" is the most appropriate since the blues encapsulates so many facets and subtle nuances of the Black experience in America. Moreover,

the blues tradition continues to inform even the most disparate Black musical styles, from gospel music to rhythm and blues and from the earliest "hot" jazz to the most recent avant-garde explorations. Many agree that Black music is the most advanced of all the Black art forms. Visual art historian Elsa Honig Fine writes: "The Black musician has already left his imprint on American culture, and the Black (visual) artist intends to do the same."⁵

To these commonly held sentiments, we should add that the special status of Black music over the other arts is also due to several extra-musical factors. These factors include the early recognition of its commercial potential, the comparative ease of its dissemination via the radio and various types of mechanical recordings, and the immediacy, portability, and centrality of music to the Black American experience. Last, but not least, the *implicit* nature of musical form also accounts for Black music's unique stature among the arts. Henry Louis Gates provides some intriguing formal observations in this regard by comparing Black music with Black literature:

*The commonplace observation that black literature with very few exceptions has failed to match pace with a sublime black music stems in large measure from this concern with statement. Black music, by definition, could never utilize the schism between form and content, because of the nature of music. Black musicians, of course, had no choice: music groups masses of non-representational material into significant form; it is the audible embodiment of form.*⁶

Gates's points are well-taken. However, Black music has not developed "free of the imperative" to make an explicit political statement. The social commentary found in many blues and pop music examples or John Coltrane's composition, "Alabama" (a piece written in memoriam of the black children killed there in 1963), all attest to explicit political statements. What is different in Black music is the intricate, almost indistinguishable relationship between form and content. Unlike the novel, prose, or the short story, the blues form evolved unfettered by any aesthetic obligations outside of the African-American traditions and the community it was destined to reflect and serve. In addition, the explicit political statement in Black music is often so embedded within the form that few musicologists, theorists, or enthusiasts have developed a way to talk about it. Present research strategies and methodologies rarely take into account factors like audience participation, extra-musical

performance practices, and musical gestures that are not easily documented through traditional music notation. Consequently, much of the essence of what makes Black music black continues to elude systematic analysis. Finally, any discourse which attempts to articulate aesthetic values and problems is, itself, an intensely political activity. The implicit nature of music, especially within instrumental forms, has made black music particularly prone to a

broad range of political as well as aesthetic interpretation. In this regard, it seems clear that African-American writers and social critics have yet to reach a consensus. Ralph Ellison's familiar review of LeRoi Jones's *Blues People* immediately comes to mind. Ellison writes: "The tremendous burden of sociology which

Jones would place upon this body of music . . . is enough to give even the blues the blues."⁷

Let us presume that the blues is, in some sense, paradigmatic of all Black music. Now let us consider how one central feature of a blues aesthetic may be extrapolated from the music itself. We must begin by maintaining that the roots of Black music lie not only in the adaption and synthesis of various African musical practices but also in the African conceptualization of music as power. Music served as a means of communication with the gods; it had the capacity to not only alter the *understanding* of an existential experience, but also to dramatically change the quality of the experience itself. Thus to participate in the creation of music is to have both divine access and power.

Therefore, music for the African-American is a means of *self-empowerment*. Self-empowerment, in turn, represents the aesthetic foundation for the blues as well as for all other truly African-American music including jazz and rap. I believe this concept of self-empowerment, which is often overlooked, is the most significant of all the probable African adaptations/retentions in African-American music. The Black preacher does not simply speak when he preaches; he often "sings" his sermon as well. Within this tradition, the sung word is radically more powerful than the spoken word. Fela Sowande notes: "By far the most important single factor in African music is the full recognition, practical endorsement, and use of the metaphysical powers of sound."⁸ Clearly the African-American has retained, albeit with some adaption, the notion of the metaphysical powers of sound (music). This idea of self-empowerment is all the more profound when we consider that it evolved in the midst of an American slave system designed to render the slave powerless, disenfranchised, and without hope.

We have already noted the "tuning" preacher as one example of the empowerment concept. Let us now consider another musical concept in more detail. The African-American approach to musical time and rhythm is of particular interest. Rhythm has to do with the temporal organization of music. More specifically, it is the way in which one of more unaccented pulses or beats are grouped in relation to an accented one.⁹ Rhythmic features common to most African-American music include cross-rhythms, swinging the eighth note, polymeter, and off-beat phrasing. In each of these features we can see the realization of self-empowerment. The common thread connecting each of these musical idioms has to do with manipulation of the basic pulse. In European art music, each pulse is divided or subdivided into equal subgroups. By contrast,

much of the vitality in Black music comes from the unequal partition of the pulse. If the beat is established, the challenge of the improviser is to express his understanding of the beat by not playing it! He plays *around* the beat. Two excellent examples of this manipulation of the pulse may be found in Louis Armstrong's solo on "Big Butter and Egg Man" (1926) and his duet with Earl "Fatha" Hines in "Weather Bird" (1928). In both cases Armstrong skillfully obscures the beat by slightly increasing or decreasing the tempo of his riffs over the constant pulse maintained by the rhythm section. In so doing, he illustrates his mastery or "power" over time by playing against it. Such examples do not require elaborate melodic configurations. In fact, a simple scalar figure or even one note can be played in such a way that the "given" (the beat) is temporarily overshadowed by an off-beat phrase or figure. A more familiar example may be found in the opening phases of Stevie Wonder's "Tell Me Something Good." Here the entire opening

melody is presented as a simple string of quarter notes. What is interesting is that each quarter note is displaced by an eighth note, creating a dynamic level of tension between the beat and the off-beat. One final example is worth mentioning. Anyone familiar with the vocal stylings of Ray Charles will readily marvel at his ability to present the text of even the most well-known tune in a novel and innovative fashion. Part of his musical genius is due to his strong sense of rhythm and his ability to affirm or subvert the pulse at will.

These diverse examples illustrate the ways in which discrete musical practices are the consequence of an aesthetic "prior notion." It would be easy to suggest that these various musical practices are the residual influences of an African-based music. However, such an assertion does not account for the presence of certain musical practices in Black music versus the absence of others. By considering the empowerment notion as the basis for these and other musical idioms, we can begin to uncover the aesthetic foundation of a blues aesthetic.

The blues tradition informs all subsequent Black music but does not limit them. However, the more formal continuities between the blues and its musical progeny will not necessarily be found in the surface musical details of any two examples. Rather, the continuity lies in the fundamental concepts of what music is and how one engages in the creation of it. A properly formulated blues aesthetic should be able to express the formal connections and continuity between, say, B.B. King and Anthony Braxton or between L.L. Cool J and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Equally important, a blues aesthetic should also provide a discourse which helps us to understand the nature of difference when comparing pieces across time periods, styles, and genres. At present, most analytic approaches focus primarily on surface musical details and stylistic features. Since many of these artists and styles maintain a strong connection with older Black music forms, the meaning and potential of a blues aesthetic is most powerfully expressed if it increases our understanding of the relationship between the assorted music genres.

There can be no question that the blues casts a long shadow upon artistic and intellectual sensibilities of the twentieth century. The blues aesthetic represents both the conscious and unconscious attempt of African-American artists and others to respond to life as they see it—through music, drama, art, language, dance, and literally through living. The artists' responses are as varied as are the forms of expression; their articulations are sometimes painful and strident and, at other times, peaceful and quiet. What unifies these diverse artists and forms is a shared sense of tradition, freedom to break the rules, and the imperative to continually re-create the canon to serve their own needs.

Dwight D. Andrews—scholar, reed player, and an ordained Congregational minister—is a nationally recognized authority on Afro-American Music. A product of the University of Michigan, Yale University, and Yale Divinity School, Andrews presently teaches Music Theory and Ethnomusicology at Emory University. An accomplished musician, composer and musical director, Andrews has performed on and off Broadway (with director David Richards) as well as in recording studios and concert halls worldwide.

Notes

1. August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (New York: Samuel French, 1981), 62-63.
2. In this essay I use the terms "Black," "Black American," and "African-American" to mean the same thing.
3. Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University, 1956), 308.
4. Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 85-86.
5. Elsa Honig Fine, *The Afro-American Artist* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 1.
6. Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black: Word, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University, 1987), 31.
7. See "Blues People" in Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 249-250.
8. Fela Sowande, *The Role of Music in African Society* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University, 1969), 27.
9. Grosvenor Cooper and Leonard Meyer, *The Rhythmic Structure of Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960), 6.

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January 12, 1990—March 4, 1990

Duke University Museum of Art, Durham, North Carolina
March 23—May 20, 1990

Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, Houston, Texas
June 8—July 31, 1990

Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, New York
September 16—December 30, 1990

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