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The Politics of the Free Jazz Movement of the 1950s and 1960s

In a 1965 article for leading jazz publication *Downbeat Magazine,* saxophonist Archie Shepp was interviewed concerning a recent controversy in the jazz world with a movement that was called free jazz by most critics. This new jazz was a passionate music that emphasized improvisational variations in rhythm and melody while abandoning the Western elements of chords and harmony. In describing the motivation behind his music, Shepp claimed that "jazz is the product of Whites – ofays – too often my enemy. It is the progeny of the Black. By this I mean you own the music and we make it… then you own the people by definition" (11, 42). Shepp's view concerning the cultural and economic tension between African Americans and whites illustrates the power relations of the 1950s and 1960s that the Civil Rights movement aimed at leveling. These new ideas created a discourse among African American artists in jazz and literature. Like Shepp, they attempted to radically reinvent the way that they wrote, performed, interpreted and mediated their music in defiance of the racial power structure.

Throughout its evolution, jazz has mixed with other popular art forms commonly associated with whites. Jazz historian and theorist LeRoi Jones, also known as Amiri Baraka, claims in his book *Blues People* that jazz became appropriated most significantly during the swing era of World War II. Jazz had converged with popular music genres and became severely commercialized, often involving very catchy melodies, if not rearrangements of popular songs. These new arrangements of swing pieces were said to have lost the vocal expression of earlier

black music such as African American work songs and spirituals. These older forms of black music were used to communicate and relieve the tension of social strife. Jones argues that the commodified swing heard on radio stations was a way of silencing the voices of oppression and imposing whitened identities onto African Americans via integration into mainstream culture. (181-183)

The earliest solution to this identity crisis for African American culture was the movement of bebop in the 1940s and 1950s, which revitalized black music from the manipulation of popular culture. Bebop is stylistically characterized by complex harmony and melodies played over dissonant chords, often using unanticipated rhythmic and melodic variation (Gridley 140). These elements are said to have evolved for the purpose of creating a style of jazz that could not be easily integrated into mainstream music. Recalling the public reaction to this new radical form of jazz, Jones writes that "the willfully harsh, anti-assimilationist sound of bebop fell on deaf or horrified ears" (*Blues People* 181-182). This was the first in many steps towards establishing a separate black identity in jazz.

Free jazz came on to the scene around the late 1950s to expand on the stylistic advancements in bebop. It presented a more radical development away from popular music by further abandoning the structures of Western music. The key innovators of free jazz were saxophonist Ornette Coleman and pianist Cecil Taylor. Coleman's definitive contribution to free jazz was his 1960 landmark album *Free Jazz*. While it is debatable whether or not it was the first album to be characteristic of this new style, *Free Jazz* is generally accepted as the first album to bring free jazz to a broad enough audience for national recognition (Gridley 277). This album featured the approach of "collective improvisation" in which an entire group improvises a piece, blurring the distinction between soloist and accompanist. In addition, Coleman's sound generally

involves no preset chord changes, allowing the soloist the freedom to embellish the piece in any way he or she wishes (Gridley 275-276). Pianist Cecil Taylor's approach to composition mainly focuses on building the textural aspects over the course of a piece instead of the harmonic and melodic aspects. There is no swing to Taylor's jazz. Rather, his characteristic pieces involve percussive notes played in a radically atonal nature that emphasizes complex rhythmic development (Gridley 278-279). Coleman and Taylor established the genre of free jazz by offering different approaches to composition and improvisation in a manner that allows the player to abandon any previous conventions in Western music such as melody, rhythm, harmony and chordal structure. Free jazz musician and activist Ronald Radano argues that "as the principle component of European-based music, [harmony] became a metaphor for white cultural dominance and oppression" (qtd. in Townsend 152). Free jazz became a means for many African Americans to further rid themselves of this oppression.

Musicians abandoned harmony and emphasized rhythmic and melodic texture because they believed that it enriched African American identity by putting free jazz closer to traditional African music. In a 1965 interview, Archie Shepp described Cecil Taylor's drum-like and rhythmically sophisticated approach to piano as "a throwback in the direction of the African influences on the music" (*Black Music* 152). In *Blues People*, Jones describes the unmelodic yet expressive use of the horns by free jazz musicians to "scream or rant" as a way of recovering the primitive vocal styles inherent to African music (227). Free jazz used African musical elements to further abandon Western influence.

In addition to using African elements in their music, free jazz musicians would integrate an explicit African theme in to their live music and performances. The free jazz composer Sun Ra often integrated African instrumentation and chants into his pieces while his performing

ensemble, The Sun Ra Arkestra, would dress in African garments and perform ritualistic dances (*Sun Ra*). The Art Ensemble of Chicago, another free jazz collective, would similarly integrate African percussion into their music while mimicking street bands on stage by dressing themselves in Pan-African garments and wearing tribal make-up (Gridley 293). African American artists saw this alteration of their musical identity as a way to recover the authentic culture that they had been historically denied since their people's arrival in America.

Musicians embraced a stylistic primitivism in hopes of salvaging their people's identity through denying many popular musical forms. However, some of the key free jazz musicians had aimed at drawing influence from the entire spectrum of black music, including the dreaded popular genres. Ornette Coleman has openly admitted that his training as a rhythm and blues musician had stylistically influenced his music (Smethurst 267). Similarly, Sun Ra's performances often incorporated doo-wop with bebop and free improvisation at times (*Sun Ra*). James Smethurst argues that when integrating folk music into art music for nationalist association, as done with free jazz, that the integration of popular forms becomes equally representative of a people's contemporary and historical identity (262). This way, free jazz musicians retained their radical new identity while including the many faces of black music to represent the entirety of their culture.

Though some forms of free jazz may not have been written with a political purpose, they were interpreted as metaphoric of political struggle. Cultural critic Charles Hersch interprets Ornette Coleman's method of collective improvisation in *Free Jazz* as a symbol of eliminating the dichotomy of the individual and the group common in jazz soloing. There is a sense of mutual regard that allows for the musical texture of dialog among the differing individual styles of soloing, allowing for the "redemptive community" of brotherhood that Martin Luther King Jr.

proposed in his Civil Rights speeches (114-115). In a similar analysis of the equally influential free jazz piece, John Coltrane's *Ascension*, Hersch claims that as some passages are collective, the individuals become lost within the texture of the piece. This implies that the individuals of the group become interchangeable to enforce a common melodic idea. Hersch draws a parallel between this approach and the self-interest groups that emerged in the 1960s to reject King's redemptive community to act on the goal of black racial unity, like the groups with which Malcolm X was involved (115-116).

Although some popular players like Coleman, Coltrane and Taylor were welcomed to the popular New York jazz clubs such as The Gallery, The Five Spot, The Half Note, and The Village Gate, clubs generally did not see live free jazz as profitable. The performances in New York clubs were arranged by charging customers a minimum number of drinks per set. The night clubs purposefully gave the performers short sets in order to fit several sets in per night, which maximized the club owner's profit, and minimized the musicians' profit. (Kofsky 145) Archie Shepp viewed these "plantations of the new slavery" as "crude stables where Black men are run [sic] until they bleed" (qtd. in Baskerville 488). Free jazz additionally lacked the commercial appeal favored by clubs to attract audiences, and if musicians were popular enough to get a gig (as with Coleman or Taylor), their sets were often cut short, as the long sessions of improvisation required longer sets. Musicians generally felt that this restriction hindered their creative endeavors (Baskerville 488).

To allow for environments that would support the abstract and time consuming nature of their music, free jazz musicians founded new venues to allow players these capabilities. This caused musicians to resort to hosting shows in their oversized apartments, called lofts. Aside of lofts, free jazz artists received help from downtown coffee shops, such as The White Whale,

Take 3, The Playhouse, Harot's, and The Metro Café. Because the artists received no aid in promoting their dates at these venues, they often drew up hand-made posters with the help of friends to be posted in popular spots in New York. The turnout was commonly successful, often pulling in full houses paying customers. (Jones, "New York Loft and Coffee Shop Jazz" 94-97) This offered African American musicians a way to exercise autonomy over their economic institutions, leaving them at the source of their promotion and publicity. Jazz historian John D. Baskerville argues that this practice of economic control paralleled the Civil Rights movement that demanded for African Americans to acquire self-control over the economic institutions that were used by whites to systematically exploit them (487).

In addition to being exploited by nightclubs, jazz musicians lacked control and rights over their published and recorded music. The musicians generally did not own the rights to their music and were expected to pay all of the production costs involved in recording commercial albums. These fees included studio hire, tapings, sideman's fees, liner notes, cover photography, and pressing (Wilmer 266-267). Jazz musicians saw the recording industry as another white institution targeted at pulling money away from African Americans in the workforce, referred to by some as "musical sharecropping" (Baskerville 491). In addition to the inherently exploitive nature of the recording industry towards musicians, free jazz musicians found it close to impossible to find recording companies that would invest in recording free jazz due to the music's inability to attract commercial appeal (Wilmer 236).

Organizations arose that attempted to counter these practices in the recording industry through assisting creative African American musicians in recording and promoting their music. A group of free jazz musicians of Chicago founded the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) during the early 1960s to assist and promote free jazz by

organizing concerts, workshops and recording sessions (Gridley 293). Similar organizations arose such as the Detroit Artist Workshop and the Jazz Composers Guild who shared the goals of AACM. Often these groups who would organize boycotts of major jazz clubs and stage concerts offered at low prices in hopes of spreading free jazz to a common audience (Baskerville 490). Free Jazz musicians began to operate their own independent record labels, and some artists founded the Jazz Composers Orchestra Association (JCOA) to provide distribution services for their new labels. JCOA also allowed jazz sideman to receive a greater percentage of royalties than what was offered by major labels through the union pay scales (Wilmer 1980). Through this process of self-promotion via the rise of independent venues and recording companies, African American free jazz musicians established ways to gain economic autonomy amidst the exploitation and humiliation from larger companies and jazz clubs.

Free jazz was often a condemned genre whose reception by the public was repressed and swayed by major recording companies and magazines. Often critics of major jazz magazines would give free jazz negative reviews and tie it to the racist tendencies of the musicians. Jazz critic Martin Williams wrote in a 1960 article for *Downbeat* that free jazz artists were “black supremacists” who encouraged “the unthinking, gut-level white racism that we should be at great pains to extirpate” (qtd. in Kofsky 82). A study done by jazz historian Frank Kofsky in 1970 shows that jazz critics do not make a majority of their income from magazine reviews, but rather from liner notes for the reviews on album covers (76). Baskerville suggests that in an arena of the recording industry where free jazz artists were starting an economic revolution, it was in the interests of the record companies to give this revolutionary music a bad reputation (493).

To correct this misinterpretation by critics and the public of their music, free jazz musicians began to write their own liner notes. The innovator for this trend was Ornette

Coleman, who reflected on and discussed his artistic intentions behind the 1961 album *This is Our Music* in his liner notes (Barlett 276). John Coltrane helped this new tend drastically by being the first mainstream artist to give his personal views concerning music and religion on the album sleeve for his well-received opus *A Love Supreme*, in which he thanks God and explicitly invokes his faith. Coltrane made it widely acceptable for artists to share their views on such matters in their liner notes (Townsend 157). Following in Coltrane's footsteps were a handful of artists including Cecil Taylor, who for his 1966 album *Unit Structures* wrote a narrative essay and poem about how his improvisation reflects and critiques the power relations, culture and history of the United States (Barlett 276). In addition to musicians offering their own input and interpretations of their pieces, often other African American literary figures wrote the liner notes and included poetry in free jazz albums. A notable example is Amiri Baraka's liner notes for Coltrane's album *Live at Birdland*, in which Baraka offers his relation of Coltrane's "aggressive tone" to the political tension of the 1960s, although Coltrane was never explicit in his political opinions (Feinstein).

In addition to album liner notes acting as a means of free jazz musicians expressing artistic and political ideas, the musicians also extended their political ideas through magazines and interviews in hopes of overthrowing racist practices inherent to jazz and American culture. Once in an interview for the *Downbeat Yearbook 1996*, Cecil Taylor called for African American citizens to boycott all jazz clubs, record companies, and jazz journals, stating that new jazz musicians were "no longer reflecting or vibrating to the white energy principle" (qtd. in Sidram 143). In interviews for *Jazz Magazine*, artists like Archie Shepp and the Art Ensemble of Chicago attempted to get the public to abandon the use of "jazz" title. Shepp stated that "if we continue to call our music jazz, we must be continued to be called niggers," while the Art

Ensemble of Chicago suggested that "jazz" be changed to "Great Black Music" (qtd. in Wilmer 23). The free jazz movement produced artists that were among the first jazz musicians to publicly demand that their music take on a radically different form.

Another way in which the free jazz movement conveyed its politics was in the racial character of the lyrics in some pieces. In his performances, Sun Ra would open a set by polemically stating that "the world is in darkness…I have many names, names of mystery, names of shame…I'm not part of history, I'm more a part of the *mystery* which is *my* story…they say history repeats itself, but history is only *his* story – *my* story is different" (*Sun Ra*). These lyrical passages explore the theme of the subjective history of African Americans that has been altered by whites to obscure the black identity to one of shame, ultimately for racist means. Ra suggests that he can provide a counter-narrative to his people's history that is not intended to misguide and deceive them. Lyrics were also integrated into free jazz performances by collaborations with poets like Amiri Baraka. Baraka would recite poetry that addressed his concerns with the repression of African Americans and would explicitly employ violent imagery at times. Examples of this fusion between Baraka and free jazz appear with his reading of "Black Dada Nihilismus" off of *New York Art Quartet*, and his reading of "Black Art" off of *Sonny's Time Now*. Each performance features Baraka reciting poetry while being backed by improvised free jazz from prominent musicians. These pieces highlight Baraka's vision of radical and militant reform for African Americans. (Smethurst 267)

Many other literary figures found inspiration from the styles free jazz, notably that of John Coltrane. African American poets have interpreted Coltrane's aggressive tonal approach as an outlet for political tension. They have extensively borrowed its phonetic characteristics for use in poetry. One example is in Sonia Sanchez's "a/Coltrane/poem" in which she writes:

scrEEEccCHHHHH screeeeEEECHHHHHHHH

sCReeeEEECHHHHHH SCREEEECCCCHHHH

SCREEEEEEEECCCHHHHHHHHHHH

a lovesupremealovesupremealovesupreme for our blk/people

BRING IN THE WITE/MOTHA/fuckas…/WHO HAVE KILLED/

WILL CONTINUE TO/KILL US. (qtd. in Feinstein)

Sanchez synthesizes Coltrane's volume and intensity in an outburst with an explicit Civil Rights message that emphasizes the power imbalance between African Americans and whites. Poets were also influenced by Coltrane's signature transition from melodic lines to intense soloing and have used similar phonetic elements to emphasize political passages. In his poem "Orishas," Larry Neal begins with the simple line of praise, writing "is the eternal voice, Coltrane is" and escalades his poem to later violent passages, ending with "kill. kill. kill./ . . . ancestral demons swhirl in the noise: swear in blood, accept nothing less than the death/ of your enemies" (qtd. in Feinstein). Neal recreates Coltrane's characteristic shift in tone by transitioning from tranquility to political violence.

Amiri Baraka is one of the most notable African American poets who helped influence this literary interpretation of Coltrane's music. Baraka's "AM/TRAK" is definitive in how it was among the first of many poems to idolize Coltrane through the nature of his life and music as a martyr and figure of inspiration and perseverance. Baraka, writing the poem from jail states "and yet last night I played Meditations/it told me what to do Live, you crazy/mother fucker! Live!" (qtd. in Feinstein). In this passage, Baraka describes his personal motivation from the abstract intensity of Coltrane's music. Baraka's style in these pieces is influenced by Coltrane's approach to reinterpreting Western popular music. In discussing Coltrane's rendition of the standard "Nature Boy," Baraka scholar William Harris argues that Baraka's approach to poetry is

analogous to the free jazz approach as a way of destroying a Western song form. Harris claims that Baraka takes this approach by introducing militant racial imagery into the Western poetry tradition. (qtd. in Feinstein) This is an example of how African American literary figures have drawn inspiration from the free jazz movement to overthrow the stylistic cultural constraints on their art.

The free jazz movement of the 1950s and 1960s attempted to overthrow racist power relations that African Americans faced concerning their identity and art. The artists of the movement abandoned appropriated forms of their music that repressed their national identity. To accommodate and effectively promote this new music, these musicians initiated a revolt against the jazz and its music industry to further overthrow the exploitive race relations that dictated every aspect of jazz. The legacy of the free jazz movement became an example for other African American artists, notably literary figures, who borrowed from its style to expand on central themes of black identity. Free jazz successfully extended itself towards various issues concerning African Americans in society and serves as an example of how artistic endeavors can liberate an oppressed group of people.

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