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Final Essay

Becoming American: A Look at the Intertwining Roles of Jazz Music and Langston Hughes'

Poetry in the Context of American History

It is hardly debatable whether or not blues and jazz music influenced the poetry of Langston Hughes; it has also been argued by a number of scholars that Hughes' writing was a direct influence on the music produced by various jazz and blues composers. This symbiotic admiration for the other can be seen in Hughes' later ventures when he compiled albums of recited poetry to the tune of jazz music. But it is not this tired idea that I shall focus on for my essay, but rather how the paradoxical nature that allowed jazz and blues to exist was the same paradoxical nature that Hughes' poetry found itself in. The history and reception of blues and jazz music in American culture - as American culture - runs parallel to the history and reception of Hughes' body of work. Both existed as a purely American idea - loved and revered by some, and loathed by others. Some Africanm Americans gladly claimed the music and Hughes' words as their own, but many others considered both jazz and Hughes' writing trash. The idea that the music and Hughes' poetry was intended *for* black people *by* black people was brutally questioned and ultimately heralded by some as detrimental to the Africanm American image, existing solely to perpetuate negative stereotypes of blackm Americans for white entertainment. But Hughes did not view the music or his writing as something making fun of the emerging black culture, but rather embracing said culture - defining the culture, and speaking for the "masses". It is the gentle space between being revered and being vilified that defined the paradox that jazz music and Hughes' writing existed. By observing the relationship between jazz and Hughes

we begin to see it is not so much how one influenced the other but how both existed synonymously with the other as part of the ever-changing fabric that was to help define American Culture.

To fully understand the emergence of Jazz, as it exists with Hughes' work, we must first understand the variances and existence of the blues. Essayist Steven C. Tracy describes these variances in saying, "there are many different types of blues styles, often subcategorized by blues researchers in terms of geographical location and historical time period" (Tracy 73). To better understand this, he uses the example of the "early Texas - blues style," which was roughly found between 1880 and 1920, and the "Mississippi Blues - style," (also referred to as the Delta Blues, so named for the Mississippi Delta), from the same time period. Though similar, these two sub-genres of blues have distinctively different subjects and styles. Tracy quotes blues researcher Sam Charter's work, describing these variations as being due to the geographical differences of the origins of the music. He argues that certain styles such as the Texas Blues show that there was "little of the oppressive Mississippi plantation life of the Mississippi Delta to shape the Texas blues" (Tracy). For instance, the population of black-Americans in the Delta at that time was nearly eighty-percent of the overall population, as opposed to thirty-percent as found in Texas. This, he argues, is not to say that Texas life was any easier for blacks at that time but that the different densities of the population led to different experiences. Therefore creating a "less sparse, less isolated, less confined life than the brutal colored society of Mississippi" (Tracy 73), which directly translated into the music of Texas performers as possessing a sound less "crowded, insistent, and rhythmic than the heavy Mississippi blues" (Tracy 74). The importance of this distinction is to acknowledge that the variations

within musical genres are dependent upon "time, location, environment and the interaction of elements" (Tracy 74). Just as is seen with music, prose and poetry are often influenced by the author's current surroundings, and we see this occur throughout Hughes' entire body of work, starting with his first-published collection, *The Weary Blues*, and ending with *The Panther and the Lash*, published posthumously. Not only did current trends and social occurrences influence Hughes' work, so did the musical trends.

Hughes grew up hearing blues music all around him, having been born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, and spending his childhood growing up in Lawrence, Kansas. Tracy argues that it "was the early blues of itinerant musicians of the first two decades of the 20th century that influenced Hughes in his Lawrence, Kansas, days" (Tracy 76). One distinction of blues associated with this era and location is the heavy influence

often slow, hard and driving beat that is deeply personal throughout

(Tracy 76). Blues greats, such as Texas Alexander, Henry Thomas, and Blind Lemon Jefferson, all incorporated a form of hollering in their singing styles that was reminiscent of the field-hollering style that was definitive of slave songs. This influence is hard to ignore

the dialect, diction and cadence all mimic that of the blues greats of that time and region. We especially Tracy calls the "old", rural type of moaning blues" (Tracy 76), in Hughes' poem titled, "Bound No'th Blues":

Road's in front o' me,
 Nothin' to do but walk.
 Road's in front of me,
 Walk...an' walk...an' walk

I'd like to meet a good friend

To come along an 'talk

From the above-selected stanza we see how this poem follows the traditional rhythm and form of the 12-bar blues, wherein the first two lines are repeated (sometimes exactly, other times just closely, like in this instance), and followed by two different lines that act as a response or comment to the *first* two. In his essay titled, "Langston Hughes + Poetry = The Blues," Yusef Komunyakaa describes how "the short lines of the blues poems create a syncopated insistence and urgency," which creates tension and, as he argues, "art has to have tension" (Komunyakaa 1140). He continues, saying that it is the "simultaneous tension between laughter and crying that create tension in Hughes' blues poetry" (Komunyakaa 1140). Hughes echoes this tension in his poem, "Homesick Blues," wherein he writes, "Homesick blues is / A terrible thing to have. / To keep from cryin' / I opens ma mouth an' laughs." Hughes explicitly addresses dichotomy again in his 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" where he argues the African-American can draw influence from "his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the blues becomes ironic with laughter mixed with tears," (Hughes 41). It is the fine balance between laughter and sorrow that makes up the paradoxical space that jazz and Hughes existed within. While Hughes was able to verbally express this dichotomy, jazz did so through its music; in this sense, jazz is the laughter in response to the tears of the blues.

Hughes was only twenty-two when he moved to Harlem and found himself fully immersed in the social, political, and musical scenes therein. Musicians such as Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith, Eubie Blake, and Josephine Baker – to name a few – were popular at this time and were among some of the names explicitly mentioned in Hughes'

autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), as having all had profound effects on him. Different from the blues he was familiar with, these musicians performed in cabarets and clubs, and many of them had a “vaudeville edge” to their music, while still deriving musical influence from “more archaic styles prevalent in more rural areas,” (Tracy 77). Unlike the performances of the Texas or Delta blues, this emerging style had a more “highly arranged,” “dramatic” and “sophisticated” approach to their performances (Tracy 77). Hughes’ preference towards particular blues/jazz singers and musicians became very clear when he started including their names in the bodies of his poems – paying homage to individual artists.

In his essay, “Poetry and Jazz – A Twentieth Century Wedding,” Barry Wallenstein quotes jazz historian Neil Leonard in his explanation of this progression by arguing that it came into existence because of the “incapacity of ordinary language to express extraordinary feelings” (Wallenstein 598). While the musician is lacking adequate language to “convey his deepest emotions in the received idiom, the jazzman invented terms of his own...probin[ing] the unknown or unexpressed with metaphor, oxymoron, and synecdoche in ways puzzling to un-attuned ears” (Wallenstein 598). Like Wallenstein discusses, from here we see the relation to the poet, wherein the poet is “unable to tell the deepest truths directly, and often employs oblique references to emotions and events” (Wallenstein 598). Hughes was extremely moved and inspired by this newfound jazz music, and could relate on an unspoken level to what it was attempting to convey to its audience(s). Wallenstein summarizes this theory nicely in his essay:

Both poetry and jazz-with-lyrics are the arts of indirection, often extremely ironic constructs, sad and funny at the same time. Poets, like jazz artists, have traditionally been on the other side of the approved culture’s speech and attitudes. This might

explain the attraction many poets feel toward the music and language of jazz – especially African-American poets, for whom the jazz influence has been most profound. (598)

Hughes was immensely inspired by the Harlem music-scene, and like the variations found in music, we see his poetry also progressed with changes in time and place. It was after moving to Harlem that Alfred Knopf published two collections of Hughes' poetry: *The Weary Blues* (1926), and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927). Komunyakaa describes Hughes' evolving writing style as starting to incorporate a "jagged lyricism and modulation...by using short lines – a modern feeling that depends on a vertical movement that sidesteps contemplation but invites action/motion" (Komunyakaa 1141). According to Patricia Johnson and Walter Ferrell in their essay, "How Langston Hughes Used the Blues," it was the latter collection of poetry that solidified Hughes as one of the "most innovative voices in American poetry and the first poet in the world to transform the idioms of blues and jazz into poetic verse" (Johnson and Ferrell 55). He was, as they claim, "demonstrating what he had called for in 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,'" which "suggested that creative individualism should be the guiding esthetic value for the black artist" (Johnson and Ferrell 55). Hughes explains this in saying:

We younger negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

This type of self-embrace by African-American's was unprecedented, and it was Hughes and his contemporaries who were leading the movement. Similarly, jazz musicians that Hughes drew such inspiration from were unprecedented in their sounds, movements and performances. In his essay, "Jazz and American Culture," Lawrence Levine describes jazz as being "an openly *interactive*, participatory music in which the audience played an important role, to the extent to which the line between the audience and the performers was often obscured" (Levine 7). As this blurring was occurring between bandleader and band, musicians and their audience – so was a blurring occurring not only between the whites and the blacks, but also blurring the line of both ethnicities between the upper and lower classes.

While 'blurring' was what some people thought was the necessary approach to reach a more progressive level of equality, it was greatly criticized by a number of people. Levine explains this in his essay, saying:

These notions flew too directly in the face of the comfortable evolutionary predispositions of the day, which simply ruled out the possibility that those at the top of society had anything to learn from the "plantation melodies" of Afro-Americans firmly ensconced in "the lowest strata of society." (9)

It was not just middle- and upper-class white-American's who were refusing to accept Africa as part of their American-heritage, but there were also critics from African-American literati circles who not only shamed the music, but Hughes' jazz-inspired writing as well. Maude Cuney-Hare, author and former music editor of *The Crisis*, denounced jazz in her book *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (1935), by saying it was the "common combination of unlovely tones and suggestive lyrics," that was characteristic of most of jazz. It was widely accused of returning "civilized people to the jungles of barbarism," and

subsequently “bordered too closely upon the racial stereotypes of rhythmic, pulsating, uninhibited blacks” (Levine 12). Similarly, one of Hughes’ “closest contemporaries,” Countee Cullen, vehemently questioned Hughes’ poetic credibility when it came to his jazz poems, asking whether or not “jazz poems really belong to that dignified company, that select and austere circle of high literary expression that we call poetry” (*ContemporaryReviews*). Following publication of *Fine Clothes to the Jew* in 1927, other black critics began lashing out against the work, proclaiming the poems were “trash” and “unsanitary” due to their so-called unsavory and “lecherous” characters. The Chicago *Whip* even went so far as to denounce his unofficial poet-laureate title, dubbing him instead as the “poet ‘low-rate,’” in the headline of the review (Rampersad 151). Many black critics felt betrayed by Hughes’ portrayal of blacks – as though he were only perpetuating a negative stereotype to the white people they were trying so hard to prove their worth to, much in the same way jazz was looked at as a perpetuation of barbaric and animalistic attitudes – a return to the forbidden African *jungle*.

As with anything revolutionary, an onslaught of critics is to be expected, and in the case of emerging jazz music, as well as Hughes’ poetry and outspoken positions on black-Americans, these critics transcend race and creed. Levine succinctly sums up the paradoxical aspect occurring with the reception of jazz at the time, and we can see that these same ideas directly apply to the reception of Hughes’ poetry:

[...] jazz was often praised for possessing precisely those characteristics that made it anathema to those who condemned it: it was praised and criticized for being innovative and breaking with tradition. It was praised and criticized for being a form of culture expressing the id, the repressed or suppressed feelings of the individual, rather than submitting to the organized discipline of the superego, which

enforced the attitudes and values of the bourgeois culture. It was praised and criticized for breaking out of the tight circle of obeisance to Eurocentric cultural forms and giving expression to indigenous American attitudes articulated through indigenous American creative structures. It was, in short, praise and criticized for being almost completely out of phase with the period's concept of Culture. (13)

America was breaking-away from its Eurocentric ideals and was facing something (for once) *truly American*, but found itself struggling to embrace the challenge. It is this idea of being criticized and praised for the same thing(s) that also makes up the delicate existence for the era's music and Hughes' writing – once again we see the laughter and the tears.

With the onset of The Great Depression, Hughes' poetry subsided as the focus of his writing turned to political and social transformations – attempting to bridge the gaps between race, class and creed, much like jazz was blurring the boundary between musician and audience. The Depression struck Harlem harder than any other part of the city – as is too often the case in any economic downturn where the minority and poorer areas of the metropolis are hit exponentially harder – and an end was put to the “New Negro Era,” as well as the booming nightlife that once harbored such exciting and frequented venues as The Cotton Club. Cabarets that managed to survive moved to Broadway, and the fiscal influx that was once available to Harlem seemed to have disappeared practically over night (Davis 278). By the time Hughes published his next collection of poetry in 1942 titled, *Shakespeare in Harlem*, his tone and descriptions of Harlem changed from his previous ideas of hope and growth, to notions of frustration and despair. Essayist Arthur P. Davis describes Hughes' next two collections of poetry, *One Way Ticket* (1949) and *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), as “bring[ing] to full cycle the turning away from the Harlem of *The Weary Blues*” (Davis 280). He further argues, “one sees a people searching – and searching

in vain – for a way to make Harlem a part of the American dream” (Davis 283). Through Hughes’ depictions of Harlem’s hopes and dreams, frustrations and struggles, and the “deep-seated discontent of the New York ghetto,” we see that Hughes uses Harlem as a literal inspiration as well as a symbolic setting to give voice to any black ghetto throughout America (Davis 283). In this same sense, jazz music offered a soundtrack to something at first exclusively “black,” but what later developed to something specifically American.

As we look at the birth and development of jazz music we cannot help but see the parallels between the paradoxes it faced with the paradoxes that Hughes was faced with and thus addressed in his poetry. Both jazz music and Hughes’ writing were unprecedented and fresh – something truly American – influenced by things from past experiences and ancestry, but ultimately cultivated as something unique and all its own. The receptions of both – including the positive reviews as well as the negative ones – are uncannily similar. By looking at these paralleling similarities we see how both aspects of what has now become part of American Culture worked alongside and with one another in a dual struggle to assert oneself as a collective whole, rather than the forbidden *other*. Just as jazz music grew overtime to become revered on a worldwide platform, so did Hughes’ poetry. From humble beginnings, born from a world of incredible struggle, both Hughes and jazz have achieved the ultimate American Dream.

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