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# Performing texts; playing with jazz aesthetics

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PERFORMING TEXTS; PLAYING WITH JAZZ AESTHETICS

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

May, 2003



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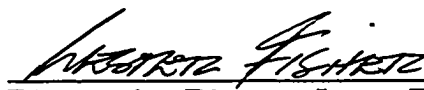
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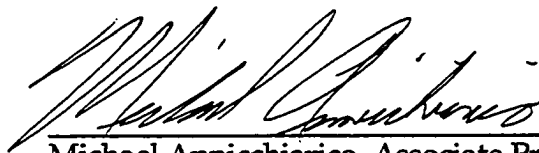
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## FOREWORD

“I keep seeing my book wandering through the halls. There the thing is, creeping feebly, if you can imagine a naked humped creature with filed-down genitals, only worse, because its head bulges at the top and there’s a gargoylish tongue jutting at a corner of the mouth and truly terrible feet. It tries to cling to me, to touch and fasten. A cretin, a distort. Water-bloated, slobbering, incontinent. I’m speaking slowly to get it right. It’s my book after all, so I’m responsible for getting it right. The loneliness of voices stored on tape. By the time you listen to this, I’ll no longer remember what I said.”

Don DeLillo  
(Mao II 92)

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ABSTRACT

PERFORMING TEXTS; PLAYING WITH JAZZ AESTHETICS

by

Rick Walters

University of New Hampshire, May, 2003

Despite all the critical attention jazz has received in recent years from scholars in other fields—literature, history, political science, cultural studies—very little headway has been made in understanding what jazz aesthetics are and how they might inform other forms of cultural and artistic expression. Part of the difficulty lies in the time-bound, performative nature of the artform and the fact that it is primarily a non-discursive means of expression; that is to say, jazz does not translate well.

This dissertation attempts to evoke and inhabit jazz aesthetics rather than trying to define, categorize or delineate them. Alternating between close reading, formal musical analysis, musicology and narrative improvisation, this performance sounds much in the manner of a jazz set in which the musicians work through a series of styles, forms and settings. The texts and approaches taken here are a mixture of the familiar and the unexpected. Thelonious Monk is discussed as a formalist of the highest order; Langston Hughes is not read as a “jazz poet”; James Baldwin is argued to be more concerned with jazz brothers than literary fathers; Frank Zappa becomes one of the keepers of the jazz flame. Between these ostensibly conventional chapters lives a counter-melody, an “autobiography” at times parodic, satirical, self-reflexive and allusive that

mimics, mocks, pays tribute to, improvises and signifies upon other less scholarly forms of “jazz writing”.

Although any number of elements suggestive of a jazz aesthetic are located in various texts—defamiliarization, reciprocity, incremental repetition, collective contextualization—no attempt is made to codify or delimit an understanding of jazz aesthetics. Rather, the performance is meant to organically give rise to and embody the aesthetic process itself. Jazz is all about telling your version of the story in close aural proximity to others who are simultaneously telling theirs. Each individual narrative is both tempered and enlarged in a process of collective contextualization. I think that is about as (dangerously) close as one would want to come to capturing jazz aesthetics in a declarative sentence.



## INTRODUCTION/APOLOGIA

*In a barrel of odds and ends it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and the things go better*  
Huck Finn

Traditionally, in a doctoral dissertation, the introduction and sometimes the first chapter afford an opportunity for the writer to “clear a space” for his or her own work by taking on, engaging, challenging, refuting, surveying, or incorporating the work previously done in his or her field by other scholars. However, given that my concern in this dissertation is with aesthetics and the way in which aesthetics manifest themselves in various forms, disciplines, and uses of material, a more flexible, improvisatory realization of the form at hand—the doctoral dissertation—might be in order. The fact that it is *jazz* aesthetics in particular that I am interested in further suggests that in attempting to re-create, reanimate, or at very least point to elements of a primarily non-discursive means of expression through the use of language, a more intuitive, expressive approach might be not only justified, but in fact, necessary as well. Given my subject matter and my attendant, implicit argument that there is such a thing as a jazz aesthetic and that I can conjure it up somehow, it makes much more sense formally, artistically, and logically to let voices arise organically, where they will throughout.

For central to my necessarily implicit argument in the body of this dissertation is the claim that it is not only reductive, but potentially destructive to

try and explain, catalogue or delineate a performative aesthetic from one discipline in the terms of another. Although any number of literary critics have taken great pains to articulate ostensibly interdisciplinary conceptual paradigms that would facilitate commerce between language and music—Baker’s “blues matrix,” Gates’ theory of “signifyin’,” Werner’s “jazz impulse”—they all ultimately reduce the music to just another occasion for language. These paradigms then become models not for reading musical texts, but for reading other literary texts. The “blues matrix,” or any of the other paradigms is at root a model of how language works; music becomes no more than a voice that testifies on language’s behalf. While I certainly do not propose to arrest language’s tendency to turn in on itself and become its own text, I do think that it is possible to use language in such a way as to approximate, if not borrow the performative aesthetic that arises from musical texts themselves. Rather than define, translate or even compare and contrast, my aim here is to generate a performance about, with, and through other performing texts, both musical and literary. More specifically, my intent is to use a jazz aesthetic as a method of working with language, and in doing so, make that aesthetic apparent, without—ideally—any loss of its integrity.

One would expect that any work that argues implicitly or explicitly for the presence of an aesthetic would need to locate that aesthetic in specific texts. This dissertation is no exception, taking both musical and literary texts as the occasion for performative close readings. Literary scholarship has a long tradition of close reading, explication and emphasis on the text itself. However, jazz writing, with few exceptions until recently, has been focused more on appreciation, cultural significance, and intertextual comparison than on the music itself. While that

type of jazz writing is certainly interesting, it would be so much more valuable and useful if it was informed by an understanding of the musical texts from which it supposedly springs. In my readings then, I hope to borrow the best from each expressive realm: to bring literary close reading to musical performance and to read literary texts as indicators or expressions of non-discursive aesthetic models. In each case the goal will be to find out how and why the texts are performing as they do rather than the extraction of “meaning” from them. One might learn a great deal in the course of carefully dissecting a bird, but it is probably not the best way to discover the secrets of flight.

At the risk of sounding like, of all things, a new critic, if this dissertation does nothing else I would hope that it points readers back to original texts in order to help them see and hear “fluently,” as Jessie B. Semple once said. Simply put, if there is such a thing as a jazz aesthetic, we had best look and listen for it on the bandstand, or even better, sit in. My intent here, is to join the jam session, take a few choruses on some tunes, old and new, and demonstrate how I think changes should be played. Like any jazz performance, this means engaging the other voices around me as well as the voices that have sounded before. And this necessarily means intertwining my musical narrative with the musical histories and biographies I take as my texts. The autobiography that appears in between the more academic chapters works as a recurring bridge of sorts. Much as the bridge, or “B” section of a 32-bar tune offers contrasting material and usually takes the composition into new, or different keys, these sections modulate in terms of genre. While the song remains the same—a song of jazz aesthetics, if you will—the orchestration and arrangement are changed. The defamiliarization and refamiliarization that occurs in going from one section to another then is a

formal manifestation of the more specific examples evidenced in the Monk chapter and elsewhere.

Jazz is all about telling your version of the story in close aural proximity to others who are simultaneously telling theirs. Each individual narrative is both tempered and enlarged in a process of collective contextualization. I think that is about as (dangerously) close as one would want to come to capturing jazz aesthetics in a declarative sentence.

\* \* \* \*

The first chapter of this dissertation begins with a familial scene that serves to introduce many of the main themes found throughout the rest of this text. Rather than lay out a carefully constructed argument, or sketch a conceptual map, I've attempted to craft a piece that works like the "head" to a jazz tune. The idea is to spin out a narrative that touches upon and makes known the underlying themes much as a melody might be said to be one expression of the supporting chords. Over the course of this dissertation, the themes, or underlying "chords" are returned to time and time again, although approached and expressed differently each time around.

This first chapter also models several of the narrative voices that will be juxtaposed with one another for the rest of this text. We find an academic voice, at least two different narrators, and the voices of other jazz musicians as well. Collectively these voices and narratives generate the interplay and mutual contextualization one would expect to find in a jazz performance and in doing so put into play many of the aesthetic principles—reciprocity, defamiliarization,

collective contextualization, repetition—that will arise repeatedly throughout this text. Beginning this dissertation with narrative rather than academic close reading or theoretical/critical application then serves to establish at the outset that this will be more a story than an argument; more circular than linear; more a performance than a record.

Chapter two addresses the issue of politics and jazz, bebop in particular. In the aftermath of Ken Burns' codifying documentary, questions about a jazz canon—what it might be, who makes it, what it means—have prompted scholars to consider the ideological work that jazz does. Given the relatively high visibility and influence of Wynton Marsalis, the Lincoln Center program and critics like Stanley Crouch, all associated with the “Neo-Conservative” wing in the jazz party, scholars such as Catherine Gunther Kodat have been able to argue that the period and genre known as bebop is ironically marked by “a reconciliation with capitalist culture industry” (12). I attempt to relocate some of the political vitality that marked the bebop period by looking at specific musical texts, a strategy for the most part ignored by critics in favor of cultural studies approaches that use jazz as a prompt, or an occasion for talking about something else. Developing the centrality of performance to my larger discussion, my emphasis is not on the significance of the particular musical texts themselves that we find in bebop, but what the musicians are able to do with them. Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm* is not inherently political; as I will try to demonstrate, Charlie Parker's *Anthropology* is.

In preparing the ground for my textual reading, I take some time to discuss a few moments and critical formations in jazz writing that have led to, and codified the cultural approach I've mentioned above. In short, it was an early

mis-informed argument about the political impotency of jazz that in fact forestalled claims about the potential political agency on the part of jazz music, and by extension, jazz musicians. By and large, jazz has been constructed as passive and quietist ever since, a result in part from emphasizing the often common, if not commercial materials used by jazz musicians and not paying close enough attention to what they do with them.

The third chapter is a three part structure that develops three related discussions involving Langston Hughes and jazz. Conventional wisdom has it that more than any other African-American writer, Hughes was able to immerse himself in musical forms and materials and bring them to the written page, aesthetically, performatively, and formally. Against the implicit back-drop of the parallels between Hughes' career and the development of jazz, I first consider the validity of the often heard claims that Hughes was a "jazz poet", or a "blues poet", taking the poem *Jazzonia* as my text. The second section is a juxtaposition of convergent moments, events and developments that cumulatively, through weight of mass and coincidence, implicitly argue in circular fashion that a certain aesthetic alchemy was at work in the early 1940's that resulted in the maturation of artists and artforms.

The third section is the longest, building as it does on the previous two in order to locate an active jazz aesthetic in Hughes' later work. Although Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper's recent book length study of Hughes' *Jessie B. Simple stories* has greatly enriched our understanding of the stories' history, development and cultural significance, her broader concerns are treated at the expense of a detailed unraveling and understanding of the relationship between the narrator and Simple, the two primary voices in the series. In tracing the

development of this relationship over the course of more than twenty years and six collections through a connected series of close readings, I've attempted to demonstrate the manner in which Hughes takes jazz as a performative model in creating two, ever-changing voices, engaged in collective contextualization. Hughes is then able to use this relationship as a means for considering larger issues attendant to the subject positions of African-American artists, whether they be writers or musicians. More specifically, Simple and the narrator at times stand in for the African-American community and the African-American artist who draws upon that community's cultural traditions and practices and in doing so "represents" that culture. From where, how, and at what cost the artist does this are implicit concerns played out and through the discursive negotiations between Simple and, ultimately, Boyd.

The fourth chapter is somewhat musicological in nature and takes the life, myth and music of Thelonius Monk as its subject of focus. As much a corrective as an argument for a specific reading of Monk's significance, I attempt to counter the prevailing notions about Monk that conflate his sometimes odd personal behavior, his unusual name, strange hats, and funny song titles with the music itself which was brilliantly logical, formal and rigorous. By bringing the type of close reading associated with literary studies to specific musical texts, all the while contextualising those texts, I hope to move in the direction of an interdisciplinary approach that would allow for a type of "thick description" that doesn't sacrifice the specificity of the texts themselves. As an example: throughout I involve myself in identifying Monk's own aesthetic approaches to jazz and the degree to which they are extensions or personal articulations of a more generic jazz aesthetic. In looking carefully at the formal aspects of Monk's compositions, it

becomes apparent that we can identify certain aesthetic principles such as reciprocity, defamiliarization, incremental repetition. However, it is also apparent that these principles or formal devices are not essential in and of themselves, but are the frames, or even Platonic ideal forms, through which one realizes a performance.

The Monk chapter also prepares us for the last chapter in this dissertation in which I leave behind texts and artists most would associate with, or identify as “jazz,” and on to an unlikely subject, Frank Zappa. In identifying formal, aesthetic and philosophical similarities and connections between Monk and Zappa, I am able to show evidence of a jazz aesthetic put into play in a non-jazz environment; that is to say, jazz aesthetics transcend even their materials.

Chapter five is a consideration of the early work of James Baldwin and as with the Monk chapter it is a corrective of sorts. Although I do not entirely dismiss a psychoanalytical approach, I challenge the near Oedipal readings that many critics have applied to Baldwin’s early fiction. As an alternative, I position Baldwin as something of a jazz musician, creating amidst the voices of other artists. Rather than read him as reacting to writers and other artists who may have come before him, I suggest that James Baldwin is more engaged in a dialogical performance: explicitly in the case of Richard Wright, and implicitly in the case of Charlie Parker. Again, close readings of specific texts are generative of everything else I have to say.

My take on a psychanalytic approach to Baldwin is revealed in my argument that Baldwin used displacement and projection in his fiction to deal with the self-destructive/genius African-American artist figure, a subject position nearly defined by Charlie Parker who was in close figurative and, arguably,



psychological proximity to Baldwin during his early years as a writer. Baldwin's larger consideration of how one responds to an artist of that sort and to what degree that type of self-destruction both enables expression and damages the image of the artist and his or her culture is not that far removed from Hughes' similar, albeit less sensational concern in the Simple stories. Baldwin's implicit claim in *Sonny's Blues* that these issues are worked out through performance—whether it be writing or playing—is tenuous given the ambivalence on his part I locate in other early works.

The sixth chapter begins paradoxically with an argument that Frank Zappa was not a jazz musician. The large strategy of this final chapter is to suggest that jazz aesthetics can be found in play in other environments than jazz itself and further, that this aesthetic can manifest itself materially and formally in such seemingly foreign environments. In many ways Zappa's oeuvre is the perfect place to locate jazz aesthetics outside of jazz. Zappa was one of the most important American artists of this century, even if his work has been overlooked or misunderstood: as a composer and musician, his range in terms of genre and style was unparalleled; his performances were often "mixed media" events, using that phrase loosely; and finally, Zappa often took jazz, or the idea of jazz as his subject matter. Given the eclectic nature of Zappa's materials, performances and attitudes toward audiences and popular music, locating any semblance of a stable aesthetic practice would seem near impossible. However, if it can be done with jazz aesthetics, then that performance would argue implicitly for, the flexibility, the translatability, the utility, and the pervasiveness of jazz aesthetics in American arts, if not American culture.

The specific text I chose to look at is one of those performances of Zappa's that brings together many, if not all of the eclectic elements common to Zappa's work—the mixed media, the multiple genres, jazz-as-subject matter. In reading this text, my performance upon Zappa's performance insists that the reader go back to Zappa's text—that is to say, the recording—in order to fully understand both performances. Nearly done with my performance, I gently shove the reader away from my text and toward the originals from which mine has originated. Only now, if I have been successful, the reader is outfitted with new, or at very least, more capacious ears.

The "autobiographical" interchapters of this dissertation are perhaps the most expressive, in the musical sense of that word, in this document. They are probably the closest that the writing gets to inhabiting a jazz aesthetic. Rather than reach for justification, or try and explain how it might "fit," I think the reader would be best served with a couple of remarks about the various elements that have been put into play in these sections.

Jazz autobiography is its own genre with a set of tropes, conventions and stylistic quirks the same as any other. Despite the relative paucity of actual texts, it nevertheless boasts a range and variety the equal of any other genre, as witnessed by the distance one travels between Ellington's Music is my Mistress and Mingus' Beneath the Underdog. At the same time, jazz autobiography is a thread in a larger, predominantly African-American, discursive fabric that ties together, however loosely, slave narratives, kunstlerromans, social satire and those wonderful hybrid, or multilayered creations realized by people like W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson and Jean Toomer, to whom this text is in some ways aesthetically, if not formally indebted. In including an autobiography

“of my own,” I join the performance in part to work out how a white voice can, or should sound in this discursive environment, how the larger performance is changed, and what my contribution might be. In that respect, my writing, although of much less consequence, touches upon some of the authorial-subject issues we find in the Hughes and Baldwin texts I work with.

This autobiography necessarily contains many of the devices, scenes and tropes that one expects to find in writing of this kind. If there is evidence of signifying practices, quoting, parody, satire, self-mockery and vernacular excess, then those things are indications of the extent to which I have immersed myself in, and engaged myself with the genre(s) and the tradition of which they are a part. To take risks, privilege invention and creativity, and engage voices that have sounded before me then is a sign of deep respect for the performative aesthetic by which the tradition continues to thrive.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE OPENER

#### 32 BAR TUNE: MAX IS MAKING WAX

Satch sits there on the floor sphinx-like watching me cook. He has that placid patience that is only fully realized in a dog of his advanced age and experience. Satch figures that although he might wait a considerable piece, he's gonna get something sooner or later. And sure enough he will. I've been known to cook expressly for the dog. The day before he went in for his tumor operation five years ago, I roasted up a big-ass London broil outside on the grill and lay it down on the grass for him. We thought it might be his last meal. He wouldn't eat it at first, bouncing around and barking at the sheer absurdity of getting a steaming steak off the grill. Eventually his gut got the best of him and he overcame any "cognitive dissonance" clouding the moment. Needless to say, he pulled through the operation and lives to eat again. And again.

I'm making a chicken/pasta dish tonight. With this type of meal I generally dredge the chicken in an herb/flour mixture and then sauté it in olive oil. This goes over pasta but the real performance is the making of the sauce. Usually I start with a roux and then add liquor, broth, wine or other liquids as well as herbs, spices and various other elements to create a sauce that speaks not only of whatever specific ingredients might be at hand at the time, but usually

the mood of the moment as well. Tonight I figure I'll use some of that Courvoisier my brother's girlfriend Tracy gave me for Christmas. I'm telling myself it'll be our delight to try and distinguish between this dish and previous ones that were built upon that cheap-shit Hennessy cognac one of Nicole's many cousins gave us on some forgotten occasion an indeterminate number of years ago. You can listen to a band play a blues in B-flat and you can listen to a band play Monk's *Misterioso*. They're both blues tunes, but long after the melody's gone, Monk's still has a certain constitution to it that the other doesn't. Or so I tell myself.

Nicole cleans the chicken, preps vegetables, grates cheese, sets the table, acts as my *sous-chef*, whatever the hell that really means—it seems that's what they call the usually unaccredited minimum-wage assistant on those TV cooking shows—but more importantly at this stage in our evolution, she tends to young Max. I feed her, she feeds him—it's a wonderful articulation. At some point, maybe five years ago, we implicitly came to the realization that I was more interested in cooking than Nicole (although barely) and therefore it was incumbent upon me to make sure we ate like "kings and fuckin' queens" as we so often characterize it at that moment of presentation on the dinner table. I'm about to start stirring in some parmesan into the emerging sauce when Nicole alerts me to the fact that we have some left-over gruyere cheese by stuffing freshly grated strands of it into my mouth. The cheese is incorporated into the sauce, remnants are tossed to the dog, and Nicole opens her nursing bra in response to the sudden howls of Max. To our mild surprise however, all he needs is a taste and he's back in the land of nod.

Cooking has always been fine time for us. Usually in the late afternoon we start prepping food—not always with a gourmet meal in mind—but one always prepared with care and some element of creativity or improvisation. We stock what are basic elements for us: a variety of cheeses, peppers and onions, broth, eggs, butter, cream, pastas, starches and whatever proteins seem appealing (and affordable) at the market. Meal construction is always a mix of relatively familiar materials and forgotten, unexpected discoveries from the fridge along with sometimes absurd seasonings suggested obliquely by the music always present while we cook. Tonight I drink a beer, uncork a nine-dollar bottle of cabernet and shoot a couple drops of lemon juice into my cheese sauce before lifting the pasta into the strainer. Wes Montgomery is on the box, live at Tsubo with Miles’ rhythm section—Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers and Jimmy Cobb. One of the outrageous joys on this recording of course is Johnny Griffin. It’s Wes’ gig, but when Johnny plays it’s his band. And this is as much a tribute to the creative plasticity of the rhythm section as it is to the will of the particular soloist. Griffin’s playing commands your attention—he’s like Worcestershire in a sauce, always threatening to overwhelm the other perhaps more subtle flavors with its boldness, if not its brute saltiness.

Sauce bubbles, chicken’s firm, onions are caramelized. As I ready the dishes, Max sits crouched in the car seat on the kitchen table and starts fussing in those appealing, alto animal-like tones. Nicole sings to him softly, perhaps unaware of how her improvised lullaby is not only borrowing from, but in accordance with the Wes Montgomery’s painterly interpretation of “I’ve grown accustomed to your face” now seeping from CD player. I’ve made a meal similar to this one before. This time, however, I have found a way to get the herb/flour

mixture to adhere to the chicken the way I want it to—an epiphany of ingredients at my hand. I set up Nicole’s plate and present it to her. As I put together my own, I mouth something about past dishes, successes, failures, could have done this to the sauce, could have done that, but scramble to get to the table to see her first reaction to first taste, because after all, talk at this point is bullshit.

Satchmo sits at the end of the table having calculated in Pythagorean exactness the precise point at which he could most efficiently snap up a stray ort falling from either eating position at the table proper. Nicole looks down and says “beat it, go on, get outta here.” Of course, he knows we’re too into our meals for serious reprimands and settles in for the duration at the foot of the table. At some point he’ll get a “sketty plate,” which at one time referred to the leftovers of a spaghetti dinner but now means anything tasty we’re not going to eat. Meanwhile, Nicole has two bites and lets go a wordless, though communicative sigh that tells me that my sauce is sauce enough for her. Gustatory rapture rules until Max uncorks one of those shrieks that sends scurrying any already tentative belief in a rational universe. Nicole puts down her fork and raises Max out of his seat and into a “belly to belly” position so that they can begin nursing again. Once he latches on correctly, at minimal pain to Nicole, they both resume eating: her somewhat clumsily pawing her pasta and chicken with her right hand; Max drawing rhythmically, his cheeks contracting and expanding, not unlike a horn player replenishing his air supply in between phrases.

Traditionally it has been my great fortune to sit after the meal and enjoy my wine, absorb the music in the full flush of a food buzz and toss off half-realized platitudes about cooking-as-art and what a talented prick I am in the

kitchen while Nicole loads the dishwasher. This has now changed. I put away all the perishables, clean the counters and cutting boards, but leave the dirty dishes stacked neatly and symmetrically in the sink and slide on back to my seat and my wine to watch Nicole and Max. Because Nicole is preoccupied, I get to feed Satchmo the leftover pieces of chicken, which I am careful to coat in the now cooled, but nevertheless still robust cheese sauce, watching him take them gingerly off the tip of my fork with maddening dental precision. After three or four bites the hairs below his lower lip are coated with cheese residue, prompting me to exclaim loudly "Look! He got da liddle white beard" a phrase repeated only too often in our house. Satch's beard grows menacing and he snarls when I tell him "all gone, id all gone now."

The main show though is Max and Nicole. They've settled into a groove just as compelling as the music that has just stopped playing. Max's rhythmic sucking noises, the gentle swing of Nicole's cradled arms, and even the chant-like panting of the dog animate the room with polyrhythmic pulse. I sit quietly waiting for those rare, though anticipated moments when all pulses coincide for a brief instant of synchronicity before careening off into disjunct, though traceable patterns.

\* \* \* \*

Developing as it did from folk art to maturity in a bewilderingly short span of forty or fifty years, Jazz has never had much of a chance to divorce or estrange itself from the fabric of everyday life. While it may seem trite and even tautological to say that Jazz is an expression of the culture from which it springs,



there is an intensity to the truth in that statement that is not attendant when making the same observation about many traditional Western artforms. For in African-American culture, performing music has always been more about *dealing* with life than about distilling or transcending it in art. No less a voice than Albert Murray says as much in his discussion of the dialectic between Saturday night saturnalia and Sunday morning sanctification—the intertwining of sexuality and salvation. Traditionally, this is a music as often performed at rent parties, in rooming houses, on street corners and subways, and in boisterous backyards and Sunday afternoon ballparks as it is in nightclubs and theaters—or the Lincoln Center for that matter. In such settings, the music often serves as a common denominator, many times the cultural equivalent of food, liquor or conversation, a commonality, a stepping-off point and a spur to social relations.

Whether the Jazz musician is running down yet another version of *Satin Doll* at the local Elks club, or negotiating a free-form, group improvisation based upon the concept of “peace” at an obscure club in the village, it is an interactive affair situated squarely within the realm of entertainment. That is to say, that outside of strict and isolated solo performances, and perhaps Anthony Braxton, every Jazz player plays for an audience, or more accurately, plays *with* an audience. As a rather specific example, when a horn player is trading fours with another player, he anticipates that what he plays in his four measures will be answered, refuted, commented upon, revised, extended, mutated, or even purposely ignored by the player blowing on the following four measures. In fact, this knowledge colors what he plays, at times motivating him to challenge, inspire, introduce, taunt, circumscribe, or even foreshadow what will follow him depending on his mood, how many drinks he has had, how his lover is treating

him, how hip the crowd seems, who won the ball game that day and what he had for dinner. In a very real sense, the two or more players involved in this game of tragi-comic brinkmanship are in fact entertaining one another, entertaining the other supporting members in the band, and depending upon the accessibility of the music and the hipness of the room, entertaining the audience as well.

A defining element of this entertainment, not as evident in most other artforms, is reciprocity, a concept perhaps more dangerous than it might seem at first glance. In any performance there is risk. However, the risk involved in having an improvised performance critiqued, revised, challenged and commented upon in real time by accompanying musicians is exponentially more intimidating, if not more menacing than the risk of messing up a well-worn etude one has rehearsed hundreds of times, note for note. This is one difference between living the music—inhabiting it—and *reliving* it, if it can be said that reliving it is really the case. Of course one could argue that in the performance of a concert piece, the soloist is contextualized, perhaps subtly nuanced, and even pushed in an interpretive direction by the accompanying musicians, but that's a small concern when you consider the tenor man that walks in midway through your gig aiming to cut your ass because he can, calling some hellacious bop tune at a tempo that makes grown musicians run to the john mumbling lame shit about "yeah, but can he play the blues?!" as they fumble about the trough. In the Jazz performance you will get and you will give. The character of that transaction though is influenced by the personalities involved, the setting, the audience however defined, which may or may not play an active role, and a host of other variables unanticipated and often ultimately unknown. What

makes for a “good” Jazz performance is how it plays in, and contributes to a given environment, musical or otherwise.

Of course this is not to imply a comparison of art forms that valorizes one and finds the other bereft of emotional significance. What I suggest is that Jazz is performance in its ultimate quotidian splendor whereas many other art forms operate within, using Bakhtin’s language, an altogether different *chronotype*. That is to say, the time/space matrix operative in Western music is perhaps something akin to the paradigm implicit in Eliot’s consideration of tradition and individual talent. The fledgling author asserts his or her (usually his) hesitant offering against the cold, though dominant and overwhelming body of received tradition. If he is of particular genius, once the borrowings, paraphrases, references and outright acts of thievery have been accounted for, there perhaps exists a small microcosm of original work that is worthy of inclusion, that in fact expands the boreal body of tradition ever so slightly, but not so radically as to shatter the frigid corpse. As Eliot himself says, this situation represents “an escape from emotions; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.”

A Jazz aesthetic is one in which tradition is manifest as a received set of flexible, though paradoxically, in the case of the blues, essential, *inhabitable* forms; a received, though infinitely expandable vocabulary; and thanks to recording, a received record of how others *have improvised* upon and with those materials in the past. The task of the Jazz musician, to borrow from one of Tom Stearns contemporaries, is to take those forms and vocabulary and “make [them] new.” As a result, every utterance of a competent Jazz musician is as *valid* as the next. That is because each utterance is an existential moment in which the player,

“constantly risking absurdity”, tries to order chaos on the fly, his task complicated by the need to simultaneously inhabit a conversation with others involved in an identical, although individualized task. Jazz improvisation is a fleeting, time-bound trajectory of life lived. And this is why traditional Jazz wisdom has it that although you may find a serviceable voice early on, it may take a while before you have something to say. Wynton Marsalis, one of the most perceptive of Jazz commentators tells of Louis Armstrong’s later years in which Pops’ playing became so distilled and condensed that a single note spoke volumes to those capable of hearing what was there. While Armstrong’s playing certainly reflects his years of experience as a Jazz singer, trumpet and cornet player, more importantly it is a manifestation, an elaboration, an articulation, a crystallization of life experience, life knowledge that younger musicians can only sense or catch fleeting glances of until they have lived some shit.

Pops used to sign his letters—and he wrote a lot of letters—“ricely yours,” referring to the red beans and rice of his home town New Orleans. In fact, food is a constant thread throughout Armstrong’s autobiography emphasizing the episodic, yet repetitive, cyclic and creative nature of a jazz life, if not a Jazz appetite. In Duke Ellington’s autobiography *Music is My Mistress*, a whole chapter (“Taste Buds”) is devoted to the food Duke was fortunate enough to have sampled in his travels as a Jazz musician. Jazz lore and legend are rife with references to food and cooking: Charlie “Bird” Parker supposedly got his name from an incident in which a car he was in hit a chicken. Parker brought the bird into the owner’s farm house to ask if someone could cook it up for him. There are scores of Jazz tunes referring to food and drink, Dexter Gordon’s *Fried Bananas* and *Cheesecake*, Gillespie’s *Salt Peanuts*, Ray Bryant’s *Chicken and*

*Dumplings, Monk's Straight, No Chaser, and Lee Morgan's Cornbread* to name but a few. The phrase "cooking," when applied to a Jazz group, indicates that they are playing in a particularly inventive and inspiring manner, that the music is visceral, *shit all up in your body*, according to Miles.

The connection between Jazz and cooking is not a chance one. Insofar as it transpires in a relatively short time span and is meant to be consumed in a continuous timely fashion, a prepared meal offers pleasures similar to that of the Jazz performance. In both cases base materials are probably familiar, whether it be chicken and potatoes or a twelve bar blues. The method of execution may be similar as well—roast it, braise it, swing it, grind it. Now one might object that the preparation of a meal and its consumption are set apart in time if not by distance; but I would refer the reader back to the backyard barbecue or the rent party. For one of the true pleasures involving in cooking is the tasting, sampling, snacking and savoring that occurs during the course of a meal's preparation. During the run of a tune, the horn man might turn to the bass player, pianist, or any other musician on stage and ask "you want any of this?," wanting to know if they feel like blowing a few choruses. The received wisdom that too many cooks spoil the broth points to the fact that everyone wants to put their two cents, or in the case of aromatics, two scents in whatever you're cooking and will even go as far as to toss in a handful of cumin seeds, a sprig of basil or a dash of Tabasco when you're not looking, the bastards, reasoning perhaps that everyone at the party is going to eat it so why shouldn't we all have some small say as to what those eats are. Naturally, once ingredients have been smuggled into the dish the guilty party of necessity must then taste the food in order to gauge the impact of their crime. Of course I'm talking here about cooking for a

group of people, but that's the point isn't it? The performance is as much the creation as it is the consumption. Along those lines Baraka says, *hunting is not those heads on the wall.*

## Bridge

October, 1989

The band is cranking out the final few tortured bars of Ellington's *Satin Doll* at 12:50 in the morning at the VFW lounge. The room's occupied by the band, the bartender and two formerly verbose, and then obnoxious, and now near comatose retired ex-employees of a transit company no one's ever heard of, hugging the bar and occasionally sputtering "ffffuck da wife" or some such nonsense. For their closing tune of the night, Walters announces in exaggerated fashion, "the band is sending out this tune to two very dear friends, Fred and Emile"—he knows their names from hearing the bartender telling them to "quiet the fuck down" all night. There is the not improbable hope that upon hearing their names, one of them might arise from his stupor long enough to buy the band a drink. This is an opportunity not to be missed given that the band is not involved in any real way with this esteemed fraternal organization other than providing music for dancing after the Friday night feed. In places like this, musicians are unlikely to receive common courtesies, not to mention favors even so slight as allowing for a quick drink after last call—unless of course they have ingratiated themselves with one of the boys from the lodge.

*You kids sounded all right until ya started that ad-lib bullshit, can't ya play some more Dorsey? That's what we want ta hear, you're not down in goddam Massachusetts, don't be playin' that jungle music, ya ever hear of Glenn Miller?*

The band rushes through a two minute version of some jumbled blues head the horn player Pedro has improvised and hustle on over to the bar, half-heartedly asserting "employees' rights" for a drink after the bell has rung. Somewhat surprisingly, the bartender sets them up with the implicit understanding that the entire band will listen to his no doubt riveting narrative.

*The wife's a paramedic, once responded to call about a dog bite, got there and found a forty-three year old male sitting in the driveway, sobbing inconsolably with his balls in his hand. The dog was only a foot or two away, casually posed on the pavement, methodically licking his paws.*

The band loads their equipment into the bed of Pedro's pick up and then all get into the back of Booker's twenty-something-year-old caddy. Carrey fires up a J-bar of his own design and sucks the first half-inch of it down, illuminating the front of the car with an ethereal glow familiar and quite welcome at this stage in the evening. Pedro speaks first.

"That was a fucked-up gig man. Did you see those lames? Munching the roast beef and slaw in plaid jackets and shit. How come there's always some loudmouth motherfucker named Sully or Gino who wants to make a fool of himself on the dance floor . . . *Benny Goodman! Gene Krupa! Tommy . . .* motherfuckers; we should strap them into chairs and make them listen to Sun Ra for a couple of days."

"Pass the herb man" Booker says.

"Booker, put this in" Pedro says as he forwards an unmarked tape to the front of the car.

Pedro's not his real name. Rather, it's just this night's variation of a name beginning with P. It's a game played by Pedro and Walters. The week before Walters was calling him "Porky" as he made time with one of the cocktail waitresses; the week before that it was "Presley" when he was forced to sing *Don't be Cruel* on a G.B. gig. Given P's dark complexion and the crowd they were playing for this particular evening, Walters thought there might be some humor in trying to pass P off as a Mexican and had therefore introduced him to the audience as "Pedro Pascal."

Booker asks, "what is it" as he slaps the tape into the portable deck that is duck-taped to the front seat.

"Just play it man."

As soon as Booker pops it to the portable tape deck on the front seat, everyone in the car, except maybe Carrey the drummer, knows it's Bird. But this is Bird none of them have heard before—possibly a bootleg, a Benedetti recording, an out-take—who knows?

"Check this shit out, it's righteous" Pedro says.

They all sit rapt and there is no sound outside of the bird-calls hailing them from the tape deck for a good two minutes. Finally Pedro, no longer able to hold it in, breaks the growing intensity by barking "shit's tumblin' out his horn, it almost seems like he doesn't know where he's going, but he's going there faster than anybody else, but then when he gets there it's RELIGIOUS and it all makes complete sense after all."



“It’s like a madcap fuckin’ sled ride” Walters says, having recently become enamored with the word “madcap.”

“Hats flying off” says Pedro.

Everyone freezes up as the car is suddenly lit by the headlights of another vehicle.

“It’s cool” Booker says. “Its just the bartender leaving.”

“Could have been the chief looking for his mayo, man, ya never know” Pedro says.

All’s quiet for a few seconds as the pressure drops.

Eventually Walters says “you sounded good tonight Pres, you managed to work the *All In The Family* theme song into three different tunes; you’re a bad motherfucker, that’s three different keys, you’ve been shedding huh?”

“Fuck you Wilters” Pres says, “you never told us, did that gig with Barry Manifold fall through? I heard Weird Al Yankyerdick was looking for a bass player. Maybe you could hook him up.”

“Seriously” Joe Carrey says, “we were swinging in those first two sets, *All the Things You Are* was right there, the groove, the solos—Pedro, you’re the man—you sounded like Sonny Rollins. The light of Jesus must guide your way.”

“I was one with the lord, Joe, on that tune” Pedro says in a neutral tone, having long ago accepted, or at least implicitly agreed to not question Carrey’s religious/philosophical conception of the mind and body as a marijuana temple for our lord.

Joe nods in aggressive agreement and takes another long pull off the blunt that he has been holding for entirely too long.

“Pass the goddam weed” Booker cries in mock, although not *that* mock exasperation.

As Walters is wont to do, he offers some sort of summary statement, perhaps feeling semi-consciously that since it is his gig—he hired the guys—it is incumbent upon him to rally the troops, if not confirm the fact that they are some sort of *real* Jazz musicians.

“So, we got to play some tunes tonight, we played that Dexter tune Spike transcribed and a couple of bop tunes we never tried before.”

This is met with silence. Eventually Pedro says, “yeah, we did play some different stuff.”

Silence again.

“Pass the gauge” Walters says.

An indeterminate period of time later Booker asks “so, we got any gigs coming up?”

With the exception of Carrey, who is more than happy to play one night a week, everyone is working relatively steady, splitting time between top-forty dance bands, weddings, the occasional R&B gig, and whatever may come up—a local production of *The Music Man*, a Sunday jam at the Odd Fellows, or maybe a singles get-together at the Dance Emporium. Nevertheless, this work can sometimes be as little as \$100 a week and so everyone tolerates some sort of a day gig—day laborer, Manpower stalwart, line-cook etc.

Whenever a “jazz” gig comes up, however, people make time. Booker is asking about Jazz gigs.

“I don’t know man,” Walters replies, “that dude with the hairpiece said he has a club in Lawrence and wants us in a couple weeks.”

“That’s a tough town man” Pedro says, “did he say anything about what the bread would be like?”

“No” says Walters, “but he did say he dug Jazz and we could pretty much play whatever we want. Even though, if we can’t get fifty bucks a man it ain’t worth it.”

“Fifty bucks!? he’s playin’ us man. Fuck fifty bucks in that nasty town. I’ll sit at home and listen to Eric spin tunes on the radio before I’ll drive to Lawrence for that paltry shit.”

“He didn’t say fifty, that’s what I’m guessing. What *do* you want to ride to Lawrence with me, smoke some holy weed, and jam with some righteous brothers you know and love so well?” Walters asks.

“Veronica has us booked for the next five weeks “ Pedro says. “We’re playing the fried-rice circuit—the Lo-Gai, Swingapoor Moon, Kung-Pao Gardens or some such shit. Hey man, \$100 bucks a night for top-forty swill. With enough herb and oil I can deal with that shit long enough to pay the rent and maybe even get a haircut.”

Booker and Carrey both commit to any future gig in Lawrence but Walters is completely deflated. Although Walters might, in his darkest moment question his own commitment to the music, he knew that music was the unchallenged queen of Pedro’s soul. For while Walters could hold his own in most playing situations and even rock the house on select occasions, Pedro had that thing that set him apart. Once on a gig at the Brookline country club, a rodent of some sort ran across the dance floor during a Whitney Houston tune upsetting the dancers on the floor. In very real time Pedro incorporated *Three Blind Mice* into the tenor saxophone solo he was playing and it was some of the

most lyrical playing Walters had ever heard. Another time Pedro was warming up on a gig in which Spike Bellimissimo, a professor of music, was the pianist on the gig. As Pedro wandered through his warm-up, the professor cried "hey, that's an octatonic scale" in surprised disbelief referring to some arcane construction.

"Is that what that is?" Pedro asked wide-eyed before improvising on it as if he had invented it. "Big ears" is what musicians call it.

No matter how lame a gig, Pedro always made it tolerable with his constant inventiveness. For a year or so Pedro and Walters worked in a high-end wedding-function band performing exclusively at the best hotels in Boston. Faced with the nightly prospect of playing *Lady in Red*, *Old Time Rock and Roll* and *My Way*, the two had not only mastered the art of getting high in bathroom stalls, alleys and elevators, and smuggling bottles of Bacardi 151 on to stage to be loosed into coca-colas, but more importantly had learned how to weave jazz phrases as well as the themes from *Hogan's Heroes*, *Gilligan's Island* and *The Brady Bunch* into timeless tunes such as *Celebrate Good Times*, *The Electric Slide* and *The Chicken Dance*. Pedro played sax--mostly tenor--and Walters played brass--mostly trombone. They both heard the same way and therefore harmonized parts on the fly, so well that people asked them on occasion who wrote the arrangements.

Walters felt betrayed. At least he allowed himself to feel that way. Recently divorced and sharing a house with three other people it was relatively easy to inhabit that bohemian "I'll only take a gig on my own terms" mentality. Pedro had recently gotten a place with Boo, a woman he had met during a tour of duty he and Walters had both done with Jimmy and the Barhoppers. She

wasn't a bar girl though. Boo worked a high-tech job and was into literature, pop culture, Jazz to a degree, and particularly film. Pedro fell hard. Walters understood why Pedro dug her and was happy for him. Nevertheless, for reasons unclear at the time, Walters branded Pedro something of a traitor.

"So . . . what, you're gonna play top-shorty shit for the rest of your life?" Walters asks.

"No, man, it's just a gig, chill."

"Obviously the real problem is that there's no steady Jazz gigs in New Hamster" Booker offers.

"No shit, and all the Mass gigs are locked up by Berklee clowns running those Beserklee-scales" Walters moans, fairly barking the last word "scales" as he exhales a monstrous roach hit.

"A New Hampshire Jazz Musician, what do they call that? An oxymoron, a contradiction or some such shit?." Pedro asks.

"Hey, there's a jam at the Musician's club in Concord this weekend" Carrey offers, "the ad in the Onion Loader said 'Musicians welcome'."

Carrey is summarily dismissed with deafening silence.

"So who do I get for a horn player, Roger Smalls?" Walters asks, referring to an obese, older alcoholic sax player who is known to muscle other players around the stage when he isn't happy with their playing, or his mood for that matter.

"Hey, I'm sorry man, I need the bread" Pedro says.

\* \* \* \*

Max doesn't want any more. He bites, spits, howls and displays an anguished face both comical and troubling.

"Hold him will ya?" Nicole asks. "I need a break, you're good at rocking him down during his fussy time, I'm exhausted. I'm gonna try and get a couple hours sleep. If he needs chow, wake me up."

I hold Max in front of me eight or so inches from my face. I tell him he's a big boy, a righteous boy, a star-child, dabestbabyindaworld, a stinky-boy, binky-boy, winky-boy, slinky-boy, pinky-boy, kinky-boy, blinky-boy, drinky-boy, zinky-boy, sklinky-boy.

He's unimpressed.

Recently I've been singing him simple sing-song bebop tunes like *Now's the Time* and *Little Suede Shoes* but I figure I'm probably rushing things. He's most relaxed at the changing table and so I bring him there and begin to make high-pitched animal-like noises to him. He responds with a-rhythmic, atonal slurs that despite their ambiguity, seem profound. I have read somewhere that a father doesn't truly bond with a child until it's smarter than the dog. Nicole and I have talked about this and concluded that whoever said that didn't have a dog and a child at the same time, or didn't really LOVE their dog, or had a dog and lost her years before they had a child. I'm a bit upset about it, but Nicole says it's probably just some hack who writes cards for Hallmark or some yokel submitting to Reader's Digest for a quick twenty-five bucks.

Once Max loses interest in call and response, I start the process of transferring him to bed. He has fallen asleep on the changing table and so I pick him up, and then let him adjust to the sudden change in position. I sing him to the bedroom and then hold him there suspended over the bassinet, letting him

grow accustomed to the room's temperature, the humidifier, the soft babble of the television as well as Nicole's rhythmic breathing. I lay him down, humming all the while, but keep my hands under his head and rear-end as he inevitably exhibits the startle reflex by shooting his hands and feet out in chaotic surprise. Once he seems settled I begin easing my hand out from behind his butt and eventually remove my hand from the back side of his head at which point he displays the startle reflex again, but now in almost token fashion. I tip-toe out of the bed room and back into the kitchen.

In the past, during this part of an evening I would take out my flugelhorn, perhaps open another bottle of wine and play for an hour or so working on any given tune that may have captured my attention recently.

I open a beer, sit in front of the computer screen and prepare to write—something about Langston Hughes, Jazz aesthetics. There is some sort of noise in the front of the apartment and when I get up to look I see Satchmo waiting anxiously at the door. He makes it down the stairs okay, but after relieving himself I have to help him up the two flights by cupping my hands behind his buttocks and gently pushing him, his hips so deteriorated now that even with medication he occasionally grunts when lying down. Despite his fifteen years though, Satch is always waiting on that next meal. We eat some cheese and I return to the screen. Max begins to howl and I rush into the bedroom to grab him before he wakes Nicole. It seems he'll be up for a while so we move into the living room and I turn on the television. Max is half sobbing, half cooing on my shoulder. There's a ball game on the classic sports channel—1967 world series—of course I know who wins the ballgame.

## CHAPTER 2

### PLAYING MUSIC, READING JAZZ

In his study *The Creation of Jazz*, Burton Peretti claims that there are “three major streams of jazz studies that have proven of limited use to cultural historians: musicology, social science fieldwork, and aficionado history” (3). Peretti’s subsequent attempt to write a cultural history of early jazz that would nevertheless acknowledge the importance of, if not incorporate all three streams he mentions is typical of the current direction in jazz studies. Scholars such as Kathy Ogren, Scott DeVeaux, Gary Giddens, Jon Michael Spencer and even Ann Douglas have of late contributed to a contextualized, cultural study of jazz that acknowledges jazz’s integrity as well as some of its social and artistic import. However, with few exceptions (Giddens’ documentary film *Celebrating Bird* being one, Jon Panish’ work another), jazz scholarship for the most part portrays jazz music and its practitioners as apolitical or quietist. At the same time, ironically, there is no short supply of critics who talk about the political *potential* of jazz, or of jazz’ ability to *represent* political belief, and/or unrest. What critics for the most part *do not do* is to locate political content or strategy within the music itself. While the instrumental nature of most jazz would seem to preclude any attempts to wrestle political “meaning,” discursive or otherwise from the music, it nevertheless can be done and I aim to do it. Along the way I will also address one case in which jazz is rendered politically impotent: despite affirmations of its significance and influence by many critics, the period and



music known as bebop is often separated from the rest of the jazz tradition and treated almost as an anomaly. My purpose here then is to make my way through a number of texts, addressing both these issues as I go.

\* \* \* \*

Peretti offers the telling claim that during the 1930's, "jazz musicians differed from other Americans in disdaining *political* involvement, for the most part perpetuating the search for knowledge and technique they had begun as youths in previous decades" (3). If immersion in one's art precludes overt political involvement that is not to say that the art or its performance is not in itself a political act. As Peretti himself shows, the twenties and thirties, the adolescent and young-adult years of jazz, were marked by a fierce struggle for artistic identity on the part of jazz that featured appropriation, re-appropriation and syncretism between white and black, classical and popular, high-brow and low-brow. When this period of jazz is ostensibly endowed with the political as in Ogren's *The Jazz Revolution*, it is the case that jazz is merely the *site* of the political and hardly ever generative as such. Despite a professed emphasis on "the rich exchange between performers and their audiences," Ogren is primarily concerned with "the ability of jazz to represent change" (8). If for Ogren jazz is a passive (in that it's symbolic), yet expressive function of society, for Peretti, jazz is a product. Peretti tells us that "social change was the engine driving the creation of jazz. More specifically, jazz came about because America was urbanizing on a massive scale" (2). In Ogren, Peretti and much of the writing on

this time period in jazz, jazz is cast in a decidedly un-dialectical relationship with the culture of which it is a part.

The characterization of early jazz as politically disengaged seems related to two questions about the music itself: its origin/identity, and its translatability. Lacking any "jazz" recordings before 1917 it is nearly impossible to chart the musical development of jazz with any certainty. Perhaps the most comprehensive history, Gunther Schuller's *Early Jazz*, establishes at its outset that jazz "developed from a multi-colored variety of musical traditions brought to the new world in part from Africa, in part from Europe" (3). While there are near-essential, identifiable elements and attributes in jazz (improvisation, the blues scale, swing eighth-notes, the ii-V chord progression) that remain to this day, jazz from the beginning has been a complex, ever changing hybrid. When considering the political ramifications of this music then, the most productive question would not be "what is jazz," but rather, "what does jazz do." Most cultural or historical scholars however, explicitly or implicitly concern themselves with discussions of identity, focusing on racial, gender and class issues as they relate to jazz in an attempt to puzzle out how and why jazz was constructed for and by different people, positing jazz as an effect rather than a cause. For instance, the contributions of "The Austin High Gang," a group of white jazz musicians, is given extended consideration in Peretti's book, yet these musicians are barely mentioned by Ogren; additionally, some writers have detailed the contributions of women while others have explored the differences between urban and rural musicians. While this is undoubtedly valuable work, its usefulness seems contingent upon consideration of the common element—that which should be the logical starting point—the performance of the music itself.

With the exceptions of musicologists and music theorists, scholars have yet to go to the text, so to speak. In cultural studies of jazz, the music is often merely a common token that takes its attributes and qualities from the groups and identities it is for the moment associated with. Jazz is constructed then as an end product, a result, or an a-posteriori representation and thus, is rendered politically impotent. Yet jazz is frequently improvised, and at the same time partakes of identifiable forms, materials and traditions that offer their own political potential to the jazz performer. The jazz performance is a dialectical event that features interaction between performers and audiences, soloists and supporting musicians, received forms and improvisation. That jazz "texts" themselves remain mute (in that most cultural studies consider only one side of the dialectic) speaks of a second issue here, translation.

There have been many fine analyses of jazz styles, forms and performance that enrich our understanding of the art-form. However, almost as a reverse mirror image, these studies neglect the type of cultural contextualisation that the scholars I've mentioned do so well. While we might look at these two approaches as complementary halves that make a whole, unfortunately that is not the case. The terminology and expertise one finds in studies such as Schuller's *Early Jazz*, Thomas Owens' *Bebop*, or, to a lesser degree, Scott DeVeaux's *The Birth of Bebop* is for the most part accessible to only a small group consisting of musicians and music educators. These works make few interdisciplinary claims (not that they should) and presume a very specific audience with a substantial understanding of music theory. This analytical, close-reading approach to jazz performance is essentially structuralist, if not formalist

and puts little or no emphasis upon historical, sociological or biographical concerns.

Cultural studies of jazz, however, at very least implicitly claim to be interdisciplinary as evidenced by the variety of fields scholars come to jazz from: English, American Studies, History, Political Science, Anthropology, Critical Theory and no doubt others. Taken as a whole, the work of most of these scholars fits nicely within a definition of cultural studies offered in a well known reader: "cultural studies in fact has no distinct methodology, *no* unique statistical, ethnomethodological, or *textual analysis to call its own*. Its methodology, ambiguous from the beginning, could best be seen as a bricolage" (Grossberg, 2, emphasis added). While the interdisciplinary freedom offered by cultural studies allows for a plurality of readings, without a textual methodology there is no agreement on what the text is that is being read. This seems to be a major reason why so much time is spent on answering the question "what is jazz;" for with a few notable exceptions, these critics do not have the musical knowledge to incorporate close readings of the music itself into their studies, or for some reason they choose not to. In short, there is little commerce between these two approaches to the same subject and neither approach takes the idea of "political jazz" seriously. It is not surprising that this bifurcation in jazz studies is related to a whole series of binaries attendant to jazz since its inception: high-culture/low-culture; art/entertainment; black/white; and even instrumental/vocal. However, these issues, as important as they may be, are beyond the scope of this paper. It is, nevertheless, the split between text and context, object and its history, as seen in these disparate methodologies that has divested jazz of its political content. I will show that it is only by way of a dialectic between these

methods, a *performance* of text and context that the political nature of jazz can play itself out. There was at least one critic in the past who was positioned to attempted this type of synthesis. His work deserves some mention before proceeding with my own essay.

One of the founding fathers of cultural studies, Theodor Adorno, was also one of the first theorists to take jazz as a subject. Knowledgeable about music theory (his analysis of twelve-tone music, Schoenberg and Stravinsky in *Philosophy of Modern Music* is quite technical) and acknowledged as the leading aesthetic critic associated with the Frankfurt school, Adorno was uniquely qualified to merge the textual and contextual in a syncretic study of jazz. Unfortunately, however, Adorno fell prey to the same un-dialectical methodology that marks contemporary studies of jazz. In his unpublished Ph.D. dissertation *Critical Theory, Jazz, and Politics: A Critique of The Frankfurt School*, political scientist Robert W. Bernotas argues convincingly and at length that Adorno not only “forced jazz into [Adorno’s] ready-made theoretical scheme” (9), but also was less than honest in his use of evidentiary sources. In a series of essays beginning with *Uber Jazz* in 1936, including *Commitment, Culture and Administration*, and *On popular Music*, Adorno is clear on the point that jazz is a particularly odious instance of “affirmative culture,” a term Marcuse used to designate any cultural artifact or movement that “enters the service of the status quo [in which] the rebellious idea becomes an accessory in justification” (Marcuse 121). For Adorno, jazz was simply more of the same, an ostensibly fresh, creative art-form that when unmasked, was no more than minor new wrinkles on tired empty forms. The progressive elements of jazz were seen by Adorno as simply “facades of something that is in truth quite reactionary” (Quoted in Susan

Buck-Morss, 288). Adorno analyzed jazz formally, but only in order to demonstrate its standardization. The repeated use of the 32 bar form, syncopation, portmanteau effects, improvisation—all were instances of apparent novelties masking gross uniformity.

As Bernotas shows, Adorno's analysis was not the result of fair-minded investigation, but a forcing—regardless of means or costs—of jazz into a preordained position. Adorno stresses certain elements of jazz, the deception of syncopation and the influence of military bands for example, to illustrate how jazz is in fact a cultural contributor to the centripetal forces of the state. However, Adorno ignores the possibility that these elements have subversive potential. He doesn't consider that jazz introduced elements of individuality and spontaneity into otherwise rigid, disciplined military bands in New Orleans and other southern cities. Adorno also assumes an inflexible and perhaps uninformed position regarding improvisation, the most liberating and potentially subversive element jazz offers. As Bernotas summarizes,

Adorno, lacking a concrete conception of the nature of jazz improvisation, tended to conceive of improvisation as a sort of "either-or" choice—either the performer has cast aside the authority of pre-written, pre-conceived musical formulas, and thus improvises freely and spontaneously, or remains subject to the confines of the composed musical framework, and so, individuality and improvisation are absent" (61).

In perhaps his most un-dialectical moment, Adorno also claims that syncopation (emphasis on the weak beats) is a futile effort that only strengthens the dominance of the strong beat.

It is apparent that Adorno came to his analysis of jazz with his mind already made up, and Bernotas documents the many instances of Adorno's "arrogant, cynical manipulation of his source material" (88). Writing in 1941 for

*Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, and drawing primarily from Winthrop Sargeant's 1938 *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid*, as well as Wilder Hobson's 1939 *American Jazz Music*, Adorno relentlessly takes quotes out of context and ignores counter arguments. The shady research and citation practices Adorno employs in support of a questionable argument appear all the more callous when one considers that Adorno's conception of what jazz was may have been far off the mark. Martin Jay observes that "the jazz [Adorno] was most concerned with was the commercial variety churned out by Tin Pan Alley, not the less popular variety rooted in black culture itself. Much of his apparent insensitivity came from his failure to make the appropriate distinction between the two" (Quoted in Bernotas, 56). Adorno is able to portray jazz as reactionary, commercial drivel because, in circular fashion, he takes commercial drivel for his object and calls it jazz. However, Bernotas argues that there was no distinction to be made for Adorno between commercial and any other type of jazz and his point is well taken. It seems that critical theory aside, Adorno was ultimately interested in preserving a distinction between "pure" art that could only be appreciated by the connoisseur (such as himself) and the redundant rubbish generated for the non-specialist.

If Adorno's dismissal of jazz was itself a reactionary move that perhaps unwittingly worked to contain the radical nature of the art, he was not alone in his self-deception. Many of the cultural critics of the time including W. E. B. DuBois, Dave Peyton of *The Chicago Defender* as well as other presumably left-leaning figures decried jazz as ignoble, prurient, degrading or trivial. Alternately, while there certainly were exceptions (Adorno obviously being one), it appears that the more knowledgeable commentators were about jazz musically, the

more likely they were to find merit in it. Many “classical” composers who would have the most at stake in preserving a high/low dichotomy in music praised jazz. Aaron Copland, Igor Stravinsky and Virgil Thomson, to name but a few, all wrote favorably about jazz during the time of Adorno’s criticism. What emerges then from early jazz criticism is a precursor to the split I mentioned earlier between methodologies. One need not argue influence to suggest that as an early, important cultural critic, Theodor Adorno certainly played a pivotal part in establishing the paradigm for future studies of not only culture in general, but jazz as well. In denuding jazz of any political potential or social import, Adorno, for the time being, essentially rendered jazz the sole domain of musicians, aficionados and music theorists. It is only of late that cultural critics have attempted to recover or rehabilitate “subjugated knowledges” (ironically subjugated by one of their own) and thus jazz now enjoys an expanding critical audience. However, to recover the political in jazz involves no less than a re-reading of jazz texts, a corrective to Adorno’s reading that so thoroughly rendered jazz impotent.

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It is not coincidental that the time period in jazz that is the subject of most contemporary studies is also the period in which Adorno wrote. It is my argument that jazz did not mature, or perhaps better, cohere as an art-form until the bebop movement in the 1940’s. This obviously is not to say that “real” jazz was not played until then, but that the distinctions between jazz as entertainment, dance music, a type of speech, attitude, racial property and art



were the sites of constant negotiation. While it might be easy to look back on the twenties and claim with certainty that what Louis Armstrong played was jazz and what Paul Whiteman offered was not, at the time it would not have played out that way. Burton Peretti observes that "*Jazz*, Paul Whiteman's 1926 book, contains no mention of blacks or their music, and 'the King of Jazz' felt that jazz mostly consisted of syncopated classical music" (189). As Kathy Ogren points out, as late as 1941 "for many Americans the term 'jazz' referred to all popular music, and might include pseudo-jazz bands or ordinary dance orchestras using modish effects" (102). It is not surprising then that studies of this period mirror the sort of identity crisis that manifest itself in jazz' early years. Almost as if taking on the epistemological paradigm of the period they study, cultural critics of early jazz, as I've already mentioned, foreground issues of identity, often at the expense of agency.

With the appearance of bebop in the mid 40's, jazz had finally begun to effectively wean itself from a reliance upon other forms of popular music. Musicians self-identified themselves as serious artists as opposed to mere entertainers and were decidedly less likely to compromise their music and lifestyle than their predecessors. The "new sound" of bebop was most definitely not for dancing and rarely featured vocal performances. That little work has been done on this period of jazz seems a result of, as with earlier jazz, the object of study. From bebop onwards, jazz is more coherently defined as a cultural artifact, yet is played by fewer people, in fewer places and by virtue of its instrumental nature and radical musical innovations, even less accessible to the layman than jazz of the 20's and 30's. Partially due to its insular nature, its difficulty and the failure of cultural historians to construct a stable identity for its

musical predecessors, bebop has been truncated from the body of jazz tradition. I intend to begin the process of reconnecting bebop with its tradition and recovering the political element of jazz texts by restoring at least one thread of continuity. The process need be a dialectic between text and context that concerns itself with identity only insofar as identity is performance—what jazz does, and perhaps even why.

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Bebop, the development in American jazz that held sway from the mid-forties to the mid-fifties is one of the most perplexing, yet compelling cultural moments this country has ever witnessed. Straddling mid-century, bebop is uniquely situated amid, if not often *between* many of the important aesthetic, political and cultural movements or moments of this century: Modernism and Postmodernism, Jim Crow and civil-rights, tonal and free-jazz, Structuralism and Post-structuralism. Yet since its inception on up to the present day, bebop and its players have been alternately demonized, marginalized and at times even dismissed by critics, cultural historians and even other jazz musicians. In comparison to the cultural currency given to the “giants” of jazz—Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and the ubiquitous Miles Davis—the few studies, documentaries, biographies and cultural artifacts relating to bebop and its players would almost suggest that it was but a minor episode in the history of jazz, and that its aesthetic was somehow found wanting. To the extent that bebop exists at all for the non-specialist general public it exists as a brief, obscure,

drug-addled moment amidst an otherwise sunny history of entertainment that progresses from vaudeville acts to dance bands to rhythm and blues shows.

Yet, for jazz musicians, aficionados, and others familiar with the history of jazz, bebop is not a minor episode, but rather, represents one of, if not *the* defining moment in jazz's development. Not only are the players and composers of this music widely held to be among the most gifted and productive musicians ever to have participated in the art-form, but also, the harmonic and rhythmic innovations that found expression in bebop shattered the paradigm in which American popular music operated and continue to inform American musics of all stripes to this day. In fact, jazz, as bebop arguably broke free once and for all from the realm of popular entertainment and unabashedly trumpeted its own status as a true art-form. And despite media constructions of bebop as arcane, isolated and politically quietist, it was in fact immediate, engaged and politically radical. Bebop posed a threat to a host of conventions; musical, cultural, political and racial, yet it did so almost solely through music and that is what not only made bebop dangerous, but ironically, gave it the appearance of being apolitical. As a non-discursive means of expression, music is another way of knowing, another way of telling that to some degree is proof against appropriation. Because, as we shall see, bebop musicians quite often combined creative genius with their own delicious acts of cultural larceny, they were actually aggressors who, not content to find a small cultural space for their art, actively seized territory and materials and remade them as they saw fit.

One of the more radical practices of Bebop is its appropriation of materials. Jazz musicians have always relied heavily upon the American popular song, drawing from Vaudeville, Tin pan alley, Hollywood musicals and

Broadway revues as well as more traditional sources and Bebop musicians were certainly no exception. However, where musicians a generation prior to Bebop more likely than not would retain the original melody, Bebop players such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell and others valued many of these songs solely for their chord progressions and often had little use for the melodies. In fact, by at least 1950 it had become standard practice within Bebop circles to write new melodies for the chord progressions of popular tunes and re-title them: *Embraceable You* became *Meandering*, *How High the Moon* became *Ornithology*, *Cherokee* became *Ko-Ko*, *What is this Thing Called Love* becomes *Hot House*, *Back Home in Indiana* becomes *Donna Lee* and most importantly, *I've Got Rhythm* becomes *Anthropology* and perhaps dozens of other titles (Gitler 15-58). However, this is neither to say that these players were the first to do this, nor that they rewrote the melody in every case. Musicians had been writing new melodies for the chord progression of *I've Got Rhythm* for decades and many original popular melodies such as *All the Things you Are* and *Stella by Starlight* were favorites amongst Bebop musicians. Nevertheless, the majority of performances and compositions widely held by musicians, fans and critics to be the peak achievements of Bebop are instances of the appropriation I have been demonstrating.

The radical difference between Bebop musicians and those a generation earlier is that the Bebop musicians did not simply exchange melodies; they reconstructed the whole song, employing a new "melody," which James Patrick calls a "contrafact," as a starting point. This can be illustrated by considering Eddie Condon's observation of jazz as played in 1922: "you know what the melody is but you don't hear it. The cornet and the clarinet, and sometimes the

trombone, treat it like a girl. They hang around it, doing handsprings and all sorts of other tricks, always keeping an eye on it and trying to make an impression" (Quoted in Peretti 113). Condon is referring to the improvisation that follows the melody itself. The improvisation is an embellishment of, or variation upon that stable, repeatable melody line. In "jazz" of this stripe, the audience would hear a familiar melody, at least twice, as well as "improvisation" that stayed close enough to the original melody to be recognizable. Bebop musicians did away with the original melodic line and replaced it with what thirty years before would have passed as the improvisation. These contrafacts that were written for the chord changes of popular songs then were much more than substitutes.

In tonal music, the relationship between melody and harmony is dialectical: the melodic material available at any given point is limited by the chord (implied harmony) present at that moment and the articulation of harmony is largely shaped by the melodic line. In the majority of popular melodies, which often proceed at a pedestrian pace, the melodic materials have a fairly simple relationship to the accompanying chords, Dissonance, when it occurs, often takes the form of brief, easily resolved tensions that serve to color the otherwise over-riding sense of consonance. In Bebop, however, the relationship is much more complex. As Thomas Owens points out, Bebop melodies were "less symmetrical rhythmically" (4) than their predecessors and the tempos in general were much faster than in the past. Melodic and harmonic ground then is covered at a much more rapid pace and the occurrence of dissonant passing tones (notes that are not part of the chord present) is more likely. This increase in melodic density and complexity in turn necessitates a

more detailed articulation of harmonic materials. The contrafacts then differ from the lines they replace in tempo, amount of dissonance, and rhythmic regularity. In fact, when one listens to nearly any of these “heads” as they are called, it is immediately apparent that they are much closer to an improvised line than they are to a traditional melody. There are several important implications here not the least of which is a consideration of the ways in which these new melodies position their listeners.

Aaron Copland points out that “when the man on the street listens [to music] he is most likely to make some mention of the melody. Either he hears a pretty melody or he does not, and he generally lets it go at that” (524). For most people, melody is the entranceway to a piece of music. And although many listeners never get past the foyer, the melody often must first be negotiated if one is to explore the more specialized rooms of a given musical structure. This is not to say that one does not hear rhythm, harmony or tone color until one has digested the melody, but that it is usually the melody that “hooks” the listener by providing a memorable, repeatable musical idea that allows the listener to engage the piece of music as a whole and perhaps more importantly, to remember it. Once a listener has acquired a melody so to speak, he or she exerts a certain ideological control over it. That is to say, the listener can now sit in judgment whenever the melody is played and determine whether or not it has been played “correctly” by comparing the performance with one’s memory of the “original.” Moreover, because most popular melodies can be sung or whistled by the average Joe, this allows the listener to claim some rights as the “creator” of the melody, if only a second-order creator. Arguably, one could rearrange the rhythmic and harmonic elements of a song without offending the

listener's sense of "correctness" as long as the melody is audible and left intact. However, all other things remaining the same, if one were to change just a few of the notes in a melodic line it would undoubtedly be considered "incorrect" by listeners familiar with the song.

The Bebop musician's radical move was not to alter the relationship between artist and audience, although that occurred as well, but to change the audience's relationship to the music itself. This "false relation to art . . . the fetishistic idea of the artwork as property that can be possessed" (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 14) was neutralized by replacing memorable, singable melodies with complex, fast-paced and often disjointed phrases. Bebop musicians reclaimed the sole rights to every part of the music and undermined nearly all claims to authority on the part of the listener. Because these complex heads were quite difficult to remember and nearly impossible to sing for the average listener, and the tempos were often undanceable, the listener had little to hold on to. What Adorno perceived to be a negative aspect of jazz, that "even where there is real improvisation . . . the sole material remains popular songs" (123) can be seen here as an act of subversion. The absence of a user-friendly melody and the insistent emphasis upon improvisation effectively reversed the implicit binary between melody and harmony. Chuck Berry perhaps summed up best in the 1950's what might be taken as the popular and hence, dominant reaction to Bebop: "I got no kick against modern jazz, unless they try and play it too darn fast, and lose the beauty of the melody, until it sound just like a symphony." Issues of validity and similitude could only be judged by the musicians and therefore, appreciation of Bebop became an act of faith for the audience

member—not so much faith in the music as faith in the authenticity of the musician’s performance.

As I’ve mentioned, these Bebop heads have more in common with strands of improvisation than they do to the original melodies. The old saw amongst jazz musicians that a good head should sound like a good solo and a good solo should sound like a good head finds its most compelling illustration in the Bebop era. These contrafacts then have the additional effect of blurring the distinction between composition and improvisation, theme and exposition, form and content. Harmony (the chord progression) in fact becomes the organizing principle whose primary purpose is to foster improvisation. Bebop might be seen then as the apex of structuralism in jazz. The chord changes are a sort of deep structure or “Langue” that allow for the performance of meaning in specific instances of improvisation/parole. When one “plays the changes” he/she is not actually articulating the chords—that would be impossible on all but chordal instruments; piano, guitar etc.—but is playing “over” them, making the changes apparent by weaving a unique statement that partakes of the chords, signifies them, but does not actually present them in their entirety. Once melody has been decentered, or reduced to one instance of improvisation/parole, the playing becomes the thing. Jazz is not so much to be identified, but to be experienced.

To all but musicians and perhaps non-musicians with very big ears, there is little to indicate that, for example, Charlie Parker’s *Ornithology* has any relationship whatsoever to Lewis and Hamilton’s *How High the Moon*, from which the chord progression to *Ornithology* comes. Not only has the original melody been erased, but insofar as Bebop was primarily instrumental, the lyrics are absent as well, lyrics that in this case ironically begin “Somewhere there’s music,



How faint the tune” Nevertheless, the contrafacts are related to the originals by virtue of their shared harmonic ground (the chord progressions) and it is fruitful to think of the original and contrafact melodies as operating in a dialogical relationship with one another. The deep structure of these tunes, the chord progressions, act as shared forms mediating between different performances as well as different eras and styles of jazz. For although the relationship may be obscure to the listener who cannot “hear” the chord changes, it is very much alive to the performer who is almost always aware of a given song’s pedigree.

Thomas Owens points out that “the blues and the *I Got Rhythm* harmonic structures became the most common harmonic plans in Bebop during the late 1940s” and that “entire recording dates...were devoted to these two harmonic structures” (13). While the blues certainly have a re-occurring set of textual themes and motives if not an articulate mythology, individual performances vary markedly from one another at the textual level. Because “The” blues lyrics do not exist, they cannot be appropriated. *I Got Rhythm*, on the other hand, features a fixed text, the gist of which was known to millions of Americans in the 1940s:

I got rhythm, I got music,  
I got my man. Who could ask for anything more?

I got daisies, in green pastures,  
I got my man. Who could ask for anything more?

Old Man Trouble, I don’t mind him,  
You won’t find him ‘Round my door.

I got starlight, I got sweet dreams,  
I got my man. Who could ask for anything more?

Who could ask for anything more?

Perhaps needless to say, the sort of fat and happy complacency evoked by these lyrics would not have squared with reality as experienced by millions of Americans—that is to say, anyone who was not fortunate enough to have a perpetually romantic and idyllic relationship with, and presumably the deed to a substantial tract of fertile farm land. Many of the contrafacts that replaced this text and its accompanying melody, speak aurally of a more dissonant, fragmented American experience. Because most bebop contrafacts were instrumental, the only text (in the linguistic sense of the word) that can be said to replace the original is the new title. The head Charlie Parker originally wrote for the *I Got Rhythm* changes is *Thriving from a Riff*, a self-referential title that emphasizes the music, as in a riff, but also the musician's relationship to that music: he is thriving because of it. The irony here lies in the fact that few, if any Bebop musicians thrived financially as a result of their music; even if the small, elite communities of musicians who performed this music thrived artistically.

It's worthwhile then to compare the two titles. "I got rhythm" is a statement of possession. No indication is given in either the title or the lyrics as to what use is, or can be made of that possession. The person simply has it, as well as wealth and prosperity. When this situation is reconstructed as *Thriving from a Riff*, a presumably immanent quality (rhythm) is replaced by a cognitive, creative facility, the ability to compose (riffs). *Thriving from a Riff* is not a rejection of *I got Rhythm*, but a reworking of its two components: musicality (rhythm--riff) and success (got--thriving). The contrafact's title asserts independent artistry and

refutes the “green pastures” claim that success is measured by the possession of property.

In fact, the lyrics cited above are deceptive because they are not complete. When performed in shows, most tunes from the twenties and thirties began with a “verse” that acted as a preface or introduction to the main body of the tune. When recorded or performed outside of a theatrical context, however, the verse was many times omitted. A textual element then had long been negated in popular renditions before Bebop musicians ever got a hold of *I Got Rhythm*. The verse goes as follows.

Days could be sunny,  
With never a sigh;

Don't need what money  
Can buy.

Birds in the tree sing  
Their dayful of song.

Why shouldn't we sing  
Along?

I'm chipper all the day,  
Happy with my lot

How do I get that way?  
Look at what I've got:

If the main text in this song seems to present a wealthy, white perspective, then this mute verse seems to play the role of “other.” The speaker (a woman) attempts to address the contradictions that constitute her life by repressing desire and modeling identity on a romantic, noble conception of nature. In telling herself that she does not need what she can't have and that she should emulate the birds and be “happy with [her] lot,” the speaker internalizes the very

contradictions that create her condition. The “I got” of the main text then is only possible because of the sacrifice, labor and self-denial embodied in this speaker’s narrative. It appears from this reading then that there are two “texts” encased in *I got rhythm*. Yet it is primarily the main text that is heard. While it is true that in a complete performance both “halves” of the text are sung by one speaker, that type of performance was, and is quite rare.

If what has just passed seems an overly creative performance of *I Got Rhythm*, perhaps historical contextualization is in order here. George and Ira Gershwin wrote *I Got Rhythm* in 1930 for the musical *Girl Crazy*. As first generation American Jews, the Gershwins themselves occupied a liminal site between African-American and Anglo-American, enfranchisement and disenfranchisement, and as composers, between high and low culture. The folk opera *Porgy and Bess* (written with DuBose Heyward), *Rhapsody in Blue* (an attempt to combine blues and classical elements) and a host of other compositions spoke of a certain double vision that found expression through musical performance. The original *Girl Crazy*, however, is one of the most monochrome creations ever produced by the brothers. Essentially a “boy attempts to win girl” story, *Girl Crazy* is set on the campus of an all male (all white) southwestern university. *I Got Rhythm* is sung by a supporting character played by Ethel Merman. Shortly after the musical’s run, the song was recorded by both Louis Armstrong and Ethel Waters. These recordings are unavailable so it is unknown whether or not the song is performed in its entirety (verse and refrain). However, the performance of the song’s lyrics certainly would have to be read differently depending on which Ethel was performing. “Happy with my lot” and “Don’t need what money can buy” resonate differently when sung by

Merman against a white, middle class backdrop than they do when interpreted by Waters, an African-American well established as a blues singer for Black Swan and Columbia recording companies (Douglas 392). Additionally, Armstrong, who throughout his career unfailingly complicated the distinction between entertainer and artist, increased the song's potential for signification by performing it instrumentally as well as vocally.

If the song became a site for contested meaning shortly after its first appearance, the situation was exacerbated by one of the creators, George Gershwin, who published *Variations on I Got Rhythm* in 1934, a set of piano improvisations on the main theme. Gershwin realized, as did thousands of jazz musicians, that the chord changes to the song were naturally amenable to improvisation, that is to say, they were really fun to play with. From that point on the chords to *I Got Rhythm*, known as "rhythm changes," became the basis for countless jazz performances and tunes. As Scott DeVaux puts it, *I Got Rhythm* became "the hoariest of jam session warhorses" (224).

The lyrics might have been forgotten or at least depoliticized if it weren't for the 1943 film version of *Girl Crazy* that starred Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney. The movie not only reawakened the public's memory of the lyrics, but also restored the lyrics to their original white, middle-class setting. The release that same year of Tommy Dorsey's long playing album featuring the songs from the movie further pulled the song, in the public's eye, away from jazz and into the domain of popular entertainment. For although the primarily white Dorsey band was promoted as a jazz band, it was at root a popular "swing" dance band that, despite partaking of some jazz elements, earned its keep by crafting pop tunes and catering to the latest dance craze. The Dorsey band featured little

improvisation and the improvisation that did occur was musically stunted in comparison to the bebop innovations that were just beginning to be heard at the time.

In many ways, Bebop musicians could not have wished into existence a more fertile text than *I Got Rhythm*. Already established as a valuable musical resource, *I Got Rhythm* became ideologically active once again at the exact moment bebop was making itself known. The re-appropriation of the tune by bebop musicians allowed them to negotiate their relationship to not only contemporary culture, but to the jazz tradition as well. If the use of a contrafact reverses the power relationship in a binary between melody and harmony, we might also claim that the elision of the linguistic text in an instrumental performance allows space for the missing verse—the “other” text—to make itself known. However, the missing verse is not manifest textually in contrafacts (except perhaps the title), but experientially: improvisation—the living, or performance of life. Textual representations that attempt to capture or arrest meaning such as *I Got Rhythm* in the context of the movie, cannot help but establish power relations. The erasure of the text in favor of the spontaneous generation of extra-discursive meaning by bebop musicians, a world of aural motion, is at once subversive and defensive. That which cannot be defined, but only experienced, cannot be appropriated. At the same time performance suggests the possibility of multiple meanings.

What cultural critics many times fail to acknowledge when they look at bebop, or even jazz in its entirety, is what the musicians do with their materials. If we were to limit our gaze to the surface of a text like *I Got Rhythm*, we might draw the conclusion, as Catherine Gunther Kodat does in a more general

discussion of bebop, that the use of this popular song is an example of an attempt to “establish a lucrative foothold within [the] culture industry” (12).

When we look closely at the way in which the song was manipulated, turned and co-opted by bebop musicians, however, it is apparent that the politics is in the performance of the text, not necessarily the text itself.

Yet under the type of erasure I’ve been discussing lies a textual trace that continues to inform the performance. Dialectic relationships still remain between text and music, performer and listener, melody and harmony. That a textual element must remain is evident not only in the fact that songs have titles, but in the types of titles bebop musicians chose for their instrumental performances. In a large majority of cases a contrafact’s title is self-referential in some way that places emphasis upon the music or its composer. Titles relating to Charlie “Bird” Parker, (by general consensus, the greatest improviser who ever lived) include *Ornithology*, *Chasing the Bird*, *Carving the Bird*, *Yardbird Suite*, *Bird Feathers*, *Bird of Paradise*, *Parker’s Mood*, *The Bird*, *Bird’s Nest*, *Bluebird*, *Bird Gets the Worm*, and *Charlie’s Wig*. Other titles aspire toward mock scientific or academic credibility or simply deconstruct meaning: *Crazeology*, *Anthropology* (an *I got rhythm* contrafact), *Ornithology*, *She Rote*, *Okiedoke*, *Au Privave*, *Oop Bop Sh’ Bam*, *Bebop*, *Ah-Leu-Cha*, *Emanon*, *Rhythm-a-ning* (another IGR contrafact) and *Klactoveesedstene*. Other titles suggested a politics: *Now’s the Time*, *Confirmation*, and *I mean you*. These various strategies of naming all work to either shape meaning around the idea of the artist, or to subvert it altogether. Self-referential titles perform a circular function that bring the reader/listener back to the musician, if not his music. Indecipherable or nonsense titles illustrate the inability of language to capture the experience of music. These two most common naming strategies reach their

logical conclusions decades later with Miles Davis, who entitles songs *What it is*, *That's Right*, and *That's What Happened*, and with Anthony Braxton who abandoned language completely and let mathematical equations stand in the place of titles on his recordings.

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By the time bebop was at full strength in the 1950's, a profound reversal had occurred as concerned jazz and its relationship to American culture. As the thread traced out by the brief history of *I Got Rhythm* demonstrates, jazz moved from entertainment to art, and from a defensive political posture to an aggressive one. For Armstrong and Waters to simply sing those lyrics and implicitly offer a counter-reading was a radical, yet defensive act in that it countered a dominant reading but was not able to replace it. Bebop, by renaming itself and its objects, reversed the playing field and asserted the right to self-representation. If jazz had an identity in the 1920's and 1930's, it was by necessity a provisional one. Constantly running the risk of being swallowed up and incorporated by the expanding maw of pop-culture, early jazz found a strategy for self-preservation/development in performance. The arrival of bebop is testament to the success of that strategy and to the triumph of jazz over the hegemonic forces that would co-opt it or dilute it to pap.

It is possible to reconcile jazz texts with their cultural histories in a close reading as long as the reading is a reading of performance. Because jazz has always made use of popular songs and has always defined itself one way or another in relation to popular culture, one need not be a music theorist to take



on jazz texts as objects of study. It is more a matter of studying the different manifestations of shared/appropriated materials, taking note of hybridization and provisionality and not worrying one's head with definitions. While I certainly hope that such a practice would eventually lead to the development of an interdisciplinary patois common to theorists, cultural critics, musicians, etc. that would build its vocabulary from a diverse array of fields, such a language is not a necessary prerequisite for a more comprehensive study of jazz. The only prerequisite is that we consider jazz artifacts as active elements embedded in specific cultural contexts. That is to say, we restore jazz's history and recover its political vitality.

## INTERCHAPTER 1

### THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF RUSTY JOHNSON

#### A MUSICIAN

#### WRITTEN BY HIMSELF

#### NOTES ON THE TEXT

The following manuscript was found among some papers in the cellar of the old 1957 Jazz Club of Cambridge, Massachusetts. As far as this writer can ascertain, these papers were apparently saved from ruin by a construction worker involved in the renovation that eventually resulted in the Chucky Cheese Funworld that now stands on the original site. Being of no apparent worth to the original finder, these papers passed through a number of hands over the last twelve years before finding their way here, home to the Jazz Institute, arriving abruptly one day on my desk wrapped innocently enough in a dark brown oilskin.

I must admit I regarded the package with some skepticism. However, upon opening the parcel it dawned on me at once in an unanticipated moment of golden rapture that here before me lay the unpublished autobiography of Rusty Johnson. Johnson's reputation as a jazzman—legendary among his cognoscenti—could only be enhanced by the autobiography, long rumored to exist, yet never actually having been seen by anyone. For years it had been thought that the

autobiography—if it did exist—contained not only the first fully realized articulation of a Jazz Aesthetic, but also chord changes that finally explained Anthony Braxton.

I could barely contain myself. As I began my perusal I found the manuscript to be 300-400 pages long. However, hopes were soon dashed and I found myself sitting haplessly amidst the rubble of my premature expectations: there were but a handful of pages by Johnson; the bulk of the manuscript consisted of blank pages, flyers for the Blue Man Group, To-Go menus from Famous Village House of Pizza, odd pages from a text called *Tale of a Tub*, or *Tuba*—I can't be sure—and some unintelligible verbiage by a lowrate named Beefheart.

I trust gentle reader you will think no less of me if I admit quite frankly that I was crestfallen. I had hoped for a substantial share of Johnson; what I had, but a pittance. Nevertheless, I suppose one must make do. It is the institute's mission to collect, categorize and codify these artifacts of our cultural heritage despite one's personal dissappointments. The first order of business then, of course, was to verify the authenticity of the text which I was able to accomplish in due course by locating several members who had played with Johnson and witnessed his growth. They agreed to a man that the text you will find below is indeed real Johnson. Lest anyone question the legitimacy of the text, I have included transcriptions of the brief, tape recorded testimonies solicited from the aforementioned gentlemen below.

All that is left to consider then is what to make of a diminished thing. With that question heavy in my heart I publish this text for the first time so it may see the light of academic day and stand or fall upon its merits. It is but a few dozen

or so pages, apparently from Johnson's early years before he cast off the ill-fitting clothes of popular music and allegedly devoted his life to Jazz or something.

At the risk of editorializing, let me just add that it is no doubt fair to conclude, even at this early stage, that what was anticipated to be a comprehensive, coherent, careful consideration of Jazz Aesthetics reveals itself as nothing more than a jumbled, discontinuous assortment of diary entries and nostalgic indulgence. What these scant lines have to do with the Art form we call Jazz is beyond my humble powers of cogitation. Nevertheless, this text will take its rightful place in our archives, if not the canon, probably somewhere between Jobim and Jolson. I leave final judgment to minds indeed more astute than mine.

Jan Orgenbern  
Executive Director  
The Jazz Institute

TESTIMONIALS TOWARD THE VERIFICATION AND  
AUTHENTICATION OF THE FOLLOWING NARRATIVE

"Rusty was a beautiful cat, man. He used to fall by my crib in the early days—he was just learning then, you dig? He used to make me tell that story over and over, 'bout how me and Sun Ra come up together in Chicago, hustlin' for gigs. Yeah, Rusty had something going on, even back then. I used to put on Freddie Hubbard records, sometimes Lee, or even Roy, and we'd play along,

blowin' the heads and layin' out until the piano solo, trying to copy some of Freddie's shit. He was doggin' around in commercial bands back then to make some bread and gettin' his chops together during the day. I didn't see the cat much after he hooked up with that R&B band and went on the road. Anyway, I read those papers Orgenbern showed me and it sounds like Rusty to me, though I never really thought of Rusty as a writer. He should of stayed with his ax. The cat had potential."

Dub Frazier

Piano, Flugelhorn

RIP

"Rusty Johnson? Wasn't he that one-armed cat from Philly, came up through Basie's band? No, no no, wait a second, he was that white cat who was always hanging round asking to sit in and then always calling a Blues in F. [*he reads the manuscript*] Yeah, I remember this motherfucker, he was like some shit you couldn't get off your shoe. Every night man, at the Oasis club, hanging at the table next to the stage. After a while, when we'd get done a set we would all walk off together in the opposite direction of the cat hoping he'd get the message. He'd just hang man, and Dino felt sorry for him so he'd call him up once every set or so. We'd ask the cat "what do ya want to play," as if the cat actually knew any tunes. It was always a Blues except one night I remember he came in all confident and shit, like he had something we wanted to hear. He came up on stage and Dino says "what do want to play." I'll never forget this man, the cat says "just a vamp in F that we can play all sorts of weird altered

chords on." Dino just grabbed the mic and said in a real formal voice and shit "we are very fortunate to have Rusty Johnson with us who we're going to feature now on his own composition 'Weird altered chords in F;'" I wet myself man, that shit was so funny. I gotta give the cat credit though, he just hung there waiting for somebody to lay down a groove. Yeah, that shit reads like something I suppose he'd write. He was always a serious cat, unflustered, you know what I'm saying? I guess you probably need that shit to be a writer."

Hen Gates

Piano, Vocals

"Yeah, that's definitely Rusty. We were on the road together with the Bluetones. We were tight man, white on rice, played in R&B bands, Blues bands, Rock bands, GB bands, Wedding bands, jazz gigs--we even played a pep-band gig once for a basketball game that Manute Bol was in. I haven't seen him in almost six years. He couldn't dig me doing the family thing--called me "the family man on the family plan," motherfucker then goes and gets all academic and shit. Fuck his sorry ass. Anyway, that's Rusty for sure. We were always messing with language. We had this "brother" association game we played--the more ridiculous the better. We would be talking and one of us might mention Charlie Parker and the other one would say "Colonel Tom's brother." Or someone would set off a string--"Joe Williams--Ted's brother--Jimmy's brother--William Carlos' brother--Tennessee's brother, Cindy's brother, Walt's sister--who the fuck is Walt Williams?--he was the cat who played for the old Washington Senators, they called him no-neck Williams, remember? Oh Yeah,

Sherwin's brother." The more obscure the better. Yeah, I remember blowing in his cellar right after his wife moved out and took all the furniture. We'd play till 2-3 in the morning smokin' weed and shooting beers. There would be seven or eight cats there taking turns, running through tunes. Rusty had this one hanging plant upstairs in the kitchen that I guess his wife forgot. Rusty would make a big show of it every night pouring some toxic shit over the plant trying to kill it. Motherfucker lived for months, survived bleach, oven cleaner, who knows what else. Rusty eventually threw the thing over the fence in his back yard. We were playin' some shit though back in those days."

Jeter "Bop" Stith (Bryant's brother)

Tenor, Soprano Saxophones

## My Story

*Ich bin Eier alle Arten*  
Zappa

I know that in writing this narrative I am giving away many secrets from my past, secrets that I have guarded far more carefully than any of my prized personal possessions—charts I've written, Ron Swoboda rookie card, my first trumpet, bags of weed, etc. I know that I am playing with fire and I dig the thrill of the game. However, I also suffer a vague feeling of dissatisfaction, of regret, of almost remorse, all of which I am now attempting to come to terms with, as I will indicate in the last few paragraphs of this text.

\* \* \* \*

I was about eight years old, probably in the second or third grade when I came home from school one day asking my parents if I could take music lessons. I couldn't decide if I wanted to play the trumpet or the trombone so my parents sat me down in the living room and started pulling out records.

My mother loved the trumpet. Harry James was one of her first love interests when she was a teenager. He had his own big band, had been married to the pinup girl herself, Betty Grable, and carried that older, man of experience, almost British virtuosity about his person.



Dad was a trombone man. He began telling a story to me at this time, or thereabouts, in which he was in his high school's band in the trombone section. They were trying out this new song and as they progressed through it, the instrumentation began thinning out as the inexperienced students lost their places, became confused, or simply gave up. Pretty soon it was just the trombone section and then quickly they all fizzled out leaving my father the only student still playing. At this point in the story he tells me that although he had some doubts, he was pretty sure he was playing the part right. This is confirmed when the band director tells the rest of the band that Johnson is the only one who was playing the part right. I'm not sure what this story is really about—perseverance—competition—right and wrong notes—existential loneliness. I just know it has stayed with me whether I wanted it to or not.

Ma has all the Harry James records out and a couple of other things that feature trumpeters. Dad counters at first with J.J. Johnson and Stan Getz. My parents trade turns at the turntable, shouting out when their favorite instruments are playing. The original purpose is eventually obscured and my parents start pulling out records simply because they want to listen to them. Ma goes to Stan Getz playing the Jobim Bossa thing and Dad finds some Kenton sides. I dig Maynard Ferguson for the first time without realizing it. I don't know the name of Kenton's lead trumpet player but I do know that he's playing some shit no one else in the trumpet section is capable of.

He's Screaming; I go with the trumpet.

Sometime in that first year I learnt a bunch of simple Christmas tunes that I had in a book. I remember bringing my horn to my third or fourth grade class around Christmas and blowing *Adestes Fidelias* and *Frosty the Snowman*. I got

some small jolt playing in the front of the class. I don't really remember the teacher and I can't visualize the classroom. I recall that I played well though and everyone was fascinated with the way in which the spit-valve worked. At that age we were all still enthralled with body functions and their fluids so the sight of spittle splattering on the floor was quite a treat for most in attendance. I felt some vague sense of power.

I must have been playing a school horn or a rental horn because I remember that one day my father brought home a trumpet that he had bought for me. Ownership told me that I would be taking the trumpet seriously and playing it for quite a while. It was a Getzen and I loved the German name. My father had just participated in a local town contest to see which man could grow the best beard. He grew a sharp looking "gitzel," but didn't win.

The first time I oiled the valves of my new horn I spilled some of the oil on my hands and then inadvertently touched my lips or tongue. I couldn't get the taste out of my mouth for an entire day. We had liver for dinner that night and it tasted like oil. I haven't been able to eat liver since because of its oily, metallic taste. One night a few months later, I had my trumpet half in its case sitting on the couch. My brother was jumping around goofing off and fell atop the case crushing part of the horn's bell. I cried really hard while I beat the snot out of him.

Shortly after that I was referred to a school band of older kids. I had to walk a bit to the junior high every day after school to practice with them. They were playing actual arrangements of tunes unlike the grade school unison ensemble I'd been playing with for the last few months. One of the songs we played was *Spanish Flea* by Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass. The first trumpet

carried the melody in this arrangement and that was the part each of the eight or so trumpet players in the band strove for. The band leader would let the first and second trumpet players take turns playing the lead amidst a subtle air of competition. We all thought that we would eventually get a shot at playing it. Herb Alpert was awfully popular at the time so I heard him at home as well as on the radio. My parents bought me a book with the trumpet parts to Herb Alpert's songs; and they eventually bought all his current albums so I found myself playing along with records for the first time. I practiced that *Spanish Flea* part hard to the point at which I had most of it down. It was a cool song in a hokum kind of way, but hokum was good enough for a pre-pubescent white trumpet player. We moved to New Hampshire so I never had the chance to try and cut someone in the trumpet section.

The grammar school band in New Hampshire was poorly organized and offered nothing particularly challenging. What immediately caught my interest though was a summer arts and music fair/competition for elementary school students that the school district ran every year. I entered the composition competition which had been won the previous two years by a piano player my age because he had been the only entrant. I made some stuff up that I could play on my horn and half-heartedly tried writing it down. The Doors were big that summer and thanks to my enrollment in Record Club of America, their *Light My Fire* Album had made its way into our house and on to my turntable. One particular section of one song had squirreled its way into my head and would not leave me alone—the second half of *The End*, the part where Morrison sings “I’ll meet ya at the back of the, blue bus blue bus, blue bus . . . “. Thus my first transcription exercise as I sampled Jim Morrison’s improvised, symbolist,

Mailierian, evocation of the sex-death thing and wrote it out for trumpet (I'm stealing from Walters here—he's always pulling my coat about this Mailer guy). It was just a blues riff, and maybe even a tired one at that, but I *felt* it and had to make it my own.

I walked into the class room and sized up the judge who was an elementary school music teacher one town over. I had enough wit about me to mention that unlike a piano, I could only play a note at a time on trumpet and therefore she would have to imagine the accompaniment. I played what I had initially written for myself and then segued into a lively interpretation of the three or so notes that Morrison had sang which I had conceptually welded on to the end of my "composition." Having heard the piano player all ready I guess, she told me right then that I was the winner. Later in the day during the awards ceremony they had my composition and the piano player's on display in little frames. His chart was a tight sixteen bar tune comprised of sing-songy diatonic arpeggios and half-note bass lines. The manuscript paper was crisp, white—almost as if starched—and the title, *New Beginnings of Spring*, was penned with a flair and precision that immediately called to mind the *Declaration of Independence*. My tune was written on the blank back of a piece of music I ripped out of an exercise book. Areas were nearly worn through where I had erased and erased again and an attentive eye would have probably picked up any number of smudges and grease spots, if not an occasional booger or two. I was actually ashamed that my chart was on display looking like it did, but the ten bucks they gave me for winning took my mind off it rather quickly. Hipster that I was, I went out the next day and used some of the money I won to buy a Three Dog Night album.

Around this time my interest in reading was at fever pitch, spurred by not only my parents, but my grandparents as well. My grandfather had worked as a newspaper man for the Associated Press, and then as a night copy editor at The New York Times; my Nana had taught English in England and had any number of poems published in newspapers and little magazines. As a result, I had been awash in books and magazines for as far back as I could remember. Every holiday, birthday or get together was an occasion for giving me new reading material as a gift. Following my father's lead, my first interest had been science fiction. I read all our local library had and then made my way through all of Asimov's science series for young readers—Chemistry, Biology, Astronomy etc. One day the collected works of Samuel Clemens showed up in our living room—in twenty or so volumes with their own bookcase. I didn't go out much for a year or so after that other than to play baseball or go to school. I flew through Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer, Life on the Mississippi, Tramps Abroad, struggled with others, but had a major epistemological breakthrough while reading A Connecticut Yankee . . . At some point early on in the novel, I caught on to the fact that the author was making fun of things. After that it became almost a game or a puzzle in which I tried to figure out what the story was "really" about. Thus I was born into critical analysis.

It was during Sunday afternoons that I began to really develop an interest in jazz as well, and the interest was as much a product of the context within which I listened as the music itself. Mom quite often made a big meal on Sundays, a roast or something else that took time and care to prepare and cook. Around noon she would ask my dad to put something on the stereo for her to listen to while she worked in the kitchen and this request would signal the end of

Dad's Sunday newspaper reading and the beginning of his slow, yet inexorable descent into audiophile bliss. Back in the fifties and early sixties, before the advent of PCs, VCRs, or even color television in many homes, audiophiles were the technological hipsters. Audiophiles like my dad built their own receivers and sometimes speakers, bought or built exotic components like equalizers and pre-amps, but for the most part, spent hours listening to music they enjoyed knowing they were experiencing the most faithful reproduction possible given their level of expertise and their heft of wallet. Dad would begin with something relatively sedate—small combo jazz perhaps—move to Kenton's big band, all the time gradually increasing the volume, and then inevitably, by early evening, the house would end up shaking as the 1812 Overture boomed out of the speakers, my father shouting over the din to anyone at hand, "listen to those cannons will ya!"

During Dad's progression, however, he would allow for requests and I began listening to Louis Armstrong on a regular basis. The attraction was a combination of things: Pops played trumpet, his singing was compelling, he was larger than life, and he lived right down the road from my grandparents in Queens. My Nana said she used to talk to Mrs. Armstrong on Sundays as they were leaving church, but I don't know how accurate that might be. Nevertheless, the idea of it was all that mattered to me. The first recording I heard by Pops was "Top hat, white tie and tails," which my parents had as part of a Playboy Jazz All-Stars compilation that included a performance by each of the different instrumental poll winners for the year of the recording—1958. It was a nice big band arrangement that featured Armstrong both singing and soloing on trumpet. As much as I dug the music, it was the occasional little historical lectures

my father gave me about Pops being one of the people who started jazz, and the liner notes in the Playboy album that raised Armstrong to mythic proportions for me.

The notes were written by legendary jazz journalist Leonard Feather, yet they said as much about Playboy's readership as they did about jazz:

The sun has set, the cocktail hour has come and gone, and it's time for a night on the town. With the Playboy All-Stars as our guides, it will be a night of exciting jazz moods, ranging from the romantic, to the frenetic, to the azure . . . so set your topper at a properly rakish angle, and prepare your ears for the finest sounds they'll hear for at least another year.

Feather's subsequent little blurb about Armstrong identified Pops as "the most famous soloist in jazz" and claimed he was "liable to end up anywhere from Eastern Germany to Outer Space." What I took away from this was that Pops was a world traveling hipster, loved everywhere he went *because* he was a great jazz musician. I had yet to differentiate between art and entertainment or between the sensational and the sublime.

Adding to my early misconceptions about jazz was the racial representation of the poll winners. There were fifteen categories, some with multiple winners, ostensibly arranged to represent the instrumentation of a big band—five saxes, four trombones etc. But there were also categories for miscellaneous instrument, for clarinet, for vocals, and for leader and instrumental combo as well. There were twenty-three winners in all and of those twenty-three, fifteen were white. If that's not ridiculous enough, although Ray Brown won in the Bassist category, someone named Norman Bates placed sixth, well ahead of presumably lesser lights like Charles Mingus, Milt Hinton and Slam Stewart. Pat Boone took seventh place for vocals ahead of Joe Williams, Louis Armstrong and Billie Eckstine. Nevertheless, I didn't draw the conclusion that

jazz was a predominantly white art form. For the vast majority of the artists my parents told me they had seen and dug in the village were black. Additionally, my father had told me a bit about the black origins of jazz in New Orleans; and Louis Armstrong was black. I understood that jazz began as a primarily black music, but I figured that with enough talent and practice white guys could play it—at least well enough to win a Playboy poll. I didn't realize then that attitude was a big qualification too.

In between musical indulgences and my more scholarly readings, I consumed every baseball story I could find. By age twelve I had a pretty good handle on baseball history, knew most of the myths, and could demonstrate the proper grip and throwing motion for any given pitch. I was the ace of our little league team's staff, but since we were only allowed to pitch once a week, I spent a fair amount of time at first base as well. Right around that time I decided that Lou Gehrig was my 'old-time' baseball hero, with Willie Mays and Juan Marichal claiming the honors as my contemporary heroes. It wasn't just that the Iron Horse played in 2130 consecutive games without the luxury of air travel, the blessing of anti-inflammatory and pain-killing drugs, or the benefit of modern training and rehabilitation techniques, but that he did it all quietly, and with class in the shadow of Babe Ruth, who was perhaps a better hitter, but certainly a lesser man.

Some sort of strange alchemic idolatry was at play in what then was my installation of Pops and Gehrig as twin heroes. If I thought of either man in racial terms it was Gehrig—he was German-American as I fancied that I was. If I didn't think of Armstrong as black in any meaningful way it was probably because I thought of him first as a musician and I already knew then that that was different



enough. Both men certainly exemplified my dual passions at the time, baseball and music; they were both representative of New York in my mind—my parent’s city—regardless of where Pops had come from; and they both were Louises, a name that began taking on such significance for me that I asked for a book by Robert Louis Stevenson for my birthday, even though I had never read anything by him before. When it was time to go to classes for confirmation in the Catholic church, an institution I was running away from as fast as I could, I put aside my contempt for organized religion (I think Clemens is mixed up in this) after learning that part of the process involved choosing your own middle name. Thus: Rusty Louis Johnson.

\* \* \* \*

During my first year in high school I discovered the fine art of shoplifting records. I was no kleptomaniac and my stealing was not an instance of “teen rebellion,” or a “cry for help,” or even a “steal this book,” fuck the capitalist establishment maneuver that might have done me solid with the still visible counter-culture crowd. No, quite simply there was a shitload of music out there I wanted to hear and I had no money, or any way of getting money. They may have called it a recession back then in the early seventies, but it was a depression in our house. My dad had been laid off and was trying to generate income by building furniture and picnic tables in the garage. Mom waited tables and we used the fireplace to heat most of the house—trees and fallen deadwood were plentiful in our backyard. We ate a lot of spaghetti back then.

Store stealing was simple in those days, even if they had already started using surveillance cameras. You walked into a department store with a large bag from another store, casually picked up two copies, back to back, of the album you wanted, went to a blind spot in the store, stuck one in your bag, went back to the record section, and slowly and obviously put back the remaining album. It was so easy I started taking orders at school and selling the ripped-off albums at half price. It wasn't long before I came up with a plan, cunning in its simplicity and profound in no less than philosophical terms. If I walked into a store, went to the record section, grabbed a record and casually, nonchalantly walked out the front door smiling at the cashiers, anyone watching would have to assume I was exchanging a previous purchase or had some other legal justification for my actions, as outrageous as they seemed on the face of it.

When they finally caught me I had already scored six albums using that method. My only error was in hitting the same store too often.

I was feeling pretty good about the four bucks I was going to get for Chicago's four-album, *Live at Carnegie Hall* and was a quarter way across the Shadley's parking lot before I was spun around by a bearded, hippie-looking dude shoving his badge in my face. He took me up to the security office and called my parents. My father answered, and when apprised of the situation said "you deal with him. I don't need a thief in my house." The house dick told me what my old man had said and then muttered "it takes all kinds." I would have busted him in the face if he wasn't twice my size. Mom came as she always does and took me home.

It worked out well for me, getting bagged for shoplifting. Thanks to the local parish kicking in the tuition money, I was at a suit jacket and tie parochial

school where class wasn't about learning, but rather, determined by what town you came from. A lot of people wouldn't talk to me, and in some cases wouldn't fuck with me because I was probably a "bad kid." That rep gave me an identity with which to deal with the class thing. The students in the band, however, had to at least tolerate me because most of them had hot records in their possession. They cut me a lot of slack.

I played my first gig—at fifteen—with a group of older high school guys I knew from marching band. As much a result of my long hair and headbands as my trumpet playing, they asked me to join the band. "Gladiator," they called themselves. They rehearsed in the drummer's parent's cellar, hacking away at an unlikely assortment of tunes by Chicago, Black Sabbath, Blood Sweat and Tears, Chuck Berry, Deep Purple, The Carpenters etc. The first gig we played was a Christmas party for a Woodworm's department store where our lead singer Tommy Knight worked as an assistant manager in automotive. At that time there wasn't any stigma yet attached to bands in matching outfits. As a matter of fact, that sort of dress was considered professional, if not "smart." So, hoping to take advantage of our singer's employee discount, we all went down to the department store a week before the big gig. The band had already agreed that black pants and shoes were the way to go; we just needed to find us some slick looking shirts. What we ended up with were basic white synthetic shirts overlaid with irregularly shaped black geometrical objects, sort of a sartorial manifestation of the old Asteroids game, or perhaps what you might envision one of the Flintstones wearing on bowling night.

I don't remember much about the actual gig other than everybody being shitface by nine o' clock at which point generous members of the Woodworm's

sales team began buying the band drinks. Although I was only fifteen and looked about twelve, the drinking age was just eighteen so everything was cool.

We played a battle of the bands a couple of weeks later at a local K of C. Tommy opened our set by saying "Good evening, we're Gladiator." Someone immediately yelled back "so was she." The room burst into laughter and I didn't get it. I was drinking screwdrivers, I forget who won.

During the two or so years I played with Gladiator we had any number of musicians come over and jam with us, always looking to add a new member who might bring something interesting to the mix. One person who came by a few times was Reg Dubeeplay, a black guy who played trombone, bass and a few other things. He went to a different high school than us in Stumpton. Some of the guys in the band who knew him, or knew of him, had talked about how good he was with the implicit assumption that his talent was directly related to being black. I didn't give it much thought. He was too good for us and eventually stopped coming by.

The only other job of any significance was a dance we played at "New Beginnings Technical High," the remedial school next to the Futurama Funpark just off of Interstate 93. Recollections again are hazy. I do remember though a girl, or woman, of indeterminate age, appearance, or intent standing off in the shadows just to the side of the stage. Looking at me; intently.

Around this time I started digging into my parents record collection. Over the course of about six or seven months I soaked up the big-band stuff they had—Les Elgart, Glenn Miller, Goodman's Carnegie Hall concert, Kenton, Herman's herds. If the big bands in their collection were overwhelmingly white, they were balanced by the small-group records they

had—Bird, Diz, Blakey, JJ Johnson, Ella, etc. What really opened my ears during this time though, and it still gives me pleasure to think that they actually did this, was the big-band “cabaret” performances they took me to. I saw Miller’s band, Harry James and maybe a couple of others at a ballroom in Nastia, a small city fifteen minutes from our home. These were BYOB affairs—after the door you paid maybe five dollars for set-ups and chose a table. My mother encouraged me to go up real close to the bandstand, explaining that in her day that was what all the “guys and gals” did who wanted to listen rather than dance. Interested in the brass players who were a row back behind the saxes, I darted my head up, down, back and forth trying to determine what those odd looking mutes were at their feet. I dug the trumpet section turning pages of music in unison, emptying their spit valves, and when they were not playing, for some reason, slowly scanning the dance floor as if looking for an old friend.

Near the end of the night at the Harry James gig, my mother caught Harry as he made his way back to the stand. Dragging me by the arm like a stage mom, she introduced herself and told Harry how she had admired him in her teens, how her sister had admired him, what his music meant to her, and then suddenly said “this is Rusty, my son. He plays trumpet too.” Harry had a pencil mustache, a huge waist line and an odor about him that reminded me of cleaning products. He looked down on me vaguely, said “that’s swell,” and made some sort of pretense about shaking my limp hand.

During one of the last breaks at the James concert or the Miller one—I really don’t remember—my father struck up a conversation with one of the trumpet players and brought him over to our table. My mother had brought along her friend Babs and both of them were a bit awestruck by the presence of

one of the musicians. By the end of the gig everyone was friendly enough—particularly the trumpet player and Babs—that the guy agreed to come back to our house to drink scotch and listen to some music. His name was Tom and he was the hippest motherfucker I had ever met, although I wasn't using the term "motherfucker" just yet. Tom and the old man got ripped and I hung as long as I could. We probably didn't even get to our house until well after two. I asked Tom if he could try my horn and tell me if it was a good instrument. I can still hear some of what he played. My small epiphany that night was in the realization that there were all kinds of hidden notes, phrases and styles in that seemingly blunt instrument. Even after playing a four hour gig, the effort of which I could only dimly appreciate, Tom played things that were far beyond my feeble skills, and in doing so they suddenly, somehow became possible for me. I remember playing big-band records all the next day and fitting myself out imaginatively as the lead trumpet player on the stand, emptying my spit valve with stylish nonchalance and nodding coolly to admirers.

I began digging deeper into my parents record collection. I hit upon Dizzy Gillespie's Have Trumpet, Will Excite, and it just thrilled me. I guess I was ready to move beyond the increasingly predictable stylings and voicings of big bands. Although the music really turned my head around, the initial attraction came from the album cover. The title is a play on a popular television series at the time of the album's release: Have Gun—Will Travel with Richard Boone as a gun toting, 1870's westerner named "Paladin." In fact, the series began airing three weeks before I was born and my parents were big fans. Although they claim not to remember, my parent's purchase of Dizzy's album three years later may have been a result of the show's popularity in our house. Bizarre.

Underneath the title is a picture of Gillespie holding his trumpet. The trumpet has a “dizzy bell,” that is to say, the bell of the horn is bent upward at an angle of maybe 45 degrees so that when the horn is raised to his lips, Gillespie would appear to be playing toward the heavens. Dizzy is wearing a casual shirt, no tie, a suit jacket, dark shades and a big smile. I thought he was the coolest guy I had ever seen. Around the age 14, I was just beginning to develop a fashion sense, twisted as it would turn out to be, and Dizzy immediately became my model. Although I never got into the shades thing, I wore berets and some of my father’s old, 1950’s suit jackets off and on for fifteen years.

Of course I had to learn more about Diz, so I stole Jazz Masters of the Forties, by Ira Gitler, from the high school library and devoured it. I can tell you that page 21 of the 1966 edition is directly responsible for introducing me to drugs. As part of a discussion of Charlie Parker, page 21 reads in part, “But later Bird showed the members of the band how to get high on nutmeg by taking great quantities of it in milk or coke.” That was all I needed to hear. Without a clue about dosage, I emptied half a can of my mom’s nutmeg into a big glass of milk and chugged it down. A few minutes later I choked down a coke for good measure. The heartburn was excruciating but I tripped for three days.

## CHAPTER 3

### GROWING UP BEBOP? LANGSTON, JESSIE AND A COMING OF AGE

Born in 1902, seven months after the birth of Louis Armstrong, Langston Hughes was of the same generation that produced the first giants of Jazz. Don Redman, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Coleman Hawkins, Sidney Bechet and many other significant figures were all born within five years of Hughes. Hughes' long literary career then offers interesting parallels to the development of jazz. The publication of Hughes' first collection of poetry, The Weary Blues, came within months of Armstrong's seminal "Hot Fives," a recording session which resulted in what many believe to be the first significant "jazz" record. The success of Hughes' The Weary Blues in 1926 and Fine Clothes to the Jew a year later, established him as one of the most important young poets of the Harlem Renaissance, a voice as inventive, distinctive and compelling as Louis Armstrong's. Taking African-American culture and oral traditions as his subject matter and means of expression, Hughes' art was a manifestation and elaboration of everyday experience just as surely as Armstrong's plaintive blowing on *St. James Infirmary* or Ellington's *Black and Tan Fantasy*. It is well documented that Hughes was enamored with African-American music. And he obviously derived materials and drew inspiration from the same cultural traditions as did early jazz musicians. What's more, he consciously borrowed structural, emotional and aesthetic elements from the music itself.



However, it is not all that obvious that Hughes was a “jazz poet” as seems to be the conventional wisdom. Such a characterization of Hughes and his work almost always stems from either a conflation of blues and jazz, or simply a failure to make a distinction between the two. No less an authority than Arnold Rampersad, in his Hughes entry for The Oxford Companion to African American Literature, writes that Hughes’ “devotion to black music led him to novel fusions of jazz and blues with traditional verse in his first two books” (369). In its biographical note for Hughes, The Norton Anthology of African American Literature speaks of Hughes’ “adaptation of traditional poetic forms first to jazz, then to blues” (1252). While the blues elements and structures in Hughes’ first two collections of verse are relatively easy to locate, identifying any vestiges of jazz is a more formidable task. It would seem that Norton has it backwards. As with the development of African-American music itself, Hughes’ work begins with the blues and progresses towards a more complicated, multivocal jazz-like performance. In this three part essay I will offer a corrective to the misguided critical approaches to Hughes that fail to differentiate between the blues and jazz as artforms or as aesthetic models. In part one I will briefly re-historicize/re-harmonize Hughes’ early poetry and consider to what degree that work drew from, reflected, or commented upon widely divergent popular conceptions of “jazz” and its substantial reliance upon the blues. Part two speaks of convergences. In part three I move from poetry to fiction and look to the Jessie B Semple stories from the 1940’s onward for evidence of an emergent jazz aesthetic in Hughes’ work.

## I

During the mid-twenties when Hughes produced his first two volumes, the definition of “jazz” was anyone’s game. Nevertheless, in his influential essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, Hughes refers to some of his work as “jazz poems” (Mitchell 59). This alone would seem justification for characterizing Hughes as a “jazz poet.” However, Hughes is not talking about a musical descriptor as much as he is trying to identify and locate a cultural, if not racial essentialism that is generative in a variety of expressive disciplines. For Hughes, jazz is “one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul” (Mitchell 58). He goes on to speak of “jazz and all of its manifestations,” mentioning Aaron Douglas, Rudolph Fisher, Paul Robeson and Bessie Smith as performers who allow African-Americans to “catch a glimmer of their own beauty” (Mitchell 58-59). Hughes certainly seems to have been working toward an early conception of a jazz aesthetic that was interdisciplinary in theory and performance. However, at the time of Hughes’ essay (1926), outside of the musicians themselves, jazz was conceptually inchoate and was just beginning to be codified performatively through the recordings of Armstrong, Morton and a scant few others. If we want to locate a musical cognate to Hughes’ poetry we must look to older forms.

The blues were much more popular, more settled structurally, and better understood by a general audience in the mid-late twenties than most of the numerous musics that called themselves “jazz” at that time. The blues recording craze that began in the early twenties had, by the end of that decade, codified the blues at least in terms of how they were received as entertainment by a general audience. However, if there ever has been a time during which a general

consensus existed as to what jazz was or did, it certainly wasn't during the twenties. The word "jazz" itself was used to signify not only music, but attitude, and style as well. Ted Gioia points out that "during the Jazz age, it seems almost anything in fashion would, sooner or later, be classified as jazz" (77). As a musical descriptor, jazz was applied to the light-classical works of George Gershwin, to the society band of Paul Whiteman (the self-proclaimed "King of Jazz" who vowed to "make a lady out of jazz") and to just about any music that was sprinkled, however lightly, with either syncopation or blue notes. Gioia rightly claims then that "as a category of entertainment [jazz] came to occupy a wider and wider orbit, encompassing a broad spectrum of popular culture" (77).

Yet even if we limit ourselves to the music of the twenties that we might identify in retrospect as "real" jazz—the work of Armstrong, Ellington, Morton, Bechet and a few others—it's still clear that jazz music was not moving centripetally towards monologic expression, to borrow from Bakhtin, but was rather an unpredictable and varied affair. To give just two examples, where Armstrong's Hot five and Hot Seven recordings were squarely within the New Orleans small band jazz tradition (managing stunning innovations at the same time), the more elaborately conceived compositions of Ellington, written for ten or more pieces, were at times closer to what we might be tempted to call "jazz program music." Paradoxically, despite their artistic innovations, both men thought of themselves as simply musicians (or "musicianers") and entertainers, equally concerned with the music and the audience. Certainly in Armstrong's case, there is little evidence of a singular or dogmatic commitment to a vision concerning the performance, development or future of "jazz music" as an art form. As was the case with many other "jazz" musicians, Armstrong found

himself in a variety of playing situations. Over a few short years he recorded small group New Orleans jazz as a second cornet to King Oliver and then as the leader of his own band, performed as the feature soloist in Fletcher Henderson's blues-riff-based big band, was heard on some of Bessie Smith's classic blues recordings and established himself as a vocalist as well as a personality. Despite the cultural, political and musical significance of early jazz, it remained an unsettled affair: it was indebted to the blues, yet it was more complex and potentially richer in expression than the blues; it was situated squarely within popular culture, yet it was marked by innovation and often experimentation; it drew upon traditional forms and materials, yet it transformed and transcended those very materials.

Virtually all of Langston Hughes' poetry, generally written from a first or third person perspective, is informed more by a blues sensibility than by anything we might identify as a jazz aesthetic. Any number of works employ the AAB, repetitive format of a twelve-bar blues. The short, epigrammatic nature of many poems approximate the condensation of significance found in concise, deceptively simple blues lyrics. Hughes' subject matter (with obvious exceptions) is also quite often the stuff of traditional blues: elements or moments specific to the existential plight of a sometimes down but-not-out individual who will persevere through the joy and the pain of everyday experience. Although there are many elements, forms and strategies common to both the blues and jazz, evidence of one art form's influence or presence does not necessarily entail the presence of the other. Nevertheless, this is the assumption often implicit in discussions of Hughes' use of African-American music. To illustrate again from no less a codifying text as The Oxford Companion to African American

Literature, under the entry “Jazz,” Hughes’ poem “Jazzonia” is implicitly read as a jazz poem by the entry’s author Siva Vaidhyanatyhan. We are told that “Langston Hughes, the master of adapting blues styles to a flat piece of paper, also painted a picture of a 1920’s Harlem jazz cabaret scene in his poem ‘Jazzonia’ . . . employ[ing] blues-like repetition , variation, and syncopated rhythm to capture the essence of the music” (396). Notably absent from this cursory reading is any specific mention of jazz, jazz elements, or jazz influence. Keeping in mind that this reading comes under the “Jazz” entry rather than the much longer “Blues” entry, the assumption seems to be that since the poem makes use of “blues-like repetition [and] variation” it qualifies as an example of *jazz* manifest in literature, suggesting in turn that jazz is a sub-species of the blues. When we look at the poem itself we see where the potential for confusion lies, for this is a poem that it is potentially *about* jazz, or at least a jazz environment.

O, silver tree!  
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

In a Harlem cabaret  
Six long-headed jazzers play.  
A dancing girl whose eyes are bold  
Lifts high a dress of silken gold.

Oh, singing tree!  
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

Were Eve’s eyes  
In the first garden  
Just a bit too bold?  
Was Cleopatra gorgeous  
In a gown of gold?

Oh, shining tree!  
Oh, silver rivers of the soul!

In a whirling cabaret

Six long-headed jazzers play.

Structurally, the poem does not correspond strictly to any musical form although it appears to be based on the blues. The stanzas beginning with “Oh, silver” (or, “shining”) act as a sort of refrain, chorus or response to the call of the longer stanzas. The two longer stanzas consist of two sentences apiece and are expositional in nature. Depending on how much musical space we allow for each section, this poem could be taken for an eight, twelve or sixteen bar song.

Conceivably, the two longer stanzas might correspond to the first two four bar sections of a traditional twelve bar blues. If so, the “Oh, silver” stanzas represent the last four measures of this form—the “release” or “turnaround.” Arranging a blues so as to begin with the last four bars of the structure as the poem seems to do was and is still a common practice. Nevertheless, there is nothing definitive here. While we find evidence of call and response and can point to “repetition with a difference” in the progression “Oh, silver/singing/shining tree” these are aesthetic and structural devices common to not only blues and jazz but to many other forms of African-American cultural expression as well. If we want to characterize this poem in musical terms, it is much easier to make a case for “Jazzonia” being a “blues poem” given its structure and the fact that there is nothing present that is more characteristic of jazz than of the blues.

At its very best the poem speaks of a reciprocal relationship between the musicians and the dancer, a feeding off each other’s performance. That the phrase “Six long-headed jazzers play” occurs twice in the poem, with all the imagery of dance and desire coming in between those two occurrences, suggests

that the dance (and dancer) are enabled, contained or even generated by the musicians, and by extension, the music. However, it's also quite clear that it is the dancing girl that has captured the imagination of the musicians and perhaps even inspires the music. If the "repetition, variation, and syncopated rhythm" then capture "the essence of the music" as Vaidhanathan claims, that essence is at very least filtered through, or interpreted by dance. It is important to note that the poem concerns itself with the relationship between musicians and a dancer, not the performative interaction among the six musicians. The dancer in this situation inhabits a liminal state—not a passive member of the audience, but not a producer of music either. She is perhaps a second-order performer, not unlike the poet who hears music and is motivated to respond performatively. It is her performance that lies at the center of the poem. Of the music we know almost nothing. It could be a rag, a stomp, a ballad, a ditty, a blues or a sea shanty. We do not know if there is any improvisation, any solos or any breaks. In fact, the only thing that suggests that the music is jazz is the Harlem setting and the word "jazzers." Samuel Charters observes correctly that "little of what [1920's audiences] found so exciting would even be considered jazz today" (121). In 1923, when "Jazzonia" was written, a band of "jazzers" was most likely what was known as a "syncopated band." Charters notes that in New York "by the early twenties, jazz [was] little more than a vaudeville novelty" (119), explaining that "as far as the audiences . . . were concerned, jazz was dance music played with a little 'pep'" (121). It's not surprising then that the poem focuses more on the dance of a woman and attendant themes of desire, seduction and transgression than the musicians or the music itself. There is nothing to indicate that Hughes was making a distinction in 1923 between syncopated dance bands

and what we in retrospect we now call “real jazz” bands. For few if any people, musicians included, were making such distinctions at the time. In 1923 the music we now accept as “jazz,” was being played primarily in Chicago and to a lesser extent, New Orleans. Although in his travels prior to 1923 Hughes may have indeed heard what we now call Jazz, he most likely did not hear it in a “Harlem cabaret.”

To assert as the Norton Anthology does that Langston Hughes adapted “traditional poetic forms to jazz” in his early work is to make simultaneously an insupportable and irrefutable claim. One might just as well say he adapted poetic forms to popular culture, as imprecise and ultimately non-descriptive as both terms are. Although Hughes did take jazz, however he thought of it, as his *subject matter* in his early poems, his work did not seem to be informed by anything we might distinguish from the blues and identify as a jazz aesthetic. For evidence of a jazz aesthetic in Hughes’ work we must not only move ahead to the development of bebop in the 1940’s, but shift genres as well

## II

About 1945 a young trumpet player named Dizzy Gillespie began to blow on his trumpet a saucy, more offbeat than ever kind of jazz called “bebop” . . . small bands soon took up the new bebop riffs and chords and bongo drumbeats. For a while this ultra-modern music was much talked about. When the bebop wave passed, it left its influences behind on what is called “cool” or “progressive” jazz, which often is played for listening rather than dancing, and which does not always have the steady rhythms of Dixieland jazz or swing. Clashing chords and dissonances may be more prominent than in older forms of jazz.



The quote above, taken from Hughes' *First Book of Jazz*, published in 1955, the year of Charlie Parker's tragic death, suggests that Hughes had ambivalent feelings about bebop. He chooses the affable and colorful Dizzy Gillespie as his representative and only mentions the more musically significant Charlie Parker at the end of a list of other contributors. Hughes may be attempting to separate the music from the personal lives of musicians like Parker who were known to the general public as much for their drug use and self-destructive behavior as for their art. In this aspect, Hughes is not that far removed from Baldwin.

\* \* \* \*

In February of 1943, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, two of the founding fathers of bebop were "informally recorded for the first time while on tour in Chicago" (Woideck 265). Within days, on February 13, the first column featuring a character that would come to be known as Jessie B. Simple ran in the *Chicago Defender*. Both of these "records" are the initial creations in bodies of work that would reach aesthetic maturation in just two or so years.

\* \* \* \*

Hughes does implicitly acknowledge the radical innovations of bop, characterizing it as "offbeat" and "ultra-modern." He also suggests that bebop was a fad "for a while" that had by and large gone away. Hughes not only speaks of "when the bebop wave passed," but also suggests that it featured "bongo drumbeats," a stereotype perpetuated in the popular press along with

berets, horn-rimmed glasses and addiction. While bongos were used frequently in Afro-Cuban jazz, they were a rarity in “mainstream” bebop. Additionally, Hughes’ characterization of bebop as lacking the “steady rhythms of Dixieland jazz or swing” is not musically accurate—he seems to be thinking of the sometimes contorted melody lines rather than the pulse of the rhythm section. Nevertheless, most of Hughes’ observations are in service of his larger, valid point that modern jazz was for “listening rather than dancing.”

\* \* \* \*

The Simple character appeared more and more frequently in Hughes’ column and grew in popularity enough so that on November 3, 1945, Hughes gave the character a first name: “Jess” (Harper 87). 23 days later, on November 26, Charlie Parker recorded “his first recording under his own name” (Woideck 265). The column in which Simple appeared afforded Hughes a flexible space in which he could begin to work out a number of issues regarding narrative, voice, aesthetics and the responsibility of the “artist” to his cultural community. The Jessie B Simple character was born into bebop, even if his creator was not.

\* \* \* \*

In his early to mid-forties when bebop made its presence felt, Hughes had spent a good part of his life listening to African-American music that was for the most part accessible, danceable, and wildly popular among a variety of American audiences. The advent of bebop signaled the maturation of jazz as an artform

and threatened to render the often conflated roles of entertainer and artist discrete. Additionally, the difficulty of the music itself, the eccentricities of many of the musicians and the popular press' fetishization of all things bebop widened the distance between the musicians and general audiences all the while adding to the near cult-like aura of bebop musicians and their followers.

\* \* \* \*

Hughes' decision to foreground Dizzy Gillespie is curious. Although Gillespie was one of the foremost innovators in bebop, he was also an entertainer of the highest order. Insofar as Gillespie could go from singing *Swing low, sweet Cadillac* to a blistering, dissonant, instrumental version of *Woody 'n You* over the course of a few minutes, he challenged the binary opposition between art and entertainment that bebop seemed to exacerbate.

\* \* \* \*

The narrator in the Jessie B. Simple stories is initially nearly an invisible man. While he is a partner in many conversations with Simple, Simple's voice is so strong, entertaining and infectious that there is a tendency to overlook the narrator, to relegate his voice to background noise that at best only serves to facilitate Simple's stories.

### III

In reading early critical essays on Langston Hughes' Jesse B. Simple stories, one keeps bumping into the idea of Jesse B. Simple as a "Black everyman". While this characterization seems innocuous enough, it nevertheless often entails a host of secondary assumptions that ultimately reduce and restrict our readings of these stories. Hans Ostrom writes,

In a sense, Simple did not grow immensely during his 23 years and hundreds of stories: in part because he seemed to spring whole into Hughes's imagination in 1943, and in part because the Simple/Boyd routine is static the way Vaudeville acts are static. Simple had a prescribed role to play within these stories. But Hughes made sure Simple stayed aware of the changing times, and in this sense there is a suppleness and flexibility to the Simple canon. (42)

The words "static", "prescribed" and "routine" suggest the extent to which much of the criticism of the Simple stories can be narrowed. Simple and Boyd (the character that the initially un-named narrator eventually *becomes*) are portrayed as locked in a repetitive pattern. In direct opposition to most of the critical writing on jazz music, the characterizations of these stories emphasize form at the expense of content. That is to say, we have heard much about how the two characters borrow from or inhabit well known roles from vaudeville, minstrelsy, straight man/comedian routines and the like; but we have heard little about how the characters employ, alter, exchange and transcend these roles through a process of discursive improvisation. Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper's work Not So Simple, the first book-length study of the Simple stories, has advanced and nuanced the discussion of these stories considerably. In marked contrast to

earlier criticism, Harper charts movement, development and growth in not only the characters, but in the narrative strategies as well over the course of the 23 years the stories ran. Nevertheless, her portrayal of the narrator and Simple as representative of “two separate cultures” (oral and written) and two separate “aesthetic traditions . . . the folk tradition . . . and the middle class tradition” (12) leaves her quite often understating the narrator’s role by characterizing him as a “foil” or Hughes’ “persona.” My reading of these stories begins with the understanding that the narrator is so much more than a “persona,” straight man or passive scribe, that he in fact is a voice in an improvised duet with Simple that features all the complicated interplay, development and elaboration one would expect to find in any other jazz performance. Further, both Simple and the narrator, each an artist in his own right, can be heard in their conversations with one another struggling with two often conflicting problems: how to develop one’s individual voice, and how to play well with others.

In the first collection of stories Simple Speaks his Mind, Simple and the narrator appear to be on very good terms. Yet, behind the Vaudevillian facade that marks these stories we can sense a subtle tension arising from the conflicting goals of the narrator and Simple. What at first appears to be a donning of masks on the part of the narrator and Simple for the purpose of mockery and humor is in reality a jockeying for representational position. The narrator, who initially appears almost as a stranger in town, needs and tries to create a stable Simple with whom he can position and contextualise himself. Yet, Simple is anything but static. As a result, we progressively find both characters in a representational game of musical chairs, reversing roles and mimicking one another in a constant displacement of identities.

An can see this in the story "A word from Town & Country" . When Simple says that both women and dogs are sometimes bitches, the narrator responds after the fashion of Simple himself by making a pun: "That is not a polite word.....it will get you in the doghouse with the ladies" (Mind, 56). Simple then posits a specious argument about the relative meaning and possible application of the word, in effect mocking the narrator's habit of making fine, academic distinctions between things. The narrator mistakes Simple's meaning, as Simple so often does his. He tells Simple that "you would insult *my* mother, if you applied that term to womankind." Simple replies "I do not even know your mother." The narrator then says "I would appreciate it if you did not talk about her now...in the same breath with female hounds." Simple tells the narrator "You must be drunk, I did not mention your mother" (Mind, 57). That the narrator is clearly uncomfortable with Simple's discussion of "Bitches" is evident in his attempt to laugh it off by employing a pun, a move that backfires when Simple begins "signifyin(g)" and elicits an emotional reaction in the narrator. In his study The Signifying Monkey, Henry Louis Gates describes one type of "signifyin(g)" as convincing someone "he has spoken literally, when all along he has spoken figuratively" (57). While this is certainly the case here, Simple also improvises in reaction to the narrator's responses and ends up reversing the equation, convincing the narrator he has spoken *figuratively* when he has really spoken literally. In either case, Simple's discourse is double-voiced and acts as a centrifugal force in opposition to the narrator's centripetal propensity to delimit meaning, whether it be figurative or literal

Simple's use, or misuse of language is of course, the best indicator of how issues of representation are played out between him and the narrator. Although

Simple does often mistake the meaning of many a multi-syllabic word, evidence suggests that these are intentional mistakes on Simple's part in the service of humor, mockery, or political irony. Simple may play by ear, but that doesn't mean he hasn't mastered the language. For in other cases in which the vocabulary is elevated, communication is not compromised in the least. In "Summer Ain't Simple" the narrator asks of Simple's girlfriend Joyce, "Doesn't Joyce dress rather diaphanously?" Simple replies, "Joyce better not dress like that and let me catch her! You think I want her sashaying up and down the street for every man to whistle at with the sun shining through her skirt like Zarita? Joyce better wear a petticoat" (Mind, 52). Simple displays a perfect understanding of this uncommon word, even if it is not one he would use himself, and in doing so Simple declines to take the linguistic bait offered by the narrator—refuses to signify—because he has little at stake here. Joyce is the subject of representation, not Simple.

At other times Simple's "mistake" is nothing more than an ironic reversal of meaning. During a discussion in "Ways and Means" about non-black business men who make their money in Harlem while living elsewhere, the narrator accuses Simple of putting "social co-operation on....a mercenary basis" to which Simple replies, "They would want me to have mercy on them if they was in my fix" (Mind, 164). Where the narrator's use of the word "mercenary" paints Simple as a cold hearted capitalist, Simple's usage places emphasis on the signifier itself and makes possible multiple meanings. Simple effectively plays the monetary, military and "merciful" connotations of the word "mercenary" against one another in order to make a political statement and undermine the narrator's representation. For where the business men who come to Harlem profit from a

transaction, the narrator's work is that of appropriation. He takes the images, words, and experiences of Simple and markets them in the form of writing, leaving nothing in return outside of the occasional beer. Simple implicitly exposes "social co-operation" as the capitalist construct that it is, as well as the narrator's role in it, and in doing so shows a sophisticated ability to manipulate language that belies his mask of simplicity.

Although the narrator and Simple are often at linguistic odds, there are other times when they seem to find common ground. In the story "Final Fear" the narrator and Simple combine to create a call and response exchange that has many of the elements one might expect to find at a prayer meeting:

'In this uncertain world, something unpleasant can happen to anybody, colored, or white, regardless of race.' 'Um-hum,' said Simple. 'You can be robbed and mugged in the night—even choked.' 'That's right,' I said, 'or you can get poisoned from drinking King Kong after hours,' 'Sure can,' said Simple. 'Or you *can* go crazy from worriation.' 'Or lose your job.' 'Else your money on the horses.' 'Or on numbers.' 'Or policy.' (Mind 111).

Each speaker affirms what the last one has said before adding his own entry to a rhythmic list of woes. There is the feel of a Jam session here with the speakers imitating the practice of "trading fours". As the conversation continues, Simple becomes the featured soloist with the narrator acting as the chorus. Three times in succession, Simple builds a long staccato line of worries and woes that at the peak of tension are cadenced by a short, declarative summary from the narrator such as "'You're a tough man'.....'You have suffered'" and finally, "'Great day in the morning'" (Mind, 112-113). The narrator is willing to let Simple take the lead here because Simple's self-representation is a constant one that presents no interpretive problems for the narrator. Additionally, it will be the narrator and not a character in the narration who will exert editorial control in the end. In this



passage, Simple is a musical, somewhat religious "Black everyman" who requires no censure, and who allows the narrator to fill the role of community chorus. Simple abides by this characterization because it allows him to assert his voice. However, this is a rare moment, for Simple is not satisfied with just playing lead in somebody else's band. He wants to call the tunes as well. In order to achieve this aim, Simple must seek to undermine the narrator's control of the representational economy.

The shifting, and at times interchangeable roles played by the narrator and Simple suggest a dialogic in which the boundaries between high-brow/low-brow, separatist/integrationist, and even writer/reader are trespassed with regularity. Perhaps the definitive example is the story "Banquet in Honor". Simple mentions that he has gone to a banquet to honor "an old gentleman who is famous around Harlem for being an intellect for years, also very smart as well as honest, and a kind of all-around artist-writer-speaker and what-not". Once again, a role reversal is suggested by Simple's having attended a cultural affair and the narrator's colloquial response "Tell me about it, man" (Mind, 83). Simple goes on to say, "It seems like this old man always played the race game straight and has never writ no Amos and Andy books....for which I give him credit. But it also seems like he did not make any money because the white folks wouldn't buy his stuff and the Negroes didn't pay him because he wasn't already famous" (Mind, 84). During the long stretch in which Simple relates this story, Simple has for all purposes become the narrator. And I would suggest that Simple's narrator has become the old man (whose name Simple cannot remember) in a temporally displaced allegory. The old man, who is referred to as "The Doctor" tells the crowd "You are *not* honoring me a damn bit....the way you could have honored

me if you had wanted to....all these years, would have been to buy a piece of my music and play it, or a book of mine and read it, but you didn't" (Mind, 87). He finishes by saying "I ate in spite of the occasion. I still need a potato and some meat—not honor" (Mind, 88). Through Simple's reversal of roles, he is able to exact some sweet measure of revenge on the narrator. Where the narrator is able to control the representation of the Simple *of the moment* in his stories, Simple appropriates the narrator's/old man's past, present, *and future*, and a sad future it is. Having assumed control of his own story, Simple can reconstruct the narrator in any fashion he would like. On a broader plane, this process suggests that the black community has it within their power to construct the artist just as he constructs them, by either manipulating the raw materials with which he works (as Simple does in this story), or by refusing to buy the finished product.

"Banquet in Honor" ends with the line "I'd buy that old man a beer *any time*" (Mind, 90). The next story in the collection, "After hours", begins with: "'Bartender!' Simple cried in a loud voice as though he were going to treat everyone in the place. 'Once around the bar.' Then pointing to ourselves, 'This far—from my buddy to me'" (Mind, 91). The close proximity of these two lines, coupled with the fact that Simple rarely buys anyone a beer, reaffirms the reader's association of the narrator with the Doctor. This association is also supported by the way in which the Doctor has eased his way into "Banquet in Honor" as the narrator has gradually faded out. The narrator plays less and less a part in the story until the point at which the Doctor (by means of Simple) is given voice. After the Doctor speaks, we never hear from the narrator again, and Simple becomes the only narrator for the rest of the story. Simple has effectively written the narrator out of the story and replaced him with an

allegorical figure. That a displaced narrator is presumably writing the master story *from which* Simple writes him out, erases boundaries between reader and writer, portrayer and portrayed and leaves us with a disparate heap of empty representations. Every character seems to double the other here. If we see the narrator and the doctor as doubles, we can also see Simple, who in conversations with Joyce often rails against the snobbish pretensions of middle class blacks, identified with the doctor as well. Near the end of the story Simple mimics the doctor, asking "It's more important to eat than to be honored, ain't it?" and concludes "If I wasn't honored, I sure was tickled...." (Mind, 89-90). Simple is ecstatic about the Doctor's put down of the cultural elite, yet in identifying with the Doctor, he blinds himself to his own complicity in the problem the Doctor has described. He says "They wouldn't buy none of his art when he could still enjoy the benefits. But me, I'd buy that old man a beer *any time* " (Mind, 90). Simple certainly has never bought any of the Doctor's art, nor will he, for when he identifies with the doctor, he reads the Doctor's problem solely as one of sustenance, not appreciation. Having commandeered the narrative and laid bare its constituent parts, Simple makes no attempt to resolve the plurality of voices and representations. He eschews any abstract theorizing or attempts at closure at the end of the story and rather, *finds* himself back in the concrete world of beers and bars in the next.

Fairly silenced in the last half of "Banquet in Honor", the narrator becomes a reader of Simple's story, and of the Doctor's as well. Yet he is also the author presumably of the final story that contains all the others. The narrator, who in this first collection remains somewhat of an outsider, must deal with the fact that he exists in the black community only in so far as he is able to create that

community in fiction, and himself along with it. Ironically, in constructing his existence in the black community, the narrator alienates himself from it as evidenced by his representational wrestling matches with Simple. It seems that the more the narrator tries to constitute himself fictionally in relation to that community, the farther away he gets from even a fictional sense of empirical reality. The situation of course is exacerbated by Simple's constant undermining of the narrator's authority and claims for representational rights. To claim that the narrator is an "almost invisible first-person narrator" (Ostrom, 36) then is to ignore the mutable nature of representation and suggest that meaning and identity can be fixed within clearly marked boundaries. Boundaries, however, are illusory, as exemplified by the constant masking and unmasking, and the role negotiations that characterize the relationship between Simple and the narrator.

Even what appears to be an a priori facet of Simple's personality can be shown to be negotiable. In the story "Race Relations" Simple reveals, "This week I bought all the colored papers....trying to get a race-mad on, reading about lynchings, head-whippings, barrings-out, sharecroppers, cheatings, discriminations, and such. No dice" (Mind, 214). Despite his inability to "get a race-mad on", Simple goes on to make a deceptively simple point about how race relations should take place on a "family basis" (at the physical level). The narrator counters with the argument that "the basic social issues.....are not to be dealt with on a family basis, but on a mass basis" (Mind, 216). In revealing that he tries to get a "race-mad on", Simple implies that anger about race relations is not a given, but must sometimes be summoned up; being mad about race is a conscious *decision*, not an inherent trait—or so Simple would have the narrator believe. However, this is just a ruse within a ruse, another signifying game

orchestrated by Simple that facilitates the positioning of the narrator and himself at opposite poles—even though they both work towards similar ends. Simple argues for free choice, individual agency, and race relations that spring from the flesh. The narrator calls for collective action and universal rights. Because Simple has tricked the narrator into believing that Simple is unable get mad about race at the moment, the narrator is suckered into an argument he believes will be even-tempered and rational. Yet Simple confounds him by insisting on a sexual interpretation of the word "relations", rendering the narrator's abstract platitudes about "social issues" as pompous, if not irrelevant to the issue as Simple has framed it. Simple's comment about getting "a race-mad on" is in essence an unmasking that reveals another mask unbeknownst to the narrator. By implying that his race-anger is a construct, Simple suggests that he is now being forthright with the narrator. The narrator sees Simple's apparent openness as an opportunity to present a non-hostile, proper Simple to whom he and his audience could relate to comfortably. However, this openness is an illusion created by Simple, a decoy that attracts the narrator's attention and allows Simple to represent himself in stark contrast to the narrator's now exposed attempt to construct Simple. At this point we cannot say to what extent Simple's race anger is intrinsic or constructed, but what matters is that an awareness of anger, if not anger itself, is manipulated at will by Simple. As a part of his identity, Simple claims the right to do with his anger as he chooses.

The second collection of stories, Simple Takes a Wife, is marked by heightened tension between Simple and the narrator as well as a change in Simple's tactics. Simple's fight for control of his own representation becomes more overt and sophisticated. Whereas in the past Simple has mocked or

contorted the words of the narrator, he now openly appropriates material from others and takes the first steps towards becoming a writer himself. Not surprisingly, there are indications that he has begun to read more seriously as well. At the start of "That Powerful Drop", we find Simple "holding up a copy of the *Chicago Defender* [in which the Simple stories appeared] and reading" (Wife, 85). Given the layering of representations we find earlier in "Banquet in Honor" and other stories, we might expect Simple to be reading stories about himself. But he is not. Simple reads "about how a man who looks white had just been declared officially colored by an Alabama court" (Wife, 85). He then goes on to a discussion of racial identity. It seems that Simple is experiencing an awakening of sorts. In ignoring his own story in the Chicago Defender, (in a sense, withdrawing from the narrator's representational economy) and reading about other people's struggles with identity, Simple demonstrates a full awareness of the constructed nature of representation. That "a man who looks white [can be] declared officially colored" indicates that identity is determined by the portrayer and the portrayal (Wife, 85). The "official declaration" reveals that language is the tool that facilitates that determination. This appears to be the formula Simple has been looking for. Rather than subvert the language of others, Simple now begins to claim language as his own. This maturation might be seen as comparable to a young jazz musician who has paid some dues, listened closely to the masters and has now realized his own voice.

It is during Christmas that Simple writes his first extended piece of prose. While he has written a few poems in the past, their rhythms, rhymes, and subject matter do not mark a serious departure from Simple's everyday speech. Simple imagines himself as Santa Claus responding to a letter from "some little Johnnie

Dixiecrat" (Wife, 205-206). Simple's perhaps new-found belief in the power of the written word is evidenced by the didactic nature of his response. He lectures "Johnnie" about treating black people fairly and demands that he work for civil rights. More importantly, Simple warns that if Johnnie does not do as he is told, he will be forced to answer to a more daunting piece of writing: "If you don't, [act as you are told] I'm liable to drop down your chimney a present you don't want a copy of the United States Constitution" (Wife, 207). This marks an important phase in Simple's development, for he realizes here that language need not always work against him. The 15th Amendment, which grants the right to vote regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude" affirms identity for Simple without modifying it as the narrator often does. The existence of the constitution demonstrates that language—even language generated by whites—can be used in a manner advantageous to blacks. Simple's warning to Johnnie then is both an affirmation of self and a testing of his newly realized power.

About the same time Simple has written this letter, he composes a poem as well, entitled XMAS. It is not the poem's content, however, that is important here, but rather what the poem as an object bespeaks of Simple's relationship to the narrator. Simple reveals that the poem is "for [his] Christmas card" (Wife, 213), but then tells the narrator "Man, you know I can't afford to have no cards printed up. It's just jive" (Wife, 213). However, the cards *are* printed up, in that this poem appears in print through the narrator, under the name of Langston Hughes. Simple is aware of this appropriation, and he retaliates in kind by lifting material from Hughes the writer and using it ironically to assert his own voice: "if I was a composer, I would write me a song also, which I would sing myself.....I

would put into it such another music as you never heard" (Wife, 213). Compare this to Hughes' "Daybreak in Alabama": "When I get to be a composer/ I'm gonna write me some music about/ Daybreak in Alabama/ And I'm gonna put the purtiest songs in it...." (Selected Poems, 157). A similar situation occurs in the story "Staggering Figures" wherein Simple characterizes the narrator as "Heaven-sent" (Wife, 136) all the while imploring him to lend a dime. When we consider Simple's comment along with the poem it suggests, "Little Lyric", ("I wish the rent/ Was heaven sent.") we again see Simple appropriating language for his own purpose. The abstract portion of the poem ("I wish") is deleted and the narrator is confronted with a declarative statement: "you are heaven sent". The material from the poem now speaks of the exigency of the moment: money. What's more, the declarative nature of that material carries an assumption that the narrator will provide that money. If Simple's appropriation of "Daybreak in Alabama" is an attempt to claim his own voice, it is also testimony to the limits of that claim. The "If" in "If I was a composer" points to the fact that the narrator is the final, and therefore "real" composer, as does the publication of Simple's Christmas card. "You are heaven sent", then, might be Simple's resigned way of saying to the narrator: if you're going to use my material, I expect you to pay me for it.

If the narrator and Simple are engaged in a struggle over representation, it doesn't seem to affect their friendship until the final story in the collection. In the penultimate story, "Four Rings", Simple asks the narrator to serve as best man at his wedding, explaining, "Don't nobody know *me* better" (Wife, 236). In fulfilling his duties as best man, the narrator could be seen as the facilitator of Simple's future, a role he has played since the inception of the Jesse B. Simple



stories. However, in the final story "Simply Love", Simple marries earlier than expected without the narrator's knowledge. And with help from a surprising quarter, he pulls off a stunning coup that frees him from the representational grip of the narrator—if only temporarily. Simple relates, "The white man were my best man, and I was his.....we was all so happy when it was over that the white couple hauled off and kissed my bride, and I hauled off and kissed his. I did not think that anything like that would ever happen—kissing white folks, and they kissing me. But it did—in New York—which is why I like this town where everybody is *free, white, and twenty-one, including me*" (Wife, 239) (Italics mine).

The narrator has been usurped by a white man who, along with Simple and the wives, by way of figurative chiasmus is now part of a communal marriage that transcends racial and sexual boundaries. Stepping into this strange representational space of his own making, Simple creates a distance between himself and the narrator that is never closed. Simple's act is an unprecedented transgression that does not bode well for the narrator. How can the narrator use Simple to position himself in the black community, or represent it, now that Simple has either left that community, or at very least, blurred its boundaries? The material with which the narrator has been working is now undifferentiated. Simple boasts "I *am* a new man. I intends to act like a new man, and therefore *be* a new man" (Wife, 240). If we recall the conversation in "Race Relations" between Simple and the narrator, we realize that Simple has co-opted the narrator's principles and estranged the narrator from them in the process. The wedding is a communal affair, yet, the kissing that occurs across racial lines suggests the sexual element of "relations" that Simple had argued for. The marriage incorporates both poles of the debate between the narrator and Simple.

Ironically, the narrator who had argued for collective action, is left out of the affair. All boundaries having been erased by Simple, the narrator is left unplotted.

As we might expect, in Hughes' third collection of stories Simple Stakes a Claim, the role of the narrator is greatly diminished. In some cases ("A Dog Named Trilby", "Puerto Ricans"), the narrator is not even present; in others, he has only a walk-on role. More important to note, however, is Simple's continuing development as a writer/storyteller. Although he has always told stories, it is not until this collection that Simple exhibits an ability to develop a story or a character over a relatively long stretch of time. There are four stories devoted exclusively to Simple's cousin Minnie in which the character is developed to a level unrivaled by any other character except perhaps Joyce. We learn of Minnie's history, her appearance, her habits and psychology by way of Simple's telling. The narrator, who does not know Minnie, or anyone else it seems, does little more than prompt Simple during these stories.

In other stories where he does appear, however, we find the narrator trying to level the dialogic playing field in order to reclaim his fair share of the discourse. The first lines of "Duty is not Snooty" are as follows: "I remember one time you told me that you thought that if white people who say they love Negroes really do love them, then they ought to live like Negroes live. Didn't you say that?" (Best, 196). Here the narrator is trying to frame a dialogue in which he and Simple are on familiar ground. By recalling a statement by Simple from a past conversation about race, he hopes to return, if only temporarily, himself and Simple to their original, often polarized roles and reactivate the dialectic through which he had hoped to achieve some semblance of a relational

identity. In "Bones, Bombs, Chicken Necks", which follows shortly after "Duty is not Snooty", Simple opens by telling a story about his wife Joyce. The narrator shows a rare flash of anger and chastises Simple as if he were a child: "You're hurting your wife if you make her feel bad.....From your own selfishness in regard to your wife's wishes, it is only a step to being inconsiderate of everyone everywhere. Consideration begins inside yourself first, right where you are, *at home* " (Best, 202). The increasing tension between the narrator and Simple can be seen as arising from the narrator's diminished role and his inability to give direction to what is left of it. More important, however, is the narrator's display of emotion. His reaction is more instinctual than rational, and thus, he shows signs of developing a more rounded, integrated identity. Insofar as his relation to Simple and the larger community has been a discursive, intellectual and perhaps even abstract one, an emotional outburst suggests a new avenue of communication, a more physical way of incorporating himself in the community. That his emotion arises in a conversation about a third party who is a female foreshadows the path the narrator will eventually take into the community.

In Simple's Uncle Sam , Hughes' fourth collection, we finally come across Boyd as an active and frequent narrator. The question remains as to whether Boyd has superseded a previous narrator, or if he is one and the same. Particularly puzzling in this regard is the dialogue between Boyd and Simple, for it contains many of the features we have observed earlier in the early conversations between Simple and the un-named narrator: the two occasionally reverse roles, Simple plays off the wordiness of Boyd, and the tenor of their conversations is generally relaxed, although sometimes punctuated by spates of mock outrage. However, if Boyd is in fact the un-named narrator, how do we

account for what appears to be a return to the original terms of their relationship after the tension that built up in the period leading to Simple's wedding, tension that resulted in Simple's *Staking a claim* for the right to represent himself? I would suggest that despite the relatively few appearances of Boyd, there is enough evidence to make a case for his being the un-named narrator re-emerging *fully integrated* in the community.

Over the twenty-three year span of Jesse B. Simple stories we are witness to remarkable changes in Simple. He begins as a single, womanizing Harlemite, and ends up a happily married denizen of the suburbs (The Return of Simple, "Hail and Farewell"). And coinciding with these material changes has been an increased capacity for self-representation. It seems only logical that the narrator, so intricately entwined with Simple, should finally show some growth as well. In the early stories, the narrator seems a bit unsure about his position as an intellectual. When Simple tells of his relationship with an old girlfriend, the narrator comments "That's deep psychology.....I didn't get *that* far in college, so I can't explain it" (Wife, 18). On another occasion, Simple asks, "Do you reckon depression days is coming back?". The narrator again declines an invitation to display his knowledge, answering, "I don't know.... I am not a sociologist" (Mind, 14). Compare these statements with this later ostentatious display by Boyd:

[Einstein] was dealing in pure science, which relates to the basic sources of matter and material, the great principles of the universe, the paths of the stars, the vast whirl of the zodiac, and the mysteries of infinity. When Einstein wrote that *phi* over *psi* divided by *gamma* multiplied by the square root of *p* equals *naught*, he did not have you in mind. You are an infinitesimal unit in the great complexity of the cosmos (Return, 61).

Although Boyd's equational rhetoric is tongue-in-cheek, it is nevertheless clear that this is a much more confident and assertive persona than the first narrator. And this seems to have something to do with Boyd's living in Harlem.

Boyd is a much more physical presence than his initial incarnation was. In "Lynn Clarisse", we find Boyd making time with Simple's cousin, behavior that would be out of character for the original narrator who never talked to anyone save Simple, and who expressed discomfort during Simple's discussion of "Relations". When Simple takes his cousin away from Boyd for the night, Boyd cracks, "Goodnight, my erstwhile friend" (Sam, 86), a humorous comment that nevertheless reveals a tension between Boyd and Simple that does not arise from representational concerns, but from immediate, concrete matters involving the body—"relations" as Simple would have it. That Simple's cousin Lynn Clarisse, the object of Boyd's desire, has "gone to a sophisticated college" (Sam, 83) and is "darker than dark brownskin" (Sam, 84) is an indication that Boyd has learned to balance or conflate the abstract with the concrete, the mind with the body. Boyd is *living* Harlem, not just representing it. He is physically present and seems in part to take his identity from his surroundings. Where Simple's wedding transgressed all boundaries set in the conversation about race relations, Boyd's desire encompasses the polarities of that previous debate. He admires Lynn Clarisse' work on voter registration and her participation in freedom marches, and he is attracted to her physically as well. That attraction indicates that he has been able to place his consolidated identity in the context of the black community without employing Simple as a mediator.

Despite overt displays of learning on Boyd's part, the tension arising from representational issues that marked the earlier relationship between Simple and

the narrator is not evident in these later stories. After Boyd toys with a line by Shakespeare, Simple remarks, "Boyd, your diploma is worth every penny you paid for it.....Only a man who is colleged could talk like that. Me, I speaks simpler, myself". Boyd replies "Simplicity can sometimes be more devious than erudition.....especially when it centers in an argumentative ego like yours", to which Simple answers, "Of course" (Sam, 152). The sense here is that both Boyd and Simple can live with, if not appreciate their differences in voice and expression. They are at/of peace/a piece. And this is because the hitherto ghostly narrator now possesses an identity incorporated in a Boyd/Body: *Body and Soul*. As a member of the community, he has more a *right* to represent that community in writing than he had before. Simple implicitly acknowledges this by letting Boyd's flights of poetic fancy and philosophical ramblings go by without seeking to mock them. He accepts Boyd for who he is just as Boyd can now accept and portray an "argumentative ego" such as Simple's for what it is, since Boyd no longer need define himself through Simple.

The connotations of Boyd's first name, Ezra (Ezra of The Bible), suggest that he has *returned* to the community, having spent several years immersed in white culture/education. The biblical Ezra is noted for having returned to Jerusalem with "a number of exiles.....a kind of ideal group consisting of, among others, priests and Levites" in order to rebuild the temple (Metzger, 220). In light of this and the fact that these later stories were written in the aftermath of the Harlem renaissance, the name Ezra Boyd might be seen as an artistic manifesto then. His name is a call for black writers to return figuratively, and in some cases literally, to the black community, as Hughes did, and ground their art in black experience. Appearing fully realized some twenty years after the heyday of the

Harlem Renaissance, Ezra Boyd also speaks of what has been lost. When the biblical Ezra returned to Jerusalem he "discovered that there had been intermarriage with the neighboring nations, and he ordered all foreign wives to be repudiated, so as to keep the religion of Jews pure of contamination by the worship of different gods" (Metzger, 220). Ezra Boyd is something of a two-way mirror. He reflects the need to maintain and celebrate black experience, as well as the reality that that experience has been fragmented and dispersed by not only oppression, but integration as well. That these reflections are contradictory, points to the representational problems that still loom large for the black artist. Nevertheless, an Ezra Boyd suggests that these problems can only be addressed from a material and figurative place within the black community.

Even though Simple was born into bebop, the aesthetic that emerges from his stories is one more beholden to an earlier conception of jazz. While the Boyd/Simple duet speaks of the difficulties in negotiating between art and entertainment, idealism and materiality, the very oppositions that bebop exacerbated, in the end these contradictions are absorbed into a sense of place (Harlem) if not some amorphous conception of "community." Nevertheless, Simple can be said to have lived a jazz aesthetic. He develops a voice through his creative, improvised interaction with other voices, and eventually moves from sideman to headliner to simply peer, once the narrator/Boyd incorporates himself fully into the community.

## INTERCHAPTER 2

The High school band experience was warped considerably by my extracurricular musical activities. The “stage band,” which was a leaner, more skilled version of the high school band itself, played at all the basket ball games. During games we were located in the balcony which was only accessible from the band room itself. It was our own private den, often unsupervised save maybe the student band leader. I recall that it was the rotund soprano sax player Will Balsh, two years my senior, who introduced me and a couple of other hipsters to the art of mixing Jack Daniels with orange soda during those games my sophomore year. We were playing charts from the Bill Moffit “soundpower” series and to my green ears they were begging for an obligato, if not full-fledged trumpet improvisation. Limited as I nevertheless was to simple blues scales, *Guantanamera*, *The Work Song*, the theme from *Hogan’s Heroes*, *Brandy*, *Brazil*, the *Star Spangled Banner*, all were occasions for my hobbled, half-assed, yet inspired blues wanderings.

I was deep into Maynard Ferguson’s bag then—or, at least as deep as you can get into a Ferguson bag. His rock/big-band album MF Horn II was constantly on my turntable at home. Although I was listening to a lot of Diz, Bird, and even Pops still, for the most part their playing was beyond my capabilities. So over the course of any given popular tune we played I would attempt the type of blues-based improvisations I was hearing Ferguson play and in doing so inadvertently begin to learn the blues in keys other than the horn-



friendly C, F and Bb. At the end of the tune I would scream out the highest note I possibly could and then let it hang over a split second after the tune ended like Lew Soloff did with Blood Sweat and Tears so everyone could dig that the trumpet player was a bitch.

Once, at a football game against Nastia High with the entire band, I had gotten enough beer in me to override the constraints that usually kept my improvisational impulses in check when performing with adult supervision present. At one point I was playing a no doubt profound and moving improvised solo on the *Work Song* when the band's director Horton Gumbar knocked the horn from my mouth, cutting my lip in the process. I guess my actions were fairly brazen—completely ignoring my part and blowing whatever I felt like with Gumbar standing right in front of me. Nevertheless, the physical nature of his response gave me pause. We all had heard tell that he played lead trumpet with Patti Page's big-band in the forties so I checked myself and let it slide for the time being. Later in the year we were rehearsing for the school's production of the musical *Sweet Charity* when Gumbar's nineteen-year-old, head-turning daughter came walking into the practice room. Right about the moment at which everybody saw her, I grabbed my plunger mute and growled out in exaggerated fashion the bluesy riff with which one of the characters in the play sang "Hey Hot Mama." The laughter was explosive with an almost perverse strain coming from many of the guys in the room, hot as she was. I knew enough not to make eye contact with Gumbar for several weeks.

I have to give old Gumbar credit though. My Junior year I played the sousaphone in the larger band because no one else wanted to play it. On a whim I had tried it and picked it up pretty quick. As part of our annual formal concert

that year, we played a chart called "A Touch of Tuba." It was a feature arrangement for the instrument, but instead of playing the written "solo" part, Gumbar allowed me to improvise. It was a nice ride. The changes really didn't lend themselves to the blues so I found myself playing around with different scales. The applause was thud-like, no doubt more a reflection of the novelty than my lumbering improvisation. The next year they featured me and my white sousaphone on "Zing Went the Strings of my Heart." I was a pro by then. I remember consciously using a whole-tone scale in my solo. I'm sure it didn't fit, but just knowing what a whole-tone scale was and actually playing it made me the hippest motherfucker in town. I had read that Bird and Diz sometimes used whole-tone scales.

During my Junior year I applied for and was accepted at the St. Rolph's Advanced Buddies Program, or "ABP" as the graduates often display it on their \$50 tee shirts, many of them doctors, lawyers, charitable trust CEOs, entrepreneurs, politicians, astronauts, start-up wizards, peace corp volunteers, or just shameless materialists. Most everybody there thought they were "wicked smart." A few of us weren't so sure. The day I moved in to Nixon hall I hooked up with Reg Dubeeplay, the trombone and bass player I had jammed with when the Gladiators were just forming. Unbeknownst to me, he was two rooms down from me and was playing his horn when I first entered the building. Not having seen who was playing and lured by the sound of a trombone, I unpacked my trumpet, started blowing and walked down the hall to his room. When I came around the corner into his room and we both saw each other, we simultaneously said something to the effect of "hey man, what the fuck are you doing here?" We paraded around the quad blowing our horns like pied pipers. Many students

followed us clapping and then singing some inane song as if that was what smart people did in a St. Rolph's type environment.

Later that evening there was a meet-and-greet reception in one of the formal rooms. Taking note of the big French doors that looked out over the campus, Reg and I sneaked away and stripped down. We casually streaked by the French doors, Reg, the only black guy on campus, and me with a red, white and blue headband and hair halfway to my ass. We sang an inane song as we went by. Loudly.

Reg surprised me one day when he came in my room with his guitar and asked me if I could help him with some chords. He was trying to figure out David Crosby's *Almost Cut my Hair* from CSNY's Deja Vu. While we hung out I realized that he really dug that album, particularly the Neil Young tunes. At first I thought he was kidding, but he sang and played *Country Girl* as if he had written it himself for his girlfriend: *Country Girl I think you're Pretty /Got to make you understand /Have no lovers in the city/let me be your country man/Got to make you understand*. I mean, I really dug Neil Young too, but at the same time Young seemed the epitome of whiteness to me, even if a very hip whiteness. It wasn't that I expected a black guy necessarily to be listening to Hendrix and Richie Havens, but Neil Young seemed so remote. I went back to After The Gold Rush, Everybody Knows This is Nowhere, and Harvest and heard things again for the first time. That wasn't the last time a black guy hipped me to white music, if those classifications even mean anything at this point.

This was a six week endeavor in which everyone split their time between an English course and their "Major." My major was Creative Arts which meant equal parts of visual arts and music. The English class, which met every

afternoon for three hours or so, involved sitting around a big oak table and discussing Beckett's Waiting for Godot and a couple of other twentieth-century plays I've since forgotten. What I do remember is finding a play called The Connection in the anthology we worked out of. It was about a bunch of junkie bebop musicians waiting around for a fix. I read it with glee. Quite naturally of course it wasn't one of the plays chosen for discussion. Years later I found out that my parents actually saw a performance of that play somewhere in Manhattan during the sixties with either Dexter Gordon or Jackie McLean in the cast, hipsters that they are.

For the fifteen or so of us who had chosen creative arts, we spent the early morning dealing with rudimentary music theory which was almost yawn material for me, and then went to the "studio" where we had our own easels, brushes and acrylics. I recall that the Beatles' *Abbey Road* played over and over in that studio for six weeks, the numbing repetition of the music in stark contrast to the task at hand. We were given no specific instruction other than to paint what we felt, heard, sensed, thought, inferred etc. This type of freedom generated its own cage quite rapidly in light of a hard canvas, indelible acrylics and my dullard's understanding of the supposed process attendant to the artform. I only recall two canvasses from that summer. One was a ribbed, receding tunnel, rendered in dark blues and muted reds that my younger brother John fell in love with at first sight and owns to this day. In retrospect it's obviously quite vaginal and I'm okay with that.

The other piece featured a sinuous double line of fire red and smoldering blue that snaked its way from the upper left hand corner of the canvas to the lower right quadrant—fire and ice Jack. When something approximating a small

face showed up as a result of my random brush strokes and I pointed it out to Rodney, the TA, he thought it was the most interesting thing I had done so far. I was confused and finally concluded that painters were full of shit. Jazz is where the fair's at, I told myself.

Reg and I had been jamming. He was one of those musicians you are blessed to meet. Even at sixteen Reg played not only trombone, but bass, guitar, piano and probably anything else you could hand him. We would go to memorial hall where there was a baby grand and we would simply start playing, Reg on piano and me on trumpet. Looking back, what we played wasn't really of any importance in light of the way in which we played it. I remember more than anything else the eye contact. We looked, listened and followed one another through various keys, tempos and colors without much regard to form, satisfied with working our ears as strenuously as possible. That was probably the first time I was able to decenter myself enough to really hear context, if not conversation. *What* I was playing wasn't shit, but *how* I was playing was really coming around. I was learning how to hear and as a result I was hearing new things, even if I didn't have the facility yet to play what I heard. This was also a result of the intensive listening I was doing to some of my parent's records I had brought along—Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, J.J. Johnson. And I was shedding hard, playing 3-4 hours a day in the practice rooms at memorial hall.

One afternoon, Gil Jell, the director of ABP knocked on my practice room door and came in for what was initially, obviously going to be a "heart to heart." Gil laid it down cold: "you will never be able to make a living as a trumpet player; you need to understand that there are other skills and talents that you should focus on." I mumbled whatever was necessary to get him to leave the

room so I could continue working on *Billie's Bounce*. Nevertheless, the motherfucker gave me pause (although I wasn't really using the term "motherfucker" all that often at the time). Maybe Gil was suggesting I spend more time with class related activities? I don't know; I could tolerate very few of the people there and the music teacher was trying his best to discourage me from doing my main research paper on jazz.

In the end it didn't matter. Prior to our third weekend, Reg, myself and a few other sympathetic souls decided we had to find a way to get fucked up. Reg had a small amount of weed, but it wasn't for large scale, public consumption. We all decided we needed cases of beer. Nick Lendahan, who ended up a NASA astronaut and who looked about 26 at the time, announced that he had a car on campus (even though that was forbidden) and he probably could go down to the local shopping center and score some beers. We returned that Friday evening with two cases of Maximus Super , a brew popular at the time with bikers, career beer guzzlers and teen-agers, probably due to its outrageous alcohol content.

Later that evening I found myself cruising around campus on a ten-speed bike a friend had lent me. As I came down a rather long hill that let out onto the main campus road, I tucked my head tight into my chest and pedaled like the pistons of hell. My head was still down when the bike was clothes-lined by the one inch cast iron chain that draped across the bottom of the road. I went airborne and don't remember landing.

An indeterminate amount of time later, back at my room, Reg and others from adjoining rooms worked to keep me awake. They feared a concussion, and were probably concerned about all the blood as well. I vaguely recall throwing up on my bed and the people around me. I didn't go to class for two days; I

didn't go to the infirmary either. At St. Rolph's you didn't miss class so I knew I was fucked—whatever that meant in this bizarre context. Nevertheless, I finished my research paper on “The Bebop Revolution” and learned “Billie's Bounce” in at least two different keys. Graduation came and they let me march. My diploma read “has attended” where everyone else's read “Graduated.”

I've been getting the ABP newsletter a couple a times year ever since and in it I read about the accomplishments of my former classmates. Many are corporate lawyers, CEO's, ESL teachers in Botswana, software gurus, politicians. Most have degrees and usually advanced degrees from the Ivys, Stanford, Michigan, Duke, Cambridge. They send in little snippets to keep their classmates up to date:

*As you might gather from previous posts, Jeff and I have launched yet another **Dot Com**. Our latest venture is **Shitgard.com**. Of course this is really my project and just an amusement for Jeff—he's quite content with his tenure track at Spamford. Jeff just finished his third book, You are Correct Sir: Negative Dialectics and Existential Angst in the Early Work of Ed MacMahon. I'm thinking about running for oaffice. We are in desperate need of original ideas in the political system, don't you think? “A Fresh, New Beginning,” how does that sound for a campaign theme? We look forward to seeing all of you at the reonion next year. Last summer was such a hoot!*

I've fantasized any number of times the realist shit I might send in if I really thought they would print it.

*Hello to everybody! Let's see, what's been happening with me. Well, we got a new plywood blade for the table saw last week. Things are slow around the shop but my brother has a line on the new development going up the next town over. Oh yeah, my ex-wife is going to med school I guess, but fuck her, right? I finally got laid last week. Me*

*and my buddies went over to one of them singles dances. I figured it would be lame and it was—mostly divorced chicks in their thirties with a pack of kids at home. I fuckin' scored though. I wanted to come to the reunion the last couple of years but I always end up working that day. I'm going to court next month for my second DWI so unless I blow the judge or something I probably won't be able to drive up for this year's reunion either. Well, I guess that's it. If anyone needs a shed built or could give me a ride to the reunion (I'll kick in for gas) give me a call.*

Sure, there was a sort of wry bitterness, but why not? You've got to keep an edge or it all reduces to sludge.

One final note on St. Rolph's. One of the people in the Creative Arts course with me was Slick Johnson, a smooth talking football star who invited me and Reg up to his parent's huge house one weekend. One of his high school teammates came over and Slick suggested a game of two man football. It was me and Reg against them and we got crushed—I don't think we ever even completed a pass. Reg and I had never played organized football, but Slick and his buddy both were all state. They had set us up and then laughed at us afterward. About fifteen years later Slick runs for congress and gets elected, perceived by many as much more sincere and compassionate than his Republican counterpart. During a sit down interview with a local news anchor, Slick draws an analogy between politics and music and in doing so enlightens the audience to the fact that a "violin is a much more subtle instrument than a saxophone" or some such shit. Thank god for that creative arts course.

The other joker I can never forget is Euripides Montplaiser, who not only went to St. Rolph's, but was also president of my high school's senior class. After a lifetime of private schools leading to a law degree, he went on to be some sort



of education czar, slashing and burning his way across the state before his term expired or someone hustled him out the back door.

I'm just grateful I was able to leave that place with dignity, under the right conditions.

Motherfuckers.

## CHAPTER 4

### LISTENING TO MONK

*A man is a genius just for looking like himself*

Thelonious Monk

Despite the somewhat recent resurgence in critical and popular attention that has resulted in two documentaries, the reissuing of most of his recorded work, at least three biographies, with another one in the works, and a massive, 560 page discography (Chris Sheridan), Thelonious Sphere Monk remains one of the most enigmatic and least understood figures in African-American music. While his reputation as an innovator, composer and now, even pianist seems secure, there is no consensus, and perhaps there shouldn't be, as to who Monk was, and more specifically, where, how and when he fits into the evolving narrative of jazz history. When the innovations of the 1940's, commonly called bebop, are discussed or delineated, the three names inevitably invoked as originators or founding fathers of that movement are Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk, usually in that order. Yet a significant body of critics, many of whom recite this list, nevertheless agree with Martin Williams' claim that "whatever his contribution to bop had been, Monk was not a bebopper" (152). The implicit suggestion that Monk could help create a movement of which he was not a part is a paradox indicative of the

contradictions that marked Monk's life, music and the subsequent discussions of his legacy.

Part of the problem in talking about Monk is that he had so little to say about himself or his music, a music that was dismissed, ignored or misunderstood for the first twenty or so years of his professional life. Additionally, Monk's early contributions occurred during a period that was largely undocumented (his youthful days accompanying an evangelist, followed by the AFM recording ban of 1942-1944) and then at a venue (Minton's Playhouse) and has been almost completely mythologized. Figuring Monk's early role in the music is further complicated by his first, although belated, rise to popularity in the late 1950's, twenty or so years after he started working professionally. This popularity marked an evolution in opinion among both critics and aficionados that in turn forced a reevaluation, if not a begrudging acceptance of his early work. Although people were apparently now able to "hear," if not understand Monk's music at some level, years of befuddlement on the part of those who had been listening left its mark on the critical opinion of Monk as simply being odd. Paradoxically though, it was the very image of Monk as mysterious, difficult, flighty and eccentric, often played up in the press, that accounted for at least some of his new-found popularity. For the critic or historian then, Monk's career, development, progress—all of these terms suggesting a teleology—appeared at best to be riddled with vacant spaces, at worst, decidedly non-linear. As might be expected then, much of the writing about Monk's life and his music has emphasized the non-linear, the discontinuous, the eccentric and the odd. "Mad Monk," "The Lonliest Monk." "The Lonliest Monk;" these are but a handful of the tags that have helped

perpetuate the myth of a brooding, cryptic, hermetic soul whose puzzled compositions are accessible to only the privileged few.

In joining the conversation about Monk, I do not want to simply refute what has been the conventional wisdom regarding him (if I can use the word “conventional” given the context) or to provide a counter narrative that will “explain” Monk. Rather, what I hope to do is bring to light some of the logic, consistency and formalism in Monk’s work and life that heretofore has either gone undetected or has been ignored or dismissed in order that we might more fully expand and elaborate the apparent contradictions and paradoxes that mark his life and music. Monk and his music were indeed unconventional, at times unpredictable and often quite difficult. Yet, these qualities are not indicative of an iconoclast who has cut all ties to his past, but of an individual in a dialectical relationship to the jazz tradition, an artist who draws upon received forms and materials in order to make them new again, in many ways, the personification and performer of a jazz aesthetic. Although much valuable writing about jazz exists, there has always been a tendency in the literature to exalt the individual soloist, to emphasize difference—whether musical, sociological or psychological in nature—and to value the expressiveness of content over the necessity of form. This is especially true in the discourse generated about the bebop period, a moment in the development of jazz characterized by many as “revolutionary.” I hope to provide something of a corrective here by illustrating just a few of the formal elements overlooked or underplayed in Monk’s work and by extension, a jazz aesthetic that informs the ongoing jazz tradition, confident that his reputation as an eccentric oracle will survive anything I might write that reveals

his more mundane characteristics, musical or otherwise.

## I

He was always named as one of those who had contributed to the evolution of the bebop style of the mid-'forties during those jam sessions at Minton's, but it was fate that he happened to be there—Monk had been hired as the house pianist.

Martin Williams

Perhaps the signal contradiction in the discourse attendant to Monk is the aforementioned notion of Monk as a non-bebopper who helped father bebop. There seems little doubt that Monk contributed to the harmonic language developed at the time and that he influenced any number of his contemporaries, including Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie, both of whom note Monk's involvement in the music and role as a teacher. We also know that Monk wrote several tunes that became standard repertoire for bop musicians in the 1940's, songs such as *Round Midnight*, and the *52nd Street theme*. Monk's presence at the seminal, early 1940's sessions at Minton's, his friendship, and at times, mentoring of Bud Powell, as well as his relationship to Art Blakey further tie Monk to the rather small community of musicians that were involved in making new music at the time. Yet this seems to be the extent, both musical and social, to which Monk was directly involved with the development of bebop. Despite his harmonic sophistication, Monk style of piano playing was anything but bop-like. In contrast to the lightening-fast strings of eighth-notes favored by Dizzy, Bird and Bud Powell, Monk was more of a thematic improviser, who articulated small musical ideas with crystal clarity. Monk's idiosyncratic playing style set him apart from the majority of young musicians at the time and it would seem that it is that disparity in playing styles that has allowed most critics to claim that Monk

was not a bebopper, all the while acknowledging his compositional and harmonic contributions to that period. In line with many other critics, Joe Goldberg claims that “Monk was never a bop musician.” explaining that he “appeared on the musical scene full-formed and has remained intractably Monk, with little change, ever since” (26, 28).

Yet Goldberg’s claim seems a bit extreme, suggesting as it does that Monk was some sort of immutable musical entity, oblivious to external influence. Furthermore, to exclude Monk from the ranks of beboppers because he “remained intractably” himself is to ignore the dominating style and singular vision of an undisputed modernist such as Charlie Parker. Few, if any critics would argue with the notion that Bird “remained intractably [Bird] with little change.” Individuality does not rule out participation in larger movements. A more likely scenario than Goldberg’s might be one in which Monk participated in the early making of bebop but moved on very quickly to something else, perhaps even before bop had been completely conceived and articulated on an individual basis as a playing style by men such as Parker and Gillespie. Monk wrote several of his most important compositions before the early ‘forties sessions at Minton’s, most notably, *Round Midnight*. This particular song makes it quite clear that Monk was already familiar with most of the harmonic innovations that would later be seen as representative of bebop. *Round Midnight* derives much of its character from the use of half-diminished chords. While this chord was by no means new to jazz, its use in the past, primarily in minor II-V-I progressions, did not exploit the inherent dissonance *melodically* as Monk would. Additionally, Monk employs a well known bebop device, the tritone substitution, to create a chromatic chain of ii-v relationships in the fourth

measure: B minor 7–E7–Bflat minor7–Eflat7–Aflat7. Both of these elements, the half-diminished chord and tritone substitutions, became the important base materials from which bebop was made. Dizzy Gillespie's *Woody 'n You* and *A Night in Tunisia* (whose bridge Monk allegedly wrote) are later examples of how intrinsic these elements were to the music.

The early composition of *Round Midnight* and other pieces such as *Epistrophy* suggest that Monk brought a fully realized harmonic conception with him to Minton's. However, these innovations were not necessarily unique to Monk. For as Ted Gioia points out, the compositions of pianist/composer Tadd Dameron "are often cited as model bop pieces [and] many of the best known were written in the late 1930's before the new movement had crystallized" (221). Dameron also made use of advanced harmonic materials in early tunes such as *Lady Bird* and *Good Bait*, and by mid-'forties in songs like *Hot House* and *Our Delight*. The late 'thirties output of both Dameron and Monk then suggests that bebop manifested itself compositionally before it flowered as a style or conceptual framework for improvisation. Yet Monk seemed to abandon the developmental trajectory followed by the other bop pioneers, Dameron included. Although both men continued to write and perform in small bop groups throughout the 'forties, their paths diverged in ways that illuminate the differences in experience and environment that separated Monk from the vast majority of his contemporaries.

An exact contemporary of Monk's (both men were born in 1917), Tadd Dameron thought of himself primarily as a composer despite the steady work he found as a pianist in the 'forties fronting his own band with Fats Navarro or as a sideman with others. Before Dameron even made the acquaintance of people

like Gillespie or Parker, he had already established himself as a composer/arranger, having contributed charts to the bands of Count Basie, Harlan Leonard, Jimmy Lunceford, Benny Carter and Teddy Hill. Dameron himself suggests how early on his piano playing was simply a tool that allowed him to compose: "I could only chord—I couldn't solo. The first I soloed was when I came to New York" (Gitler 264-5). Monk's development was much different in that he began as a pianist in small groups: on the road with an evangelist in his teens, winning talent contests at the Savoy, and as the house pianist at Minton's in 1941. His early experience finds him alternating between the roles of accompanist, composer/arranger and small group improviser. For both Dameron and Monk, their careers for the most part followed the pattern set down in their youth. Dameron continued to compose and arrange, playing piano primarily to bring in income and get his music performed. Despite the extensive club dates he played in the 'forties, Dameron's playing remained at best merely functional. Monk, however, throughout the majority of his years maintained a balance between composition and improvisation. For unlike Dameron, Monk *needed* to be a pianist as well as a composer, if for no other reason than to make sure his sometimes difficult compositions were played correctly. Although Monk certainly valued improvisation for its own sake, in his various groups, Monk's piano playing was as much instructional as it was expositional, a point I will return to later. It is the productive tension generated by a composition/improvisation dialectic that marks most of Monk's work and sets him apart in temperament and practice from the rest of his contemporaries. Where at times Parker, Gillespie, Powell and others embodied what might be characterized as a "performative aesthetic," which foregrounded spontaneous



expression and often saw form as no more than a vehicle, Monk's broader "jazz aesthetic" is apparent in his constant negotiations between form and content, tradition and innovation, and performance and composition. Additionally, his concern with his music above and beyond career considerations resulted in a trajectory that took him off the standard developmental path of professional "jazz" musicians.

While bop is often portrayed as a reaction against the conformity, commercialism and appropriation that marked much of the preceding big-band era, in the late 'thirties and early 'forties it was still the big bands that employed the majority of "jazz" musicians. More importantly, as Scott DeVeaux makes clear, the model for a professional musician that Parker, Gillespie and others grew up with was one of a player who made his way through the ranks of various big bands until he had achieved enough competence, respect and fame as a sideman that he could form his own big band. Dizzy Gillespie played with the big bands of Frankie Fairfax, Tiny Bradshaw, Teddy Hill, Edgar Hayes, Cab Calloway, Lionel Hampton, Earl Hines and Billy Eckstine; Charlie Parker played in the big bands of Jay McShann, Earl Hines and Billy Eckstine. In both cases most of this experience came before or during the beginnings of bop in the early 'forties. The relationship between the development of bebop and the big bands is a complicated one that cannot be accounted for by simply claiming that one was a reaction to, or antithesis of the other, or by appealing to any other commonly invoked binaries such as composition/improvisation, form/content or art/entertainment. However, fans and critics nevertheless point to the small group collaborations of Bird and Dizzy as not only the defining moments of bebop but also as the high-water marks of the careers. Obscured by this

romanticized and compartmentalized view of bebop is the fact that the vast majority of Dizzy Gillespie's work after 1944 was with his big band, a unit he formed and reformed time and time again despite the prohibitive costs of running such a large operation. Bird also moved toward larger groups during the last seven years of his abbreviated life beginning with his recordings with Machito's Afro-Cuban band in 1948 and continuing on with his recordings with strings. Similarly, Tadd Dameron and Miles Davis had both moved on to large group formats by the end of the nineteen-forties. For while small groups afforded the musician extended opportunities for improvisation and a welcomed flexibility, they often did so at the expense of larger compositional, organizational and formal possibilities. Despite achieving relative financial success and fame as leaders of their own small groups, Bird, Dizzy and other contemporaries were continually drawn toward an earlier model for the professional musician. While it is certainly the case that many of the innovations that sprang from bebop were the products of small bands, it wasn't until the 'fifties and the advent of "hard bop" that the big bands had been supplanted by quartets, quintets and the like as the typical working jazz ensemble.

Although Monk played briefly with Lucky Millinder—a band of indeterminate size—and with Gillespie's big band for a short period, unlike most of his contemporaries he developed both as a pianist and as a composer in an environment of small bands. Striving for success as a big-band leader was not an operative model for Monk, perhaps due in part to his upbringing in New York City. For Gillespie, Parker and many others got to New York by way of the big band. That is to say that such bands not only provided experience and the chance to develop a reputation, but they also offered the opportunity to travel to large

metropolitan centers, most notably New York, where name musicians had set up shop in local jazz clubs and many of the recording companies were found. Living in New York from age six, Monk “grew up in a city that . . . was already the international capital of jazz” (Fitterling 21). Big bands then would not have offered Monk many of the attractions that drew so many other musicians. Additionally, as a composer, Monk did not move in the direction of big-band arranging or composition either, content throughout his career to work with small groups. In her biography of Monk, Leslie Gourse tells us that Monk “had little interest in working with the big bands,” quoting Monk as having said “I wanted to play my own chords. I wanted to create and invent on little jobs” (15). While others gravitated toward the riches a big-band afforded—a plurality of voices, increased timbral possibilities, the possibility for full harmonic realizations—Monk, at times in almost minimalist fashion, worked with an economy of ideas and materials. However, unlike other small groups of the time, Monk’s bands rarely sacrificed the potential for compositional complexity and nuance for excessive or unchecked improvisational journeys. In a sense Monk found, or perhaps even created a middle ground between the two positions (small group/big band) we find Gillespie and others alternating between throughout their careers. Although he worked in small groups throughout his career, Monk’s bands and compositions always displayed an over-riding concern with form. Yet, if his work was framed by an (at times intricate) architecture rarely found in other small bop units, it was always flexible enough to accommodate the strongest and most individual of solo voices—John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins and Johnny Griffin for example.

In using the word “minimalist” in conjunction with Monk I am not suggesting that there exists a certain willful poverty in his work, or that he is a primitivist of sorts. For some of his work is both bewilderingly complex and emotionally jarring. What I refer to is Monk’s focus and endless variations upon a few foundational aesthetic principles and devices. Rather than privileging musical materials themselves, whether they be half-diminished chords or the bridge to “I Got Rhythm,” Monk worked under the assumption that it was what you *did* with things—especially “common” things—that was really interesting. And this lies at the heart of Monk’s ability to negotiate between form and freedom, and tradition and innovation. In the next section I will discuss some of the aesthetic principles that arise from Monk’s use of apparently familiar, local materials and go on to consider Monk’s legacy as both an innovator and conservator of the jazz tradition.

## II

I just experimented arranging. You learn most harmonics by experience. You fool around and listen. Most chord structure is practically arithmetic anyway. You just have to use common sense.

Thelonious Monk

In his “History of jazz,” Ted Gioia argues that “the boppers were not formalists. Content, not form, was their preoccupation. Instrumental solos were at the heart of each performance, sandwiched between an opening and closing

statement of the melody" (203). Accurate as this statement is in regards to most of the small group work of Parker, Gillespie, Navarro, McGhee and others, it reveals just how divergent Monk really was from way in which the new music was conceptualized and performed during its day. As I've indicated earlier, Monk's music always played upon the dynamics generated by form and content, composition and improvisation. Yet, perhaps because Monk was of the same generation as the bebop musicians, performed with many of them in various bands, and worked almost exclusively in a small group format that was privileged by more content-orientated musicians, much of the discussion about Monk's music has given short shift to the formal and structural elements of his work as they might relate to content. Much has been said about his gifts as a composer of clever, quirky, yet logical tunes, and he has finally won recognition as a brilliant, if unorthodox pianist; however, most of the time connections between the two are simply overlooked. Yet the emphasis upon form that lies at the center of Monk's music is crucial to understanding the content it often generates. The hesitancy of critics to acknowledge and discuss the formal elements of not only Monk's music, but also jazz in general seems born of a somewhat romantic notion of jazz performance as an unencumbered, sublime, spontaneous expression of one's tormented soul. At times this process is portrayed as inscrutable, beyond analysis, at other times as fragile: we dare not look to close lest the spell be broken. However, a close consideration of the inherent formal and emotional aspects of Monk's music can only help us to understand in greater depth the uniqueness and profundity of his art as well as the degree to which he inhabited a jazz aesthetic. A good part of Monk's genius

is evident in his appreciation and manipulation of form. To ignore those elements of his music is to listen with only one ear.

Monk's early composition *Epistrophy*, was popular with other musicians, becoming a jazz standard as well as Monk's own unofficial theme song. While other critics have pointed to songs such as *Criss-Cross*, *Brilliant Corners* or *Rhythm-a-ning* as the most representative of Monk's genius or his compositional style, it is *Epistrophy* that puts on display many of the aesthetic principles that remained constant throughout his life. *Epistrophy* is in thirty-two bar song form, the most commonly employed form by bebop musicians besides the twelve-bar blues. However, Monk's use of this form is radically different than the ways in which other musicians of the time used that structure. In his brief discussion of Monk's use of existing forms, Scott DeVeaux says in passing that Monk "radically defamiliarized them" (224). Although DeVeaux does not elaborate on this characterization, it seems that he has hit upon one of the central aspects of Monk's music.

*Epistrophy* does feature many of the elements one expects to find in a thirty-two bar song: it is comprised of four eight-bar sections, it provides contrasting material in the form of a bridge in the third eight-bar section, and that bridge marks a move to the iv chord, a standard chord. That, however, is all that is familiar. Many thirty-two bar songs that have a bridge (B section) open with two eight bar sections that are either identical or quite similar, usually designated as A A or A A-prime. If there is a difference in the two eight-bar A sections, it usually occurs at the end of the second A section where transition chords are introduced to prepare for the new material that will mark the B section. What Monk does in *Epistrophy* is quite different. The two A sections that

begin the tune are paradoxically both identical and dissimilar. The first four measures of the song each alternate harmonically back and forth between C#7 and D7, a distance of a half-step, the smallest interval in western music. As I will show, this interval in itself is intrinsic to Monk's harmonic and melodic thinking. The second four measures repeat the pattern of the first four, but up a whole-step, that is to say back and forth between the chords D#7 and E7. Even within the first eight measures then we see a sort of displaced repetition: the half-step relationships and the alternating pattern that mark the first four measures are replicated in the second four, yet the materials change from C#7-D7 to D#7-E7. Although the tonality is not at all clear here, there is a sense of familiarity.

If then, the second eight measures repeated the first eight, we would have a perfectly symmetrical and ultimately pleasing AA form. Yet Monk subtly confounds our expectations by giving us a mirrored, and therefore reverse reflection of the first eight bars. Rather than repeat at the beginning of the second eight the C#7-D7 progression that began the song, the D#7-E7 pattern of the second four measures is repeated for another four bars. Only then does the song revert back to the original C#7-D7 progression that began the tune.

Arguably then, the first sixteen measures of the tune break down into four bar sections we would categorize as A-B-B-A rather than the standard two eight bar (AA) form so prevalent in American popular music. Yet despite this intricate, unorthodox structure, when one listens to the song there is the undeniable and pleasing awareness of repetition that gives one an almost immediate feeling of familiarity. This familiarity arises from not only the repetition of chords and their harmonic relationships, but from melodic phrasing as well. For the first sixteen bars can be logically broken down further into sections as small as single

measures when we observe that the melody of the song is a series of quite similar four note motives repeated measure after measure. Rather than create a melody that snakes through progressions and across bar lines, as would a typical bebop melody, Monk constructs short, crisp melodic articulations of the underlying chords that accentuate the relative paucity and brevity of those harmonic materials.

Monk's remarkable achievement in just the first sixteen bars of *Epistrophy* then is in his ability to take a familiar form, defamiliarize it by mutating-- however logically--its shape, yet provide the listener with what, through the use of short motives and an abundance of repetition, seems to be familiar materials. Although the melodic phrases are compact and the chords limited, the subtle variations amount to something akin to Gertrude Stein's notion of incremental repetition in which with each repetition something is added, changed or advanced in order to gradually develop or reveal a theme or idea across a given span of time. Whereas the acts of reading and listening (or playing) exist only in time, such a use of repetition orders that time and perhaps even gives the momentary illusion of having stopped it or subjugated it to one's own use in order to exist fully within the moment. Monk's technique then might be thought of as incremental defamiliarization and refamiliarization. There is no specific point in which we realize that this song is something other than what it might have initially appeared to be. Rather, somewhere along the line a subtle alchemy occurs in which the familiar seems to change its nature without losing its familiarity.

When the first sixteen bars are played out, the song *appears* to move harmonically to the iv chord, a common and perhaps even expected progression.



The melodic phrases that begin the bridge are two measures long each, a smooth and swinging contrast to the choppy, four note phrases that inhabit the first sixteen. The lead line is based upon an F# minor/blues scale here providing a gritty, more emotional feel than did the first sections in which the melody took on an oddly enticing, hard edge of cold reason. Coming out of the bridge into the final eight, one would expect a re-articulation of the first eight measures of the song. However, Monk trips the listener up slightly by repeating the second eight bar section of the tune. It works beautifully and finishes off the form with an elegant symmetry. Because the second eight bar section was a reverse mirror image of the first eight, it ends with the chords that begin the first eight: C#7-D7. Paradoxically, by ending with this second section, the song ends with the same chords and melody with which it began. Broken down into increments of eight, *Epistrophy* would be characterized as A-B-C-B. However, that would ignore the microstructures that mark this amazing composition. To break the song down to its smallest identifiable "sections" (probably measure by measure) would likewise understate the song's indebtedness to traditional thirty-two bar song form. Ironically then, this is a song that abounds with structure yet resists a formal definition any more precise than saying that it is a thirty-two bar song. In *Epistrophy*, as with almost all of Monk's compositions, form is where you look and how you listen.

Despite the abundance of form and the complexity that amasses over the course of a composition like *Epistrophy*, Monk very often employs the simplest of materials, as evidenced by *Epistrophy's* simple phrases and clipped progressions. Ted Gioia claims that Monk's "genius lay precisely in [his] ability to juxtapose the simple and the complex" (243). This juxtaposition itself is a manifestation of the

larger aesthetic device, defamiliarization. For often in Monk's work, complexity arises when the simple is defamiliarized. Fine examples are found in Monk's use of the twelve bar blues form, one of the most commonly employed forms in American music. Monk's *Straight, No Chaser* consists of a relatively simple, short blues figure that is repeated with variations and at various lengths over a standard blues chord progression. The figure begins each time with a pick-up C note, a sort of rhythmic pivot point, and unravels itself over the course of five to eleven notes. However, the actual musical phrases of the composition are displaced from the articulation of the smaller figures. The first musical phrase consists of two of these figures, one five notes long, one seven notes long. Although this is an uninterrupted phrase, the presence and repetition of two figures, each beginning with C, suggests to the ear that maybe these are two phrases, or perhaps a compound phrase. The second phrase contains three figures, five, five, and four notes long respectively. This is followed by the third phrase which consists of only one figure, seven notes long. At this point we have covered half the tune—six bars. The last six measures of the composition encompass one long, sinuous phrase that contains six figures, each five to seven notes long.

What makes this song so difficult to diagram or to talk about for that matter is the disjunction between the smaller figures and the larger phrases of which they are a part. If we were to claim that the figure was the phrase unit, then the song would consist of an arithmetically pleasing twelve phrases (even if the twelve phrases do not coincide with the twelve measures). However, to try and play the melody in twelve phrases would result in something other than *Straight, No Chaser*, for the feeling and momentum of the song depends upon the

very disjunction between phrase and figure. The rhythmic displacement generated by this disjunction is the most notable characteristic of the song. After only a couple of measures the downbeat—the *one*—is obscured and meter seems to be articulated more by phrase than bar lines. Adding more ambiguity is the fact that whether we count phrases or figures, the song seems to be split into two, six-bar sections, a structure uncommon in a twelve bar blues which is usually divided into three, four-bar sections. Both the sixth and twelfth bars of the song are occupied by a whole note, which suggests a rhythmic pause or coming to rest after a predominance of eighth notes. As with *Epistrophy*, we find a certain compositional irony in that for all its structural elements a final, definitive sense of form remains just beyond our grasp. Additionally, despite the relentless syncopation produced by the jagged phrasing, when the song is performed the result is a remarkable fluidity of form and expression. It is perhaps all the more frustrating, and the irony all the more tart for the fact that it is simple, easily identifiable ingredients with which Monk concocts his complex piece of music. At root, *Straight, No Chaser* is a twelve-bar blues, yet one with a jigsaw structure that recombines common elements in unexpected ways.

If we listen to an apparently simple blues such as *Blue Monk*, we find that complexity arises not so much from the given musical materials, but from the way in which they are to be performed. The melody line, which is in some ways a less developed version of *Straight, No Chaser*, does not pose any problems in of itself for the performer or the listener. The difficulties show themselves in the tempo that Monk establishes for the song. Monk's long time drummer Ben Riley claims that "the most difficult tune for [him] was *Blue Monk*," explaining that Monk "would never play it where I could fit my little things that I had set up for

it, and he kind of sensed that I didn't do this song that well, so he would never play it at a tempo that I could utilize the things I liked to do best. He'd make me find another way to approach this song" (qtd. in Troupe 105-6). The tempo that Monk calls for *Blue Monk* is one that forces the performer to abandon familiar riffs, patterns or licks that he might rely upon to help structure his improvisation. That a tempo itself can be rendered unfamiliar is illustrated by a comment Monk made to Riley in which he claimed "most musicians can only play in three tempos. Slow, medium and fast." Riley goes on to add "and so now he's letting me know that all these different reasons why he's playing all these things in these different tempos is to make me become aware that there's more than three ways to play. You gotta play in between all of these three things" (104). In Monk's 1957 recording of *Blue Monk* with Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, the song is taken at an almost excruciatingly slow metronome marking of about 70. Ironically, in light of Riley's statement, this affords the soloist three options. He can construct his solo out of eighth notes, similar to the fashion in which the melody is made; he can double that tempo by playing sixteenth notes; he can again double that by playing thirty-second notes. That is to say there are three rates of speed built into this tune. In performance, the distinction between these three is not all that cut and dried. The horn players in particular mix all three elements throughout their solos as well as triplets which might be said to suggest yet another "tempo." However, possibly because most solos build toward some sort of a climax, both tenor saxophonist Johnny Griffin and trumpeter Bill Hardman do seem to move from the slower to fastest across the arc of their solos. In fact, both horn players begin with a mixture of eighth and sixteenth

note runs and eventually finish their solos with long (and impressive, given the speed involved) thirty-second note phrases that burn with intensity.

Implicit in the song's tempo then is a temporal model for improvisation. While that statement is true in general for any song, it is particularly the case in *Blue Monk*. If the song was taken any slower it would arguably degenerate into burlesque. At MM (metronome marking—beats per minute) 70 or so, it is on the edge of self-mockery, negotiating between the comic and the tragic. If the song was performed any faster, it would rule out thirty-second note runs for all except the most technically proficient—perhaps Coltrane or Bud Powell. In this performance, *Blue Monk* sits at a tempo that allows for a maximum of temporal possibilities. Yet, there is more going on here than just providing musicians with a chance to play slow, medium and fast all within the environment of one song. In a study of the tempos commonly employed by jazz musicians, Geoff Collier found that “the usual range for jazz tempos is from as low as MM 80 (metronome marking), a slow ballad, to MM 275, which will tax any but the best jazz musicians” (Collier 80). At MM 70, *Blue Monk* is slower than what musicians are accustomed to. When that tempo is articulated in thirty-second notes, the musician is playing faster than is the norm—MM 289—which, as Collier suggests, would provide a formidable challenge for any musician. While the musicians have three tempos available to them then, they are tempos displaced from the norm, defamiliarized, and therefore they force the musician to “find another way[s] to approach the song” as Ben Riley put it. Monk's long time tenor saxophonist Charlie Rouse confirms the value of rhythmic defamiliarization in Monk's music in commenting on another tune: “I can remember playing ‘Rhythm-a-ning’ at three different tempos and thinking differently on it at each

tempo” (Gourse 151). As a general practice, Monk often fell into a medium to fast tempo that Laurent De Wilde identifies as “the magic tempo” which “falls somewhere between 140 and 160 beats a minute” (179). According to De Wilde, all the songs on 1964’s *It’s Monk’s Time* are set around this tempo, “a gray area in music where things seem almost to decide for themselves” (179). Because this intermediate tempo is really too fast to be double timed, it forces the musician to play eighth note phrases that, at this tempo, are remarkably close to the rhythm of everyday speech.

It is finding “another way to approach the song” that is often the goal of Monk’s manipulation of form, particularly as regards improvisation. For just as *Blue Monk* provided a temporal frame for improvised solos in that tune, most other Monk compositions are far more than merely “opening and closing statement[s] of [a] melody.” Sometimes, in the case of songs such as *Trinkle Tinkle*, *Criss Cross*, *Nutty*, or *Played Twice*, the sheer quirkiness of the melody forces the band to hear and approach the rhythmic and comping responsibilities differently and the resulting altered context affects the shape and movement of the solos. In other compositions like *Well You Needn’t*, *Off Minor*, or *Monk’s Mood*, striking, often unorthodox chord progressions push the soloist away from conventional devices and ideas and toward more adventuresome expression. Compositions such as *Brilliant Corners*, *Evidence*, and *Little Rootie Tootie* incorporate unique rhythmic motives and displacements that color the performances at times in odd and abstract ways. For example, in *Brilliant Corners*, the melody is played and then repeated at twice the original tempo, giving “the listener two distinct perspectives on the same idea” (Lyons 188). and providing the musician with a unique temporal frame as did *Blue Monk*. Monk’s

defamiliarization of form then whether it be melodic, harmonic, rhythmic or temporal, bears directly and necessarily upon the improvisation that usually comprises the bulk of a performance.

Yet the connection between the composition and the ensuing improvisation is much more than suggestion and inference. Monk's own solos provide the listener, and more importantly, the musicians he is playing with, an example of the symbiotic relationship that should exist between composition and improvisation in the performance of a Monk song. For as anyone familiar with Monk's music knows, Monk does not restrict himself to playing the written melody solely at the beginning and end of the song. He often repeats, develops, varies and incorporates the melody, or pieces of it, throughout his solo, effectively blurring the distinction between composition and improvisation. Monk's peculiar brand of thematic improvisation suggests someone who is continually composing inside of what is ostensibly an improvisatory process. This is even more evident in what we might call the intertextual Monk, that is, Monk's penchant for quoting himself. When Monk plays a line from *Misterioso* during the course of a solo on *Straight, No Chaser*, improvisation is invoking form, paradoxically, a form related (in that it is another Monk composition), yet apart from the formal environment that gives rise to the improvisation. This implies not only that composition and improvisation are fluid, but also that the forms Monk works with (his compositions) are at times perhaps even flexible (improvised?) variations upon themselves. The interrelatedness of Monk's compositions, their ability at times to apparently summon one another testifies to the fact that Monk never had to travel very far in search of materials. His repeated use of simple motives such as the minor second, which I will turn to

shortly, enabled Monk to create a thematic continuity, or better, a chain of signification throughout not only an individual song or performance, but across the entire body of his work, and by extension, the entire jazz tradition. While this can be easily traced throughout Monk's compositions as well as his own playing, it is not always as apparent in the performances of the musicians who played with Monk. Playing with musicians schooled in the bebop tradition, Monk perhaps found it necessary to push others in certain directions that might force them to pay more attention to context and re-evaluate their own approach to any given tune. Monk often accomplished this not only by defamiliarization as we have seen, but paradoxically, by familiarization as well.

While Monk certainly improvised for his own personal fulfillment, it seems that his playing was instructional as well, providing the other musicians with a model upon which to base their own solos. Monk has said that "jazz must first of all tell a story that anyone can understand" and this philosophy manifests itself in his emphasis upon the melody even during improvisation (Fitterling 64). "If you know the melody, you can make a better solo" is something Monk not only told musicians, but demonstrated in his own playing (Goldberg 28). As Thomas Owens observes "often his short solos would be theme choruses or theme paraphrase choruses instead of independent improvisations, and even in solos in which he strayed from the theme he normally returned to it during the final measures" (144). In teaching his compositions to musicians, Monk "preferred that [they] simply listen to the chord changes. But when they couldn't learn them by ear, he wrote them out . . . then he insisted on just playing it, *sculpting* it for them" (Emphasis mine, Gourse 150). Although Monk wanted musicians "to experiment . . . to be as free as possible and not be boxed in"



according to Rouse, his repetition of thematic and melodic elements in both performance and rehearsal points to his belief that perhaps musicians abandoned form too quickly in favor of more spontaneous expression (Gourse 150). When Monk said that he played the same songs over and over in order that "somebody might hear them," he might have said "in order that somebody might hear them *correctly*." For when asked by his manager Harry Colomby why he wasn't playing his new compositions during performances, Monk replied "I don't need new tunes . . . the musicians don't know the old tunes yet. They have to learn those first" (Gourse 197). A unique situation then exists in many of Monk's performances that further points to the instructional nature of Monk's playing. Unlike nearly any other small group with a front line of one or two horns, Monk quite often plays the melody in unison with the horn players. The effect is sometimes an odd one, particularly when the song is a difficult one or the musicians seem a bit unfamiliar with the music. With tentative horns playing just behind the beat and a confident Monk leading them, right on top of the beat, there is often a subtle displacement in the articulation of the individual notes, almost a brief echo effect much like what was done intentionally in the early 'sixties by Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry and other members of the "free" movement. While the result is interesting and even pleasing in an unsettled way, given that it occurs in situations in which the musicians are likely to have trouble with the music, it would seem that Monk's decision to play unison with the horns is both pragmatic and aesthetic. That is to say, he may be falling back upon a practice he learned as an accompanist, that of playing the melody line for singers so that they might find their way. Monk teaches through performance and the lesson always begins with form. In the performance of a Monk tune one is never

very far away from the melody. It remains as a trace, as the original writing on a palimpsest that is written over but never entirely erased because it is returned to, quoted, interpreted and reformulated throughout the performance before being re-composed at tune's end.

Given Monk's use of simple materials and his emphasis on repetition, it's strange in retrospect that Monk was seen as markedly different for much of his career. Yet, there is also an almost logical irony in the fact that it was Monk's concern with, and employment of form that made him seem unconventional. For as we've seen, in Monk's music itself, it is form that generates familiarity all the while displacing that familiarity in incremental steps. Central to Monk's use of form is the deployment of the local, the familiar and the knowable in the service of the new. As Martin Williams pointed out relatively early on, "Monk's pieces . . . are often unexpected elaborations, extensions, recastings of simple musical phrases, traditional jazz phrases, sometimes even clichés" (154). This method finds its counterpart in, and perhaps in some way stems from, the way in which Monk lived his life. Living in the same apartment for almost his entire life, in a city in which he did most of his performing, and surrounded by a relatively unchanging small group of family and friends, Monk, odd as it may seem, had a level of stability in his life, the likes of which most musicians could only dream of. At the same time, Monk's life was punctuated by "spell[s] of oddness," as Leslie Gourse charitably calls them (154). For all the structure and security a stable family and a familiar environment provided, Monk had his own moments of defamiliarization in which he became psychologically displaced, sometimes "making twitching motions with his arms, and then [saying] odd things that had no connection to the conversation" (Gourse 154). Where Monk

could sit, perhaps in his own living room surrounded by family, and yet be worlds away psychologically, there exists an interesting parallel in his music that suggests that Monk's was a living aesthetic, manifest not only in music by existentially as well.

Thomas Owens claims that "other than great craftsmanship, there is no single identifying feature common to Monk's pieces" (214). However, there is one element that, while not present in every Monk performance, reoccurs with enough frequency in such a variety of ways that it might be said to be a foundational aesthetic and compositional device. The minor second, an interval of a half step, is the smallest interval in western music. Monk's fascination with this interval is evident in his repeated employment of it as both a melodic and a harmonic device. Although, as Scott DeVaux observes, "Monk's harmonic language was centered around the tritone," that statement is true in general for almost all the musicians of Monk's generation in that tritone substitutions and the related use of the half diminished chord became defining elements of the new music (224). Certainly, Monk's use of the minor second as a harmonic element often can be seen as the result of tritone substitution, however; at times Monk made that interval the central motive of a given composition. Both early compositions *Epistrophy* and *Well You Needn't* feature a chord progression that alternates between two dominant seventh chords, a half step (minor second) apart. In *Epistrophy*, the alternation occurs within a measure, (C#7-D7), in *Well You Needn't* it takes place every two measures, (F7-Gflat7). Although similar patterns show up in many other Monk tunes, it is within these two that the progression is used to its greatest harmonic effect. The striking thing about the relationship between these chords is that although the root tones of the chords

(C#-D, or F-Gflat) are as close together on the keyboard as two notes can get, the scales generated by these chords are quite dissimilar. That is to say that only two notes in a C# dominant scale are present in a D dominant scale as well. Despite their proximity to one another, these chords are in another sense as far apart as is possible in that unlike most chord progressions, their relationship is based upon difference rather than shared materials. The challenge for the improviser on these tunes is to try and establish some sort of continuity across a harmonic landscape that goes from extreme to extreme. By employing altered scales or modal thinking one can find a common set of materials, however, those materials in turn suggest different and extended articulations of the basic dominant chords underneath. This task is further complicated by awkward keys these progressions provide. C#, in the case of *Epistrophy*, and Gflat, in the case of *Well You Needn't*, are uncommon and potentially cumbersome keys for horn players. With the exception of the truly great improviser, favorite patterns, riffs and ideas are not likely to fall as easily under the fingers of the soloist in these keys. Just as tempo forced Ben Riley out of his usual bag of tricks, so does this progression insist that the soloist find new materials and new ways of shaping them.

The irony implicit in Monk's use of this interval as a harmonic device is that although you don't seem to have moved very far at all, you are as distanced as possible. Again, Monk employs the local—a note a half step away—in order to defamiliarize, but in a fashion that allows the listener and the performer to maintain their bearings. Both chords being of the same type—dominant chords—they are parallel in the sense that any figure played over the first chord can be transposed and played over the second, creating a displaced, although perfectly

logical and satisfying repetition. In fact, that practice is common in the improvisations that have been played in these songs and the device of playing a figure and then repeating it a half step up, regardless of the chord changes, has become somewhat of a jazz cliché. The mirrored structure we have already seen in the larger architecture of *Epistrophy* is repeated then at the local harmonic level. In *Well You Needn't*, a similar situation exists in that the bridge of this thirty-two bar song is derived directly from the minor second relationship that marks the first two A sections. Picking up on and repeating the four note melodic figure that ends the A sections, the bridge moves up, and then down in half steps until it returns to the first chord of the A section. Essentially, the whole piece is an exercise in incremental repetition, the increment being the distance of a half step. Rather than a strict chord progression, the harmonic movement in *Well You Needn't* is more a case of “repetition and revision,” to use Henry Louis Gates’ characterization of a black aesthetic, and anticipates the “constant motion” device that began showing up in late sixties jazz and jazz fusion.

Monk employs the minor second in other ways as well, most notably as melodic device that articulates the blues tension between the major and minor third of the scale. To refer back to an earlier example, *Straight, No Chaser*, which “sometimes ends on a blues note, and sometimes resolves into a major third,” plays this tension for all it’s worth, providing both the darker and the brighter colors of the blues simultaneously (Gioia 243). Monk also incorporated the major and minor thirds of the scale into many of his pet phrases, particularly a repeated four note run that would typically end with two eighth notes, the minor third followed by the major. Additionally, Monk was known for hitting both notes at the same time, creating a bone-jarring dissonance that spoke of the inaccessible

quarter tone between the two notes as it momentarily blurred the overall tonality of the song. Although this type of dissonance became a trademark sound of Monk's and no doubt provided aural confirmation for those convinced of Monk's progressive bent, if not his eccentricity, Monk was in fact drawing upon the foundational materials of African-American music. It was an attempt to play the quarter tone between the major and minor third on Western instruments that led to the discovery of the blues scale. Playing the major and minor third simultaneously—the notes on either side of the quarter tone—is one way of suggesting that tone on the piano, of calling attention to its absence. Since at least the late 19th century musicians have been bending strings on guitars, flattening pitches on horns with their lips and shaping sounds on the harmonica so as to access blue notes. Because the piano does not offer the flexibility of pitch that one finds with a horn, guitar or harmonica, playing the major and minor third at the same time is the closest one can come. What Monk did that was different was to foreground the dissonance. Rather than temper the dissonance by couching the notes in a #9 chord and playing it with the left hand as accompaniment, Monk often played the notes in the upper register as a melodic element shorn of ornamentation—a distillation. We might then categorize Monk's practice here as an act of *re-familiarization*: Monk not only re-acquaints us with the blues roots of jazz, but brings us back to the inception of the blues themselves as well.

Laurent De Wilde makes the interesting claim that in Monk's piano playing "the left hand was classic, and the right was modern," going on to argue, "take away the left hand and there would be the Monk of twenty years later. Remove the right, and it would be back to the jazz of twenty years earlier" (20).

While this claim is certainly reductive, it does provide a performative example of the dialectical aesthetics manifest in Monk's work. As we've seen, the relationship between form and content, tradition and innovation, one note and another, is what Monk and his compositions constantly worked towards realizing. In light of this it is necessary to consider Monk as not only one of jazz' great innovators, but also as an aesthetic conservator as well. If nothing else Monk's music teaches us that the received forms and materials of jazz are only as limiting as the imagination with which they are put to use. To the extent that forms are conceptual and only manifest when articulated through performance which is itself improvisatory, they cannot be said to "exist" unless it is in the Platonic sense of "ideal forms." If so, then Monk's music is an attempt to trace the un-writeable, to articulate what cannot be said entirely, to sound the notes between the keys. When we talk about a jazz performance and ignore the formal properties in favor of the more emotionally satisfying elements, ironically, we are practicing the worst kind of formalism. To elevate expression and ignore the form that in part generated or at least delimited it is to be oblivious to process. Monk's music teaches us that form is necessary and good and rather than inhibiting the powerful, emotional aspects of the music, it is part and parcel of them. Form is motivation; performance is yet another attempt to improvise form that was already there.

### INTERCHAPTER 3

Many young folk go to college with at least a foggy understanding that they will call in to question any assumptions they might bring with them, that they will be exposed to new, and even radical ideas, that their world will be turned inside out and upside down, all in the service of a broadened, deeper, more complex and considered understanding of themselves, the world and their place in it.

Having successfully auditioned on trumpet and been accepted by the music department at Plimptom State College, I arrived the first week to find out that I was going to be a Tuba major because my “trumpet embouchure was incorrect.” More to the point, I had experience playing Tuba, and all the Tuba players in the symphonic band had graduated the previous year. So, I was the man . . .

At this point in my life I knew my parent’s record collection better than they did and although it remained and remains foundational in even spiritual ways, I had moved on. After nearly memorizing their *Bird with Strings*, I went out and got all Bird’s sides with Dizzy and Miles and wore them out. Bird lead me to Max Roach who hipped me to Sonny Rollins who pulled my coat about Monk who introduced me to Art Blakey who sent me in Lee Morgan’s direction (and I’m still there a lot) who *made* me hear Wayne Shorter who pointed me to McCoy Tyner who was playing with Coltrane who paid some dues with Monk who helped start all this shit with Bird and Diz.



The problem was I wasn't gonna make the motherfucking jazz band playing Tuba, "motherfucker" being a cherished part of my vocabulary at that point.

But there are such beings as jazz loa and they were on their game my sophomore year when a valve trombone turned up unexpectedly in the music department at Plimpton State. I already played trumpet and tuba, and trombone was half way in between so no sweat I figured. I commandeered it and auditioned successfully for the jazz band. The band's director was Mr. Lucky (I couldn't make up a name like that) and he had us reading some great charts: the Sammy Nestico arrangements for Basie's band, some old Kenton things, Buddy Rich charts, Thad Jones/Mel Lewis. It was a great learning experience, reading all that classic literature and getting my sight-reading chops up, but what shined my bell was playing second trombone. Since the lead player is required to play a higher and more stylistically integral part, most of the improvisation is left to the second chair--second book's the blowin' book Jack. We played tunes in odd keys, in different time signatures, and tunes with unconventional forms and I remember sounding really bad at times and knowing I had more chances and would eventually sound at least all right.

Early summer after my freshman year I happened upon DeBakey's Pizza parlor in Nastia where a group of older cats had a steady weekend gig playing some Dixieland, twenties tunes, and for lack of a better description, banjo music. One beer lead to another and I eventually began showing up with my tuba and sitting in. I got all the pizza and beer I wanted for free as well as a hands-on course in chord progressions and conventional bass lines. Although they played surprisingly well, no one was terribly serious and they were all fairly hammered

by ten each night so I had plenty of room and time to figure stuff out. We played our only real, true, paid professional gig when we were hired to play a political rally in the state capital, Canker, for Mel Pumpkin who was running for Gubbinal. We rattled off *Happy Ofays are Here Again*, *Hail to the Geek*, *God Bless Comerica* and oddly enough, *Pennies from Heaven* while Republicrats and Demicans alike mounted the stage and one another belting out slogans, the likes of “bully for you,” “how now brown cow,” and “good night mittens.”

Sometime during my sophomore year I decided that the music-ed program I was in was for chumps, stopped going to any classes that weren't music related, and spent most of my time hanging in my girlfriend's dorm-room drinking beer and listening to music. Thanks to the liberal air we were all breathing at the time, I was actually living with my girlfriend in her single room and the other women in the all-women dorm who knew thought it was as it should be.

I made it all the way through my junior year before, simultaneously, the good deans at Plimpton revoked my college license and my girlfriend tacitly ended our love affair by boning her way through the school jazz band, starting with the trumpets, I might add. One hot June day after I had returned to home for good, Rudolf Schmidt, the department chairman knocked on my bedroom door in my parent's house looking for the department's four-thousand dollar Miraphone tuba, and oh yeah, the school's concert tuxedo as well. I was listening to Mose Allison when he showed up--“What do you do after you've ruined your life/Where do you go/Who do you know/That will give you anything to go with/Good advice . . .” I let the old fart haul the horn and the tux all the way down the stairs, out the door and to the car by himself. Motherfucker

I went through a series of short-lived jobs in an attempt to *incorporate* myself into society in some sort of productive fashion. After cooking, washing dishes and cleaning booths in various restaurants I took a job as the assistant manager of the home improvement section at the local Grunts department store. Lou McKing, the manager of our department, only had the job because his father was in upper management. He didn't know jack shit about home improvement but he was an all-right guy. He played guitar, had written some randomly interesting folky originals and smoked weed. Finding and working with a guy like that in an otherwise culturally sterile, disheartening environment allowed me to retain some satisfactory sense of otherness, a sort of "I know how lame this gig is but I'm only here until I get my chops together" attitude. There was one memorable moment from that job. It occurred when Lou paged me over the store public address. When I picked up the phone in another section of the store, Lou assumed that the P.A. was off. He then said something to the effect of " hey Rusty, you wanna come down here, there's some fuckin' clown here asking questions about two-by-fours. I don't know anything about fuckin' wood. Help me out and I'll get you high later." You could hear laughter erupting all about the store. When I finally made it to home improvement he was all serious as if the shit never happened.

Twenty years later, I turn on my television and see Lou, one of the sales staff in the background of a commercial for Dylan Bellow Dodge, a local car dealership. Their ad features the entire sales staff singing, ala Donovan, "I'm just wild about Bellow, Dylan Bellow Dodge!" as a graying, slightly balding Lou McKing fronts the group, strumming his guitar and singing his heart out.

Too many for me.

Maybe it was just the store I was at, but all the managers seemed cardboard cut-outs mouthing clichés, ironically in their own individualized ways about “the economy,” and “sales figures,” and “product placement.” Retail wisdom seemed self-evident to me and although I wasn’t completely sure I wasn’t a fool, I figured it might be interesting to take my show on the road and peddle my ass as a full fledged manager. Within days I landed a job at Shadleys, the very store that had busted me five or six years earlier for ripping off records. I can remember a perverse pleasure in coming to work everyday. I immediately told all my friends that I worked there and encouraged them to come in and buy stuff. My buddy Kenny came in for a shop-vac. Although it went for fifty or sixty bucks, I broke out my price tagger and marked it down to four dollars. The word got out quick. I recall that Barry showed up looking for a deal on a gas grill.

“How much you wanna pay” I asked him.

“Ten dollars?”

“There ya go” I said, and sent him on his merry way.

Despite my individualized sales policy which went undetected the whole time I was there, Jay, the crew-cut store manager told me I was “an intellectual” because he caught me red-handed, reading Dante one day on break. What rescued me from that job, and probably jail-time as well, was a gig. Well, not really a gig, but a rehearsal for a gig.

I had been at the beach earlier that summer and heard a big-band playing at the little stage that was used for generally non-descript public concerts. All the cats (and kittens, I should add) in the band were around my age. I talked to the “director” when they took a break and found out that they were, for the most

part, one time music students from the nearby University. I knew this was a band I could play with, and wanted to play with, having no gig whatsoever at the time. I told the director, Shaydon Kule, that I was a monster trombone player (I was with a date), that his trombone section sounded good on ensemble parts, but that the soloists weren't playing shit (and they weren't). He invited me to rehearse with them the next week and when I did, despite my marginal sight-reading chops, I soloed well enough to put grins on the faces of most the other musicians in the band.

Let me qualify the previous statement. Almost everyone in the band was the type of band member we recall from school, only a bit more advanced. They all played their instruments with technique, skill and precision. What they lacked as a group however was dirtiness. There was no funk, no nastiness, and as a result, no one could blow shit when it came to solo time. Although I was still quite limited harmonically, I knew blues scales inside and out, and even if I misplaced them on many occasions, they were resonant within the band in a limited, although quite visceral way. Shaydon gave me the second trombone part to take home and learn.

Shaydon had booked a series of Friday and/or Saturday night gigs at ballrooms within a hundred mile radius and although the pay was fifteen to twenty dollars a night, it meant I was a working musician. When all the managers at Shadleys were asked (required really) to work an all-night inventory one Monday: I had to choose between the job and rehearsal. Adding to the dilemma was the presence at Shadleys of Rosemary Polenta, a girl I hadn't seen since grammar school who greeted me the first day on the job with a hug, and a kiss that featured a five second tongue-job that left me looking like I was

smuggling bananas. In anticipation of the all-nighter, Rose had told me in that husky voice of hers that there were lots of hidden places in the back she could show me. She had really large breasts and used to stand real close when we talked. Artists really do suffer. I went to rehearsal that Monday and was fired from my job.

My mother, of all people, hooked me up with a job shortly after that at Hendrix Electronics (another name I couldn't make up). I worked an eight-hour day gig Monday through Friday and geared up for weekends when I would get to improvise on five, maybe six tunes within a Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Woody Herman, Tommy Dorsey, *the big bands are coming back*, context for middle-aged to elderly folk who smiled constantly and unrepentantly in the haze of their gin and tonic, martini, highball-fueled journeys into nostalgia. Me and some other guys in the band were just as bad, always looking to get high—one gig found us grinding up crossroads in an old boy scout mess-kit and snorting them in between sets, telling ourselves that it was all part of the "jazz life".

The Hendrix job, unremarkable in its quotidian dreariness, nevertheless put me in a fortunate position, that is to say, positioned head to head with Ron Homes. After working in the stockroom for six months, the bosses at Hendrix decided I was capable of more than tallying daily figures on a calculator and filling orders for grommets, standoffs, shrink-wrap and number 5 panhead nickel screws. They made me a "Production Control Dispatcher" and gave me a desk on "the floor." My standard issue gray metallic, four-drawer, rubber topped desk was mated inversely to an identical standard issue desk, graced on occasion by Ron Holmes, the "Final Test" supervisor. During my first two or three weeks we would be at our desks at the same time maybe a couple of times

a day. It was pretty much “how are you,” “what’s up,” and “did those parts come in yet?” One day though, I sat down at my desk and caught the last few sentences of a conversation Ron was having with someone on the phone. His last sentence to the other party was “that piano had better be tuned.” He hung up and muttered “motherfucker.” Bolts of electricity shot through my body. I struck up my first real conversation with Ron and found out that he was a bass player.

Upright.

Jazz.

He told me about a jam I should come to, run on Sunday nights in Stumpton by a trombone player by the name of Paul Telmore. He also mentioned that he grew up with and was still tight with Phil Stilton, the legendary trombonist at Beserkly School of Music. “Call the cat up, tell him you know Ron and cop some lessons man.” All this was too many at once for me.

I held off on the lessons but went down to the Oasis club that Sunday to see if I could sit in with Telmore. I struck up a conversation with Telmore on a break and he called me up the next set for a blues in B-flat. I may have played on another tune that night, I’m not sure. What I do recall is that Telmore talked me into taking trombone lessons with him. I realized the first lesson with Telmore that he had little to offer me. He certainly had knowledge and ability, but he was just going through the motions for the fifteen bucks, knocking back drinks at ten in the morning and pointing me toward lame-ass method books I had memorized years ago. He only hemmed and hawed when I asked him about *improvising*.

Nevertheless, I soon became a regular at the Oasis. At first the guys would only let me up for one tune at the end of each set. It was always a blues tune. One of the regulars there, who eventually replaced Telmore as the horn player fronting the band, was Dino Belaggio, a Flugelhorn player. Dino took a liking to me for some reason and gave me things to work on each week. His rule was that I couldn't play unless I had worked on a ballad. If I wasn't quite ready to play the ballad, he would play it and then ask me on break what he had played on it and why. Dino was a self-taught cat and even if he couldn't lay out changes for you, he had a learned ear and true gift for lyricism. All the more schooled cats loved his playing and I figured out early on that Dino's playing was where I wanted to be. Dino became almost my advocate and introduced me to the other guys as if I was actually a serious player. That small gift I will never forget. I began hiping my friends to the scene and we collectively became in our own limited, backwater, New England white way, the new breed. The future of jazz. At least the future of jazz in Stumpton New Hampshire.

One of the guys my age who was checking out the Oasis scene about the same time as me was Jeter Stith, a sax player. We met at a session and traded the usual information about what drugs we had done and how hip we were. Nevertheless, it was readily apparent early on that we had near identical musical interests as well as the same jaded, ironic attitude and wry sense of humor. We became fast friends. At this point it was all about sessions. If there was a jam on Fridays in Nastia—we were there. Dino might have a thing in Canker on Sundays and might let us sit in—we would be there. Someone ran a session at the VFW the first of every month—we lived there for four hours. It was all about *finding a place we could blow*. Jazz gigs of course were preferred, but rare. Many times we



convinced ourselves that providing a set's worth of riff-based background for an R&B singer was certainly a fair deal in return for a couple of improvised choruses on a Gloria Gaynor tune.

One Sunday afternoon on break after sitting in at Jimmy Jacks, an upscale restaurant that featured jazz on the weekends, a gaunt looking fellow came up to me and Jeter and introduced himself as Pauly Prisoner, a guitarist in search of a horn section. He had a bunch of kick-ass R&B originals, he said, and was looking to put a band together with an eye towards fame and fortune etc. Prisoner rented a house with two other guys and it wasn't long before they moved out and Jeter and I moved in. Pauly's tunes were actually well conceived and the arrangements fairly inventive, although many years later I began to notice many of the "original" horn lines and rhythm riffs showing up in lesser known recordings of Aretha Franklin, Al Green and the like. The "Prisoner Band," as we were known, worked every weekend for nearly two years. In addition to catchy originals and classic R&B covers, we featured a three piece horn section that offered frequent improvised solos, if only over repetitive blues riffs. Nevertheless, this proved a winning combination at the time. We had a steady following that would show up wherever we played, do lines in the bathroom, and buy us beers all night.

Even if my heart's desire was to play jazz on a regular basis, the thought of playing any kind of interesting music full-time for appreciative audiences was quite alluring. What this particular experience provided me was an awareness that I was not just a horn player. For whatever reason, I ended up singing a couple of tunes—a Johnny Guitar Watson song, "Ain't that a Bitch"—and the old chestnut "Back in the USA". I also began helping to shape, if not harmonize or

write the horn lines and eventually put together an instrumental horn feature that we used as our opening tune. Working four, to five hour long, loud amplified gigs every Friday and Saturday night built my chops and gave me a solid confidence, if not a sense of prowess which in turn provided me with the balls necessary to approach a band I would have been intimidated by a year earlier.

\* \* \* \*

I saw the Bluetones the first time they came to Stumpton along with about twenty other local musicians. The word got out after the first night that a black show band from Boston was in town and they were smoking. They were nine pieces: three rhythm players, a three piece horn section, and three lead singers who fronted the band in tuxedos, stepping in rhythm and singing three part harmony reminiscent of groups like the O Jays, Spinners, the Miracles or the Temptations. Although their show was about fifty percent current rhythm and blues top-forty material, they played a variety of music from the last twenty years that ranged from James Brown to the Beatles. The show was incredibly tight. One tune segued dramatically, or smoothly into another, spotlights, strobes, and flashpots accentuated the drama or subtlety of the music, and all nine musicians moved as one to an incessant pulse that never let up entirely for an entire forty minute set.

The attraction of such a band to musicians in Stumpton was a combination of a number of things. The musicianship was impeccable and the overall production well conceived, so despite the mundane nature of some of the

material they worked with, they were really entertaining to watch. With the exception of Tazu, the Japanese trumpeter and a white trombone player, all the band members were black which gave the group collectively an exotic otherness not commonly encountered in overwhelmingly white, French-American Stumpton. Additionally, they were a full-time working band on the road. In their own regional way, they represented the world of professional music. It didn't matter all that much what type of music they played—they played it well, played it most every night, played it to full houses, and presumably played it in return for solid coin.

I went up to the guitar player during a set break, introduced myself and nearly fell down when told that the Bluetones were looking for a trombone player who could write arrangements because their current trombonist was leaving. The Prisoner band was playing a couple nights later when the Bluetones happened to have a night off. I told Garry the guitarist, and he said some of the guys would come by and check me out. I couldn't believe that this might actually happen. For me this was sort of like being signed by the Yankees. Home town loyalties are fine, but when the bigs call, you go.

The Prisoner gig came and went with no appearance of the Bluetones so I figured it actually had been too good to be true. However, a couple of days later the phone rang it was one of the lead singers, the leader and "owner" of the band who was referred to behind his back as "the chief." He gave me a time and location and told me to be there to audition. I found out later that five guys from the band had shown up at our gig but were denied entrance, ostensibly because they didn't have New Hampshire IDs. Apparently, in New Hampshire the Bluetones were welcome on stage, but barred from the dance floors.

I auditioned in the chief's garage with the six instrumentalists of the band, sandwiched between the chief's two vintage cars, a Corvette and a Bentley. When the three singers were not around, which was most of the time, Garry the guitarist organized or rehearsed the band as the situation required. When I first got there, in an effort to overcome my initial nervousness and insecurity, I talked some shit about being a jazz player, with the tacit understanding that that put me a notch above the average rhythm and blues player. Garry said "oh yeah? Do you know this tune?" He ripped off Charlie Parker's *Confirmation* at near the original tempo. I looked at him, probably with my mouth agape and he smiled, nodded, and said "that's right motherfucker, everyday".

Eventually he spelled the whole situation out for me. Brett, the current trombonist and arranger, was leaving for unspecified reasons. It was time to "change the show," which meant updating the songlist by adding new, top-forty material. Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album was just hitting the charts and the plan was to do at least four or five tunes from that record. My job then, in addition to playing trombone, would be to arrange tunes and adapt them to the instrumentation of the band which meant featuring a three piece horn section. The vocalists usually were able to work out their own parts, although occasionally they would ask for help.

Writing horn parts for simplistic, often cliched three or four chord pop songs is not a difficult task for anyone with a rudimentary understanding of music theory. It is something that any professional, working horn player should be able to do. However, I had some serious doubts. Although I had written arrangements for the Prisoner band, they had been conceived at my leisure, under little or no pressure. In the beginning at least, this looked like a production

gig. Also, for maybe the first time in my life I questioned my hipness. Going into any new playing environment it's only natural to be a bit apprehensive about your abilities relative to the other musicians. This situation, however, was transfigured by race, even if I didn't think of it in that way at the time. Though I didn't give much focused thought to the larger issues attendant to a white guy writing arrangements for a predominantly black rhythm and blues band, I was really worried that anything I might come up with would be square as rice chex and just as white. It was an imagined standard that I was operating against, but it probably brought the best out in me as an arranger insofar as I was constantly on the lookout for cliché and I avoided the sweeter harmonies at every turn.

Most of the new songs did not have horn lines in them so I found myself having to almost invent them. What I did in the beginning was to use background lines played in the songs by a keyboard or guitar as a starting point for a horn arrangement. With just a little bit of tailoring, these lines made for great horn charts and allowed me to knock off arrangements in a very short period of time. Once I had shown myself to be competent and we were past the rush of changing over the show, I would be able to try more adventuresome things.

Having overhauled the show, we were to spend two weeks in Boston at *The Flying Machine*, an upscale club atop the Holiday Inn at government center, and two weeks in Hartford before leaving on a three-month tour of Eastern Canada. The guys were excited because this club was "home," the place they always played at after coming off the road. Although from all over the country, most of the band now lived in Boston and *The Flying Machine*

was usually packed with friends and family. We arrived three hours before the gig in order to do a sound check.

I was a bit apprehensive about the show because although I had been rehearsing for two weeks, rehearsal had just been with the band. The three front guys had only stopped by once or twice during our rehearsals and never actually sang with us. As musicians and as people they were basically strangers to me. What's more, I wasn't quite sure who sang what songs and when. In a typical performance, the six instrumentalists would take the stage and introduce themselves as "The Bluetones part two". After playing three or four songs (usually sung by Baby Dave, the drummer), fireballs would fly suddenly from the flashpots, the strobe lights would kick in and the band would rip into *Eye of the Tiger*, the overly dramatic, eventually lame theme from one of the *Rocky* movies; "Ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together one time for the stars of our show...The Bluuuuuetones part one!"

The Chief, Kinny and Miles would come strutting out nodding thank-yous and blowing kisses as the band segued into a different tune, usually whatever was hottest on the charts at the time. I knew all the songs, but I had almost no idea how they fit into the show. And if that wasn't confusing enough, there was no set list. Although certain songs were always followed by other specific tunes, quite often the band would have to take its cue from what the front-men said to the audience in order to figure out what we were playing next. What had appeared a seamless production from the other side of the dance floor two weeks prior now felt like a game of musical chairs.

As soon as we took the stage and started playing, all fear left me. In a flush of comfort I realized that all I had to do was to keep my ears open and

play. My sense of ease lasted exactly eight measures—the length of the horn intro to our first song. Looking downward to make sure I didn't empty my spit-valve on my shoes, I noticed that everybody's feet were moving, and mine most definitely were not. Now this was far, far worse than those times in marching band. I wasn't simply out of step, I was inert. I knew that I should start stepping, but I just couldn't figure out the weird physical algebra I saw around me. The guitarist and bassist, on either side of the drummer, were moving their feet the same way, but their upper bodies were moving in opposite directions in relation to their feet and to each other. The taut, mechanical movements of Tazu, who was at my shoulder, seemed to bear no relation to what anybody else was doing. I decided the best course of action would be to finish the set like a professional (if only a lifeless one), quietly pack my trombone and head for the service elevator. In the meantime I would hide behind my mic stand.

When the set ended, just as we were about to leave the stage, Tazu said "it's just a two-step, man. Two steps to the right, two steps to the left, over and over."

After the second set, to my surprise the chief, Kinny and Miles all left. It seemed that except when playing at a new club, the front men only did two sets a night. The Bluetones-part two would typically play dance music for the rest of the night. As we approached the stage for the third set, Garry said "time to play some shit on the *real side*." I hadn't expected to do any improvising because the night I saw the band there were no horn solos. Five minutes into the set Garry abruptly yelled "Blow man! play your horn." We were playing the James Brown classic "Sex Machine" and as I began to play, a call and response pattern developed between the band and the people on the dance floor, similar

to that on the original recording: get on up/get on up, stay on the scene/stay on the scene, like a sex machine/like a sex machine. I was blowing hard, so hard that my tone took on a gritty, ragged edge—an edge that usually only came from my horn when I hadn't played in a long time. After a good five minutes I stopped from sheer exhaustion. My chops were like Jell-O, my knees were shaking, but I was high as things. Everyone on the floor seemed to be nodding their heads at me and clapping while they continued to dance. I remember thinking I had passed some kind of test and that I had played just about as well as one could in that situation. In the back of my mind, however, I knew that it was just a repetitive funk groove over one chord and that any satisfaction I derived would be short-lived and harder to come by the next time. What I had played was not jazz improvisation, but rather a string of, albeit funky, but nevertheless clichéd blues riffs.

When the set ended the bass player Eddie leaned over and said excitedly “you were playing some *shit*, man!” Miles Davis ain't never played any shit like that...you're badder than Miles.” That statement was so ridiculous all I could do was laugh like a stooge and say “thanks man”.

Later that night after the last set, we hung out and had a few drinks while the DJ played dance songs for the rest of the evening. An attractive black woman came out of nowhere and asked me to dance. Already feeling pretty good about myself and thinking that maybe this woman had been admiring me while I soloed, I lead her to the floor and started moving with confidence. After a few minutes I caught on to the fact that she would smile, if not laugh every time she looked in a particular direction. I looked to see what was so funny. Leaning up



against the bar, half pointing at me and howling with laughter were most of the guys in the band.

Two weeks later we were at The Boston Trading Company, the nightclub in the Hartford Sheraton. This was my first time on the road with the band and I learned quickly just how it was. Regardless of where we traveled, the main concern other than the show was hooking up with a woman you knew in town or finding one. Wives and girlfriends at home weren't part of the picture—it was all about “getting with the bitches,” a phrase I heard at least several times everyday I was with the band, whether I wanted to or not. As a result, I wasn't completely initiated or accepted into the band until that first week in Hartford when I was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of a young woman from, of all places, Stumpton. While I played host to her in my hotel room, a couple guys from the band stood outside the door for five minutes giving the Woody Woodpecker call.

The relationship between musicians and their female fans is a complex and sometimes bizarre one that really cannot be understood until you are a part of it. This is not to justify it, excuse it, or even valorize it; it needs no justification or excuse and it is not as non-musicians want it to be. At its core is loneliness despite, ironically, the germination of these relationships in the public eye. Both parties are cheated in the end. In many ways these trysts are not unlike the public, yet clandestine, furtive meetings of young homosexual men that Foucault has written about so compellingly—but you would have to ask my friend Walters about that, I don't read much academic shit.

The chief abruptly fired Hector the sax player one night for reasons still unknown to me. Hector had trouble with the parts anyway and his departure

allowed me to suggest Jeter Stith as a replacement. Nevertheless, the way in which he left the band was troubling. After the chief told Hector he was all done, the other singers and the bass player started calling Hector an asshole, a lame motherfucker and a piece of shit as they poked at him with mic stands to the point of bruising his face and drawing blood. They left him to find his own way home—we were in Hartford; he lived in New Bedford.

## CHAPTER 5

### IGNORING THE FATHER: BIRD HUNTING IN THE EARLY WORK OF JAMES BALDWIN

He is—and how old-fashioned the words sound!—something more than that, something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable. In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves.

(James Baldwin on “the terror of the human being,” *Everybody’s Protest Novel*)

James Baldwin’s early important works, the essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and the novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, have gone a long way toward establishing a critical frame with which many critics have examined the whole of Baldwin’s *oeuvre*. More specifically, until recently criticism has quite often implicitly taken the father-son dynamic these works suggest as a primary deep-structural element that underlies all of Baldwin’s work. A good example of this type of criticism is the essay “Fathers and Sons in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*” written in 1970 by Richard Wright’s biographer Michel Fabre. Fabre not only argues that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* represents an attempt at liberation [from the father] for Baldwin” (134), but also, that once Baldwin’s stepfather David died, Baldwin “projected on [Richard] Wright the image of a spiritual and fraternal father” (135). As a result, Baldwin is implicitly seen as progressing from

one father figure to another, negotiating these relationships discursively in the various texts he produced throughout his career. In that Baldwin's first novel is largely autobiographical, and Baldwin *was* at times discursively preoccupied with Richard Wright, the emphasis Fabre, and Baldwin's biographers David Leeming and W. J. Weatherby place upon the father-son relationship, if not the Oedipal complex itself, seems justified at first glance. Nevertheless, this shop-worn critical frame seems a bit too facile and certainly limiting, especially in light of the variety of performative roles Baldwin inhabited in his early years. The father-son model locks Baldwin and his work into a linear, almost causal paradigm of inheritance and rebellion, and that paradigm itself then precludes the consideration of a host of other relationships, both real and imagined, that existed both inside and outside of the texts.

As an alternative to the "constellation of fathers" (124) paradigm Fabre and others posit, I would like to suggest a more synchronic, interdisciplinary model that acknowledges Baldwin's role as an African-American *artist* within an active community rather than just that of a lone writer asserting his individual talent against the cold body of tradition. And here I need point out a second area of interest popular in criticism of Baldwin that often goes hand and hand with the father-son model. Early on, critics began examining the role the blues play in Baldwin's work. Writing about "Sonny's Blues" in 1970, John M. Reilly claims that "the basis of the story . . . and its relationship to the purpose of Baldwin's writing generally, lies in his use of the blues as a key metaphor." (139). The first-person narrative aspect of the blues is a natural fit with a critical frame (father-son) that views texts as antithetical. For although the blues draw upon a body of shared cultural experience and tradition, the blues utterance itself is monologic,

rarely entailing a response. However, as I will show later, what is really operative in Baldwin's work is a jazz aesthetic that while *rooted* in the blues, is nevertheless quite different and much more complex. The alternative reading I propose implicitly manifests a jazz aesthetic insofar as I assume that Baldwin's texts "sounded" within a plurality of other voices, all of which contextualized one another. Such a reading (a performative act in itself) will concern itself with a "constellation of brothers" rather than fathers and will find Baldwin negotiating with his present rather than his past, a process of self-contextualization as a means toward self identification. Following that argument then, we might claim that when Baldwin wrote "Everybody's Protest Novel" and then later "Many Thousands Gone," he was initiating a *conversation* with Wright, not writing Wright's epitaph. My reading will begin by considering a peculiar absence that marks Baldwin's accounts of his early years as a writer as well as the fiction Baldwin produced during that time period: the most dominant and in many ways terrifying African-American voice of the time, Charlie Parker. In imagining or reconstructing a relationship between Baldwin and Bird we have a means of tracing Baldwin's early development as an artist that might allow us to understand the process from which his early work arose.

At least as a teenager and a young adult, Baldwin was just as interested in becoming a jazz musician, painter, or an actor as he was in being a writer. During the years in which he wrote "Everybody's Protest Novel" and started writing what would become *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin was acquainted with many contemporary African-American artists, musicians and writers that congregated in Greenwich Village (Leeming). It is inconceivable that Baldwin was not aware of the revolutionary music being created in mid nineteen-forties

New York by Charlie Parker and others. The innovations that Bird, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, Kenny Clarke, Fats Navarro and others made in modern jazz were so shocking, and alienating for many, that the jazz world was hopelessly torn apart; some people embraced the new sound whole-heartedly, others dismissed the music as nonsensical “Chinese music.” For any young artist, particularly an African-American artist, regardless of the discipline in which they worked, Charlie Parker—“Bird”—would have represented the cutting edge of not only music, but black consciousness, social consciousness and aesthetic revolution as well. One could idolize or disparage Bird, but one could not ignore him. Four years younger than Bird, living or working in some of the same neighborhoods as Bird, whether first or second-hand, Baldwin was witness to the greatest triumphs and the most despairing failures in Bird’s career. Baldwin’s failure to mention his most important contemporary, one of the true geniuses in twentieth-century music, in any of his early writings or in any writings about his early years is a silence that must be dealt with if we intend on contextualizing Baldwin in a manner that constructs him as something more than just a father’s son.

While there are no accounts that place Bird and Baldwin together in the same room at the same time, the close proximity of the two in terms of culture, art and even geography is striking. In the early forties, during the time in which Baldwin was introduced to, if not educated about jazz by Beauford Delaney (Introduction x), the Baldwin family lived only a short distance away from both Monroe’s Uptown house and Minton’s where the early jam sessions that led to “bebop” took place. It was at these jams that Bird began making a name for himself. Ross Russel remembers that Bird “was fast becoming a legend in the

jazz underground. Musicians from traveling bands were steered uptown to hear him perform. They were amazed by his ability to improvise from any tune or sort of musical material . . . the legend began to proliferate” (141-142). In 1944, Bird cut a record as a sideman with Tiny Grimes and then made what is considered the break-through “bebop” album in 1945 with Dizzy Gillespie (Russel 167-168, 193). During the period between Bird’s first recordings in the early-mid forties and 1948 when Baldwin left for Paris, Greenwich Village was “a place generally associated with ‘artistic and social freedom’” (Jones, LeRoi 233). Jon Panish observes that “Charlie Parker’s participation in Village society was crucial to the establishment of the downtown area as a hospitable place for progressive African Americans because his legend as ‘patron saint’ of bohemians (both Euro and African American) provided the highest avant-garde endorsement of the village” (26). It was during this period that Baldwin not only lived in the village, but worked/performed at the Calypso, a Village bar and otherwise “favorite spot for artists, musicians, actors and writers in general” (Leeming 44). Although certainly a coincidence, it is entirely within the pattern here that Baldwin would leave for Paris in November 1948 and that Bird would follow him there six months later on his first European tour. Leeming’s biography tells us that once in Paris, Baldwin “settled into a bohemian life with little difficulty” (59) and that he was acquainted with many expatriates there including jazz musicians.

By the mid-forties Bird was already the dominant revolutionary-artist figure in New York, if not America. It’s important to recognize that the unprecedented musical innovations that Bird and others offered were accompanied by a fierce, uncompromising aesthetic that insisted that jazz be

regarded as an art-form of the highest order. This new jazz was difficult, dissonant, often frantically paced and almost entirely instrumental. This was not music one danced to or sang along with, but rather, it was music that was experienced on its own terms in that it foregrounded improvisation and technique to a much greater degree than jazz had done in the past ten to twenty years. Bebop musicians essentially reclaimed the sole rights to every part of the music and undermined nearly all claims to authority or appropriation on the part of the listener. This was done primarily by denying the listeners many of the props that music traditionally provides in order to make itself accessible: without simple, repeated sing-song melodies the uninitiated listener has no melodic reference points, little chance of remembering a theme that would invest him or her in the music, and therefore little sense of melodic line. Additionally, without lyrics there is no linguistic narrative to structure what is heard either; the listener is completely submerged in a non-discursive aural realm. The absence of repeated arranged phrases, except at the very beginning and end of songs, and the privileging of long improvised solos demand that if the listener is to make formal sense of the music, he or she must recognize form *as it is articulated*. Additionally, the listener is essentially at the mercy of the improviser who structures his or her solo in relation to a chord progression that is inaccessible to all but the most experienced listener. The chord progression is the deep structure through, with, and sometimes against which the improviser constructs an aural, personal narrative.

In sum, bebop reversed the hierarchies operative in much of the jazz of the past by privileging the musician over the listener, improvisation over form, and art over entertainment. The implications for all African-American artists



were profound. Bird and others showed that it was not only possible, but perhaps necessary as well for the African-American artist to create a difficult, *mature* art that was not beholden to any notion of entertainment. However, in doing so bebop narrowed its potential audience considerably. Such a complex, intensely personal artistic expression, at times seemingly devoid of mass appeal, radically redefined the artist's relationship to the larger community. Older masters such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Earl Hines were treated as royalty and considered cultural treasures by the African-American community in general. Bird and his contemporaries, although fiercely championed by a small but devout fan base, were initially ridiculed and sometimes scapegoated by not only jazz aficionados, but often times by the older musicians as well.

The new emphasis upon the musician and his or her art—what we might categorize as the autobiographical element of modern jazz—is apparent in the titles of many of the bebop compositions of the nineteen-forties. Titles relating to Charlie “Bird” Parker alone include *Ornithology*, *Chasing the Bird*, *Carving the Bird*, *Yardbird Suite*, *Bird Feathers*, *Bird of Paradise*, *Parker's Mood*, *The Bird*, *Bird's Nest*, *Bluebird*, *Bird Gets the Worm*, and *Charlie's Wig*. We can begin to see then an affinity between the modern jazz aesthetic and Baldwin, who wrote autobiographically all his life. Baldwin's first published short story (1948) “Previous Condition,” a “thinly disguised voice for Baldwin's frustrations” (54) according to David Leeming, suggests that Baldwin's early conception of himself as an artist was quite similar to that of his contemporaries in the jazz world. The story tells of a black artist figure named Peter who realizes that he has been “a kind of intellectual Uncle Tom . . . working for his race” (83). Disgusted with

white society, he leaves behind the Beethoven he is accustomed to listening to and heads uptown to Harlem where he intends to continue his drinking. Once he settles into a rundown bar, the character reveals not only an impressive familiarity with, if not knowledge of black music, but a preference for jazz as well. He immediately identifies "Hamp's Boogie," a jazz-blues jump tune which is playing on the jukebox. That tune is followed by "something brassy and commercial which [he] didn't like" (100); and here, given the time frame of the mid-forties, we might reasonably assume the song to be a Big-Band dance number, perhaps even something by a white band leader such as Glenn Miller or Tommy Dorsey. Finally, Peter identifies Ella Fitzgerald singing "Cow-Cow Boogie" (100). The story ends with one of the two women the character has bought drinks for asking "What's your story," to which Peter replies "I got no story, Ma" (100).

Peter's appreciation of and preoccupation with music is not matched by anyone else in the black community he seems to want to join at the end of the story. We infer that Peter is the only one in the bar making distinctions—perhaps even capable of making distinctions—between jazz and "commercial" music. Peter's artistic temperament and appreciation separates him from the community, arguably, a separation he tries to overcome by drinking and buying drinks for others. It is not so much that Peter has no story to tell; it seems that there is no audience that is willing or capable of hearing it. He seems perilously close to being caught in a repetitive cycle of alienation and self-abuse, his identity as an uncompromising artist at odds with his need to feel a part of something larger than himself. "Previous Condition" ends when the narrator essentially stops writing in order to drink. Although Peter implicitly gives up his art, at least

temporarily, the story also suggests that the only community possible for an artist is the one he creates with his art, an audience perhaps similar to Bird's who demand nothing from the artist except that he create. Peter realizes that there are not audiences out there waiting for his art, that to look for audiences or welcoming communities is to get the equation backwards. What he must do, similar to jazz musicians, is to create first and then let come who may.

How does this relate then to Bird's absence in the writing of a predominately autobiographical writer who has told us that he "grew up with music," that he "met musicians, and it was a milieu [he] moved in much more than a literary milieu," and most telling, that "when [he] was underage [he] was listening to the very beginning of what was not yet known as bebop" (Binder 190)? I would suggest that in addition to issues of the artist's relationship to the community, the combination of blinding genius and self-destructive tendencies exhibited by Charlie Parker offered Baldwin a profoundly ambivalent—tempting and appalling—model of what being an African American artist in the age of bebop might entail and more important, what it might cost. The chaos out of which art is formed appeared very close to the surface in the figure of Charlie Parker. Bird and the particular artist's life he led caused many to question whether or not being a true artist necessarily entailed riding the fragile crest of a wave that threatened to dash you at any time. While I hope to avoid as best I can reciting a litany of horror stories about Bird, a strategy that has been used repeatedly since his death to marginalize, discredit or tar Bird and to draw attention away from his undeniable and now foundational contributions to twentieth-century art, it will be necessary to touch upon a few elements and

instances that appear relevant to Baldwin's development and my argument in general.

We do not find Bird explicitly in Baldwin's early writing, but we do find re-occurring images of madness and self-destruction, often in artist figures. I would suggest that Bird is not directly identifiable because he is often split by Baldwin into a variety of subject positions that forestall the perhaps terrifying unitary presence of Bird himself. The compelling attractive/repulsive image of Bird and Baldwin's fragmentation of him can be traced, although it is filtered by time and displaced into a discursive construct, in the essay "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel" written in 1960. In a passage worth quoting in its entirety, Baldwin evokes an image of a man who "haunts [his] imagination" (147):

this is a man about as old perhaps as I am now who's coming up our street, very drunk, falling down drunk, and it must have been a Saturday and I was sitting in a window. It must have been winter because I remember he had a black overcoat on—because his overcoat was open—and he's stumbling past one of those high, iron railings with spikes on top, and he falls and he bumps his head against one of those railings, and blood comes down his face, and there are kids behind him and they're tormenting him and laughing at him (144).

Baldwin then tells us that this man "is important because he's going to appear in my [Baldwin's] novel. He can't be kept out of it. He occupies too large a place in my [Baldwin's] imagination" (144). The role this man will play in Baldwin's hypothetical novel is one closely aligned with Bird and safely distanced from the lead character which is Baldwin's autobiographical self. In speaking of hypothetical brothers and sisters, Baldwin tells us "I had danced to Duke Ellington, but they were dancing to Charlie Parker; and I had learned how to drink gin and whiskey, but they were involved with marijuana and the needle . .

. I want to remind you again of that man I mentioned in the beginning, who haunts the imagination of the novelist" (147).

The distinction between Ellington fans who drink alcohol and Bird fans who use heroin is an important one for Baldwin who will use a similar trope later on in "Sonny's Blues." For the distinction is actually three-fold, involving as it does the difference between the socially sanctioned practice of drinking and the illegal use of drugs, the difference between bebop and the jazz that preceded it, and the different generations that the two forms of music would attach themselves to. These distinctions however do not speak of a diachronic binary between past and present, inheritance and innovation or, as we might infer, father and son, but are instead the fragmented remnants of that tragic man who "haunts the novelist's imagination," the artist figure, the novelist himself, and by extension, Charlie Parker. For in the scenario presented in "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel" and others like it ("Sonny's Blues") the narrator is a drinker, not a junkie and he listens to Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, not Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. In practice, the narrator is much closer to the subject position of the father than the rebellious son, even though he is part of the generation that listens to bebop. By aligning the narrator with an earlier generation, the self-destructive, chaotic Charlie Parker of "marijuana and the needle," that is to say, the unstable part of the artist, can be split off from the whole and isolated. Yet, to do so is to fracture all artist figures and more importantly, the novelist himself, and create generational and musical oppositions that are unnatural, as the narrator's subject position indicates. For although Baldwin associates Bird with drugs, as opposed to alcohol, alcohol was just as much a factor in Bird's miseries and final tragedy. Bird drank and did

drugs just as his music, as innovative as it was, relied upon the past achievements of jazz musicians such as Ellington. Baldwin wants to separate and obliterate the chaotic element of self-destruction. Dichotomizing and categorizing it as “the needle” or “gin and whiskey” is just a way of exercising some sort of discursive control over it, a way of displacing or attempting to purge that which is undeniably inherent.

Although alcohol, and to a lesser degree, drugs are conspicuous in the stories of Baldwin’s “artists,” they are only specific manifestations of the general chaos that often spirals out of the individual’s control. As early as 1961 Baldwin talks about “the great psychological hazards, of being an American Negro” and admits that as a young adult he “really began to go a little out of [his] mind” (Terkel 5). Speaking in 1986, looking back on his early years as a writer in New York, Baldwin tells us frankly, “[m]y best friend committed suicide when I was twenty-two, and I could see that I was with him on that road. I knew exactly what happened to him—everything that happened to me” (Estes 275). The friend Baldwin refers to is Eugene Worth, a political activist who was incorporated into *Another Country* as Rufus Scott, a jazz musician (Leeming 46). In fact, Baldwin began writing that novel in earnest around 1956, about the time he himself had made the second of several suicide attempts (Leeming 118, 119).

When we consider “Everybody’s Protest Novel” then, which appeared less than three years after Worth’s suicide and well before *Another Country*, we can suggest a reading of Baldwin’s protest against protest that breaks with the rebellion against the father theories. Given Worth’s political activism and his untimely death (is there ever a “timely” death?), Baldwin may have felt strongly at the time that an artist’s life given to protest was indeed a waste. Nevertheless,

Baldwin's essay is very much a protest against the white world he is repulsed by in "Previous Condition;" as is Rufus later on in *Another Country*. This is apparent in his discussion of the "cage" and more specifically, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel. In light of his penchant for displacement, it's not a stretch to suggest that Baldwin attempts to resolve his own contradiction—protesting against protest—by displacing it as criticism of Wright's work. If that's the case, then Baldwin's criticism is not as much a break with Wright as it is an engagement with him that begins to blur the boundaries between authorial identities and change a father-son opposition into a fraternal dialectic.

For Baldwin's criticism of Wright might be read as a specific consideration of the essay's primary concern, the dialectic between form and chaos inherent in the process of art and the formation of identity. Baldwin states that "[w]e take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed" (154). He goes on to claim more specifically that "it is only this void, our unknown selves, demanding, forever, a new act of creation, which can save us—'from the evil that is in this world'. With the same motion, at the same time, it is this toward which we endlessly struggle and from which, endlessly, we struggle to escape" (154). Baldwin seems to be saying that imposing order on chaos entails placing oneself in the cage of form and it is only the destruction of the cage in the attempt to create a new one that has any redemptive power. To simply rail against the cage—to protest—is to stand still and let the cage define you. Baldwin's primary concern in "Everybody's Protest Novel" then is the nature of art and the grounds for its creation. Insofar as the creation of art begins with a reconsideration of form, all art contains an element

of “protest.” This artistic protest, however, is of a more sublime nature, far removed from the brute, literal protest that marks “The Protest Novel.” What I spoke of earlier as Baldwin’s strategy of displacement is essentially a move from one conception of “protest” to a much more articulate one—a manifestation of the very artistic process he elaborates on. Rather than accept or rail against the cage/form of “protest” extant in Wright and Stowe’s work and “bequeathed” to Baldwin, Baldwin reworks it. He is signifying on Wright’s work and in doing so invites a response/revision from Wright that will once again redefine the cage. This is a much more complex and interactive dynamic than that of inheritance and revolution. Nevertheless, critics seized the literal element of protest in his essay and used it to construct an Oedipal cage. Baldwin is reduced by critics to Wright’s “Captive Son.”

This is not to say that Baldwin wasn’t complicit at times in the creation of the father-son paradigm. Baldwin’s first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* relies so dramatically on that trope that to ignore it or deny it would be to seriously misread the novel. However, we need not consider it as the *Ur* trope from which all readings must ultimately come. I would suggest that rebellion against the father is actually a conservative move on the part of Baldwin that allows him to divert attention from more troubling issues, the most important being identification with/among/against his contemporaries. The father-son dynamic, one of the most commonly used tropes in literature, would have been immediately available to Baldwin, or any young writer for that matter. However, unlike most *Bildungromans* or *Kunstlerromans*, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* does not take us past the protagonist’s fourteenth year. Oddly enough, the novel ends not with the overthrow of the father, but right at the point at which that



struggle might begin. Furthermore, rather than a linear progression that demonstrates development, we get a collage of flashbacks that tell us more about identity and maturation in his parent's generation than they do about the protagonist, if that characterization can even be said to apply to John Grimes. Emphasis upon the older characters, whose stories take up at least two thirds of the novel, diverts attention away from John Grimes' future and the negotiations of identity that will occur amongst a constellation of peers. It is not surprising then that in critical discussions of the novel there is comparatively little discussion of John's peers: the older Elisha and John's brother Roy who much more than John, represents the chaotic, incestuous Oedipal element in the story. For early on the narrator tells us that "Roy sat up, and said in a shaking voice: [to Gabriel] 'Don't you slap my mother. That's my mother. You slap her again, you black bastard, and I swear to God I'll kill you'" (55).

Elisha and Roy parallel the split between Ellington and Parker fans in "Notes On a Hypothetical Novel," the initial opposition between the narrator and his brother Sonny in "Sonny's Blues" which I will turn to shortly, and even the difference in temperament between Paul and Michael, the two sons of Richard and Cass in *Another Country*. Elisha and Roy together reflect the dynamic tension between order and chaos, creation and self-destruction, conformity and innovation that John will have to negotiate as he forges his identity as a young adult, if not an artist. The fact that the writing and publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* would help establish Baldwin's early identity as an artist makes the absence of a story line after John's fourteenth birthday all the more noticeable and problematic. That is to say, the years in which Baldwin himself would come to terms with that tension and probably became aware of

modern jazz as well, are omitted. Where traditional readings see John as breaking away or at least distancing himself from Gabriel, who is a figure not unlike the man who haunts the novelist's imagination, the opposition between Elisha and Roy suggests that he has been split into manageable halves by the narrator that serve to compartmentalize the chaotic, self-destructive elements in one character, Roy. Additionally, Roy's behavior, while not resulting in death, leaves him wounded and ignored for the rest of the novel. Having isolated undesirable elements in Roy, the narrator simply disposes of him. Critics themselves have then mirrored the narrator's strategy by ignoring Roy's necessary role in the dynamics of identity formation: Keith Clark, for one, focuses his analysis on "the central trilogy—John, Gabriel, and Elisha," despite his expressed concern with "a constellation of interlocking male relationships" (134). The rather short novel ends, as I've indicated, just as trouble seems about to begin, trouble that arises from the split I've just delineated: although John seems completely given over to Elisha, his physical positioning on the stoop between his father and his mother also aligns him with his "other" brother Roy. John's future is unwritten, its potential ambiguous.

In Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country*, his strategy for dealing with the artist figure is partially motivated by the suicide of a friend, Eugene Worth as previously noted. Bringing the suicide to a successful completion textually in the character of a jazz musician (Rufus) again allows Baldwin to discursively displace self-destructive tendencies, and in doing so distance himself from them as an artist. In *Another Country* there exists also an interior displacement that is not only racial, but gendered as well. Although Rufus is dead less than a quarter of the way through the novel, his figurative presence remains central to the novel

and the characters that are left to inhabit it. The black artist, as seen in *Ida* and by implication Rufus, possesses a “sense of self so profound [that it] transforms and lays waste and gives life, and kills” (Country 254). This consciousness entails a tentative balance or even opposition between destruction and creation. For Rufus this is a fragile state he can no longer maintain. He stops playing music and begins a short and inexorable descent into destructive behavior triggered by his relationship with a white, southern woman that ends with his own annihilation. For white characters such as Vivaldo, Cass and even Eric, the legacy of Rufus’ death is a sense of guilt and responsibility that arises from their inability to prevent Rufus’ suicide. For Rufus’ sister *Ida*, the issue is knowledge. That Vivaldo and the rest were not fully aware that Rufus was in trouble indicates not only the gulf between black and white experience, but also calls into question the motivation behind their various relationships with Rufus.

The relationship then between *Ida* and Vivaldo, a white writer, becomes the site at which issues of race, knowledge and art continue to play out in the shadow of Rufus’ death. However, as with the novel as a whole, the relationship reduces to inertia. *Ida* realizes that her attempts to further her singing career by sleeping with Ellis are self-destructive and she presumably ends that arrangement when she confesses to Vivaldo. Vivaldo himself is still at work on his own “Hypothetical novel,” the suggestion being that he will not be able to complete it until he acquires the racial knowledge *Ida* seems to believe is beyond his grasp as a white person. The only artist figure in this novel full of artist figures that seems to survive as a functioning, productive artist is Eric, the white, ex-patriot, bisexual actor. Although beyond the scope of this essay, one might argue that Baldwin ultimately elides questions of race in his eventual focus on

Eric whose sexual marginality allows him to cross racial boundaries more fluidly than characters defined primarily by their race. Although Rufus is never forgotten in the novel, we do move farther and farther away from him until the point at which we reach his inverse reflection: Eric. Eric is both foreign and domestic, feminine and masculine, southern and northern and in light of his *tour de force* subjectivity, race gets lost in the mix.

In *Another Country* we find an attempt to incorporate in the adult character Rufus the identities we find split in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and other works. That this novel is as much about gender, friendship and the nature of love as it is about race makes it a bit more difficult to delineate Rufus as primarily a black artist than is the case in other works. Nevertheless, that does not preclude us from locating him within the discussion of artist figures in Baldwin's writing. During an early scene in the novel in which Rufus arrives at an after hours party we are told that "The horn of Charlie Parker, coming over the hi-fi, dominated all the voices in the room" (14). Rufus himself dominates the first quarter of this narrative until his own tragic death. And if the connection is not clear, between Rufus and Bird and all the brothers in and of this music, Baldwin gives us the image of a saxophone player, "a kid . . . about the same age as Rufus [with] a lot to say. . . wide-legged, humping the air, filling his barrel chest, shivering in the rags of his twenty-odd years, and screaming through the horn *Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?*" (8). That Rufus cannot maintain a stable subject position may be due to the significant, although underplayed fact that his gig has ended and he has no place to play on a regular basis. Without the sustenance that the music provides, Rufus falls to pieces.

The only time Baldwin comes close to reconciling the fractured identity he writes about repeatedly comes in the short story "Sonny's Blues," published shortly after Parker's death in March, 1955, although probably written much earlier. The story concerns two brothers: the narrator, an algebra teacher who equates jazz with Louis Armstrong, and Sonny, a modern jazz pianist and recovering addict who is just beginning to perform again after not playing for a year. Perhaps following the lead of the title, critics often read this story through a metaphor of the blues. Emmanuel S. Nelson claims that "Sonny and his brother find themselves and each other through the medium of the blues" (123); Marlene Mosher tells us that in "Sonny's Blues" and elsewhere "Baldwin . . . usually writes 'blues'" (119); Eleanor Traylor argues that John Grimes, Rufus Scott, Sonny and others are all "blues boys" (218). In most cases these and other critics go on to talk about the blues as something that "has promoted black survival" (Mosher 111), or "has developed out of the African's nightmarish experience in America" (Nelson 123). Their conception of a blues aesthetic relies upon the idea of a first person speaker relating an experience (usually of suffering) that is "typical of the community and such as each individual might have" (Reilly 139). The dynamic between the bluesman and the community is that of speaker and listener. However, "Sonny's Blues" seems to offer something more. Whereas the blues aesthetic features one voice that may or may not be answered, transferring a narrative to receptive listeners, "Sonny's Blues" speaks of several voices creating a narrative simultaneously: a jazz aesthetic.

When near the end of the story Sonny sits down to play for the first time in a year, it is not as the lone bluesman pining away, but as a member of a quartet, more specifically, as a member of the rhythm section. We learn that

“everyone on the bandstand was waiting for him and pushing him along” (137). This does not indicate that the music was centered around Sonny, or that he was being featured, but simply that he was expected to pull his weight, to play at minimum the supporting role that is expected of him as a pianist. It is Creole, the bass player who initially holds the group back. The narrator tells us that “he had them on a short rein . . . he was listening to everything, but he was listening to Sonny. He was having a dialogue with Sonny” (138). Keeping in mind that this is the first set of the night and that Sonny has not played with these musicians in at least a year, Creole is merely letting the group warm up and get familiar with one another. While he is having a dialogue with Sonny, he is of course having a dialogue with the other two musicians as well who in turn are conversing musically with one another. It is only near the end of the set that the band really begins to jell. The narrator observes that “the dry, low, black man said something awful on the drums, Creole answered, and the drums talked back. Then the horn insisted, sweet and high, slightly detached perhaps, and Creole listened, commenting now and then, dry, and driving, beautiful and calm and old. Then they all came together again, and Sonny was part of the family again” (139). While there certainly are conversations going here as the narrator suggests, what is lost in the linguistic retelling is the instantaneous, simultaneous nature of collective improvisation. Sonny’s musical voice sounds within and because of the other voices around him. A balance, or even tension is created between the individual and the group, between text and context, between cohesion and chaos. The jazz musician must struggle to create a personal statement within the context of other voices which immediately revise and

contextualize the content of that statement in ways unimagined originally by the individual.

This is markedly different from the more limited blues dynamic that critics are so fond of. Even though jazz is foundationally indebted to the blues, it offers a more complex model for the formation of identity and the creation of art. This is most evident when we consider the song the band is playing when they finally come together. In what is a typical misreading of the role “Am I Blue?” plays in the story, one critic refers to “Sonny’s rendition of ‘Am I Blue,’ a pop blues tune” (Jones, Harry L. 145). First of all, as we’ve seen this is not “Sonny’s rendition,” but rather, a group performance. Secondly, “Am I Blue” is not a blues tune, “pop” or otherwise. And although the melody line does feature some blue notes (as do many songs) it does not incorporate the typical twelve bar blues form, or even the less popular eight or sixteen bar forms, and it does not feature the common I-IV-I-V-I chord progression. “Am I Blue” however, is actually the exact type of thirty-two bar song that bebop musicians might perform. One of the more interesting elements of bebop was its appropriation of materials. Jazz musicians have always relied heavily upon the American popular song, drawing from Vaudeville, Tin pan alley, Hollywood musicals and Broadway revues as well as more traditional sources and Bebop musicians were certainly no exception. The thirty-two bar form in its many permutations, was, with the exception of the blues themselves, the favorite vehicle for improvisation among modern jazz musicians. This is not to say that one could not play the blues in such a song, for the blues always seem to show up in some form or another, only that it is not necessitated formally. The form and feeling in this type of song is markedly different from that of the blues. The irony then, which surely would

not have been lost on Creole, Sonny and the others is that the literal answer to the musical question "Am I Blue" would be no, at least within the popular context the song was usually related to.

"Sonny's Blues" suggests that perhaps the narrator is moving towards a more complicated understanding of the artist's identity and with that comes a willingness to deal more directly with the tragic artist figure. During a revival meeting on the street in which one of three sisters is singing, the narrator says of the crowd "not one of them had been rescued" and then goes on to observe what is now a familiar dynamic: "the woman with the tambourine, whose voice dominated the air, whose face was bright with joy, was divided by very little from the woman who stood watching her, a cigarette between her heavy, chapped lips, her hair a cuckoo's nest, her face scarred and swollen from many beatings, and her black eyes glittering like coal. Perhaps they both knew this, which was why, when, as rarely, they addressed each other, they addressed each other as sister" (129). Here again we find the same type of split we have already seen between Elisha and Roy, the narrator and Sonny, and gin and junk. However, there is a certain communion between the evangelist and the haggard woman evident in their near tacit resolve to go on with the performance despite the recognition that no one's soul is saved. The illustration of collective performance as a strategy for dealing with the present is of course apparent in the jazz performance and this is why Sonny is enamored with the woman's singing voice. His laughing comment "but what a terrible song" (130) is telling in a number of ways. Sonny recognizes that it is the performance, not the formal structure that is important. He also implicitly suggests that the music of African-Americans is "terrible" in the sense that it was, and remains, a means of



communication and protest, a source of sustenance, and a strategy for survival necessitated first by the brutal oppression of slavery and then by the continued pervasiveness of racism. The woman's song and others like it convey an experiential truth about the history of African-Americans in America. As we've seen, in his own way Sonny will play a "terrible song" himself later that night.

Acceptance of Sonny by the narrator entails at very least a willingness to listen to him. As the narrator puts it, Sonny "and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen" (139). Becoming an active listener involves sharing a portion of that risk—acknowledging the "terrible song." The narrator is able to consider this in a meaningful way for the first time while listening to Sonny. The band begins to play its first set and the narration changes to the present tense. The narrator tells us "All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations" (137). The narrator argues that listening to music for most is quite often a solo affair in which the listener, perhaps selfishly, employs, or imbibes in the music within a personal frame of reference, in effect cutting himself off from the cultural, if not spiritual source of the music. However, as the band continues to play the narrator also realizes that "the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air" (137). The imagery here is almost biblical and the creative act is something profound, awe-inspiring and life-giving. The narrator's portrayal of the musician here seems an elaboration upon or even condensation of his experience earlier that day involving the

evangelists, Sonny, and the “terrible song.” Conceived in this light, the narrator begins moving towards an understanding of what has been missing and what has been lost in the act of listening .

The narrator’s epiphany arrives when he concludes that “What is evoked in him [the musician], then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours” (137). The switch to the present tense finds the narrator in a situation comparable to Sonny in that as he listens to the music a thought process is triggered that takes him to perhaps unexpected places just as Sonny’s improvisations take him into unknown waters. The word “then” in “What is evoked in him, then, is . . . ” allows us to witness the narrator moving from one thought to another, his awareness growing and building upon itself not unlike the unraveling of an improvisational solo. The narrator sees that the musician’s art is to shape and channel what is evoked in him—that “terrible” song that “has no words,” a role much like that of a prophet. The narrator’s role is to first really hear the music, and then to bear witness by giving it voice, language, so that others might find access.

It seems that the narrator accepts that he is “in” something, that he is a link in a chain of cultural and historical custody, the strength of which is the principle of reciprocity. In fact, it is reciprocity that lies at the heart of the jazz performance itself. Even at the end of their performance, when Creole steps back to let “Sonny speak for himself” (140), Sonny’s is only a voice among others that has assumed the lead for the time being. We are told “Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others” (140). The narrator realizes by story’s end how the performative jazz dynamic works and

its cultural and personal significance even if he is not a musician himself. There is role for him to play. He buys his brother a drink, which appears to be shaking over Sonny's head "like the very cup of trembling" (141). The drink itself, scotch and milk, is common among jazz musicians and one favored by those with sensitive stomachs, recovering addicts and long time heavy drinkers. The milk and scotch bring together, however tenuously, the noble and self-destructive elements we have seen manifest in many of Baldwin's characters. It holds both a terrible knowledge and the promise of salvation. It is a volatile mixture, contained successfully perhaps only up in that circle of light on the bandstand with other musicians present to watch it. The narrator has observed that the musicians had been "most careful not to step into that circle of light too suddenly: that if they moved into the light too suddenly, without thinking, they would perish in flame" (136). The stage an altar, the cup a holy grail of sorts, both the old and the new testament gods are evoked as the musicians make sacrifices necessary for the redemption of the listeners. In sending Sonny the drink, the narrator partakes of communion with his brother and in doing so signals his willingness to share the risk and take responsibility for a part of his brother's life even as it scares the hell out of him.

Baldwin eventually reached a point when he was able to acknowledge Bird, although it's not clear when—most likely after Bird died in 1955, a time in which Baldwin began thinking about *Another Country*. For Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* is dedicated to Bird and other musicians, and Baldwin became friends with many musicians who performed with Bird including Max Roach, Dizzy Gillespie, and most important, Miles Davis, an ex-sideman of Parker's and one of the few musicians who shared Bird's addiction

but managed to beat it. Reflecting on bebop in particular and jazz in general, Albert Murray tells us

It is a statement about confronting the complexities inherent in the human situation and about improvising or experimenting or riffing or otherwise playing with (or even gambling with) such possibilities as are also inherent in the obstacles, the disjunctures, and the jeopardy. It is also a statement about perseverance and about resilience and thus also about the maintenance and equilibrium despite precarious circumstances and about achieving elegance in the very process of coping with the rudiments of subsistence (251).

Perhaps denying Bird, who seemed to embody the very idea of “precariousness,” was necessary in order for Baldwin to maintain his equilibrium as a young artist. Bird was such a daunting, and possibly frightening figure that he may have been one of the “obstacles” or “disjunctures” with which Baldwin had to deal. In Baldwin’s last interview, conducted by Quincy Troupe in 1987, Baldwin seems close to accepting the community as well as the cost involved with identifying oneself as an artist. Reflecting on his close relationship to Miles Davis, who was tutored by Charlie Parker during Baldwin’s early years as a writer, Baldwin tells us, “I don’t think Miles thinks of me as a writer. He knows I’m a writer, but he doesn’t look at me that way. He doesn’t look at me that way at all. I think he thinks of me as a brother, you know? In many ways I have the same difficulty as he has, in terms of the private and public life. In terms of the legend. It’s difficult to be a legend. It’s hard for me to recognize *me*” (189).

#### INTERCHAPTER 4

Jeter joined the band the night we left for Quebec without ever having rehearsed with us. He listened to tapes and looked over the charts on the way up to Canada. Our first week was at Chez Degobert in Quebec city. We were treated like rock stars and played to a standing room only crowd every night. People actually asked us, in broken English, if we knew Michael Jackson, or Huey Lewis, or Prince personally. Fans bought us drinks all night long, offered us drugs and sex and returned every night as if they had no other lives. The other side of the story involves six musicians, a lightman and a soundman sharing two small, roach infested rooms with little or no heat while the lead singers slept in bed and breakfasts or inns. We were never really paid; but rather, when we complained we had no money to eat with, the chief would toss us ten or twenty Canadian and tell us to make it last. Jeter and I learned quickly how to cadge food, money or drink from our admirers and where the best and cheapest poutine was in every town we played in.

We played in small and medium sized towns, five days a week with a matinee on Sunday, for one or two weeks before moving on to the next. Victoriaville, Thetford Mines, Cap de la Madelaine, Trois Rivieres, Sherbrooke, Levis, Drummondville, and countless other towns all seemed to have two things in common: a nightclub and a strip club; and interestingly enough, the strippers worked town to town just like the bands did. Two women I remember fondly, Nadia and Minot, worked the same towns we did for about a month and shared housing with us—I'm not really sure how, or why it worked out that way. In the

true spirit of professionalism, we would go see each other's acts on our nights off.

After a couple of months in Quebec things were starting to wear thin. We never had any money, there was nothing to do in these backwater towns during the day except walk around trying to pick up a few more French words, and the public wasn't quite as adoring out in the country as it was in Q city. In the little towns no one spoke English it seemed and fights would break out in the club almost every night, sometimes with hockey sticks, really. More important though, it had become quite clear that the chief was borderline psychotic. At least once a week, with no provocation, he would lash out at a particular band member for no apparent reason and blame him for everything that was wrong with the band—real or imagined, mostly imagined—and do so in front of the whole band. Through these outbursts I was able to determine the alliances in the group. The other two singers and Eddie, the bass player, were loyal to the chief and would go so far as to fuck you up if the chief said he wanted it done. Garry and Baby Dave were neutral and could afford to be. At age sixteen, Dave had been approached by Donna Summer who wanted him in her band. His parents wouldn't let him go with her, but had allowed him to play with the Bluetones when he turned eighteen. Dave could play with anyone, and even if he didn't quite realize it, the chief did and so he didn't mess with Dave. Garry was a graduate of Temple University, a former golden gloves regional champion and a former student at Berklee School of Music. He had options most other guys didn't.

One day while working on a new arrangement, I realized that I seemed to be the only one in the building. I went next door, into the club, and found Jeter

standing in the middle of the stage with three guys up close in his face threatening him. I asked what was going on and everybody chilled out immediately as if nothing was happening. Later, Jeter told me that the chief had been there and started things by claiming that Jeter was “fucking up on stage.” Miles, Kinny and Eddie took over the interrogation and the chief left. Two days later it was my turn. Right after a Sunday matinee, with members of the audience still in attendance, the chief started screaming about me stealing ideas from him and putting “fucked up jazz shit” in the horn parts, all of which was untrue—at least for the time being. From that point on Jeter and I had as little to do with the other band members as possible—except for Garry and sometimes Dave.

I started experimenting with my arrangements figuring I had nothing to lose. Frustrated by the material I had to work with, I began putting bits and pieces from bebop heads into background lines. That grew tiresome so I started trying whole tone and diminished scales over dominant chords, using dissonant voicings—seconds, tritones etc. Sometimes I got caught and the chief made me change it, but unless it was a Bluetones part one feature tune, he wasn't listening. Garry, however, had a jazz background and was all for whatever I tried, even going as far as to change his voicings or chords to fit the changes I made. I wrote a transition piece that had the trumpet and sax playing the Brecker Brothers' *Some Skunk Funk* against the trombone and guitar playing *Freedom Jazz Dance*; I used a twelve tone row for an opener; and I took a stab at bitonality on Elton John's *I'm Still Standing*. I had no idea what the fuck I was doing but it was fun not knowing. A trumpeter friend of mine known as “The Prof” came by one

night we were in Boston and said to me after a set, "you're writing some heavy shit man. I don't really like it, but it's heavy man, heavy."

A profound change had occurred while we were gone those first three months. We had a couple weeks off when we got back so Jeter and I went looking for jam sessions, or anywhere else we could play something besides Bluetones repertoire. Apparently the word had gotten out about us being with the Bluetones and cats who previously wouldn't give us the time of day were inviting us up on the bandstand, with introductions that included the likes of, "privileged to have with us tonight," and "currently performing with the Bluetones," or "just back from a three month tour." The most interesting thing about our new reputations though was how they were attributed. Although I can't point to any specific remark anyone made, many people seemed to assume that we were far better musicians now simply because we were playing in a "black band". Some guys would ask us "what the brothers were really like," or if "they treated us like shit because we were white." The only musicians who didn't ask these questions, make assumptions, or really even care, were the real jazz musicians we knew, black and white. Their attitude was best summed up by something the pianist Dub Frazier said to me one of our times back from Canada: "why are you wasting your time playing that tepid shit. You can't learn nothing there. Respect yourself as a musician man!".

Nevertheless, we went back out on the road a few more times on shorter tours and managed to keep our distance from most the band, strange as it might seem. The chief called us "separatist motherfuckers" a few times, but I'm sure he was happy with the arrangement. This wasn't really about race, even if that became a convenient excuse at times. Although he certainly was a snap case, he



was also all about manipulating people to his own (usually financial) advantage. We did our jobs and stayed out of the way—stayed out of the way of his little cocaine trade he had on the side and the numerous mistresses that his wife (who was the band's manager) would grill us about whenever we got back from the road. November came and Jeter and I went out on what would be our last tour with the Bluetones.

It was the week of Thanksgiving and we were in Thetford Mines, Quebec in the middle of a blizzard. The club we were at was attached to a vacant motel on a lonely stretch of road near the asbestos plant, two miles from town. The first week we played Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights without a single person in the club. Of course, since we were rarely paid, it was hard to tell what was a paying gig and what was a rehearsal. I remember on one of those nights going into the lobby in between sets, sitting down and watching Bill Murray in *Stripes*. On our day off, Monday, Jeter and I decide to thumb into town and find a liquor store. We got there easily enough and bought ourselves several bottles of Canadian Whiskey. The way home nearly killed us. It had been snowing off and on for the last sixty-three years it seemed and when I stepped off the barely plowed road to let a car pass, the snow came up almost to my neck. No one would pick us up and eventually we knocked on someone's door and begged to be let in before we froze to death. The woman spoke no English but was able to figure out what was going on. She made us some coffee and let us warm up for twenty minutes or so before we went back out. We were out there walking for about a half hour when one of the Bluetones vans came up over the hill and passed us with the horn honking.

Our last night in Thetford Mines was a Saturday and Jeter and I decided to celebrate in between sets by going outside and smoking a joint. As we passed by the window of the chief's room, one of us accidentally knocked off a jar of mayonnaise that was chilling on the sill. Jeter said "fuck it" and we kept walking until we heard a door open and someone yell "who knocked my motherfucking mayonnaise off the window, motherfucker!" Jeter said casually, "sorry, man," but the chief was about to burst a blood vessel. In no time the chief's henchman were there, in our face, threatening to fuck us up because we fucked with the chief's mayonnaise. We all most certainly would have come to blows if Garry had not reminded us, when he got there, that we had a show to finish. The ride home from Quebec the next day was long and scary, to be honest. Jeter and I were spiritually dead, and we would have left the band for good once we got back to the states except that all our equipment was brought directly to *The Flying Machine* where we were playing that next Wednesday.

Jeter and I were sitting at a table on break after the first set Wednesday when Garry came over and sat down. He said, "when you leave, take all your shit and don't tell anyone you're going." We told him we weren't thinking about leaving, but he knew. He told us that about a year ago he gave the Bluetones his notice and they had threatened to keep all his equipment and fuck up Baby Dave just to show him how serious they were. After the last set we left for good. Quietly. About eight the next night, as Jeter, myself and my girlfriend sat eating a spaghetti dinner, the phone began to ring. Kinny called first and I told him we quit and hung up. Twenty minutes later it was Miles. I told him to fuck off and hung up. Then the chief himself called. I hung up once I heard him screaming.

We were haunted by the idea of that guy for months. I think we really believed he might be looking for us for a while there.

I lounged around my girlfriend's apartment for several months watching cable television, which was new at the time, and picking up day work here and there through Manpower whenever my girlfriend asked me if I was going to do anything with my life beside watch *I Dream of Genie*, *Leave it to Beaver* and *Sanford and Son* reruns. One such job involved putting warning stickers on packages of light bulbs. After the first day my fingers were literally raw and I had to wear gloves when I went back the next day. No matter how much weed I smoked on break or how much I drank at lunch, I couldn't last longer than a week. The next gig they gave me was working a drill press—pulling a lever continuously for eight hours. For fear of drilling holes in my hands I had to work that gig sober and as a result I could only hold out a day or so. Finally I got a gig as a maintenance man at a circuit board plant. I got to do mildly interesting things like fixing the hinges on fire doors, moving file cabinets and putting up partition walls. The plant closed though, so reluctantly I went to work for my brother and father in the cabinet shop. Meanwhile, I looked for any way I might support myself again as a musician.

I got my hands on an electric bass guitar one day and started learning how to play. At this point I already played a couple other instruments with mixed success, had a solid understanding of at least basic theory, and knew how to read bass clef from my lost years as a tuba player my first go round in college. It was just a matter of teaching myself the correct fingering, performing rote exercises and building up finger and wrist strength. My goals were quite limited

and practical: I figured I could easily learn bass well enough to play Rock-Top-Forty-G.B. gigs and make some cash when the jazz gigs on horn were scarce.

I spent a lot of time playing along with the radio, learning pop tunes and in turn the standard licks, progressions and styles that dominated much of what passed for “new” music on the airwaves. When I reached the point at which I could play most anything on Top-Forty or Classic-Rock radio (which isn’t saying much, believe me), I went looking for a band.

The very first audition I had was with a band that called itself *Max Planck*. They had some very loud, occasionally interesting originals, two of which we rehearsed over and over for at least a couple hours. Although I’m sure I played the bass line correctly, the drummer and guitarist (this was to be a power trio) felt something was missing in my presentation. Half way through the evening they plugged me into a *hundred megaton Galaxy amp* or some such shit they had rented from the local music outlet and told me to let it rip. The sheer power was cool for a while but inevitably it became tiresome and I grew concerned about long term hearing loss.

We broke for beers and bongos and the drummer asked me with a hipper-than-thou demeanor “so you know why the band’s name is Max Planck?”

“He was the quantum mechanics guy, right? During Einstein’s time?”

“This guy is flipping me the fuck out” the drummer said in animated fashion, pinning his index-fingers to his forehead.

Shortly after that, I packed my shit quickly and left, with vague apprehensions of guns about the house.

A friend at a local music store reminded me that the place to find a band was the in *The Boston Phoenix*. I picked up a copy and sure enough there were at

least a dozen ads for bass players. The one closest to my speed read “Top-Forty-Show-Band seeks professional bass player with vocals to play regularly in the New England area.” I was a bit wary about what they might mean by the “professional” qualification as regarded bass but figured if I was asked about where and with whom I had played I could always name some Bluetones gigs I had done, leaving out the instrumental specifics. I was pretty confident I could cut a show-band gig on bass at that point.

When I called in response to the ad, a guy named Stu answered who immediately asked me how long my hair was. I told him I wasn’t sure but it was in a pony-tail that came about half-way down my back. He then asked in rapid succession about my height, my approximate weight, my age, how I got over with women and if I had any skin problems. He explained to me that “image comes before sound” and that “an audience is won or lost when the band walks onto the stage.” I told him I had a *hundred megaton Galaxy amp* but sensed that my lack of get up and go had already lost me the gig. I was really just going through the motions though. I wanted to make my living as a musician but I had little heart left for packaged music. Amidst a desolate, barren jazz landscape, I yo-yoed between thinking I could give up music and find something else that might satisfy my soul and telling myself that I just hadn’t found the right situation yet—maybe life on bass guitar would be different.

I finally hooked up with a bunch of guys who rehearsed in St. Benardsville. I don’t even remember how I heard of them, but I went over to the drummer’s house where they rehearsed, jammed with them on some classic rock tunes, and was informed that I “got the gig.” Now that I had the gig, I decided not to tell them that I had only been playing the instrument for a few

months and had never really played bass with other musicians—it didn't seem relevant. This was an ideal situation in a limited sort of way. They had five or six tunes down and were looking for more. I had any number of tunes I had always been dying to play in my more nostalgic moments. It wasn't jazz or anything remotely serious, but it was work and practice, both of which I really needed on bass in a group situation.

By "dying to play" I mean that there were, and still are a bunch of rock/pop tunes that were/are meaningful in shallow ways at some point in my life. These are the tunes we play air guitar to, sing in the car with, quote to effect at the exact right, light moment, tunes we've remembered and hung on to, sometimes desperately, sometimes ambivalently in those inevitable, unaccountable moments of abject spiritual poverty. Shit, if it felt good in the shower to sing these songs, it would be so much heavier to actually perform them with a band in front of people

The first song I brought to the band was Tommy James and the Shondells' *Crystal Blue Persuasion*. Now, the simple two-chord, major-seven sound is appealing enough in its own lounge-act kind of way, not to mention the vague Latin flavor added by the congas and the churchy organ; but the lyrics suggestive of the rapture give the song, paradoxically, a freshness and a conventionality that simply *charges* the listener—or at least the song fuckin' charges me. The guys in the band initially took the tune as just another generic song—fit to play, mainly because we were all able to physically play our parts. However, having successfully introduced marijuana to the band my second night (although I think the guys were sand-bagging me) I made an impassioned speech about how the tune was really heavy for me when it came out (I was

twelve then) and has since haunted my musical imagination (which I admit is true). It was important that we take the tune seriously. After that we did the song every night and when I sang the lyric "Maybe tomorrow, when he looks down. Every green field, in every town. All of his children, every nation . . ." everyone in the band would nod knowingly at me. Once, Marty the guitar player even said "right on."

It was through rehearsing this and then many other tunes that I learned a terrible lesson about American Rock and Roll bandhood. Having played in a variety of professional working bands as a horn player, I was accustomed to either sight-reading, or knowing my part before I got to rehearsal and expecting that the other musicians had learned their parts as well. American rock bands work out of a completely different aesthetic, however, and it really is an aesthetic in its own hamhanded sort of way. The idea in most cases is that the band learns tunes together by rote. An example: we wanted to play the Pretenders tune *Mystery Achievement* so we all sat down in the living room in front of the stereo with our instruments and began playing along with the record. I suppose the idea was that at some point we would have our parts down well enough to go back downstairs and play the tune as a band. I felt like I was in pre-school. When we did go downstairs to try the tune, the mindset was that we would continue to rehearse until we had it down. I suggested that we all take copies of the tune, learn our parts at home and come to rehearsal and knock the fucker down, but someone in the band said "no, that's fucked up, that's too much work".

The point is, in blunt terms and in no disrespect to the thousands of bands trying to pound out a career, that the repetitiveness and perhaps even the sheer

drudgery of day after day rehearsal of increasingly familiar materials is first of all going to engender a competency in even the most anemic of bands and at best, instill the type of camaraderie that arises out of twelve-step programs, union halls, or a roofing crew. It is through this almost medieval process of rehearsal that a rock band really becomes a "band" if it becomes anything at all. All exceptions granted, of course.

A well known spray-painted sign on a wall outside Berklee School of Music used to read "Jazz took a shit and out came rock and roll." So much for aesthetics.

We ended up playing three paying gigs, calling ourselves "Clockwork" which I of course changed to "Schlockwork" for anyone who asked. It was a good time for me though; I got to sing a bit since everyone sucked as badly as I did on vocals. I sang the Temp's *My Girl*, Stevie's *Another Star*, Santana's *Black Magic Woman* and other tunes that sounded odd, but maybe heartfelt coming from this white boy. But you know, those guys were going to goof around forever taking gigs only when they flew up in their faces. If I was going to play, I wanted to work. I was already doing gigs on the side with Rave Groosom, a jazz guitarist with a really good paying top-forty band. I told Clockwork that I was punching out (I actually said that, lame that I am).

It's clear now that playing a new instrument with a group of goofy white guys in St. Bernardsville was about as far away from the Bluetones as I could get. If nothing else, my time in Clockwork had the effect of a debriefing.

Rave's gig had seemed a bit more promising than it turned out to be. When I auditioned for him in his apartment he whipped out a Berklee Real Book, turned it to *Just Friends*, a sort of tricky jazz tune, and called it off at a



surprisingly rapid clip. I'd been shedding though, so I tore it up. Rave just nodded and said "yeah man." When I got to our first gig a week later it was Rave on guitar, a Berklee cat on drums who was studying in New York with Andrew Cyrille, and a twenty-year woman named Heather trying her honest best to hit the Whitney tunes note for note. Our first gig was the prom at Illton High School, in a small resort community on Lake Winnesqueakem. As we unloaded our equipment, Rave said, "by the way, they want Skynard's *Free Bird* as their prom song. Me and Bob don't sing, so it's on you Jack." I figured I had the easy out and said "I don't know the words." But Rave handed me a greasy Dunkin's Donuts napkin spotted with ink and said "here ya' go."

It was a loud, din-like affair. I changed the words at will and nobody cared or noticed—they were probably as fucked up as I was at my senior prom. The memorable moment of the night came as we sat in the high school cafeteria before our first set eating the "meal" provided for us. A perky cheerleader came up to us and asked what type of music we would be playing. Pulling the plastic wrapper off the rancid little snack the dining staff at Illton had provided, Bob the drummer replied, "the usual swill."

Telling myself that I had sown my wild oats, it was time to settle down, and that I could be happy as a cabinet maker and part time musicianer, I got married. We had a jazz trio at the reception and went to Quebec for our honeymoon. Things went well for a while, but one day Carrie came home and told me that her friend at work had said "Carrie, you can do better than Rusty". It didn't really surprise me that some chucklehead might say something like that. I wondered why Carrie would repeat it to me though. A working class hero is something to be.

I played a New Year's Eve gig with Rave a few months later that only merits inclusion here because it might be the closest I've ever come to God, however that might be. It was just the two of us. Rave played guitar, and foot-pedal bass on some tunes. I played bass guitar, flugelhorn and trombone. This was a gig at the New Egglard Hotel in Jimson, New Hampshire; mostly older folks listening for *Pennies From Heaven* as they slowly gummed their prime rib and lobster tails. What made this interesting for me was the fact that I had to sight-read many of the tunes, not being familiar with most of the twenties and thirties tunes Rave was calling to suit the audience. I had three fake books that together had all the tunes Rave called. However, these books were in two different clefs and of the two treble clef books, one was concert and the other was Bb causing me to transpose on sight one way or another nearly every tune. I was continually shifting between bass and horn, sometimes playing bass until the solo section at which time I would play a solo on horn as Rave picked up the bass line with his feet. At some point I remember just sort of nodding at the books—a space of Zen— and going with the flow, not consciously transposing, but just playing, hearing it all in time—where and what and how. There was some sort of chi, force, universal unconscious—call it what you want—that I had accessed, however briefly.

I felt like a two hundred dollar a night demi-god.

After the gig, I scored as many drinks as I could before the bar closed, having nothing to look forward to on a rather vacant New Year's Eve than a cold, bug-eaten rack in the non-descript auxiliary building near the hotel. When I had first met Rave, he had an appealing, tragically hip look—disheveled beard, unkempt hair and that ruffled, hard-time look of someone dedicated to, if not

obsessed with his art and all the vices that might accompany it. Recently though, Rave had shaved his face, cut his hair and affixed “One Day at a Time” stickers to his car’s bumper. When I left the bar to make the short walk to our room, I covertly fired up and cupped a fatty I had been brooding on for the last four hours.

The first few hits left me pleasantly, if not humorously aware of the satisfying crunch of rubber upon compacted snow.

While entirely, blissfully rational, I began to inhabit the crystal nature of Winter. I hummed Chick Corea’s *Crystal Silence*, thought of Wallace Steven’s *Snowman*—“One must have a mind of Winter . . .” and eventually congratulated myself on my cleverness. My rapture was shattered by the sudden appearance of Rave, who had been lurking about in the shadows of the maintenance building, apparently waiting for me, but posing the vampire figure—all skinny and shit, moving slowly and saying nothing but “hey,” in a low voice. For some reason (I hadn’t been paid yet?) I stuffed the roach down my pants, praying that it wouldn’t catch afire like the last time. Rave was cool though, despite the aroma therapy that muscled its way around the immediate environment.

“I was waitin’ on ya’ man,” was all he said.

We fell back to our temporary crib and crashed.

I played with Rave on a fairly regular basis until I came home one day to find that my wife had left with all the furniture. It dawned on me that my baby done made some other plans.

Vacant days, empty evenings—I organized a jam in the cellar of my house a couple times a week. It was just the way you would want it. There was always a core rhythm section and other cats fell by as their schedules and inclinations

allowed. Some nights there were three or four horn players, sometimes a couple bass players, a percussionist, guitar players, keyboardists etc. We read tunes out of fake books—sometimes starting with the first tune in the book and working our way page by page—worked on originals, played free, covered whatever lame tune came to mind in mock fashion, smoked a lot of weed and drank a lot of beer. Despite the fact that the players were overwhelmingly white and the cellar was in New Hampshire, for a year or so this was one of the places that jazz really lived.

Rave found enough jazz work that he was able to give up his top-shorty gig so I went looking for steady work again to supplement my own paltry jazz calendar. Fortunately, an old friend Timmy Featherbill was putting together a blues-type “show band”. Leery as I was about “show bands,” I became the bass player for “Jimmy Getz and The Barhoppers.” Timmy was an all right guy, and if his band and choice of material was less than inspiring, it was okay because the guy was such a trip. Each person in the band had to have a stage name—even though we were mostly playing small bars and cafes, and he took it upon himself to name us. Timmy decided to call me “Boss Tweed,” even though he had no idea who the historical character was. He just thought the name was hip. While we were partying one night with some female friends after a gig, I managed to convince him that I should really be “Boss Hogg” I argued, because “it was a much hipper name, I had a huge penis, and we should try to be as accurate as possible.” I remained Boss Hogg for my time in the band and I don’t think he ever dug the *Dukes of Hazard* reference. Timmy married a music teacher who convinced him to go to school, so he broke up the band and split for a state college.

About this time Jeter was hitting the commercial gig scene pretty heavy. His primary work was with Pannonica, a late thirty-something vixen with silicon body parts, a decent voice and a profound understanding of how to play the guys in her band. Jeter worked every weekend for solid coin and even ended up doing some vocals which included a simultaneously heartfelt and ironic rendition of Pop's "Wonderful World." Jeter hooked me up for a few gigs when their regular bass player was unavailable and I was grateful for the cake. We played all the best hotels in Boston for really good money, for the first time in my life. We had to wear tuxedos though and the most inspiring tune we ever played, I think, was Van Morrison's *Moondance*. That couldn't even come close to making up for *Old-time Rock and Roll*, *Mony Mony*, *We've Only Just Begun* and any number of Neil Diamond songs—even at \$200-\$250 a night.

## CHAPTER 6

### DOES FRANK ZAPPA BELONG IN A Ph.D DISSERTATION?

*“Conducting” is when you draw ‘designs’ in the nowhere—with a stick, or with your hands—which are interpreted as ‘instructional messages’ by guys wearing bow ties who wish they were fishing.*

Zappa (176)

Long before his death in 1993, critics, fans and even musicians were already involved in categorizing, containing, commending and condemning not only Zappa’s music, but also the man himself. Since his death, such activity has only intensified. What both draws people to Zappa and threatens to scuttle any attempt at a comprehensive understanding of his music and “career,” if such an ideologically saturated term can be used in reference to Zappa, is the unprecedented range and the sheer magnitude of his work, and the fact that much of it is marked by insistent satire. Unlike any other twentieth-century American composer/musician, Zappa made significant contributions to Rock music, Fusion and “serious,” concert music in addition to radically advancing the seminal art of studio engineering. Zappa composed and recorded Rock “concept” albums, film scores, films themselves, ballets, orchestral music, and various music for ensembles of all sizes and instrumentation. Zappa’s work also includes parody—1967’s *We’re Only In It for the Money*, a take-off on the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* for example—political and social satire, burlesque, mock opera, allegory, and performance art. He has performed on

stage or in the studio with an eclectic variety of musicians and entertainers— Pierre Boulez, John Lennon, Roland Kirk, Sting, George Duke, Jean Luc Ponty, Adrian Belew, Zubin Mehta, Ringo Starr, Captain Beefheart, Kent Nagano, Johnny “Guitar” Watson, the Brecker brothers, and Theodore Bikel to name a few. Clearly, in all its cross-genre, interdisciplinary complexity, Zappa’s work challenges the critic, the listener, the musician in ways neither attendant to the consideration of your everyday “classic” rocker, nor even to a late twentieth-century composer of “serious” music.

Although many claims have been made about Zappa’s influence on and contributions to everything from punk to musique concrete, he is not often associated with jazz. Yet Zappa did incorporate many jazz musicians in his bands such as George Duke, the Fowler brothers, Jean Luc Ponty, the Brecker brothers, Sal Marquez and others. His 1969 recording *Hot Rats* is recognized as one of the founding documents of fusion, released as it was the same year as Miles Davis’ more acclaimed, but less cogent *Bitches Brew*. Zappa also played quite a few jazz events such as The Boston Globe Jazz Festival in 1968 and a George Wein sponsored jazz tour with Duke Ellington, Gary Burton and Roland Kirk in 1969. In October of 1969 he appeared on the cover of the jazz magazine *Downbeat*. However, as Ted Gioia observes “Frank Zappa has rarely been lauded by jazz players” even though “his projects from the late 1960s and 1970s . . . represent, on the whole, some of that period’s most ambitious and effective examples of the integration of jazz . . . techniques into a rock setting” (370). There are two reasons, I think, why Zappa did not attract a reputation in the jazz world: he was not a jazz guitarist by anyone’s definition of the term, and in both performance and composition he strayed too far afield from “true jazz.” In both cases Zappa

was at variance with what “jazz musicians” are stereotypically thought to be and do.

According to the accepted wisdom, a true jazz musician is an ax-man (or ax-woman, I guess) first and foremost. If you do nothing else, you “play yo’ instrument,” as Art Blakey once instructed Lee Morgan in the middle of a particularly moving cadenza. As fine a guitarist as Zappa was, even a cursory glance at his work reveals that his guitar playing was often only a means toward a musical end, a component of a much larger and more complex compositional scheme, or an opportunity to give his audience what they thought they wanted to hear from a “rock band.” Although a thorough, detailed analysis of Zappa’s actual guitar improvisations is beyond the scope of this essay, suffice it to say that his playing exhibits scant few of the materials, approaches and techniques one expects to find in almost any type of *jazz* guitar solo. When improvising, Zappa did not employ the harmonic grammar of bebop to any appreciable degree and his rhythmic conception, while inventive and at times complex, was heavily indebted to rhythm and blues. Yet Zappa’s use of thematic phrasing was perhaps unmatched among his peers. Additionally, his use of modal patterns on simple chord progressions, thematic development, and emphasis upon passing tones gave his playing an exotic, almost ‘outside” (people use to say “progressive”) feel that at very least separated him from the majority of clenched-fisted rock and roll guitar heroes. Zappa was so much more than a rock guitarist, but he was not a jazz guitarist, nor did he want to be.

An integral part of jazz mythology centers around the “purity” of the artform and its status in relation to other types of music. A commentary on Zappa-as-jazz-musician might go something like this: “Zappa did some



interesting fusion things in the sixties and he quite often played with jazz cats, but he was just dabbling. If he was serious about the music he would have kept on playing it. Why would anyone go *back* to playing rock or R&B after getting into jazz? That's going backwards. And what's with those goofy lyrics to his songs? He was a rock guitar player anyway." Zappa could never be considered a jazz musician or jazz composer because from the view within the discourse of jazz, Zappa was not serious enough, committed enough, or more to the point, in love enough with the music. Zappa had too many other musical mistresses. There has been a certain romanticization of jazz on the part of writers, critics, and even the musicians themselves that is something akin to both an idyllic notion of "true love" and fundamentalist religious belief. In its puritanical extremes, the jazz world demands no less than unwavering commitment and any lapse can cost you your reputation. A case in point is Roland Kirk who, appropriately enough, sat in with Zappa on at least two occasions. Kirk's incorporation of other styles of music, studio engineering, non-traditional instruments, rotary breathing and social commentary into his "jazz" performance alienated any number of critics and fans and arguably cost him his reputation as a first-tier jazz musician of weight, worthy of merit and respect. Zappa gets off much easier having had no jazz reputation to begin with.

So why a discussion of Zappa and jazz if Zappa was not a jazz musician (he called it "The Music of Unemployment"[106]) and was not thought of as such by himself or within the jazz community? The first answer is that Zappa's work incorporates jazz musically, performatively, narratively and philosophically, even if it isn't "jazz" itself: Zappa often worked through a jazz aesthetic, issues of intent aside. Despite a number of books and articles about Zappa, with more

undoubtedly coming, nobody seems to want to talk in any detail about the music. Looking for the manifestation of an aesthetic is a productive way to do just that. Second, Zappa composed and/or performed several pieces that were *about* jazz even if they were not always jazz musically: *The Bebop Tango*, *The Eric Dolphy Memorial Barbecue*, *Jazz from Hell*, *Stolen Moments* and many others. Zappa's performed observations about jazz--meta-jazz maybe?--come from a unique perspective, situated as Zappa is between and betwixt several different musical and cultural worlds. In looking at particular moments and elements in Zappa's career and music then, particularly when he is writing for specific bands, we can begin to understand how an aesthetic rooted in jazz can extend to and inform non-jazz performance, musical or otherwise. My discussion will be a two part form. In the first part I will briefly touch upon Zappa's relationship to, and negotiations with his various working, performance bands in the late sixties through the seventies in which he was not only composer, but stage leader, guitarist, vocalist and emcee as well. The second part will involve a close reading of a particular performance with an eye and ear toward the realization of aesthetics through performance.

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Above and beyond the eclectic range of interests and activities, musical or not, that Zappa was involved with throughout his life, his primary, driving desire was to get his music performed, whether it be a work for the London Symphony Orchestra or a satirical pop ditty about excrement for a rock band. This fact immediately separates Zappa from the vast majority of musicians

playing popular music, rock, rhythm and blues, country-western etc. for whom “success,” fame, financial reward and ego satisfaction takes precedence over self-actualization as a musician and, or composer. Zappa’s primary audience was his own ears, and this also put Zappa at odds with many of the musicians he worked with to bring his music to life. Any narrative about Frank Zappa the composer is also a story to some degree about Zappa’s bands, the individuals who played in them, and more to the point, the negotiations, formulations and compromises that had to occur in order to get the music made. In this regard Zappa is somewhat similar to Duke Ellington.

As a matter of fact, the parallels are quite striking. For both men, getting new music played on a regular basis meant keeping a core of players, if not an entire band gainfully employed. In order to do this, both Zappa and Ellington toured incessantly. The paradox that arises from this situation is that in order to support a group of musicians that are sympathetic to, and capable of playing your music, you must provide them with work, and steady work meant some sort of concession to popular tastes. Yet even then the monetary rewards are few for all but those who cave entirely to the tyranny of mass appeal. Zappa recalls that while on tour in 1969, sharing the bill with Ellington and others, Zappa went backstage and “saw Duke Ellington begging—pleading—for a ten-dollar advance.” Faced with the pressures of keeping his own band working, Zappa goes on to say “suddenly EVERYTHING looked utterly hopeless to me. If Duke Ellington had to beg some George Wein assistant backstage for *ten bucks*, what the fuck was I doing with a ten-piece band, trying to play rock and roll—or something that was *almost* rock and roll?” (107). Shortly after that occasion Zappa decided to break up his band. Although the financial strain was

undoubtedly a factor, Zappa tells us that he broke up the band because they were not capable enough musicians in regards to playing his music, a situation Duke fortunately did not have to deal with.

Part of the genius common to both men was their ability to give the public just enough of what they thought they wanted and at the same time create something of greater musical value. Ellington turned the idea of "jungle music" into an occasion for experimentation with form, instrumentation and tone color. Zappa both expanded the possibilities of, and laid bare the rock/pop song-form for his own satirical and political purposes. If these musical 'concessions' were motivated by monetary and other pragmatic concerns rather than aesthetic ones, that does not mean they are necessarily of less value. Although Ellington and Zappa might have argued otherwise, I would suggest that it is these hybrid musical mutations that constitute the most interesting and inventive parts of each composer's oeuvre, at least in terms of process. No doubt Ellington's sacred music and Zappa's compositions for the Ensemble Modern are much more complex musically, perhaps even "better" than something like *Satin Doll* or *Joe's Garage*, yet the latter are richer cultural texts and more clearly manifest pragmatic aesthetic impulses, if not principles..

Zappa and Ellington both had their own custody battles with band members over the course of their careers. Band members complained openly about Ellington's appropriation of their musical ideas and contributions and the entire band quit on Ellington once over this and other issues of control and ownership. Members of Zappa's original band, The Mothers of Invention, suggested in the press that Zappa took credit for their contributions to early recordings and performances. Both situations point to the difficulty in making

distinctions between composition and interpretation, motivation and articulation, and appropriation and collaboration in an interactive environment. It is certainly true to some degree that at times Ellington wrote what he did, the way that he did because he had Bubber Miley, or Lawrence Brown, or Johnny Hodges, each of whom possessed special abilities and talents. We can only speculate how many riffs, ensemble sections, codas and introductions were originally played off the cuff or brought in by section leaders like Hodges only to be incorporated into a homogenized Duke Ellington "composition." Similarly, Zappa was notorious for sometimes exploiting the particular talents and personality quirks of band members or simply making full use of skills they brought to the band. Multi-instrumentalist and improviser Ian Underwood, for example, is the dominant voice on *Hot Rats*, despite that being a "Frank Zappa" album. Zappa simply says "I respect musician's idiosyncrasies—they add 'texture' to a performance" (Real 169). However, where Duke's appropriations were "blended," to use a Zappa neologism, and as a result the interactive dynamic between "composer" and "performer," or "composition" and "improvisation" was masked, Zappa, more often than not, worked to emphasize, if not exacerbate the tensions that marked his relationship with other band members in his various roles as composer, leader, frontman, autocrat etc.

In a moment from Zappa's 1971 movie *200 Motels*, Zappa exploits the very issue of exploitation by making it the subject of the performance. Zappa's real life bass player Jeff Simmons, described in the movie as the "bass player in a rock orientated comedy group," has misgivings about how his career is progressing. "Why are you wasting your life night after night playing this comedy music?" he is asked, to which he replies, "you're right, I'm too heavy to

be in this group. In this group all I ever get to do is play Zappa's comedy music." He's then advised by his bad conscience to "quit the comedy group, [and get his] own group together. Heavy! Like Grand Funk, or Black Sabbath!" At this point the narration is picked up by Mark Volman and Howard Kaylan (Flo and Eddie), lead singers in Zappa's band as well as the "fictional" band that the movie follows. We are told "Jeff is flipping out—road fatigue—we've gotta get him back to normal before Zappa finds out and steals it and makes him do it in the movie."

Zappa undermines any easy assumptions we might make about what is "real" here and what is representation; *200 Motels* is a movie written by Zappa, in which members of Zappa's band play the roles of musicians in a band lead by Frank Zappa, in a concentration camp. Zappa appears only in surrogate form: Ringo Star is "dressed up to look like Frank Zappa." Amidst all these layers of representation we find an imbedded issue of textual authority. Even if all we see and hear has been "arranged" by Zappa, we do hear the voices of band members complaining about Zappa's near dictatorial control and his penchant for co-opting anything and everything other members might come up with—musical or otherwise. Yet, there is no easy answer to whether or not these other voices have been neutralized by their incorporation into Zappa's discourse, or if they stand in opposition to it. By the time we see Flo and Eddie trying to get Jeff Simmons "back to normal before Zappa finds out and steals it," the idea has already been stolen and preserved on film. We might read this as an instance of "carnavalesque" in the Bakhtinian sense—a state (read: Zappa) sanctioned occurrence of parody, mockery or saturnalia in which power relations are reversed and chaos triumphs over order. However, the band members who

give voice to this mockery are the subjects of parody themselves. Michael Gray notes that “during rehearsals [for *200 Motels*] Jeff Simmons quit the band, unable to tolerate working under what he saw as Zappa’s autocratic rule” and that “Zappa hit back on the liner notes of the *200 Motels* double album with the line ‘special thanks to Jeff Simmons from all members of the group’” (136). The fact that the sequence in the movie I’ve just described arose from a real occurrence—Simmons quitting the band—makes it no less difficult to unravel.

Regardless of how we read the power relations here, this instance is just one of a multitude of available examples of Zappa’s propensity for taking unscripted material from “real” life and putting it into compositional and/or improvisational play. Zappa’s willingness to afford solo space for members of his band (and audience members as well), both literally, and in the more abstract sense as we have just seen, is exactly what one might expect from the leader of a jazz ensemble. However, Zappa’s take on this practice is necessarily quite different than that from someone squarely within the jazz tradition such as Duke Ellington. Where Ellington was limited for the most part to music as a vehicle for composition and performance, Zappa was working with lyric content, physical movement and all other manners of spectacle. In Zappa’s bands, performance, improvisation and interaction all became not only much more visible, but also become the subject of language, in turn multiplying orders of signification. Particularly in his live performances, Zappa is not so much concerned with containing the entire performance, with all its musical, linguistic and visual elements, or structuring it into a coherent whole as he is with stitching together a series of performative moments, each self-contained, speaking about itself, yet multivalent in juxtaposition with the others. This would be a modernist

manifestation of a jazz aesthetic in which, borrowing again from Bakhtin, individual voices, performances, improvisations are not centripetal in nature but centrifugal. That is to say the “collective” performative movement is not towards a unitary language, a homogenized mood or meaning, an articulation of the tonic, the final coda, but toward an expression of difference and continuance.

In a sense then Zappa has enlarged the idea of a jazz performance aesthetic by extending it to the use of materials. Where in a jazz performance individual musicians collectively contextualize one another while simultaneously creating their own individual narrative lines, Zappa juxtaposes chunks of sometimes disparate musical material and creates a string of “musiconarrative” fragments. The result is a musical conversation not only between the different musicians at any given point, but an implicit conversation as well over the course of a song between its component parts.

The most interesting example of Zappa’s aesthetic deployment, I believe, is the live 1973 performance of *The Bebop Tango (of the Old Jazzmen’s Church)* on the recording Roxy and Elsewhere. Among “jazz” musicians familiar with Zappa’s work, this performance has as high a reputation as anything Zappa ever did with the possible exception of *Inca Roads*. There are many reasons for this: the sheer difficulty of the music, the masterful playing of individual musicians, Bruce Fowler’s mind-boggling trombone solo, Zappa’s eventual, near total disdain for the audience, and finally, the humor. There is also a second text present besides the music, at times a subtext, and other times a meta-text, depending on where we find ourselves in the performance: Zappa invites us to compare and contrast jazz and tango as both musical and cultural products and to consider their place, or lack thereof in contemporary popular culture. He



foregrounds the comparison at various times in the performance with commentary and activities ostensibly designed to educate the audience, but more importantly, lets the music itself generate an implicit discussion.

Although the idea of a bebop-tango fusion might seem bizarre at first to the casual listener, it makes complete sense when one considers the history of both types of music. Jazz and tango developed around the turn of the century in America and Argentina respectively, both folk musics that combined European and African elements to forge a rhythmically syncopated music often associated with dance. Although the exact origins are ambiguous, both types of music were played early on in bordellos and other venues of ill repute. At least for the first fifty years of the twentieth-century, jazz and tango were associated in the general public's collective imagination with passion and sex, if not deviance and crime. About mid-century both jazz and tango were marked by radical changes that signaled the end of their widespread popular appeal even as they matured as artforms. Interestingly enough, these changes were partially due to an indirect cross-fertilization between the two styles of music. Nineteen-fifties Afro-Cuban jazz was an attempt to more fully incorporate and emphasize the complex polyrhythms of African and South American music into jazz. Tango of the fifties and sixties--particularly the work of Piazzolla--was marked by a conscious attempt to deploy jazz harmony and some elements of swing. Zappa's *Bebop Tango* then might be thought of as a realization of potential fusion between jazz and tango that began, arguably, only twenty or so years before Zappa's 1973 performance.

As the performance begins, pianist George Duke plays a tango-like vamp quietly in the background and Zappa casually addresses the audience:

Some of you may know that the tango, which is not a very popular dance anymore, was at one time reputed to be a dance of unbridled passion. Back in the old days when it wasn't so easy to get your rocks off, when it was hard to make contact with a member of the opposite camp, and you had to resort to things like dancing close together and going hey! . . . those were the days. Well, those days are probably gone forever—I don't know unless Nixon is going to bring them back a little bit later.

It is clear that Zappa wishes to foreground the cultural context of the music he is about to play. He does not actually refer to the music at this juncture, but rather, the dance that it entails. He goes on to announce that “we have this very special, highly evolved, permutated tango, It's actually a perverted tango . . . yes, it's so perverted.” As Zappa says the phrase “a perverted tango,” George Duke plays a fast, bebop phrase which draws the “yes, it's so perverted” reply from Zappa. The connection established here is as old as jazz and tango themselves. As mentioned earlier, jazz and tango are stereotypically associated with deviance, the forbidden, and all that is outside prescribed normality and morality. What is interesting about this characterization, however, is that Zappa is talking ostensibly about the tango, not jazz. We are told that it is a perverted *tango*, yet the sense of transgression or deviance arises from a non-discursive signifier—the “bebop” notes that George Duke plays. Jazz operates then as latent content that is manifest in sublimated fashion as the tango, much as sexual desire between partners is sublimated through dance.

Zappa announces the name of the piece the band will be performing and in doing so compresses the different levels of signification: jazz-tango-dance-desire. He tells the audience that “this is the *Bebop Tango*, a special entertainment event, that includes choreography a little bit later, so watch out folks.” More than just a song, and given the monologue that preceded it, this “entertainment event” not only challenges the audience to look for and differentiate between

two different types of music—both relatively obscure to the general public—but also asks them to make sense of a Bebop Tango conceptually. In other words, what is, and why a Bebop Tango? If things are not difficult enough, Zappa turns to the band and says “okay, ya’ ready? Not too fast now, ‘cause I want to get the right notes on the tape. I mean, this has to be the one. This has to be the one with all the right notes in it.” He then says to the audience in a voice one would use to speak to a child “this is a hard one to play.” The music that follows is in fact extremely difficult. About ten seconds into the song, Zappa exclaims “the cowbell as a symbol of unbridled passion, ladies and gentlemen.” Zappa’s comment suggests to the audience that they should be “reading” the performance, that various elements are symbolic and generative of meaning, and that somehow the music accords with the narrative he prefaced the song with. At the same time, however, the music is monstrously complex, insistently dissonant, and entirely instrumental. It provides none of the expected elements that make a song accessible to a general audience such as melodic hooks, catchy lyrics, repetition, or familiar, formulaic riffs and patterns. In effect, the general audience is presented with an opaque text, or a wall of sound if you will, and told that it is meaningful. Zappa is both showing contempt for his audience here, and implicitly questioning how, and even if one can derive “meaning” from music. His choice of the cowbell is perfect. As a blunt, non-pitched percussion instrument, the cowbell is perhaps the least expressive instrument at Zappa’s disposal and his drawing of the audience’s attention to this instrument as a symbol of brute desire, if not lust, suggests that their appreciation of the music is blunted and brutish as well.

The bulk of the actual musical performance itself breaks down into two parts: the written, “hard” part played by the entire ensemble, and then an improvised trombone solo by Bruce Fowler over an accompaniment by the rhythm section. It might be said that we have two different versions, articulations or realizations of the idea of a Bebop tango, one composed and one improvised. This works quite well given that a tango as a musical form is often articulated in two parts. The first part of *The Bebop Tango* is a compositional tour de force replete with multiple time signatures, a myriad of textures and tone colors, shifting and ambiguous tonality, and atonality. This is music that is probably impossible to dance to. The second section is a bit more accessible since the trombone is a constant focus and the rhythm falls into somewhat regular patterns: an alternation between a 4/4 tango pulse and 6/8 swing complete with walking bass. The rhythmic juxtaposition of 4 against 3 is not only a staple of jazz, but also suggests the 4 of the tango proper and the 3 of its subset, the Vals Creole.

Where the first section conflates bebop and tango conceptually into a composed piece that seems more than the sum of its parts, the second section juxtaposes the two rhythmically, allowing the improviser to negotiate the difference performatively. The result is an odd sort of symmetry with the second section encapsulating a number of binaries—bebop and tango, compound meter and simple meter, soloist and ensemble. Taken as a whole, this fluid second section acts as an antithesis to the composed, rigorously structured section that precedes it. Yet, at the same time both sections complement one another as two articulations of the same proposition: the idea of a Bebop Tango. In one of the few commentaries on this recording ever published, Ben Watson suggests that

the *Bebop Tango* “constituted a virtuosic solution to a musical problem faced by jazz rock in the seventies: how to integrate the sensuous (and salable) impact of rock sonority with musicianly challenge” (Kostelanetz 162). While there is certainly enough “musicianly challenge” to go around in this piece, there is very little “rock sonority,” instrumentation notwithstanding. Further, to characterize the *Bebop Tango* as “jazz rock” is to ignore or gloss over the large conceptual, compositional and narrative frameworks that structure the performance.

After Fowler’s solo, with the rhythm section continuing to vamp, Zappa tells the audience “as you might have noticed, Bruce Fowler has just completed some sort of trombone solo based on the idea of an evolved tango event.” The phrase “as you might have noticed” is certainly sarcastic and suggests that, in Zappa’s estimation, no one is paying much attention. He goes on to announce that “Bruce has also prepared for you a demonstration of a dance that he hopes will sweep the ocean right after the mudshark did [sic]. Bruce is now warming up the important muscles of the body in preparation for the real live *Bebop tango*.” Rather than explain what has just transpired, or continue with his original narrative, Zappa tells the audience that despite what they just heard, the “real, live *Bebop Tango*” is in fact a dance, the performance of which they are about to witness. As the rhythm section vamps on a 4/4 tango pulse, George Duke begins paradoxically inserting little snippets of what sounds increasingly like Thelonious Monk’s *Straight, No Chaser*. Paradoxical because, as I’ve shown elsewhere, *Straight, No Chaser* is very complex rhythmically—anything but a dance tune. Zappa returns to the near condescending tone he used to preface the performance and tells the audience that “this is sort of like jazz in its own peculiar way,” before announcing that “jazz is not dead, it just smells funny.”

It's unclear at this point exactly what Zappa is referring to when he says "this" is sort of like jazz. Although it can refer to what is about to be played, or what is being played (Straight, No Chaser), it can also be taken as an overview of all that has occurred up until that point—a partly improvised performance that works with and reworks received (the tango/bebop) forms and materials. If the performance ended at this point it would seem logical and perhaps even provide a sense of closure. For as we've seen, the musical performance is a neat two part form that through conflation and then juxtaposition implicitly brings the tango and bebop into musical conversation with one another. The dance announcement might then be read then as a sarcastic, if not contemptuous nod toward the audience and its lowbrow desire for entertainment despite something musically inventive and sophisticated having just happened, a sort of thumbing of the nose, if not a giving of the finger. However, the performance does not conclude at this point for there is more fun to be had at the audience's expense.

As the band thumps out what Zappa later calls a "pedestrian beat," George Duke is heard whispering "yeah man, Jazz, man, ya' know what I mean." Using an angular, syncopated scat-like melodic line, Duke then sings "this is bebop, even if you think it doesn't sound like that." Other members of the band respond by shouting out "bebop!" in mock protest as if the very idea of bebop was scandalous, perhaps acting out Zappa's imagined response from the audience. Where Zappa's earlier comments about the tango prefaced the music and were therefore complimentary or supplemental rather than incorporated into the music, here we find the music containing its own commentary/criticism. For the moment at least, this is bebop about bebop. And there is the potential for

irony here as well. For the appropriation and containment of critical content into the body of the musical text reaffirms that the text is the primary source.

Incorporating language about the music into the music itself suggests implicitly that music should be taken on its own terms, that it should speak for itself. The irony arises from the fact that message is delivered lyrically, through language, a second order of signification. At the same time, the words that Duke sings appear to carry some educative intent, directed as they are at the audience. On one hand, Duke may be attempting to dispel popular notions or misconceptions of bebop as antiquated and arcane, or as strictly instrumental music, or worse, (and this is a common misconception) as the type of up-tempo whitened rhythm and blues that Elvis sang. On the other hand, the attitude towards the audience has been anything but charitable up until this point.

Following George Duke's vocal, Zappa says "now, as you might have noticed, some of you with a musical education can tell that the notes that George just sang when he went 'this is bebop, even if you think it doesn't sound like that' is actually a sort of a twisted form of the theme of the tango itself which will get even more depraved as the number goes on." At this point, it's fairly obvious that Zappa does not actually think people were paying close attention to what was going on musically, or that they had any musical education for that matter. More likely, in light of what has already happened, Zappa is chiding the majority of the people in attendance all the while explaining accurately the musical process they are party to. For, without getting into detailed analysis, the short phrase Duke sings is almost an exact reiteration of a prominent theme established in the first (composed) section of the instrumental piece: The words "this is bebop" are very close to the notes Gb, F, Ab a minor tenth up, and then

A, a major seventh down. This is a main theme that Zappa developed in the first section. Quite possibly Zappa intended for Duke to sing those notes exactly, but given the difficulty of large intervals and ambiguous tonality, Duke may have simply been off a bit. When Zappa then tells the audience that the music will get "even more depraved" as the performance goes on, he references back to the earlier association between jazz and deviance and simultaneously tweaks the expectations of bizarre and lascivious spectacle that many bring to a Zappa concert. At the same time, however, Duke's reiteration of the theme has reaffirmed the primacy of the musical text, regardless of what might follow.

Zappa then tells the audience that "George will now attempt to dismember that melody, play it, and sing it at the same time while we sort of dance to it." Duke scats a bebop line while accompanying himself in unison on piano, ending with a cliched, Armstrongesque, "Oh Yeah" all the while the rhythm section maintains a straight 4/4 tango pulse. Zappa tells the audience that "what [he'd] like to do at this point is get some volunteers from the audience . . . some people who have never tried it before, who have never even thought of trying it before, a boy, a girl, preferably who like each other, who would like to come up here and attempt to dance to what George sings." Once Rick, Jane and Carl have volunteered and come up onto the stage, Zappa gives them their directions. He says "all right, here's how it works. There's a beat going on like this. That's a pedestrian beat. You don't dance to that beat. You dance to what George sings, okay, the little ones. The little quick ones . . . ready?" As George Duke scats improvised, double-time bebop lines, the three attempt to dance, with little success apparently, because Zappa tells them they



need to “loosen up” before finally dismissing them in order to “bring up the next batch.”

There are several things going on here. Zappa manages to make members of the audience, and by representation, the entire audience look like fools by having them to twitch around in accordance with Duke’s improvisation. This display, probably quite similar to the movements of someone wired to a car battery, also makes the perhaps belabored point that unlike early forms of jazz, and tango for that matter, bebop was not made for dancing. Bebop and the tango are musics that have lost their mass appeal, musics that, to use another well known Zappa phrase, have “no commercial potential.” Zappa does succeed, nevertheless, in getting audience members to listen closely, however temporarily, to the music (the little quick ones that George sings). However, the listening is only done so as to facilitate dancing. Yet, by creating the spectacle that he does, Zappa gives the audience a type of entertainment they are familiar with even as their participation in it makes ironic reference to their inability to appreciate the music on its own terms.

The “next batch” of participants includes a woman named Lana who has been volunteering in a most provocative manner. She coos suggestively “anything you say Frank,” to which Zappa replies in mock embarrassment “oh my god!” As she dances to Duke’s bebop lines, Zappa says with satisfaction “now that’s more like it.” Duke’s scat grows in intensity and suddenly, for the first time during this audience participation section, the latent is fully manifest when the rhythm section shifts into straight swing while Duke vocalizes the entire twelve-bar head of Monk’s *Straight, No Chaser*. Given the hybrid bebop tango that has been realized and the incongruity between audience expectation

and appreciation and what Zappa gives them, *Straight, No Chaser* is a perfect, ironic addition to the festivities, carrying as it does connotations of both purity and intoxication. If the pre-dance musical presentation of the *Bebop Tango* was uncompromising, given to the audience *straight*, then the dance that follows is certainly the chaser, the wash that makes the first draught/draft more palatable.

Zappa tells Lana that she is “so good, we have to bring up some other people to assist.” He then announces to the audience “Brenda, imported from Edward’s airforce base, where she . . . ladies and gentlemen, Brenda, Brenda is a professional harlot! And she just got finished stripping for a bunch of guys at Edwards’ airforce base, and she made down here in time for the show, two hours of taking it off for the boys in the corp, really good.” Zappa’s introduction of Brenda to the stage seems to signal his capitulation to the basest of audience expectations. However, the moment is not without irony. Zappa observes that “Brenda has lovely assistant, named Carl,” who quite possibly is her pimp. Of course this invites the question of who is pimping who here. It looks, at first glance as if Zappa is the uberpimp—for Brenda, whose appearance seems pre-arranged, for the audience members who are pressed into service, and for the music itself, which under other conditions would be a hard sell to any audience. However, immediately after introducing Brenda’s “assistant,” Carl, Zappa suddenly barks out “Herb Cohen, Ladies and gentlemen.” Cohen was Zappa’s manager—Zappa’s pimp if you will, the mention of his name no doubt triggered by the appearance Brenda’s “manager.”

Despite the apparent pandering going on, Zappa seems to have come full circle with his exposition of an “evolved tango event.” He began the performance with some sort of nod towards historical narrative which

emphasized the original dance and desire elements of the music, moved into a contemporary musical realization, and figuratively ended up back where he started with both dance and desire on stage in the persons of Lana and Brenda, bringing to life the “real, live Bebop tango.” As the two dance, the accompaniment grows chaotic and eventually turns into yet another opaque wall of sound—not orchestrated this time, but the cumulative effect of all the musicians blowing freely, perhaps the musical manifestation of “unbridled passion.” We can only imagine what Lana and Brenda looked like trying to dance to the sonic chaos that envelops them. Eventually the musical fog clears and the rhythm section returns to a pedestrian beat, but now with bluesy touches added by George Duke’s piano. Zappa tells the audience “ladies and gentlemen, you’re probably sitting in your chairs saying to yourselves ‘I could do that’ and of course you can.” He then tells them, “link your minds with the mind of George Duke, and when he plays those funny fast little notes, twitch around and have a good time with the Bebop Tango.” Perhaps the thought of thousands of people doing the St. Vitus dance was too awful for even someone as jaded as Frank. For the band quickly segues into a rocking, twelve-bar blues with George Duke singing “anything you wanna do, it’s all right . . .”

Ben Watson argues that the dance section of this piece “underlines the distance between jazz specialism and everyday life” (Kostelanetz 163). However true that may be, it is not necessarily the case that Zappa found jazz to be deficient in any musical sense, or even superfluous as Watson implicitly suggests. If anything, Zappa’s criticism is of audiences who are incapable or unwilling to invest any amount of time in listening closely and seriously to any music that is not a pre-packaged product of the pop culture/industrial complex. Like most

critics in their writing about Zappa, Watson spends very little time with the actual music, preferring to concentrate on cultural significance, what Zappa was “trying to say,” influences etc. Watson is concerned with the “meaning “of Frank Zappa and he finds that meaning everywhere except the music. It’s not surprising then to find out that Watson himself was one of those participants that came on stage and danced to the “little notes” at a concert a few years after the Roxy recording. When Zappa asked Watson what his name was, Watson, wearing a tee shirt that said “Out To Lunch,” replied, “Eric Dolphy” (335).

While Watson is probably still reveling (read any of his contributions to Wired magazine) in the multiple layers of representation created by Zappa’s performance, his involvement in a Zappa performance, his subsequent textual re-presentations and his out-to-lunch tee shirt, we can only wonder how different his take would be if had sat in with the band instead. This is not to suggest that the cultural and semiotic implications of Zappa’s performances are unimportant, but that they arise from a specific musical text, that they only come after the music as is the case literally in the performance I’ve been discussing. Zappa does give in, and give the audience what it wants, but along the way he is able to perform a serious piece of music and raise any number of interesting questions for anyone who might care to take notice. Involving the audience at the end is not “the thing itself,” but rather, ironic juxtaposition, a grotesque, visually dissonant physical articulation of the place bebop and the tango occupy in the historical imagination.

\* \* \* \*

Zappa's interest in, and use of jazz materials themselves is quite complicated as even this one reading suggests. In his Real Frank Zappa Book Zappa claims that the ii-V-I chord progression that "Tin Pan Alley and jazz standards thrive on" is a "hateful progression" (187). He goes on to add that "In jazz, they beef it up a little by adding extra partials to the chords to make them more luxurious . . . but it's still the essence of bad 'white-person music'" (187). For Zappa this progression was a metonymic evocation of cocktail lounge "jazz" and by extension, all the trappings of purblind, republican, middle-class consumer society. The fact that Zappa nevertheless used this progression with stunning creativity in the appropriately satirical *America Drinks and Goes Home* suggests another manner in which Zappa inhabited a jazz aesthetic. No matter how shop-worn, familiar, and even distasteful the material might seem, Zappa is able to employ it in new ways—quite similar to Monk—defamiliarize it and make us hear it again for the first time. The ii-V progression, or any other element of music becomes "bad white-person music" when it is no longer a means through which performance is realized, but rather an object—the thing itself.

This performative aesthetic, counter-intuitively, applies to composed material as well. In another interesting parallel to Monk, Zappa stuck with a number of his compositions over the course of his career, re-arranging them for different bands and instrumentation, incorporating them into other, longer works, or simply playing them time and time again despite the huge body of work he had at his disposal. *Oh No, Big Leg Emma, The Black Page, Sofa, Big Swifty*

and a handful of other pieces comprise music he obviously wanted people to hear (ala Monk), but also base compositions that he could revisit and recontextualize over and over again.

Frank Zappa was not a jazz musician or a jazz composer. Nevertheless, we cannot understand his work or the work of his bands completely until we acknowledge the jazz aesthetic that informed much of what he did. In 1988 Zappa released an album entitled Make a Jazz Noise Here. The album is a compilation of twenty-five different pieces of music, mostly instrumental, many which feature improvised “jazz” solos by at least one of the five horn players in the band. The cover shows a small nightclub in a post-apocalyptic landscape, otherwise barren except for two signs, one of which reads, “last chance for live music”. According to Den Simms, Zappa explains the title of the album like this: “You ever hear of Erroll Garner, jazz pianist, who mumbles along with what he plays? ‘Ayee! Ayee!’ It’s the whole concept of jazz musicians who make jazz noises while they perform” (Qtd in Watson 504). Unlike corporate music, in which the packaging often serves to fetishize the recording as an object that is timeless, yet can be owned and consumed, Zappa’s album and his characterization of its title foreground the performative moment in which the music originally lived. In this recording, the music itself for the most part is not jazz—but the idea of it is.

## INTERCHAPTER 5

I hit the *BIGTIME*, or so I was told, with “Random Access.” They had tacked up a note card on the board at the local music store that simply said “working band needs bass player.” I came down to their gig at the Lo Gai, a cramped, roach-infested restaurant on the seedy end of Dutch Elm Street, the main thoroughfare of Stumpton.

They had hair. More importantly however, they had gigs. After a couple of weeks off, they were booked three or four nights a week for at least the next two months at a variety of Rock and Roll clubs. Before talking to them I heard two sets in which they played every lame, dated, hard-rock, hair-rock tune from Bon Jovi to Poison, to Skid Row to Warrant. When I introduced myself, the pug-faced drummer Heath pointed me towards Gary, the Soon-to-be-in-Florida-making-big-bucks-bass player. Gary offered up his bass for audition purposes in between sets: I flashed some pop-and-snap funk shit, blew some Fusion riffs I ripped off from Stanley Clarke, and ended with a few bars from Clapton’s *Crossroads* solo. Gary told me I was the best bass player he had ever heard in his life. I knew this was bullshit, and concluded that he was lamer than I had originally thought. Nevertheless, he hugged me and told me he was leaving the “heritage of bass and shit” to me. Whatever.

We rehearsed in the West-Side basement of Heath’s house for the next two weeks. We were auditioning guitar players and singers because Jonna, the former lead-singer, had been sleeping with Jake, the former guitarist. Jonna’s

live-in boyfriend Butch had threatened to rip Jake's arm off and beat him to death with it. Both had presumably taken their last curtain-call at the Lo Gai.

After about thirty minutes of rehearsal I realized that these guys were right out of the "let's play along with the stereo" school of musical education. Despite that, somewhere during the first two or three practices I decided that I would hang with the band for awhile and milk it for all its Rock and Roll glory. After all, I was on borrowed time. Although over Thirty, I looked about the same age as the guys in the band—mid-twenties. I intended to party full-tilt-boogie for as long as I could. Jazz gigs were really scarce and I told myself that it was preferable to be a working musician in a lame rock band than an unemployed jazz cat.

I had met some bastards before, but Heath set the bar. He had two good looking kids and a really pleasant and attractive wife. A couple of times she came downstairs to ask a question or to tell Heath that someone was on the phone and he would say "shut the fuck up and go bake a cake". I'll admit that I laughed the first time he said it. You don't know the nature of the relationship and it takes you by surprise. It became obvious though that that statement pretty much summed up Heath's attitude toward his wife. He said shit to her that despite my liberal use of the vernacular, is too nasty for me to repeat. It was painful to listen to, especially once I got to know his wife and eventually one night while he was lighting into her I said "why don't *you* shut the fuck up fatboy". He said "you don't talk to me like that," and I said "yes I do motherfucker" as I grabbed his ride cymbal and tossed it across the cellar. We would've started throwing hands, but I got right up in his face and started running some of the "gonna fuck you up" intimidation language I had heard so



often from the Chief's thugs in the Bluetones. I wasn't anybody's hero; I was just sick of all the fuckin' nastiness in the world, or my world at least. The other guys broke it up with the new understanding that I was a loose cannon. It worked for me.

We actually had groupies. Several women, who are better off for not being described here, followed us around New England helping to unload vans and providing vigorous physical stimulation between sets. We spent at least half the money we made on alcohol and drugs, quite often having hours long, intensive tea parties in the van on Sundays after we broke down the stage and were ready to load. It wasn't long though before the herb just didn't seem to get me high anymore and I no longer got a jolt when a woman in spandex and a black *Metallica* tee-shirt came looking for me. At least with The Bluetones the musicianship was at a high level and I had some hand in what we played. Here everything was thud-like. The lead guitar player had some chops, but the drummer sounded like he was building a barn; the lead singer reminded me of the sound dogs make when they go out into the woods to die; the keyboard player was insecure and kept his volume so low no one could hear him—which was a blessing, I guess—and the other guitarist simply sucked. People loved us though, and that was the worst of it for me. After about a year I had had enough of “Random Assholes.”

It was clear to me that in order to make a legitimate career as a jazz musician I would have to move some place there were gigs and other jazz musicians, and devote most of my time to it. It was pretty to think that that might be possible, but I was just too burnt out to seriously consider it. What's more, I'd been playing fast-food music for so long I questioned what kind of

jazz chops I had, or would ever have. Somewhere along the line I had gotten derailed.

I'd started reading quite a bit again and for some reason thought that maybe I had some talent at writing. With the mistaken belief that Freshman English would include writing fiction, I signed up for a night section after my mother volunteered to pay for it, mom being thrilled that I might go back to school. My first go-round at Plimpton State left me with a major attitude toward professors. However, I told myself that it was time to start getting over shit and that if I wanted to get anything out of this writing course I needed to give the teacher the benefit of my doubt. Maybe I could write *about* jazz even if I couldn't play it all the time. But wouldn't that be an admission of sorts? A confessional even? Might there be a difference between writing *about* jazz and writing *jazz*? Is there such a thing as *writing jazz—jazz writing*? My expectations are mixed and modest.

September, 1990

## 32 BAR TUNE: CODA

*Rick, you're too reserved*

Zappa (Roxy and Elsewhere)

A couple of months ago, Nicole handed me a book and said "you should read this".

"No," I said, "I don't have any time for casual reading."

"You really should read this book," she said.

I read the book.

Anthony Bourdain's Kitchen Confidential is a picaresque autobiography that takes the reader inside the kitchens of clam shacks and four star restaurants. The story of his life as a chef is uneven, incomplete, and often more honest than we might want it to be. Yet, it has the feeling of a freshly made thing. Even when Bourdain is not drawing analogies to music, pirates or pop culture, or addressing the larger philosophical or aesthetic elements of his craft, he is writing from a jazz place, the result of having lived a jazz life, even if he himself wouldn't characterize it as such. Here's a taste.

"I wallow in it. Just like all the other sounds in my life; the hiss and clatter and spray of the dishwasher, the sizzle as a filet of fish hits a hot pan, the loud, yelping noise—almost a shriek—as a glowing sizzle-platter is dropped into a full pot sink, the pounding of a meat mallet on a cote de boeuf, the smack as finished plates hit the 'window." The goads, curses, insults and taunts of my wildly profane crew are like poetry to me, beautiful at times, each tiny variation on a classic theme like some beat-era jazz riff: Coltrane doing "My Favorite Things" over and over again, but making it new and different each time. There are, it turns out, a million ways to say "suck my dick." Most of the people in my kitchen

can do it in Spanish, French, Italian, Arabic, Bengali and English. Like all great performances, it's about timing, tone and delivery—kind of like cooking" (222).

In his book, Bourdain expresses contempt for celebrity chefs and says that the Food Network won't be calling him up anytime soon. But due to the success of his book, Tony now has his own show—*A Cook's Tour*—on the Food Network. That's all right. He's the only chef on television who chain-smokes cigarettes and spends more time on camera looking for alcohol, drinking it, and occasionally puking than he does with food. I think Tony and I know some of the same things.

\* \* \* \*

Well, old Satch is gone. Nicole took him to the Vet; I couldn't bear to do it. A lot has happened since I began this thing. Jake is here: he's three months old and he checked in at the 96th percentile for weight and height his last doctor visit. My father says Jake's a typical German baby—pudgy face, reddish-blond hair, blue eyes, and a huge appetite that never lets up.

Joe Henderson, Lionel Hampton, Nellie Monk and Art Farmer passed.

Max just turned two and has memorized his first song, *Happy Birthday to You*, which he sings incessantly. He calls me "Daddy-Rick," or sometimes just "Rick" and laughs hysterically when I say "no, my name is daddy".

Cancer took Aunt Audie and George unfortunately went to work at the WTC on 9/11 like he had every other day.

One of my mother's oldest friends, a woman of Irish descent, told my mother she couldn't understand why we gave both our sons Jewish names.

\* \* \* \*

I got a call a year ago from a percussionist Jeter McGlibness whom I used to jam with years back. He and two other guys, a pianist and a saxophonist, had been getting together to play jazz regularly and figured that with a bassist they could complete the group and maybe even get some gigs. We put together a sort of standard jazz repertoire and started landing gigs. Just a few days ago, Cole Swindell called me up. He was the old bass player from The Hostage Band, an R&B group I worked with years ago. The deal was this: he was in a new R&B band that was just about ready to start working. They needed a horn section and were looking to play every weekend if possible.

It was easy to turn down the gig. After all, I was already playing jazz-- forty year old guys trudging through old R&B tunes struck me as some sort of pitiful exercise in nostalgia. That wouldn't do.

Now; neither will half the tunes in the jazz band's book. It is time to find a new way to play *Green Dolphin Street* and start working on some more original material. In the meantime though, I'm lighting out for the kitchen

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