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"Members, Don't Git Weary": Max Roach, "Treme", and the Sound of Resistance

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"Members, Don't Git Weary": Max Roach, *Treme*, and the Sound of Resistance

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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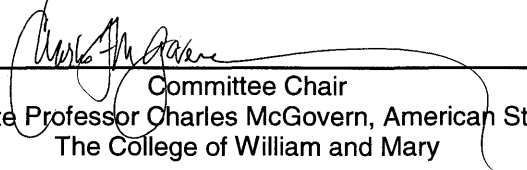
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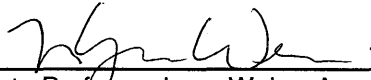
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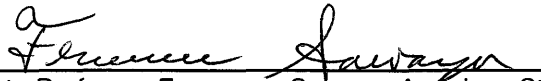


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ABSTRACT

Jazz musicians have continuously imbued their quotidian existence and aesthetic praxis with political valency. This thesis examines two key locations associated with this idea: the life and work of jazz drummer/composer/activist Max Roach and the politically engaged television program *Treme*, which depicts the revitalization of post-Katrina New Orleans through the lens of the musical celebration - and struggle - of its vibrant arts community. Both Roach and *Treme* embody the spirit of political-aesthetic activism. Roach and *Treme*'s dynamic work transports this conception of the political aesthetic to its ultimate reification. It is the goal of this author that this thesis will illuminate the ways Roach and *Treme* engendered the "sound of resistance" via jazz improvisation, composition, political activism, community advocacy, and the catalytic role of cultural identification.

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Rest in peace.

Since their early beginnings, African American jazz musicians have employed radical strategies to escape the shackles of systemic racism in the U.S. society and culture. Along with this rampant racism, acute political and economic oppression forced many black jazz musicians to rethink the intellectual and emotional properties distilled in their music, which resulted in new musical philosophies imbued as much with empowering tactics that informed the music as much as the harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic qualities of their sound. Simply put, the music was no longer just about *the music*. I am interested in the ways in which music is a conduit for social change, specifically by exploring the ways in which jazz practitioners - from the Civil Rights era onward into the present day - are political activists, race warriors preaching the need for social justice through the power of their compositions and improvisations. Such race work has persisted throughout the jazz tradition, with earlier examples of jazz as protest music being Billie Holiday's 1939 recording of "Strange Fruit," Duke Ellington's suite *Black, Brown, and Beige* from 1943, and, coming on the heels of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, Louis Armstrong's 1955 version of "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue."¹

¹ Scholarship on the political nature of these particular pieces can be found in: *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song* (David Margolick, 2001), *Duke Ellington's America* (Harvey G. Cohen, 2010), and *Louis Armstrong: Master of Modernism* (Thomas Brothers, 2014). It should be noted that "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue" was originally composed in 1929 as a collaboration between lyricists Andy Razaf and Harry Brooks, and pianist Thomas "Fats" Waller, who wrote the music.

At the dawn of the Sixties, Max Roach continued this trend, becoming an active member of the Civil Rights Movement's fight against racial inequality, imbuing his music with a pro-black, pan-African political stance. Max Roach embodied the intersection of music, race, and politics as a drummer, composer, and civil rights activist. Beyond his role as the architect of modern jazz drumming, Roach was one of the prime shapers in re-aligning the political discourse within the jazz milieu. Beginning in the late 1950s, and continuing until his death in 2007, Roach's music became political action, a powerful voice for change in the fight for racial equality. In my essay *Dropping Bombs: Max Roach's Radical Political Aesthetic*, I explore three specific performance locations (*Members*, *Don't Git Weary/Force: Sweet Mao – Suid Afrika '76/M'Boom*) in which Roach's political, social, and cultural beliefs were imprinted musically, and show how Roach's innovative legacy has both influenced and been corrupted by the progenitors of the neoclassicist turn in jazz.

Similarly, my essay *Twenty-first Century Blues: Treme, Jazz, and the Remaking of New Orleans*, to be published in the forthcoming book *African American Culture & Society Post Rodney King: Provocations & Protests, Progression & 'Post-Racialism'* (Ashgate Publishing), investigates the theme of musical activism and its various representations in post-Katrina New Orleans. *Treme*, an hour-long HBO television drama created by David Simon and Eric Overmyer that aired from 2010-2013, explores New Orleans' cultural framework through the city's unique forms of black aesthetic traditions. Named for the

historic, traditionally African American neighborhood where the show is situated, *Treme* posits New Orleans as a city in recovery, with no visible political direction, a corrupt criminal justice system, a failing institutional infrastructure, a public education system beyond repair, and an ecology of poverty and violence. With the absence of any tangible and logical course of action from government officials, the members of the black musical community of New Orleans take it upon themselves to solve problems and attempt restoration through musical expression. Specifically, I show (through *Treme*) how second-line parades, creolization, and New Orleans' complex web of musical diversity have played a role in the rebuilding of this decimated city. I contend that by analyzing the content specific to *Treme*, New Orleans' musical culture - specifically the musicians and the members of their particular public sphere - is working as a collective agent for radical change, struggling for survival in a particularly harsh social, political, and economic climate, and striving to revive a city reduced to rubble by Hurricane Katrina.

What connects these two essays is the way in which jazz works as a weapon for social justice, or as worded earlier, *music serves as a conduit for social change*: fighting racism, battling poverty and violence, improving the education system, and transforming the ills of society. At the center of each essay is the depiction of an artist (or in the case of *Treme*, artists) maintaining a dogged commitment to the struggle until victory is in hand. For Roach, victory is racial equality. In *Treme*, it is the re-establishment of the majesty of New

Orleans' unique expressive culture. The underlying connective thread is the idea that to Roach and *Treme*, jazz still matters. It matters in the way that the music can express joy, provide hope, secure income, act as an escape route, give voice to the subaltern, and empower/embolden a community. Jazz flows through the lives of Max Roach and the musicians of *Treme* as a lifeline to humanity, a meditation on the will to survive another day in order to fight for justice.

Dropping Bombs: Max Roach's Radical Political Aesthetic

Prologue: Pittsburgh, 1987

In the fall of 1987, my father dragged me to see the Max Roach Quartet at Harper's, the subterranean Pittsburgh jazz-club operated by the pianist Walt Harper. I say "dragged," because at the time I was an impudent thirteen year-old novice drummer, completely under the spell of all things metal and progressive/classic rock. Metallica's *Master of Puppets*, Rush's *Moving Pictures*, and Led Zeppelin's *Physical Graffiti* provided the soundtrack to my suburban existence. Jazz, let alone the swinging mastery of Max Roach, was completely off my radar. My father, turning a deaf ear to my complaints that "there was no way this Roach guy is better than Rush's Neil Peart," packed me into his yellow Mazda RX-7 and we headed downtown.

I remember there were very few people in the club – only one other table besides ours was occupied. Musically, my memories are pretty blurry, but I know at some point Roach performed his signature Papa Jo Jones tribute for unaccompanied hi-hat (look it up on YouTube – it's a stunning example of

virtuosity). My chief recollection is non-musical: in the middle of the quartet's set, a woman at the other table began to have a seizure. I thought she was dying. The concertgoers at her table appeared stunned, entranced by the slow-motion sensation that is often triggered by a state of emergency. Roach did not hesitate. He flew off the bandstand and - in my naïve, never-seen-anything-like-this-before eyes - saved her life, guiding her safely to the floor, resting her on her side, and making sure her airways were unobstructed. The hi-hat solo was off the charts, but what really stuck with me all these years is the indelible image of Max Roach jumping off the stage and taking total control of the situation. The fearlessness, compassion, and strength of character that jazz scholars have readily recognized in Roach's life and work were immediately apparent in that moment. This was not a man prone to cautiously stand back and passively allow events to unfold. This was a man of action. Roach was purposeful in his movements; he confronted a situation and acted decisively, improvising in the moment. He was the embodiment of the title of his 1958 LP *Deeds, not Words*. And yes, after it became apparent that the seizure victim was stabilized and safely in transit to the hospital, Roach returned to his drums, and along with his band mates, finished the first set.

A year later, my high school jazz band director loaned me a copy of the classic 1955 Clifford Brown and Max Roach recording *Study in Brown*. The fluidity and sheer velocity of Roach's playing on "Cherokee," along with the hard-swinging swagger of "Sandu" and the group's imaginative adaptation of Billy Strayhorn's "Take the 'A' Train," instigated my life-long engagement with Roach's

body of work. Whenever I introduce Roach and his music to one of my students, I always retell the story of that night in Pittsburgh, hoping to impart the concept that you can never separate the human being from the music. On some microscopic level, I hope this anecdote administers the context for my initial understanding of Max Roach's musical performance as a location of action. As I became more familiar with Roach's canon, it became glaringly obvious that action, and more precisely, activism, was intermeshed within his aesthetic ideology. As the 1960s commenced, Roach's social activism would shape and focus his musical praxis.

Making the Changes

While it is apparent to many of us that a transformation in black consciousness is taking place throughout the political, social, and cultural framework of the United States, it is not always clear what relationship black music has to that transformation.

Max Roach (1972)²

Max Roach embodied the intersection of music, race, and politics as a drummer, composer, and civil rights activist. Beyond his role as the architect of modern jazz drumming, Roach was one of the prime shapers in re-aligning the political discourse within the jazz milieu. Using his status as an innovator/leader as a platform to present his ideas on the need to unlock the death-grip of white

² Roach, Max. "What 'Jazz' Means to Me." *The Black Scholar*. Summer 1972, vol. 3, no. 10, p. 3.

America's hold on the power structure in the United States, by 1960 Roach had come to the understanding that music was an agent for awareness, subversion, and ultimately, progress.³ One of the few original bebop musicians to become involved with Black Cultural Nationalism, Roach was a key figure in the fight for black civil rights within the jazz matrix. Girded and inspired by the self-determination and self-reliance gleaned from his and his colleagues' achievements at Minton's Playhouse, Roach transformed his musical aesthetic into a progressive, quasi-militant stance characterized by Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.'s definition of Afro-modernism: "For African Americans, the thrust of Afro-modernism has *always* been defined primarily within the sociopolitical arena: as the quest for liberation, freedom, and literacy as well as the seeking of upward mobility and enlarged possibilities within the American capitalist system."⁴ As a musician working inside the commercial sphere, Roach's approach to black expressive culture shifted; his creative process was now aligned with the demand for uplift within the black community. Roach's compositions and recordings provided the semiotic dimensions upon which the public(s) – his audience, jazz critics, and fellow musicians – would delineate the political significance of his music within American culture.

At the dawn of the 1960s, African-American jazz musicians were employing radical strategies to escape the shackles of the systemic racism inherent to the hierarchical cultural structure operating within the United States.

³ Taylor, Arthur. *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interviews* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977), Kindle Edition, Location 1421.

⁴ Ramsey, Jr., Guthrie. *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 106.

In tandem with this rampant racism, acute political and economic oppression forced many black jazz musicians of this era to rethink the intellectual and emotional properties distilled in their music, imbuing their overall musical philosophies with empowering tactics - (as well as self-destructive behavioral practices) - that informed the music as much as the harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic qualities of their sound. Simply put, the music was no longer just about *the music*. Maybe this was always the case, but at the dawn of the Sixties, this idea was coming increasingly to the forefront. For example, the pianist/composer Sun Ra created a proto-Afrofuturistic cosmic philosophy that obliterated his upbringing in the intensely segregated Birmingham, Alabama and repositioned his origin story to the planet Saturn. John Coltrane began investing his compositions, improvisations, and ensemble interactions with a metaphysical intensity that his wife, the pianist Alice Coltrane, would deem the search for “universal consciousness.” Ornette Coleman, sickened by the racially discriminating financial strategies, tactics, and policies of promoters and club owners, simply dropped out of the scene, temporarily retiring from music in 1962. Encouraged by the promise of plentiful work, a relatively benign racial climate, and the respectful treatment befitting an artist, avant-garde pioneer Sunny Murray relocated to Europe. Shirley Clarke’s seminal independent film *The Connection*, depicted the dismal quotidian existence of jazz’s heroin culture, syncretizing the qualities of subversion, euphoria, and danger tethered to this particular escape route.

Max Roach became an active member of the Civil Rights Movement's fight against racial inequality, imbuing his music with a pro-black, pan-African political stance. Beginning in the late 1950s, and continuing until his death in 2007, Roach's music became political action, a powerful voice for change in the fight for racial equality. In this essay, I will explore specific ways in which Roach's political, social, and cultural beliefs were imprinted musically, and show how Roach's legacy has both influenced and been corrupted by the progenitors of the neoclassicist turn in jazz.

Let Freedom Scream

I'm a black man who is in the United States of America and I'm still searching for me and myself - for my family, for my children, and everything.

Max Roach (1973)⁵

As a drummer, Roach possessed laser clarity and graph-like precision; his solos were constructed with a logician's ken, often seeming more composed than improvised. This attention to structure and form emboldened his skill as a supreme stylist, an original improviser with a singular voice. It was with this awareness and heightened focus that Roach turned his musical gaze to the issues facing the black community at the end of the 1950s. Specifically, Roach's collaboration with jazz vocalist (and future wife) Abbey Lincoln spawned two

⁵ Cheatham, Jomo. "A Shot of Life (part two)." 30 May 1993. Online video clip. YouTube. Accessed on 03 March 2014.

influential, as well as controversial LPs: Max Roach - *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, and Max Roach - *Percussion Bitter Sweet*. His involvement with the 1960 Newport “rebels” and the formation of the short-lived Jazz Artists’ Guild solidified his role as a political organizer. These key moments of Roach’s performance locations have been examined extensively. The impressive scholarship of Ingrid Monson, John Gennari, Eric Porter, Iain Anderson, and Scott Saul has presented salient arguments representing Roach as one of the crucial musical civil rights activists of the 1960s.⁶ Their scholarly work is important because it analyzed Roach’s early politically charged work and musical praxis at a time when jazz still mattered within the American public sphere. This essay will draw from this scholarship, as well as posit Roach’s sweeping body of work as a conduit of mobility – a strategic struggle towards self-determination and aesthetic transcendence – across the terrain of jazz, as well as the American culture. Roach has stated, “Black people have to keep moving. That’s why every new generation of black people is *obliged* to try something new. Every new generation of black folks comes up with a new innovation because we’re not

⁶ Anderson, Iain. *This is our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Monson, Ingrid T. *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). O’Meally, Robert G., Edwards, Brent Hayes, and Griffin, Farah Jasmine, eds. *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*. Gennari, John. “Hipsters, Bluebloods, Rebels, and Hooligans: The Cultural Politics of the Newport Jazz Festival, 1954-1960” (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Porter, Eric. *What is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Saul, Scott. *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

satisfied with the way the system is economically, politically, and sociologically.”⁷ Roach cut a wide stylistic swath, and in doing so mapped a course for creating a musical praxis steeped in what trombonist/musicologist George Lewis has called “the Afrological” – a metaphorical term referring to the “musical belief system and behavior” historically attributed to African Americans.⁸ In Roach’s hands, “black musical belief systems” were imaginative and expansive. With this idea of the “Afrological” in mind, I would like to examine three of Roach’s important (if overlooked) performance locations: the LP *Members, Don’t Git Weary*, his avant-garde duo work with Archie Shepp on the recording *Force: Sweet Mao-Suid Afrika ‘76*, and his percussion ensemble M’Boom.

Swinging the Metaphysical

Black leadership came out of the church. And black musicianship came out of the church.

Max Roach (1984)⁹

⁷ Owen, Frank. “Hip Hop Bebop.” *Spin* October 1988: 60.

⁸ George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives.” In *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, eds. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), 274. Understand that Lewis is not an essentialist, rather he is interested in underscoring the historical veracity of the cultural components of improvisational practice. His terms afrological and eurological “make no attempt to delineate ethnicity or race, although they are designed to ensure that the reality of the ethnic or racial component of a historically emergent sociomusical group must be faced squarely and honestly.”

⁹ *Sit Down and Listen: The Story of Max Roach*. Geoffrey Haydon. A Third Eye Production for Channel Four. 1984. DVD.

The exposition of the documentary film *Sit Down and Listen: The Story of Max Roach* features an extended scene following Roach as he visits North Carolina's Mount Carmel Baptist Church, where as a child his family used to partake in services.¹⁰ Riffing on the role of the black church's importance in the development and genealogy of the African American expressive continuum, Roach asserts that, "The church . . . has been the fountainhead, and actually the school, the music school if you will, of some of the greatest artists that America has produced; since Mahalia Jackson and on up through to Aretha Franklin, and as well as Michael Jackson and people like that. All these roots come from our religious background . . . this is where I come from. If there is anything musical about me, its roots started in this kind of environment and the church, the Mount Carmel Baptist Church."¹¹

Throughout his career, Roach revisited the gospel music of his youth, arranging various spirituals, gospel tunes, and original works for a unique synthesis of vocal soloists, choir, and jazz ensemble, most notably on the LPs *It's Time* (1962), *Members, Don't Git Weary* (1968), and *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (1971). Of these three recordings, *Members, Don't Git Weary* relates the connection of the black church to the civil rights era, specifically in how black spirituals and gospel music were utilized to rally and solidify the movement.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The personnel on *Members* was stellar, a unique blend of performers who embraced both traditional jazz values and the spirit of innovation that characterized the avant-garde: Gary Bartz – alto saxophone, Charles Tolliver – trumpet, Stanley Cowell – piano/Fender Rhodes, Jymie Merritt – bass, and guest vocalist Andy Bey.

Recorded on June 25-26, 1968 - (directly in the aftermath of the killings of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy) - *Members* provides significant insight as to how the political climate in the United States was influencing Roach's musical frame of mind during this time period. The pervasive disgust and growing disillusionment with the war in Vietnam, along with the intense tragedy and frustration associated with the assassinations of JFK, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bobby Kennedy, fractured the soul of the civil rights era. Black America was smoldering in its realization that its goals had been thwarted. In cities ranging from Los Angeles, Detroit, and Newark, urban riots broke out in black neighborhoods, a testament to the extreme acrimony African-Americans felt towards white symbols of power within these areas.¹³ Exacerbating the tinder-box like atmosphere was the sickening realities of certain lower-income black communities stuck in a horrendous cycle of "unemployment, the deterioration of the ghetto, the rising crime, drug addiction, violence."¹⁴

Overall, *Members* is a blistering post-bop artifact, hinting at the plurality of the various musical trends of the late 1960s jazz milieu: the influence on jazz of the burgeoning soul music movement (Fender Rhodes electric piano on "Absolutions"/the funk-bathed rhythms on "Abstrutions"), the establishment of free improvisation as a legitimate practice within jazz, knotty - if lyrical - melodic compositions, and blues-based rhapsodic incantations. The title track falls into this last category, and features the moving vocals of guest singer Andy Bey.

¹³ Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), 451.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 458.

Roach arranges the traditional Negro spiritual in a defiantly unique setting, forgoing strict meter for a rubato exploration, emphasizing the song's lyrical content. Drums and cymbals contract and expand the time, hurtling headlong into the dizzy circularity of the harmonic tension, conveying the urgency of the song's message as Bey sings:

Members, don't git weary/Members don't git weary
Members, don't git weary/For the work's almost done
Keep your lamp trimmed and burning/Keep your lamp trimmed and
burning
Keep your lamp trimmed and burning/For the work's almost done
We're going down to the river Jordan/We're going down to the river Jordan
We're going down to the river Jordan/When our work is done
We're gonna to sit at the welcome table/We're gonna sit at the welcome
table
We're gonna sit at the welcome table/When our work is done
We're gonna feast on milk and honey/We're gonna feast on milk and
honey
We're gonna feast on milk and honey/When our work is done
We're gonna march with the tallest angel/We're gonna march with the
tallest angel/We're gonna march with the tallest angel/When our work is
done

“Members” can be heard as a free jazz take on a gospel standard – the twist being the unbridled musical accompaniment to Bey’s solid, dignified, and resolutely transparent vocal part. There is a sense of dignity in his voice, a resolve that is impenetrable. As the rhythm section rumbles on, completely shunning standard time-keeping procedures, a trance-like effect is induced. The music functions as a snake charmer – captivating the listener with a repetitive technique signified by Bey’s vocal line “when our work is done.”

Awash with biblical imagery, the implication of this tune’s meaning is the continued need to rail against the oppressive power structure in the United States. In the wake of his leaders’ assassinations, Roach is calling out to reinvigorate the movement, awakening the subaltern to the fact that a protracted effort was still required to achieve the goals of equality and self-determination. Roach’s radical political aesthetic echoed the notion that the fight must continue, for the goals of the Civil Rights movement had still not been reified. As the seventies began, Roach would tap into this sentiment as he approached his most subversive work to date with the avant-garde leaning LP, Max Roach/Archie Shepp *Force: Sweet Mao – Suid Afrika '76*.

The Abstract Truth

We are all part of the same continuum. Taking the least and making something out of it is what we have always had to do, and it personifies the (creative) genius of black folks in this country.

Max Roach (1993)¹⁵

When talking about the 1960s, Roach's colleague Sonny Rollins stated: "The main thing that affected me during this period was the change going on in this country with the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. That is the main reason for what happened with music during this time: things just reached a point where people wanted to say something about it. This reflected in the music we were making at that time. People were trying to escape from the restriction of society, all this racism and these kinds of things."¹⁶ As the seventies broke, Roach's compulsion to address the ills of society and "say something about it" did not subside.

Turning his musical gaze onto a series of duets with key instrumentalists of the African American jazz avant-garde (Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Anthony Braxton), as well as a cross-cultural collaboration with the South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (formerly Dollar Brand), Roach aimed his political bile towards global issues, particularly with the release of Max Roach/Archie Shepp *Force: Sweet Mao – Suid Afrika '76*.

In the early 1970s, both Roach and Shepp were appointed to the faculty of the University of Massachusetts Amherst. At this institution, they would begin a musical partnership that would last throughout the 1970s. While on tour of Europe in the summer of 1976, Roach and Shepp were approached with the idea

¹⁵ "A shot of Life (part three)."

¹⁶ Nisenson, Eric. *Open Sky: Sonny Rollins and his World of Improvisation* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 172.

of creating a musical suite dedicated to the recently deceased Mao Tse-tung. Recorded in Paris, France and released on the Italian Uniteledis label in 1977, *Force* was facilitated by the death of Mao on September 9, 1976: “Mao Tse-tung had died, so the Left all over Europe wanted to pay tribute . . . Archie and I did it as a duo. I wrote ‘Sweet Mao’, in three parts. About that time there had also been a slaughter of students in South Africa, so I wrote another piece, ‘Soweto ‘76’.”¹⁷ *Force*’s opening suite “Sweet Mao: La Preparation/La Marche/Le Commencement” features Roach’s most scorching drumming since “Tryptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace” from 1960’s *We Insist: Freedom Now Suite*.

What cannot be overstated is the seething fury that is sonically transmitted when listening to “Sweet Mao.” It was often a cliché of jazz criticism to interpret the content of the free jazz movement as “violent,” but on this particular recording, there is a genuine feeling of carnage.¹⁸ The sheer face-melting energy and riveting intensity, conflated with the stamina and sustained fervor witnessed in these tracks (each movement of the suite is over sixteen minutes long) makes for a powerful aesthetic experience. These are radical, extreme performances, even to the point of making his groundbreaking 1960s political music praxis seem tame.

Though Roach has never publicly identified as a communist, “Sweet Mao,” has to be heard as an aesthetic testimonial of solidarity with the political Left in the wake of Mao’s death. In the original liner notes, Acklyn R. Lynch asserts,

¹⁷ Roach, Max. As told to Acklyn R. Lynch, liner notes for Max Roach/Archie Shepp *Force: Sweet Mao – Suid Afrika ’76*, (September 10, 1976).

¹⁸ Gennari, John. *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

“Max Roach and Archie Shepp attempt throughout the work to suggest that political commitment demands physical endurance, intellectual integrity, intense meditation, artistic vision, uncompromising courage, and an undying love for one’s people.”¹⁹

As a case in point, the final movement of *Sweet Mao*, “Le Commencement,” is a body-rocking, deep-in-the-pocket groove revelation. Almost a backbeat, Roach snakes a grease-slicked pattern around Shepp’s blues-drenched lines: the duo intones a fever-dream meant to eulogize the gone, but not forgotten, Mao Tse-tung. Roach’s threnody for Mao is a full-bodied ecstatic 4/4 swingfest. Beginning the piece with some of his signature melodic drum set phrases played at full bash, cymbal accents intone gloriously, bathed in a ferocity that Roach rarely displayed on earlier recordings. When Shepp enters with a dagger-like six-note phrase, constantly embellishing and reinventing this line, Roach and Shepp synthesize their collaborative sound into a rhapsodic celebration for the achievements of the deceased. A musical dance for the dead.

As a side-note, the album’s cover-art, featuring an illustration by Christian Gaillard, provides a stunning meta-narrative to the unfolding musical drama. A titanic, outstretched black fist emerges from an ocean vista, while the image of Mao treads water in the background. Black power intermingles with the enduring image of the radical political Left. In the aftermath of Mao’s death, Roach and Shepp are turning their collective energies towards the fight to defeat Apartheid in South Africa, a battle that would engross the global community with the advent

¹⁹ Acklyn R. Lynch, liner notes for Max Roach/Archie Shepp *Force: Sweet Mao – Suid Afrika '76*, (September 10, 1976).

of the 1980s. Their musical statement asserts a fierce agenda of aggressive activism, bold camaraderie, and the fearless commitment to the cause for human rights.

Beyond the Traps

My passion does come from the fact that I realize that we haven't been given the opportunity to really participate in this society of ours as citizens and its something we're gonna struggle with.

Max Roach (1993)²⁰

Throughout his career, Roach intermingled with classical music and musicians, invariably on his terms and always in an attempt to address some aspect of classical music from a jazz musician's (read African American) perspective. For example, Roach's percussion group, the sublime M'Boom, was modeled after Western European contemporary classical percussion ensembles, employing xylophone, glockenspiel, marimba, timpani, and chimes – all instruments associated with the European canon. Alongside these instruments were trap set, vibraphone, claves, musical saw, congas, timbales, bongos, gongs, and steel drum, instruments closer in connection to American and Latin American jazz, Afro-Caribbean and world music. M'Boom's members were predominantly African American jazz drum set players with a vast degree of experience performing standard classical percussion literature, as well as an

²⁰ "A Shot of Life (part 2)."

interest in composition. Emphasis must be placed on the notion that the drummers of M'Boom identified first as jazz musicians. Besides Roach, members included Roy Brooks, Joe Chambers, Omar Clay, Freddie Waits, Ray Mantilla, and Warren Smith.²¹ About M'Boom, Roach claimed: "We hope it will bring about a better understanding of what we as African-Americans can contribute to percussion literature. We started in the summer of 1970, and the group is just beginning to jell. It's something extra that all of us have dedicated ourselves to. I might add that all the members of the group are accomplished percussion players and also very fine composers, which was why we put those six people together. It's been a revelation to me and I guess everybody else involved."²² This "revelation" was drawn from Roach's palpable excitement over M'Boom's synthesis of jazz and classical traditions. Or was Roach's exuberance tied to his sly appropriation of the classical model of the percussion ensemble, and his refiguring to fit the African American format? Roach himself has stated, "I wanted to have a percussion ensemble . . . that reflected what we call American music, or jazz if you will – the improvisational thing. Not like Stockhausen."²³ By forming an improvisational-based percussion ensemble, Roach was taking territorial possession of an aesthetic practice that was always

²¹ Here is a brief compilation of the various jazz musicians the different members of M'Boom performed with: Roy Brooks (Yusef Lateef, Abdullah Ibrahim), Joe Chambers (Joe Henderson, Andrew Hill), Omar Clay (Sarah Vaughan, Horace Silver), Freddie Waits (Pharoah Sanders, McCoy Tyner), Ray Mantilla (Dizzy Gillespie, Don Pullen), and Warren Smith (Anthony Braxton, Julius Hemphill).

²² Taylor, Arthur. *Notes and Tones: Musician to Musician Interviews* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977), Kindle Edition, Location 1456.

²³ Haydon, Geoffrey and Marks, Dennis. *Repercussions: A Celebration of African-American Music* (London: Century Publishing, 1985), 97.

close to his creative domain. Considering that the concept of the percussion ensemble is an ancient African tradition, Roach is reformatting it to fit his personal musical purview. This co-optation can be understood as a classic example of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s trope of "signifyin(g)."²⁴ Roach, by flipping the script and mutating the conventional, white orientation of the classical percussion ensemble into an African American improvisation-based, groove-oriented juggernaut, radically shifts/re-imagines the classical aesthetic. From a cultural and political standpoint, Roach's subversion is a heroic feat and suggests that as his career evolved, his commitment to an awakened notion of black consciousness and the continued African American struggle for racial equality would not be quelled, only recast and re-envisioned.

Roach's "The Glorious Monster," from M'Boom's 1979 eponymous release, swings with an Afrofuturistic strut that belies its 7/4 time signature. Dedicated to the late Clifford Brown, "The Glorious Monster" presents a constellation of aural textures, ranging from the psychedelic tones of Roy Brooks' musical saw to the sturm and drang of Roach's multiple percussion (drum set) and Freddie Waits' violent concert tom tom incantations. Mirroring the function of the double bass in a jazz ensemble, Omar Clay's timpani ostinato provides the low-end bedrock for Joe Chamber's vibraphone solo during the second section of the piece. This ostinato, in combination with the marimba, conga, clave, and hi-hat patterns, supplies a simmering rhythmic chug that is the simulacrum of the classic jazz rhythm section (piano/bass/drums).

²⁴ Gates Jr., Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 68-71.

What is most striking about M'Boom is the depth of the emphasis they place on "the groove." This is body-music for the introvert, mindful improvisation for the extrovert.²⁵ By this, I mean to imply that Roach and company are unleashing the creative potential of the ensemble. They are simply taking the musical elements they utilize as jazz musicians and applying them to the percussion ensemble format.

It should be noted that this idea of priority to an infectious rhythmic impulse is also the chief area of differentiation between M'Boom and the standard classical percussion ensemble. The effect is a palpable expression of rhythmic "swing" that has no real role in the classical realm. What is the calculus of "swinging?" How do we describe this *action* in the abstract? The concept of swing is understood as a type of "rhythmic flow": the buoyant repetition/joyful interaction that is experienced during the collaborative act of structural group improvisation while playing "time."²⁶ "Swinging" is generally understood as a feeling, the affect of the reification of the abstract groove. It is the heartbeat of the music.

Even on a relatively sedate and pulse-less composition like Roach's sublime "January V" (dedicated to the late bassist/composer Charles Mingus), there is a jazz feeling – a looseness and/or restless sonic ripple effect - within the swelling harmony and haunting melodic development. This piece falls closer to the sphere of the jazz ballad than something from the classical percussion

²⁵ Monson, Ingrid. *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 66-69.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26-29.

ensemble canon. Shadowing the shape-shifting possibilities of the modern percussion ensemble in dialogue with an improvisational approach to performance, Roach and M'Boom re-envision the percussion ensemble as a fluid, African American machine. As a side note, the dedication of Roach's compositions to two powerful African American jazz musicians (Mingus and Brown) whose lives were tragically cut short, but whose influence and inspiration is enduring, echoes this essay's earlier analysis of Roach's *Members, Don't Get Weary* as a searing musical testimonial to the need to continue the fight for equality in light of the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

Deceptive Cadence

In all respects, culturally, politically, socially, we must re-define ourselves and our lives, in our own terms. As we continue this process, we will more accurately see indeed what we are, and what power we do have.

Max Roach (1972)²⁷

Max Roach is a pivotal figure in understanding the twenty-first century jazz milieu. As the music arrives at its hundredth birthday, jazz operates as a niche art, represented by a myriad of stylistic amalgamations, retro-scenes, and post-avant-garde approaches. In other words, jazz is an intricate webbing of interconnected sonic and cultural networks. Roach's expansive engagement with various trends within black expressive culture – bebop, political chamber

²⁷ Roach, 6.

jazz, gospel, the avant-garde, hip hop – as well as his mutations of European-based musics, places him as an excellent case study for understanding the complex cultural hegemony of contemporary American jazz.²⁸

A disconcerting trend within the sphere of jazz is the conservative neoclassical movement spearheaded by Wynton Marsalis and Jazz at Lincoln Center. In some ways, Roach's body of work is a blueprint for the exclusive and confining agenda of the neoclassical ontology. From a different perspective though, Roach's restless creativity and his association with the avant-garde goes against their traditionalist program. Attempting to make Roach a representative of their goals, openly displays the lack of clarity of the neoclassicists' message.

Championed by Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, and Wynton Marsalis, the neoclassicist project of a stiff definition of jazz (swing/blues/ballad/latin-tinge/improvisation), coupled with an aggressive commercial agenda and educational stance, came to fashion in the late 1980s alongside the development of Jazz at Lincoln Center.²⁹ Grounded upon the intellectual framework of Duke Ellington's compositional characteristics and the rigorous challenge of bebop performance, neoclassicism speaks to Roach's (and Murray's) ideas about black ingenuity, regardless of idiom. What the neoclassicists decline to convey, is how bebop was a representation of nonconformity, and a revolt against the status quo. As to how the political significance of bebop was connected to its musical agenda, Roach's colleague Dizzy Gillespie stated: "For a generation of

²⁹ Crouch, Stanley. *Considering Genius: Writings on Jazz* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 210.

Americans and young people around the world, who reached maturity during the 1940s, bebop symbolized a rebellion against the rigidities of the old order, an outcry for a change in almost every field, especially in music. The bopper wanted to impress the world with a new stamp, the uniquely modern design of a new generation coming of age."³⁰ Under the current flaccid neoclassicist/Lincoln Center regime, the defanging of jazz's overtly political significance seems particularly alarming.

Neoclassical mouthpiece Wynton Marsalis, making the case for Roach's inclusion as one of the first artists highlighted in Jazz at Lincoln Center's 1988 Classical Jazz series, stated: "(Roach's) stature as a musician, composer and bandleader is the result of his having created a larger and more varied body of work than any other drummer-leader. He has done solo pieces, pieces for drums and voice, for jazz ensembles, percussion ensembles, for choirs, and has performed with video. While working with Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell and Clifford Brown, he developed a new vocabulary that gave the drums another level of identity. He played the drums in a way that not only kept the time and accentuated the beat, but he also developed the call-and-response idea central to the foundations of American music."³¹ Unpacking Marsalis' statement is a disconcerting lesson in the art of elision. Beyond the general omission of Roach's importance as a political firebrand within the jazz tradition, there is no mention of Roach's avant-garde duo

³⁰ Gillespie, Dizzy with Fraser, Al. *To Be or Not to Bop: Memoirs of Dizzy Gillespie* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), 278-302.

³¹ Walser, Robert, ed. *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*. Roach, Max. "Beyond Categories" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 337.

work with the likes of Shepp, pianists Cecil Taylor and Abdullah Ibrahim, and multi-reedist Anthony Braxton. For Marsalis, the free-improvisation of Roach's duo work did not fall under the rubric of jazz for it did not meet his rigid musical requirements of swing/blues/ballad/latin-tinge/improvisation. To Roach, playing in the duo format was part of the autodidactic black continuum signified by the informal jam session and not unlike his experience as a younger musician: "It really all began back in the 1940s, when I used to have jam sessions in the basement at Monroe Avenue. I'd be there with just Cecil Payne, or maybe Leonard Hawkins on trumpet. There wasn't room for more than two of us in that little cubbyhole."³²

Also omitted from Marsalis' statement is Roach's belief in the importance of hip-hop culture as an empowering artform to the black community.³³ Roach deemed hip-hop a "phenomenal innovation" and claimed for African American musicians, "everyday is a new audition. And it's the same with hip-hop. Since I started listening to it four or five years ago, its evolved at breakneck speed. The changes in the music are very radical and it's changing all the time. Black folks are always saying, 'Man, we gotta keep on getting up. Man, we gotta keep on getting up.' Every new generation of black people is going to come up with something new until things are equitable for black people in society."³⁴ For Roach, jazz and hip-hop were related in the fact that their origins were similar. Both were products not of the academy and formal education, but of the streets:

³² Haydon and Marks, 97.

³³ Owen, 60.

³⁴ Ibid., 60.

“Louis Armstrong didn’t go to school; he was an orphan, he came from a poor section of New Orleans, he came from disenfranchised black people. He didn’t have the advantage of a conservatory education but he came up with something that affected the whole world. And the same goes for Charlie Parker. Hip-hop came out of the city’s poorest area, out of miserable public education . . . they didn’t have normal instruments, they invented a way to create sounds with turntables. They came up with something that affected the whole world in terms of rhythm, movement, the spoken word and the visual arts. They joined the ranks of the Louis Armstrongs and Charlie Parkers because they created something out of nothing.”³⁵ This notion of creating “something out of nothing” alludes to the two primary underpinnings of Roach’s personal musical expression: black exceptionalism and the trope of “finding your own sound.” Roach averred, “What I learned from [Big Sid Catlett], [Coleman Hawkins], people like Charlie Parker was ‘You don’t join the throng until you write your own song.’”³⁶ Creating a singular voice is further tethered to the idea of the continuum of black ingenuity and the idea that “[African Americans] have had to create to survive in a hostile society.”³⁷ Bulwarking this point Roach claimed, “I don’t separate Charlie Parker from Michael Jordan. I don’t separate Michael

³⁵ Ibid., 60.

³⁶ Korall, Burt. *Drummin’ Men: The Heartbeat of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 193. Also, this is a quote Roach often attributed to saxophonist Lester Young.

³⁷ “A Shot of Life (part three).”

Jordan from Michael Jackson. I don't separate Michael Jackson from Aretha Franklin. All of it exemplifies the genius of black creativity."³⁸

For his part, Roach's public statements about neoclassicism have been mixed. In 2004's *Highway 61 Revisited: The Tangled Roots of American Jazz, Blues, Rock, and Country Music*, music historian Gene Santoro prefaces his interview with Roach by highlighting Roach's ambivalence with the musical and institutional machinations of Marsalis and Lincoln Center: "Twenty years ago, when I first interviewed [Roach], he straddled the fence on Wynton Marsalis, then a hot, divisive topic of discussion: he thought the trumpeter's classical chops outpaced his jazz abilities . . . but added that it was about time jazz musicians themselves and American institutions like Lincoln Center recognized the value of what Roach, like many in the jazz world, sees as America's greatest contribution to the arts. Then when Marsalis unveiled his rather Mingusy but jumbled extended work, 'All Rise,' in the late 1990s, Roach was furious: 'Those churchy sections,' he sputtered at me during the intermission, 'are shit! He's never even been in a Baptist or Holy Roller church, and it shows.' In my review, I attributed the cleaned-up quote to 'a jazz legend in the audience'; Roach told me the day the piece ran that he got a sharp phone call from Lincoln Center officials – they'd guessed it was him and wanted to know why he'd talked such trash to me. 'Because it's what I think,' he shot back."³⁹

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Santoro, Gene. *Highway 61 Revisited: The Tangled Roots of American Jazz, Blues, Rock, and Country Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 37.

Jazz at Lincoln Center, the bastion of neoclassicism, is arguably the most powerful institution within American jazz culture; certainly the best funded and most vocal/visible, with an omnipotent stranglehold on the political economy of all things jazz. But beyond the reach of Jazz at Lincoln Center, concomitant new jazz scenes are stylistically syncretizing, intermeshing, and restructuring the music in unique fashions. By listening to the recent movements within the genre - Jason Moran's hip-hop experiments, Rudresh Mahanthappa's immersion into the Carnatic music of South India, and Dave Douglas' chamber music explorations - we can hear jazz's future: an ever-expanding horizon-less artform that daringly confronts infinite musical possibilities, reflecting America's multiple identities, and connecting with Roach's personal ethos of pursuing a inimitable path. As jazz continues to evolve, Max Roach's influence as a restructuralist is reified in several areas: as a unique voice with an expansive musical definition of jazz, an endless curiosity about how the music's properties can be restructured - both aurally and culturally, a powerful belief in music as a political agent of change, and an awakened notion of African American consciousness.

Epilogue: From Bebop to Hip-Hop

There must be some kind of awakening. In order to survive an art must be a stethoscope of the community in which it evolves. It must be a vital part

of the community, because as long as the people live, the art lives; the art is the people.

Max Roach⁴⁰

To Roach, hip-hop was another movement within the continuum of black musical genius. Roach was always open to new musical adventures. His career was a spectacular journey through creative possibilities, a panoply of sonic combinations: trio, quartet, double quartet, drum set concertos, solo improvisations, drum/sax duos, jazz quintet with gospel choir, percussion ensemble, and drums + spoken word. That hip-hop would resonate with his peripatetic aesthetic is completely fitting. Encompassed by graffiti art, break dancing, rap music, and turntablism, hip-hop is a natural outgrowth of jazz and a representation of the African Diaspora.

Author and cultural interpreter Josh Kun's *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* skewers the ocularity of the American racial imaginary, relocating and filtering its ontological focus through the aural matrix, and one of his chief projects is connecting the work of the bebop movement to the development of hip-hop in the United States.⁴¹ As Kun relates: "Bebop musicians understood the importance of communicating their racial difference from the American mainstream through their music. They understood that American slavery and

⁴⁰ Taylor, Kindle Edition, Location 1293.

⁴¹ Kun, Josh. *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

American racism had made them, as black musicians, separate from America.”⁴²

Bebop musicians like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, and Max Roach, crystallized a reinvention for the black cultural continuum through the blatant negation of the status quo: bebop was the sound of pro-black, antiracist sentiment. Beyond bebop, hip-hop is a direct byproduct of the African American musical continuum: “The black diaspora is nowhere better exemplified than in the incredible fusion of multiple languages engaged in the rhetorical, rhythmic, percussive, tonal, and sonic structures of hip hop. Even a brief listen to hip hop gives you a sense of its sheer musical vitality and tonal signatures; the polyrhythmic structure of hip hop cadences, like the funk music it partially bit off; the improvisational elements of the art form; the booming and bracing sound systems being transported from the Caribbean to American soil; the guttural cries, shrieks, and moans that lace the aural landscape; and the ingenious multicultural dimensions of rhetoric insinuated into the percussive elements of African diasporic cultures.”⁴³ Inherent within the “aural landscape” of this particular Diaspora, are the social and political components of the black aesthetic - an aesthetic intimately associated with the struggle for the equality of African Americans.

That Roach has been an inspiration to the sprawling polychromatic sensation that is hip-hop culture in post-1980s America should come as no surprise. Frederick Brathwaite, aka Fab 5 Freddy, was an early hip-hop culture

⁴² Ibid., 125.

⁴³ Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007), 47.

enthusiast/participant, as well as the godson of Max Roach. In many ways, Brathwaite was the catalyst for the impending explosion of hip-hop culture in New York City. A street-artist involved with graffiti art, Brathwaite had higher aspirations and ambitions and longed to be a serious artist. His studies of the contemporary art world led to an epiphany about the connections between the seemingly incongruous styles of painting that encompassed modern art: "I had looked at all the movements that were kind of radical, like Futurism, the Dadaists, the Impressionists, the Abstract Expressionists into the Pop Artists. To me, it was like, wait a minute, this shit is a lot like what graffiti is," he says. "So I was thinking about how to make moves into the art world, but still keep the integrity of what graffiti was."⁴⁴ Roach heard from Brathwaite's father that Freddy and his friends had been experimenting with a new sound. Roach was intrigued. In an interview with Willard Jenkins, Freddy reminisced on the influence of Roach, and marveled at the encouragement he received from him as to the validity of the new style of music. After only a brief demonstration, Roach lectured Freddy: "Let me tell you guys something, that shit that you and your man were doing was incredible as anything that me, Bird, Dizzy, and any of us were doing."⁴⁵ Roach further extrapolated this point in a PBS interview from 1990: "When I first heard rap, I thought it was one of the most revolutionary sounds that I'd heard at this time . . . Being a drummer, the fact that there was no melody and no harmony – I

⁴⁴ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 148.

⁴⁵ Fab 5 Freddy interview with Willard Jenkins, "Fab 5 Freddy: The Max Roach Influence. JazzTimes Online, 5/26/2011.

thought (this) was absolutely revolutionary.”⁴⁶ As always, Roach remained firmly committed to the cause of black advancement in America. With hip-hop, he was cognizant of its vast potential, commercially and communally. He told Brathwaite, “Man, if you don’t know it, this is so big what you guys are doing.”⁴⁷ By the end of the 1980s, hip-hop would be a global phenomenon.

Twenty-first Century Blues: *Treme*, Jazz, and the Remaking of New Orleans

New Orleans, that was a place where music was a natural as the air. The people were ready for it like it was sun and rain. A musicianer, when he played in New Orleans, was home; and the music, when he played it, would go right to where he sent it. The people were waiting for it, they were wanting it.

—Sidney Bechet⁴⁸

Treme, an hour-long HBO television drama created by David Simon and Eric Overmyer that aired from 2010-2013, explores the cultural framework of post-Katrina New Orleans through the city’s unique forms of black aesthetic traditions. In an early review of the show, *New York Times* television critic Allesandra

⁴⁶ Max Roach, PBS interview, 1990.

⁴⁷ “Fab 5 Freddy.”

⁴⁸ Sidney Bechet, *Treat It Gentle* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1960): 215.

Stanley stated that “[*Treme*] uses sound and imagery to suggest that even the worst damage and disruption can’t extinguish the *joie de vivre*” specific to New Orleans’ musical culture.⁴⁹ Named for the historic, traditionally African American neighborhood where the show is situated, *Treme* posits New Orleans as a city in recovery, with no visible political direction, a corrupt criminal justice system, a failing institutional infrastructure, a public education system beyond repair, and an ecology of poverty and violence. With the absence of any tangible and logical course of action from government officials, the members of the black musical community of New Orleans take it upon themselves to solve problems and attempt restoration through musical expression. Particularly intriguing is *Treme*’s placement of jazz (and its derivatives) as a living artform, whose historical narrative signifies a unifying presence to the existing cultural sphere. New Orleans has a long tradition of activism within its vast musical matrix, and *Treme* portrays a robust community in which the mere act of *being* a musician is political.

In a 1970 interview, Ralph Ellison famously hypothesized that American culture was “jazz-shaped.”⁵⁰ New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz, is a cultural environment whose racial, political, economic, and social dimensions have

⁴⁹ Allesandra Stanley, “After Katrina, Staying Afloat with Music,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2010: C1, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

⁵⁰ Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” *Time*, April 6, 1970: 56, <http://content.time.com>.

mirrored the dynamics of the music's extraordinary properties of improvisation, transcendence, genius, and survival.⁵¹ As an irreplaceable, invaluable "jazz-shaped" cultural milieu, the remaking of New Orleans is a project of necessity, one that requires a sensitive, nuanced intervention with black modernity and the security of its future. It is with this precept that I will analyze three locations within the narrative of *Treme*. First, I will examine the tradition of second line parades and their particular ability to transcend adversity, operate as an act of political agency, and provide a sense of community purpose and togetherness. Next, I will investigate creolization as the marker of various problematics and syncretic triumphs surrounding the integration of modern jazz with the traditional music of New Orleans. Finally, I will consider the multiplicity of *Treme's* music scene and ponder the role of jazz as an agent of this diversity, as well as a representation of the Crescent City's ingrained culture of segregation. All the while, I contend that by analyzing the content specific to *Treme*, New Orleans' musical culture—specifically the musicians and the members of their particular public sphere—are working as agents for radical change, struggling for survival in a particularly

⁵¹ For more information on the importance of New Orleans to the creation of jazz and its complicated cultural formations, see Chapter Four entitled "New Orleans" in Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux's comprehensive text *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009); Bruce Boyd Raeburn's *New Orleans Style and the Writing of American Jazz History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); and Thomas Brothers' *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).

harsh social, political, and economic climate, and striving to revive a city reduced to rubble by Hurricane Katrina.

Swinging the Liminal

There used to be big parades all over New Orleans—a band playing, people dancing and strutting and shouting, waving their hands, kids following along waving flags. One of those parades would start down the street, and all kinds of people when they saw it pass would forget all about what they was doing and just take after it, just joining in the fun. You know how it is—a parade, it just makes you stop anything you're doing; you stop working, eating, any damn' thing, and you run out, and if you can get in it you just get as close as you can.

—Sidney Bechet⁵²

The opening montage from episode one/season one of *Treme*, entitled “Do You Know What It Means” finds the camera combing a city street, busied with musicians and revelers preparing to disembark on a second line parade (a unique New Orleans tradition, a second line parade is a celebratory street processional/moveable party) three months after Hurricane Katrina. As National

⁵² Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*, 61.

Guardsmen ominously gaze over the proceedings, a saxophone reed is nestled into its ligature; liquor is poured; a cigarette burns. Children dance behind a large cooler of beer, while feathers hint at the possible presence of Mardi Gras Indians. A passing image of Austin Leslie, a renowned New Orleans chef, mixes fiction with reality: Leslie's wake was the occasion of the first jazz funeral post-Katrina—Leslie died in Atlanta at age 71 after being evacuated from his attic where he was trapped for two days in 98-degree heat. Diegetic sounds prevail: trumpet and saxophone calisthenics, eavesdropped snippets of conversation, erupting laughter, hip-hop music escaping from a slowly passing car's stereo, the flash of a momentary percussive dance pattern.⁵³ The subtext is understood; this is a distinctively New Orleans tableau, an environment unique to its black expressive culture. The second line parade, with jazz providing the musical seed of the brass band accompaniment, is a life-affirming event, and in the aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina, essential to the remaking of the black community of New Orleans. At its essence, a second line parade is a processional street celebration that is led by a brass band (the "first" line) traditionally made up of a group consisting of trumpeters, trombonists, a tuba player, a bass drummer, and snare drummer. They are followed in the parade by a group of revelers (the "second" line) that follows the band dancing and carousing as this roving party snakes its way through the streets of New Orleans.

⁵³ David Simon and Eric Overmyer, *Treme* (HBO, 2010-2013), episode "Do You Know What It Means."

The second line parade is the traditional domain of the various social aid and pleasure clubs that are part of the fabric of the black working-class neighborhoods of New Orleans. Existing since the end of the nineteenth century, social aid and pleasure clubs are benevolent societies that have traditionally helped dues-paying members afford funerals, pay hospital expenses, and promote general acts of charity and financial aid. More than that, they are the spine of the black working-class community, unifying neighborhoods and providing a hub for social activities.

At the core of these social avenues is the second line parade. American Studies scholar Joel Dinerstein's exacting analysis of second line culture is extremely helpful in understanding the various components that construct this unique cultural phenomenon:

It is a mobile block party that lasts four hours—by police permit—and travels five miles into and through the streets of black New Orleans. Each one is organized and sponsored by a Social Aid and Pleasure Club (SAPC)—there are about sixty, each with dues-paying members—that reserves a particular Sunday between Labor Day and the end of May. “Route sheets” are printed, distributed and e-mailed throughout the city, alerting people to the four or five stops to join the parade. At each, there will be tailgate

grills smoking up sausage, chicken, and pork chops; makeshift bars, with alcohol, on top of pickup trucks; women circulating with trays of homemade sweet potato pie and brownies. Along the way, coffin-sized coolers are dragged to provide beer, water, and wine-coolers to the weary and sweaty. Music is provided by a hired brass band, the engine of the second line. The band is out front with the resplendent members of the SAPC leading the parade, and in front of the band there extends a twenty-yard roped-off area in which the members dance with and against each other. When parading, *everyone* is supposed to dance or, at the very least, *roll with it*; as a phrase, this refers both to physiological movement—a sort of half-crouched, bent-over, rolling dance-walk—and the philosophical import of maintaining one’s spiritual balance in the face of social and economic pressures. Simply, the club members and the brass band constitute *the first line*; everyone else is a second liner.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Joel Dinerstein, “Second-lining Post-Katrina: Learning Community from the Prince of Wales Social Aid and Pleasure Club,” *American Quarterly* vol.61, no.3 (Sept. 2009): 618.

Jazz scholar Eric Porter describes a second line parade as a “participatory ritual” that “may be understood as facilitating a sense of connection to place, affirming members’ neighborhoods and their histories, constituting alternative forms of community and civil society ... and engaging in implicit and occasionally explicit political protest.”⁵⁵ In *Treme*, the second line is an unrestrained event, existing within the realm of multiplicity, a spatial imaginary of “inescapable hybridity,” marked with the polychromaticism of a “becoming” utopia.⁵⁶ The praxis of the black aesthetic can be thought of as a location situated between the various cracks and ruptures—the imbricated seams—that characterize a space of liminality, and is best witnessed in the music of the traditional New Orleans brass band and the parade structures of the various New Orleanian social aid and pleasure clubs.⁵⁷ Musicologist Thomas Turino furthers this notion of the parade as a representation of collaborative reflexivity, explaining:

Music, dance, festivals, and other public expressive cultural practices are a primary way that people articulate the collective identities that are fundamental

⁵⁵ Lewis Watts and Eric Porter, *New Orleans Suite: Music and Culture in Transition*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013): 21.

⁵⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993): xi.

⁵⁷ Neil Leonard, *Jazz: Myth and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): 25-26.

to forming and sustaining social groups, which are, in turn, basic to survival. The performing arts are frequently fulcrums of identity, allowing people to intimately feel themselves part of the community through the realization of shared cultural knowledge and style and through the very act of participating together in performance.⁵⁸

A socio-political populist collaboration between musicians, dancers, and the numerous revelers that follow the parade, second-lining is a cornerstone of New Orleans culture. A unique conflation of social activity and political statement, the parade is the semiotic event that embodies this notion. When asked to describe what a second line experience was like, Hot 8 Brass Band tuba player/bandleader Bennie Pete stretched this idea even further, stating:

The easiest and quickest way, I could say—just like a moving party, a moving concert, you know? Got to be, you know, the simplest way to put it, but it's—it go[es] deeper than that, you know, because there's really a lot of people who are just expressing their self in any way. And there's no rules and, you know, no wrongs, no rights, you can do whatever you feel. ... It's just

⁵⁸ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 2.

expressing whatever they're going through in their life.

They get to feel like, you know, at that time, they don't have any worries; they can just let go."⁵⁹

A second line parade cracks open the rigid framework of normative society, exposing a locus of liminality, a space that Dinerstein characterizes as a locality "that carnivalizes and colonizes the public sphere."⁶⁰ In this liminal space, "musicians can restore a sense of mastery and control (and channel the rage) through the performance of their craft, despite the incidence of despair and hopelessness. By affirming life in the moment, they make a better future seem possible."⁶¹ In this regard, the second line parade can be viewed as an expanding network of positive fluidity, what musicologist Kevin Fellezs (via Isobel Armstrong) has termed the "broken middle": a formation of a musical space characterized by a "flowing across, between, and through geographic, temporal, cultural, national, ethnic, and generic limits."⁶²

⁵⁹ Rachel Martin and Luke Burbank, "Hot 8 Brass Band Play for a Living New Orleans," *National Public Radio*, December 7, 2007, <http://www.npr.org>.

⁶⁰ Dinerstein, "Second-lining Post-Katrina": 618.

⁶¹ Bruce Boyd Raeburn, "They're Trying to Wash Us Away: New Orleans Musicians Surviving Katrina," *Journal of American History* vol.94, no.3 (Dec. 2007): 816.

⁶² Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011): 8.

Parades are witnessed throughout the four television seasons of *Treme* in various contexts: the revelatory second lines of the various social aid and pleasure clubs, traditional Mardi Gras truck parades, the Courir de Mardi Gras masquerade parade (the Cajun Mardi Gras celebration situated outside of New Orleans in rural South Louisiana), and the fierce, folkloric parade culture of the Mardi Gras Indian tribes.⁶³ At once a riotous celebration and a critical political stance, jazz historian Thomas Brothers has characterized the importance of parade forms as a heroic action, claiming:

a parade through unfamiliar territory stands as a symbolic victory: it accomplishes the goal of unrestricted motion while preserving the 'real' status quo, the otherwise rigidly enforced restrictions. But the parade is more than symbolic because it moves through the actual battlegrounds of class conflict. And it is also structured as a moment for asserting cultural autonomy, to literally broadcast vernacular culture over the entire city.⁶⁴

Further bulwarking this triumph of "unrestricted motion," George Lipsitz invokes the significance of New Orleans icon Louis Armstrong's parade lineage, stating:

⁶³ *Treme*, episode "Carnival Time."

⁶⁴ Brothers, *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans*: 28.

Black expressive culture has long been one of the sites where a counter warrant against the white spatial imaginary can be found. For example, street parades held a powerful allure for the young Louis Armstrong in segregated New Orleans at the start of the twentieth century. Later in life, the trumpeter's unparalleled virtuosity would enable Armstrong to travel across countries and continents, but as a child he needed a street parade merely to move freely across town.⁶⁵

In post-Katrina New Orleans, the first second line—(in honor of the passing of the aforementioned celebrated local chef Austin Leslie)—after the hurricane signified the potential for the city's recovery, and for the reinvigoration of its unique cultural heritage. Brothers states, "It was clear that this cultural institution carried all the layers of jazz as it informs American and African American cultural history: jazz as dance music, jazz as social protest, jazz as ethnic group expression, jazz as existential affirmation, jazz as emotional release, and most important, jazz as individual self-expression with a supportive community network."⁶⁶ In *Treme*, we see the hegemonic machinations specific to New Orleans' expressive culture

⁶⁵ George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011): Kindle edition.

⁶⁶ Joel Dinerstein, "Second-lining Post-Katrina": 619.

play out in the form of an unjust spike in post-Katrina parade fees, the increased harassment of culture workers by law enforcement officers, and the seemingly arbitrary regulations imposed upon the second liners by city officials. Still, the parades prevail(ed), even in the face of such animosity—quite possibly *because* of these violent interruptions.

Why do second line parades matter in the remaking of post-Katrina New Orleans? Throughout *Treme*, parades are the embodiment of unbridled revelry, as well as subversive reclamations of space, as celebrants are seen filling the streets and sidewalks, shake-dancing on top of abandoned cars, buck jumping amongst Katrina's detritus, and in doing so reoccupying all manners of the spatial imaginary. The police look on warily with a resigned ambivalence, a defeated sneer on their individual facades.⁶⁷ The second line is an act of chronotopic power, and in the aftermath of Katrina—a moment of particular impotence for subaltern New Orleanians—a statement of collective strength. Even in the most quotidian of interpretations, the second line parade is an opportunity—(at a time when gigs were scarce)—for blue-collar, working musicians to get paid. As trombonist Antoine Batiste (Wendell Pierce) exclaims as he joyously joins the Rebirth Brass Band at the first second line since the storm: "Play for that money boys. Play for that mother-fucking money!"⁶⁸ Perhaps the significance of the second line parade to black working-class New Orleanians is best summed up by

⁶⁷ *Treme*, "Do You Know What It Means."

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

jazz historian/archivist Bruce Raeburn: “The ‘second lines’ enable communities beset by institutionalized racism, poverty, and high crime and mortality rates to maintain hope in spite of oppressive daily realities.”⁶⁹ Throughout *Treme* the viewer witnesses various on-screen forms of police brutality, senseless violence, and political corruption. In the aftermath of Katrina’s devastation, the people of New Orleans were in dire need for a glimmer of hope while surrounded by a sea of desperation. When second line parades are featured in *Treme*, they represent a reprieve from this turbulent and uncertain existence, a brief interlude of celebration and peaceful social interaction.

Hell or High Water

It’s the remembering song. There’s so much to remember. There’s so much wanting, and there’s so much sorrow, and there’s so much waiting for the sorrow to end. My people, all they want is a place where they can be people, a place where they can stand up and be part of that place, just being natural to the place without worrying how someone may be coming along to take that place away from them.

—Sidney Bechet⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Raeburn, “They’re Trying to Wash Us Away”: 813.

⁷⁰ Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*: 202-203.

According to *Treme*, jazz is ontologically foundational to the inner-machinations of New Orleans. Jazz can be “heard” in the Crescent City’s unique cuisine, in the various scenarios in which *Treme*’s musicians are seen hustling to make a living, and in the way music informs the entire ecology of the cultural matrix. Eric Porter further illuminates the importance of jazz to New Orleans, especially in regards to its formation and role as a cultural touchstone, as well as a platform for achievement. He states:

Jazz has for many decades been a visible signifier of the possibilities of multiracial democracy in the United States and for black achievement and distinction. Many such narratives begin in New Orleans, which, as a port city in a succession of empires and an important crossroads in the southern United States, provided the multicultural milieu that musicians, and most notably black and Creole musicians, drew upon as they created a variety of urban and urbane musical styles they eventually synthesized into something called jazz near the beginning of the twentieth century.⁷¹

⁷¹ Eric Porter, “Jazz and Revival,” *American Quarterly* vol.61, no.3 (September 2009): 595-596.

New Orleans is a city with a tumultuous racial past, and this past, through its various formulations, is still being interpreted, decoded, and troubled throughout the city's various regimes of power. This racial hegemony operates in a parallel system of articulation along with the concept of creolization, and creolization is situated heavily throughout the multiple plot lines throughout *Treme*. The concept of creolization is inherent to jazz. Signified by cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy's trope of "inescapable hybridity," creolization is the engine of New Orleans and the American imaginary.⁷² Gilroy, discussing "the distinctive attributes of black cultural forms which are both modern and modernist," hypothesizes:

They are modern because they have been marked by their hybrid, creole origins in the West, because they have struggled to escape their status as commodities and the position within the cultural industries it specifies, and because they are produced by artists whose understanding of their own position relative to the racial group and the role of art in mediating individual creativity with social dynamics is shaped by a sense of artistic practice as an autonomous domain either reluctantly or happily divorced from the everyday lifeworld.⁷³

⁷² Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*: xi.

⁷³ *Ibid*: 73.

Treme takes every opportunity to show how this hybridity is at work. *Treme's* depiction of the character of trumpeter Delmond Lambreaux (Rob Brown), and his struggle to find a synthesis between modern jazz and traditional New Orleans music is the perfect representation of this notion of creolization. In episode seven, entitled "Carnival Time," from season two, while second-lining on Mardi Gras day with the Guardians of the Flame, Delmond accidentally hears Quincy Jones' arrangement of the Benny Golson composition "Killer Joe" conflated with "Shallow Water" by the Guardians of the Flame.⁷⁴ Modern jazz meets Mardi Gras Indian chant-percussion. Suddenly Delmond hears a "third way,"—a vehicle to lead him towards a new innovative path. The following conversation between Delmond and New Orleans native, saxophonist Donald Harrison, Jr., (loosely playing himself) further comments on this quest for an ideal hybrid of New Orleans music and modern jazz:

Delmond: I just feel like we lost something in modern jazz, you know, somewhere along the way, something New Orleans music always held on to. Probably 'cause we're so damn backwards. You know, but joy, life! You know what I'm saying?

Donald: Yeah, I do.

Delmond: Anyway, so I've been going home for months and I didn't even know. I'm listening to old

⁷⁴ *Treme*, "Carnival Time."

stuff and then old, old stuff. Then I'm pulling out the Library of Congress damn recordings. Pretty soon I'm walking around my New York apartment singing along with field hollers and shit you know. Fife and drum bands.

Donald: Fife and drum bands?

Delmond: Angola chain gang chants and shit you know. I'm previous to previous to previous and I'm damn near driving myself crazy trying to get back to something I don't even know. Alright. So finally I end up on Mardi Gras morning with my father under the bridge and I'm hearing those rhythms and at the same time I'm hearing something else. I'm hearing just some real jazz from a box—a boom box you know—in one ear and at the same time I got the drums and my daddy's call in the other ear—'shallow water oh mama'—right? And it fucking knocked me over. All that in my ear at once.

Donald: Wow man that's incredible. I'm feeling that. I wonder why no one ever thought to do that before?

Delmond: Right! I knew you'd see it right away. Gotta be someone who comes from the tradition but also lives outside of it musically like you.

Donald: Man D., I see everything you're saying but the purists from both sides, how are they going to take this, man? It's not straight jazz and it's not straight New Orleans. They're gonna rip this apart.

Delmond: Never mind what the old time Indians are gonna say.

Donald: You can't please them anyway.

Delmond: Fuck it. Let's do it.

Donald: I'm down....⁷⁵

With its emphasis on the underlying conflict between traditional practice and aesthetic modes of progress, this slice of dialogue calls into question the validity of the various ways musicians/composers can incorporate modern post-bop jazz styles with established New Orleans jazz. Is it acceptable to fuse these two legitimate modes of praxis? What does this mean in terms of "authenticity" and vernacular statements about New Orleans' essentialism? Throughout the narrative of *Treme*, Delmond is seen shuttling back and forth between New York

⁷⁵ *Treme*, episode "Can I Change My Mind." Ironically, in 1992, Donald Harrison, Jr. (with Dr. John) released *Indian Blues* (Candid Records). This recording was an experimental amalgamation of modern jazz with traditional New Orleans music, as well as the percussion and chant stylings of the Mardi Gras Indians. In a clear example of art imitating life, the creators of *Treme* are clearly using *Indian Blues* as a model for Delmond's project.

City and New Orleans. New York is portrayed as the sophisticated embodiment of jazz as art; its clubs are sleek, chic, and modern with a multicultural clientele of New York City's elite urban professionals. The New York audiences do not participate through dancing: they listen intently with an air of concentration.

Jazz is seen as a much more complicated entity in New Orleans—simultaneously more tied to the tourist entertainment industry than as an expression of chic modernist ingenuity. Yet it is not that simple of a reduction. In Delmond's storyline, the creators of *Treme* are making a claim for the hybrid as the ideal, as a way of synthesizing art with entertainment. Modern jazz meets Mardi Gras Indian chant is the ultimate conflation of styles, with the past and present merging to enact a new path, an activist future. Taking this point even further, by including musical elements of the Mardi Gras Indians in the synergy of Delmond's new hybrid, *Treme* is also making a statement about authenticity and its relationships with modern forms. *Treme* makes the claim that New Orleans jazz is the bedrock of American music and culture, even though at times it maintains a marginalized stigma by being simply entertainment for tourists. The creators of *Treme* reconcile this conflict by uniting two markers of African American genius and modernity's authenticity: the radical black American praxis of the Mardi Gras Indians and the challenging compositions, knotty improvisations, and ingenious formulizations of post-bop (modern) jazz.

In the opening sequence from episode three/season four, entitled “Dippermouth Blues,” WWOZ radio DeeJay Davis McAlary’s (Steve Zahn) post-song commentary further delineates this notion of creolization, its connections to New Orleans’ jazz-shaped culture, its larger project as a deep-seated American characteristic, and its reification in the forthcoming inauguration of President-elect Barack Obama:⁷⁶

The late, great King Curtis “What Are You Doing New Year’s Eve?” written by Frank Loesser of *Guys and Dolls* fame. A stellar example of McAlary’s theory of creolization: Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, the Great American Songbook meet African American musical genius. And that’s what America’s all about. Check out Miles’ version of “If I Were a Bell” [if] you don’t believe me. Merle Haggard with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band doing “Basin Street Blues” written by New Orleans’ own Spencer Williams: “Basin Street is the street where all the dark and the light folks meet.” That’s how culture gets made in this country. That’s how we do. We’re a creole nation whether you like it

⁷⁶ WWOZ 90.7 is a famed New Orleans radio station that features local music. It is a non-profit, community-organized station that unabashedly celebrates the musical culture of New Orleans, as well as the surrounding areas of Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta.

or not. And in three weeks America inaugurates its first creole president. Get used to it.⁷⁷

New Orleans is a creole culture, with jazz at its center. Yet, as seen in this paper's next section, there is still conflict surrounding jazz's racial connotations, especially when dealing with the imagery with the music's origins.

Hope's Last Waltz?

The only thing they had that couldn't be taken away from them was their music. Their song, it was coming right up from the fields, settling itself in their feet and working right up, right up into their stomachs, their spirit, into their fear, into their longing. It was bewildered, this part in them. It was like it had no end, nowhere to even wait for an end, nowhere to hope for a change in things. But it had a beginning, and that much they understood ... it was a feeling in them a memory that came from a long way back. It was like they were trying to work the music back to its beginning and then start it all over again, start it over and build it to a place where it could stop somehow, to a place where the music could put an end to itself

⁷⁷ *Treme*, episode "Dippermouth Blues."

and become another music, a new beginning that could begin *them* over again.

—Sidney Bechet⁷⁸

One of the prime tensions surrounding *Treme* and its relationship with jazz is the veiled consciousness engulfing the aesthetic convictions of the African American community: early traditional jazz represents a form of minstrelsy that is abhorrent. For example, in episode four/season two—entitled “Santa Claus, Do You Ever Get the Blues?”—a conversation between Delmond and his partner Jill (Danai Gurira) speaks to this topic:

Delmond: Man, “Tom Cat Blues.” Don’t this shit sound like two motherfuckers profiling with their brims and shit on the corner?

Jill: Two old motherfuckers. I just can’t see anybody listening to this. Not this century.

Delmond: Now see that’s fucked up. You take a classical orchestra—anything from Bach to Stravinsky—three hundred years of music is standard repertoire, right? But in jazz, Jelly Roll Morton is considered prehistoric.

Jill: Well he sounds prehistoric to me. I’m sorry Del, I’m just not hearing it. Listening to this I just see brothers toting barges and lifting bales.

⁷⁸ Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*: 30.

Delmond: What! No! Listen—this here was popular music. Jelly Roll and King Oliver and Pops. I'm just trying to figure out what elements made this music so popular back in the day, you know. This is what I want to capture.⁷⁹

Jill hears Jim Crow in Jelly Roll's majestic (if not dated) artistry. Where Delmond hears strength and the inventiveness of modernity in the music, as well as a thread of continuity with contemporary black expressive culture, Jill imagines an aura of impotence and subordination. For Delmond, Jelly Roll's music is representative of an empowering and transcendental artform, with specific elements that are in dialogue with the numerous struggles besieging post-Katrina New Orleans. Describing black cultural expression as an instrument of agency, Gilroy states: "[Aesthetic praxis] terminates in a portrait of the boys, back on the block where they ride out the genocidal processes of the inner city through the redemptive power of their authentic racial art"⁸⁰ Jelly Roll Morton's "Tom Cat Blues" is a 1924 duet featuring Morton (piano) and Joe "King" Oliver (cornet). When I listen to this seminal recording, I can hear what Delmond is searching for: the raw materials of New Orleans music—the pleasure quotient, the dancing component, the bliss—that are occasionally thrown to the wayside during the technical thrill-ride of modern jazz.

⁷⁹ *Treme*, episode "Santa Claus, Do You Ever Get the Blues?"

⁸⁰ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*: 108.

What Delmond, and by association the creators of *Treme* are insinuating, is that modern jazz needs a shot of rhythmic funk—the body-rocking product of the African Diaspora that I call the *ecstatic rhythmic continuum*—in order for the music to work in the contemporary New Orleans cultural matrix. For Delmond, “Tom Cat Blues” is a lesson in virtuosity, a bravura statement of black genius, in which he hears the echoes in contemporary hip hop culture’s signature braggadocio. But *Treme* is asking even larger questions. What is it about black expressive culture that elides canon making (at least to the general public)? How can classical music easily traverse “three hundred years” of music and its listeners have no problems understanding the significance of the music’s various periodizations? What is it about the speed of modernity that makes black popular cultural forms seem so ephemeral? What role does the trope of migration—mobility, travel, and freedom of movement—have in this scenario? Finally, what role does race play in these questions? The creators of *Treme* are very clearly, if at times slyly, making the point that the citizens of the United States need to become aware of the cultural importance of black New Orleanians, their integral contributions to jazz, and the multiplicities of the American musical imaginary they spawned. Jazz is equal in importance to anything offered by European classical music, and Hurricane Katrina’s devastation threatened to erase the various musical traditions of New Orleans in its multiple forms. *Treme* is a love letter to the Crescent City, and by extension an appeal to the American public to understand its depth as a cultural treasure.

The Antiphonal Blues

But ragtime, that's no history thing. It's not dead. Ragtime, it's the musicianers. *Rag it up*, we used to say. You take any piece, you make it so people can dance to it, pat their feet, move around. You make it so they can't help themselves from doing that. You make it so they just can't sit still. And that's all there is to it. It's the rhythm there. The rhythm *is* ragtime. That's all there is to be done. You could do that to all kinds of numbers still being played, still being composed today.

—Sidney Bechet⁸¹

The concept of call and response between musical eras can be witnessed in other areas of *Treme's* portrayal of a vibrant aesthetic culture. New Orleans is a playground of black expression, defined by the diasporic realities of what Gilroy deemed “the ethics of antiphony.”⁸² According to *Treme*, the local musical environment in post-Katrina New Orleans is a rich landscape of brass bands, soul, traditional jazz, modern jazz, Cajun music, zydeco, and rock-n-roll. We see and hear musicians in multiple poses of performativity: in rehearsal, busking on

⁸¹ Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*: 212.

⁸² Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*: 200.

the streets, performing in clubs, recording in studios, practicing in isolation, playing festivals, and diligently working on new compositions. *Treme* also imprints the New Orleans creative musical milieu with the aura of romanticism embodied by the cultural politics of artistic creation. According to the multiplicity embodied by this music—the wellspring of the diverse genre-shifts in New Orleans—jazz and the music of New Orleans is also a living artform and one that *is worth saving*. African American exceptionalism is the motor behind jazz’s lifeline. The imperative intervention of revitalizing the black neighborhoods of jazz’s origins is fundamental to *Treme*’s message.

It is not a coincidence that the show is named after one of America’s oldest African American neighborhoods. In *Treme*, various loci are sacred spaces and there is a constant valorization of place that borders on fetishization. In the final season of *Treme*, the creation of a National Jazz Center—as a means to generate tourist capital in the wake of Katrina—and in turn destroying the soul of the neighborhoods and clubs that serve as the lifeblood of the city’s vibrant music scene—exposes the corporate and political corruption that saturates New Orleans’ hegemonic landscape. A conversation between McAlary and the interloping opportunistic developer (whom McAlary calls a “corporate succubus”) Nelson Hidalgo (Jon Seda) from episode two of the final season entitled, “This City,” highlights this point:

Nelson: Why is everyone in this town so damn pissed off all the time? I mean, what’s there to yell about?

Davis: [Are] you kidding?

Nelson: How bad would it be if someone did something with the old municipal auditorium? I mean it isn't like you put up a performing arts center and property values go into a freefall. [A] jazz center would be a good thing. Right?

Davis: The clubs on Rampart—Funky Butt, King Bolden's—these places were real jazz centers. Those places are where the music comes from and the city shuts them down.

Nelson: Well that sucks. But the auditorium is still empty. So what the hell? This could be good for the city, good for everybody.

Davis: Yeah, as long as it is not one for the other. You open a music museum and then close down the clubs.

Nelson: It wouldn't be a museum!⁸³

Here, the creators of *Treme* are incorporating an actual post-Katrina New Orleanian reality to give their script a timely veracity. In real life, the initial push for a National Jazz Center (reputed to be a proposed \$716 million venture and include a hotel, jazz museum, indoor/outdoor performance venues, and a new

⁸³ *Treme*, episode "This City."

courthouse and city hall), fell apart due to alleged internal political collapse and backbiting.⁸⁴ Though at times *Treme* seems ambivalent about the creation of a National Jazz Center, it is wary about the institutionalization of jazz. Throughout the scenes of *Treme*, indigenous venues, clubs, and bars are portrayed as the incubators of live music. Snug Harbor, Tipitina's, the Howlin' Wolf, the Spotted Cat, Preservation Hall, and Vaughan's are just a few of the myriad of real New Orleans venues that figure prominently within the visual narrative of *Treme*. These are sites of vibrant musicality, where the musicians and the audience partake in a transcendent ritual of experiencing music. And in *Treme*, this experience is treated as a sacred festivity, a life-affirming, interactive celebration, which has a very specific association to the black working-class neighborhoods of New Orleans. McAlary elaborates on this notion of spatial importance when talking about the streetwise education of current New Orleans bandleader/phenom Trombone Shorty:

He is who he is because he comes from where he comes from. Not some music conservatory, performing arts center, none of that shit. He comes from the street, [from] the second lines, from the funerals and later those shithole, three sets a night,

⁸⁴ Bruce Egler, "Grand Visions for New City Hall, Jazz Park Have Faded," *The Times-Picayune*, June 6, 2007, <http://blog.nola.com/times-picayune>.

clubs. Music lives where it lives, brah—you can't fuck with that. You don't wanna fuck with that.⁸⁵

This alternative “education of the street” provides the backbone of the vernacular music of New Orleans, and in *Treme* is bathed in romanticism as an ideal mode of learning.

Complicating this notion of an idyllic cultural milieu, segregatory practices appear constantly throughout *Treme*, as witnessed in the portrayal of the racial constitution of the schools, the dominance of white-on-black police brutality, and the monoracial makeup of the club audiences at the various loci of performativity. Whether consciously or not, the creators of *Treme* highlight the discontinuity between their fetishization of New Orleans' multicultural milieu and the quotidian reality of a rigidly segregated societal structure. The ideal of aesthetic amalgamation is continually complicated by the plural scenes of segregation located in *Treme*. Though musically this syncretic aural imprint might be intermeshed and intermingled, racially the majority of scenarios in which music is seen being made in *Treme* is marked by homology, especially those in which the world is watching—i.e., the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival (Jazz Fest) and the more commercial rituals of Mardi Gras. Ethnomusicologist Matt Sakakeeny bulwarks this point of contention within the complicated musical culture of New Orleans:

⁸⁵ *Treme*, “This City.”

New Orleans music is not only a form of expressive culture; it is also a site where competing social, political, and economic vectors intersect; New Orleans musicians cannot be reduced to a collective of tradition-bearers once their individual experiences are accounted for; and New Orleans as an inscrutable place is nevertheless a thoroughly American urban center with all of the poverty, racial marginalization, segregation, and other problems that characterize postindustrial cities.⁸⁶

Sakakeeny's cogent analysis represents the notion that New Orleans music is never *simply about the music*; there is much more at stake. Throughout the narrative of *Treme*, intersecting storylines highlighted by graft, violence, and a sense of desperation are connected by the rejuvenating and transcendent qualities of New Orleans' unique musical culture. In this sense, *Treme* expertly depicts a complex city struggling to endure in the crushing aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, with music illuminating hope and providing strategies for survival.

In *Treme*, the musicians that make up the various music scenes within New Orleans provide the narrative for how a devastated city can rebuild through cultural praxis. Jazz, as it is portrayed in *Treme*, signifies the notion of the

⁸⁶ Matt Sakakeeny and Willie Birch, *Roll with It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011): Kindle edition.

musician as a social activist. In New Orleans, the musicians, under the rubric of black working-class skilled labor, are doing the noble and backbreaking work of rebuilding neighborhoods and revitalizing the economy. In this way, *Treme* depicts the reality of the economics of the working jazz musician. Furthermore, *Treme* asks penetrating questions. Can aesthetic practice renew a woefully damaged metropolis? Can the music and its musicians do more than simply provide a distraction and/or escape to the bleak quotidian existence of its urban citizens? How is race and racism functioning in this arduous climate? As symbolized by the lyrics Louis Armstrong sings in his rendition of the tune “Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams,”—“sunshine always follows the rain.” Like the promise of a beaming sun after a raging storm, ultimately, *Treme* is a survival story: The survival of a way of life, a style of music, and of a city seemingly on the brink of its demise. Will the graft and corruption endure? Will systemic racism continue to blight New Orleans? With the progression of *Treme*’s narrative, as living conditions in New Orleans improve, cracks in the infrastructure that were there *before* the storm become increasingly evident. As *Treme* pointedly exposes, this is a city with a complicated past, bursting with class struggle and sickening racial violence, as well as colossal cultural achievements and personal triumphs. The eminent New Orleans musical icon Dr. John has stated that New Orleans is a location that invades the imagination of its inhabitants and maintains an intense hold on one’s psyche.⁸⁷ New Orleans will not go quietly, for its roots run too

⁸⁷ Dr. John (Mac Rebennack) with Jack Rummel, *Under a Hoodoo Moon: The Life of Dr. John the Night Tripper* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994): 250.

deep. *Treme* mirrors the show creators' unblinking stance on New Orleans, and by default its positioning of jazz. Like the old saw (often credited to Louis Armstrong), "If you have to ask, you'll never know," post-Katrina New Orleans and jazz may be somewhat marginalized entities, but their mysteries and beauty will always be understood by those in the "know."

Epilogue: Jazz Fest 2014

And that left the music natural to be itself. It could have a good time; it was free to. And that spirit there was to it, that was a wonderful thing, there was a happiness in it. It was there to be enjoyed, a whole lot of spirit.

—Sidney Bechet⁸⁸

In 2014, I attended the first weekend of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. I was floored by the various representations of jazz at the actual festival and at the post-festival gigs around the city. In the WWOZ Jazz Tent at the festival, I saw Branford Marsalis tearing it up with his quartet (with both his father Ellis and brother Jason sitting in); Astral Project played a typically groove-laden set that got the locals humming. Branford's brother Delfeayo's Uptown Jazz Orchestra played with swinging, graph-like precision—their arrangement of

⁸⁸ Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*: 213-214.

Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" was mind-altering—and culminated in a celebratory parade around the audience. At the Congo Square Tent, the Rebirth Brass Band stirred up the funk, summoning the spirit of a second line parade.

In the clubs after the Festival, I saw a deafening, dance-inducing set by the Hot 8 Brass Band at the Howlin' Wolf (Den), and serendipitously sat next to Clarke Peters, the actor who plays Albert Lambreaux on *Treme*, at Donald Harrison, Jr.'s show at Snug Harbor. Surreal.

During the course of the four days I was in New Orleans, there was an electric vibration in the air—a hypnotic second line groove of mystic vitality. In terms of the spirit of the music, *Treme's* portrayal is remarkably accurate. The city was an undulating organism, a sweltering musical juggernaut.⁸⁹ Beyond the stellar performances, the fractures and dysfunction within New Orleans' political/socio-economic structures were not invisible. When I watched the local news in the morning before heading out to the festival, stories of police corruption, senseless violence, and educational deficiencies flooded the television. Can expressive culture remake a city? If I have learned anything from the 36 episodes of *Treme*, we must look to the musicians of New Orleans as beacons of hope and fearless examples of radical activism. We must keep watching—and *listening*.

⁸⁹ Michael Jarrett, *Drifting on a Read: Jazz as a Model for Writing* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999): 164.