

# 18

## African American Film Sound

### Scoring Blackness

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#### Introduction

The term 'black music' has long been a cause for contention. What do we mean by music being 'black', or more specifically in the case of this chapter, African American? The music industry has typically marketed products via the categorization of specific genres: for example, jazz, blues, soul, funk and rap. These generic types are often classified as 'black music'. Philip Tagg vehemently debates the suitability of such an essentializing label, as he correctly argues that aesthetic practice is not linked to biology:

Very rarely is any musical evidence given for the specific skin colour or continental origin of the music being talked about [namely black music in this instance] and when evidence is presented, it usually seems pretty flimsy to me from a musicological view point. (1987: 2)<sup>1</sup>

While Tagg's position is admirable and sensitive to multi-cultural society, he fails to address that 'black music' is systematically deployed by the film industry to gain swift entrance into the African American condition.

Before we turn to our attention to the historical condition of black America, let us first consider industrial shorthand in filmmaking. Mainstream films look to inform an audience in a concise and unambiguous way. Cues are given to connote location, period setting, and characterization. These are

typically communicated through visual or aural signs. Film as a medium has to rely on such devices, as there is a prescribed period of time in which a narrative can occur. These limitations are not entirely due to time restriction; economic constraints also play a role. Directors work within a set budget, and building up characters' back story by including numerous locations and investing in period décor can significantly impinge on finances.

Historically, music has been used by the film industry to alleviate such obstacles. Specific modes and scales have been habitually applied to reduce complex issues of nationality and ethnicity to a sequence of tones and half-tones. Nevertheless, this form of melodic abbreviation lends itself to the restrictive limitations imposed when producing a film. The most predominant modes that feature in film scores are the Ionian and Aeolian: these are more commonly referred to as the major and minor scale, respectively. As most Western music conforms to these two sequences, the saturation of such melodies frequently renders them invisible to the general public. Conversely, the Dorian scale, with its sharpened sixth and minor structure, is used to connote Celtic culture as being different. The Phrygian mode is also known as the 'Gypsy' scale. Here the flattened second, once more in a minor framework, evokes an exotic Flamenco or Arabic setting.

### **'Black Music' as Spatial and Geographical Shorthand**

I have already established that 'black music' is a problematic turn of phrase. However, the inclusion of blue notes, call-and-response, improvisatory techniques and syncopation, which Tagg justly attributes to other non-black musical cultures, are adopted time and time again by the film industry to represent African American identity. The aforementioned traits are key components found in musical genres that have an associative link, albeit if only in cinematic terms, to black America. Accordingly, 'black music' is often used by the industry as a spatial or temporal cue. Depending on the cultural competency of the spectator, jazz, blues, gospel and other forms of black music can provide orientation within a filmic narrative as throughout cinematic history they have prolifically featured to evoke geographical locations or period settings.

Let us now consider in detail the way black musical motifs can be deployed in mainstream cinema. 'Negro Spirituals', first of all, are often introduced because of their associative links with the Deep South. Spirituals evoke the period of slavery, a topic which is rarely explored by the film industry. The television mini-series *Roots* (Marvin J. Chomsky et al., ABC, 1977), scored by Quincy Jones and Gerald Fried is one such example. *Roots* included the

traditional spiritual 'Another Man Has Gone' as the main motif; and its use of blues notes and lilting rhythms clearly sets the scene of the sleepy South. The spirituals fall into two categories: namely, the sorrow songs and jubilees. Sorrow songs are regularly featured in films that represent civil rights issues, as the melancholy tones evoke black suffering at the hands of racist white supremacists. Sorrow songs are used in the films *Mississippi Burning* (dir. Parker, 1988) and *A Time to Kill* (dir. Schumacher, 1996). Conversely, jubilees are celebratory songs, antecedent to gospel music. Jubilees are often introduced to a soundtrack to symbolize community and empowerment.

The blues, on the other hand, is a style of music that connotes a rural past, embittered by economic disenfranchisement. The Mississippi Delta blues music has become synonymous with the Great Depression and hobo culture following the devastation of the Midwest farmlands. In recent years, the blues have been used as a backdrop for the wilderness of the American plains. Ry Cooder adapted an old Delta blues tune written by Blind Willie Johnson, for the score *Paris, Texas* (dir. Wenders, 1984) in order to emphasize the hobo-like character of Travis Henderson. Conversely, rather than being used to illustrate the pastoral wasteland, the electric blues are often used to connote the excitement of lively urban life.

Traditional Jazz can also be utilized in film to symbolize both place and era. It is often used to evoke the 1920s and generically is often featured as an accompaniment to gangster movies. More specifically, jazz can be employed as a backdrop to the period of prohibition due to its association with speakeasies: for example, in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984). However, the film industry has predominantly used jazz to signify the imposing isolation and alienation of the city as featured in Elmer Bernstein's score for *The Man with the Golden Arm* (dir. Preminger, 1955) and the iconic jazz saxophone in Bernard Herrmann's score for *Taxi Driver* (dir. Scorsese, 1976). The lonely jazz wail echoes through the empty streets.

Rap music has been the most recent addition to the film music canon, and like jazz, is ultimately tied to an urban locale. During the early 1990s there was an emergence of movies featuring the impoverished ghetto, home to the black angry male youth. John Singleton's *Boyz n' the Hood* (1991) and the Hughes brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993) were amongst the social-realist films that introduced gang culture to our screens. In an endeavour to authentically represent the specific demographic, the directors accompanied their pictures with rap music. Rap has since become a sonic signature for the confrontational militant African American.

Through the day-to-day consumption of film and television, the audience is culturally conditioned to make associative links between melodic and instrumental choices and identifiable locales or time periods. When these associative links are applied to African American cultural formats the symbiotic relationship becomes further infused with the history of racial inequality.

### **Appropriating Race**

Although we have established that musical notation is not related to any genetic blueprint, we cannot overlook the fact that black music struggles to become disentangled from the African American experience. Beneath the reverberations of the honky-tonk piano, the lonely moan of the harmonica and the flattened notes of the blues scale, the dehumanizing weight of slavery has become fossilized. The traces of slavery have not become erased over time but instead act as a palimpsest, open for reinterpretation, while the impression of the past is faded, yet ever present. The film industry has repeatedly used the historical association between black music and African American affliction to its advantage. In particular when scoring for film black music has been culturally exploited by white composers; on the other hand black composers, musicians and directors have consistently been placed in a position of struggle for control of their musical heritage.

From the moment the illustrious blackface performer Al Jolson opened his mouth to sing in Alan Crosland's 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, black music developed a profitable synergy with the film industry. In spite of the film's title foregrounding jazz music, which is identifiably rooted in the African American experience, the film told the tale of a white Jewish son turning his back on the Yiddish heritage of his immigrant parents in favour of embracing the cultural currency of the New World. Ironically this New World was epitomized by the vernacular expression of the African American people rather than the traditional melodic refrains of white society.

In the 1920s jazz had become a signifier of modernity and industrial development; jazz signalled change and hope. This period was especially momentous for black Americans. After the war effort, both at home and abroad, there was an air of optimism that African Americans would finally be accepted as U.S. citizens. This sense of hope was further fuelled by white interest in black cultural forms. The Harlem Renaissance inspired white high society to flock to black neighbourhoods to hear artists such as Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway and Ethel Waters performing at the Cotton Club and other black establishments. This burgeoning interest coincided with

the mass migration of African Americans from the racist South to the liberal North. The North held promise of employment and an opportunity to flee the historical scar of the rural South. Ironically as white America fashionably adopted jazz as a new progressive national cultural commodity, they failed to recognize that the dissonant chordal patterns and angular rhythmic motifs could be seen as an index of human suffering and a growing agitation for change.

'Black music' and its function in film can be seen as a microcosm of prejudice within the film industry and the wider issue of American race relations. From the birth of the Hollywood studios, African Americans have been consistently exploited by the industry, overlooked or had their cultural voice appropriated by others. When we consider Hollywood's legendary film composers, for example Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Bernard Herrmann, Alex North, Max Steiner, Elmer Bernstein, Miklos Rozsa, Dimitri Tiomkin, Victor Young, Danny Elfman, Michael Nyman, Jerry Goldsmith and Howard Shore, it soon becomes apparent that not only are the aforementioned white and male but they are all from Jewish backgrounds. In the golden age of the Hollywood studio system the industry was predominantly run by a handful of Jewish moguls, which may explain the influx of Jewish immigrant composers working in the field of film music. Interestingly, many Jewish film composers made their mark by infusing their scores with black musical idioms. Why so many Jewish musicians adopted the African American musical vernacular rather than developing the Eastern European voice of their ancestry can be seen as a mixture of popular demand and socio-political necessity.

As the fight against white supremacy was being openly challenged in the struggle for civil rights, Hitler's fascist regime took hold in Europe, as thousands of Jews were sent to extermination camps. With America's hesitancy in joining the allied forces and entering World War II, Hollywood headed by Jewish studio moguls, felt uncomfortable in openly exploring Yiddish culture. Michael Rogin argues in his book *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* that Jewish subjects and characters disappeared from the screen, and instead Hollywood produced numerous films dealing with black oppression at the hands of racist whites. These films were metaphors for the Jewish plight in Europe:

Hitler's rise brought to an end Hollywood's cycle of Jewish generational-conflict film. Responding to the Nazi seizure of power, and to the fascist sympathies of the Hays/Breen Production Code Administration (the industry group with the power to censor films), the Jewish

moguls evaded anti-Semitism by simply eliminating Jews from the screen . . . As the Jewish movies were fading away, Hollywood did produce the generational conflict film about black passing *Imitation of Life* (1934). Thanks largely to the performance of Fredi Washington as the light-skinned African American, *Imitation of Life* opened a window on the issue of racism<sup>2</sup> (1996: 209).

Rogin's book ironically highlights that during this period, the traditionally Jewish Hollywood studios were adorning a metaphorical blackface to relate narratives about the mistreatment of the ethnic Other. The movement away from the Jewish ancestry could in part be read as a sign of cultural desperation. It seems apparent that numerous composers and directors wanted to disassociate themselves from their racial inheritance; Jacob Gershowitz became George Gershwin, whereas Julius Korngold selected the Germanic-sounding Erich Wolfgang Korngold. Whether this was merely a process of embracing their American identity, the Jewish preoccupation with black cultural forms can be read as a cloaking device. Nevertheless, the appropriation of black musical idioms had endured a lengthy and profitable history for white composers.

Prior to the Civil War, American popular song was founded on the folk melodies of Celtic and European traditions. As the divided nation turned its attention to the issue of race, black musical tropes gained admittance into the populist canon. This tradition began with people such as Stephen Foster who attempted to recreate the lyrical melodies of black slave communities. The adaptation process resulted in sanitized versions of black folk expression, infused with rural plantation mythology of the 'happy ducky'. Rather than retaining the essential spirit of black culture, Foster transcribed the melodies so that they conformed to Western counterpoint. This in turn made the music more easily acceptable to a white audience. Foster rid the black music of its quarter tones, guttural inflections and improvisatory technique; and while he was not of the Jewish faith, his work influenced the next generation of composers who predominantly were. Collectively, they were recognized via their place of work, Tin Pan Alley.

Foster's fascination with black melodies in the 1850s was pivotal in the development of American popular song. Black musicians such as Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton further entrenched the rhythmic drive and syncopation as an essential component of popular music. George Gershwin, Jerome Kern and Irving Berlin, while working on Tin Pan Alley, all looked to black folk culture in order to create many memorable classics. Unfortunately, in the hands of white composers the adoption of black

music was also closely tied to the propagation of negative African American stereotypes. Samuel A. Floyd Jr, points out that this was inscribed in the music from the earliest borrowings:

With the onset of the 'coon song' craze in the 1880s, Tin Pan Alley consolidated the production and marketing of sheet music, producing such titles as Ernest Hogan's 'All Coons Look Alike to Me' (1896) and 'Da Coon Dat Had de Razor' (1885). Through such titles and their illustrated covers, Tin Pan Alley consistently portrayed the African-American male as a fun-loving dandy, a chicken- or ham-loving glutton, a razor-totin' thief, gambler, or drunkard, or an outrageously unfaithful husband or lover. The black female was presented in these illustrations either as a very black, fat, large-lipped mammy or carouser, or as a beautiful light-skinned 'Yaller Rose of Texas' . . . In the late nineteenth century, the advertising of musical products became the primary means of developing, perpetuating, and communicating negative images of black people in American society (1995: 60).

Floyd highlights that the cultural borrowing of African American expression is inherently tied to economic gain and the misrepresentation of the ethnic Other. It is this misrepresentation that we should be particularly alert to. The film industry has always had a fascination with the exotic, 'ethnic Other' and African American identity has habitually been exaggerated and fetishized for this very reason. In the same way that film scores often reduce the complexity of black identity to a sequence of notes, and instrumentation, the visual stereotyping of African Americans is equally problematic.

### ***Porgy and Bess***

In order to illustrate the uncomfortable issue of cultural exploitation, stereotyping, and 'black music' let us now turn our attention to George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. I have chosen this case study for a number of reasons. Firstly, Gershwin's music is consistently featured on many soundtracks, including: *Once Upon a Time in America* (dir. Leone, 1984), *Chocolat* (dir. Hallstrom, 2000), *Hart's War* (dir. Hoblit, 2002) and the Farrelly brothers' *Stuck on You* (2003). The frequent appearance of Gershwin's music on contemporary soundtracks illustrates its longevity and cultural significance. Secondly, Gershwin's attempt to create a 'Folk Opera' is paradoxical. The catchy tunes from *Porgy and Bess* have become entrenched in the

popular music repertoire; therefore, its reputation is not necessarily operatic, but it is more in keeping with the musical. Thus, the opera has constantly received criticism due to its attempt to fuse high and low art forms; in the same vein, film has struggled to gain recognition in line with more traditional artistic practices. Furthermore, opera is akin to cinema in that both mediums marry music and image. Finally, Otto Preminger controversially brought the opera to the screen in 1959. The film is exemplary in that it stars many of the finest African American actors of all time: Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, Sammy Davis Jr, Pearl Bailey and Diahann Carroll. The film has since become buried; therefore it is important that we discover the reasoning behind this.

The novel *Porgy* was written by the white author Dubose Heyward in 1925 and tells of a poor black community living on Catfish Row. The lead protagonist Porgy is a crippled beggar who is pulled around the neighbourhood by a cart and goat. Bess is a whore and drug addict, who finds refuge and love in the arms of Porgy. Moreover, the character of Crown is a violent, murdering brute and Sportin' Life is a city dandy dependent on the consumption and selling of narcotics. Throughout the narrative, the community is depicted as backward, superstitious and embroiled in gambling, murder and vice. George Gershwin had long exhibited a passion for black music in his compositions. Accordingly he, along with his lyricist brother Ira, looked to adapt the colourful, parochial novel into a 'Folk Opera'. In order to immerse himself in black customs and listen to musical tropes first-hand, Gershwin spent time observing and studying the Gullah people of Folly Island, just off the coast of South Carolina. The opera opened in 1935 and has long since been one of the most problematic cultural artefacts in American history.

The main concern black artists, critics and the general public have with Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* is its adoption of stereotypical Negro characters. In addition to the main characters, other members that reside on Catfish Row are either fishermen or unemployed. Many African Americans feel that these caricatures are not a realistic portrayal of black life; instead, they help reaffirm the negative stereotypes that have been responsible for misinforming white society.

The opera has continued to confuse critics since its formation, due to it being too white for a black audience and too black for its white counterparts. The African American composer Hall Johnson claimed that any moment of authenticity was due to the energy and heritage of the black performers involved. Herein lies another problem: *Porgy and Bess* provided African



American entertainers the opportunity to appear on stage in front of a white audience, yet the chances for black operatic performers were restricted to the folk opera and nothing else. As the opera was not regarded favourably with black society – to perform in *Porgy and Bess* often meant losing face and selling out. This became apparent when Samuel Goldwyn set about turning the opera into a film in 1959.

Harry Belafonte openly refused to play Porgy, although it is debatable as to whether he was ever offered the role. Ultimately the part of the crippled beggar went to Sidney Poitier. Poitier had based his career up until this point on attempting to rework the derogatory stereotypes that Hollywood had long used to represent African American identity. It is fair to say that Poitier was very much the integrationist hero. He constantly played the middle-class, conservative, non-sexual acceptable face of black America. Poitier worked to give the African American community noble black heroes. For many, his acceptance of the role of Porgy was a step too far in the wrong direction. Gershwin's lyrics 'I got plenty of nuttin' and nuttin's plenty for me' were not in keeping with the ethos of the civil rights movement which was steadily building in momentum. Poitier was aware of the disappointment many felt at his acceptance of the role but later admitted he had been threatened with never working in Hollywood again.

The film industry was prepared to enforce the perpetuation of backward, impoverished-yet-happy black stereotypes: the same caricatures that Foster had drawn on almost one hundred years previously. Due to prolonged opposition from the NAACP and famous African Americans including Lorraine Hansberry, the film was taken out of circulation by the executors of both the Gershwin and Heyward estates. Nowadays it is incredibly rare to happen upon a print and the quality of those in existence is far from ideal. Preminger's film has become an embarrassment; and as a result it has been rendered invisible. The film, like the original opera, has found itself in a paradoxical position. Visually the film depicts harmful, derogatory caricatures of black society but musically Gershwin was looking to introduce white America to the multi-faceted writing styles of black America. With the rise of political correctness this great musical text has become marginalized, in the same way that Hollywood traditionally marginalized African Americans on screen. This film gives evidence of the mistreatment of black race and the cultural exploitation and white paternalism of Gershwin, Heyward and Preminger. The precarious relationship between *Porgy and Bess*, white appropriation of black culture and stereotyping is quoted and developed in the work of Spike Lee.

### Spike Lee: Signifying on 'Summertime'

Spike Lee is arguably the most famous African American director of all time. His work is frequently controversial and often contradictory. He refuses to define his personal standpoint relating to African American politics, yet is frequently outspoken regarding American race relations and the George Bush administration. Regardless of his political persuasion, the authority with which Lee selects music for his films highlights his talent as not only a director but also as an aficionado of black American music. Lee's eclectic taste in music by black artists results in the pairing of such diverse acts as Stevie Wonder, John Coltrane, Curtis Mayfield and Public Enemy. Additionally Lee always supplements the popular music in his films with an original orchestral score. Initially, the director's father Bill Lee was responsible for composing scores for his films; but since the film *Jungle Fever* (1991) he has established a collaborative relationship with the composer Terence Blanchard.

Blanchard began his professional career playing trumpet with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. He then teamed up with fellow messenger Donald Harrison for a few projects before going solo. Lee's tastes in popular music are complemented by Blanchard's understanding of black musical tropes and Western orchestral writing. Their partnership has resulted in original scores rooted in the black vernacular and heightened by a sense of political awareness. Prior to working with Lee, Blanchard wrote for the film *Sugar Hill* (dir. Ichaso, 1994). In this feature he performed with a small jazz ensemble. He introduced a muted jazz trumpet refrain as an accompaniment to a series of flashbacks. However, as the film progresses the melancholy melodic approach gives way to harsh atonalities to portray aggravation and hurt. *Eve's Bayou* (dir. Lemmons, 1997) also includes a deliciously rich score executed by a more mature and experienced Blanchard:

The dark meanderings of the bayou, made more mysterious by the overhanging Spanish moss and the switch to black and white film as death is remembered or predicted and underscored by the darkly bluesy orchestral accompaniment (Ellison: 2005: 223).<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the film there are allusions to the idea of memory being likened to 'a tapestry of intricate texture and the tapestry tells a story and the story is our past'.<sup>4</sup> This description can also be applied to Blanchard's music in the film. He skilfully blends strings with the distinctive moan of the harmonica. Colour is further enhanced as he deftly peppers the film with musical flavours associated with the Louisiana bayous.

The score for Lee's film *Bamboozled* (2000) is most relevant to the key arguments raised here, as the music offers additional layers to the criticisms the film poses. The narrative features a television writer, Delacroix (Damon Wayans), who in fear of breaking his contract with the studio due to his failed portrayals of middle-class African American issues, sets out on a mission to get fired. Consequently he looks to regurgitate the distasteful minstrel show in an effort to lose his job. However, the American public go wild and blackface becomes the latest fad to take the country by storm.

The main musical theme which dominates the majority of the film is employed to represent the idea of 'blacking' up. It appears in all the scenes where burnt cork is being applied as the actors prepare to perform in blackface. What is most interesting about this musical theme is its first appearance in the film. The music is initially used to introduce the character Julius Hopkins, known to his gang as 'Big Blak Afrika'. The character, played by real-life rapper Mos Def, is used to represent the contemporary stereotype of the violent black gangsta. In placing the metaphorical blackface theme alongside the introduction of the militant rapper, Lee is making the controversial connection between the modern-day rapper being equivalent to the derogatory minstrel figure of the past.

The secondary theme introduced to the narrative is key, as it is a rendition of George Gershwin's 'Summertime'. The 'Summertime' motif appears in various guises throughout the film and is placed in accompaniment to scenes that explore the uneasy, yet lucrative, relationship between black stereotyping and financial gain. Blanchard's performance of 'Summertime' on muted trumpet is not instantly recognizable as it does not conform to the rhythmic patterns of the original lyrics. However, this is typical of the black cultural practice of 'signifying'.

Signifying is a theory expanded on by several writers and then popularized by the African American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr in his work, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988).<sup>5</sup> Signifying evolved as a survival technique introduced to youngsters within slave communities. It was a teaching tool, which asserted that through wit and words, punishment could be deflected. Signifying stems from the idea of 'getting one over', or outwitting a rival through the art of boasting. The practice of signifying is founded on the idea of improvisation, humour, manipulation and quick thinking – all of which are present in Blanchard's performance of Gershwin's aria.

The sparse, acoustic tone of the piece is laid back and lazy, evoking nostalgia for the mythic Deep South, the location of *Porgy and Bess*. However, the music is used in accompaniment to Delacroix's decision to resurrect the minstrel show. In pairing minstrelsy with *Porgy and Bess*, Lee and

Blanchard are raising age-old questions regarding authenticity, authorship and appropriation of black cultural forms. To complicate matters, 'Summertime' is a recognizable classic from the jazz canon. Black jazz artists have continuously and consciously re-appropriated the ballad and through the skills of improvisation, quoted and transformed it. Nevertheless, in using the motif in conjunction with the ideas of stereotyping for monetary reward, Lee could be accused of exposing the reality behind the African American adoption of the tune. Lee is suggesting that the motivation for performing 'Summertime' as a black artist is a matter of survival, a case of earning some cash.

When the theme next appears, these ideas are solidified as the famous tune is heard alongside images of grotesque turn of the century folk art collectable, 'the Jolly Nigger Bank', once more connecting the fetishization of black identity and economics. The instrumentation at this point is far denser, as it is performed by a small ensemble including clarinet, oboe and jazz guitar. It is still written in the lazy jazz style, but now it involves moving voices in the accompanying strings. This is far more in keeping with the way Gershwin realized the melody in his opera. The contrapuntal texture is compliant with orchestral writing, yet at no point does the jazz style become sanitized in the way that Gershwin's opera often does. However, with each subsequent reprisal of the theme the motif is slowly stripped of its jazz inflection, its black roots.

Lawrence Starr pointed out that "Summertime" is always used ironically; its gentle words and flowing music portray a world that lies totally outside the reality of life in Catfish Row' (1984: 31).<sup>6</sup> Starr's research suggests that whenever the peaceful lullaby appears it is quickly juxtaposed with violence and tragedy. The principle of juxtaposing beauty and ugliness is in fact the premise of the film *Bamboozled*. Lee skilfully positions African American culture in a volatile environment. Black art has always found itself in an impossible situation, hinged between fetishized fascination and substantive creativity. Lee in his borrowing of 'Summertime' exploits the musical motif's cultural and historical baggage. Lee is posing questions concerning the role of black art and the reception, commodification and misappropriation of black cultural forms by white society. This, however, was not the first time Lee had alluded to *Porgy and Bess*.

*Do the Right Thing* introduces the use of various leitmotifs, one of which has a distinct flavour of George Gershwin's infamous aria 'Summertime'. Unlike the direct quotation in *Bamboozled*, echoes of the melody are only suggested. The theme written by Bill Lee, Spike's father, follows the same contour as 'Summertime', yet does not emphasize the lilting motion achieved

by dotted rhythms in the original. However, the free style interpretation, performed by Branford Marsalis, gives the suggestion of dotted rhythms as he skilfully manipulates the tune. Bill Lee's leitmotif seems to concentrate on the Gershwin lyric 'and the living is easy'. Marsalis introduces the distinctive rhythmic idea and then transforms it; yet the essence of Gershwin's 'Summertime' remains evident. This impression is given greater validity through the accompanying dialogue that occurs between the characters of Mother Sister and Da Mayor:

Da Mayor: Ain't nuthin'like the smell of fresh flowers, Don't you Agree, Mother Sister? Summertime, all ya can smell is the garbage. Smell overpowers everything, especially soft sweet smell of flower . . . If you don't mind, I'm gonna set right here, catch a breeze or two, then be on my way . . . Thank the Lord, the sun is going down, it's hot as blazes. Yes Jesus.

It is of interest to note the use of the word 'summertime' and the many references to the heat within Da Mayor's attempt to court Mother Sister. Could this be Spike Lee signifying on the ballad 'Summertime'? Is he playing verbal games? If so, then this would suggest that the word 'nuthin' may be alluding to the ballad 'I Got Plenty of Nuttin' sung by Porgy in the original stage play. Likewise should Da Mayor's gesture that he 'catch a breeze or two, then be on [his] way' be another reference to a song from *Porgy and Bess* – that being 'Oh Lawd, I'm On My Way'? Whether the viewer chooses to accept these subtle linguistic similarities or not the evidence cannot be denied when we consider the musical notation. Both melodies follow the same contour, the harmonies and intervals utilized by Bill Lee are based around minor thirds and blue notes, and additionally Lee emphasizes a rhythmic motif which replicates the inflections found in the phrase 'and the livin' is easy'.

Due to the familiarity of 'Summertime' worldwide, its employment in such poignant scenes in the films of Spike Lee demands recognition. The lullaby refuses to remain in the background; it fights for our attention. Harold Cruse claimed that *Porgy and Bess* was 'the most contradictory cultural symbol ever created in the Western World'; as not only is it a mixture of populist and high art forms but also an undisputable example of cultural appropriation and exploitation.<sup>7</sup> What is clear, however, is that the film industry has historically been reliant on shorthand, both visually and musically, to represent race and ethnicity. Accordingly African American

identity has become abbreviated to a set of formulaic semiotic codes. What Spike Lee proves is that through the re-appropriation, quotation and transformation, problematic cultural texts can be loaded with political accountability. *Porgy and Bess* prompts interesting questions regarding the marginalization of cultural artefacts. The fact is that Preminger's film has been withdrawn from circulation, along with the equally controversial Disney classic *Song of the South* (dir. Harve Foster & Wilfred Jackson, 1946), is evidence of embarrassment. Yet we need to consider the appropriateness of trying to erase evidence of cultural exploitation and racism within the film industry. *Porgy and Bess* is a symbolic text, as it is grotesquely awkward yet innovatively brilliant on so many levels.

Returning to the film *Bamboozled*, and the scene where Delacroix is given the 'Jolly Nigger Bank' the dialogue addresses problems that have been raised throughout this debate:

Delacroix: And what do we call this thing?

Sloan: It is called a 'Jolly Nigger Bank'. Ain't that something! And it's not a repro, it's circa turn of the century

Delacroix: Thank you I guess

Sloan: I thought it was appropriate

Delacroix: And is that good or bad?

Sloan: Well, got a brand new successful show so you'll be going to the bank. Plus I love these collectibles . . . It reminds me of a time in our history, in this country, when we were considered inferior, subhuman and we should never forget.

Lee is issuing a warning to African Americans working within cultural industries. His message warns against colluding in the regurgitation of archaic stereotypes. Lee, like many young African Americans, is a professed collector of grotesque black collectables. This newfound interest in the derogatory essentialization of black identity is testimony to contemporary African Americans reclaiming their past. Therefore, maybe it is time for the recirculation of *Porgy and Bess*. Rather than trying to bury the past, it is now time to thoroughly interrogate racially problematic artefacts.

## Notes

1. This has been taken from the online version of Philip Tagg's 'Open Letter about 'Black Music', 'Afro-American Music' and 'European Music' available from his website at <http://>

[www.tagg.org/articles/opelet.html](http://www.tagg.org/articles/opelet.html). Interestingly when Tagg re-edited the piece in 1989 for the journal *Popular Music*, 8.3, 285–98, this section was omitted.

2. Douglas Sirk's 1959 remake of *Imitation of life* concludes with an impassioned ending with Mahalia Jackson singing 'Trouble of the World'. Here the sorrow song resonates with a historical sense of African American martyrdom. However it can also be read as Annie Johnson's (Juanita Moore) riposte to her white counterpart Laura Meredith (Lana Turner).

3. M. Ellison, (2005), 'Resonating screens: echoes of Africa in Charles Burnett's *To Sleep With Anger* and Kasi Lemmon's *Eve's Bayou*', *African American Review*, 39(1–2), 223.

4. *Eve's Bayou* (Kasi Lemmons: 1997).

5. Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

6. Lawrence Starr, 'Towards a reevaluation of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*', *American Music*, 2.2 (1984), 31.

7. Harold Cruse, '“Hollywood Has Taken on a New Color”: The Yiddish Blackface of Samuel Goldwyn's *Porgy and Bess*', in J. Gill (ed.), *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001, p. 348.