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Response to Monson - 2

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Response

Jane Rhodes

I would like to thank Professor Monson for her fascinating and wide-ranging essay. In particular, I am delighted with the ways it effectively links black expressive culture with the myriad processes of globalization. The essay helps expand our understanding of the global exchange of goods, ideas, and bodies. It also demonstrates the manner in which music transmits the complex range of black American and African identities, politics, and social and political practices. In other words, black music is not the kind of frivolous enterprise that a more conventional analysis might have us believe. It is not “just about the party.” Rather, since the dawn of the Transatlantic slave trade, music has been and continues to be a chief interlocutor of the black diasporic experience. I appreciate the role of the International Roundtable theme this year in pushing us to interrogate this reality.

When preparing for this session, I couldn't help but think about the 2007 Nobel Prizes being bestowed as symbols of the kinds of accomplishments that signify genius and real heft on the international stage: in science, economics, diplomacy, literature. The Nobel Prizes are widely considered the world's most influential acknowledgment of intellectual and political achievement. Yet music is visibly absent from this domain. Implied in this absence is that music provides cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual effects, but rarely material effects. Music isn't serious business—it's play, it's craft, it's entertainment. That music, as Monson suggests, has functioned as a principal domain for the multiplicity of black experience leads us to consider the marginal status of diasporic black subjects regardless of where they reside. If music is understood in these terms, blacks are continually located within less serious and status-laden enterprises. Their contributions are influential yet ephemeral. Among other things, Monson's essay propels me to ask why it is music (rather than oil, stocks, or other commodities) that becomes the focal point for the global presence of Africans and African Americans. The answer, I would argue, is located in the historical specificity of the African slave trade; in the fact that for many of those of African descent, music was the only product that could not, for the most part, be possessed by others. In light of this reality, we might view music in more pragmatic or commercial terms—as a commodity to sell; as a gift to bestow; and as a vehicle for political and social dis-

course. This suggests another way to interrogate the power that resides in black music—as an intensely desired commodity through which issues of race, economics, and politics are negotiated.

There is no better example of this phenomenon than the appropriation of black expressive culture by white Americans in blackface during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Black music, dance, and folk culture were prized commodities for an audience hungry to create a popular culture distinct from its European roots. But this form of entertainment, wildly popular in its day, also performed a disciplinary function for persons of African descent. As political scientist Michael Rogin explains, “African Americans may have inhabited an expressive culture that whites in blackface were drawn to copy, and minstrels may have imitated free blacks...rather than slaves, but in appropriating African American virtuosity minstrels presented a masking means of defense as if it issued forth from the essential black.”¹ Hence, black music and black culture have always had to wrestle free of this cycle of commodification and control. Black artists have always had to map out a space in which they could be creative and innovative beyond the gaze of the dominant culture. In addition, they had to straddle the terrain between marginalization and poverty, on the one hand, or integration and some measure of prosperity, on the other. No form of black music better embodies these divergent possibilities than jazz.

Before continuing, I do want to take issue with a couple of sweeping concepts offered by Monson. One is the dangerous dip into essentialism, as represented by claims such as, “the exceptional place for music in African American culture.” There is no singular and unified African-American culture, and scholars must take pains to avoid such assertions. Similarly, the use of the phrase *black community* implies the existence of a homogeneous black formation in the United States, whose inhabitants are equally connected to the mythological triumvirate of church, family, and culture. Nothing could be further from the truth, particularly when it comes to engaging with jazz music. Let me offer my own family as an example.

My parents—one born in Mississippi, the other in Georgia—came of age during the worst years of the Jim Crow South and were part of the great migration northward. Both of their families were intensely secular, distancing themselves from a religious identity that seemed to reinforce stereotypes and encourage devotion over action. My parents did not listen to gospel music nor attend church regularly. “Negro” spirituals served only as a tie to historical memory. They found them-

selves on a path to a different way of seeing the world that they inherited from their parents. Once they arrived in the big city, New York, they dwelled in a cosmopolitan, multinational, multiracial universe as they and their peers clambered their way up from the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder. Jazz was their music, from swing to bop to modern jazz. It provided the backdrop of their youth and their struggle, and it marked them as the kinds of aesthetic Afro-modernists Monson describes.

My brother and I, growing up during the 1960s, picked up these threads and thrust ourselves headlong into the avant-garde “new jazz” scene. My older sibling, in particular, was linking his engagement with Black Nationalism to this art form. He swore he could tell a black musician from a white one just by listening. He was willing to accept white performers if they had “serious chops,” but the new jazz spoke to his longing for a defiant, determinedly black, and largely male domain—one that couldn’t be appropriated by whites or tainted by commercialism and commodification. The post-war jazz scene that appealed to children of the Sixties had several overlapping characteristics:

- Jazz privileged the secular over the sacred
- Jazz privileged technical prowess over mere cleverness
- Jazz privileged an intellectual engagement with other art forms, including surrealism and beat poetry
- Jazz privileged a political engagement with black freedom struggles
- Jazz privileged innovation over repetition; this was more than dance music

In this regard, I want to reference the 1977 book by British jazz critic Valerie Wilmer, whose title, *As Serious As Your Life*, underscores the project I’m discussing. These performers, people like John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, and the members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music in Chicago, had encountered blistering criticism and opposition, rather than a romantic embrace of the jazz idiom. Wilmer perceptively understands this as a project of racial containment. “With few notable exceptions, the critics attacked the unfamiliar directions the music has taken,” she wrote. “There is nothing new...The so-called New Music has been treated irresponsibly by many critics, something that could not, I suggest, have gone on for so long had the music in question been created by whites.”² Wilmer, like most of the musicians she interviewed, openly

discusses the black-white divide in jazz that Monson addresses. What is revealed is that these artists sought to elevate back music to the weighty and serious domain that it deserved. That meant you had to pay serious dues to get an entry card; dues that was both musical and experiential.

Professor Monson's important analysis opens up a series of crucial questions. Why is music over-determined in the black experience, if this is, in fact, the case? In what ways is the hyper-visibility of black music an intentional political project? Is this a choice, rather than a reaction to structural inequality? Does music really occupy all of the nooks and crannies of black American life? Or is that just what it looks like from the outside? It is this outsider/insider metaphor that helped construct the black/white divide in jazz. It wasn't so much whether whites could play jazz, but whether or not they had access to the more private, interior dimensions of the black experience.

I agree wholeheartedly with Monson's contention that, "to erase the aesthetic history in the name of universalism is a whitewash that allows whites to appropriate black cultural forms with impunity." Black musicians set the terms for participation in jazz culture. This enraged some white musicians and humbled others; it pushed others to work harder to gain entry. White musicians understood that the highest compliment might be to be mistaken for black; a powerful upending of a social system that historically favored white over black. What black musicians brought to this enterprise was an intensity of experience, anger, frustration, alienation, and love, and a desire to channel the history of racism through art. It wasn't that they were more musically inclined, more "naturally" musical; they were simply more oppressed.

Finally, I'm not sure jazz has been a vehicle out of a "race-based second-class citizenship" for black Americans—also contended by Professor Monson—unless you're talking about the Marsalis family. Many of the great innovators died penniless, addicted, sick, depressed, or unrecognized. Many chose a life of penury as a means to stay authentic. Even those who aspired to success often found it elusive at best. Nevertheless, black Americans and their diasporic kin have clung defiantly to the identification of jazz as an essential black art form. It is an expression of ownership and power and of autonomy and self-sufficiency, characteristics that are as old as the earliest forms of black political culture.

Notes

1. Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1994), p. 33.
2. Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz* (London: Quartet Books, 1977), p. 15.