

“The Greatest Jazz Concert Ever”: Critical Discourse, European Aesthetics, and the Legitimization of Jazz

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On May 15, 2003, five of the most prominent jazz musicians in North America gathered at Toronto’s Massey Hall. Alto saxophonist Kenny Garrett, trumpeter Roy Hargrove, pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Dave Holland, and drummer Roy Haynes came together in tribute to the fiftieth anniversary of another quintet performance. The earlier concert—on the same date in 1953 and at the same location in Toronto, featuring iconic bebop musicians Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, pianist Bud Powell, bassist Charles Mingus, and drummer Max Roach—has achieved near mythical status, as evinced by the rather preposterously hyperbolic description, “the Greatest Jazz Concert Ever,” that appears in countless textbooks and collector’s guides (Miller, *Cool Blues* 98). Curiously, the interviews of the participating musicians that appeared in the papers in the days leading up to the 2003 concert were hardly electric with anticipation: “It’s another concert, another gig,” Garrett told the *Montreal Gazette*, “I’m having fun with other musicians” (qtd. in Pacienza). Roy Haynes, the oldest member of the quintet and the only one to have performed with the members of the 1953 band, was similarly restrained in his comments to *The Globe and Mail*’s Mark Miller:

But let’s get this straight: despite all appearances to the contrary, Haynes feels no particular obligation as one of bop’s surviving originals to uphold its traditions. “No,” he says, matter-of-factly. “‘Bebop’ is just a word. I guess I was part of that, and part of it was in me, but as far as ‘upholding’ it . . . well, I’d like to uphold the music but still be creative, still innovate . . . My mind is open musically; I’m not just stuck in one thing.” (“A night”)

Such apathy perhaps befits an homage to a concert that, when not being mythologized as the “greatest,” is often identified as the “most hyped” (Miller, “A night”). Indeed, the descriptor “greatest” was not affixed to the concert until eighteen years later when the recording (originally released on Mingus’s Debut label) was re-released by Prestige Records in 1973. In 1953, however, *Globe and Mail* arts critic Alex Barris offered a decidedly lukewarm review: “All in all, it was neither a great concert nor a bad one” (qtd. in Miller, “A night”). He preferred Parker and Gillespie’s 1954 performance in Toronto, with the Erroll Garner trio opening for the Stan Kenton orchestra, which was “a bit better than on his last appearance here” (qtd. in Miller, *Cool Blues* 100). More recent critics have been similarly subdued in their responses: former Toronto jazz radio host Ted O’Reilly offers, “It’s probably not the best any of them ever played individually but it was beautifully made music” (qtd. in Pacienza), while an anonymous contributor to Mark Miller’s 2003 review, who was in attendance at the ’53 concert, suggests, “It was very short and not too sweet. Less than an hour; very disorganized; everybody was in pretty mysterious shape” (Miller, “A night”).

The mixed reviews cannot be blamed entirely on the musicians. An unfortunate scheduling coincidence sabotaged the economic viability of the concert: a much-anticipated boxing re-match between heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano and number one contender Jersey Joe Walcott, originally scheduled for April 10, was moved to May 15 and broadcast on public television throughout Canada and the United States. Consequently, contrary to Mingus’s (typically) exaggerated assertion that the concert was “a sell out, [you] couldn’t get in the door,” Massey Hall was just over half full, as many Torontonians who otherwise would perhaps have attended the concert stayed home to watch the bout. As it happened, even those who had chosen to come to the concert (including Parker and Gillespie) were able to witness the entire match at the Silver Rail across the street during the intermission. Much to the disappointment of the musicians, Marciano knocked out the African-American Jersey Joe two minutes and twenty-five seconds into the first round (Miller, *Cool Blues* 84). As a result of the poor attendance, only Parker, Powell, and Roach were ever paid in full, while Mingus received the master tapes of the concert recording in lieu of payment. Gillespie was not remunerated at all: Gillespie later said of the cheque he received in Toronto, “it bounced, and bounced, and bounced like a rubber ball” (qtd. in Miller, *Cool Blues* 95).

Evidently, the discourse that has built up around the Massey Hall concert is rife with contradictions and inconsistencies. My purpose in this paper, therefore, is not to answer the obvious question (oft-posed on blogs and discussion boards) of whether or not the performance lives up to its billing as “the greatest jazz concert ever”; it is difficult to imagine that any concert—let alone one that clearly had such a mixed reception—could ever warrant such a description. Indeed, the billing falls in a lineage of “greatest jazz” groups, performances, and recordings, including the “World’s Greatest Jazz Band” (an all-star Dixieland revival outfit active from 1968-1978) and *The Greatest Jazz Concert In The World* (the 1975 Pablo Records release of a 1967 Carnegie Hall concert that featured Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, the Duke Ellington Orchestra, and a host of other prominent musicians). In all of these cases,

reviews have been mixed, leaving little doubt that although the use of the word “greatest” purports to be an aesthetic declaration, it is better understood as a rhetorical maneuver. Hence, this paper focuses on discourse, treating the concert and its hyperbolic billing as an entry point into the complex web of social and textual factors involved in the discursive valorization of bebop, in particular, and jazz in general.

Bebop musicians—for the most part, a group of African-American musicians (including, notably, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie) living and working in New York during the 1940s and 50s—were not the first to explicitly identify themselves as highbrow artists in the European mold, rather than entertainers; however, as Scott Deveaux (*The Birth*), Bernard Gendron, and numerous other scholars have suggested, bebop marked the first historical moment when significant numbers of jazz musicians adopted this aesthetic stance, and made it a fundamental element of their music. Equally significant, it was also the moment when significant numbers of critics began to recognize and celebrate jazz musicians as artists. Drawing on the socially-grounded aesthetic theorizations of a number of sociologists (most notably Pierre Bourdieu and Lawrence W. Levine), I consider the discursive construction of bebop as a high art idiom, worthy of inclusion in the canon of European art. I suggest that this process was advanced by both critics and musicians who sought to align the music with the conceptual framework, terminology, and institutions of European classical music. Given the illustrious venue, I propose that the 1953 performance was a part of this process. I argue, however, that the contradictory discourses that have alternately mythologized and dismissed the Massey Hall concert reveal an intriguing (and somewhat surprising) ambivalence, one that characterizes the relationship between the musicians who performed at the concert and the critics who named it “the greatest ever.”

The relationship between musicians and critics has frequently been characterized as deeply antagonistic. Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) vociferously argued this position in his 1963 *Down Beat* article, “Jazz and the White Critic”: “The irony here is that because the majority of jazz critics are white middle-brows, most jazz criticism tends to enforce white middle-brow standards of excellence as criteria for performance of a music that in its most profound manifestations is completely antithetical to such standards; in fact, quite often is in direct reaction against them” (258). Jazz scholar Frank Kofsky amplifies Baraka’s argument, in his book *Black Music, White Business*. In it, he angrily calls out what he perceives to be the tacit racism of the most esteemed jazz critics, from John Hammond to Martin Williams to Nat Hentoff to Leonard Feather. “The essence of the political economy of jazz,” Kofsky writes, “has never been stated with greater succinctness than in saxophonist Archie Shepp’s aphorism, ‘You own the music and we make it.’ Further clarification, should any be needed, comes from the comment of [trumpeter] Rex Stewart . . . ‘Where the control is, the money is. Do you see any of us running any record companies, booking agencies, radio stations, music magazines?’” (Kofsky 19). For Baraka and Kofsky (as well as for Shepp and Stewart), the relationship between critics and jazz musicians—in fact, between members of the American musical establishment and jazz musicians—is a purely antagonistic racial binary: the white exploiter/colonizer and the black exploited/colonized. The ambivalence in the discourses that have developed around the Massey Hall concert, however, requires us to re-evaluate this formulation of the relationship between jazz musicians and critics, particularly during the 1940s and 50s. Such a re-evaluation reveals that the valorization and legitimization of bebop (and jazz) was not a unilateral imposition of hegemonic (white) aesthetic standards on a subaltern (black) music, nor was it a utopian case of progressive black musicians and white critics casting aside generations of racial and cultural prejudice in order to collaboratively elevate a previously-maligned music into the upper echelons of American art. Rather, the process was deeply ambivalent: musicians and critics worked with *and* against each other to transform jazz from a popular music into a high art, entering into a relationship that might best be understood in terms of Ralph Ellison’s notion of “antagonistic cooperation.”¹

Eurocentrism in America

Lawrence Levine and Joan Shelley Rubin have both traced the shifting position of European music in America. In their view, the notion that European music represented the apotheosis of expressive culture crystallized in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Following Carl Dahlhaus, Levine uses the term “sacralization” to describe the process whereby European classical music came to be regarded not only as the aesthetic measuring stick against which all other forms of cultural expression must be compared but, also, as a moral compass. During the final years of the nineteenth century, it became commonplace in the U.S. to refer to European music as “a religion” and its master practitioners as “high priests” (Levine 134). Rubin has suggested that this sense of religiosity and mysticism was established in part by the Harvard moral philosophers, including Joseph Stevens Buckminster, Andrews Norton, and William Ellery Channing, whose writings would eventually form the foundation for Unitarian doctrine. “For [them],” writes Rubin, “the attainment of a cultured sensibility was part of a larger task: the achievement of salvation” (Rubin 5).² By the early twentieth century, as Levine explains, “[t]he process of sacralization [had] reinforced the all too prevalent notion that for the source of divine inspiration and artistic creation one had to look not only upward but eastward toward Europe” (Levine 140).

This ideology of Eurocentrism was not only prevalent among white Americans in the northeast. In fact, New Orleans was home to the first permanent opera company and one of the first permanent symphony orchestras in the U.S. (Gridley 38). Prior to and during the legal reification of segregation in the late nineteenth century, both the French Opera House and the symphony were chiefly patronized by the city's sizable (and relatively affluent) Creole population. David Ake has suggested that, as segregation concretized, European aesthetic standards became a means for the downtown Creoles to distinguish themselves culturally from the ethnically African uptown residents, particularly after the so-called "one-drop rule"³ eliminated any legal distinction. Creole musicians and musical cognoscenti, most of whom had grown up attending concerts at the French Opera House, commonly dismissed "negro" music and musicians as crude and "unschooled" (Ake 18). During a series of interviews with Alan Lomax, the Creole pianist Jelly Roll Morton (self-proclaimed "inventor of jazz") referred to disputes he had with his family regarding his predilection for unsavory uptown music, musicians, and (above all) venues: "Of course, my folks never had the idea they wanted a musician in the family. They always had it in their minds that a musician was a tramp, trying to duck work, with the exception of the French Opera House players which they patronized" (qtd. in Ake 18). In this context, it is hardly surprising that Morton would defend himself and his music by reframing it within the Eurocentric aesthetic standards of his Creole community: "Jazz music is based on the same principles, because jazz is based on strictly music. You have the finest ideas from the greatest operas, symphonies, and overtures in jazz music. There is nothing finer than jazz because it comes from everything of the finest-class music" (20).

Of course, Eurocentrism was hardly unique to New Orleans Creoles. Across the United States, and throughout the history of racial segregation, African American musicians, writers, intellectuals, and cultural producers of all stripes have turned to European aesthetic standards as a means of debunking myths of African American intellectual and cultural inferiority by demonstrating (as Jon Michael Spencer has put it) a "two-tiered mastery [of European] form and technique [and Negro] mood and spirit" (qtd. in Porter 3). We can trace the phenomenon from nineteenth century New Orleans through to early twentieth century New York City, where it became one of the founding tenets of the "New Negro Movement"—a cultural movement that began at the turn of the twentieth century and eventually blossomed into the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. In New York, a number of leaders of the Harlem Renaissance regarded both African-American folk music and jazz⁴ as a rich musical resource that was merely (in the words of Howard University philosopher and leading Harlem intellectual Alain Locke) awaiting "transformation into serious music of high culture by some race genius in the tradition of a Dvorak or a Smetana" (qtd. in Thomas 105). By invoking classical composers Antonin Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana, Locke links jazz to the classical canon. In the same breath, he makes it clear that in order for jazz to become a "serious music of high culture," it must follow in "the tradition" of European art, in this case personified by the two eastern European composers.⁵

Jazz musicians have engaged with this discourse in a variety of ways. Musicians (particularly pianists) from Morton and Willie "The Lion" Smith to Art Tatum regularly performed canonical classical works.⁶ Morton described taking melodies from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Verdi's *Il Trovatore*—music "that they used to play in the French Opera House, tunes that have always lived in my mind as the great favorites of opera singers; I transformed a lot of those numbers into jazz time, using different little variations and ideas to masquerade the tunes" (20). Similarly, Smith was known to boast that he could "play Chopin faster than any man alive" (qtd. in Lee 105), while Tatum regularly performed music by both Dvořák and Chopin in his concerts. A.B. Spellman places these musicians in "a tradition in jazz in which one first proves oneself capable of playing classical music to show that playing the blues was a matter of choice" (qtd. in Lee 105). By performing and adapting such pieces, these musicians were simultaneously demonstrating that their abilities as performers were on a par with white European and American musicians, and that their music was the equal of European art music. Hence, for Morton, Smith, and Tatum, along with Alain Locke and many other musicians and commentators, the performance of European music and the assertion of European aesthetic standards served as a means of demonstrating African American musical and intellectual sophistication, and of asserting the "seriousness" of African American music.

White musicians and critics also began to participate in this assertion of jazz's "seriousness" as early as the 1910s. David Lee identifies the Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet and the American critic Olin Downes as two of the first white men to argue that "certain aspects of jazz deserved serious critical attention" (Lee 21). It was not until the 1920s, however, that most mainstream Americans began to consider jazz as having the potential to become a legitimate art. This embryonic shift in attitude can be attributed to no small extent to the white bandleader Paul Whiteman. He coined the term "symphonic jazz" to identify his music, a genre that Gerald Early has described as "the fusion of the black primitive and the white civilized . . . the fusion of the European with the American" (Early 405). Whiteman's 1924 performance at New York's Aeolian Hall, billed "An Experiment in Modern Music," was a particularly key moment in this shift. While it was not the first jazz performance in a concert hall,⁷ it was the first to receive the "serious critical attention" Ansermet and Downes had advocated. Critics praised Whiteman for "[making] a lady out of jazz" (Early 398), a project that surely hinged on his engagement with the ideology of Eurocentrism, both in terms of his music and his selection of venue.⁸ Musically, Whiteman claimed that his primary contribution to the elevation of

jazz lay in his detailed, fully-scored arrangements. According to Whiteman's publicist, Hugh C. Ernst (the author of the programme notes for the concert), "Paul Whiteman's orchestra was the first organization to especially score each selection and to play it according to the score" (Ernst 40).⁹ This decision was meant to introduce a new level of refinement and control to jazz performance, and to counteract the chaos and cacophony that were seen to be inherent in the more heavily improvised music played by Whiteman's black counterparts. To provide a dignified stage for this refined music, Whiteman's concert was held at Aeolian Hall, an intimate concert hall in a midtown Manhattan building owned by the piano manufacturer, the Aeolian Company. The hall had previously played host to performances by the New York Symphony Orchestra, along with concerts by European musical luminaries Ignacy Paderewski and Sergei Rachmaninoff; hence, it served as an appropriately prestigious venue for Whiteman's "experiment."

In the 1930s, jazz concerts began to proliferate, and John Hammond, the author and producer for Columbia records, emerged as a primary force for promoting the seriousness of the music (Berger). In December of 1938, Hammond organized "From Spirituals to Swing," one of the first performances by black jazz musicians in New York's celebrated Carnegie Hall. Though the somewhat patronizing tone of Hammond's program note to the concert (co-authored with James Dugan) partly belies his admirable intent, the concert was nevertheless a watershed in American music history: a large scale concert in America's flagship concert hall that was widely publicized, well attended, and racially integrated.¹⁰ As Dugan and Hammond wrote,

The music of these hot musicians and their talented colleagues must first be considered as *music*; it is not, as ignorant people contend, a sort of anarchy in music. Good jazz has outlived its highbrow detractors of the twenties and will continue to refute petty charges. Look to it for the same qualities you expect in the classics: expert instrumentation, a musical structure (even in *ad lib* jazz), and a quality that we must call sincerity. (102)

Like Ansermet, Downes, and Ernst before them, Dugan and Hammond praise the musicians and the music by describing both in terms of the European aesthetic standard: the music is legitimate insofar as it possesses "the same qualities you expect in the classics: expert instrumentation, a musical structure, . . . and . . . sincerity." Like Whiteman's Aeolian Hall performance, the venue is also a factor in linking the music to a European aesthetic. As David Lee explains, the concert "brought jazz music, and black performers, to the stage of a major classical concert venue," thereby affirming "that black performers could qualify fully as members of the [European art music] field" (Lee 87).

Bebop and the European Aesthetic

Jazz became more firmly and more visibly ensconced within the European art music tradition with the advent of the bebop genre. Bebop was the first jazz idiom to explicitly stylize and define itself according to the standards of taste of the European aesthetic. It distinguished itself from previous idioms by emphasizing harmonic complexity and technical virtuosity. Bebop, unlike much of the swing music that preceded it, was concert rather than dance music, intended to appeal to a sophisticated listener. Lorenzo Thomas suggests that bebop musicians "thought of themselves as artists rather than entertainers, [and hence] [t]hey sought both respect for their dignity and recognition for their creative genius" (113). Thomas elaborates on the sophistication and "seriousness" that attend to this concern for complexity:

Bebop . . . represent[s] a development of African-American cultural nationalism which *identifies* the evolution of a popular performance style toward a more sophisticated or 'serious' art form as a social and political statement. As performed by Gillespie, Blakey, Randy Weston, Max Roach, and others, the style is a creative and explicit expression of racial pride that is logically and inextricably linked to the musician's desire for artistic recognition and economic self-determination. (Thomas 117)

It seems appropriate that "serious" concert music, as bebop claimed to be, should have been performed in "serious" concert venues. Hence, like the Aeolian Hall and Carnegie Hall concerts, the 1953 performance at Massey Hall was a potent force in the ongoing process of linking jazz to a European aesthetic. Toronto historian William Kilbourn has described the facility as "one of the greatest concert halls of the world, and for much of its life the only major one in Canada. It became a necessary stop for the impresarios touring their stars on the continent" (Kilbourn 8). As a prominent international venue, Massey Hall has played host to such leading high art figures and institutions as Anna Pavlova, Enrico Caruso, Jan Paderewski, Glenn Gould, the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (Kilbourn 1). By performing to a room that had previously witnessed some of the grandest performances of some of the pre-eminent luminaries of the European art music field, the Parker/Gillespie quintet made a powerful claim for a position within that field. As Lee puts it, "Jazz in a jazz club is a night out, jazz at Massey Hall is a bit of a

pilgrimage” (Lee 93). The Massey Hall concert thus helped to affirm bebop’s validity as sophisticated art music and the quintet’s legitimacy as serious musicians, worthy of performing beneath its hallowed proscenium arch.

Critics—particularly white critics—were quick to pick up on and (in many cases) to celebrate bebop’s high art ethos and aesthetic. In so doing, they further legitimized bebop’s position within the tradition of European art music. In his article, “A Short Stay in the Sun: The Reception of Bebop (1944-1950),” Bernard Gendron considers the role of the American jazz press in the legitimizing process. He focuses particularly on the periodical *Metronome*, the editors of which, he argues, were “strongly committed to the legitimization of what was being called ‘bebop,’ as a modernist art movement within jazz” (142). Gendron points in particular to the English émigré jazz critic Leonard Feather’s several articles on Dizzy Gillespie:

[Gillespie] achieved his first publicity breakthrough in two articles by Leonard Feather of *Metronome*, ‘Dizzy is Crazy Like a Fox’ (1944) and ‘Dizzy, the 21st Century Gabriel’ (1945), each of which had all the earmarks of a hard-sell promotional piece. Dizzy was then defined in the jazz press as a unique new stylist and technical virtuoso, with a ‘genius for substituting and extending chords in unorthodox but singularly thrilling ways and places,’ and a facility for playing ‘incredible cascades of fast notes at breakneck tempos’ while making ‘every note mean something.’ (Gendron 139)

Differing from critics like Hammond who emphasized the beauty and excitement of jazz “rhythm” and “feel,” Feather focuses his praise for Gillespie on his genius for *harmony*—for chord substitution and extension in particular. This marks a significant move away from earlier criticism (both positive and negative), in that it shifts the critical subject from the musician’s body and emotions—often seen to be linked with a strong sense of rhythm¹¹—to the musician’s mind—which has traditionally been regarded as the locus of sophisticated harmonic conception. Not only that, Feather also deploys the key word “genius” to describe Gillespie’s music, thereby unlocking a host of associations with the European conception of high art. A significant number of theorists¹² agree that the modern day notion of genius can be traced back to early romantic theorists such as Schiller. According to Lydia Goehr, these theorists used “genius” to describe “[a]rtists [who] effectively superseded their status as mere mortals to reach an ‘aesthetic state,’ in Schiller’s terms, so that the content of their works would express not the individual or mundane thoughts of a mere mortal, but universal thoughts of which there can be no personal ownership” (162). While the direct association between creative genius and divinity was no longer so explicit by the 1940s and 50s, the term nevertheless continued to carry enormous cultural clout. Keith Negus and Michael Pickering remind us that “the category of genius has contributed to the legitimation of various types of social divisions, particularly those associated with race, class and gender” (Negus and Pickering 200). Feather’s word choice in this article was anything but idle or coincidental.

While the affable and gregarious Gillespie has often been the darling of journalistic music critics, these same critics have worked to mythologize Parker as a paradigmatic suffering genius according to the Romantic trope. Ingrid Monson explains: “To the extent that the romantic conception of the artist linked the notion of genius with madness and pathology, and entitled the artist to behave in an unorthodox manner as well, it opened an interpretive space in which supposedly negative social behaviours could be transformed into positive markers of artistic genius” (412). Thus, through the legitimizing work of the mass media, even an ostensible blemish such as Parker’s notoriously deviant behaviour (particularly his alcoholism, drug addictions, and struggles with mental illness) can be transformed into a hallmark of the European artistic tradition.

The discourse of music critics was also likely the key factor in the mythologization of the Massey Hall concert. While Toronto critics such *The Globe and Mail’s* Alex Barris were evidently underwhelmed by the performance, effusively glowing reviews began to appear in American journals with more authoritative voices and wider international readership, once the concert recordings (initially released in three volumes, on a series of three 10-inch LPs, on Charles Mingus’ Debut record label, beginning in the autumn of 1953) began to circulate. In its seminal review of the concert recording, the pre-eminent jazz magazine *Down Beat* called the concert a “masterpiece,” and named the band “Quintet of the Year” (Quill). Similarly, Michael James wrote in his review in the February 1963 edition of *Jazz Monthly*, “Certainly few records in the whole of jazz history can rival these for continuous inventive brilliance and emotional involvement” (James 25). He also suggests that the concert recordings demonstrate that “Parker [was] . . . an even more daring thinker in his last five years,” and that “[few, if any] pianists . . . during the last decade have been able to match the brilliance and intensity of Bud Powell” (James 26).¹³ The definitive moment in the mythologization occurred in 1973 with the Prestige re-release of the recording under the new title *The Greatest Jazz Concert Ever*. While Mingus was rarely one to eschew self-aggrandizement,¹⁴ when he released the recordings on Debut in 1953, it was under the far more modest title, *Jazz at Massey Hall*. While the Prestige title greatly exaggerates the importance (and the quality) of the Massey Hall concert, it nevertheless marks the position jazz had attained in the popular consciousness by 1973.¹⁵ These reviews in authoritative journals were essentially responsible

for mythologizing the Massey Hall event in particular; by extension, they contributed to the legitimization of the participating musicians and their music in general.

Bebop musicians, of course, also played a role in the legitimization of jazz as a serious art form in the European mold. In an interview in 1957, Gillespie insisted that, contrary to the fact “that the great mass of the American people still consider jazz as lowbrow music,” the music that he played was a “serious” art, worthy of critical listening, “study,” and performance in the “concert hall” (qtd. in Lopes 1). Parker, too, turned to both the concepts and materials of European music as a resource to enhance his knowledge and enrich his approach to composition and improvisation. Gary Giddins suggests that “Parker was intrigued by the music of many modern European composers, and it is said that had he lived he might have explored directions only hinted at in his music. He asked Edgar Varèse to take him as a student” (Giddins 77). He also spent time studying the music of Stravinsky. Thomas explains: “If one credits Charlie Parker as an intellectually curious musician capable, even though lacking formal conservatory training, of remarkably advanced composition and improvisation, then Parker’s interest in Igor Stravinsky should not be more surprising than Stravinsky’s own interest in Woody Herman as expressed in his *Ebony Concerto* (1945)” (117). Whereas Willie “The Lion” Smith seemed to have learned to play Chopin simply to prove that he could, Parker’s “intellectual curiosity” led him to study Varèse and Stravinsky with a view to enriching his own work.

This study of classical composers is manifest in the myriad quotations from classical sources in both Parker’s and Gillespie’s improvisations. Scott Deveaux has identified a reference to the trumpet solo in the third tableau (“The Moor’s Room”) from Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*¹⁶ in Parker’s solo on “Out of Nowhere” on the album *Charlie Parker at Storyville*, released in September of 1953 (Deveaux, “Multiphrenia”):

A musical transcription of a trumpet solo in G major, 4/4 time. The notation features a complex melodic line with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. Chord symbols Eb, D, and a triplet of D are indicated above the staff. The piece concludes with a triplet of eighth notes.

fig. 1;
transcription by the author

Alfred Appel recounts a comparable moment at a 1947 Parker performance at Birdland in New York, when the saxophonist quoted the opening of Stravinsky’s *Firebird Suite* during a solo in *Koko*, while the composer himself sat listening in the front row (Appel 60).¹⁷ Similarly, at the Massey Hall concert both Parker and Gillespie reference the “Habañera” from Bizet’s *Carmen*¹⁸ during their respective solos on “Hot House” (Tadd Dameron’s melody based on the jazz standard “What Is This Thing Called Love”). Parker’s reference is particularly noteworthy:

A musical transcription of a saxophone solo in B major, 4/4 time. The notation shows a melodic line with a bottom bracket under the first four measures and a top bracket under the last eight measures. Chord symbols F#m7b5, B7b9, Em, C#m7b5, F#7, and Bmaj7 are placed above the staff. The piece includes several triplet markings.

fig. 2;
transcription by the author

Parker quotes Bizet’s four-measure theme in its entirety (as indicated by the bottom bracket in the example), albeit with some expressive rhythmic deviations during the final eight measures of his first pass through the thirty-two measure form; however, he commences the theme on the second measure of the four-measure harmonic phrase of Dameron’s tune (as indicated by the top brackets in the example). Bizet’s theme is thus displaced against the “Hot House” harmony, and the final phrases of Bizet’s melody lose their cadential implication. Parker goes so far as to eschew the final note of the theme (what should have been an F#), instead resolving to an extra-chordal D before suffixing a cadential motive to affirm the “Hot House” resolution to B major.

This melodic displacement becomes clearer when it is compared with Gillespie’s quotation, at the beginning of the second chorus of his solo, which fits the first two measures of Bizet’s four-measure theme squarely within the four-measure harmonic phrase:

A musical transcription of a saxophone solo in B major, 4/4 time. The notation shows a melodic line with a bracket under the first two measures. Chord symbols F#m7b5, B7b9, and Em are placed above the staff.

fig. 3;
transcription by the author

Both Parker's and Gillespie's quotations operate as intertextual references, indexing their awareness of the European composer Bizet. In Parker's case, he marks not only his cognizance of the "Habañera" passage but his thorough absorption of it. By displacing it metrically, disfiguring its cadential structure, and replacing its final utterance with an angular one of his own, Parker's quotation does not seem intended to score a cheap laugh with the audience. By integrating the Bizet melody carefully into his solo, he virtually makes the melody—which, for the sake of metaphor, we might consider a metonym for the European aesthetic—part of his own vocabulary.¹⁹

Black Musicians, White Critics, and Aesthetic Ambivalence

And yet, even if Gillespie and Parker did (with the aid of the critics) successfully legitimize their music in accordance with the European aesthetic, they often exhibited a sense of ambivalence about their participation in the process. This ambivalence, I would argue, is manifest in the character of these intertextual references from the Massey Hall concert. Because Parker seamlessly embeds the "Habañera" into his own improvisatory language, his reference cannot be considered a univocal statement: while it does index his knowledge of and competence within the European aesthetic, it also displays a certain ironic distance from that aesthetic. Pierre Bourdieu has suggested that this sort of position—simultaneously accepting of the dominant aesthetic and ironically distant from it—is a common stance for newcomers to a given artistic field:

It is significant that breaks with the most orthodox works of the past, i.e. with the belief they impose on the newcomers, often take the form of *parody* (intentional, this time), which presupposes and confirms *emancipation*. In this case, the newcomers "get beyond" the dominant mode of thought and expression not by explicitly denouncing it but by repeating and reproducing it in a sociologically non-congruent context, which has the effect of rendering it incongruous or even absurd, simply by making it perceptible as the arbitrary convention it is. (31)

We might also align the quotations with Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of signifyin(g)—a typically (though not necessarily) African American practice that Robert Walser has described as "[working] through reference, gesture, and dialogue to suggest multiple meanings through association" (346). Crucial to the concept is a sense of indirection and trickery, represented for Gates in the figure of the Signifying Monkey. Parker's (and Gillespie's) quotations can be seen as operating within this tradition of irony and trickery, "direction through indirection" as Roger D. Abrahams has explained it (qtd. in Gates 74).

In the first place, rather than considering Parker's disfigured quotation of the "Habañera" theme as an example of an outsider trying to fit into a European mold, we might also look at it as a recasting of Bizet's music within an African American aesthetic. This argument becomes still clearer if we consider the "Habañera" quotation (or, for that matter, the *Petrushka* quotation) in the context of the general practice of intertextual references in jazz improvisation. Popular and show tunes constitute the primary resource for quotation; indeed, at the opening of his solo on "Perdido" at the Massey Hall performance, Gillespie quotes David Raskin and Johnny Mercer's "Laura." By the same token, Mark Miller has identified several references during Parker's solo on "All the Things You Are," including to the Irish folk melody, "The Kerry Dance," and Ferde Grofé's "On the Trail" (Miller 83). With this in mind, Parker's use of melodies by Bizet and Stravinsky hardly seems to be a reverential acknowledgement of the supremacy of European art; on the contrary, in using tunes from the American songbook, the Irish folk tradition, and American light classics, alongside iconic themes of the European concert hall, his quotations almost seem to be an act of postmodern aesthetic leveling.

Gillespie's quotation of the "Habañera" theme in his "Hot House" solo is more obviously ironic. Whereas Parker weaves the theme into a serpentine, cadential melody of his own creation, Gillespie brazenly states the theme twice at the very beginning of the second chorus of his solo. Here, there is no question of ironic deconstruction of the melody; however, Gillespie does disfigure it to a certain extent by starting the second iteration of the theme with a noisy rip up to a scorching E. There is certainly no sense of Carmen's teasing sensuality in Gillespie's strident, raucous take on the melody. Additionally, Gillespie's trickery is as much dialogical as it is intertextual, in that the trumpeter signifies on his colleague Parker at the same time as he signifies on the original melody. By stating the theme so explicitly, Gillespie almost seems to be teasing Parker both for his (perhaps somewhat precious?) choice to reference Bizet and for the subtlety of his interpolation of the reference. At the end of Gillespie's eight-bar phrase, the audience applauds appreciatively, seemingly in on the joke.

Gillespie exhibits a similarly irreverent attitude elsewhere in the performance, most notably during the performance of "Perdido," the first tune of the evening. Miller speculates that Gillespie often played visual jokes on stage, especially during Parker's solos, distracting the audience's attention from the saxophonist's artistry: "Not long into Parker's third chorus, a woman squeals sharply. The audience responds with a cheer. But nothing in Bird's playing would warrant such a response. The joke is visual. Gillespie is no doubt up to tricks" (80). After Parker's solo, Gillespie takes over. It

is here (eight bars into his first chorus) that he quotes the opening from “Laura,” a tune that had been a hit for Parker on his 1950 Verve release, *Bird with Strings*. Recognizing the quotation and recalling Gillespie’s earlier visual gags, much of the audience laughs out loud, enjoying Gillespie’s jokes at Parker’s expense.

Of course, such irreverence would have been entirely inappropriate at a Massey Hall concert by a performer more clearly established in the European art music tradition, such as Glenn Gould or the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. With this in mind, it seems as though Gillespie is not only teasing Parker; he is also making light of the majesty of Massey Hall and the austerity of the European art music performance paradigm. Gillespie’s sense of ironic distance and ambivalence towards the European aesthetic is evident in certain passages from his 1979 autobiography, *To Be, Or Not... To Bop*: “To be a ‘hero’ in the black community, all you have to do is make the white folks look up to you and recognize the fact that you’ve contributed something worthwhile. Laugh, but it’s the truth” (“The Cult” 162). While Gillespie was doubtless successful at winning over “white folks” with his harmonic sophistication and his virtuosic trumpet playing—both key elements of the European aesthetic—he admits to a certain level of discomfort with the underlying authority of Eurocentrism. His irreverence in performances at Massey Hall (and elsewhere) might be read as a resistance to being entirely pigeonholed within the European aesthetic framework.²⁰

This sort of irreverent behaviour and ambivalent attitude was endlessly frustrating to some of the critical champions of the legitimization of bebop, including the *Metronome* critic Barry Ulanov. Scott Deveaux cites Ulanov’s criticisms of many black bebop musicians, particularly Gillespie, for their unwillingness or inability to perform with a gravitas that reflected their status as legitimate artists:

To Ulanov, a concert was “a responsibility and a privilege of great dimensions,” offering the hope that “the dignity which now accrues only to so-called classical music will attach itself in similar splendor to . . . jazz.” As a result, he fretted about the cavalier attitude musicians brought to details of organization: “They often show up at concerts uncertain about their parts, or determined that the solos they played at rehearsal did them an injustice and that they must, therefore, change pieces, number of measures in solo, tempo, etc. etc. ad nauseum.” He complained about any behavior that smacked of frivolity or otherwise served as an embarrassing reminder of the close relationship of jazz and popular entertainment. (“The Emergence” 19)

Ulanov was similarly critical of Duke Ellington, particularly with regard to his inclusion of dance tunes during his 1943 Carnegie Hall performance: “what is perfectly in place at a stage show is not at a concert, where the profoundest aspects of a band deserve prominence, but not its roughest and rudest and slightest.” Owen Peterson, a writer for *Jazz Journal*, expressed a related sentiment in his 1970 review of the Massey Hall concert recording:

The big problem with this type of concert—especially at that particular moment in time—is that the audience does not really want to hear what the artists can do best. They are looking for the kind of excitement that is usually produced by a honking, screaming, Jazz at the Philharmonic type ensemble . . . To put it bluntly, they are too good for their audience, and, as their performance on the Jazz at Massey Hall album shows . . . a constant battle of aesthetics is being waged, not only between the soloists and the audience, but between the soloists and each other. (Peterson 8)

For the most part, Peterson seems to blame the ignorant Toronto audience for undermining the artistry and refinement of the musicians by demanding to be entertained. His final words about the battle of aesthetics “between the soloists and each other” are intriguing, though, and are suggestive of an implied censure of Gillespie’s paradigmatically low-brow gags. Even John Hammond, one of the greatest proponents for the legitimacy of African American culture, evinces a degree of doubt regarding the seriousness and sophistication of the artists he presented in the *Spirituals to Swing* concert: “The best [jazz] musicians are men of profound feeling, even if this feeling is inarticulate” (102). While Hammond’s comments should be considered in the context of 1938, they nevertheless fall into the racist trope of the noble savage, attributing the musicians’ talents to some innate, inexpressible ethnic genius, rather than recognizing the thought and effort those musicians put into mastering their art. It is almost as though Hammond feels compelled to apologize to the well-heeled Carnegie Hall audience for the crudeness of the performers.

Conclusion: Antagonistic Cooperation

Criticisms like those of Ulanov and Hammond reveal a fascinating ambivalence in the relationship between bebop musicians and the critics charged with advocating for them. On the one hand, we must remember the good intentions of critics such as Hammond, Feather, Ulanov, and the unnamed *Down Beat* reviewer who coined the moniker

“Quintet of the Year,” as well as industry executives such as those at Prestige Records who selected the name *Greatest Jazz Concert Ever*. All of these individuals clearly were active, often passionate contributors to the legitimization of jazz (and bebop in particular)—so much so that they occasionally disregarded the rough edges of a less than pristine product like the Massey Hall recordings in order to further their legitimizing project.²¹ This becomes particularly clear when we note that those few critics we have encountered who were somewhat negative in their response to the 1953 concert—a including Canadians Alex Barris, Ted O’Reilly, and Mark Miller, together with *Jazz Journal’s* Owen Peterson (writing in 1970)—were all writing in a time and/or place that was removed from the heated polemics around jazz’s legitimacy (and, concomitantly, the legitimacy of African American culture) in 1940s and 50s United States. At the same time, it is clear from the musicians’ eagerness to play in conventionally high art venues, and from their multilayered engagement with European art music, that they were deeply complicit in the project and (in certain cases, and to a certain extent) accepted its Eurocentric focus. This relationship is, in the main, a symbiotic one that contravenes the view of “jazz and the white critic” offered by Amiri Baraka and echoed by Frank Kofsky, wherein the critic is painted as a neo-colonialist parasite. While that model no doubt exists, it is not to be found here.

On the other hand, tensions emerge when critics and musicians fail to fall into step with one another—as can be seen in John Hammond’s patronizing tone in the *Spirituals to Swing* programme note, and in Barry Ulanov’s criticisms of Gillespie and Ellington, as well as in the ironic and irreverent stance maintained by Parker and Gillespie. Bourdieu writes of cultural practices in the process of legitimization,

The *boundary* of a field [i.e., the site of legitimization] is a stake of struggles, and the social scientist’s task is not to draw a dividing line between the agents involved in it by imposing a so-called operational definition, which is most likely to be imposed on him by his own prejudices or presuppositions, but to describe a *state* (long-lasting or temporary) of these struggles and therefore of the frontier delimiting the territory held by the competing agents. (42)

Baraka’s and Kofsky’s sharply racialized characterization of the relationship between the discourse of white critics and the music of black musicians as “antithetical,” and of the legitimization process as an essentially colonial endeavour (perpetrated by white critics on unwilling black musicians), is compelling, but it is also imprecise. Its inaccuracy lies chiefly in Baraka’s and Kofsky’s understanding of the relationship as a singular, unchanging binary struggle. Bourdieu’s formulation of the “state . . . of the struggles” adds a level of nuance to the Baraka/Kofsky idea. As I have demonstrated, while the relationship between critics and musicians was at times every bit as antagonistic as Baraka suggests, it was not always so. While Parker, Gillespie, and their musical colleagues were occasionally ambivalent about—or outright opposed to—the continuing critical invocation of a European high art aesthetic as a standard by which to evaluate their music, they also worked cooperatively with the critics by engaging with that standard themselves, both with word and deed. Hence, as the performance and reception of the so-called *Greatest Jazz Concert Ever* shows, the “state of struggles” that characterized the legitimization of jazz during the 1940s and 50s was a site of profound complexity and intriguing contradiction.

Notes

¹ For more on “antagonistic cooperation,” see Ellison 188, 267, 500-4, 594-95.

² Of course, this discourse has a much longer history in aesthetic philosophy—dating back to Schopenhauer and Kant, and beyond them to Boethius and Plato. Still, it was the Harvard philosophers who introduced the idea to nineteenth century America.

³ The “one-drop rule,” which emerged alongside the Jim Crow laws in the late nineteenth century, defined a person with any degree of African heritage as legally “black” and thereby subject to racial segregation.

⁴ Depending on the commentator, folk music and jazz were regarded either as distinct practices, or as two different words for the same practice.

⁵ Of course, it is important to recall that Dvořák and Smetana were both Czech—an ethnicity that had not been regarded as a significant player on the European high cultural scene. In citing these particular composers, Locke demonstrates that he doesn’t consider them to be part of a pan-European cultural monolith; rather, he sees them as representatives of a previously maligned ethnic group that developed a meaningful, modern identity by adapting its own musical traditions to fit into the trends and techniques of European art music. As such, Locke (and other commentators) regarded Dvořák and Smetana as useful models for African American musicians and composers.

⁶ This trend has continued with John Lewis, Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, and many others performing classical pieces and (in a number of cases) releasing recordings of classical music.

⁷ James Reese Europe's "Clef Club" orchestra performed a series of concerts at Carnegie Hall beginning as early as 1912 (Early 418).

⁸ His race, of course, was also one of the primary factors that brought him such critical adulation.

⁹ Whiteman, Ernst, and the critics who accepted this assertion perhaps did not realize (or chose to disregard) that a large number of Creole and African American musicians—including Morton, Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, and many others—read music very well, and had been using notated scores with varying degrees of detail for years.

¹⁰ Benny Goodman's 1937 concert at Carnegie Hall was an important moment for similar reasons. The *Spirituals to Swing* concert (which, like the 1937 performance, featured Goodman's sextet along with members of the Count Basie Orchestra) is particularly noteworthy, however, because promoters were explicit about their goals: namely, to represent a retrospective of African American music, and to elevate and legitimate African American culture.

¹¹ For a discussion of the discursive links between rhythm and the African American body, see Radano.

¹² See, for instance, Battersby, Goehr, Citron, DeNora, and Negus & Pickering.

¹³ The fact that it is reviews of the *recording* and not the concert itself that have consecrated and mythologized the Massey Hall performance is a fascinating point. Though space constraints prevent me from exploring this point in detail in this paper, I would argue that the centrality of the recording indexes the shifting nature of the definition of the ontology of a musical work within the discourse of the art music field. It is my contention that many critics and scholars within the field were obliged to expand this definition to include recordings, in addition to more conventional musical *objets d'art* (especially scores), at least partly in response to the challenge presented by jazz's growing high art cache.

¹⁴ Mingus famously claimed (in *Beneath the Underdog*) that he had organized the show himself, while in an interview with Ted O'Reilly in 1975, he suggested that he was an extremely reluctant participant in the concert because he had never liked bebop (Miller 65).

¹⁵ It is important to note that, by 1973, both Parker and Bud Powell had passed away and had been mythologized in their own right. The Prestige title likely plays on the legacy of these two artists in one of their final performances together.

¹⁶ Compare Parker's solo with the original:



¹⁷ Unfortunately, this concert was not recorded.

¹⁸ Compare with the original:



¹⁹ It is worth noting that Bizet's "Habañera" is a popular melody that would have been more recognizable to a lay audience than Stravinsky's "The Moor's Room."

²⁰ Scott Deveaux ("The Emergence") has argued convincingly that, throughout his career, Gillespie continually walked a fine line between artist and entertainer.

²¹ Of course, these individuals often had a financial stake in the emerging legitimacy of the music as well. Doubtless they recognized that widespread acceptance of the music could only help magazine and/or record sales, a fact that must be considered alongside their social activism.

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