

Jazz and its Impacts on Racism: A Cultural Consideration

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the impacts of jazz on racism through a cultural perspective. It examines the various changes to jazz music and whether black jazz musicians were affected through the production of jazz. Many black jazz musicians today are still facing discrimination in the music industry. However, jazz audiences have continued to retain interest in jazz music and jazz has certainly transformed and continues to evolve and adapt to changing music preferences. As long as African Americans continue to produce jazz and advocate for their music, jazz music can create positive impacts in American society and reduce racism.

Introduction

According to Assistant Professor of History at the University of Northern Iowa, John D Baskerville, black music is a reflection of African American life during any given period of time. In the mid 1960's, a new form of music had developed that would reflect African American life. It was called "free jazz." Around the same time, the Black Power Movement was imposed. Many Black nationalists wanted to reconnect with their African lineage and form new cultural identities. "They wanted to be known as Black" (Baskerville 485). The term jazz has been used to describe a style of music developed by African Americans in New Orleans during the 1920's (Baskerville 485). Since its beginning, African American jazz musicians have faced discrimination. According to Douglas Malcolm, an independent scholar with a PhD in English, African American jazz musicians have often been the center for racial conflict in the United States, frequently dealing with racial prejudice (Malcolm 185). Despite the fact that black musicians have always been represented among jazz musicians, they have still managed to advance in social mobility and reduce racism.

Origins

Since the early establishment of America, the struggle for African freedom has been associated with African culture. According to John A. Davis, Professor and Chairman of the Department of Political Science at the City College of the City University of New York, Africa has influenced our music, art, folk literature, dance, and language (Davis 76). However, it has been part of American teachings that African slaves came to this country with no culture and having no impact on American society. Many achievements of Africa in sculpture and pottery have been lost in America. Back then, when slaves were brought to America, art was scarcely appreciated, and money was the primary interest in slaves.

African Americans were heavily discriminated against. When black jazz musicians did get the opportunity to work with companies, these musicians did not own their rights to their own music (Baskerville 491). To publish their own music, they had to use the companies' materials. They would only get little amounts of money from infrequent royalties and had almost no control over the final product. Additionally, they did not trust jazz critics since the majority of them were White. They knew that these critics would go against the Black

Power Movement. This not only affected the jazz musicians but also on the music as a whole. Through reviews, the critics commented that the music was “raw, shrill, repulsive...The assaults were ineffective; the music attracted many followers anyhow” (Baskerville 493).

Although blacks were the original inventors of jazz music, they were less credited for their invention. According to Giovanni Russonello, music critic and politics reporter, “Black musicians have built institutions since before the word “jazz” was even used” (Russonello). As white audiences started enjoying the music, white entrepreneurs began to handle the record labels, the best paying clubs, and the publishing companies. “While whites in the jazz music industry got rich, black musicians did not reap equal benefits” (Phillipp). The industry was in full control by the whites. They kept earning money and gaining fame from music. Furthermore, white entrepreneurs took almost all money-making methods from jazz, leaving almost no room for black jazz musicians. “The civil rights movement progressed, and white liberal audiences recognized jazz musicians to be some of the country’s great artistic leaders, but they rarely treated those musicians as the scholars and thought-leaders that they were” (Russonello). These roles were reserved for white broadcasters, historians, and journalists.

Progression

After the First and Second World Wars, jazz made its way into Europe. Some people appreciated the music while others viewed it as hostile. According to Berndt Ostendorf, a professor emeritus for North American history at the Amerika Institute, Ludwig Maximilians Universitat Munchen, “The jazz idiom is best described as an individualistic quest for musical literacy and freedom under conditions of a perpetual contest with peers” (Ostendorf 56). Jazz served as a barrier against American racism. Jazz musicians became a role model for young Germans. Jazz concerts provided a stage for worldwide jazz fans to get together. “By the 1970s the public jazz concert scene in Europe had become a most important source of income for American jazz musicians whose home markets had been taken over by Rock’n Roll” (Ostendorf 67). In America, jazz was associated with a low social status. In Europe, it was viewed as celebratory music and did not carry any racial connotation. According to Gerald Early, an American essayist and American culture critic, jazz musicians became role models to a group of people who were unhappy with modern commercialism (Early 379). Jazz became high in demand and helped people who needed entertainment.

Nowadays, jazz has become a universalized form of music. According to Denis-Constant Martin, senior researcher at the Centre for International Research and Studies, Jazz and other African American derived music are now played all over the world and have displayed new connotations in their societies (Martin 115). “From their mixed origins to their contemporary universalization, black American musics have permanently exceeded their “blackness”” (Martin 106). In Europe, African American musicians were treated with great respect and considered as creative artists. Eventually, music was more important to the general audience than segregation laws and by the 1940s, more and more bands began to perform consisting of both black and white musicians (Bennion). In the 1960s and 1970s, African American musicians had several opportunities to freely develop new and original styles. According to Jason Toynbee, Senior Lecturer in Media Studies in the Department of Sociology at The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK, they are increasingly making music on their own decisions (Toynbee 21). The development of jazz is a step to freeing African Americans from the racial discrimination.

Conclusion

From the Jazz Preservation Act (JPA) in 1987, jazz music and culture have risen in popularity. According to Jeff Farley, a PhD from the University of Glasgow, “Record companies, book publishers, archivists, academia, and private foundations have also contributed to the effort to preserve jazz music and history” (Farley 113).

The JPA has allowed American education programs to help youth understand the importance of jazz as a part of American culture. In music classrooms across America, the problems of racism and discrimination have allowed jazz to be addressed as a part of American life.

African American musicians have expressed their deepest feelings through jazz and have used it to protest against racial discrimination. “For over 300 years, African American society has been reflected in African American music” (Baskerville 495). Nowadays, jazz is being taught everywhere and American culture and democracy is being promoted internationally. As long as African Americans continue to produce jazz music and promote their culture, racism will diminish, and jazz will have positive impacts in American society.

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