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The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse

By INGRID MONSON

The white beboppers of the forties were as removed from the society as Negroes, but as a matter of choice. The important idea here is that the white musicians and other young whites who associated themselves with this Negro music identified the Negro with this separation, this nonconformity, though, of course, the Negro himself had no choice.

—Amiri Baraka¹

In those days, there were supposedly hip guys who really were squares, pseudohip cats. How do you distinguish between the pseudo and the truly hip? Well, first, a really hip guy wouldn't have any racial prejudice, one way or the other, because he would know the hip way to live is with your brother.

—Dizzy Gillespie²

ETHNOMUSICOLOGY AND MUSICOLOGY share a common concern with positioning music in relationship to broader social arenas that impinge upon its reception, interpretation, and cultural meaning. If an essay on hipness may strike readers of this JOURNAL as particularly removed from the musical, its point is to convey that the complex of aesthetic, social, racial, and gendered meanings associated with the term has everything to do with the way in which jazz improvisation has been heard since World War II. My interest in positioning hipness in a wider cultural field emerged from an ethnographic context: musicians I interviewed were extremely critical of presumptions outsiders made about them and their supposedly hip lifestyles. Thinking about the implications of their critique inspired this article.³

¹ Imamu Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 188.

² Dizzy Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop: Memoirs of Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser* (1979; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1985), 297.

³ An account of this work will appear in Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Interaction and Jazz Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, in

After thirty years Amiri Baraka's *Blues People* remains the classic narrative of jazz as an avant-garde subculture that, in its separation from mainstream popular culture and the black middle class, synthesized a modern, urban, African American aesthetic fluent in "the formal canons of Western nonconformity."⁴ In Baraka's account the "autonomous blues"—the essence of African American emotional expressivity—has been in constant danger of dilution due to the conformist and assimilationist demands of a black middle class that has dictated an "image of a whiter Negro, to the poorer, blacker Negroes."⁵ Jazz musicians, by identifying with modernist avant-garde notions of formal and stylistic rebellion, provided a link between the social extremes of the African American community: the "rent-party people" at one end of the scale, and "the various levels of parvenu middle class at the other."⁶ Baraka argued that it was possible, through a reciprocal exchange between the modern African American artist and the alienated "young white American intellectual, artist, and Bohemian," to articulate an authentic black expressivity within an urban modernity.⁷ This hip subculture, comprising black Americans interested in Western artistic nonconformity and white Americans captivated by urban African American styles of music, dress, and speech, fashioned itself as a vanguard cultural force against the "shoddy cornucopia of popular American culture."⁸ It was an elite of the socially progressive and politically aware that constructed itself as both outside of and above the ordinary American, black or white.

Baraka's narrative of the African American musical avant-garde centers on the transitions from swing to bebop to free jazz from the 1940s to the early 1960s. The hipness Baraka speaks of is an attitude or stance marked through modes of symbolic display associated initially with bebop: beret, goatee, "ridiculously draped suits in the manner of the zoot suit," horn-rimmed glasses, heroin addiction, bop talk, and, of course, the music itself.⁹ The attitude of the bebop musician as "anti-assimilationist"¹⁰ social critic became embodied in and visualized through various sonic, visual, linguistic, and ideological

press). The complex interaction between the musical and the social, and how it affects the way jazz improvisation is heard, is the principal theme of the book.

⁴ Baraka, *Blues People*, 231.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 190–91, 201–2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 181–82.

markers. Any one of these markers could be taken to stand for a complex nonconformist attitude that Baraka argues is present in the most vital African American musical expression.

The idea of hipness and African American music as cultural critique has, of course, detached itself over the last fifty years from the particular historical context of bebop, circulated internationally; it has inspired several generations of white liberal youth to adopt both the stylistic markers of hipness, which have shifted in response to changes in African American musical and sartorial style, and the socially conscious attitude that hipness has been presumed to signify. Indeed the idea of a subcultural politics of style and resistance has been central to cultural studies, including Dick Hebdige's classic *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.¹¹ In problematizing "white hipness" I mean to call attention to the interrelationships among the music, gender, class, and social diversity of African Americans, on the one hand; and the function of African Americans as a symbol of social conscience, sexual freedom, and resistance to the dominant order in the imagination of liberal white Americans, on the other. To the extent that well-meaning white Americans¹² have confused the most "transgressive" aspects of African American culture with its true character, they fall into the trap of viewing blackness as absence. Whether conceived as an absence of morality or of bourgeois pretensions, this view of blackness, paradoxically, buys into the historical legacy of primitivism and its concomitant exoticism of the "Other."

In developing this perspective, white liberals have no doubt been assisted by Baraka's dismissal of the black middle class, which, as Andrew Ross notes, is "surely one of the most disparaged social groups

¹¹ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Methuen, 1979); see also Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1976); and Cathy Schwichtenberg, ed., *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993).

¹² Here, "well-meaning" white Americans include those who politically oppose racial discrimination and, in the interest of racial justice, valorize aspects of black culture that are in violation of mainstream American moral values. The anger provoked by well-intentioned whites through patronizing presumptions about African American cultural values has been most amply discussed in accounts of the Civil Rights Movement. See August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 282–326; and Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 96–103, 144–45.

in all of modern history.”¹³ My purpose here is not to condemn subcultural style or to trivialize its significance, but to draw attention to the *limitations* of hipness in a cultural account of African American music. Ross’s trenchant essay “Hip and the Long Front of Color” discusses several themes that are germane to this essay, including the problem of primitivism and white identification with black culture, and the masculine tenor of hip.¹⁴ In what follows, I develop two emphases, which are meant to extend Ross’s themes in an anthropological direction. First, I am interested in how gender mediates notions of race, class, and African American cultural authenticity. Second, I want to situate the meaning of *modernity*, as used by jazz musicians, within the historical context of the African American mobilization against Jim Crow after World War II. Several interpretive challenges emerge in what follows: (1) to situate hipness within a broader African American historical context than that which Baraka presents; (2) to interrogate the problematic relationship between race and gender in cultural analysis; and (3) to explore the relationship between African American moral values and strategies for the achievement of racial justice.

I

To be hip, in one common definition, is to be “in the know,”¹⁵ not to be duped by the world around one, and to react with dignity and “cool” when faced with an assault on one’s being. The word began to supplant “hep” in the early 1940s as Dizzy Gillespie and several other musicians, including Slim Gaillard, Cab Calloway, and Billy Eckstine, became the visual and stylistic icons of hip.¹⁶ Although Baraka

¹³ Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 76. Baraka is wrestling with his own middle-class background throughout *Blues People*; see pp. 122, 125–26.

¹⁴ Ross, *No Respect*, 65–101.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶ Dizzy Gillespie received by far the most media coverage of the three. According to Mary Lou Williams it was Thelonious Monk who was responsible for the beret and thick-rimmed “bop glasses” that were credited to Gillespie due to his greater visibility in the media. See Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, eds., *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It* (1955; reprint, New York: Dover, 1966), 350. Gaillard’s trademark was his “vout” language, characterized by the interpolation of nonsense syllables into everyday words, as in “French fries-o-rooni.” Cab Calloway was known for zoot suits with extremely long jackets and baggy pants. Singer and trumpeter Billy Eckstine developed a “Mr. B.” shirt with a loose-fitting collar whose buttons would not strain against the expanded neck of a wind player. See Roy Carr,

mentions hipness as a particular attribute of bebop and beboppers,¹⁷ the sartorial image of hip clearly included musicians who were only marginally involved with the music of bebop. The lack of complete coincidence between musical genre and visual image, however, in no way altered the ability of the goatee, beret, glasses, and zoot suit¹⁸ to become symbolically associated with bebop, despite the fact that many bebop musicians—Charlie Parker, for one—did not dress accordingly.

Indeed there is something of a disjunction between hip, fashion, and the musicians who subsequently were recognized as the musical innovators of bebop: Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Kenny Clarke, Bud Powell, Charlie Christian, Max Roach, and Oscar Pettiford.¹⁹ Dizzy Gillespie, however, was an exception: the coincidence of his musical and visual importance made him a very attractive subject for the musical and popular press. *Metronome*, for example, cited Gillespie as the “influence of the year” in January 1946.²⁰ Many musicians and fans found the sartorial image and physical bearing of Gillespie easy to emulate, and the cult of imitation was frequently ridiculed in the jazz press:

Musicians wear the ridiculous little hats that have been seen around lately because Dizzy wears one; musicians have started to laugh in a loud, broken way because that's the way Dizzy laughs; musicians now stand with a figure “S” posture, copying Dizzy who appears too apathetic to

Brian Case, and Fred Dellar, *The Hip: Hipsters, Jazz and the Beat Generation* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986), 12, 18–19, 30–31.

¹⁷ Baraka, *Blues People*, 191.

¹⁸ Zoot suits, which required excessive amounts of fabric for manufacture, were banned in March 1942 by the War Production Board in an effort to ration cloth for the production of military uniforms. For an account of the race riots in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York set off by violations of the ban, see Stuart Cosgrove, “The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare,” in *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses: An Anthology of Fashion and Music*, ed. Angela McRobbie (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 3–21; and Chester B. Himes, “Zoot Riots are Race Riots,” *Crisis* 50 (July 1943): 200–201+.

¹⁹ Musicians, critics, and historians disagreed as to the most significant contributors to bebop, but the roles of Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Kenny Clarke, and Charlie Christian are seldom questioned. For compilations of the opinions of contemporary musicians, see Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*; and Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*.

²⁰ “Influence of the Year: Dizzy Gillespie,” *Metronome* 62 (January 1946): 24. A photograph of Gillespie accompanying Sarah Vaughan shows him wearing a beret. Several months later *Metronome* featured four photographs of Gillespie, all with beret, taken at a recording session: the first shows him holding his trumpet and smoking a cigarette in a holder; the second shows him in a pensive mood, listening to the playback of a recording; the third shows him laughing at something he played; and the final one shows him laying his head on his wife's shoulder as he listens (*Metronome* 62 [September 1946]: 21).

stand erect—and so on down the list. Surely this *copycatism* accomplishes nothing for the Dizzy fan, but, just as surely, it does Dizzy much harm.²¹

The subcultural implications of this process of imitation are expressed in another writer's exasperation with "zombies":

The Zombies are here and their kiss is deathly. They are ruining jazz spots from coast to coast. As soon as they start hanging around certain clubs, the decent citizenry avoid the spots like the plague. They come with their zoot suits, long haircuts, reefers and "zombie" jive to night spots that feature top jazz talent. Soon they become the "atmosphere" that pervades the spots.²²

Although both African Americans and non-African Americans could be hip, that quality was quintessentially defined by and expressed in the sartorial display and bearing of black men. The image of hip was consequently weighted in gender as well as race.²³

II

The Negro jazz musician of the forties was *weird*. And the myth of this weirdness, this alienation, was sufficiently important to white America for

²¹ "Dizzy Gillespie's Style, Its Meaning Analyzed," *Down Beat* 13 (11 February 1946): 14. Gillespie reports that he preferred the beret because he could easily stuff it into his pocket ("Bebop Fashions," *Ebony* 4 [December 1948]: 31; Carr, Case, and Dellar, *The Hip*, 13). There were large numbers of Gillespie imitators as early as 1944; see "Dizzy is Crazy Like a Fox," *Metronome* 60 (July 1944): 16+.

²² Tom Piper, "Zombies Put Kiss of Death on 52nd St. Jazz," *Down Beat* 13 (25 February 1946): 3. The racial allusion embedded in "zombie" should be noted despite the fact that the word here may refer to white hipsters. "Zombie" has been associated with the "voodoo" magic, which is a term in popular culture for the syncretized religions of Africans in the New World. The image of "voodoo" in popular culture is highly distorted. For accounts of Haitian vodou and Cuban santería that provide correctives, see Lois Wilcken, *The Drums of Vodou* (Tempe, Ariz.: White Cliffs Media Co., 1992); and John Amira and Steven Cornelius, *The Music of Santería: Traditional Rhythms of the Batá Drums* (Crown Point, Ind: White Cliffs Media Co., 1992).

²³ Carr, Case, and Dellar (*The Hip*, 52–57) include two short chapters on "hip chicks," a category that includes primarily singers, as well as "kittens on the keys." Their description of singers illustrates the importance of the male gaze in defining the "hip chick": "They were shapely, decorous, wolf-whistle worthy. They all came poured into dresses that accentuated their superstructure. And when not rousing the ardour of the out-front punters, they contended with the more rigorous, attention-grabbing exploits of the musicians with whom they worked. They also sang. Did it well too" (*ibid.*, 52). It was most important, it seems, for the "hip chick" to be an attractive complement to the hip male. The sartorial accouterments of the male look are absent; pictures in Carr's chapter show women in form-fitting, sparkling show business gowns with no particular "hip" stylistic markers. Cosgrove, however, reports the existence in Los Angeles of women gang members (of Latina background) wearing zoot suits; see "The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare," 13.

it to re-create the myth in a term that connoted not merely Negroes as the aliens but a *general* alienation in which even white men could be included.

—Amiri Baraka²⁴

It is still true, alas, that to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others. The relationship, therefore, of a black boy to a white boy is a very complex thing.

—James Baldwin²⁵

The intersection of gender and racial stereotypes in the concept of hipness deserves some attention: for the “subcultural” image of bebop was nourished by a conflation of the music with a style of black masculinity that held, and continues to hold, great appeal for white audiences and musicians. The frequency with which white male musicians and fans emulated the style and bearing of their African American heroes has received much comment; the question is whether white identification with jazz has been primarily a “dialectic of misrecognition and identification,” as Eric Lott suggests is true for blackface minstrelsy, or whether it has served most centrally to counteract racist ideology.²⁶ While in *Blues People* Baraka is inclined to stress the positive in his discussion of the common social critique of both black and white nonconformists, James Baldwin is more critical. Admiration and the reinforcement of stereotype, he argues, are often not far apart.

Consider Mezz Mezzrow's autobiography *Really the Blues*. Mezzrow was a white musician who so deeply identified with African American culture that he told officers at Rikers Island that he was black in order to be incarcerated with his friends in the “colored” side of the prison.²⁷ In recounting earlier experiences at a reformatory, Mezzrow wrote:

In Pontiac I learned something important—that there aren't many people in the world with as much sensitivity and plain human respect for a guy as the Negroes. I'd be stepping along in the line, feeling low and

²⁴ Baraka, *Blues People*, 219.

²⁵ James Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985), 290.

²⁶ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²⁷ Milton “Mezz” Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, *Really the Blues* (New York: Random House, 1946), 305. Mezzrow was imprisoned for selling marijuana.

lonesome, and all of a sudden one of the boys in the colored line . . . would call out, "Hey boy, whatcha know," and smile, and I'd feel good all over. I never found many white men with that kind of right instinct and plain friendly feeling that hits you at the psychological moment like a tonic. . . . I had plenty to thank those colored boys for. They not only taught me their fine music; they made me feel good.²⁸

Mezzrow also credited the black world for opening his eyes to how "clean" and "natural" sex can be: "Songs like Tony Jackson's show the Negro's real artistry with his prose, and the clean way he looks at sex, while all the white songs that ever came out of whorehouses don't have anything but a vulgar slant and an obscene idiom."²⁹ In the hip jazz cat, it seems, Mezzrow found a man that he could truly admire:

He really *comes on*, like a performer making his entrance on stage, full of self-confidence and self-control, aware of his own talents and the ability to use them . . . ; and he's *groovy* the way musicians are groovy when they pool their talents instead of competing with each other. . . . These are the qualities the young cats go for, the ones they've invented new phrases to describe. Fitted together they form a portrait of Uncle Tom—in *reverse*, a negative print. They add up to something mighty impressive, a real man.³⁰

There can be no doubt about either his sincerity or the appeal that the masculine style of African American musicians held in his imagination. Mezzrow nevertheless mythologized these qualities in a manner that sometimes partook of what Andrew Ross has called a "romantic version of racism."³¹ Casting jazz musicians as "untutored, natural geniuses" easily invokes primitivist ideas of the African American artist unspoiled by culture or civilization.³²

While Mezzrow's account seems relatively benign, the gendered character of white identification with black music is taken to more hyperbolic and prurient extremes in Norman Mailer's essay "The White Negro"—a work that has provoked perhaps more commentary than any other dealing with "cross-racial immersion":

Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 227; emphasis in the original.

³¹ See Ross, *No Respect*, 85.

³² *Ibid.* For an account of primitivism and early jazz criticism, see Ted Gioia, *The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 19–49.

inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm. For jazz is orgasm.³³

The bald equation of the primitive with sex, and sex with the music and body of the black male jazz musician is so voyeuristic and sexually objectifying that it is no wonder James Baldwin criticized white obsession with the image of the African American male as “walking phallic symbol.”³⁴ Mezzrow and Mailer occupy contrasting points along a spectrum of gendered white hip identification with African American culture, but the complex intersection of race and gender through music and performance is an American cultural theme far older than jazz. In what is perhaps the most cogent account of the interrelationship between race, gender, and American popular culture, Eric Lott locates within blackface minstrelsy the origins of the American concept of the bohemian nonconformist:

With antebellum blackface performers a set of racial attitudes and cultural styles that in America go by the name of bohemianism first emerged, and there was a utopian or emancipatory moment in their often clumsy courtship of black men. I am not interested in romanticizing these performers. While I believe they were to some extent drawn to “blackness,” this fact should also interrogate the racial logic usually hidden in our romantic notions of the bohemian, the Beat, the hipster. We ought to recognize, in other words, the degree to which blackface stars

³³ Norman Mailer, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” *Dissent* 4 (1957): 279. For discussions of Mailer’s essay, see Nat Hentoff’s critique in *The Jazz Life* (New York: Dial Press, 1961), 138–42; Steve Shoemaker, “Norman Mailer’s ‘White Negro’: Historical Myth or Mythical History?” *Twentieth Century Literature* 37 (1991): 343–60; William Crawford Woods, “The ‘Passed’ White Negro: Brossard and Mailer at the Roots of Hip,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 7 (1987): 94–102; and Ross, *No Respect*, 19–49. Anotole Broyard’s article “A Portrait of the Hipster” (*Partisan Review* 15 [June 1948]: 721–27) has received less attention than Mailer’s essay but is also pertinent to the themes discussed here. For related material see David Meltzer, ed., *Reading Jazz* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1993), 175–260.

³⁴ While the phallic stereotype confers a symbolic power on African American men, it is counterbalanced by its inevitable intersection with a historical legacy of disempowering racial discourses. Baldwin’s remarks were specifically in response to Norman Mailer; see James Baldwin, “The Black Boy.” Frantz Fanon also complained of the reduction of the black man to a phallic symbol; see his *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1967; reprint, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 169–72.

inaugurated an American tradition of class abdication through gendered cross-racial immersion which persists, in historically differentiated ways, to our own day.³⁵

The image of African American musicians in the jazz literature draws heavily upon what Lott terms “bohemianism.” To the extent that black jazz musicians, and more generally African American music, have come to symbolize political liberation, emotional depth, and sensual intensity, non-African Americans must examine the gendered racial logic that has shaped their popular understandings of African American music and culture. The points that Lott raises about bohemianism do not, I believe, apply only to men, despite the fact that white men have predominated among those who have crossed the racial divide through music.³⁶

The intersection of gender and race through music raises extremely important interpretive problems for a musicology interested in gender and cultural difference. Lott’s treatment of blackface minstrelsy is one of the most successful psychoanalytic interpretations of race, gender, and sexuality. Still, the affinity between primitivism and the Freudian model of the unconscious is disturbing: when sexuality is conceived as an instinct that civilization represses or inhibits through the efforts of the superego and ego, more expressive sexual cultures are tacitly presumed to be more primitive (id-like). It is perhaps no accident that Anatole Broyard’s hipster is “the great instinctual man, an ambassador from the Id.”³⁷ As long as a “freer”

³⁵ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 50–51.

³⁶ The symbolic intersection of masculinity, music, and race perhaps explains the persistence of jazz as a fraternity of predominantly male musicians. While many women have successfully crossed the gender barrier, many cite their technical musical prowess as having compensated for the symbolic liability of their gender. Mary Lou Williams, for example, has remarked, “You’ve got to play, that’s all. They don’t think of you as a woman if you can really play” (quoted in Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* [London: Quartet Books, 1984], 67). Focusing exclusively on musicians also masks the presence of women in the jazz industry as publicists, managers, and bookers, as well as in otherwise enabling roles. See Leslie Gourse, *Madame Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 48–65; and Patricia Sunderland, “Cultural Meanings and Identity: Women of the African-American Art World of Jazz” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Vermont, 1992). Lott focuses perhaps too heavily on male identification with the gendered racial logic. Many white women have enjoyed the reputation of black men and women for hypersexuality. Attention to the particular pathways of identification would no doubt illuminate the cultural issue further. See Lott, *Love and Theft*, 159–68; and Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76–127.

³⁷ Broyard, “A Portrait of the Hipster,” 726.

sexuality is presumed to result from *less* socialization rather than from cultural differences *in* sexual socialization, I suspect that tacitly primitivizing discourses about race and sex will continue. Viewing the issue from an anthropological perspective—perhaps considering what alternative theories of the unconscious and sexual desire might be available—could lead to a broader understanding of the interrelationships among race, sexuality, and gender.³⁸

III

I have, until now, been using *bebop* as if it were not a problematic term. Kenny Clarke, one of the pioneers of the new style during the nearly legendary jam sessions in the early 1940s at Minton's in Harlem, recalled "that the music wasn't called bop at Minton's. In fact we had no name for the music. We called ourselves modern."³⁹ Indeed, in contemporary materials the term *modern music* is used just as frequently as re-bop, be-bop, and bop.⁴⁰ According to Max Roach and Kenny Clarke, the terms *bop* and *bebop* were used only after the music moved "downtown" from predominantly black Harlem to

³⁸ Psychoanalysis presumes a Western European type of kinship organization and its corresponding psychic conflicts that may or may not exist in exactly the same way in other cultures. For an introduction to recent work on kinship and gender in anthropology, see Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney, eds., *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Some anthropologists employ revised psychoanalytic frameworks that account for differences in kinship organization; see Stanley N. Kurtz, *All the Mothers Are One: Hindu India and the Cultural Reshaping of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). Works on race, gender, and sexuality employing psychoanalytic interpretive paradigms include Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 169–222; and Krin Gabbard, "Signifyin(g) the Phallus: Mo' Better Blues and Representations of the Jazz Trumpet," *Cinema Journal* 32 (1992): 43–62. The cultural presumptions of psychoanalytic theory deserve further investigation.

³⁹ Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*, 350. For similar usages of "modern," see "Dizzy Gillespie's Style, Its Meaning Analyzed," 14; and Bill Gottlieb, "Posin'," *Down Beat* 14 (10 September 1947): 6, where Charlie Parker defines bebop as "advanced modern music."

⁴⁰ While current orthographic practice omits the hyphens, the contemporary literature included them. Both "re-bop" and "be-bop" appear frequently in the pages of *Down Beat*. Those critical of bebop tended to use "re-bop." See "A Jazz Purist Guilty of Collecting Re-Bop!" *Down Beat* 13 (17 June 1946): 16; and "Condon Raps Tough for 'Re-Bop Slop,'" *Down Beat* 13 (7 October 1946): 4. *Metronome*, a publication which advocated the new style, used "be-bop" consistently as early as 1944.

Fifty-second Street and its racially mixed clientele.⁴¹ The change in location coincided with increased press coverage and awareness of the new musical style outside the boundaries of African American residential communities.

Bernard Gendron has argued that the opposition “traditional versus modern” must be understood within the debate about New Orleans jazz versus swing in the early forties. The “moldy figs,” as the advocates for older jazz were called, denounced swing as “modern,” commercialized music. For a time, then, swing and bebop musicians were united in their disdain for the “traditionalists.” As bebop became more controversial, however, battle lines were drawn between swing and bebop musicians as well.⁴² There are two aspects to the concept of “modern” among musicians and jazz fans. The first uses the word to describe structural and artistic elements of the music. Whole-tone scales, the use of flatted fifths, the interjection of rhythmic bombs into the rhythmic texture, complicated reharmonizations of popular tunes, technical virtuosity, rhythmic articulation and phrasing, and extremely fast tempos: these were among the markers of musical style labeled as “modern” by musicians and the jazz press.⁴³ The second aspect has to do with the meaning of “modern” in relation to political and social opposition to racial segregation in the entertainment world. Young “modern” musicians sought not only to change the sound of jazz, but to reject the legacy of the minstrel mask by emphasizing “art” instead of “entertainment.” Louis Armstrong’s “plantation image,” as Dizzy Gillespie called it, with a “handkerchief over his head, grinning in the face of white racism,” was a performance presentation rejected by the new generation of musicians.⁴⁴ As Ralph Ellison observed, musicians strove “in the name of their racial identity” to eradicate the entertainer’s role and acquire that of the modern artist.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 350; Dizzy Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 209.

⁴² My discussion simplifies a more nuanced argument in Bernard Gendron’s “Moldy Figs and Modernists: Jazz at War (1942–1946),” *Discourse* 15 (1993): 130–57; see also idem, “A Short Stay in the Sun: The Reception of Bebop (1944–1950),” *Library Chronicle* 24 (1994): 137–59.

⁴³ For the musical characteristics of bebop from the points of view of several musicians active at the time, see Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 91–101, 134–51, 165–72, and 212–21. For a basic introduction to bebop musical style, see “Bop,” “Beat,” “Harmony (i),” “Parker, Charlie,” and “Gillespie, Dizzy” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, ed. Barry Kernfeld, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1988).

⁴⁴ Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 295–96.

⁴⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (1964; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1972), 225.

The 1940s witnessed increasing dissatisfaction with Jim Crow policies in the music industry among both black and white musicians. Increasingly, band leaders announced that they would refuse to accept engagements in segregated performance venues, often at considerable economic sacrifice. The principal music publications with white editors, *Metronome* and *Down Beat*, reported racial incidents and ran many editorials opposing discrimination and Jim Crow policies in night clubs, dance halls, radio broadcasting, and music unions.⁴⁶ Some examples from their pages serve to illustrate:

1. Cab Calloway was arrested in Kansas City after attempting to visit Lionel Hampton at an engagement at the whites-only Pla-Mor ballroom. Hampton, who had invited Calloway to the club, refused to play after intermission, forfeited his guarantee and percentage for the night, and forced the management to refund admissions charges to the patrons.
2. In 1945 Benny Carter successfully defeated an attempt by his white neighbors to evict him from a house he owned in an exclusive area of Los Angeles.
3. Charlie Barnet protested the Hollywood film industry's decision to keep two of his band members, Al Killian and Paul Webster, off camera on account of their skin color.
4. Toby Butler, a white woman trumpeter performing with an all-black women's orchestra, was detained in Georgia for associating with the group in violation of Georgia segregation laws. The leader of the band, Jessie Turner, secured the trumpeter's release by telling authorities that Butler was a relative of hers.
5. Billy Eckstine lost a job at a Boston night club after he exchanged harsh words with a white woman patron who had hurled racial insults at him. A brawl broke out after the woman's escort kicked Eckstine. The club reported that they had been having "trouble" with the band all week. Eckstine's group had refused to stop playing "jive" and continued to use the front entrance to the club after they had been told that all employees were to come through the rear.
6. A New York policeman watching Count Basie make notes in his appointment book presumed that he must be a bookie. After seeing

⁴⁶ *Metronome* was decidedly more critical than *Down Beat* of AFM president James Caesar Petrillo, especially regarding the issue of segregated locals. See "Union Escrows Wages, Hits Negro Rivals," *Metronome* 57 (November 1941): 9; "John Hammond Leaves Post," *Metronome* 58 (January 1942): 9; "Bad Unionism, Good Unionism," *Metronome* 60 (December 1944): 4; "Caesar," *Metronome* 61 (June 1945): 5. As Gendron discusses, the liberal policies of *Metronome* did not prevent the editors from attacking *Music Dial*, a black-run jazz publication, for its political line; see his "Moldy Figs and Modernists," 148.

the datebook, the policeman apologized, and Basie, in a magnanimous gesture, gave him two free tickets to his performance.⁴⁷

The conflation of modern musical and artistic traits with the modern struggle against racial discrimination and segregation characterizes the particular meaning of “modern” within the jazz community of the 1940s. Musical excellence, in the view of younger musicians, should entitle the artist to unprejudiced treatment. It was on the basis of tremendous musical mastery, after all, that the leaders of modern bebop established their reputations within the jazz world. Dizzy Gillespie explained that one motivation for inventing complex harmonic variations was to “scare away the no-talent guys” who would attempt to sit in at Minton’s, the Harlem club most associated with the experimental jam sessions in which bop was born. Thelonious Monk, Gillespie, Joe Guy, and Kenny Clarke worked out challenging new harmonic progressions in the afternoon and took them to the bandstand at night.⁴⁸ Recollections of Minton’s and the early years of bebop are singularly devoid of the sensationalism found in the popular press, which tended to stress the fashion, language, and substance abuse associated with bebop.⁴⁹ Instead the conviviality and environment of musical exploration are recalled.

⁴⁷ The Calloway incident is reported in “Kansas City Court Makes Just Ruling,” *Down Beat* 13 (14 January 1946): 10; Benny Carter’s difficulties in “Carter v. Crow,” *Metronome* 61 (August 1945): 7. Both the Butler/Turner incident and Barnet’s struggle with Hollywood are described in “Jim Crow Stuff Still Spreading! Girl Trumpeter Tastes Southern Chivalry and Color Ousts Mab’s Men,” *Down Beat* 13 (29 July 1946): 1; for more on Barnet see “Movies Fix Merit by Color of Skin!” *Down Beat* 13 (29 July 1946): 10. The Eckstine fight appears in “Eckstine, Band, Lose Job after Brawl in Boston,” *Down Beat* 14 (15 January 1947): 4. The Basie encounter is described in “Blushing Cop Catches Basie Show—For Free,” *Down Beat* 13 (1 July 1946): 1.

⁴⁸ Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 337. Gillespie says that he and Monk worked out progressions together. Kenny Clarke reports that he and trumpeter Joe Guy participated as well.

⁴⁹ Gillespie’s *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 134–51, and Shapiro and Hentoff’s *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 335–58, are specifically devoted to remembrances of Minton’s. Both books present material from interviews of musicians who were present at the club in the early 1940s. While the most skeptical might argue that musicians deleted the more unsavory aspects of the jazz world in accounts collected long after the fact, their stories—gathered independently of one another—reveal a musical world of vastly greater nuance and complexity than some of the contemporary popular media allowed. My account of Minton’s draws also from Ralph Ellison’s essay on the club in *Shadow and Act*, 199–212.

Henry Minton, owner of the club and the first black delegate to Local 802 (New York City) of the American Federation of Musicians, was known to be extremely generous toward musicians.⁵⁰ Mary Lou Williams described the club as an intimate place where people talked all the time, ate good food, and spent a good deal of time “living, dancing, and drinking.”⁵¹ When Teddy Hill took over its management in 1941, he established Monday Celebrity Nights in which musicians were given free license to play whatever they wished.⁵² Dizzy Gillespie recalls:

On Monday nights, we used to have a ball. Everybody from the Apollo, on Monday nights, was a guest at Minton's, the whole band. We had a big jam session. Monday night was the big night, the musician's night off. There was always some food there for you. Oh, that part was beautiful. Teddy Hill treated the guys well. He didn't pay them much money—I never did get paid—but he treated the guys nicely.⁵³

It was in this informal environment that many of the musical ideas of this African American modernism were traded. Gillespie, in particular, was known as a generous teacher—someone who would explain the intricacies of extended harmonies to interested players, and show young drummers rhythmic and timekeeping innovations pioneered by musicians such as Kenny Clarke. The atmosphere of camaraderie was not in contradiction to making serious music, but, on the contrary, something central to its invention.⁵⁴ “What we were doing at Minton's,” recalls Gillespie, “was playing, seriously, creating a new dialogue among ourselves, blending our ideas into a new style of music.”⁵⁵

Musical achievement had also become a symbol of racial achievement. The fierce pride in music, one of the few professional arenas

⁵⁰ Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 207.

⁵¹ Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*, 338.

⁵² Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 209–10.

⁵³ Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 139.

⁵⁴ The exchange of musical ideas in jam session is best contextualized in relationship to the tradition of big bands as institutions of higher learning. See Illinois Jacquet's comments in Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 144–48; and Kenny Clarke, interview by Helen Oakley Dance, 9 September 1977 (Jazz Oral History Project, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, Newark). For the best account of the jazz community as a learning institution, see Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁵⁵ Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 140. While the clientele and musicians at Minton's were predominantly black, several white musicians played there as well. Dizzy Gillespie mentions bassist Johnny Carisi as a regular.

open to African Americans, put much more at stake in these musical proving grounds than formal musical innovation. In the wake of the commercial triumph of white swing bands, such as Benny Goodman's, many African American musicians sought to reassert their musical leadership in jazz by creating something that outsiders had difficulty copying. Mary Lou Williams observed:

The boppers worked out a music that was hard to steal. I'll say this for the "leeches," though—they tried. I've seen them in Minton's, busily writing on their shirt cuffs or scribbling on the tablecloth. And even our own guys, I'm afraid, did not give Monk the credit he had coming.⁵⁶

The modernism of the beboppers explicitly sought to carve out a new space for a specifically African American creativity. Their unorthodox clothing, their refusal to speak in mainstream English to mixed crowds, and their refusal to play at mainstream dance tempos all announced to wartime audiences that the terms of participation in the jazz scene were shifting. As Dizzy Gillespie's comments about the use of hip language indicate, it was time for audiences to accommodate themselves to African Americans, not the other way around: "People who wished to communicate with us had to consider our manner of speech, and sometimes they adopted it."⁵⁷ On his particular view of the relationship between art and social protest, Gillespie further remarked:

Within the society, we did the same thing we did with the music. First we learned the proper way and then we improvised on that. It seemed the natural thing to do because the style or mode of life among black folks went the same way as the direction of the music. Yes, sometimes the music comes first and the life-style reflects the music because music is some very strong stuff. . . . Artists are always in the vanguard of social change, but we didn't go out and make speeches or say, "Let's play eight bars of protest." We just played our music and let it go at that. The music proclaimed our identity; it made every statement we truly wanted to make.⁵⁸

Little did the musicians active at Minton's suspect that, when transposed downtown and scrutinized by mixed audiences and the press, the stylistic aspects of the musical scene—the clothes, the hats, the talk,

⁵⁶ Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*, 350. Williams also speaks of guarding against the commercial appropriation of bebop, in Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 149. See also Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 212.

⁵⁷ Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 281.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 291.

the goatees, the drugs—would breathe life into the very primitivist presumptions that the new modern musical movement, with its commitment to art, sophistication, and social protest, most deeply opposed.

IV

The figure of the “artist” represented to the young modern musician a purity of musical purpose as well as a means of demanding recognition and projecting a stance of social critic. 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 behaviors could be transformed into positive markers of artistic genius. To the extent that eccentric artists were believed to have access to an inner truth and a greater perception of the nature of society, they were deemed superior to ordinary citizens. The modernism in the self-conception of bebop musicians partook deeply of the image of the avant-garde artist as outsider and social critic, and of the accompanying expectation of “mad” or “bad” behavior. On the one hand, this image mediated racial difference through a common vocabulary of an artistic modernism; on the other hand, the historically close associations between madness, pathology, and racial difference made the image of the jazz avant-garde artist especially prone to appropriation by primitivist racial ideologies.

In *Difference and Pathology*, Sander Gilman probes the history of stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness that have been applied to both blacks and Jews at various moments in history. The associations of blackness (or Jewishness) with pathological sexuality, blackness (or Jewishness) with madness, and madness with artistry have taken divergent forms but are nonetheless of very long duration in the historical imagination of the West. Gilman argues that blackness has been linked with concupiscence as far back as the twelfth century and that by the eighteenth century blackness had become “an icon for deviant sexuality in general.” The presumed relations between blackness, prostitution, and disease, as well as those between blackness, “rascality” (or criminality), and madness, became firmly established in the medical literature by the mid-nineteenth century. The “pathology” of the person of color was presumed to be part of his or her essential nature.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, chaps. 3–6, and chap. 10.

The length of the association among blackness, social transgression, and pathology necessarily links the nonconformity of the hip to a much broader context than that provided by bebop or mid-twentieth-century modernism. Consequently, the cultural theme linking jazz musicians with rebellion, modernism, and primitivism cannot be confined to a history of bebop in the forties; neither, however, can it be detached from the history of the genre. The most excessive instances of primitivism and the hipster occurred after the heyday of bebop: Mailer's "White Negro" appeared in 1957, and Ross Russell's romanticized view of Charlie Parker's drug addiction was published in 1973.⁶⁰ The writings of academics in the 1950s and 1960s nevertheless had bebop in mind when they articulated the themes of social nonconformity, deviance, drug usage, and sexual excess. Howard Becker's essay "The Professional Dance Musician and His Audience," which stressed the tension between musicians and "squares," extended a view of the jazz musician as deviant into the pages of the *American Journal of Sociology*.⁶¹ William Cameron's "Sociological Notes on the Jam Session" presented musicians as hedonistic, socially isolated, and cultish.⁶² Even Alan Merriam spoke of jazz musicians as antisocial and uneducated.⁶³

The stereotype of the nonconformist, hip, deviant jazz musician was subsequently transferred to musicians who developed the later styles of hard bop, cool, and free jazz. Nevertheless, the problem of hipness and how whites viewed it was apparent in the late forties.

⁶⁰ Ross Russell, *Bird Lives: The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie Parker* (New York: Charterhouse, 1973).

⁶¹ Howard Becker, "The Professional Dance Musician and His Audience," *American Journal of Sociology* 57 (1951): 136–44. Becker later elaborated on this work in two chapters of his *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963; reprint, New York: The Free Press, 1973).

⁶² William B. Cameron, "Sociological Notes on the Jam Session," *Social Forces* 33 (1954): 177–82.

⁶³ Alan Merriam and Raymond Mack, "The Jazz Community," *Social Forces* 38 (1960): 211–22. Merriam and Mack at least recognized the relevance of African American cultural contexts in an account of the jazz community. Becker's essay was based on work with white musicians in Chicago who identified with the hip ethos of bebop. Cameron's stressed psychological pathology. The jazz press of the fifties and early sixties, it seems, was not the primary disseminator of the mythical hipster. Perhaps the most thoughtful writing by jazz journalists in the late fifties and early sixties was that by Nat Hentoff and Ralph Gleason. Hentoff was an associate editor for *Down Beat* from 1953 to 1957 and co-editor of *The Jazz Review* from 1958 to 1961; Gleason wrote for *Down Beat* from 1948 to 1961 and for the *San Francisco Chronicle* from 1950 until his death in 1975. See Hentoff, *The Jazz Life*; and Ralph J. Gleason, *Celebrating the Duke, and Louis, Bessie, Billie, Carmen, Miles, Dizzy and Other Heroes* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975).

Dizzy Gillespie recalled that although he was happy at first to have publicity of any kind, he was deeply disturbed by some of its substance:

Around 1946, jive-ass stories about “beboppers” circulated and began popping up in the news. Generally, I felt happy for the publicity, but I found it disturbing to have modern jazz musicians and their followers characterized in a way that was often sinister and downright vicious. This image wasn’t altogether the fault of the press because many followers, trying to be “in,” were actually doing some of the things the press accused beboppers of—and worse. I wondered whether all the “weird” publicity actually drew some of these way-out elements to us and did the music more harm than good. Stereotypes, which exploited whatever our weaknesses might be, emerged. Suable things were said, but nothing about the good we were doing and our contributions to music.⁶⁴

The fact that Charlie Parker was known among his peers as an avid reader who liked to talk about politics and philosophy was less interesting to the press and his imitators than his drug abuse, time spent in a state mental hospital in Camarillo, California, sexual excesses, and apparently magical, unmediated ability to coax entrancing sounds out of an alto saxophone. Gillespie’s beret, goatee, and posture were more intriguing than the fact that he was a chess player and was known for his great intelligence.⁶⁵ Many musician followers behaved as though they believed that the most excessive aspects of their heroes’ lifestyles actually *generated* musical creativity. Charlie Parker was disturbed deeply by the fact that many younger musicians emulated his heroin habit: “Any musician who says he is playing better either on tea, the needle, or when he is juiced, is a plain, straight liar. When I get too much to drink, I can’t even finger well, let alone play decent ideas. . . . Some of these smart kids who think you have to be completely knocked out to be a good hornman are just plain crazy. It isn’t true. I know, believe me.”⁶⁶

Different observers, it seems, chose to emphasize different aspects of bebop according to their investment in particular images and

⁶⁴ Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 279.

⁶⁵ That Parker’s reading included Baudelaire is mentioned in Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 287; his reputation as a great conversationalist who “could discuss anything with anybody” is mentioned in Robert Reisner, ed., *Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1962), 69. Parker’s admiration of Picasso and Rembrandt is mentioned on p. 72, Gillespie’s chess playing on p. 94. Parker was confined from 29 June 1946 until January 1947 at Camarillo State Hospital, where he was treated for a nervous breakdown and addiction to heroin and alcohol. See “Parker, Charlie,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* 2:287.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 379.

associations of blackness and music. In their recollections, the principal musical participants stress the intellectuality, artistry, and social consciousness of the musical movement. Kenny Clarke recalls: "It was the most intelligent phase of our music. It was the most intelligent, before or after, and up until now. . . . The idea was to wake up, look around you, there's something to do. And this was just part of it, an integral part of our cultural aspect. . . . There was a message in our music. Whatever you go into, go into it *intelligently*. As simple as that."⁶⁷ By contrast, Mailer saw in the hip African American the true existentialist/hedonist who counteracted death by taking an "uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self," with particular attention to the pleasures of the body.⁶⁸

In a tape made in 1959 at the Five Spot, a New York nightclub, Charles Mingus gave the downtown white hip bohemian clientele a lecture from the bandstand:

You haven't been told before that you're phonies. You're here because jazz has publicity, jazz is popular . . . and you like to associate yourself with this sort of thing. But it doesn't make you a connoisseur of the art because you follow it around. . . . A blind man can go to an exhibition of Picasso and Kline and not even see their works. And comment behind dark glasses, Wow! They're the swingiest painters ever, crazy! Well so can you. You've got your dark glasses and clogged-up ears.

You sit there in front of me and talk about your crude love affairs. You sit there in front of me and push your junkie-style glasses up on your noses.⁶⁹

For Mingus, adoption of the visual and verbal style of musicians could never compensate for an inability to comprehend the implications—musical, social, and political—of the modernist musical argument. He chafed at being reduced to a stereotype, even if it was one that audiences thought admirable.⁷⁰ The most damaging legacy of the mythical view of the rebellious, virile jazz musician may be perhaps that when African American musicians emphasize responsibility,

⁶⁷ Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, 141–42; emphasis in the original.

⁶⁸ Mailer, "The White Negro," 277.

⁶⁹ Diane Dorr-Dorynek, "Mingus . . .," in *The Jazz Word*, ed. Dom Cerulli, Burt Korall, and Mort Nasatir (New York: Ballantine Books, 1960), 17–18.

⁷⁰ This opinion did not stop him from exploiting the marketability of the stereotype in his fanciful autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus*, ed. Nell King (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971). See Brian Priestly, *Mingus: A Critical Biography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982), xi, 135–36, 180–81.

dignity, gentleness, or courtship, some hip white Americans presume that the artist in question may not be a “real” African American.

V

I had tried, in the States, to convey something of what it felt like to be a Negro and no one had been able to listen: they wanted their romance. And, anyway, the really ghastly thing about trying to convey to a white man the reality of the Negro experience has nothing whatever to do with the fact of color, but has to do with this man’s relationship to his own life. He will face in your life only what he is willing to face in his.

—James Baldwin⁷¹

In the United States, where each of us is a member of some minority group and where political power and entertainment alike are derived from viewing and manipulating the human predicaments of others, the maintenance of dignity is never a simple matter—even for those with the highest credentials.

—Ralph Ellison⁷²

The thread that ties this story together is the way in which class and gender mediate ideas about ethnic authenticity and morality. One line of debate in the literature has associated class aspirations among upwardly mobile African Americans with assimilation into and imitation of white middle-class society. Amiri Baraka devoted an entire chapter of *Blues People* to criticizing the black middle class for what he claimed was its desire to erase blackness through the emulation of mainstream white culture, especially the Puritan ethos of “thrift, prayer, and work.” Implied in Baraka’s discussion is the idea that socioeconomic advancement is necessarily tied to the renunciation of African American history and culture.⁷³ In 1964, Ralph Ellison took Baraka to task for making too simplistic an association between “color, education, income and the Negro’s preference in music.” Baraka’s linking of manners and morality with the renunciation of blackness, he argued, could not accommodate the social variety found within African American society.⁷⁴ Duke Ellington does not fit easily within Baraka’s correlation of class, manners, and ethnic identity, despite the

⁷¹ Baldwin, “The Black Boy,” 292.

⁷² Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 226.

⁷³ Baraka, *Blues People*, 122–41.

⁷⁴ Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 252.

fact that Baraka manages to praise Ellington within his framework.⁷⁵ Ellington's elegant self-presentation and his refusal to be limited to a definition of black music that did not include his large-scale compositions such as *Reminiscing in Tempo* demand a definition of African American dignity that does not equate propriety with ethnic abdication.

Assimilation (mediated by class) has also been associated with gender in the literature on African American music. In the mid 1960s, in a study of urban blues, Charles Keil wrote about the battle of the sexes in African American communities. He clearly articulated the idea of the moralizing, assimilating woman taming the "natural" man:

Men call women self-righteous, money-grabbing, treacherous, and domineering. Women simply say that all men are no good. . . . The female forces on one side of the battle line consist of units like mother and daughter, sister and sister, niece and aunt, wife and mother-in-law, a matriarch with her daughters and grandchildren. Facing this formidable opposition is the independent Negro male who seeks allies where he can—in the gang, pool hall, blues bar, and barber shop. Moralizing types—Negro women in particular and white Americans generally—see him as lazy, shiftless, and irresponsible.⁷⁶

Jeff Titon, in a critique of Hortense Powdermaker's *After Freedom*, also associated African American women with the forces of assimilation to white middle-class values.⁷⁷ And Baraka, through his scant mention of women, presents an idea of African American musical and cultural authenticity carried primarily through the activities of men. The unfortunate implication is that the "real" African American is someone who comes very close to embodying the most persistent stereotypes of African American men that recur throughout American history: the Zip Coon image of the urban, black dandy transmitted through the minstrel show; and the Buck image of black men as physically and sexually aggressive, perhaps

⁷⁵ Baraka, *Blues People*, 161–63. Baraka is often contradictory on the relationship of class to African American authenticity. If he approves of the music, as he does Ellington's, he makes a case within his theory for the musician's cultural authenticity. If he does not approve, as in the case of Horace Silver and Art Blakey, no amount of class legitimacy will redeem him; see pp. 216–22.

⁷⁶ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 9.

⁷⁷ Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 16–17.

most obviously employed in D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*.⁷⁸

The power of these stereotypes is such that white Americans in search of a bohemian experience often appear disappointed when their rebellious heroes fail to express sentiments in line with their reputations. Bassist Phil Bowler, after lamenting that most people seem to associate jazz with drug addiction, talked about trumpeter Roy Eldridge as a family man:

The late Roy Eldridge, one of the most important trumpeters in the twentieth century, . . . said when he died that one of his wishes would be to let the public know that we jazz musicians have families that we love very much, too. We have a house, we want our kids to go to good schools. We're family men, too. We care about our money for the kids. So that . . . when you think of it, it's really deep.⁷⁹

In 1966, when *Urban Blues* was written, Keil might have attributed such a response to sanitization: "Almost any Negro in the presence of a white or black bourgeois interviewer or social worker can recite a stream of conventional American values and beliefs without a hitch, halt, or second thought. Yet it is also true that these are rarely the cultural guidelines by which the person reciting them lives."⁸⁰ Family-oriented values expressed by jazz musicians historically have been dismissed as being a protective cover hiding the "true," "unassimilated" African American male.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, by contrast, undermines the notion that working-class African Americans can be defined by the panoply of stereotypes equating African Americans with an inverse of mainstream values (an absence of inhibition and morality). In her work on women in the black Baptist Church in the early twentieth century, she argues that divisions within the African American working class were frequently marked less by income or occupation than by various stances taken toward "the politics of respectability." From Higginbotham's perspective, the cultivation of middle-class manners and morals was one strategy in the struggle for racial self-help and self-esteem among working-class Baptist Church members. By behaving in an impeccably "correct" manner, African Americans could *subvert* the primitivist assumptions of the white mainstream and also construct for them-

⁷⁸ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, new expanded ed. (New York: Continuum, 1992), 3-18.

⁷⁹ Phil Bowler, interview by the author, 17 April 1989.

⁸⁰ Keil, *Urban Blues*, 12.

selves a feeling of moral superiority.⁸¹ The subcultural idea that “manners” or “morals” mark a white middle-class ethos must be revised, for the inflection of Christian values in the black church and family has a long and distinctively African American history. Count Basie’s magnanimity in offering free tickets to a white policeman who presumed he was a bookie underscores how dignity can function as a strategy of self-respect and assertion, not simply ethnic abdication.

Houston A. Baker, Jr., calls the more polite, less confrontational rhetorical strategy for African American advancement a “mastery of form”; the more rebellious, defiant stance a “deformation of mastery” (or “unabashed *badness*”). By this he means to elucidate a range of options within which African Americans have situated themselves with respect to twentieth-century urban modernity. While Baker takes Booker T. Washington as an illustration of the former and W. E. B. DuBois as an example of the latter, perhaps the most powerful implication of his thinking is that the categories are anything but mutually exclusive. Baker’s and Higginbotham’s insights offer a means of undermining the mechanical alignment of class status, morality, and ethnic authenticity. Many of the “baddest” jazz musicians were raised in impeccably middle-class homes; Miles Davis, whose father was a successful dentist, provides a notable example. Dizzy Gillespie, by contrast, was raised in a working-class environment.

The same person, of course, may choose to emphasize the respectable end of the continuum in one social context and the rebellious end in another. African American performers have frequently been caught in a bind with respect to self-presentation, for the image of “unabashed badness” and sexual transgression has sold extremely well in the twentieth century, thanks in part to white fascination with it. Male jazz musicians have not infrequently enjoyed their reputations for virility and have constructed accounts of themselves that play into the market for this image and its transgressive aspects. There is indeed a stream of African American cultural criticism that finds some performers complicit in the reinforcement of

⁸¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 185–229. Many white Americans, for example, are not aware of the reputation that they have for maintaining lower hygienic standards than African Americans; see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Colored People: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 29–39. For a discussion of “moral superiority” and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (AACM), see Ronald M. Radano, “Jazzin’ the Classics: The AACM’s Challenge to Mainstream Aesthetics,” *Black Music Research Journal* 12 (1992): 87.

“negative” images.⁸² Charles Mingus’s *Beneath the Underdog*, for example, presents in graphic detail accounts of his sexual and musical exploits; Miles Davis’s autobiography advertises his ill-treatment of women.⁸³ The difference between the reception of this image within African American communities and the non-African American mainstream can be vast. While African Americans evaluate the image of “badness” knowing that it violates more mainstream African American values, non-African Americans have tended to presume that “badness” is the “real thing” or even the “only thing.” One of the most “invisible” aspects of African American communities is precisely the ordinariness of the moral debates that take place within them.⁸⁴

VI

When I spoke with several African American jazz musicians as part of an ethnographic study undertaken in 1989–90, I found that most emphasized discipline and responsibility as the keys to performing at a level that meets the jazz community’s standards of spontaneity and soulfulness. Some also mentioned the importance of their families. By the cultural presumptions prevalent in the jazz literature, one might conclude that they must be middle class, less male or African American, than the jazz musicians described in books. Yet self-representations of musicians that do not revel in promiscuity, drugs, or violence are open to other interpretations: the recognition by musicians that the fascination for transgression shown by some non-African Americans is demeaning; that some non-African Americans have been far more interested in the supposedly marginal

⁸² Michelle Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London: Verso, 1990), 2.

⁸³ Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*; Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 172, 228. In both cases the original manuscripts were much longer than the published versions. Mingus’s biographer reports that the original *Beneath the Underdog* was approximately 1,000 pages, of which 365 were published. See Priestly, *Mingus: A Critical Biography*, 181. Mingus complained about the editing of the manuscript; see Charles Mingus, interview by Nat Hentoff, 29 March 1978 (Jazz Oral History Project). Davis’s autobiography was 1,100 pages in manuscript; 412 were published by Simon and Schuster. See Quincy Troupe, “The Genius of Miles Davis in American Culture,” paper presented at the Miles Davis and American Culture conference, Washington University, St. Louis, 6–8 April 1995.

⁸⁴ The allusion is to Ralph Ellison’s well-known novel *The Invisible Man* (1952; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1972): “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me” (p. 3).

“lifestyle” of the jazz world than in the music; that many white Americans are uncomfortable with African Americans who can challenge them in their own intellectual and moral arenas. One extremely important point made by William Kenney’s work on the 1920s is that what was “slumming” to white border-crossers to Chicago’s South Side, was to African American musicians the desire for upward mobility, self-improvement, or urbanization, on something closer to African American terms.⁸⁵ The emphasis on dignity and respectability stressed by many musicians with whom I interacted is *not* a marker of assimilation but the assertion of a professional, urban, cosmopolitan African American identity. While validating the liberating, political, social, and sensual aspects of African American music, musicians tended to be wary of those who would reduce them to the stereotype of the primitive Other—even when, on occasion, they choose to play up those parts of themselves that fit the image.

In a coincidental encounter, as I was interviewing bassist Phil Bowler about his experience in the band of Ralph Peterson, Jr., in a New York night club, clarinetist Don Byron stepped up to the table:

Phil Bowler (PB): Have you gotten into the lifestyle?

Don Byron (DB): She’s been trying to avoid it.

PB: I think so.

DB: I’ve been trying to avoid that shit myself.

IM: What is the *lifestyle*?

DB: Lifestyles of the poor and famous.

IM: Poor, famous?

PB: That’s more famous than the musicians.

DB: It’s not *poor*, it’s *po*’.

IM: *Po*’?

PB: (laughs) Yes, (to DB) thank you.⁸⁶

Embedded in this conversation is an awareness that interpretations of “the lifestyle” have a racially loaded history. Musicians live in constant dialogue with this history, often with great irony. It is not my purpose to construct all jazz musicians into virtuous middle-class citizens, nor to deny them their outrageousness, dangerousness, and charm, but to point to the historical legacy that informs the American cultural tendency to reduce African American cultural values to caricature. Cornel West has perhaps said it best:

⁸⁵ William H. Kenney, *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 303.

⁸⁶ Phil Bowler, interview by the author, 17 April 1989.

The Afro-Americanization of white youth—given the disproportionate black role in popular music and athletics—has put white kids in closer contact with their own bodies and facilitated more human interaction with black people. Listening to Motown records in the sixties or dancing to hip hop music in the nineties may not lead one to question the sexual myths of black women and men, but when white and black kids buy the same billboard hits and laud the same athletic heroes the result is often a shared cultural space where some humane interaction takes place. . . .

Yet as long as that pleasure, joy, and love is still predicated on myths of black sexuality, the more fundamental challenge of humane interaction remains unmet.⁸⁷

The intersection of race, gender, and rebellion in American music offers much to think about. Three issues seem especially important: first, hipness must be viewed within the contexts of African American history, social stratification, and debates about moral values; second, there is a history of gendered and sexualized identification with hipness that has caused many white Americans to perpetuate unwittingly primitivist assumptions about African American cultural authenticity; and third, discipline, dignity, and social consciousness are as important to defining hipness as transgression or social marginality. By positioning the relationship of whites to hipness within a broader field of African American history and cultural discourse, I hope to have suggested a range of interpretive issues that promotes dialogue between musicologists (“old” or “new”) and ethnomusicologists, and within the increasingly wide spectrum of those engaged in the cultural interpretation of music. Our methodologies, epistemologies, and ontologies may conflict, but we have much to learn from one another.

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ABSTRACT

This essay situates hipness within a broader range of African American history and moral debate than is generally presented in accounts of jazz history. The perspectives of Amiri Baraka, Mezz Mezzrow, Norman Mailer, and Dizzy Gillespie are used to develop the thesis that there is a problem with white presumptions about how hipness relates to African American cultural life and history. This problem requires addressing interrelationships between race and gender, as well as the legacy of primitivism embedded in common assumptions about how jazz since World War II relates to social consciousness, sexual liberation, and dignity.

⁸⁷ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 121–22.