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Playing Bebop: Culture and Bebop's Reciprocal Influence

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Abstract

Following the sweet, pleasant Swing era style music of the 1930's, Bebop emerged within the United States as an aggressive, percussive, musician-focused style in the 1940's. However, Bebop's creation was not spontaneous. Its composers, John Birks Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk, wrote for the sake of the music itself as a form of self-expression, not as entertainment for an audience. Bebop's dissonant sound expressed political and cultural frustrations, stemming from World War II and similarly shown in the early Civil Rights Movement. I will argue that not only did Bebop develop out of such conflicts, but in a reciprocal manner it shaped society, giving legitimacy to black musicians' technical abilities in a white-dominated music industry.

Keywords

Bebop, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Jazz

Disciplines

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Comments

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Playing Bebop: Culture and Bebop's Reciprocal Influence

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Professor Jones

Jazz 110B

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Final Research Paper

I affirm that I have upheld the highest standards of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

Audra DeBoy

ABSTRACT

Following the sweet, pleasant Swing era style music of the 1930's, Bebop emerged within the United States as an aggressive, percussive, musician-focused style in the 1940's. However, Bebop's creation was not spontaneous. Its composers, John Birks Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk, wrote for the sake of the music itself as a form of self-expression, not as entertainment for an audience. Bebop's dissonant sound expressed political and cultural frustrations, stemming from World War II and similarly shown in the early Civil Rights Movement. I will argue that not only did Bebop develop out of such conflicts, but in a reciprocal manner it shaped society, giving legitimacy to black musicians' technical abilities in a white-dominated music industry.

Shifting from the audience-oriented, danceable music of the Swing era, culture and the political climate during the 1940s were catalysts for the eventual development of Bebop. Despite prosperity following World War II, there was a general sense of unease stemming from destruction caused by the war and racial tensions underlying the superficial wash of success in the United States. Racial tensions, in particular, were heating up as African Americans began advocating for equal liberties in the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement. As a result, musicians such as John Birks Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk, developed their own style of music which distanced itself from the pleasant music of the European tradition, instead, incorporating Cuban and African elements. In what follows, I will trace both the development of Bebop from the socio-cultural and political context out of which it came, and likewise describe how Bebop and its creators influenced culture.

Emerging out of the Swing era, Bebop took over as an economical art form, both financially and in size, serving as a mode of creative expression for Bebop artists. Although Swing reigned from the beginning of the 1930's, it was soon replaced in the late 1940's by a fast-paced, uproarious, dissonant new art form known as Bebop (Yanow, 1). Leading up to this shift in musical styles was the recording strike led by the Musicians Union. During this strike, recording halted, preventing musicians from spreading their music between 1942 and 1943 (Yanow, 1). Since swing musicians were no longer being recorded, Dixieland jazz began to make a comeback as well as ballad style jazz, which were a calming break from the tumultuous World War II reports. In contrast to the sounds of jazz ballads and Dixieland jazz which had been previously recorded, Bebop remained localized in Harlem nightclubs until the recording strike diffused. Listeners were astonished to tune into this new sound that seemed harsh in comparison to the orderly, danceable music of the Swing era. Despite its unpopularity at first, Bebop musicians continued to play because this was *their* music, played for the sake of creating music and not for the audience's entertainment.

Though Swing listeners were initially put off by the shocking, experimental sounds of the Bebop style, some eventually acquired a taste for this soloist-heavy self-expression. Swing music was typically played to cater to the audience, both for the entertainment quality and for the artists' own livelihood. Thus, Swing style reflected this desire to fit the needs of the listener, including its big band size, and thrumming bass and drum lines which kept the tempo at a reasonable dance speed (Yanow, 3). Also in the rhythm section was the pianist, who often played in a striding style, rocking back and forth between notes on the piano. Finally, Swing music contained catchy melodies made for easy memorization of the tune, which were often echoed in improvised solos during performances. For this reason, it was a shock when the avant-garde

sound of Bebop emerged. Short, improvised solos reflecting the melody were replaced by long, improvisational solos which branched away from the melody, leaving behind a shell of a structure for the song: an introduction followed by solos, ending with a conclusion. The solos built off of chord changes from the song but often ignored the melody of the piece, if one existed at all. Moreover, the bass became the timekeeper and soloist as the drums took to the ride cymbal, occasionally “dropping bombs”—a reference to the war period—on the bass drum (Yanow, 3). Since large big bands of sixteen members were difficult to maintain and afford during this period, Bebop also reduced the size of the ensemble to a handful of members in a small combo of musicians who were passionate about the music itself. Thus, entertainment and regard for the audience were absent from small combos as they performed at jazz sessions in nightclubs such as Minton’s and Monroe’s in Harlem for the sake of the music itself (Harker, 188). The transition from Swing era big bands to Bebop small combos was not only a shift in the style of music to a jarring, fast, and dissonant style of music, but it was also a shift from conforming to the audience’s desires to playing for the sake of self-expression through music.

Coinciding with the emergence of Bebop were a few key political and socio-cultural movements, which helped give rise to and shape Bebop music. The first of these influences was World War II. Toward the end of the war in the mid-1940’s, the change in music from Swing to Bebop reflected the shifting mood of the citizens of the United States. Lying behind the façade of an economically prospering nation was the disturbing reality of the world war and a fear of resurgence from another side (Harker, 177). Although the economy flourished because of the war, which allowed soldiers to return home, receive an education, and buy homes in the suburbs, the American consciousness had to subvert the horrific acts that had been committed on all sides

and pretend to move on despite the unsettling reality. How did citizens around the globe deal with new conflicting feelings of success and loss? They turned to art as an outlet.

In Europe, high art remained the mode of choice, including “theater of the absurd, abstract expressionism in the visual arts, and total serialism in music” (Harker, 177). The Europeans chose to express their frustrations and inner turmoil through clever acts which required thinking, as well as through beautiful, harmonic music meant to boost one’s mood. In stark contrast to the Europeans, however, United States citizens found themselves indulging their sensuous desires instead of practicing their rational, cognitive capacities. Art in post-war America witnessed a split between art and what was considered popular at the time, since the popular tunes of rhythm and blues as well as rock ’n’ roll were deemed erotic by Swing era listeners, not as art. Grouped with rhythm and blues and rock ’n’ roll, Bebop was a newer style of music played in large part by black musicians as an outlet to express political frustrations, no longer simply a way to make money or gain fame.

One socio-cultural influence accompanying and supporting the development of Bebop music was the early Civil Rights Movement. Though many black individuals fought in the war, risking their lives for the U.S. and its liberties, they returned home to be in a racist, segregated world once again (Harker, 181). In addition to peaceful protests, leaders in the NAACP pushed for legislative change to eliminate racist and prejudiced laws. In the 1954 Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, activists made great strides by desegregating schools (Harker, 181). In addition to this, more subtle forms of non-violent action were taken by figures such as Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Though she was arrested, Rosa Parks did not move to the back of the public bus when a white passenger entered (Harker, 181). By standing her ground and refusing to be treated as a lesser race, she showed to other individuals that black individuals

need to be valued equally to their white counterparts. Finally, during this early period of the civil rights movement, preacher and activist Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to advance his civil rights objectives. As civil rights issues began to come to a head, and activists took a peaceful approach to advance their objectives, they still needed an outlet for all of their pent up frustrations. In the world of jazz, Bebop emerged as a result of black musicians' desire to be paid and recognized for their musical abilities just as white individuals (Mour, 54). Hence, art and music served as an avenue for cathartic release and self-expression without violence.

A key figure in developing the sound of Bebop was John Birks Gillespie, also known as "Dizzy" Gillespie. Son of Lottie and James Gillespie, John Birks Gillespie earned the name "Dizzy" for the innovative and confusing way he played the trumpet (Mour, 54). After being fired from Cab Calloway's orchestra for allegedly throwing spitballs, Dizzy gained the freedom to experiment with traditional jazz sounds by incorporating Cuban and African elements (Mour, 56). In an attempt to break free from the confines of traditional jazz, Dizzy Gillespie returned to New York where he found himself in jam sessions with Charlie "Bird" Parker, among others, who encouraged and further fostered his love for disjointed, angular Bebop rhythm and style. Though he was busy touring his quintet across the U.S. and Europe, Gillespie still found time to be an activist for the Civil Rights Movement later on in his career. He even found time in 1964 to campaign for president for the sole purpose of bringing peace to people around the globe by ending wars and bringing unity to the world's peoples (Mour, 59). Not only did he peacefully argue in favor of desegregation, but he created his own style to accompany this air of experimentation and self-expression which his fans copied: "horn-rimmed glasses, cigarette holder, goatee, and beret were part of his protest about the treatment of African Americans"

(Mour, 59). Thus, not only did war times and civil dispute come out in Dizzy Gillespie's development of the Bebop sound, but he also influenced fashion and political action as fans and supporters began to imitate his avant-garde style.

A close friend of Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie "Bird" Parker played the alto saxophone and likewise experimented with jazz to help create Bebop. Whereas Dizzy Gillespie flamboyantly paraded his unique style on stage, Charlie Parker complemented him with a cool, relaxed personality. Although most musicians he first played with did not understand his musical style—it broke away from conventional, beautiful sounds—Charlie Parker eventually found his niche when he went to New York and participated in the same jam sessions as Dizzy Gillespie in the Harlem nightclubs, Minton's and Monroe's (Harker, 188). He favored long improvised solos using triadic extensions, or high intervals of a chord in the melody. Additionally, he often incorporated segments of popular, classical songs into his improvised solos, a technique called quotation (Harker, 206). In contrast to the previous Swing era, his tone was harsh and because he played at such fast speeds, he rarely sustained a note long enough to warrant vibrato (Owens, 29). Just as Dizzy Gillespie's fans copied his fashion sense, Charlie Parker's fans copied his drug habits in order to be and sound like him. Taking his new musical style to Fifty-Second Street in New York, "Charlie had attracted a growing entourage of jazz writers, hipsters, musicians, poets, artists, sexually curious young women, and drug dealers" (Haddix, 80). One could surmise that his fans were progressive in thought and deed. When he came back from the International Jazz Festival in 1949, Parker returned to a New York club named after him, Birdland, where he played until he was fired for his erratic behavior and playing (Mour, 67). Though the drugs and alcohol interfered with his playing abilities and his life in general, it was this very type of

behavior which led him to stretch the bounds of ordinary jazz to create the harsh, abrasive jazz called Bebop.

Also performing at Minton's in the 1940s and a trailblazer of the Bebop style was pianist Thelonious Monk. His innovative Bebop piano style included simple melodies for one hand and rhythmically elaborate melodies on the other (Owens, 140). Because his style of playing was so new, audiences were usually startled by it. So, Monk rarely played in public until Bebop gained more recognition as a legitimate form of jazz. His songs, *'Round Midnight*, as well as *Fifty-second Street Theme*, helped catapult Monk into the public sphere as these pieces became widely accepted as jazz standards (Owens, 140). Thelonious Monk both played with the techniques of an amateur keyboardist and a classically trained pianist. At times he would hit multiple keys from an angle with flat fingers, but in a flash he could transition to arched fingers in order to play crisp arpeggios without a single flaw (Owens, 141). Generally, he plodded through tunes, aggressively plunking out a series of dissonant and percussive notes. Though he did not use melodies from popular songs as did Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk did reference his own melodies in new songs (Owens, 143). Originally met with opposition for pauses and his unconventional piano technique, Monk slowly gained credibility and a following which pushed him to stardom as a visionary in jazz. As a result, *Time* magazine printed Thelonious Monk on its cover in 1964 (Harker, 197). An individual once confined to the walls of Minton's for his bizarre new way of hitting the keys, Thelonious Monk eventually reached fame in the public sphere for individuals around the globe to emulate.

Unable to be contained, tensions within the collective psyche of the U.S. following World War II and increasing racial discrimination resulted in art becoming a creative outlet for self-expression. Frustrated with segregation within the music industry and in general, African

American musicians began developing their own style of harsh, aggressive jazz which stretched beyond the confines of traditional sweet jazz and other forms of ordered jazz based in the classical tradition. Classical styles were rational, clear, and followed a similar structure and logic, whereas the new style attached to one's emotional underpinnings, releasing the pent up array of feelings. This new sound was termed Bebop and became the music for skilled and creative jazz musicians. Rather than cater to the audience's desires, Bebop was the style of music that allowed black musicians to incorporate Cuban and African elements, making the music their own regardless of whether or not it was danceable.

Though it was not widely accepted at first, Bebop spoke to those who felt the same oppression as Bebop's creators, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk. Once these jazz icons reached the public eye, Gillespie running for president and Thelonious Monk on the cover of *Time* magazine, this style of music helped advance cultural developments such as the Civil Rights Movement. It affirmed black musician's talents and abilities which are just as legitimate as their white counterparts. Bebop paralleled the advancement of race in that its creators made the music its own original, abstract language that could not be easily imitated by the white music industry (Stewart, 338-339). Moreover, Fifty-Second Street became the seat of a blend of cultures out of which Bebop was further developed as a way to express through music what they felt they could not, or should not say (Stewart, 341-342). Not only did music change, but fashion changed as well, with Dizzy Gillespie becoming the icon for African American success. His followers wore pin-striped suits, berets, and grew out goatees to have the same cool edge and style as the famous Bebop artist. In conclusion, Bebop both developed out of socio-cultural and racial tensions during the 1940s, and it helped advance the Civil Rights Movement

by creating a niche for black artists to legitimize their own form of music and creativity within the white-dominated music industry.

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