Introduction: You've Got to Be Jazzistic

Thriving on a Riff is a contribution to the growing body of work on jazz, blues, and their multiple influences in other forms of African American and American culture. The provisional term for this relatively new area of discourse is jazz studies, although there may be a case for Sun Ra's tongue-in-cheek neologism "jazzisticology," which (considered etymologically) appears to mean the study of the "jazzistic," in other words, that which aspires, or pertains, to being like, about, or in the style of, jazz.[1] While jazzisticology seems unlikely to catch on, it does have the advantage of marking a distinction between the study of jazz itself (in a nuts-and-bolts musicological sense) and the study of things that are jazz related. *Thriving on a Riff* belongs to the latter category and sharpens its focus further to examine two of the many cultural forms affected by African American music: literature and film.

While that music has become hugely popular and influential far beyond the communities that produced it, its role within African American culture has been especially profound. Numerous black writers have confirmed this: from James Baldwin's bald assertion, "It is only in his music . . . that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story," to Bob Kaufman's more poetic coinage:

> Dirt of a world covers me
> My secret heart
> Beating to unheard jazz.[2]

This recognition of the music's crucial importance, both to African American culture and beyond, can be traced back to W. E. B. Du Bois, who referred in *The Souls of Black Folk* to the gifts that Africans had brought to America, notably "a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land."[3] That gift was tempered by the tribulations of slavery and

segregation, which served to channel African Americans' creative energies toward music, if only because they were long denied access to most other forms of cultural expression. While Du Bois believed the spirituals represented the artistic apotheosis of that gift, it was later black secular musics such as ragtime, blues, and jazz that transformed American culture—and perhaps less through "soft melody" than by their rhythmic vitality, rooted in the everyday activities of work and dance and in sync with the developing industrial technologies of railroad and automobile. To find your way in America, Fats Waller advised, just use rhythm as your compass.[4]

It was in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s that jazz and blues began to make a major impact in African American literature. The musics themselves, as well as their wider cultural influences, were largely deplored by senior figures like Du Bois, who regarded them as, at best, raw material that needed to be "elevated" into art forms more akin to European classical models, as had happened with the spirituals.[5] However, blues records were selling in the tens of thousands to black audiences, and the younger generation of writers were not only enthusiasts of the music but willing to argue for its cultural significance too. The poet Langston Hughes, disdaining black middle-class assimilation to European notions of artistic refinement, declared: "Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored neo-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand."[6] And Sterling Brown, in his poem "Strong Men," not only made clear black music's role as a survival tool, a means by which African Americans were able to resist successive phases of American racial oppression, he also stressed that the music was a continuum, with spirituals, work songs, and blues each serving the same social function and grounded in the same vernacular: "Walk togedder, chillen / Dontcha git weary . . . Ain't no hammah in dis lan' / Strikes lak mine, bebby / Strikes lak mine."[7] In resisting the "elevating" tendencies of Du Bois, Brown was reaffirming the integrity of a black music tradition that generational and class conflict had threatened to break in two.[8] And, of course, by quoting lines from the songs in his poem, Brown was making claims too for the lyrics' formal status as poetry, as Hughes had also done in many of his 1920s poems.[9]

Brown and Hughes were among the first poets to incorporate blues form, techniques, and diction (plus what Brown called "blues feeling") into their work, thereby collapsing distinctions between so-called high and low culture that ultimately derived from Europe. In so doing, their early collections—Hughes's

The Weary Blues (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), Brown's *Southern Road* (1932)—initiated a fertile line of cross-genre interplay in African American culture. Later, poets engaged with jazz and blues as subject matter and formal constituent (Wanda Coleman, Frank Marshall Davis, Henry Dumas, Cornelius Eady, Robert Hayden, David Henderson, Ted Joans, Stephen Jonas, Bob Kaufman, Harryette Mullen, Myron O'Higgins, Raymond Patterson, Sterling Plumpp, Melvin Tolson, Sherley Anne Williams, Al Young, Kevin Young); performed their work with musicians (Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Michael S. Harper, Langston Hughes, Yusef Komunyakaa, K. Curtis Lyle, Nathaniel Mackey, Amus Mor, Eugene Redmond, Ishmael Reed); and even, in a few cases (Jayne Cortez, Gil Scott-Heron), fronted their own bands.[10]

It is possible to trace a similar lineage in African American fiction, beginning perhaps with the novels and stories of Rudolf Fisher, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson, moving through post-war novels such as Ann Petry's *The Street*, Herbert Simmons's *Man Walking on Eggshells*, and John A. Williams's *Night Song*, and continuing through a whole gamut of modern fiction by authors such as Amiri Baraka, Paul Beatty, Xam Wilson Cartiér, Leon Forrest, Gayl Jones, Nathaniel Mackey, Clarence Major, Paule Marshall, Albert Murray, J. J. Phillips, Ntozake Shange, and John Edgar Wideman, to name only a sample dozen. This line would also take in many of the most highly acclaimed names in the black fiction canon—James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Alice Walker—all of whose work has been profoundly shaped by their relationship with black music.

Conversely, there are many musicians who have set, or have been inspired by, texts by black authors: Marion Brown and Andrew Hill have composed pieces in response to Jean Toomer's *Cane*; Bill Dixon has dedicated pieces to Henry Dumas, Larry Neal, Allen Polite, and N. H. Pritchard; Taj Mahal has set lyrics by Langston Hughes; Ronald Shannon Jackson has performed poems by Sterling Brown; Max Roach has adapted texts by Bruce Wright. And many musicians are themselves writers and poets, who have set or performed their own texts to music: examples include Duke Ellington, Joseph Jarman, Oliver Lake, George E. Lewis, Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, and Cecil Taylor.[11]

Given this wealth of material, perhaps it is not surprising that interest in the criss-crossings of music and literature (and especially the jazz-poetry strand) both preceded the rise of jazz studies and has since provided its major area of focus.[12] It is literary scholars, too, who have produced the most influential theoretical writing to date on the music's presence in African American culture.

Houston A. Baker Jr.'s notions of a blues matrix and of the black discursive strategies he terms "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery," Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of "Signifyin(g)," and James A. Snead's focus on the uses of repetition have greatly enhanced our understanding of African American cultural dynamics, and all have invoked black music to exemplify and validate their theories.[13]

Such work has helped to promote a more inclusive embrace of African American vernacular forms that had previously received scant attention from the academy. However, critics have also pointed to the dangers inherent in such uses of music in relation to theories that are chiefly grounded in literary texts and the precepts of literary criticism. Peter Townsend, for example, cites Gates's apparent misunderstanding and subsequent misuse of the jazz term *riff*, an error that, he says, has now been repeated so often by other literary scholars that its uses in such commentary "have moved steadily away from its use in jazz performance." The end result of this slippage, he argues, is to render these literary comparisons to jazz utterly meaningless: "'jazz' here is not jazz as a musical culture, but an inadvertent reconstruction of the term in literary-critical discourse."[14] Whether the guilty party here was Gates or his (mis)interpreters,[15] Townsend's general point is surely valid: the academy's long-standing lack of interest in jazz and blues created a hermeneutical vacuum, into which all sorts of scholars are now rushing, some of whom appear to have very little appreciation of the music, its history, or its own canonical (albeit largely journalistic) literature. Indeed, Townsend further criticizes the lack of references to jazz texts and jazz recordings in much literary-critical writing that discusses jazz, and he deplores the tendency of literary theorists to treat jazz as if it were "text."[16] Similar points are made by Charles O. Hartman and by Angela Davis, the latter noting that Baker, in his *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, "tends to relegate music to the status of literary material . . . [and] restricts the Renaissance to the realm of literature."[17] She remarks, too, on the fact that, although Baker has a photograph of Ma Rainey on the cover of his book, he neglects to mention any of her recordings.[18] Still, while such criticisms offer a salutary reminder of the old folk adage "you got to *go* there to *know* there," some valuable theoretical work on black music and black culture has resulted, as scholars have duly repeated, deformed, and Signified on the ideas proposed by Baker, Gates, and Snead.[19]

One area in which this has been happening is the relatively new field of research into the music's relationship to cinema, both black and white. Examples

would be Krin Gabbard's "Signifyin(g) the Phallus: Representations of the Jazz Trumpet," Arthur Knight's "'Aping' Hollywood: Deformation and Mastery in *The Duke Is Tops* and *Swing!*," and Richard Dyer's "Is *Car Wash* a Musical?" which uses Snead's work on repetition to propose formal and philosophical distinctions between the black musical and the white musical.[20] Nevertheless, the academic discourse on black music and cinema is not yet as extensive as that on black music and literature.[21] One reason may be that the former relationship has been far more problematic, and on many levels—from the almost total white control of the U.S. film industry since its inception to the fact that, in Krin Gabbard's words, "Most jazz films aren't really about jazz."[22] These problems have perhaps tended to obscure the fact that there have been innumerable instances of music/film cross-genre interactions that certainly invite further consideration. They include the uses of black music by black filmmakers from Oscar Micheaux to Spike Lee; the musics composed or improvised for films by musicians as diverse as Ornette Coleman, Miles Davis, Quincy Jones, and William Grant Still; the (mis)representations of black life and black music in feature films (from *Hearts in Dixie* to *Mo' Better Blues*) and, especially, in feature films that employ musicians in acting roles: examples of the latter include *Black and Tan*, with Duke Ellington; *Cabin in the Sky*, with Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, and Ethel Waters; *Hallelujah!* with Victoria Spivey; *New Orleans*, with Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday; *'Round Midnight*, with Dexter Gordon; the 1929 *St. Louis Blues*, with Bessie Smith; *Space Is the Place*, with Sun Ra; and *Symphony in Black*, with Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday. Then there are bio-pics (*Bird, Lady Sings the Blues*, the 1958 *St. Louis Blues*, with Nat "King" Cole as W. C. Handy); bio-docs (*The Long Night of Lady Day, Mingus, Ornette: Made in America*); documentaries of events, performances, places, tours (*And This Is Free, A Great Day in Harlem, Imagine the Sound, Jammin' the Blues, Jazz on a Summer's Day, Last of the Blue Devils, Thelonious Monk: Straight, No Chaser*); dozens of cartoons, jukebox "soundies," and promotional shorts; and films that feature either blackface, like *The Jazz Singer*, its sound equivalent (i.e., white music masquerading as black), like *Porgy and Bess*, or both, like *Show Boat*.[23]

The white control of the film industry noted above resulted, of course, in a scarcity of black directors and producers and, perhaps more perniciously, frequent recourse to racial stereotyping in the depiction of black people. Film appearances and performances by African American musicians were often mediated—and distorted—not only by the formal constraints of cinema but

also by the expectations and prejudices of white audiences.[24] These audiences, however, might, in turn, find their aesthetic tastes (and racial prejudices) subtly altered by their exposure to the music. This cross-race, cross-genre interplay is an important component of *Thriving on a Riff*. As our subtitle indicates, the book's primary focus is on African American culture; but it is not exclusively so, because we also wished to recognize the music's impact on white filmmakers and white writers. We should make clear, too, that in referring to jazz and blues as black musics, we do not mean to fence them off as racially specific forms, only to acknowledge the historical circumstances from which they emerged and the predominant meanings they accrued as they developed. Finally, our focus on jazz and blues in particular reflects our belief that they were the prevailing musical influences through much of the twentieth century, which is not to deny the importance of, say, funk or gospel, or the current global popularity of rap and hip-hop (or the fact that such genre differentiations are sometimes arbitrary and rarely clear-cut).

The relationship between music and (racial) identity is a theme that runs throughout this collection, linking text and film alike, and our opening two chapters address its complexities with particular reference to performative contexts such as blackface and passing. In placing James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) beside J. J. Phillips's *Mojo Hand* (1966), Nick Heffernan is able to compare two novels, written half a century apart, each of which features an African American protagonist who initially believes himself or herself to be white and then attempts to reconstruct (in Heffernan's words) a "sense of self and racial identity through a prolonged encounter with the aesthetic, cultural, and social meanings of black music." Popular music in the first decade of the twentieth century, when Johnson was working as a songwriter in ragtime and vaudeville, was dominated by the "coon" song, with its vicious racial caricatures; but by the 1920s, and the rise of the New Negro, Johnson must have believed such minstrel imagery had been banished forever. However, as Corin Willis shows in his essay on 1930s Hollywood, the new technologies of cinema gave a further lease on life to the old stereotypes. Willis argues that it was through the redeployment of these stereotypes, particularly in the phenomenon he calls co-presence ("where African American actors and performers were juxtaposed with whites in blackface"), that Hollywood was able to curtail and contain the expressive power of black music.

Following the "Paging the Devil" sequence of chapters on jazz, blues, and literature, to which we will return in a moment, our second special pairing of

chapters, which we have dubbed "Until the Real Thing," again takes up the theme of music and identity, this time in the context of autobiographical, biographical, and fictional representations—textual and cinematic—of two of the music's greatest figures: Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. John Gennari's chapter looks at Parker's image as doomed hipster genius and considers the part played in creating this image by Ross Russell, Parker's one-time producer and biographer, and the author of a pulp fiction jazz novel, *The Sound*. Gennari examines how Russell's relationship with Parker not only impinged on his fictional depictions of the jazz world but may have mediated later white portrayals of Parker. If Bird himself had no control over these versions of his life, the same cannot be said of Miles Davis, subject of the following chapter, in which Krin Gabbard explores Miles in autobiographical mode, finding an unexpected link between Davis and Paul Whiteman in their on-screen personas, and traces the difficulties of pinning down what could pass as an authentic identity or even a definitive Miles performance.

Our two longer sequences of chapters, one on jazz, blues, and literature, the other on jazz, blues, and film, offer a guide to the various ways in which music can be present in a range of texts and films. In his close reading of Sterling Brown's 1931 "Strange Legacies," for example, Steven C. Tracy details the poet's uses of black folklore and blues ballad form, specifically accounts of the steel-drivin' John Henry, as he celebrates the continuum of black heroism. The black oral tradition, reshaping itself to greet the twenty-first century, is also examined by Paul Beatty, whose poetry and two novels (*The White Boy Shuffle* and *Tuff*) Bertram Ashe locates in a "post-soul aesthetic" devised by a new generation of writers who have embraced the contradictions of growing up in a "multi-racial mix of cultures." The closing chapter in our literature set can be seen as the latest variation on the classic theme of "body and soul": David Murray teases out Nathaniel Mackey's playful, reflexive interrogations of the notion that black music is a transcendent spiritual force, and he contrasts Mackey's post-structuralist perspective with the more essentialist stance taken by Amiri Baraka.

For a different, frontline, perspective on musical influence in literature, we have also included interviews with two eminent poets, conducted for *Thriving on a Riff* by Graham Lock. The first, with Michael S. Harper, we have placed after Steven Tracy's chapter on Sterling Brown because Harper, who edited Brown's *Collected Poems* and knew him well, begins by talking about Brown's love of African American vernacular culture. He then goes on to discuss his own work's indebtedness to music, notably that of John Coltrane, who continues to be a

major inspiration. The second interview is with Jayne Cortez, one of the few poets to lead her own jazz and blues band. She reveals some of the practical and aesthetic issues related to performing with musicians, and talks, too, about her desire to restore the blues to its rightful place in black history, wrenching it back from those who not only steal its forms but even appropriate the voices in which it is sung.

While Hollywood's uses of black music have nearly always been limited and limiting, "Second Balcony Jump," our set of essays on jazz, blues, and film, shows that careful analysis can uncover subtle ways in which individual artists were able to push against the constraints. So Ian Brookes's study of Howard Hawks's *To Have and Have Not* explores how the musical performances in the film, together with the relationships between the key characters, enact surprising forms of democracy and integration that buck the established conventions. Similarly, in their essays on film scoring, David Butler and Mervyn Cooke discuss the confines of Hollywood's racially inflected musical vocabulary, in which jazz was allowed only a tiny and demeaning range of associations. Butler goes on to show how a creative figure such as John Lewis was, on one occasion at least, able to slip these yokes and produce a soundtrack that anticipated more innovative ways of using music in film; Cooke, in looking at scores by Duke Ellington and Elmer Bernstein, takes issue with critics who have dismissed 1950s symphonic jazz and argues that such "crossover" music played a vital, modernizing role in the evolution of the Hollywood score.

The book closes on a new point of departure, a glimpse of how jazzisticology may open up fresh perspectives on artistic criss-cross. Michael Jarrett takes the reader on a train ride through black music history and questions the very nature of influence in a post-literary, post-logic age of electronic culture. If the railroad has been a recurring riff, a resonance, in black music—very audibly so in some of the tracks that Jarrett cites—then the music itself has been a riff, a resource, on which African American and American culture has thrived. Hence our borrowing of Charlie Parker's title. His "Thriving on a Riff" was recorded in 1945 and its out chorus later became another composition, called "Anthropology."[25] Our *Thriving on a Riff* is more jazzisticological than anthropological, although we would certainly concur with Bird's statement, "They teach you there's a boundary line to music. But, man, there's no boundary line to art."[26] We have tried in this collection to elucidate some of the jazz and blues criss-crossings of the other arts, their infiltrations and inspirations, with reference to just a small selection of poetry, fiction, and films. Our hope is that these essays

and interviews will enhance appreciation of the texts and films discussed herein and send the reader back to the music with renewed enthusiasm and fresh insight. As Bird and Sun Ra might have agreed, such jazzistic pleasures are a riff on which we all can thrive.

A POSTSCRIPT ON THE *THRIVING ON A RIFF* WEB SITE

One advantage of living in the "post-literary age . . . of electronic culture" noted above is that Oxford University Press has set up the *Thriving on a Riff* Web site, where readers can hear a series of musical and literary performances that will, we hope, enhance their use of the book and provide some enjoyable online listening. (Many of the tracks are downloadable, too.) Details of these recordings—plus an exclusive video—can be found at the end of the relevant chapters, where they are signaled by the Oxford University Press Web site logo. The Web site is password protected, and a password, together with a username, is printed on the copyright page.

While financial, temporal, and copyright constraints have, on occasion, proved insurmountable (no film excerpts, alas), we are absolutely delighted with the material that is available on the Web site and would like to express our gratitude, both to Oxford University Press and to the poets, musicians, and rights holders concerned, for making the virtual a reality.

NOTES

1. It is not clear what meaning Sun Ra ascribed to the word—it is the title of a brief instrumental track on his 1978 LP *The Sound Mirror*—but it is tempting to read into it an appreciative nod to James P. Johnson's sentiment "You've Got to Be Modernistic," together with a passing tilt at the jargonizing tendencies of academic theory. Sun Ra, *The Sound Mirror* (LP; Saturn 19782, 1978). We should note that on our copy of the LP the word is (mis)spelt "jazzisticolgy," but in the authoritative Campbell and Trent Sun Ra discography the spelling is "jazzisticology." Robert L. Campbell and Christopher Trent, *The Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra*, 2nd ed. (Redwood, NY: Cadence Jazz, n.d.), 247, 826.