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## **Black Music as an Art Form**

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# BLACK MUSIC AS AN ART FORM

*Olly Wilson*

The title "Black Music as an Art Form" is a particularly intriguing and problematic one. Intriguing because it implies, first, that black music exists in some context other than art, and secondly, that its existence as art is, in some way, peculiar and distinct; and problematic because it raises the old question of what is really meant by the term "black music." Moreover, the title raises the complicated issue of what is meant by the term "art."

Given this plethora of unresolved issues, my first reaction to being asked to discuss this topic was simply to declare the task impossible and request that I write on a subject which contained fewer ambiguities. Upon reflection, however, I realized that it would be of importance to attempt to come to terms with these ambiguities. I became aware that my own understanding of Afro-American music would be considerably enhanced if I could clarify, at least for myself and perhaps for others as well, some of the issues raised by the title. I therefore withdrew my reservations and agreed to consider the topic, in full awareness that such an undertaking would be fraught with precipitous intellectual pitfalls.

The first step in the clarification of issues posed is a consideration of the meaning of the term "black music." This question has been addressed by a number of different forums since the inception of its popular usage in the sixties. Among the early attempt to define "black music" was that of a panel of the Symposium in Black Music held at Indiana University in 1967. The proceedings of that symposium were subsequently edited by Dominique-René de Lerma and published as *Black Music in our Culture* (1970). Black music was defined in many ways during that conference, from the facetious "black lines and dots on a white page" to the all-inclusive "any music produced by Black people." It was ultimately defined, however, by the consensus of that assembly as music which is, in whole or significant degree, part of the musical tradition of peoples of African descent (de Lerma, 1970). While this definition certainly is accurate in general terms, it is also circular and, hence, inadequate as an operational definition; that is, a definition which focuses on those qualities which exclusively denote the term being defined. Black music is, of course, music which comprises the musical tradition of peoples of African descent. However, in order for it to be perceived as a distinct tradition, it

must have specific qualities which are discernible and demonstrable. A successful operational definition would be one in which these qualities were made reasonably explicit. Unfortunately, these qualities are somewhat elusive, especially if they are approached in a quantitative manner. In addition, any attempt to define black music, particularly as it exists within the United States, is made more difficult by the fact that the music of black Americans, like that of all ethnic groups within the United States, is influenced by other cultures. Although, historically, American social and political forces have worked to denigrate and exclude African-American cultural patterns from the broader society, these attempts have always failed, and cultural interaction more than cultural isolation has characterized the American experience. Thus, black American music has both influenced and been influenced in important ways by several non-black musical traditions thereby making it more difficult to pinpoint precisely the essential aspects of the music which make it a part of a larger African or black music tradition. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports the notion that there is indeed a distinct set of musical qualities which are an expression of the collective cultural values of peoples of African descent. This musical tradition has many branches which reflect variations in basic cultural patterns over time, as well as diversity within a specific time frame. However, all of these branches share, to a greater or lesser extent, a group of qualities which, taken together, comprise the essence of the black musical tradition. The branches of this tradition, though influenced in different ways and degrees by other musical traditions, share a "critical mass" of these common qualities. It is the common sharing of qualities which makes up and defines the musical tradition.

Most people who have considered the question recognize this commonality. The problem comes in determining the nature of that "critical mass" of qualities. One frequently hears an individual claim simultaneously that while black music clearly exists, it is impossible to define. I suggest that the problem with definition is that the approach to that definition has been faulty. Most approaches have been quantitative. Investigators have attempted to define the music by specifying the degree to which a particular musical characteristic was present. While this approach is valuable as far as it goes, it inevitably results in confusion about the nature of the music. In an article entitled "The Significance of the Relationship of African to Afro-American Music" published in *The Black Perspective in Music*, I proposed a different approach to the problem (Wilson, 1974). The substance of that approach is that the essence of the black music tradition consists of "the common sharing of a core of conceptual approaches to the process of music making and, hence, is not basically quantitative but qualitative. The particular forms of black music which

evolved in America are specific realizations of this shared conceptual framework which reflects the peculiarities of the American black experience. As such, the essence of their Africaness is not a static body of something which can be depleted, but rather a conceptual approach, the manifestations of which are infinite. The common core of this Africaness consists of the way of doing something, not simply something that is done" (Wilson, 1974, p. 20).

A thorough discussion of all of the African and, by extension, Afro-American, conceptual approaches to the process of making music is out of the purview of this paper; but a brief consideration of a few such concepts should be instructive. Among these are predilections for conceiving music in such a way that the following occur (Wilson, 1981):

1) The approach to the organization of rhythm is based on the principle of rhythmic and implied metrical contrast. There is a tendency to create musical structures in which rhythmic clash or disagreement of accents is the ideal; cross-rhythm and metrical ambiguity are the accepted and expected norm.

2) There is a tendency to approach singing or the playing of any instrument in a percussive manner; a manner in which qualitative stress accents are frequently used.

3) There is a tendency to create musical forms in which antiphonal or call-and-response musical structures abound. These antiphonal structures frequently exist simultaneously on a number of different architectonic levels.

4) There is a tendency to create a high density of musical events within a relatively short musical time frame—a tendency to fill up all of the musical space.

5) There is a common approach to music making in which a kaleidoscopic range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sound (timbre) in both vocal and instrumental music is sought after. This explains the common usage of a broad continuum of vocal sounds from speech to song. I refer to this tendency as "the heterogeneous sound ideal tendency."

6) There is a tendency to incorporate physical body motion as an integral part of the music making process.

An analysis of any genre of black music will reveal the existence of demonstrable musical characteristics which consistently reflect the presence of these underlying conceptual approaches (as well as others I have not mentioned). It is precisely the pervasive existence of these qualities which gives the music its distinctive character. Black music, then, may be defined as music which is, in whole or significant degree, part of a musical tradition of peoples of African descent in which a common core of the above-mentioned conceptual approaches to music making are made manifest.

The question of what constitutes "art" is an equally vexing one. Western philosophers have been discussing this issue for centuries; the present article is not an appropriate forum for the reconsideration of the substance of that discussion. It becomes necessary, however, to review, if only in a general manner, the basic western understanding of the meaning of the word "art" if we are to address the question of black music as "art."

Plato in *The Republic* defines art or fine art as the imitation of nature. Art, in this sense, is a man-made copy of something which preexists in nature. The painting, drama, or musical sound which is mistaken for its realistic natural model, is held to be the highest form of art. "The theory of *The Republic* assumes that the aim of art really is to promulgate scientific and philosophical truths and that the artist, possessing neither, tries by emotionalized imitation to give the impression that he possesses both" (Gotschalk, 1962, p. 35). Most philosophers disagree with Plato's theory, because there are countless examples of what is conventionally understood to be art which do not seek to imitate nature, but rather to reinterpret that which exists in nature or to create something which *never* existed in nature.

More recent western theories of fine art may be characterized as belonging to one of two schools: the expressionist and the formalist. Among the most important of the expressionists have been Leo Tolstoy and most nineteenth-century writers on the subject, and John Dewey in the twentieth century. Fundamentally, the expressionists hold that fine art is the expression of feelings, "the objectification of pleasure," and/or "the expression of a vital insight into reality" (Gotschalk, 1962, p. 39). This definition seems partially true, but appears to leave out much of what is important in an artistic experience—that which cannot be adequately explained as a form of expression. The history of western aesthetics contains the work of many who argue that art is not simply the expression of emotions (Eduard Hanslick, 1854; Clive Bell, 1914; Susanne K. Langer, 1974; and Leonard Meyer, 1957). Several of these writers point out that the most basic expressions of feelings (i.e., a cry of pain or anguish, a shriek of terror, a spontaneous utterance of joyous laughter) are not considered to be of artistic importance. Moreover, much of what is considered important in an outstanding painting, play, or musical composition defies characterization as an expression of either a specific or general set of emotions. Specifically, those aspects of art such as form, structure, and logical continuity are not adequately covered by expressionist theories of art. What makes something have the quality of art, thus, clearly involves factors which go beyond the expression of feeling or the objectification of pleasure.

The formalists define fine art as “the construction of significant form,” “the delineation of characteristic form,” or “the achievement of organic form” (Gotschalk, 1962, p. 39). Among the major exponents of this idea were Clive Bell (Bell, 1914) and Roger Fry (Fry, 1925). Again, as was the case with the expressionist theory, this definition seems to be weakened by its exclusiveness. It does not adequately explain the relationship between human expression of emotions and art.

In addition to the formalists’ and expressionists’ views of art, Freudian psychologists developed another theory of art. “Artistic activity, according to the psychoanalysts, is an expression of primitive dynamisms, of unconscious wishes, and uses the objects and scenes represented to embody the secret fantasies of the artist” (Langer, 1974, p. 176). This theory may tell us something about the origin of artistic impulses but is inadequate as a definition of art because it does not deal with the substance of that which is recognized as art, nor does it suggest a criterion by which we make qualitative judgments about art.

Perhaps the most adequate definition of art as currently understood by the western world is that given by D. W. Gotschalk in his book *Art and the Social Order*. Gotschalk develops what he calls a “relational theory” of fine art (Gotschalk, 1962, p. 39). He defines fine art as “the shaping of a four-dimensional object—material and form, expression and function—in the direction of intrinsic perceptual interest. . . . This relational theory accepts the de facto truth of the form and expression theories,” and “can also interrelate these truths as diverse fragments of a more comprehensive theory” (Gotschalk, 1962, p. 40). The most convincing aspect of Gotschalk’s definition is his recognition of the fact that, in contemporary western thought, art or fine art is viewed as those products of man which are “intrinsically interesting to perceive.” In this view, any object so skillfully produced that it invokes perceptual interest has the quality of fineness of art. However, that which distinguishes fine art proper from other man-made objects, which may also elicit perceptual interest to some degree (for example, artifacts), is the centrality and eminence of intrinsic perceptual appeal to their reason for existing. Put simply, products which are considered “art” are those that exist primarily for reasons of their own appeal; this idea is embodied most explicitly in the popular phrase “art exists for Art’s sake.” While a brilliantly decorated door, chair, or hand-made grain basket may be said to have artistic appeal, such objects are not considered fine art in the same way that a novel, symphony, or abstract painting is. This is because the former products exist primarily for utilitarian purposes, while the latter products exist only as objects of concentrated perceptual interest. The latter products were made by a creative individual as a means of expressing something of that person’s experience.

The art work is thus a symbolic expression of experience consciously transformed.

In this view of art, the test of whether a man-made product is art or not is whether it exists primarily as an object of perceptual interest. This view also allows for products of man to have relative degrees of fineness of art. The utilitarian objects which are unusually exquisite from a perceptual point of view are considered art to the degree that this aspect of their function is important. Hence, in the field of architecture, those buildings which are aesthetically and intellectually stimulating are considered works of art, while those that are perfectly functional as buildings but contain little of intrinsic perceptual interest are not. The Taj Mahal, St. Peter's Basilica, and the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. are works of art in addition to being functional buildings, but the local Sears, Roebuck and telephone company buildings are not. This means, of course, that it is quite possible for society's view of a product's "fineness of art" to alter with time. Something that was considered to be of modest artistic interest at one age may be viewed primarily as an object of fine art at another. Witness, for example, the ancient Egyptian, Greek, or Chinese vases that adorn the exhibitions in contemporary western museums. These are man-made products which were designed for utilitarian purposes; yet, in the context of contemporary western society, their function is exclusively as objects of perceptual interest, i.e., objects of fine art. As a matter of fact, much of the music, drama, sculpture, and painting that was created strictly for religious or secular functional purposes in past civilizations exists in twentieth-century western societies solely as products of fine art.

There is another aspect of the notion of art in the western sense which we must consider before attempting to discuss black music as art. There are many products of man which exist primarily to engage our perceptual faculties but which are not normally regarded as art. Television situation comedies, newspaper cartoons, much popular music, athletic contests as spectacles, circus shows, etc. all exist to stimulate us perceptually, but are generally considered entertainment rather than art. Though the concepts of entertainment and art are not necessarily mutually exclusive—that is, something which is entertaining may be art, and something that is art may also be entertaining—they do imply different things. The verb, to entertain, taken from the French word "entretenir" literally means to hold (*tenir*) between (*entre*). It connotes in traditional usage "to divert," "to amuse," or "to hold one's attention." The nature of entertainment is to engage our perceptual faculties temporarily; to fascinate us and, thereby, provide immediate satisfaction; in a word, to provide amusement and diversion.

On the other hand art implies something different. The encounter with art makes a more lasting impression. It is an experience which not only fascinates us fleetingly, but continues to engage our intellect as well as our aesthetic sensibilities for some time to come. The work of art requires that we become involved with it in profound ways. The act of experiencing an outstanding work of art, whether it be music, painting, literature, or drama, requires that we actively interact with it as symbolic expression. Art requires concentrated active participation. One can return again and again to a work of art because it is rich in detail and engages our awareness in different ways at each encounter.

To summarize, the distinction between entertainment and art is that entertainment, while engaging our aesthetic sensibilities, is immediately gratifying, less concentrated in content, and tends not to make a lasting impact on us. Art, on the other hand, requires our active involvement, is highly charged with content, and profoundly influences our sense of ourselves and the world for years to come.

Up to this point I have discussed the nature of art in western societies. This view of art, however, is a view that is not universally shared. It is also a view which was not always held in the West. It is, rather, the result of specific cultural developments that have occurred within the history of Western civilization.

Within the West African cultural context, the concept of art as defined in the West does not exist. Art is not viewed as an activity or product of man whose sole purpose is "intrinsic perceptual interest." On the contrary, within the African context the aesthetic ideal is integrated with the utilitarian ideal. That is, art is not separate and distinct from utilitarian function, but the quality of "intrinsic perceptual interest" is seen as an integral aspect of the utilitarian function. Thus, while there are no museums, theaters, or concert halls in traditional African societies, there is an abundance of functional products of human creativity which involves painting, sculpture, drama, and music as an intrinsic part of their content. The creative dimension of the product or activity is viewed as an inseparable aspect of that product's nature, and is impossible to detach from its functional reason for existence. Accordingly, western scholars sometimes refer to works of artistic interest that occur within African (as well as most non-western) societies as functional art because the works are always produced for some utilitarian purpose.

The recognition of an African concept of functional art is of significance in understanding black music as art within the United States. This is so because, like other aspects of culture which exist at the conceptual stage, it tended to persist and to affect the nature of Afro-American art in the United States. As a consequence, creative activities of the first genera-

tions of Afro-Americans were based on African conceptions modified by the peculiar circumstances of slave existence in the New World. Hence, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Afro-American creative products and activities were functional in the African sense. This is borne out in the abundance of early Afro-American utilitarian products and performance practices (e.g., music and dance) in which the aesthetic and utilitarian ideals were viewed as shared aspects of that product or activity. In early Afro-American music this is seen most vividly in the association of music with work or religion. Religious songs (either African or Afro-American Christian) and work songs comprised the bulk of early Afro-American music not only because they were the most acceptable forms of music making within the debilitating institution of slavery, but also because these functional contexts were consistent with African concepts of creative activity.

The question of this music as art, therefore, has to be approached from the perspective of African (and African diasporal) concepts of creative activity. One important consideration of a work's artistic worth is the measure of its functional efficacy. However, the principal consideration is the criterion mentioned earlier as that which distinguishes art from entertainment. Specifically, Afro-American music was art when it required active aesthetic involvement, was highly charged in symbolic content, and profoundly influenced its listeners. This was the case even though it did not exist solely as a product of "perceptual interest." The degree to which a specific work of music embodied traditional African conceptual approaches to the process of music making in a unique and powerful synthesis determined the degree to which that individual work invoked those qualities cited above, and hence, the degree to which it was a successful work of art. It is vitally important to remember this criterion as the only valid measure of artistic quality of early Afro-American music. Functional efficacy must not be separated from consideration of artistic merit.

The consideration of Afro-American music produced after 1800 as art raises another issue because, by this time, there were Afro-American cultural patterns which were distinct from African cultural patterns. That issue is related to a larger question of the fundamental nature of Afro-American culture. Perhaps the most brilliant exposition of this issue is found in the writing of W. E. B. Dubois. In his classic book *The Souls of Black Folk*, written in 1903, Dubois described in penetrating poetic terms what can be called the duality of Afro-American culture.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of

the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face (16–17).

Black music in the United States reflects the duality of Afro-American culture of which Dubois speaks—"the two souls, two thoughts, two ideals." On one hand, there exists what might be described as the basic or folk African-American musical tradition. This tradition evolved directly from West African musical tradition and shares most concepts and values of that tradition while simultaneously selectively incorporating important aspects of western musical practice. It is the musical tradition of the majority of black Americans, the people to whom Dubois refers as "Black Folk," or to whom Leroi Jones refers as the "autonomous Blues People" (Jones, 1963). It most clearly expresses the collective aesthetic values of the majority of black Americans and proceeds along a line of development which, while influenced by factors outside of Afro-American culture, is more profoundly affected by values within the culture. It is clearly music within Dubois's veil. Hollers, cries and moans, early spirituals, rural work and play songs, rural blues, gospel music, urban blues, and soul music are the principal expressions of this tradition.

On the other hand, there exists a tradition in Afro-American music which dates from at least 1800. This tradition is characterized by a greater interaction and interpenetration of African and Euro-American elements, although the fundamental qualities which make it unique are rooted in African conceptual approaches to music making. Culturally, this tradition is a closer reflection of the second ideal to which Dubois refers; that is, the American ideal within black consciousness. This second ideal is not simply the American ideal as white America envisions it. It is, rather, a reinterpretation of that American ideal as viewed through the prism of black American experience; it involves a unique reinterpretation of the broader American experience from a black vantage point.

This second Afro-American music tradition finds its initial expression in the popular music of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century. Beginning with the colonial practice of allowing black musicians to perform Euro-American religious, dance, and military music, it ultimately resulted in a black tradition of reshaping the Euro-American qualities of the music to African-American norms. This process of cultural transformation became the salient characteristic of this tradition. The musical forms most often associated with this tradition were pre-existing Euro-American forms, but the significant features of their presentation are Afro-American. Necessarily, this tradition requires an awareness of the Euro-American tradition as well as the Afro-American and therefore finds its greatest exponents in those sectors of Afro-American society that are most conversant with Euro-American musical practices.

Eileen Southern in her seminal work, *The Music of Black Americans*, has cited numerous examples of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century musicians whose peculiar performance of European music was in effect a transformation of that music (Southern, 1971). It was precisely that transformation which made the music unique and, as a consequence, highly desired by whites. The numerous colonial black military fifers and drummers and the black fiddlers for white balls are examples of those in the vanguard of this tradition. The brass bands of Frank Johnson, A. J. Connor and others in the middle of the nineteenth century cited by James Monroe Trotter (1878), Maud Cuney-Hare (1936), and Samuel Floyd (1978) continue this tradition. Finally, the post-Civil War black minstrel tradition, the black marching and circus band tradition, the ragtime tradition, the arranged spiritual tradition, the black musical comedy tradition, and much of the entire jazz tradition are all expressions of this second tradition.

It is important to cite the dual nature of Afro-American music in order to come to grips with the question of black music as art. This is so because while both traditions share, in different ways, the basic African approaches to music making, the criteria by which one judges their content as art varies. In the first tradition, the artistic quality has to be approached in the manner associated with the African tradition; that is, the work must be judged by the capacity of its aesthetic content to achieve its functional purpose. One is concerned here not with music as an abstract object of art, but as an agent which causes something to happen. The function of the early Afro-American religious song was not simply to bring aesthetic pleasure to the listener, but to create a spiritual liaison between man and his God. The function of the music was to create a communion of participants who interact with each other and their concept of God for the collective good. Each religious song must be judged on the basis of how well its

particular statement of musical content achieves this end. This functional view of Art remains of importance in each of the musical genres of this tradition. One sees it reflected in one of the continuing debates within the contemporary gospel music community, a debate which centers around whether the music should be performed solely for religious purposes rather than for entertainment or artistic purposes. Those performers who have internalized basic African concepts insist that the music should serve an exclusively religious functional purpose.

In addition, within this first tradition, the basic criteria of value and merit are those qualities indigenous to the Afro-American music tradition. They provide the principal focal point of value judgment. The two reasons given above explain why, historically, the forms of music in the first tradition are less understood and appreciated as art by the broader American society.

The second tradition, which involves cultural transformation, is more compatible with western values. Within this tradition, music clearly exists as objects of "perceptual interest," either as entertainment or art. The fundamental criteria for artistic measure here, however, are still primarily based on African conceptual approaches to music making. These criteria are augmented by shared values of the broader culture, and hence, genres of this tradition are more readily understood and accepted by the broader American society. Indeed, it is within this second tradition that most cross-cultural interaction between Euro-American music and Afro-American music has taken place.

I wish to consider briefly two examples of Afro-American music as art: one from what I have referred to above as the first, or basic, Afro-American tradition, and the other from the second Afro-American music tradition. The first example is a work song entitled "Katie Left Memphis." This particular version was sung by a prisoner in Parchman Penitentiary known as Tangle Eye and recorded as part of New World Records *Roots of The Blues* album (N.W. 252, 1977). The song's title refers to a steamboat called "Katie Belle" which at one time was very popular in the Yazoo delta region of the Mississippi river, the region between Memphis and Natchez, Mississippi. The text contains references to the steamboat spinning around in a sandbar before skimming out to a deep channel, and a warning to young men to buy a return ticket on the train called the "Yellow Dog" before going out for a night of carousing in the bawdy houses of Memphis.

The function of this song is to facilitate the task of chopping wood. As is typical of African and Afro-American work songs, in this song the process of chopping the wood becomes an intrinsic part of the music. The sound produced by the ax creates a component of the music which is es-



The modal melody is based almost entirely on an elaborate ornamentation of two essential notes a minor third apart. The technique of rocking back and forth between notes a minor third apart is a common melodic device used in African and Afro-American music and is sometimes referred to as a "pendular third." This third relationship is also used as a means of establishing an antecedent-consequent or call-and-response relationship between the first statement of a line of text and its subsequent repetition. Such a relationship is accomplished by invariably terminating the first line of each verse with the upper pitch, *a*, of this interval and ending the repetition of that text with the lower pitch—*f#*. Since *f#* is the tonal center, the first phrase has an open ended or antecedent feeling, and the second phrase has a closed or consequent feeling.

Example 1.

Voice

The musical score consists of eight staves of music, each with a line of lyrics underneath. The melody is characterized by a rocking motion between two notes a minor third apart. Vertical arrows (v) indicate the downward movement from the upper note to the lower note. Some notes are marked with a small 'x' in a box, such as [ax] under 'fo' in the first line. The lyrics are: "a Lit-tle George said fo, the [ax] well the Ka-tie was made (Hm) a", "Lit-tle George said fo, the well the Ka-tie was made", "Ar-kan-sas ci-ty go-na a be her trade (wu)", "Ar-kan-sas ci-ty go-na well a be her trade (Hm)", "a oh a Ro-sie a oh Gal (Hm)", "a oh Ro-sie and a oh lord Gal the", "boats in the ba-you turn-ing well a round and round the", and "boats in the ba-you turn-ing well a round and round the". The score is written in a single system with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature.

Example 1, *continued*.

Dry wheel knock- ing A- la well a Bam- a bound (Hm) the

Dry wheel knock- ing A- la well a Bam- a bound

You go to Mem- phis don't you well you act no hog (Hm)

You go to Mem- phis don't you well you act no hog (Hm)

Buy you a tic- ket catch the well the Yel- low Dog (Hm)

Buy you a tic- ket catch the well the Yel- low Dog (Hm)

a Old a Ro- sie and a Old Gal (Huh)

a Old a Ro- sie and a Old Lord Gal

I have notated the song in  $\frac{4}{4}$  meter because the setting of the text seems to be best subsumed under that meter. The fact that the frequently used two eighth notes pattern begins exactly four beats apart at important words (*Little George—Katie was*) accounts for much of its metrical importance as a downbeat. Within this metrical scheme, however, two things occur which weaken the  $\frac{4}{4}$  meter. First, the fourth beat (normally unstressed) is consistently accented by the occurrence of the ax sound. Because these accents persistently occur on this beat and are at equidistant time intervals from one another, they establish a counter-rhythm whose principal

accents clash with the implied accents of the meter in the voice. In a simple way, the ax sounds are used to imply a subtle counter-rhythm, which relationship is emphasized by the contrast in timbre between the ax sound and the voice. In addition, the accents in the ax are complemented by the melodic accents which occur in the voice part; the vocal line is organized so that an accent occurs on alternate beats. Note, for example, the melodic and stress accents on the second beat (normally weak) of the first two measures. These weak-beat accents used in conjunction with the strong ax-sound accents of the fourth beat tend to reinforce the implied clash of accents and create the resultant counter-rhythm feeling. Finally, on still another level, a call-and-response relationship is established between the voice and the sound of the ax. The voice sounds on the first three beats of the first measure and the first two beats of the second measure of every line. This call is answered by the ax on the fourth beat of each measure. "Katie Left Memphis" is also rich in other aspects of the Afro-American musical tradition. A wide range of vocal nuances, frequent usage of implied subdivisions even when the text does not call for them, and anticipation and delay of accents immediately before or after a major beat are all used here in a fresh manner.

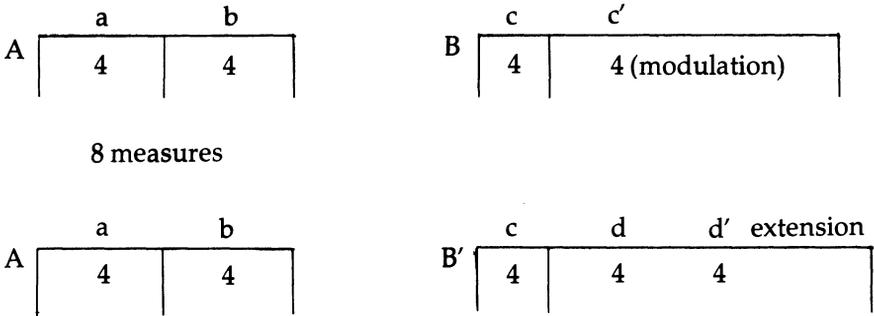
The utilitarian function of this song was to facilitate the process of chopping wood. The activity of chopping was carried on in the context of an aesthetic circumstance. In considering this simple song from the point of view of art, one has to assess the degree to which this song successfully combines its utilitarian task with the creation of something which is of aesthetic significance. My response to this particular song is that it does this eminently well. As a listener, I want to participate in this music making process even to the point of chopping wood, because the song is high in musical content and reinforces Afro-American musical values in a unique and convincing manner.

The second example I wish to consider is Miles Davis's classic recording of "On Green Dolphin Street" (*Jazz Track, Columbia Records*). My approach to this work as art is, in many respects, the same as my approach to any work of musical art in Western culture. It is a work whose artistry is its main reason for existence. My approach to the music of Miles Davis differs from my approach to a work written within the Euro-American tradition, however, because the parameters of aesthetic significance in the music of Davis are all consistent with African-American conceptual approaches to music making. However, the Davis music may also include aspects of Euro-American tradition which complement those parameters in ingenious ways. An analysis of the Miles Davis solo improvisation may be instructive in this regard.

"On Green Dolphin Street" is a popular song adapted from the theme

song of a 1947 movie entitled *Green Dolphin Street*. It was written by Ned Washington and Bronislau Kaper and, while a charming enough melody, was usually performed in a somewhat saccharine manner by popular singers of the late forties and fifties. The Miles Davis Quintet's recording of this tune transforms it completely and places it squarely within the modern jazz tradition.

The original melody is based on a thirty-two bar phrase structure form. It consists of four eight-measure phrases, each of which is subdivided into sub-units of four measures each. The last of these phrases contains a four-measure extension. The entire structure may be diagrammed as follows:



The Miles Davis Quintet's version of this song alters the original in certain important ways. The original harmonic structure of the first eight-bar phrase is altered by the double bass playing a tonic-pedal ostinato in which the second, third, and the last half of the fourth beat are emphasized (see Ex. 2). In addition to creating a mild degree of metrical clash between the meter in the melody and the bass line, the tonic pedal creates a sense of harmonic stasis throughout the entire eight measures. The static feeling is released in the second eight measures by having the rhythm section move to a different kind of accompaniment pattern (bass and bass drum occur on the first beat of the measure, piano plays more syncopated and percussively articulated chords) in which the harmonic rhythm moves much faster. At measure sixteen, there is a return to the harmonically static texture for eight more measures. The last phrase then returns to the faster harmonic movement and propulsively driving rhythm. The effect of this change is important. It creates, on a larger level, an alternation between contrasting textures in such a way that the second eight-measure phrase becomes an answer or response to the first phrase. In other words, an antiphonal or call-and-response relationship exists between the two units. This subtle change has added a new dimension to

Example 2.

The musical score for Example 2 is written in a 12-measure system, divided into two systems of six measures each. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The piano part (right hand) features a melodic line with various chords and rhythmic patterns, including triplets and slurs. The bass part (left hand) provides a steady accompaniment with a consistent rhythmic pattern. The score includes the following chords and measures:

- Measures 1-3: Eb7, Ebm7
- Measures 4-6: F7, EM7
- Measures 7-9: Eb7
- Measures 10-13: Bb7, Eb7, Abm7
- Measures 14-18: Db7, Gb7, Eb7
- Measures 19-25: Ebm7, F7, EM7, Eb7, Fm7
- Measures 26-31: Bb7, Gm7, Cm7, F7, Bb7, Gm7, Cm9

The score also includes various musical notations such as slurs, triplets, and accents.

Example 2, *continued*

32 F7 33 Bb7 Gm Cm 34 35 36

1st chorus

1 Eb7 2 3 Ebm7 4 5 F7 6 EM7

7 Eb7 8 9 Fm7 10 Bb7 11 Eb7

12 13 Abm7 14 Db7 A 15 Gb7

16 17 Ebm7 18 19 Ebm7

20 21 FM7 22 EM7 23 EbM7

24 25 Fm7 A 26 Bb7

27 Gm7 28 C7 Piano 29 Gm7 C 30 F Bb

2nd Chorus

31 Gm7 C 32 F Bb 1 Eb 2 3

The musical score is written on a single treble clef staff across eight lines. It begins with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The notation includes eighth and quarter notes, with some notes beamed together. There are several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' and a bracket) and two accent markings (indicated by a '^' symbol). Measure numbers 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, and 35 are placed above the corresponding notes. The name 'Coltrane' is written above the final staff, starting at measure 30.

the original phrase structure, a dimension which occurs as a consequence of the application of Afro-American musical approaches to this song and thus in a transformation of the original song.

The solo improvisation exploits this antiphonal relationship between the two phrases. Notice, for example, that Davis consistently uses long sustained tones in projecting a directed lyrical melodic line against the harmonically static but counter-rhythmic pedal point (m. 1–8 and 17–24 in both choruses and especially m. 30–32 in the first chorus). He also highlights the timbral distinctions between the rhythm section and his instrument by leaving relatively long spaces of silence between his entrances

(first chorus, m. 7–8, 18–19, 27–28; second chorus, m. 10). The sections of long, held notes contrast with rapidly ascending scalar lines which he tends to play during the rhythmically driving phrases (first chorus, m. 10–12, 16, 25–27). He occasionally unites the two kinds of contrasting musical gestures by using the ascending scalar lines to introduce the long sustained notes, thereby creating a synthesis of the contrasting material (second chorus, m. 3–4, 15–16 and 25–27). This is all done in a rhythmic manner which makes his solo line seem to float above the rhythm section; this feeling is achieved by Davis's use of a myriad of techniques that cause the most important accents of his line to occur in places that contrast with those of the rhythm section. He consistently plays slightly ahead, behind, or between the primary pulse or its sub-division. He also changes the degree of rhythmic drive in his phrases to achieve this feeling. It is this latter quality to which jazz musicians refer when they speak in glowing terms of Miles Davis's "sense of time."

Another quality of Miles Davis's improvisation in this piece is his astute sense of motivic development. He demonstrates that astuteness by the prominent treatment of a motive which occurs originally at the end of the first half of the song's fourth phrase and becomes the motivic basis of the four-measure extension (Ex. 2, m. 28). The most important feature of this motive is the descending interval of a third or, sometimes a fourth, which originally ended on the dominant of the key (Ex. 2, mm. 28–31). Davis does not begin to use this motive until measure seventeen of the first chorus. At this point we hear an interval expansion of the motive followed by a series of rhythmic and melodic variants of the idea, each of which occurs at a different place in the metric scheme. The motive returns in measure five of the second chorus and is again focused upon in several transposed and rhythmically altered versions. At measure twenty-five of the second chorus, the characteristic scalar line prepares for the beginning of a final series of statements of this motive, each of which involves a subtle shift of rhythm.

A unique aspect of Miles Davis's improvisational technique is his shaping of phrase structure so that the end of a phrase sounds like a new beginning. Note, for example, the extension (or tag) at the end of the statement of the melody in which the downbeat of the first measure becomes the end of his line rather than the beginning (Ex. 2, m. 36 of melody to m. 1 of first chorus; see also m. 29–32 of first chorus and m. 1–2 of second chorus).

Davis uses a variety of techniques to create this extraordinary solo. Subtle timbral changes, percussive attacks and releases, antiphonal sub-structures, multiple cross rhythms, etc. are all here. The success of this

solo results from Davis's particular employment of these factors to create a meaningful musical statement. That statement is based on an imaginative usage of the values associated with Afro-American music, and it is a work of art.

In summary, black music may be defined as a musical tradition of peoples of Sub-Sahara African descent which consists of a shared core of conceptual approaches to the process of music making. These concepts reflect deeply-rooted values of this culture and, in essence, consist of fundamental ways of approaching the musical experience. An analysis of any genre of black music will reveal the existence of demonstrable musical characteristics which consistently reflect the presence of these underlying conceptual approaches, and it is precisely the pervasive existence of these qualities which gives the music its distinctive character.

Black music as art may exist, at least within the United States, on two different levels. On one level, it exists as part of the "basic" or folk African-American musical tradition, a tradition which derives most of its concepts and values from West African musical traditions although it incorporates some important aspects of western musical practice. In this tradition, the artistic aspect of the music is inextricably associated with its functional role. Hence, its role as art cannot be separated from its utilitarian function. Therefore, any evaluation of this music must be cognizant of its multifaceted nature and consider its efficacy in achieving its function.

On another level, black music may exist as part of a second musical tradition in which Euro-American musical forms are characteristically transformed to become consistent with Afro-American cultural practices. Within the tradition, the music exists clearly as an object of "intrinsic perceptual interest" and thus is compatible with western concepts of art. The questions that one raises in evaluating this music as art are the questions one raises when considering any activity or object as art in a western sense; that is, does it require active aesthetic and/or intellectual involvement? is it highly charged in content? does it profoundly influence one's sensibilities? and does it yield new insight on repeated exposure? Obviously, those questions cannot be answered without an awareness of the unique cultural values, artistic techniques, and sensitivities of those who created the particular work in question, for all works of art reflect the cultural biases of its creators.

Ultimately, the basic criterion used to determine if a work of music is art, in either the traditional African sense of "functional art," or the western sense of "pure art," is the same. That criterion is the degree to which that music, either as part of a more complex utilitarian experience or existing alone, significantly informs and enriches our lives.

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