

## Classic Jazz on the Internet: Performance and Meaning

Christopher Johnson

This essay is a consideration of the digital consumption of African American performance. My specific interest is in historic international jazz and popular music performance excerpts on film performed by African Americans that are posted on the internet, primarily YouTube. What is the meaning of the digital presence of classic music performance? Media entertains, can educate and can also misinform. What happens as historic media is consumed outside of its original national boundaries, America, removed from its setting in the past and viewed and listened to by individuals who may have little context? The feminist scholar Ann Douglas writes that in the early twentieth century, when Europe turned to view the creative arts in north America the face that they saw was that of the African American, America's "face was black" (Douglas 1995, 353).

In 1952 the African American jazz alto saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie appeared on the television program *Stage Entrance* to each receive a *Downbeat Magazine* award. Their filmed performance of the piece "Hot House" is famous for its virtuoso displays by Parker and Gillespie and infamous for the race-tinged exchanges between the white announcer Earl Wilson, who was accompanied by writer and promoter Leonard Feather and the two awardees. Mr. Wilson refers to both artists as "boys." Visually, the announcer tries not to engage Charlie Parker, who is an unmatched virtuoso at this time in his career, instead joking a bit regarding Gillespie's first name but never addressing the two performers equally. On YouTube,

among the many versions of the program excerpt, one clip is posted by a user in Japan. There was an exchange of posted comments that included observations regarding the impressive musicianship. One post mentioned the condescending reference. A response to the post defended the exchange, saying that men often used the term “boy” across racial lines.<sup>1</sup> During the jazz age naming became important within the African American community. Musicians were dubbed the Duke and the Count. Accomplished players were euphemistically referred to as Professors. This is the language of outsiders. The use of the word “man” was another version of this creation of pride. Man stood in opposition to boy. “My man” and “you the man,” that is used in our time, is a pun-like insinuation that the person referred to is the holder of power. Charlie Parker’s second wife Chan provides testimony in the film Celebrating Bird (1987) that this television appearance was stressful for Mr. Parker, and, that he was very upset at how he was treated. We can hear his anger in the subsequent performance. Bird plays “out,” improvises outside the form of the piece. His solo is made up of raucous blues shouts that are rhythmic, and, are picked up and amplified upon by the group’s drummer. Dizzy’s solo begins with a roof-raising shout on his trumpet, he quotes, or samples, the theme of Bizet’s “Carmen,” as if to show that jazz is as much as and more than European classical music. After this beginning flurry though, Mr. Gillespie’s solo works within the form.<sup>2</sup>

Jazz became political because of the connection to the African American makers of the art form and the contradiction of their status as citizens in relation to their art. In our time there is the added dimension of this politic outside of the United States. International internet consumers love the music for its sound and visual aspects. Is the political context relevant to the perform-

ance? Another question is how do international performances by African American jazz players inform us about the nature of their art? Is the music as political if there is no resistance to it? On-the-road performance is political because there remains the politics at home. Also, a political message is often symbolic of struggle generally, from adolescent revolt to the striving for identity of alienated groups. Black jazz players enjoyed greater creative freedom outside of the United States. When we view vintage performances while the artists were on tour are these the best shows? How are they different? I believe that some of them were the best performances for the very reason that they consisted of a message delivered outside of the United States. Arguably a letter, intended for home, but mailed from afar.

Aspects regarding the artist and of art itself onstage have been played out in a contemporary conflict regarding the fronting of rap music acts at the Glastonbury summer music festival in England. Traditionally a rock-and-roll music event, rap has been promoted with mixed results. In 2005 the artist 50 Cent was “bottled” off the stage. White rapper Eminem was successful in 2001. For 2008, Jay-Z was signed to open. At the heart of the controversy is the question of the effectiveness of hip hop live on stage. Is the issue an expression of anti-Americanism for what the British may consider their festival and even rock-and-roll as their music? Hip-hop is the upstart compared to rock-and-roll and hip-hop has proved to be a form that both evolves and absorbs other styles. Rock works well fronted by rap but arguably the paring is not as effective in reverse ([BBC News, 2008](#)).

Questions about the interpretation of the African American arts have been posed by writers well before the age of the internet. In a retrospective sense I first wish to purposefully engage with a pair of late twentieth century authors, black nationalists really, on the meaning of African

American performance. Ortiz Walton, in a book chapter title “African and European Music” from 1972 asks how Europeans, and by implication Americans, have ever understood black performance? (Walton 1972, 1-19) He describes the role of talking drums and the idea that African tonal drum performance is language-based and is not a code. Walton makes the point that the west has never gotten it right and has misinterpreted the African past. Max Roach, the jazz drummer and cultural activist, in a 1972 article wrote that “we must decolonize our minds” in a discussion on how the African American arts are interpreted by the main stream. The “we” refers to African Americans who, Roach writes, were commercialized into accepting the means of exchange in American society, that is, white producers and black consumers and thus a colonial construct of dependency. The issue is the control of the cultural product. In this article that serves as a summary or how-to of black nationalist culture building, Roach tells the tale of deciding to take classical drum lessons, while he was at the time performing with jazz giants on fifty-second street in New York city, and being told that he was holding his drum sticks incorrectly. He also asks the rhetorical question whether whites can play the music, after which he continues that in America we are kept from experiencing one another’s culture across racial lines. The author here is asking us, what would America be like without the racial divide? Max too saw a problem of interpretation (Roach 1972, 3-6).

Numerous clips of artists such as Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Eric Dolphy and Miles Davis can be found on YouTube. These are all well known mid- to late-twentieth century African American performers. Although YouTube users remain anonymous and are known through their screen names, clicking on a user’s name will reveal their posted country of origin. Users have

obtained rare analog film clips that have most often been reissued on DVD in some form from the original source of a movie excerpt or television broadcast. There is significant footage of classic performances from the United States and the various countries of western Europe for much of the mid to late twentieth century. Here are some examples. A Brazilian user posts a clip of vocalist Billie Holiday in a performance in the Hollywood film New Orleans (1947). A Canadian user posts a clip of Sarah Vaughan appearing in Holland in 1958. An American user has a post of alto saxophonist Eric Dolphy playing in Berlin in 1961. A user in the Netherlands posts a clip of Miles Davis performing in the U.S. in 1964.<sup>3</sup> Generally, only with the exception of the Parker excerpt mentioned earlier, clip comments consist of phrases of admiration and often links to other similar online film samples. Eric in Berlin? Sarah Vaughan, so young, and, performing in Holland? How amazing that YouTube has allowed for the creation of these definitive digital libraries of film. This is a unique moment in time — the sharing of culture among computer desktops.

In order to set up and better consider the examples that follow, I will first present material on how black music performance has been considered over time. Two Harlem Renaissance writers who considered the idea of audience in their writings are Rudolph Fisher in his essay “The Caucasian Storms Harlem” (1927) and Zora Neal Hurston in “What It Means to Be Colored Me” (1928). Fisher is the returning medical student to his old Harlem night spots when he notices a majority of whites and thinks “What a lot of ‘fays” realizing that he is the only African American in the audience. His piece is a tour through Harlem night spots. Of the Oriental, a Chinese restaurant that featured black female vocalists accompanied by piano, Fisher states that whites never came “except as guests” of blacks. In a section following he includes “As another observer has

put it to me since, time was when white people went to Negro cabarets to see how Negroes acted; now Negroes go to these same cabarets to see how white people act.” Fisher questions whether white interest in black performance is a “fad” and a “diversion.” He suggests in his discussion the time frame during which a set of original black shows breaks onto the scene, are imitated, and how eventually the interest wanes.

Fisher asks why others are interested in black culture and what are they getting from it? One conclusion that he comes to is that whites are participating. “They camel and fish-tail and turkey, they geche and black-bottom and scronch, they skate and buzzard and mess-around—and they do them all better than I!” The author at the end of his piece offers that “Maybe these Nordics at last have tuned in on our wavelength. Maybe they are at last learning to speak our language.” Fisher punningly finds that whites as an audience are devoted and attentive, consume for their own use, remain susceptible to trends, and, should not be taken too seriously (Fisher 1927, 1194).

In “Colored Me” Hurston considers the context of her existence, whether in Eatonville, Florida, her home town, or at Barnard College where she studied. She also remarks regarding whites in a black setting. In an amazing send-up she contrasts her visceral submersion into the roaring jazz in a club she visits with a white friend, to the friend’s apparent and total cerebral take on the experience. For Zora the music “constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies.” After surviving the tune she finds here friend “sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly. ‘Good music they have here’ he remarks. Drumming the table with his fingertips” (Hurston 1928, 1010).

In contrast to Rudolph Fisher, Ms. Hurston finds a disconnect for whites as audience, well, at least her friend, an inability of the uninitiated to understand. It is not that the white friend is uninterested, presumably he enjoyed the performance based on his comment. She also acknowledges how the presence of a single white, an outsider, can change the meaning of a performance for all of us.

From these Harlem Renaissance authors I wish to move to two later-in-the-century observers of culture for the purpose of comparison on the ideas of performance and meaning. In the 1960s Amiri Baraka wrote on the then burgeoning avant-garde of African American jazz players. He makes the cogent point that jazz is western music. Acknowledging its African roots and African American origins the music was not born in Africa or Europe. Jazz is American. In a single paragraph Baraka juxtaposes Charlie Parker and James Joyce and Ornette Coleman with then U.S. senator Barry Goldwater. "We are, all of us, moderns, whether we like it or not." He bases both ideas, about the origins of jazz and modernism, on the fact that we all experience the history of our time together regardless of our color differences. Baraka continues "if an atomic bomb is dropped on Manhattan, moldy figs will die as well as modernists, and just because some cornet player looks out his window and says 'what's going on' does not mean he will not be in on things. He goes, too." The cornet player referred to here is Ruby Braff, a white player and contemporary of Bennie Goodman. This is a novel link to the discussion of experiencing or witnessing. What is created is available to all though with varying meanings for each person. Like an atomic bomb art can pervade culture (Baraka 1970, 70-71).

Toni Morrison in her 1992 work of criticism addresses the Africanist presence in American literature. In part, she describes blackness as a catalyst and essential other without which the

elements of conflict, comparison, and competition would not exist in fiction. Regarding race issues, she finds that “silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse.” Morrison credits writers with being some of the most sensitive of artists and that they have the ability “to imagine what is not the self.” As a national literature though, for American Fiction, both author and audience has traditionally been presumed to be white and male. Among the writers she considers are Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor and Henry James. Not unlike Rudolph Fisher, Morrison first questions white intent as “an occasional bout of jungle fever” but later defines a central role for black imagery that is core. Morrison’s contribution is that she questions language itself and how language is limited by its racial connotations. The author asks how we are to break out of the constrictions of an apparently endless cycle of race-based insinuation. If we superimpose this discussion from literature to music and image, is all black music bound up in a similar stereotyped lexicon of condescension? (Morrison 1992, 15)

I want to consider next writing closer to our time that centers on the idea of reception. Paul Gilroy poignantly presents the conundrum of black music’s “proximity” to slavery and the idea of racial terror as being aspects pertaining to the “status” and “capacity” of African diaspora expression (Gilroy 1993, 73). Hip hop culture’s “contest between” expression and censorship and debates in jazz concerning authenticity are among the notions Gilroy frames (Gilroy 83). Bernard Gendron writes regarding the reception of bebop during the 1940s and what he calls “discursive changes” that made possible an avant garde (Gabbard 1995, 31). In his review of Metronome magazine’s coverage of the evolution of bebop as a new African American form, of note are the binaries he presents that are an element of discussions, such as art and commerce, authenticity

and artificiality, swing and jazz (Gabbard 51). The debate over the new that set Dixieland revivalists alongside Swing aficionados was itself modernist as the very ideas of markets and origins were at the core. Similarly, Guthrie Ramsey considers discourses of reception and acceptance that suggest race consciousness in his discussion of Esquire magazine's inclusion of jazz and the 1944 Jazz Year Book. (Ramsey 2004, 123). Ramsey shows how writers on jazz placed the new music as American and progressive, moving beyond race and folk origins and dance function towards a sophisticated listened-to form (Ramsey 125). The debate on the reception of jazz also points to the fact that white American male journalists, such as Leonard Feather, were creating the narrative and were conscious of their references to African American culture and the credit to black innovation that they were providing. There is a kind of energy, a recognition of change, that imbues their presentation that is an acceptance and promotion of modernism at that time (Ramsey 97).

Gender and the cultural politics of mid century framed the careers of African American performers such as vocalist and pianist Hazel Scott. Scott was a successful club and film star who, during the 1940s, played across genres in her music with references to western classical music, the blues and jazz. Monica Hairston considers the intersection of the leftist social movement the Popular Front in New York city, the Manhattan night club Café Society, where Scott began performing in 1939 and ideas of progress and racial uplift. The author is interested in how African American women were positioned as participants and “the reception of these women for different audiences.” Scott and contemporaries such as vocalist Rose Murphy were, in the press, sexualized and compared with their potential in domestic roles as maids. Their reception was a product of the gender, racial and social limits of the time (Rustin 2008, 66). Media began to

make the spectacle of difference an item of mass consumption. African American music in American society exhibited an over-presence and African Americans were hyper-visualized. These terms, drawn from Franz Fanon's Black Skins, White Masks, suggest too the idea of doubling (Habel 2005, 125-126). In the case of an early twentieth century performer such as Josephine Baker the duality was between her comic and glamorous selves, as compared to Hazel Scott whom American writers presented as both sexual and musically attractive (Kraut 2003, 450).

The reception of jazz can also be set within the evolution of radio beginning in the 1920s and its role as a national music, a dance form, an expression of African American culture, and, its relationship with underworld activities. In 1923 the Chicago Juvenile Protection Agency cast jazz as having a link to gangsterism as part of grand jury hearings held at the time. Jazz was associated with the "sensation" that young white men and women might be tempted to give themselves up to. Radio stations in the early 1920s in Chicago sought to present a tempered "sweet" jazz performed by white groups that would not be connected with what was seen as the licentious aspects of the music. Derek Valliant argues that radio remapped race and class through the broad distribution of African American music over the airwaves. Radio as a medium was beyond an absolute policing, allowing for listeners to choose, although white performers dominated in radio studio orchestras (Valliant 2002, 36, 54).

Later in the century, bebop's reception was racially coded, via association, much like jazz in general was a generation before. Langston Hughes' satirical character Simple acknowledges how at once bebop is "crazy" and, a form that "folks who ain't suffered much can't play" (Lowney 2000, 368). Hughes, like bop itself, attempts to reconstitute jazz via its link with the

downtrodden. This was at once revolutionary and a posture of reclaiming, taking jazz back from the white mainstream. By the time of the beat era whites themselves were borrowing, for example Jack Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody" as described by Allen Ginsberg. White liberal "intertexts" of the time, as in the writing of Nat Hentoff in liner notes for musicians such as Ornette Coleman, presented a subtle stereotyping set within a laudatory prose (Witzling 2006, 393).

James Dennen considers what he terms the "subject-centered reception" of jazz and uses the modal music of John Coltrane for analysis. He writes regarding the "legible" and the "knowable" in a discussion of improvisation and a comparison of Coltrane to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. For the author, subject (the performer) and object (the music) are two very different choices for the focus of listeners and suggest the variety of avenues of perception for the experiencing of performance (Dennen 2009, 144).

There is a technological side to how media is presented and received that I will now turn to. Video hosting services now exist in opposition to the traditional media gatekeepers, recording companies and movie studios. By-passing the "clearance culture" limits of copyright, user-generated video on the internet has reached a global audience where this had previously been impossible (von Lohmann 2007, 130). We now have the immediacy of film shorts available at the click of a button, online. Writers have predicted the eventual replacement of film with digital imaging similar to the already successful paradigm in music of "shared participation" that has been the result of the digital revolution (Cave 2008, 4). "The clip" as defined in this essay then is a new form. Not a fragment, uninterpretable without its full length, but simply a short statement that stands alone. In this sense the context doesn't matter. Only the time expressed during the

segment is important. The use and interpretation of shorts in this way removes the relevance of a longer piece. The need, and usefulness, of context though remains. There emerges an interesting rationale or impetus for the short, given these cliches of our time of the sound bite and the film clip. It is a relevant fact too that classic film music performances were in reality brief but full music videos because of the song-focus of their content. In the 1943 film Stormy Weather, Lena Horne performs the title tune in a lengthy production number. In one interlude during the song, the Katherine Dunham dancers perform a street dance scene under an elevated subway rail station that is a large set. The the camera segue moves from Ms. Horne's location at a window to a rainy stage set, yes, with real rain! The complexity of this interlude alone moves beyond many contemporary music videos. In a sense we are retrofitting the media of the past with today's terminology and concepts.

This broad assemblage of film online and its study is a kind of media archaeology. Further, moving image is a form of "objectified cultural capital" that on the internet is both user appropriated and user created. Moving image, often excerpts from copyrighted material, is recycled in "new works" and as part of "creative acts." The growing meta-archive is as well tagged, with keywords, and linked within and beyond particular video hosts. Most importantly this new archive is democratic, in addition to being self-generated. (Gracy 2007, 183-185). What is new in the history of the consumption of media is the tagging and linking of specific works. My interest in this topic begins with the global community's interest in African American culture and the dissemination of that cultural capital. Tagging and linking suggests promotion in a manner of pushing to the top significant performances, much like the concept of Digg.com. Of the jazz film clips under consideration here the most-viewed is the Charlie Parker performance with a count of

over one million four hundred thousand, next is Billie Holiday with just over one million and the numbers drop to around one hundred thousand or less for the remaining YouTube posts. In this sense the manipulation of the clips, the posting, viewing, tagging and linking has established a unique archive. What fascinates too is that this is a discussion of old material that has found a new life for two reasons, access and dispersion. Whether the internet is democratic or anarchic is debatable, but the internet as usable resource is certainly unprecedented. What I mean by film clip is a YouTube posted excerpt from some larger piece that features one song, performance or solo. The clips under consideration here range in length from two minutes, Sarah Vaughan, to just over three, Miles Davis. The following section is a series of descriptions of each clip where I consider the the following questions. Is there a discourse that the general viewer may not get or at least find controversial, and, does the performance override such concerns as politics over the aesthetic interests of sound or performance? For each artist, I compare briefly my impressions of the clips with ideas represented in the scholarship. My intention is to provide vignettes for the visual and musical comparison of the film excerpts.

Billie Holiday sings the song “The Blues are a Brewin’” in the 1947 film New Orleans. She is with trumpeter Louis Armstrong and his orchestra. In the film Ms. Holiday plays the maid of the white female love interest of the male lead, played by Mexican actor Arturo de Cordova. Billie also plays the girlfriend of the real life jazz artist Louis Armstrong. She is young and beautiful in a sequined gown and wearing her trademark gardenia in her hair. What struck me was the atmosphere around Billie and Louis, of mutual respect, that what they were doing was fun. The song lyric opens with:

When the moon's kinda dreamy, starry eyed and dreamy  
And nights are luscious and long  
If you're kinda lonely, and all by you're only  
Then nothin' but the blues are brewin', the blues are brewin'

The antidote to the blues is a special person, “when the Lord up above you, sends someone to love you.” Part of the way through the song a well-dressed white male is shown standing off-stage. This is Cordova as the gambler and club owner Nick Duquesne. His presence, and the timing of the film’s cut to him, from Billie, suggests authority and a potentially possessive or controlling relationship to Ms. Holiday. Difference here is a kind of reality check, pulling the viewer out of the heavenly realm of music back to the white world, as a reminder, and then returning us for the finish of the piece. The setting is strictly high-class in that the dancing audience are all well-dressed whites. It is amazing in our time to consider the fact that in 1947 one of the era’s premiere vocalists could only be introduced in a Hollywood film in the role of a servant. Billie Holiday was cast in a role that a member of her race and class might fill. This fact is both real and an expression of bias. In terms of gender roles she is also second to and not billed equally with, Louis Armstrong. This classic film presents the contradiction of a stellar jazz performance within a relatively non-existent story and a largely decorous white cast. Cordova is wooed by a well-to-do girl as her family tries to reform his low-life ways. The black love story runs parallel to the white one. This film is one of a genre that for whites and African American performers used loose stories to present performance, from the Duke Ellington orchestra appearing in Cabin

in the Sky in 1943 to Dorothy Dandridge's lead in Carmen Jones in 1954.

What comes across most prominently in this filmed song performance is a danceable medium tempo jazz vocal with full orchestra. That is what we hear. What we see are two well-known stars in a lavish setting. On the aural level the clip belies the American context of the art. We hear only a good song. Visually the white audience and the white male reference present both class and race in juxtaposition, but only if we have the eyes for those clues. Holiday's achievements are chronicled by scholars such as Farah Jasmine Griffin, who note her success in Europe and her white audience (Griffin 2001, 100), Daphne Brooks, who, in an article on Nina Simone, points to Holiday's artistry in the context of this later female innovator (Brooks 2011, 177) and by Meg Greene who covers Holiday's success at Café Society in 1938 (Green 2006, 57). In terms of Billie Holiday's approach to performance, it is Robert O'Meally who describes her astonishing rhythmic sense and phrasing and her stylistic connection to Louis Armstrong (O'Meally 1991, 37).

Sarah Vaughan sings "Sometimes I'm Happy" in a clip from a television appearance in Holland in 1958 with Richard Davis on bass visible in the background. What is obvious to the aficionado is her youth. She appears much younger, slim, and almost adolescent in the language she uses in her introduction and by her body movements. Ms. Vaughan was known to have been camera shy with bouts of nervousness on stage that continued throughout her career. What is most interesting in the lyric are the two verses:

Sometimes I love you,

Sometimes I hate you.

But when I hate you,  
It's 'cause I love you.

That's how I am  
So what can I do?  
I'm happy when I'm with you.

They suggest a conditional aspect to love that she further emphasizes in her delivery of the song. Sarah Vaughan was known for her broad vocal range, lower lows and higher highs than most of her peers. The visual contrast is clear in this video more than in any other piece of Vaughan on film. This clip is the rarest online but for me is essential for the contrasts that it displays. By their performances both Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan take us out of the social realities of their times. They make America look good as they perform with ease, show a positive face, excel at their craft, and appear flawlessly attractive. If we gauge beauty by the adversity that an individual has overcome, then black women were the true models of the modern. At mid-century jazz was America's pop music. Beginning in the 1920s with Race Records, African American female vocalists became for a time the prominent voice for the burgeoning recording industry. What a contradiction that black women were also servants to white America. How possibly can viewers in our time understand the gulf between fantasy and reality for their time? African American women as model and maid? The scholarly writing on Sarah Vaughan presents her as an unmatched vocalist. Martin Williams, for example, writes in depth about her lyric interpretation, tone, range capacities and artistic diversity.

Like that vibrato, her “head tones” were the envy of every singer who heard her. Sarah Vaughan discovered that she had and could use not one voice or vocal texture, but several. She could take a note at the top or bottom of her range and, risking the impossible, fray it or bend it apparently out of her range (Williams 1993, 211).

Williams’ observations are relevant for how they present the influence of the sound of Sarah Vaughan, how her abilities move us. The appearances of Ms. Vaughan, and other black female vocalists, on television have been chronicled by Scott Yanow in Jazz on Film (Yanow 2004, 118).

Yet by their small numbers and relative invisibility in the media the most successful African American female performers become super women, even for our time. It is their voices that carry even over their physical beauty. Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Dinah Washington, these names evoke Siren-like powers of performance. In the clip, Louis Armstrong is the lucky man to share the limelight with Ms. Holiday. He extends a slight bow and steps back a bit to give Billie her “props.” Again, in performance Sarah becomes more than a mortal. No man could stand next to her. There is a YouTube clip of Ella Fitzgerald performing with the white male singer Mel Torme. In a short thirty-second exchange during a song, she scats effervescently in her high voice, Torme actually mimics her in response, comically, but what else could he do?

Eric Dolphy on alto saxophone performs with Booker Little on trumpet in Berlin in a clip from 1961. Abstraction in jazz was an evolution, a response that was arguably postmodern, referential and yet disassociated. The set of the television sound stage in this film recording is done in an obvious modernist art style with cartoon-like letters spelling out Jazz above and behind the

artists. Both Dolphy and Little wear dark suits and large dark sunglasses. Sound stages can be bright, but, here the musicians are playing the obvious role of the “Amerikaners.” The piece they perform “GW” is abstract, outside as opposed to inside jazz. The combination is compelling. The solos by Dolphy and Little are lyrical and beautiful, early 1960s African American urban exotica. The YouTube post shows just enough at the end of the piece for the viewer to catch the enthusiastic announcer almost attacking the microphone to introduce the players. There is almost more to see than to listen to in this clip. The dark glasses make the viewer blind to the eyes of the performers. We cannot take in their emotional state. Dolphy becomes flat like the two dimensions of the film medium itself. We are then pushed more towards the sound to take in the experience. The musicians become an archetype of the jazz player in suit and dark glasses. Within the anonymity created here the effect of the abstract playing becomes even more heightened. The more complex, esoteric, counterintuitive, visceral, tribal the better. More importantly for the present discussion is the fact that these jazz men couldn’t have been more exoticized. As musicians they are anti-western. They wear suits and play with sophistication, but where is the music, or, what is it? I have always been interested in the noise aspects of performance, volume for volume’s sake, as in the roar of a symphony orchestra, the shrillness of a church organ, the booming aspects of bass, whether delivered by a classical player on tuba or a drummer in jazz. Dolphy and Little here test such acoustical limits in their soloing.

Eric Dolphy’s style has been described as “fragmentation, decoration, and a very direct emotionalism” by Jack Cooke writing in 1966 in Jazz Monthly. Dolphy stated in an interview in 1960 that “I think of my playing as tonal. I play notes that would not ordinarily be said to be in a given key, but I hear them as proper. I don’t think I ‘leave the changes’ as the expression goes;

every note I play has some reference to the chords of the piece.” Vladimir Simosko writes that “Dolphy’s melodic lines are often Monk-like in character” and that “solos are usually based on themes” as in bop. (Simosko 1996, 10). For all of his associations with free playing and the aesthetic margins, Dolphy associated with and was promoted by some of the finest artists of his day. Dolphy’s 1963 “Jitterbug Waltz” has been described as “rhythmically conservative” and he was soloist in performances for Gunther Schuller’s “Night Music” and performed Edgar Varese’s “Density 21.5 (Litweiler 1990, 72).” For the uninitiated viewer of this Dolphy clip on YouTube there is the fascination of something at once aggressive and retrospective. For all of its abstraction, this Eric Dolphy and Booker Little clip sounds inside too because the musicians appear confident, they know their performance path, the music sounds set, planned, totally known before we hear it.

Miles Davis and ensemble perform “No Blues” in a video tape recording made at the end of “The Tonight Show” hosted by Steve Allen in Los Angeles in September of 1964. Davis on trumpet is joined by Wayne Shorter of tenor, Herbie Hancock on piano, Ron Carter on bass and Tony Williams on drums. This YouTube clip is the most contemporary of the set that I have examined. Davis’ performance and position as a jazz player was about creating a new approach to improvisation. This was one of the most important ensembles of the time and their music would have a broad impact. Most significant in this video is the experience of a reversal of tradition. The reversal is in the sense that this blues is not a blues, that is, the tonal aspects traditionally used in the form known as the blues, and referred to in the title of the piece, are different in this performance. Watching the clip is uncanny. The musicians utilize a modal approach based on altered scales that create the unusual sound. Significantly, many of the phrases played by Davis

sound unbalanced yet interesting, they don't resolve. The listener feels suspended by the music and is, in a sense, because in fact the musicians' tonal choices are creating just this effect. The host Steve Allen was a jazz pianist and music appreciator and this is the obvious connection to the group's appearance. Pianist Herbie Hancock does not accompany the soloist Davis so much as play equally with him as an ensemble member. Hancock also plays rhythmic contrasts and melodic flurries that counter Davis' minimalist lines. Similarly drummer Tony Williams does not just keep time for the group but establishes a percussive atmosphere for the players. He doesn't just play time, but plays with time stopping and starting again within the form. The clip ends as Williams begins a solo that itself is a dramatic presentation when viewed. This video is possibly the most challenging to consider in terms of what a novice viewer on YouTube may take away from seeing the piece. What is evident are a group of African American jazz players. The music swings and we hear a relatively traditional melody on trumpet, harmonies on piano and rhythm from bass and drums. It is not self evident that this is a new style of jazz and that these are important innovators of a new age. The context in fact is lost for all but the knowing. I will say though that, below the surface, for the close listener, the music is obviously different. As stated, because of the modal approach Miles' melody lines don't resolve in a traditional way.

There is extensive writing on Miles Davis by authors such as Quincy Troupe, Bill Cole, Nat Hentoff and Johns Szwed among many others. In an article on the career of Davis, Jim Merod writes that he was both a genuine modernist and a willful iconoclast (Merod 2001, 81)."

The postmodern ethos prefigured in Davis's shrewd disavowal of expected congeniality emerges in artistic experiments that appear to be radical—radical, at any event, for the jazz

universe, less radical in the larger cultural ferment of the 1960s, as Davis's ballistic career focus gathered momentum. In a word, he wanted to be a hero for black people, especially for urban and lower-middle-class blacks. (Merod 82).

The late career performances of Miles Davis complicate the discussion of how performance is received. As is well known, he would at times play with his back to the audience. What does it mean when the performing artist disavows the viewer? Davis made the audience illegitimate. Arguably his physical audience at a performance became like us, the digital viewer, a voyeur. Too, to take to heart the class reference, that the "people" were his true audience, many of us then and now don't belong. His art was for all to see but not for all to see. In a narrative section on Davis' personal life John Szwed writes that "race was something he seldom forgot—or was allowed to forget (Szwed 2004, 130)." Davis' positioning complicates the idea of reception. His body of work taken as a case study shows that viewing without context limits our understanding. Although we can appreciate the music without this information, we miss the intent.

It is possible that first time viewers of these types of dynamic classic performances experience the charge of the artist even without knowing the context. The viewable versus the invisible, is what makes us want to watch regardless of whether we understand the details. Intuitively, we all view artistry and think "this is amazing, how is it that this person is so good!" Of course there are many reasons for quality, but cultural forces, the milieu, are among the strongest. Though contradictions continue. The digital age has made us all consumers and experts of the moving image. Clips allow us to replay, to repeat, far beyond the earlier conception of the rerun. To loop

is to live. It can be argued that with increasing bandwidths in our lives we will never see the forest for the trees, or, the rich details that such considerations provide. Classic performances of African Americans that are posted on the internet prompt questions regarding understanding and context. The environment that shaped an artist's delivery remains an important aspect for consideration. The power of performance to transcend the need for context is the most salient quality of effective artistry. The reality of the political though remains inseparable from performance. This essay has in part questioned the nature of artistic expression. The specific medium under consideration also conditions the discourse. As the Max Roach anecdote portrays, many see America as a racialized place and this conception holds us back from experience cross-culturally. The internet and YouTube has amplified the black aesthetic to an extent that cannot be quantified. The stylistic influences of jazz, soul music and hip hop have been immeasurable.

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## Film

- Cabin in the sky. 1943.
- Carmen Jones. 1954.
- Celebrating bird 1987.
- New Orleans 1947.
- Vaughan, Sarah. Sarah Vaughan live in '58 and '64. Jazz Icons. DVD. (2007)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is the link to the clip. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkvCDCOGzGc> The user is sai-waiakame and is listed as being in Japan.

Here is the text of the YouTube exchange. The user scox1000 is listed as being in America and emtube is in Japan.

scox1000 (4 years ago) “Thanks for including the introduction by the totally square, white television guys. Watch the expression of disgust on Bird's face when they're talking. It's priceless.

Then, they go on to call them “boys”. Un freakin believable.”

emtube (3 years ago) “Of course, racism was (is) rampant in the U.S., but I don't think you should read too much into the announcers use of "boys". Note that the rest of the band is white, and you could find tons of other situations (on contemporary TV, radio, movies, etc.) where any group of white musicians etc. would be referred to as "boys". The racist use of the remark was generally when an individual black man was referred to face-to-face as "boy".”

This clip was added in July of 2006. In July 2010 there were 1,454,210 views of the clip and 1,563 comments on it. The post by scox1000 was third, an early comment.

<sup>2</sup> I'd like to thank Nichole Ruiz for her observation regarding Dizzy Gillispie's solo in “Hot House.”

<sup>3</sup> Billie Holiday, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWtUzdI5hIE>, user peagahairy, 1,022,318 views

Sarah Vaughan, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAItDxMHeBU>, user vintagevoices, 14,175 views

Eric Dolphy, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27QVenKmDBI>, user elmosaico, 126,922 views

Miles Davis, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9SLa4ysito>, user astrotype, 11,858 views

I have captured the entire set of clips and they can be viewed at:

[http://blackvistas.com/classic\\_jazz/classic.html](http://blackvistas.com/classic_jazz/classic.html)