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DIFFERENT PLACEMENTS OF SPIRIT: AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSICIANS  
HISTORICIZING IN SOUND

by

CASEY HALE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
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## **Abstract**

### DIFFERENT PLACEMENTS OF SPIRIT: AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSICIANS

### HISTORICIZING IN SOUND

by

Casey Hale

Advisor: Professor Stephen Blum

This dissertation examines two recent projects by African American musicians that enact critical and historiographic agency by reconstructing the music of the past: William Parker's project *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*, dedicated to re-imagining the works of the soul music icon with an ensemble featuring the poetic recitation of Amiri Baraka; and Marcus Roberts's reinvention of the Jazz Age rhapsodies of George Gershwin and James P. Johnson, *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Yamekraw: A Negro Rhapsody*. Rooted in African American interpretive traditions, and working both within and against such discursive categories as "jazz," "black music," and "American music," these artists use musical reinvention not only to articulate their identities and forebears, but to construct broader narratives of musical history and genre. Moreover, because they revisit works preoccupied with questions of racial, cultural, and national identity, these revisionist musical projects can also be read as revisionist cultural histories. Through my analyses I argue that Parker's project responds to the collapse of radical movement politics since the 1970s, and that his musical practices become the site of their own spiritual-political liberation, while Roberts's project serves to revise and realign the histories of American art music and political

identity with African American cultural production, in dialogue with the writings of Albert Murray.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

This dissertation is a study in musical analysis engaged with issues of cultural identity, musical genre, and historiography. It examines a pair of projects undertaken by African American musicians in the past two decades that engage in the reinterpretation and radical reconstruction of existing musical works—works of the past, tied distinctly to their historical moments. These revisionist projects enact a complicated sort of critical agency: they highlight their temporal distance from the revisited works, while simultaneously bringing them into the present. They can thus be seen as historicizing gestures, situating their practitioners in the lineages of their chosen forebears, while establishing a vantage point from which to comment on the original works and the cultural politics of their historical moments.

Importantly, the projects discussed in this study also involve dislocations and reconfigurations of musical genre. Both of the artists included are critically and commercially framed as jazz musicians, at least according to what George E. Lewis has called “a vulgar version of the institutional theory of art—that is, whatever they may call themselves, these musicians [are] part of an economic and social art world of jazz.”<sup>1</sup> However, each of the projects under consideration problematizes the genre boundaries of jazz in some way. Moreover, considering the significant role played by repertory interpretation in canon formation, these gestures of establishing cross-genre repertory ruptures are potentially destabilizing. In this way, the musicians involved in these projects posit alternative narratives for musical history.

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1. George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: the AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xli.

Finally, these projects involve historical works that are preoccupied with questions of racial, cultural, and national identity, and the critical gestures of their practitioners can be read as commentaries on these issues as well, at times direct and at others oblique. The examination of these projects therefore becomes a rich site for exploring the interconnections between musical expression, formal revision, history, and cultural identity. My analyses throughout the dissertation attempt to do just that: situating the projects within their intellectual and cultural milieux, and considering the writings and statements of the musicians themselves, I attempt to interpret their revisions in musical style, form, and content as interventions in the critical discourses surrounding the original works.

The dissertation is built around two analytical studies, each constituting a chapter. The first explores bassist William Parker's project *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*. Leading a group that includes poet Amiri Baraka, Parker re-imagines the music of singer-songwriter Curtis Mayfield. Transgressing the genre boundaries of jazz, he instead frames his work within the broader context of "black music." This conception of an expansive African American musical tradition rooted in the blues is central to the writings of Baraka himself, whose 1963 book *Blues People* remains one of its seminal formulations. This chapter argues that Parker's project may be understood as a manifestation of the "Unity Music" envisioned by Baraka in his 1966 essay "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," an expression of the dual interrelatedness of the popular and avant-garde in African American expressive culture.<sup>2</sup> However, situated in the first

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2. LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," *Black Music* (New York: W. Morrow, 1967; reprint, New York: AkashiClassics, 2010). All citations refer to the 2010 edition. This collection of essays was published before Jones changed his name to Amiri Baraka. For the sake of consistency, I will use the name Amiri Baraka throughout the body of the text, but, since the bibliographic record is listed under LeRoi Jones, I will continue to cite this essay under Jones [Baraka].

decade of the twenty-first century, Parker's project engages with a historical popular culture, and as such historicizes its relationship to the early 1970s, the era when Mayfield himself was most musically active, revisiting and revising the period's cultural politics of black liberation in a contemporary context.

The analyses in this chapter focus on reinterpretations of Mayfield's song *We The People Who Are Darker Than Blue*, a call for African American unity and political action. The work appears on both Mayfield's first and last albums as a soloist, and I compare his two early 1970s recordings with his own historicizing revision from 1996, arguing that the lyrical and musical alterations in the late version evince a weariness and a loss of faith in the potential for political action to affect social change. I then explore Parker's arrangement on two versions of the song recorded by Parker's group, each of which deconstructs and reinvents the work in ways that extend its length considerably, and analyze one 2004 performance in depth. The revisions by Parker's group on this recording repeat, refigure, and riff on Mayfield's materials, pushing the song and its political content in new directions, culminating in a decisive rupture that inverts the call to collective action in Mayfield's original, reframing revolutionary consciousness in a call for radical self-knowledge that champions the questing individual. Throughout, Baraka acts as a hermeneutic mediator, elaborating the esoteric, "inside" meanings of Mayfield's music with recitations of his own poetry. Ultimately, I argue that Mayfield's 1996 revision and the 2004 reconstruction by *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* can be read as varied responses to the collapse of radical movement politics in the intervening decades since the original song's conception, and that Parker's own musical practices become the site of their own spiritual-political liberation.

The second analytical study in the dissertation explores pianist Marcus Roberts's engagement with two interrelated works from the 1920s: George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) and James P. Johnson's response, *Yamkraw: A Negro Rhapsody* (1927). In 1995, Roberts recorded both works on his album *Portraits in Blue* (Sony Classical, 1996), bringing together performers from the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and the Orchestra of St. Luke's. The hybridity of this mixed-genre ensemble represents a self-conscious attempt to bring together "the jazz and classical worlds,"<sup>3</sup> and it resonates with the aspirations of both Gershwin and Johnson to forge a new American concert music from African American popular idioms and European art music. However, where both composers sought to import the idiomatic expressions of the former into the performance practices of the latter, Roberts's reinvention of these works presents a striking reversal, reclaiming them for the performance practices and interpretive strategies of jazz. Thus the scores are broken open with extended piano solos and passages of collective improvisation, while throughout Roberts and the members of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra signify on the written music by exaggerating blues elements and overlaying a pastiche of anachronistic styles.

The juxtaposition of the two works is significant in itself: while Gershwin's composition has been famously successful, Johnson's has remained obscure, to the extent that Roberts's 1996 album represents the premiere recording of the fully orchestrated work. Interestingly, in framing his project in the liner notes to the album, Roberts acknowledges, outlines, and justifies the changes to Gershwin's composition, while essentially eliding the similar changes to Johnson's. Of Gershwin's *Rhapsody*, he states: "It is important to remember that *Rhapsody in Blue* was written before Louis Armstrong taught everybody how to swing. Because of Armstrong's

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3. Trumpeter Marcus Printup, quoted in Marcus Roberts, *Portraits in Blue* (New York: Sony Classical, 1996). CD liner notes.

influence, swinging and playing the blues must be the foundation for the renewal of any jazz-based piece of music;" and of *Yamekraw*: "All we had to do was to capture the piece's uplifting feeling and play it in the style that Johnson himself did." Thus, Roberts's recording is not just a recuperation of Johnson's work, restoring its position beside Gershwin's, but serves as a vehicle for Roberts to identify Johnson as a legitimate forebear, while holding Gershwin at a critical distance. It is important to note in this regard that Roberts never uses the language of race in discussing his project; instead, Gershwin's work is "based on his view of jazz from a European perspective," while in Johnson's work one "can hear clearly the contrast and balance of European and American musical sensibilities." In order to understand this gesture, this chapter situates Roberts's project alongside the writings of his friend and mentor Albert Murray, who posits, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has noted, that American cultural identity is fundamentally African American.

A significant influence on the conception of this dissertation is Eric Porter's book *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*. Porter presents a history of African American jazz musicians participating in the critical discussions surrounding their musical productions and the broader intellectual and political currents of their times, examining their public comments, interviews, and writings. The final chapter of Porter's book, "'The Majesty of the Blues': Wynton Marsalis's Jazz Canon," is particularly significant for his analysis of Albert Murray's influence within the cultural milieu of Jazz at Lincoln Center. Like Porter's study, this dissertation is motivated by the desire to situate musicians as critics and historians, but ultimately looks to analyze their reinterpretations of historical works as sites of musical commentary. Thus, it builds upon an observation made by Jo Jones, who, when asked by



Yusef Lateef about Lester Young's philosophy on improvisation, responded, "Lester played his philosophy."<sup>4</sup> Extending from this, I contend that the musical expressions of Roberts, Parker, and their associates play an important role in articulating their perspectives on history and cultural politics, participating in a process of meaning-making that is intertwined with their writings.

The theoretical framework for understanding the musical reinterpretations in the dissertation as critical commentaries on their source materials is well grounded in the African American cultural practice of Signifyin(g), as theorized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. In Gates's conception, the uniquely African-American figure of the Signifying Monkey is prefigured by "the trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara," a messenger of the gods whose divinations are perpetually indeterminate and open to multiple interpretations; as Gates observes, "Esu endlessly displaces meaning, deferring it by the play of signification."<sup>5</sup> This "indigenous black hermeneutic principle"<sup>6</sup> finds expression in the improvisatory approaches of both Roberts and Parker to the texts upon which they Signify—whether the scores of Gershwin and Johnson, or the recordings and "spirit" of Curtis Mayfield. Indeterminacy is particularly important to Parker's strategy of collective improvisation, dubbed "self-conduction," in which form and content are entirely mutable, resulting in interpretations that are new in the moment of each performance. Moreover, Gates's characterization of Signifyin(g) as an Afro-diasporan analog to Bakhtinian double-

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4. Quoted in Michael Dessen, "Improvising a Different Clave: Steve Coleman and AfroCuba de Matanzas," in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, eds. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 173.

5. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 42.

6. Ibid., 44.

voicedness is strongly suggestive of both Roberts's and Parker's practices. As Gates quotes from Gary Saul Morson's elaboration on Bakhtin, "The audience of a double-voiced word is . . . meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's point of view . . . and the second speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view."<sup>7</sup> For Gates, Signifyin(g) manifests this simultaneity of perspectives through "Repetition, with a signal difference,"<sup>8</sup> and my analyses of musical revisions throughout the dissertation depend on just these sorts of multi-perspectival rifts.

Gates's conception of Signifyin(g) also emphasizes the subjectivity of the interpreter in ways that intertwine with George E. Lewis's articulation of the Afrological perspective in improvised music, outlined in "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives." Lewis elaborates his theory of this improvisatory praxis in opposition to the presumptive objectivity and impersonality of Cageian conceptions of chance and indeterminacy, noting that, for Afrological improvisers, priority is placed on "telling your own story" and "developing your own 'sound.'" "[F]or an improviser working in Afrological forms," Lewis argues,

'sound,' sensibility, personality, and intelligence cannot be separated from an improviser's phenomenal (as distinct from formal) definition of music. Notions of personhood are transmitted via sounds, and sounds become signs for deeper levels of meaning beyond pitches and intervals.<sup>9</sup>

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7. Ibid., 50; quoted from Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's 'Diary of a Writer' and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 108.

8. Ibid., 51.

9. George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (1996), 117.

These observations on subjectivity and personal sensibility are redoubled in the distinction between the improvisational perspectives of Roberts and Parker and approaches to the performance of historical repertoire informed by notions of period authenticity. In the case of Roberts's project, by 1995 the trend in interpretations of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* ran towards revivals of the work's original jazz-band arrangement, interpretations in which the subjectivity and "sound" of the the performers were subordinated to sonic facsimiles of Jazz Age mannerisms; in this context, Roberts's performance is, as Schiff describes it, "the polar extreme from 'authenticity'"<sup>10</sup> (though this, too, will be problematized later). Likewise, Parker insists that his ensemble doesn't attempt to reproduce Mayfield's music, but to rediscover it for and through themselves. "It was never the goal to do a cover," he asserts, but instead to "find our center within his music so that we may become ourselves."<sup>11</sup>

The connections of both Parker and Roberts to New York City are more than incidental, and my examination of their historicizing projects is framed by the institutional, economic and cultural formations in which they work: the often dichotomously conceived worlds of Lincoln Center and the Lower East Side. The stances that the musicians take within each milieu, as well as how each regards the other, are of crucial importance to these artists' cultural, political and aesthetic aspirations, as well as to how they are received critically by the press and in the academy. The city, therefore, not only provides the geographical space in which these musicians work as well as the material basis for their networks of interaction, but projects itself as a

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10. David Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 69.

11. William Parker, *I Plan to Stay a Believer: The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* (Brooklyn: AUM Fidelity, 2010), CD liner notes.

metaphor through which divergent ideological camps of style and historical attitude are constructed. This metaphor manifests itself in the interpretive strategies that these musicians bring to bear on the music of the past, as when, for example, Marcus Roberts revivifies the repertoire of "symphonic jazz" through the post-Armstrong swinging blues that has become the trademark idiom of Jazz at Lincoln Center, re-authenticating it while marketing the recording on the Sony Classical label and thus highlighting the emergent status of "jazz" as a symbol of high culture at the close of the twentieth century; or when William Parker re-imagines the music of Curtis Mayfield through the decentralized, collectivist ethos of the Lower East Side, one that has its roots in the 1970s loft scene as well as the broader Black Arts Movement, expanding, in musical praxis, upon Mayfield's own gestures, both in his lyrical themes and his business models, of self-empowerment and self-determination.

In the prologue to his 2006 essay collection *Considering Genius*, Stanley Crouch, a powerful ideologue in the camp of Jazz at Lincoln Center, recalls his time in the late 1970s booking jazz performances at the Tin Palace on New York's Lower East Side. His gloss on this experience is a prelude to his introduction of Wynton Marsalis, and, with characteristic dogmatic vigor, Crouch's agenda is to set the stage by distinguishing the "master[s] of the fundamentals" and "giants" of jazz from the exponents of the avant-garde, whose music, "When it wasn't inept or pretentious . . . was more an improvised version of European concert music." On the charge that this latter group expounds "the novelty of noise" rather than "fresh ideas delivered with authority," Crouch makes an assertion that raises questions about the historicist projects discussed in this dissertation:

there is no reason why someone should not play whatever he or she wants to play, but it seems to me that what gives an art its deepest identity is the quality of its dialogue with the past. The problem is not that a number of 'avant-garde' musicians do not know the past, but that they do not *reimagine* it with enduring profundity as opposed to eccentricity.<sup>12</sup>

While it's not hard to speculate that Crouch would have few kind words for William Parker or his collaboration with Amiri Baraka, he's often praised Marcus Roberts, and has written the liner notes to a handful of his albums. Yet, in a sense, Roberts, far from being considered an avant-gardist by anyone, delivers highly eccentric renditions of both *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Yamekraw*. In fact, one thread that connects both projects by Roberts and Parker is their eccentricity, in the sense that they enact radical revisions, apply interpretive practices that are foreign to the traditions of their source materials, and problematize the boundaries of genre. Thus, while determining the "enduring profundity" of Roberts's and Parker's acts of historical reimagination is beyond the scope of my analyses, this dissertation does set out to explore the realignments of tradition, genre, and cultural location implied by their projects, with a view to understanding them as "different placements of spirit,"<sup>13</sup> in the words of Baraka—manifestations of "the same family looking at different things. Or looking at things differently."<sup>14</sup>

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12. Stanley Crouch, *Considering Genius: Writings on Jazz* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 30-31.

13. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 215.

14. *Ibid.*, 241.

## Chapter 2. The Unity Music of William Parker's Curtis Mayfield Project

### I. *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*

Curtis Mayfield was a prophet, a preacher, a revolutionary, a humanist, and a griot. He took the music to its most essential level in the America of his day. If you had ears to hear, you knew that Curtis was a man with a positive message—a message that was going to help you to survive.

– William Parker, liner notes to *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*<sup>1</sup>

In March of 2001, William Parker, bassist and one of the leading figures in New York's downtown avant-garde jazz scene, took the stage at the Banlieues Bleues festival in Paris with a massive ensemble—a choir of ninety children from suburban schools, 25 djembe players, and horn and rhythm sections comprised of local, non-professional musicians, young and old—to perform the songs of American soul music icon Curtis Mayfield.<sup>2</sup> The concert was the culmination of Parker's work arranging and teaching Mayfield's songs to school children as part of the festival's community outreach program "Actions Musicales;"<sup>3</sup> it was also a prelude to the unveiling of an ensemble concept that Parker had been considering for years, but that hadn't

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1. William Parker, *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* (Rome: Rai Trade, 2007), CD.

2. William Parker, interview with the author, September 2011. Recordings of two songs performed on this concert, "This is My Country" and "New World Order," can be found on the compilation *I Plan to Stay a Believer: The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* (Brooklyn: AUM Fidelity, 2010), CD.

3. For a detailed ethnographic account of Parker's participation in this educational program, see Alexandre Pierrepont's contribution to the collaborative essay with Romain Tesler and Alexandre Pierrepont, "Itutu ('On how to appropriately present oneself to others'): Extra-Musical Pedagogical Values in Creative Music," *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* 4, no. 1 (2008).

come together until the opportunity was presented by the festival's director, Xavier Lemettre—a project entitled *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*. Dedicated to reinterpreting the music of the late singer-songwriter with a group of veteran improvisers, and featuring the recitation of original poetry by Amiri Baraka,<sup>4</sup> Parker's Mayfield core ensemble would perform for the first time the following evening, and would continue to appear throughout Europe and North America over the next decade, producing two albums of live recordings.<sup>5</sup>

The prefatory performance with its outsized forces of children and amateurs, in so many ways unlike the octet that would constitute the core of Parker's project, nevertheless embodied themes of empowerment, liberation and collective participation central to Parker's practices as a bandleader and key to his engagement with Mayfield's music. Parker remembers the performance as "a very, very joyous event, a special concert," explaining, "when those kids came off [the bandstand] . . . they were so happy, I mean these kids were empowered that day."<sup>6</sup> Parker's emphasis on empowerment resonates with the lyrics to many of Mayfield's songs, and particularly the four he chose to arrange for the occasion, a selection that also highlights the political in Mayfield's music: the love song "I'm So Proud," legible in the context of an African

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4. In addition to Parker and Baraka, the group's personnel for this date included vocalist Leena Conquest, trumpeter Lewis Barnes, saxophonist Darryl Foster, pianist Dave Burrell, and drummer Hamid Drake. Subsequently, saxophonist Sabir Mateen was added as a regular member of the ensemble.

5. The first is a recording of a performance from their 2004 appearance at the New York Is Now! Festival in Rome, available from the Italian label Rai Trade: *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* (Rome: Rai Trade, 2007), CD; the second is a compilation of performances from 2001-2008: *I Plan To Stay a Believer: The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* (Brooklyn: AUM Fidelity, 2010), CD.

6. Parker, interview with the author, September 2011.

American politics of uplift,<sup>7</sup> and three others which undoubtedly address political concerns, from the Civil Rights Era implications of "People Get Ready" and the more explicit "This Is My Country," to the post-Million Man March vision of "New World Order." As Parker noted, many of the children in the concert were born of African immigrants, their French language a legacy of colonization. Thus, the empowerment felt by this multitude of children coming together, singing the lyrics "Some people think we don't have the right / to say it's my country," takes on a new political significance, reframing Mayfield's messages of unity and radical integration in a transnational, post-colonial context.

This process of not only disseminating but extending and reframing the liberatory messages of Mayfield's music is central to Parker's conception of *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*, and it embraces musical materials as well as extra-musical referents. As Parker has asserted, "Every song written or improvised has an inside song which lives in the shadows, in-between the sounds and silences and behind the words, pulsating, waiting to be reborn as a new song."<sup>8</sup> The goal for Parker and the members of his ensemble is to bring these potential "inside songs" into being, collectively drawing out their own connections to the musical and cultural materials of Mayfield's music. They do this not by repeating the past through a fidelity to Mayfield's recordings, but by reincarnating his historically grounded music in the present: channeling it through their subjectivities as improvising performers, with a fidelity to "the spirit

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7. In his book *Higher Ground: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield and the Rise and Fall of American Soul* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), Craig Hansen Werner has written, "Overflowing with the joy of self-acceptance, 'I'm So Proud' quietly affirmed the Black Power movement's slogan 'Black Is Beautiful'" (119).

8. Parker, liner notes to *I Plan to Stay a Believer*.



in which Curtis Mayfield wrote his songs."<sup>9</sup> In the process, Parker's ensemble transforms these songs by breaking open both form and content, expanding upon them with new musical and textual materials and creating space, as Parker suggests, for previously undisclosed perspectives.

In thus revisiting and reinventing the music of Curtis Mayfield, Parker's project enacts a complex kind of historicism: it simultaneously collapses temporal distance, remaking Mayfield's music in the present, while highlighting historical depth, creating palimpsestic revisions of Mayfield's songs in which the layers of the past are visible. Acknowledging this historicism is crucial to understanding the cultural politics of Parker's project. As he notes, "at the same time we're doing Curtis Mayfield, we're doing a project called *Raining on the Moon* . . . that has got songs, lyrics, snap-crackle-and-pop—a lot of it is social, political—so, you say, 'Well, now I could have just done that.'"<sup>10</sup> Indeed, many of Parker's original songs address themes similar to those found in Mayfield's lyrics. The implication is that "doing Curtis Mayfield" carries with it a special significance, and I contend that this significance lies in the transhistorical cultural space created between the eras in which many of Mayfield's songs were current—those of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements—and the present moment of reinterpretation. In this space, the musical and textual contributions of Parker's ensemble enact critical agency, signifying not only on musical but historical and political matters. I also contend that Parker's collaboration with Amiri Baraka is essential to Parker's historico-political project, for in choosing to self-identify with the spirit of Curtis Mayfield as he does, Parker gestures towards another "inside song": the vision of a unified, self-aware, and politically active African American culture,

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9. Parker, liner notes to *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*.

10. Parker, interview with the author, September 2011.

aspiring to what Baraka, writing in 1966, called "Unity Music."<sup>11</sup> With *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*, William Parker transgresses the genre boundaries that obscure this vision, situating his project in a lineage of "Black Music" and enacting a liberatory politics at the level of musical process, all towards the end of fashioning from Mayfield's sounds and spirit a contemporary politics of African American identity and political struggle—the rebirth of "a message that [is] going to help you to survive."<sup>12</sup>

## II. Tribute Projects, Race, Genre and Historicism

The differences between rhythm and blues and the so-called new music or art jazz, the different places, are artificial, or they are merely indicative of the different placements of spirit.

– LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)"<sup>13</sup>

In the liner notes to the album *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*, Parker reveals, "This is the first project, in my 30-year career, that I have devoted to the music of someone else."<sup>14</sup> Though he's been a sideman on numerous recordings led by others, all of his prior outings as a leader have featured original music. Parker explains, "I don't really like to do projects and to be a project person," citing the tendency of such repertory projects to eclipse other efforts: "you get stuck on projects—you only get hired for these projects, rather than your own music." He

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11. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 205-41.

12. Parker, liner notes to *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*.

13. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 215.

14. Parker, liner notes to *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*.

continued, with some amusement, "You know, I noticed, in the Downbeat poll this year, I got an 'arranger' nomination, and that's probably because of that Curtis Mayfield record."<sup>15</sup> Parker's bemused response to the nomination underscores what an unusual gesture it is for him to assume the role of arranger and interpreter;<sup>16</sup> it also alludes to the way in which Parker's practice of ensemble improvisation, discussed later, both complicates and transcends traditional models of arrangement.

Beyond the novelty of his leading an ensemble "devoted to the music of someone else,"<sup>17</sup> Parker's decision to focus on Mayfield's music is itself notable, particularly in light of the way that tribute projects often position their practitioners in the lineages of canonical figures—a number of jazz albums on compositions by Ellington, Monk and Coltrane spring to mind. In a sense, tribute albums help to construct and reaffirm the boundaries of "the tradition," generating standard texts that interpreters can treat with varying degrees of novelty, thereby keeping the interpreted music circulating while potentially reinvigorating it. On the subject of tradition, Parker makes an interesting assertion, worth quoting in full:

I grew up listening to Smokey Robinson, The Temptations, Martha and The Vandellas, Gladys Knight and The Pips, and Curtis Mayfield and The Impressions. In my mind, their music was not separate from Marian Anderson, Count Basie, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Don Byas, Sarah Vaughan, Ornette

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15. Parker, interview with the author, September 2011.

16. Parker has subsequently developed a big band project devoted to the music of Duke Ellington, "The Essence of Ellington." The group's debut performance, in Milan on February 5, 2012, was recorded for Parker's Centering Records and is available from AUM Fidelity: William Parker, *Essence of Ellington / Live in Milano* (Brooklyn: AUM Fidelity, 2012), CD. At the time of the 2011 interview, Parker was working up the ensemble in preparation for the Milan premiere, and claimed, for the reasons cited above, that the Ellington project would "probably be the last project I do."

17. Parker, liner notes to *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*.

Coleman, Don Cherry, Cecil Taylor, Bill Dixon, and Louis Armstrong. All this music is part of an African American tradition that comes out of the blues. The roots of the jazz known as avant-garde are also in the blues, the field holler, and the church. Avoiding artificial separations is the key to understanding the true nature of the music. All these artists ultimately speak using this reservoir of sounds and colors that we can use to paint our own music.<sup>18</sup>

Thus Parker makes it clear that, with his tribute project, he situates himself not in the generically defined "jazz tradition," but instead in a tradition constituted by an ethnically marked cultural network: the "African American tradition that comes out of the blues." In a sense, he urges his listeners not to hear this music as a hybridization of disparate styles but as a reconfigured utterance arising from the same musical and cultural "reservoir," the "artificial separations" of style being music industry fictions that mask "the true nature of the music"—that is, at least in part, a multivalent commentary on the African American experience.

This understanding of a holistic African American tradition unified by a broadly defined conception of the blues is not unique to William Parker, and one of its most forceful longtime advocates is his collaborator on *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*, Amiri Baraka. I'm particularly interested in the way that Baraka's presence and his contributions to the project interact with some of the aspirations outlined in his 1966 essay, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)." Here it's worth quoting the concluding paragraphs of Baraka's piece:

But here is a theory stated just before. That what will come will be a *Unity Music*. The Black Music which is jazz and blues, religious and secular. Which is New Thing and Rhythm and Blues. The consciousness of social reevaluation and rise, a social spiritualism. A mystical walk up the street to a new neighborhood where all the risen live. Indian-African anti-Western-Western (as geography) Nigger-sharp Black and strong.

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18. Ibid.



In the 'downtown scene' of the early 1990s, non-black performers responded to the canonization of jazz, with its aggressive and nostalgic marketing of black 'young lions,' with a range of projects that echoed the increased circulation of global sounds . . . These and other actions by highly successful white performers served to consolidate the concept of the musical 'project,' a term which quickly displaced 'band' and which located music of previously unhyphenated white musicians in a zone of ideology and identity.

A 'project' is more than a band: it is an aesthetically-, thematically- and temporally-bounded body of compositions and performative approaches in which extra-musical features give music a narrative frame.<sup>21</sup>

Parker was a central figure in the "'downtown scene' of the early 1990s"—indeed, this period that saw his increasing visibility as both a bandleader and, with his wife Patricia Nicholson, as an organizer of the Vision Festival<sup>22</sup>—and his cohort included a number of other African American musicians who were held (or held themselves) at arm's length from the ossifying canonization of jazz. Though Kalmanovitch's point about the reactions of non-black musicians to this hegemonic process is well taken, her analysis doesn't seem to acknowledge that African American musicians might also be put off, or even pushed aside, by the conservative ideological underpinnings of the Marsalis-Crouch-Murray consensus, or that some might posit competing conceptions of "blackness," thereby staking out "zone[s] of ideology and identity."

With this corrective in mind, *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* seems aptly described as an "aesthetically-, thematically- and temporally-bounded body of compositions and performative approaches in which extra-musical features give the music a narrative frame." In

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21. Tanya Kalmanovitch, "'Indo-jazz fusion': Jazz and Karnatak Music in Contact," (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2008), 141.

22. For an insightful discussion of the origins of the Vision Festival and of Parker's career and worldview, see Scott Currie's dissertation, "Sound Visions: An Ethnographic Study of Avant-Garde Jazz in New York City" (PhD diss., New York University, 2009).

the liner notes to the AUM Fidelity recording, Parker identifies the historical and cultural frame explicitly: "In the 1960s during the civil rights movement there was a musical soundtrack in the background: Max Roach, Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp, Jackie McLean, John Coltrane. Curtis Mayfield was right in the middle directing his music to the cry of freedom."<sup>23</sup> This list juxtaposes Mayfield with some of the most visibly political jazz musicians of the era<sup>24</sup>—"the cry for freedom" calls to mind Abbey Lincoln's momentous performance on Roach's *Freedom Now Suite*—and demonstrates how the shared struggle against racial oppression provides a historiographic context that supersedes musical genre. Parker continues by outlining a unified lineage of African American music that dovetails into political resistance:

Ritual into Field Holler > Field Holler into Spiritual > Spiritual into Blues > Blues into Swing > Swing into Bebop > Bebop into Post Bop > Post Bop into Avant Garde > Avant Garde back to Ritual. A Circle, and all part of the bigger tune called Peoples' Music. Reclamation of land, self-determination, and right to change existing structure rather than assimilation into a quagmire misnamed progress, Inside Songs are time into rhythm, rhythm into pulse into chant.<sup>25</sup>

It's worth returning here to the political import of Baraka's Civil Rights-era essay, from the same passage cited earlier: "The collection of wills is a simple unity like on the street. A bigger music, and muscle, for the move necessary. The swell of a music, of action and reaction, a seeing, thrown in swift slick tone along the entire muscle of a people."<sup>26</sup> Both authors invoke the

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23. Parker, liner notes to *I Plan to Stay a Believer*.

24. For accounts of the political activities and affinities of each of these musicians, see Ingrid Monson's *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

25. Parker, liner notes to *I Plan to Stay a Believer*.

26. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 241.

imagery of a populace in active resistance, taking to the streets, chanting—revolutionary imagery. The connection between the musical and the political resides in this gesture of coming together.

At the same time, it's worth noting the decades separating the Civil Rights and Black Power movements from the era in which Parker and Baraka began their collaboration on *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*. Both artists lived through those earlier movements, and their birth dates frame Mayfield's: Baraka was born in 1934, Mayfield in 1942 and Parker in 1952. Nevertheless, the gesture of revisiting Mayfield's music is one of reaching back to a political moment when revolutionary potential seemed more tangible. Parker's motivations in this respect seem twofold. First, there is an overture to cultural memory: for Parker, Mayfield becomes a symbol for a panoply of African American artists, some popular and some esoteric, some actively political and others not, but all folded together within a history and a unity of African American cultural production. Continuing in the liner notes to the AUM Fidelity recording, he writes another list that shades effortlessly across "artificial separations" of genre and discipline:

Heartbeats, Stairsteps, Temptations, Supremes, Miracles, Impressions, Contours, Crusaders, Clouds of Joy, The Messengers and The Arkestra. Rahsaan, Hassan, Hannibal Yusef Waliyaya, Yusef Iman. The unrecognized old days, Lowell Davidson, Alan Shorter, Larry Neal, Bob Kaufman, Ed Bullins, Ben Caldwell, who are they? They are also inside Curtis Mayfield songs, as well as Robert Thompson, Romare Bearden, Ted Joans, Nikki Giovanni: to love one is to love them all.<sup>27</sup>

Second, this invocation of cultural memory is an act of reclamation aimed at a contemporary cultural politics. In the same liner notes cited above, Parker envisions the almost-emergent

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27. Parker, liner notes to *I Plan to Stay a Believer*.



revolutionary potential of this cultural history for a hip-hop generation beset by urban decay and corrupted by commercialism:

Underneath the pulse and crust are shouts for liberation and respect, to the left of the melody ready to surface from the gaps in the cement that covers the grass in the South Bronx inhabited by the low baggy pants clan who later signed contracts with Madison Avenue.<sup>28</sup>

Later, he continues:

We need . . . Those who can self-ignite and keep the fire of compassion glowing, who will never forget the despair on the faces of the people who think their only hope is 'basketball.' This music is for them and for the young girls who are born beautiful but are told they are ugly by people who want to sell them makeup to cover up the beauty . . . Let's play all night for them until the volcano of justice erupts, stretching the sentiments of each lyric as a way of responding to the call to get ready; get ready to prepare for a new world. The music, the poetry, the dance and the theatre once stolen will be returned.<sup>29</sup>

Thus Parker makes it clear that, by interpreting the songs of Curtis Mayfield, his aim is not to return to the glory of an idealized past, but to return the "stolen" potential of a revolutionary past to his contemporary political moment, recasting the aesthetic and political world of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the present. In this way, Parker's project points towards the era in which Mayfield's music was most visible, simultaneously making it new while highlighting its historical distance. This is not a nostalgic gesture, but an attempt to press the politics of Mayfield's music, his willfully optimistic cultural critique, into the service of a contemporary struggle for African American identity, spirituality and political engagement.

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28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

### III. Spontaneity, Spirituality, Empowerment and Revolution

The school of music I wanted to be associated with was the black music revolutionary spiritual school. At the same time, I had to be open to the unknown school that would reveal itself as time went on.

– William Parker, *who owns music?*<sup>30</sup>

William Parker and the members of his ensemble channel the spirit of Curtis Mayfield's music collectively, transforming his songs through improvisatory interventions in poetic content, musical style and form. While revisiting Mayfield's music has to be, in some sense, a historical excavation, Parker is very clear in his desire not to present any mummified corpses:

The music that passed through the life and work of Curtis Mayfield cannot be duplicated. The question becomes, how can it continue? I also ask myself this question in connection to Duke Ellington or Thelonious Monk. It always seemed to me that when Ellington died, the music physically died with him. We were left orphaned, with just the recorded part of his work and all these notes on paper, but that is not the reality. Once you realize this truth, you can find a different way to proceed to re-create the songs. Paradoxically, you can only find a way to play the music by initially affirming that it cannot be done.<sup>31</sup>

Parker's insistence on the irretrievability of the past may well be read as a critique of repertory jazz and the nostalgic canonization cited by Kalmanovitch—in the AUM Fidelity liner notes

Parker writes, "We don't . . . need preservationists, revivalists, bootleggers or music police."<sup>32</sup>

And indeed, the ensemble's solution to the paradox that Parker cites above is to radically remake

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30. William Parker, *who owns music? notes from a spiritual journey* (Köln: Buddy's Knife Jazz Edition, 2007), 33.

31. Parker, liner notes to *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*.

32. Parker, liner notes to *I Plan to Stay a Believer*.

Mayfield's songs not only for the present historical moment, but for the present moment of each performance. As Parker stresses, "every concert, every time we do it, it's different, totally different."<sup>33</sup> Thus, Parker's approach to Mayfield's music not only enacts a critique of repertory performance, but the ensemble itself continually deconstructs its own repertoire: through the interplay of group improvisation and an attentiveness to what Parker calls "playing in real time,"<sup>34</sup> each performance of a song is made anew, resisting the repetition of prior performances.

Parker's interpretive practice prioritizes individual agency as much as spontaneity, but it's an agency that's responsible to the collective, in service of a "spiritual communion"<sup>35</sup> that's grounded in Parker's broader worldview. In what Scott Currie has termed Parker's "theosonic ontology," "music occupies a realm of existence separate from and prior to mundane human reality."<sup>36</sup> In Parker's words,

music existed before man, as a separate entity. Man didn't invent music, he discovered music, or what I call the 'sound stream.' When we play music, what we're doing is throwing lines into the sound stream, and then we try to get the sound stream to come back through us as music.<sup>37</sup>

Here, it's worth noting Parker's language in describing Mayfield's music, above: "The music that passed through the life and work of Curtis Mayfield cannot be duplicated."<sup>38</sup> In Parker's

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33. Parker, interview with the author, September 2011.

34. Ibid.

35. Currie, "Sound Visions," 232.

36. Ibid., 231.

37. Pete Gershon, "Pete Gershon talks with contemporary music's best kept secret: William Parker," *AUM Fidelity*, accessed October 23, 2013, <http://www.aumfidelity.com/soundboardwp.htm>.

38. Parker, liner notes to *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*.

cosmology, individual musicians are not the creators of music, but the "catalysts" of a reaction that brings forth a unique portion of music's infinite potential.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the "reality" of music is channeled through the subjectivity of the live performer, and does not reside in the objective traces that remain: "just the recorded part . . . and all these notes on paper." The goal, then, for Parker and the members of his ensemble, is not to imitate the remains of Mayfield's music, but "to call upon the spirit in which Curtis Mayfield wrote his songs"<sup>40</sup> in order to be the "catalysts" for a new expression: "we find our center within his music so that we may become ourselves. Hopefully to present a full spectrum story that would be in tune with the original political and social message laid out by Curtis."<sup>41</sup>

In the process, Parker and the members of his ensemble utilize, alter or diverge entirely from his transcriptions and arrangements of Mayfield's songs, guided by their disciplined intuition of what the music requires in the moment. Parker refers to this open-ended approach to musical materials and ensemble organization as "self conduction."<sup>42</sup> Describing this praxis in the context of performing his own compositions with his large ensemble The Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra, Parker writes:

Self conduction is the concept of conducting oneself in and out of sections of a composition. It is the same concept one would use in a small group setting such as a trio or quartet. Each player in a section can play prearranged or composed material. There is also the option of creating parts or settings at the moment. Working individually or as a section. The rule is the moment always supersedes the preset compositional idea. Each player has the freedom to create their own

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39. Parker, interview with the author, September 2011.

40. Parker, liner notes to *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*.

41. Parker, liner notes to *I Plan to Stay a Believer*.

42. This is a riff on Butch Morris's term for conducted ensemble improvisation, "conduction."

part if they feel the part they would create is better than the written part at that moment.<sup>43</sup>

In the context of *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*, this freedom means that, through the interventions of individual players and the dynamic interactions of the ensemble, the arrangements of Mayfield's songs become not just malleable but mutable: form and content are negotiated in real time, and, once broken open, need not be restored to some preordained state. The result is a music that is continually in the process of becoming, where "preset" materials act as points of reference and musical signifiers, but do not necessarily dictate the musical flow or outcome.

This ensemble approach has a metaphysical dimension that, again, reflects Parker's musical cosmology. "Improvisation," Parker writes,

is not the art of making up, it is the art of emptying oneself of all preset ideas, not making up music but just praying and attempting to live a life in the spirit. To eventually transcend all preset form but as prayer, let it be spontaneous, its order being inside you.<sup>44</sup>

This goal of transcendence is also applied to interpreting existing music, including the music of Curtis Mayfield. Parker sees no qualitative distinction between improvisation and composition, but instead between the quantity of "preset" materials involved. "Every improvisation is a composition, but not every composition contains improvisation." He continues, "Both concepts of composition, preset and spontaneous, have to transcend themselves to work . . . When the

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43. William Parker, liner notes to *Mayor of Punkville* (Brooklyn: AUM Fidelity, 2000), CD.

44. Parker, *who owns music?*, 100.

music procreates during performance to create a living entity, it is successful."<sup>45</sup> Thus, in order for *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* to succeed, the ensemble must collectively transcend the materials of Mayfield's compositions as well as Parker's arrangements, creating a new music with a life of its own. This process of spiritual transcendence, of birthing a "living entity," is intertwined with the channeling of the "sound stream" cited earlier, and it depends vitally on spontaneity and an openness to the unknown, the yet unborn.

Parker emphasizes the importance of unlearning, of "emptying oneself," to an experience of musical liberation. "That's a personal goal," he asserted, "to find the groove everywhere you go. It's what's called playing in real time . . . rather than play something that you know, try to play in the moment."<sup>46</sup> Recalling a statement by Bill Dixon, he paraphrased,

It's very hard to play completely free, because the minute you do something, you're teaching yourself something. So every time you play something that you haven't played, you're teaching yourself about that, and you catalogue it, and you use it again. So it's very hard not to teach yourself, and to do stuff without learning. How can you stay in the zone or this spot where you don't know anything? And that's what you're shooting for: not to have a gravitational pull towards what you know, but always to have a gravitational pull to stay in the area where you don't know what you're doing.<sup>47</sup>

For Parker, moving towards the unknown requires musicians to un-train habitual behaviors and formulaic preconceptions, and instead to cultivate an awareness of "all the possibilities" for musical response.<sup>48</sup> The goal of this practice is for improvisers to be receptive to the musical

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45. Ibid., 68.

46. Parker, interview with the author, September 2011.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

situation and to their own best course of action. Parker explained, "You're training yourself to be sensitive to the moment," continuing,

Every time you play, you say, 'I gotta' play the right thing, every time I play. And I cannot fail.' That's your credo, that's your motto, that's your pledge. And, first of all, you have that. So even if you play the wrong thing, you will play it right. You know what I mean? You will make it work: the wrong thing will be the right thing.<sup>49</sup>

This last assertion is particularly significant: first, it reinforces that the responsibility to play "the right thing" resides in the agency of each player, and not in the adherence to any preconceived music; and second, it suggests that, in order for "the wrong thing [to] be the right thing," each player must also unlearn the internalized judgement imposed from the outside by musical systems. As Parker has written, "We fail musically when we try to be something other than ourselves."<sup>50</sup> Thus, it becomes clear that the ultimate concern of "stay[ing] in the area where you don't know anything" is to develop a different kind of self-knowledge: an awareness of and trust in oneself, "just praying and attempting to live a life in the spirit."<sup>51</sup>

This self-aware, spiritually humble sense of individual empowerment is central to Parker's conception of "self conduction." Parker developed his approach to ensemble improvisation as an extension of his work with Cecil Taylor<sup>52</sup>:

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49. Ibid.

50. Parker, *who owns music?*, 66.

51. Ibid., 100.

52. In an interview with Scott Currie, "Parker . . . described his idea of self-conduction as 'basically what . . . Cecil [Taylor] hopes would happen' in his own ensembles." Currie, "Sound Visions," 328.

Cecil would give you all the freedom to be your own catalyst, and not sit there and say, 'Well, Cecil's playing everything. What am I gonna' do?' No, nobody can play everything. The thing is that, what a wonderful thing if you could inspire Cecil to go beyond himself. You could inspire Cecil to play something beautiful, he could inspire you to play something beautiful, that's what it's about. But not to just sit there and follow.<sup>53</sup>

For Parker, the aspiration not to follow, but to find one's own way, operates on many levels: in the interpretation of repertoire, in the approach to musical training, and, as cited above, in the individual interactions of ensemble improvisation. The "freedom to be your own catalyst" is the empowerment to find one's own unique contribution to the emergent musical moment. As he's noted, "you're taking chances with this kind of arranging, and it really relies on the player to be the spontaneous arranger, the spontaneous conductor, the spontaneous bandleader, where they're responsible for themselves as part of the band."<sup>54</sup> To this end, despite his role as ensemble leader, Parker works to divest himself of authority:

I don't really get so much trying to control music, because I don't want to kill any spark. I want all the sparks to flame up . . . If [ensemble members] can work it out by themselves, it's better than me saying, 'don't do this,' and 'don't do that.' 'Cause you have to empower the musicians, so they can make the right decisions. And that's what I want. I don't want to be having to make every decision for people. 'Cause I don't know the answer to everything. I'll tell you that in a minute.<sup>55</sup>

Instead, Parker insists, the answers are channeled by musicians attuned to the music itself:

You know, people say, 'Well, how do you put the music together, and how do you know when to go there?' The music tells you. I mean, that's the barometer. You

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53. Parker, interview with the author, September 2011.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.



know, it tells you, 'This is not working, let's go, come on, move!' You know, and when you get to the point where you don't have to think about it, it's working. And that's when it begins to flow on its own.<sup>56</sup>

It's the coming together of these attuned, liberated musicians—humble in spirit, "sensitive to the moment" and empowered to "make the right decisions"—that gives birth to the possible, to the "living entity" of Parker's musical ideal.

The political implications of this musical ideal are manifold. The conception of a music that is perpetually of the moment, always open-ended and in constant transformation, is a conception of continual revolution. Those musicians who come together to individually and collectively facilitate this transformation are activists and role models—after all, a "catalyst" is nothing if not an agent of change:

It is the job of the artist to incite revolution, to uplift the receiver of that art so as to see the best way to live on earth, to move those who box life in to understand a more whole concept of existence, to see that it is life which is most important, not the life of the individual, but the process of living (the how and why), not just staying alive and existing, but living as full creative beings<sup>57</sup>

Parker's emphasis on life and "the process of living" is consistent with the priority he gives to living musicians and their subjectivities, over the objective materials (scores, recordings) and prescriptive rules of musical systems. His reference to "a more whole concept of existence" points towards a broader understanding of his cosmology: that his vision of ongoing spiritual revolution is not limited to music, but permeates all aspects of life. As Parker has written, pointedly addressing race and American politics:

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56. Ibid.

57. Parker, *who owns music?*, 80.

Black improvised music has had to fight for its life since the first slaves were brought here in 1619. This fight for survival goes on today and will continue to go on until America is transformed . . . To be effective against America's anti-life policies, we have to be radical in every area of our lives. The music we create, how we walk, eat, sleep, and breathe, must all be geared to a new aesthetic, a system that allows and encourages all people to follow their own vision without being penalized for it, a system that puts life ahead of profit.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, Parker provides a secular grounding for his worldview, though one that's deeply intertwined with his spiritual and metaphysical concerns: for those struggling against systematic oppression, the repetition of the past and the maintenance of the status quo ("just staying alive and existing") are both unacceptable options. In this respect, Parker's practices of musical improvisation and interpretation are reflections of a larger political perspective.

Parker's ensemble practice of "self conduction" directly enacts his political ideals in microcosm, attempting to realize "a system that allows and encourages all people to follow their own vision without being penalized for it." Parker compares the empowerment of individual musicians in his ensemble to the larger political project of movement building:

The people must be empowered . . . you cannot just be held up by a leader. You've gotta' be your own leader. Because if you're gonna' have any movement, when the leader goes, the movement goes . . . You have to think for yourself. You just can't be a follower. And I want everybody to be empowered to the max, not in an ego way, but in the way that things don't die when somebody pulls out.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, while Parker's approach to ensemble improvisation strives towards liberation for those musicians involved, it also provides a model of socio-political organization, one that might

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58. Ibid., 58-9.

59. Parker, interview with the author, September 2011.

"incite revolution" by "uplift[ing] the receiver of that art so as to see the best way to live on earth." Significantly, this model of movement politics, one in which individual empowerment is essential to collective uplift, resonates strongly with Curtis Mayfield's music. In particular, Parker's comments recall the lyrics of Mayfield's 1968 song, "They Don't Know," recorded by The Impressions in the wake of Dr. King's assassination. In it, Mayfield asks, "We have lost another leader / Lord, how much must we endure?" He continues, "Funny, they think / we have no one to lead us . . . but they don't know / every brother is a leader."<sup>60</sup> This similarity of perspective suggests not only Parker's affinity for Mayfield's politics, but the shared cultural space both artists inhabit.

Another aspect of this shared cultural space involves the relationship of spirituality to political struggle. As noted earlier, Baraka identifies the distinction between the "religious and secular" as one of the "artificial oppositions in Black Music" that the coming "Unity Music" will resolve. Indeed, by 1966, the active role of the African American church in the Civil Rights Movement and the contributions of singers from Mahalia Jackson to Aretha Franklin to Curtis Mayfield and The Impressions had already breached this sacred/secular divide and fashioned worldly demands from gospel pleas for salvation.<sup>61</sup> And while Parker's cosmology is not Christian, the way he intertwines spirituality and revolution can be understood as emerging from this broader constellation in African American culture. Much of Baraka's essay is spent meditating on his assertion that "to go back in any historical (or emotional) line of ascent in

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60. The Impressions, "They Don't Know," *This Is My Country* (Chicago: Curtom, 1968), LP.

61. For a discussion of the "gospel vision" at the heart of "soul" music, as well as a discussion of its political dimensions, see Werner, *Higher Ground*.

Black music leads us inevitably to religion, i.e., spirit worship,"<sup>62</sup> a view consistent with what Mayfield has called the "depth of the religious feeling of black music."<sup>63</sup> In Baraka's view, the emotional invocation present in both "spirit worship" and political protest is intrinsic to African American musical expression: "Black people's songs have carried the fire and struggle of their lives since they first opened their mouths in this part of the world. They have always wanted a better day . . . Black religious music has always had an element of protest in it."<sup>64</sup> Moreover, he argues, the retention of an African spiritual sensibility is itself a form of cultural resistance that dates to the imposition of Christianity in the New World, and it manifests in the evolution of a syncretic Afro-Christian church as well as in the alternative, esoteric spiritualities of African American avant-gardists from John Coltrane to Albert Ayler to Sun-Ra, members of what Parker calls "the black music revolutionary spiritual school."<sup>65</sup> For Baraka in 1966, bringing together these divergent branches of African American spirituality is another aspect of revolutionary cultural consolidation that is "Unity Music":

The meeting of the practical God (i.e. of the existent American idiom) and the mystical (abstract) God is also the meeting of the tones, of the moods, of the knowledge, the different musics and the emergence of the new music, the really new music, the all-inclusive whole. The emergence also of the new people, the Black people conscious of all their strength, in a unified portrait of strength, beauty and contemplation.<sup>66</sup>

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62. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 207.

63. Werner, *Higher Ground*, 157.

64. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 236-7.

65. Parker, *who owns music?*, 33.

66. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 219-20.

In the way that it channels the gospel-inflected soul of Mayfield's music through an improvisational practice rooted in Parker's esoteric spirituality, *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* might be understood as a "meeting of the practical God . . . and the mystical," in service of the revolutionary uplift that Baraka envisions.

Perhaps most important for understanding Parker's project, however, is the way in which the themes of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, those engaged by Mayfield in his music—self-awareness, empowerment, uplift, collectivity, spirituality, revolution, freedom—are not only reflected and transformed in Parker's worldview but actualized in his musical practice. In this sense, Parker's project points to his own engagement with black liberatory politics and reveals it as the foundation upon which he's developed an idiosyncratic musical, spiritual and political cosmology. Thus, through *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*, we are also provided a window onto the inside songs of William Parker.

#### **IV. *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue***

JazzTimes: Why do you call your project the "Inside Song[s]" of Curtis Mayfield?

[William Parker] It's like having a tablecloth that's reversible. We see only one side of it, but there's another side, which may be the most beautiful side, which we haven't seen. And when you really tap into the music, it opens up and goes beyond his notes and words. That was the concept, to tap inside. Because what he was doing, is not really so different from what I'm doing.<sup>67</sup>

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67. Michelle Mercer, "William Parker on Curtis Mayfield," *JazzTimes*, June 2001, <http://jazztimes.com/articles/20555-william-parker-on-curtis-mayfield>.

Through *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*, Parker and his ensemble identify with Mayfield's music "so that [they] may become [themselves],"<sup>68</sup> reframing his politics of uplift and struggle for their historical moment and remaking his songs in the emergent moment of each performance, thus enacting their own liberation as improvising interpreters. At the same time, they also highlight their own ties to Mayfield's cultural politics and idiom, pointing to the hidden, interwoven strands that lie behind the tapestry of his music: the interconnections in a broadly unified African American culture, one whose diverse expressions, musical and otherwise, are "merely indicative of the different placements of spirit,"<sup>69</sup> and one in which "the New Black Music and R&B are the same family looking at different things. Or looking at things differently."<sup>70</sup> What results is a familial conversation with Mayfield's music, one in which the members of Parker's ensemble reflect on their own relationships and assert critical agency through revisions and interventions in Mayfield's textual and musical materials.

In order to examine how this conversation unfolds, I turn now to one of the songs that appears on both of the ensemble's albums, *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue*. In dramatically reconfiguring and expanding Mayfield's song, the group gives it an epic treatment in the truest sense: it serves as a framework for constructing in sound and text a grand mythological history, one that builds upon Mayfield's materials but also extends and comments upon them. In doing so, it provides a vivid illustration of Parker's description above of what it means to get "inside" the music, to go "beyond [Mayfield's] notes and words."

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68. Parker, liner notes to *I Plan to Stay a Believer*.

69. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 215.

70. Ibid., 241.

## Mayfield's Recordings

In order to explore how Parker's group turns Mayfield's song inside out, it helps to establish how Curtis Mayfield structured and presented his material; after all, Mayfield himself, or, in Parker's words, "the spirit in which Curtis Mayfield wrote these songs,"<sup>71</sup> is a crucial agent in the collaboration. Moreover, *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* provides a compelling case study not only for exploring the historicist interpretations of Parker's ensemble, but for considering Mayfield's own recorded versions and revisions. Mayfield released two recordings of the song in the early 1970s: the first appears on his solo debut album, *Curtis*;<sup>72</sup> the second, released a year later, is a live recording from *The Bitter End* in New York.<sup>73</sup> Remarkably, Mayfield revisited *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* on his final album, *New World Order*, released in 1996, six years after a tragic on-stage accident left him paralyzed.<sup>74</sup> This last version is particularly significant, since it presents Mayfield himself reengaging with the song's style and content, as well as its themes of unity and political consciousness, more than two decades after the original recording was conceived. It's thus tempting to interpret Mayfield's final recording as both a musical and extra-musical revision, reflecting the changed personal and political circumstances of its moment.

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71. Parker, liner notes to *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*.

72. Curtis Mayfield, "We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue," *Curtis* (Chicago: Curtom, 1970), LP.

73. Curtis Mayfield, "We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue." *Curtis/Live!* (Chicago: Curtom, 1971), LP.

74. Curtis Mayfield, "We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue," *New World Order* (New York: Warner Brothers, 1996), CD.

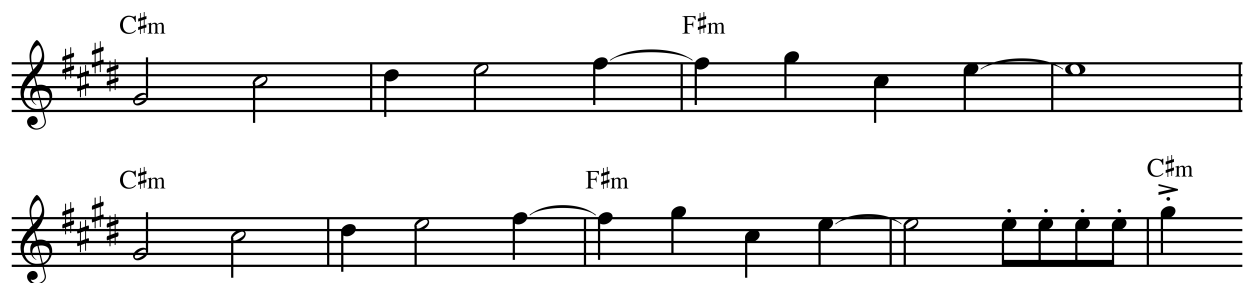
Appropriate to Baraka's aspiration to "Unity Music," Mayfield's song is a call to solidarity within the African American community, a plea for self-awareness and a renewed commitment to collective uplift. Highlighting the cultural ground he shares with Parker and Baraka, Mayfield addresses this community by way of the blues-as-metaphor: "We people / who are darker than blue / are we gonna' stand around this town / and let what others say come true?" Mayfield draws attention to divisions yet to be overcome, including internal race and class oppressions ("High yellow girl can't you tell? / You're just the surface of our dark, deep well. If your mind could really see / you'd know your color, the same as me") as well as black-on-black violence ("But there's the joker in the street / lovin' one brother and killin' the other. / When the time comes and we are really free / there'll be no brothers left, you see?"). Ultimately, as the final lyric highlights, Mayfield's song is an admonishment not to rest on the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Era, but to maintain an awareness of the challenges facing African American communities, with a resolve to work together towards collective uplift: "Pardon me brother / I know we've come a long, long way / but let us not be so satisfied / for tomorrow can be an even brighter day."

All three of Mayfield's recordings share the same formal structure and basic text, though there are some telling changes in the 1996 lyrics, discussed below. The song is divided into two contrasting sections that alternate in an ABA form: the A section is slow, with the expansive character of a ballad; the B section is faster, with the grooving, driving rhythmic sensibility of dance music. The form and presentation of the lyrics are also differentiated between the A and B sections: the A section consists of verses and refrains (which begin "Pardon me brother") in the style of strophic song, while the B section consists of a single verse declaimed in the style of



spoken-word poetry. In each of the three versions, the character of the initial A section is established by a different instrumental introduction, but each concludes the section with a variant of the same transitional melody (Figure 2.1); this melody builds to five percussive hits, the final one landing on a downbeat that gives way suddenly to the contrasting B section. This abrupt shift in tone creates a sense of dramatic rupture rather than transition, as if the elegiac, reflective A section were broken open to reveal its more dynamic, assertive counterpart on the other side. Both of the studio recordings feature an arpeggiated harp re-transition to the A section that becomes an important frame of reference in Parker's interpretations; in Mayfield's live recording, this missing instrumental texture is replaced by a brief bass tremolo. In each of the recordings, the A section returns by proceeding directly into the verse, thus reinforcing the sense that the B section has been an interruption—or, perhaps more appropriate to the political implications of both music and text, an intervention.

**Figure 2.1. Mayfield, transitional melody, *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue***



It's clear that the differences of instrumentation and arrangement in Mayfield's two recordings from the early 1970s reflect the different practical realities of studio and live performance: the live version features Mayfield's touring group, including electric guitars,

electric bass, drums and congas, while the studio recording incorporates lush horn and string arrangements, as well as piano and harp. Significant in both early recordings, however, is the featured role of the congas, played by Henry Gibson. In the song's three-part structure, the B section is dominated by the sound of the congas, and begins in both recordings with a conga solo. While the rhythmic profile of the outer sections is relaxed and spacious, gently lilting through slowly changing harmonies, the central section is rhythmically sharp and driving, full of hard attacks and short, percussive hits. Understanding the congas as an index of Afro-diasporic identity in this period provides an interesting context for this shift of musical tone. In the first performance documented on *Curtis/Live*, "Mighty Mighty (Spade and Whitey)," Mayfield himself alludes to this instrumental signification: as the band cuts out, leaving Gibson's congas as the sole accompaniment to his vocals, Mayfield sings, "We don't need no music / we got conga. / We don't need no music / we got tumba . . . We don't need no music / we got soul."<sup>75</sup> This interpolation seems to answer another, also not included on the song's original recording by The Impressions: in a reference to James Brown's recent Black Power anthem,<sup>76</sup> Mayfield intones, "I wanna' say it loud / I've got to say it loud . . . I'm black and I'm proud."<sup>77</sup> Thus, the congas become entwined with soul in the articulation of black pride, an articulation that doesn't need "music"—that is, an articulation that is self-sufficient, that doesn't require the artifices of melody and harmony. In this context, the dominance of the congas in the B section, combined with the change from the measured observation of the ballad to the active intensity of the dance, as well

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75. Curtis Mayfield, "Mighty Mighty (Spade and Whitey)," *Curtis/Live!* (Chicago: Curtom, 1971), LP.

76. James Brown, "Say it Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud," *Say it Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud* (Cincinnati: King Records, 1969), LP.

77. Mayfield, "Mighty Mighty (Spade and Whitey)."

as with Mayfield's change from singing to declaiming the text, seems marked by references to black self-determination and liberatory struggle.

The lyrics to the two early 1970s recordings express a shift in tone here as well. The text of the first A section is questioning, almost pleading, sung in Mayfield's characteristic falsetto. In contrast, the tone of the B section is more direct:

Get yourself together,  
learn to know your side.  
Shall we commit our own genocide  
before you check out your mind?  
I know we've all got problems,  
that's why I'm here to say:  
keep peace with me, and I with you,  
let me love in my own way.<sup>78</sup>

This command to "Get yourself together" is not only a call to end violence within the African American community, but also to understand one's role in that community, and perhaps to act collectively in the face of a common enemy: "learn to know your side." While Mayfield's lyrics here don't explicitly call for militant resistance, their musical setting, with its increased energy and percussive intensity, seems to imply some kind of action; at the very least, it suggests a militancy of discipline in the way one comes to self-knowledge, a kind of hard-edged realism about one's social position and the dynamics of racial oppression. Thus the B section comes to represent a sort of "inside song" within Mayfield's own composition, forcefully answering, almost in call-and-response, the imploring A section that frames it. In a sense, Mayfield's song enacts a psychodrama where the latent frustrations aroused by the internalized oppressions of the A section erupt forth in the B section, modeling a rupture where restraint gives way to movement

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78. Mayfield, "We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue," *Curtis*.

and change. It is this relationship between awareness and action, and the related tension between self-discipline and violence, that Baraka will exploit in his work with Parker's group.

Mayfield's return to *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* in 1996 departs from the earlier recordings in ways that give it a darker, more conflicted sensibility. This may be because, as the millennium drew to a close, the "brighter day" prophesied in 1970 had not yet been realized. Also, as noted earlier, Mayfield had been living with the physical trauma and limitations of his paralysis: the vocal track for *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* was recorded with a portable setup by producer Roger Troutman while Mayfield lay in bed at home.<sup>79</sup> That Mayfield may have been struggling with his own weariness, political or physical, seems evident in the changes made to the lyrics in the central section of the song:

Get yourself together,  
learn to take the time.  
We're committing our own genocide  
without even trying.  
I know we've all got some problems—  
who in the hell am I to say?  
The peace we keep will be the peace you reap,  
today there is no other way.  
What goes around comes around.<sup>80</sup>

Here there seems a sense of bitterness or alienation ("who in the hell am I to say?"). The final, extra line appended to the verse, "What goes around comes around," seems almost a sort of recrimination. There is a sadness in it that belies the hope for a brighter day with which the song still comes to a close. Perhaps most significant politically, though, is the change of the second

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79. Werner, *Higher Ground*, 285.

80. Mayfield, "We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue," *New World Order*.

line from "learn to know your side" to "learn to take the time." Here, what seems to be an admonition to be conscientious has replaced a call to "know your side" in a racially defined struggle. Whether or not this reflects, for Mayfield, a step away from a more militant politics, it certainly seems to stake out a more cautious position.

The synthesized instrumentation and musical treatment of the 1996 recording reflect Mayfield's engagement with contemporary hip-hop production styles. Mayfield was aware of the historical distance bridged by the recording, explaining, "Fusing elements of hip-hop on this CD was not so much a concession to the times, as much as it was a connection to the times . . . You have to stay true to yourself while recognizing and acknowledging what's going on now."<sup>81</sup> The structure of the song is the same: as before, the up-tempo, dance-groove B section provides a contrast, answering the slow, reflective A sections that surround it, but now the dance groove's frame of reference is updated, and the B section undergoes a transformation in tone from the earlier recordings as notable as the textual revisions that accompany it. The congas are still present, but they're synthesized congas with far less presence in the mix, submerged in a busier texture of spatialized, sampled voices and other synthesized percussion sounds (bells, claps, etc.), and laid out over a smoothly funky bass line. The overall impression is one of a house party, with murmuring voices providing ambience—an ambience from which Mayfield's voice emerges, almost imperceptibly at first, drenched in reverb and sounding disembodied. One might read the relatively light-hearted tone of this dance music as expressing the ambivalence of Mayfield's revised text: the rhythmic profile of the groove is more laid back, less driving than that in the early 1970s recordings. Moreover, the sense of place invoked by this dance music

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81. Werner, *Higher Ground*, 284.

relocates Mayfield's command to "Get yourself together" from the public square of the congas to the domestic social scene of the party, seemingly transforming a public call to action into a private didacticism. As with the changes to the lyrics cited above, it's tempting to read these musical changes as a reflection of the seemingly diminished prospects for movement politics some two-and-a-half decades after *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* was originally recorded.

### **Parker's Recordings**

The two recordings of *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* released by *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* are consistent with Parker's comments cited earlier: "The music that passed through the life and work of Curtis Mayfield cannot be duplicated . . . Paradoxically, you can only find a way to play the music by initially affirming that it cannot be done."<sup>82</sup> Where Mayfield's 1996 revision of the song maintains the same structure, Parker's versions dismantle it, reducing its materials to essentials, omitting entire passages and elongating others through repetition; where Mayfield's revision makes subtle but telling textual alterations, Parker's versions elide text, substituting Baraka's surreal poetics at great lengths, even giving him the last word; and where Mayfield's revision attempts to re-imagine the sound world of the song in the context of contemporary trends in hip-hop production, Parker channels the reinvented music through his own musical ideal of live acoustic performance, an aesthetic self-consciously

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82. Parker, liner notes to *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*.

distanced from studio recording techniques.<sup>83</sup> As should be clear from the earlier discussion of Parker's ensemble practice of "self conduction," the recordings under consideration ought not be seen as realizations of a fixed conception of Mayfield's song so much as documents of interpretations generated collaboratively in the moment of performance. Nevertheless, the materials arranged beforehand by Parker, however mutable, have a significant bearing on the expressive content of Mayfield's song, laying a foundation upon which the ensemble's historicist interpretations are continually reconstructed.

The musical elements shared between the two recordings highlight how Parker envisions *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue*. Towards the end of collective improvisation, Parker's arrangement collapses the materials of Mayfield's song to a handful of premises, including changes to some elements that fundamentally alter their character, while also adding newly composed materials. As in Mayfield's original 1970 studio recording, the A section is given a melodic, instrumental introduction, but Parker eschews Mayfield's melody in favor of his own "first line" (Figure 2.2); Parker also includes a second instrumental melody as a sort of interlude (Figure 2.3), to be introduced at the discretion of the horn section: "the second line comes in when they want to bring it in."<sup>84</sup> This "second line" might be understood to take the place of the melody that Mayfield uses to transition between the A and B sections in all three of his recordings (see Figure 2.1), but its function is very different, since, in perhaps the most significant alteration to the original song, Mayfield's B section never arrives. Instead, the

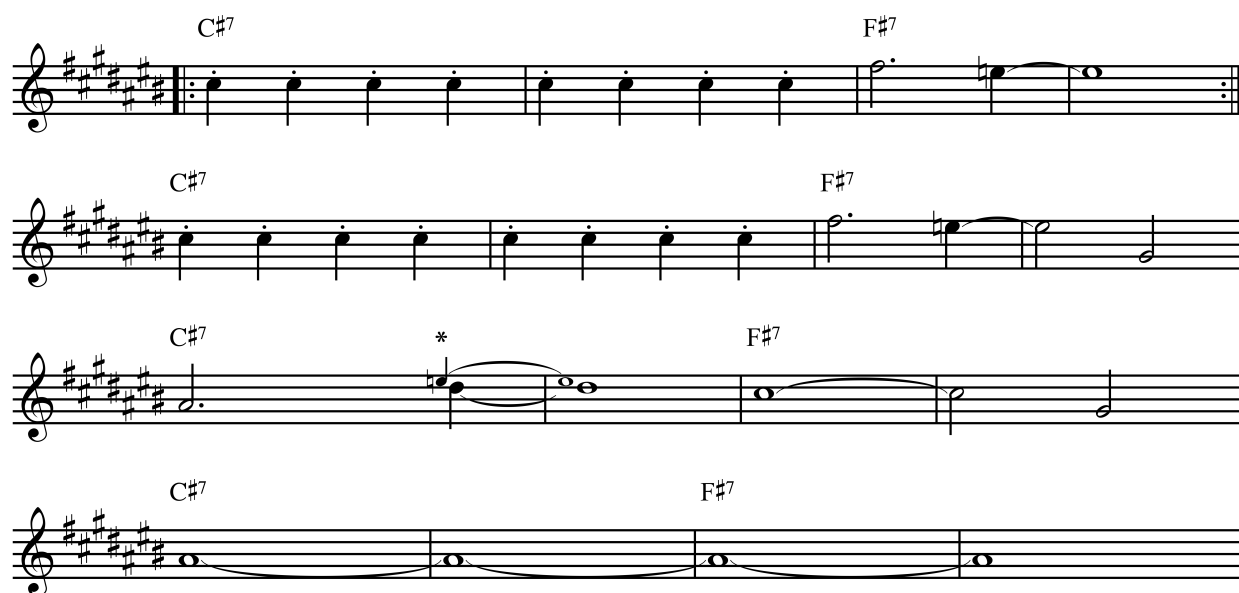
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83. As Parker once commented: "I think whenever you listen to something recorded in the studio, it's like eating food with the plastic still on it." Gershon, "Pete Gershon talks with contemporary music's best kept secret."

84. Parker, interview with the author, September 2011.

harmonic and rhythmic character of the A section is transformed in ways that open out to different formal possibilities.

**Figure 2.2. Parker, "first line," *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue***



\* D# is used in the 2004 recording from Rome (Rome: Rai trade, 2007); E is used in the 2008 recording from Cormons (New York: AUM Fidelity, 2010)

**Figure 2.3. Parker, "second line," *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue***





In a gesture that liquidates the harmonic structure of Mayfield's versions, Parker's arrangement extracts the alternation of C# minor and F# minor harmonies that sets the first lines of the verse in the A section and extends them as a vamp over which the music steadily unfolds (Figure 2.4). Significantly, the mode is changed from minor to major, and each of the chords is conceived as a dominant 7th, resulting in an alternating "blue" major/minor third above the tonic C#. The harmonic shift also renders Mayfield's melody "bluer," since its original minor/pentatonic mode now sits atop a major accompaniment. While on Mayfield's three recordings the tempos vary within a range of 120 to 144 bpm to the quarter note, the tempo on the Parker recordings is significantly faster, in the range of 200 to 216 bpm. As a result, when Leena Conquest enters with Mayfield's lyrics, the accompaniment is moving at double-time: where Mayfield's rendition sets one line of text to four bars of music (Figure 2.5), Conquest's sets each line over eight bars (Figure 2.6). The combination of this buoyant tempo with the alternating dominant-7th chords renders a rather different mood from the slow, somber one of Mayfield's original. The effect of this is to activate the instrumental accompaniment, giving it more of the dance-groove sensibility associated with Mayfield's central B section. In light of the fact that Parker's arrangement elides Mayfield's B section, this reversal of character has significant dramatic implications.

**Figure 2.4. Parker, A section bass line, *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue***



**Figure 2.5. Mayfield, verse 1, line 1, *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue*, as recorded on *Curtis***

This musical score is for the first line of the first verse of the song 'We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue' as recorded by Curtis Mayfield. It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, in the key of C# minor (three sharps: F#, C#, G#). The melody in the treble staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note G#4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C#5, and a quarter note B4. There are fingerings indicated: a triplet of eighth notes (G#4, A4, B4) and a quintuplet of eighth notes (C#5, B4, A4, G#4, F#4). The lyrics 'We peo - ple who are dar - ker than blue' are written below the treble staff. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern.

**Figure 2.6. Conquest, verse 1, line 1, *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue*, as recorded on *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield***

This musical score is for the first line of the first verse of the song 'We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue' as recorded by Conquest on 'The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield'. It consists of two systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef), in the key of C# minor (three sharps: F#, C#, G#). The first system shows the melody in the treble staff starting with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note G#4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a half note C#5. The lyrics 'We peo - ple' are written below. The second system shows the melody continuing with a quarter note G#4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C#5. There are fingerings indicated: a triplet of eighth notes (G#4, A4, B4) and a triplet of eighth notes (C#5, B4, A4). The lyrics 'who are dar - ker than blue' are written below. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern.

As if to underscore this dramatic reversal, Parker's arrangement sets the refrain of Mayfield's song over a static F# minor drone, a shift in sonority rendered particularly striking by the restriction of harmonic materials thus far. The change from the major to the minor mode recalls the elegiac mood of Mayfield's A section, and thus draws attention to the very differences

in Parker's arrangement by standing as a mnemonic link to Mayfield's original. The qualities of observation and reflection expressed by Mayfield's A section are also recalled in Parker's setting of the refrain by a rhythmic expansion into non-metered time, reinforcing the elegiac character by abandoning the dance groove of his A section. Another allusion to Mayfield's recordings comes in the way pianist Dave Burrell's articulates this new/old F# minor harmony, cascading in waves of arpeggiation across the keyboard. This gesture seems strongly reminiscent of the harp arpeggiation that provides the re-transition to the A section in Mayfield's two studio recordings, and it thus fuses two separate passages in Mayfield's song: the refrain and the re-transition. This formal conflation is particularly significant for Parker's elision of Mayfield's B section: in Parker's arrangement, the musical and dramatic contrast provided by the refrain holds the potential to open onto a new section in its own right. This potential is realized quite powerfully in the 2004 Rome interpretation of *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* by Parker's ensemble.

The presentation of Mayfield's lyrics on the two recordings of *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* is consistent with the approach taken by *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* throughout, one that is characterized by processes of repetition, interruption, extension, and elision. Adding another layer of meaning to the conception of "inside songs," Amiri Baraka's poetic recitation regularly breaks in on Mayfield's lyrics, sung by Leena Conquest. In a manner consistent with Parker's practice of "self conduction," the two performers negotiate their shared space in real time, sometimes ceding to one another, sometimes engaging in call and response, with Conquest repeating passages at will and Baraka engaging in dialogue or commenting obliquely. In Parker's conception, Baraka's role is a hermeneutic one:

Amiri Baraka is extending the message, writing off the words of Curtis Mayfield. It adds another layer of text. You have the music, the lyrics, the arrangement of the music, the improvisation, the unanswered questions that the music poses—the unanswered questions that are being posed spontaneously—then you try to provide responses with what Amiri Baraka's doing.<sup>85</sup>

This role of "extending the message" is of particular interest for interpreting the revisions that Parker's ensemble enacts upon *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* in performance. Moreover, as is clear from comparing the two recordings, Baraka's approach to his texts is open-ended and flexible, responsive to both his desires and to interactions with the other performers: while his poetry on both recordings deals with similar themes, there are no lines or even phrases shared between them. Taken along with the varying repetitions and elisions of Mayfield's lyrics provided by Conquest, Baraka's spontaneous contributions provide evidence of Parker's assertion that "every concert, every time we do it, it's different, totally different."<sup>86</sup> Thus, Baraka and Conquest's engagement with Mayfield's lyrics is analogous to the instrumentalists' engagement with Parker's arrangements, and this leveling of performance roles foregrounds the interplay between textual and musical signification: in the complex network of layers described by Parker above, Baraka's "responses" feed back into the improvising collective, his "inside songs" helping to shape the musical outcome.

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85. Mercer, "William Parker on Curtis Mayfield."

86. Parker, interview with the author, September 2011.

## Rome, 2004

Of the two recordings of *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* by Parker's ensemble, the 2004 Rome recording is more substantial in length (at over twenty minutes), poetic intervention, and formal invention. Baraka's contributions to this performance are particularly notable: while Mayfield's lyrics are grounded in the historical realities of 1970, Baraka's interpolations expand upon his themes of self-awareness, black identity, solidarity, and violence, reframing and deepening their perspective by setting them against the backdrop of a mythological blackness that extends into pre-history. In the course of performance, the Rome interpretation of *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* evolves into an ABA form that is analogous to Mayfield's original conception, a remarkable gesture considering that Mayfield's B section is not included in Parker's arrangement. Instead, the ensemble arrives at its own B section by extending the musical materials that Parker uses to set Mayfield's refrain, discussed above. Notably, however, this new section is not built upon Mayfield's lyrics, long since supplanted, but instead upon the imagery and cadence of Baraka's poetry. This new B section has a very different character from Mayfield's B section, and, in combination with the revisions in Parker's arrangement of the A section, the Rome interpretation of *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* projects a compelling reversal of the dramatic juxtaposition between sections in Mayfield's song: where Mayfield's B section turns outward, contrasting the A section's plaintiveness with a commanding assertiveness, the new B section of Parker's ensemble makes an inward turn, contrasting the grooving, almost playful character of his arrangement with a mood of expansive reflection. This inversion transforms the song's political message in ways that are elucidated by Baraka's text. It also enacts a historicist gesture on the level of musical style: where Parker's A

section is marked by references to R&B, the new B section inhabits the sound-world of what was once called the "New Thing." Thus, the 2004 Rome interpretation of *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* articulates, through sonic imagery, the fluid juxtaposition of "Unity Music" envisioned by Baraka in 1966.

The A section on the Rome recording occupies the first 11 minutes; its extended scope is announced at the outset, as the instrumental introduction unfolds two turns through Parker's "first line" for over a minute and a half. In keeping with this process of expansion, Conquest stretches Mayfield's lyrics by breaking up the verses with internal repetitions. In Mayfield's first verse (1:37), she pauses and repeats the first four lines, emphasizing the question they pose: "are we gonna' hang around this town / and let what others say come true?" As if in elliptical response, and seemingly prompted by a ringing, bell-like high C# octave from pianist Dave Burrell, Baraka joins with his own poetic recitation, intoning: "Negroes older than everything" (2:25). He repeats this phrase as Conquest continues with Mayfield's verse, and as she concludes by repeating the final question, "or is that really where it's at?," Baraka also arrives at the conclusion of his thought, "Negroes older than everything but one thing: theyselves" (2:57). The implication is that "where it's at" resides in the historical primacy of blackness, a rebuke to the racist stereotypes Mayfield outlines in his verse: "We're just good for nothin', they all figure / a boyish, grown-up shiftless jigger." This theme of the preeminence of blackness provides the ground upon which Baraka builds both the dramatic arch of his text and its political program.

As Conquest continues with Mayfield's second verse, Baraka introduces the search for self-knowledge, as well as the aural image that will come to symbolize the collective consciousness of the historical legacy of black culture, "your grandmama hummin'": "So they

walk that line 'til they find out who they is, and why they grandmama hummed that endless hum, older than any human sound in the universe, but them about the drum" (3:11). For Baraka, the tension between this exalted historical legacy and the degradation of American racism points towards another tension between violence and self-restraint, an emotional dissonance that begs resolution: "It's hard to cry and not know why" (3:51). As if in response to Mayfield's address to urban black communities, Baraka asserts, "Negroes older than cities. They stood around 'til they thunk 'em up and they still don't know, some do, why they mama hum all the time, and say 'pray child' when they heard about ignorance and sickness and crime" (4:10). Here the hum, a song restrained, becomes itself a symbol of restraint, the admonishment to pray a muted sort of response to the circumstances of oppression. Parker's "second line," slow and invocational in character, is introduced by the horns, seemingly in response to the words "pray child" (4:20), and as it ascends, Baraka sings, in imitation of the melodic outline, "*Ask yo'self, ask yo'self, ask yo'self: do you know who you is?*"<sup>87</sup> (4:31). Here, Baraka addresses an imagined interlocutor who will become the protagonist of his poetic narrative: the figure of an African American individual in search of self-knowledge and political engagement. For this individual, the search is a journey inwards into cultural memory: "And listen to the cloud of silence enclose your face, and in that place a hum start to come up, and tears roll back inside, and pictures come of something, you don't even know what it is, and your grandmama hummin', your grandmama hummin', sayin' 'quiet, child'" (4:40).

At this point Conquest has stopped singing Mayfield's lyrics, breaking off midway through the second verse, and instead she interacts with Baraka's recitation by humming, giving

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87. Throughout the transcriptions of Baraka's text, I've used italics to indicate portions that are sung.

voice to the aural imagery of his poetry. Mayfield's text won't return for nearly ten minutes, when Conquest brings in the second A section of the song (14:20). In the meantime, a kind of shift in authority takes place, as Baraka's text supplants Mayfield's. Baraka moves forward by elaborating on the theme of black primacy in a jesting, boastful tone, as if signifying on the colonial ethos of Western culture: "Do you remember when you was with Jesus and he tell you to sing your grandmama tune? Do you remember that December when the devil thought up Santa Claus, told you that he was your father?" (5:17). This passage rides upon an escalation of ensemble interaction, as Hamid Drake switches to keeping time on his ride cymbal and builds to driving, off-beat groove, while the horns slowly weave an intensifying polyphony with Conquest's vocables. Baraka continues: "Negroes older than Jesus, Peter, Paul or Mary . . . Louis Armstrong was the one who gave Eve the idea about the apple. *Negroes older than Rome, Greece*. When Negroes first come nothin' didn't have no name. Negroes older than anything that talk, sing, dance or think" (5:44). The crescendo of ensemble accompaniment overtakes Baraka's recitation, then recedes, and soon after he reenters his jocular tone serves to broach the theme of violent resistance: "Negroes know shit they don't even know they know, that's why they grandmama hummin' all the time, and grandmama hummin' *tryin' to remember why it is they don't tell they children to kick these crackers' ass*" (6:43). As Baraka sings this last phrase, trumpeter Lewis Barnes reintroduces Parker's "first line" (6:55), and saxophonists Sabir Mateen and Daryll Foster pick it up in succession, to which Baraka responds by singing a countermelody. This moment of ensemble confluence, combined with the implication of formal arrival brought on by the return of Parker's first line, underlines the significance Baraka's text: it's



the imagining of a violent eruption that will precipitate the rupture of the ensemble's contrasting B section.

Returning to the theme of violence in the context of Mayfield's versions here provides an example of how Baraka might be understood as "extending the message" of the original song. Along the crescendo of Parker's first line, Baraka continues his recitation with a quasi-sung phrase that stokes the fire of the ensemble dynamic: *"when they grandmama stop hummin' all kind of shit gon' break out"* (7:05). In his lyrics, Mayfield condemns a self-defeating black-on-black violence and calls for solidarity in the African American community, exhorting his listener to "learn to know your side" in the struggle for racial uplift; Baraka, on the other hand, addresses a threat of violence that isn't directed inwards but outwards, imagining a scene of abandonment to militant revolt, though one tinged with irony. He continues, "and Jojo come runnin' out the what's-her-name buildin' sayin', 'you can't kill anybody.' Hummin' be done stopped then, *be screams and moans and pleads and the monkey be lookin' for the brothers*" (7:24). This fantasy of riot unfolds over Parker's first line, but after the melody concludes and the energy of the accompaniment subsides, Baraka reprises the scene, highlighting its significance. In a sense, Baraka provides a response to the militancy only implied in the central B section of Mayfield's song, where the shift in tone suggests a movement from observation to action. In the scene above, Baraka's imagined outbreak seems simultaneously cathartic and dysphoric: the figure of "the monkey . . . lookin' for the brothers" calls to mind the trickster, and thus it's not entirely clear whose "screams and moans and pleads" we hear. In any case, for Baraka, the fact that this violent revolt hasn't yet occurred has to do with the dignity and pride of place accorded by the mytho-historical primacy of blackness: "If it wasn't for Negroes bein' older than everybody they

woulda' killed a lot of mothafuckas by now" (9:15). Thus, he appears to riff on the question posed in Mayfield's B section: "Shall we commit our own genocide / before you check out your mind?" In Baraka's formulation, the process of "check[ing] out your mind," one of coming to self-knowledge within collective consciousness, is key to harnessing the repressed rage that might otherwise find outlet in violence.

As if in sympathy with this imagery of breaking restraint, the dynamic energy of ensemble interaction here surges and ebbs in pockets of intensity. After Baraka retells his fantasy of riot, he returns to a long list highlighting black primacy: "Negroes older than god, marriage, schools, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, the Vikings. Negroes older than language" (8:14), etc. This list continues, and as it culminates with "Negroes older than civilization. That's why they grandmama be hummin', tryin' to keep from raisin' her voice" (9:07), Barnes initiates a new, insistent riff on trumpet, soon joined by Mateen on alto saxophone (Figure 2.7). A crescendo follows Baraka's line, "If it wasn't for Negroes bein' older than everybody they woulda' killed a lot of mothafuckas by now" (9:15), with Foster ripping into the upper register of his tenor saxophone, and both Conquest and Baraka singing. Shortly after Baraka reenters with recitation, the texture thins and the energy is briefly damped, as if to better hear his words: "your grandmama hummin' 'cause she know heathens changed the spelling of prophet to profit, put her mama out to Trinity. When your grandmama stop hummin' all hell gon' break out" (9:46). Here, though, the Barnes/Mateen riff carries on, pushing the drama forward. As with the earlier riot scene, Baraka repeats his text, and as he does the energy builds once again. When he returns to his declamation, "When your grandmama stop hummin' all hell gon' break out" (10:23), the steady vamp and groove that have been so assiduously maintained

throughout start to come undone: Parker pulls the bass out of sync with the rest of the rhythm section (10:25); Drake keeps steady time for another half minute, but then fractures the groove into a micro-timed irregularity (10:58); shortly afterwards, Burrell begins to pound out a massive F# minor triad across the compass of the piano (11:04), dissolving it into rapid arpeggiation. All the while, the horns interweave an intricate polyphony, and Conquest seems to slip into speaking in tongues.

**Figure 2.7. Barnes and Mateen's riff, ca. 9:27 on *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue*, as recorded on *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield***

The image displays a musical score for two instruments: Trumpet and Alto Saxophone. Both parts are written in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The tempo or style is indicated as C#7. The Trumpet part begins with a half note F#4, followed by a quarter rest, then a half note G#4, a quarter rest, and a half note A4. The Alto Saxophone part begins with a half note F#3, followed by a quarter rest, then a half note G#3, a quarter rest, and a half note A3. Both parts conclude with a half note F#4 and a quarter rest. The notation is presented on two staves, with the Trumpet staff on top and the Alto Saxophone staff on the bottom.

It is here that the ensemble arrives at the B section of the Rome interpretation. This outburst of playing "out" responds directly to Baraka's text ("all hell gon' break out"), musically manifesting the riot of repressed rage latent in the black collective consciousness of his poetic narrative. Importantly, however, a metaphor of implosion might be better suited to describing the process by which this space is achieved: where Mayfield's B section is more rhythmically driven and assertive (in a word, extroverted), this new section by Parker's group is rhythmically expansive and diffuse, reflective and introverted. The combination of Burrell's continual, drone-like figuration, Drake's peripatetic, coloristic drumming, and the horns' ongoing, out-of-time

polyphony renders an invocational mood, while Baraka's text takes an inward turn that suggests a struggle within the self. The earlier admonition to "pray child" hangs over this section, but rather than showing restraint this prayer carries the ecstatic abandonment and revolutionary potential sublimated from Baraka's fantasy of riot, musically manifest in the unshackling of self-expression from the metrical groove. This is the sound-world of Parker's "black music revolutionary spiritual school,"<sup>88</sup> a prayer to "the mystical (abstract) God"<sup>89</sup> of the 1960s New Black Music: "The secular voice seeking clarity, or seeking religion (a spirit worship) compatible with itself."<sup>90</sup> As Baraka writes in 1966, this "spirit worship" is "pushed by an emotionalism that seeks freedom"—not the complacent privilege found in "the 'freedom' to be a white man," but the "freedom to want your own particular hip self."<sup>91</sup> Seen in this light, it is at this sectional juncture that Parker's ensemble not only situates the 1960s and 1970s avant-garde alongside and within Mayfield's idiom, but identifies the conception of "Unity Music" with the process of becoming a unified self: for Baraka's protagonist, the awareness of the self within the consciousness of a unified black culture is a catalyst for bringing forth, in Mayfield's words, "an even brighter day."

Baraka's recitation in this B section takes on a new tone as well as new imagery. Gone are the jocularity and barbed signifying so prevalent thus far; instead, his voice seems to become both more intimate and insistent. As the ensemble spins out its free-blowing polyphony, Baraka gets hung up on a single thought: "and, if you could remember the words, if you could remember

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88. Parker, *who owns music?*, 33.

89. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 219.

90. *Ibid.*, 223.

91. *Ibid.*, 223.

the words, if you could remember the words, the words, the words, the words!" (11:18). Here, the churning musical texture seems to manifest the searching of Baraka's repetitions. In a sort of cadential gesture, Burrell superimposes a C# minor triad over the F# drone, highlighting the motive of the uppermost G# resolving down to the tonic. Baraka responds by repeating a phrase, intoned to the same G# to F# motive: "*black horse, black rider*" (12:05). He continues haltingly, splicing lines of text in repeated fragments: "if you could remember the words to that endless melody—*black horse, black rider*—if you could remember the words, if you [pause] could remember [pause] the words—that's what's in the marrow of your grandmama's hummin', she rememberin' what is lost and what is comin'." Baraka's insistent repetition and emphasis on "the words" to be remembered seems to signal an important concept: the ability to articulate self-knowledge, to give verbal expression to a history that is understood, but previously only in a muted way—humming as song without words—to be consciously aware of "what's in the marrow of your grandmama's hummin'." To "remember what is lost" is to acknowledge the history of oppression and violence, both physical and cultural; to "remember . . . what is comin'" seems an intriguing way to describe the awareness of how these historical conditions operate in the present, as well as the revolutionary knowledge of how to proceed. As the B section draws to a close, Baraka himself abandons words, evoking the aural image of humming by singing a wordless tune that melds with the polyphonic lines of the horn section and then disappears, as if transmuted into instrumental melody. The ensemble texture gradually thins until Parker's bass comes to a cadential F# against Burrell's still-resonating piano drone; after a brief caesura, Parker re-articulates the A section's characteristic bass line (13:16).

This return to the head confirms that what has just transpired has replaced Mayfield's central B section. The dance groove is a bit slower now, and Parker's "first line" is treated quietly, almost gingerly, as if registering the introspective heat of the foregoing "fire music." When Conquest picks up Mayfield's verse (14:20), at the same place Mayfield does when he returns to the A section, it's with a muted intensity, and she proceeds without any of the internal repetitions that characterized the earlier verses. Likewise, she is no longer interrupted by Baraka's recitation, and her singing is framed only by the rhythm section, without responses from the horns. This relatively direct presentation of Mayfield's music evinces a sense of catharsis following the dramatic climax of the ensemble's B section. As Conquest reaches the end of Mayfield's verse, however, a gradual crescendo accompanies the lines "when the time comes and we are really free / there'll be no brothers left, you see?" (14:45). At the height of the final phrase, Burrell reintroduces the arpeggiated F# minor drone and the ensemble slips again into non-metered time. For the first time in the Rome interpretation Conquest sings Mayfield's refrain, and the musical materials that formed the basis for the ensemble's B section are used for their original purpose in Parker's arrangement. The texture here is thinner than at the height of the B section, with only Daryll Foster's tenor saxophone obligato to comment on Conquest's vocals. As in the foregoing verse, this passage seems more an arrival than a development towards something new; because it follows after the fiery B section, and because of its relative brevity, it seems a reverberation of the earlier music. This sense of an echo, brought about by shared musical materials, retrospectively brings Mayfield's refrain into dialogue with Baraka's poetry in the ensemble's B section. Thus, Mayfield's final plea to "let us not be so satisfied / for tomorrow can be an even brighter day," finds a response in Baraka's admonition to "remember the words,"

to strive towards an awareness of history in order to know how to shape the future. As Conquest reaches Mayfield's words "brighter day," Burrell's tremolo F# minor harmony resolves back to C# major in an appropriately bright plagal cadence (15:44); the dance groove returns again, and Conquest trails off in wordless singing, ushering in the return of Baraka's recitation.

For the remainder of the performance the ensemble remains in the pocket of the groove—upbeat and confident, almost triumphant. Baraka picks up with the imagery he introduced during the B section, but the sense of struggle and stubborn insistence has been replaced with ease and fluidity as he elaborates on the thought unfinished earlier: "and if you could remember the words, the pictures embedded in that wordless melody from infinity, you'd understand why you black, why music and justice charm you, why your feet keep leaving the ground" (16:02). Here Sabir Mateen joins Baraka in a gleefully mischievous dialogue, squeaking, honking and running mercurial lines into the upper register of his alto saxophone (16:21), and the rhythm section responds with jocular, off-beat accents. Baraka's recitation comes to celebrate the achievement of self-awareness for his protagonist, the questing African American individual, "seeking what will always be beautiful, and evidence will be your residence" (16:42). His imagery has a cinematic quality, depicting his heroic "black rider of the black horse" riding victoriously into the distance, "seeking like the sun, beyond what will come, leaving a trail of fire" (16:56). As Baraka's narration unfolds, the character of the rhythm section's accompaniment becomes more assertive. Dave Burrell gradually develops an octave riff on piano that pushes and pulls at the beat, becoming fully formed as Baraka recites "leaving a trail of fire" (17:08, Figure 2.8), and Hamid Drake responds to Burrell's riff with ever more heavily accented drumming. The stomping beat that they create builds intensity up through the culminating reintroduction of Parker's "first line,"

at exactly the point where Baraka concludes the narrative of the "black rider": "and the last thing we dig, the horse fades" (17:47).



92. Ibid., 225.



eschewing the particularity of cultural identity. Thus the victory of Baraka's "black rider" is achieved through an awareness of the self bound up in the collective consciousness of blackness ("if you could remember the words . . . you'd understand why you black"). Seen in this light, Baraka's valorization of the heroic individual seems not an individualist conception—one in which identity is formed in opposition to others—but instead a conception in which the formation of a unified self depends on engagement with community and shared historical lineage. Significantly, this conception of identity formation is modeled by Parker's practice of "self conduction" and the cultural politics of his Mayfield project: "we find our center within his music so that we may become ourselves."<sup>95</sup>

The manner in which Baraka's narrative ultimately valorizes the achievement of self-awareness for his individual protagonist can be read as another example of "extending the message" of Mayfield's song. The lyrics of Mayfield's A sections focus on unity and the collective experience; while at times he addresses archetypal characters ("High yellow girl can't you tell?", "Pardon me brother / as you stand in your glory"), the sense is that Mayfield is speaking to the community as a whole: "We people / who are darker than blue." The lyrics of the B section, however, seem more pointedly focussed on an individual interlocutor: "Get yourself together . . . Shall we commit our own genocide / before you check out your mind?" In this passage, Mayfield seems to argue that the attainment of collective uplift depends upon individual awareness, responsibility and engagement. Throughout Baraka's narrative on the Rome 2004 recording, the central question is one of how his protagonist arrives at an identity that is grounded in community and history, and how this self-becoming productively sublimates

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95. Parker, liner notes to *I Plan to Stay a Believer*.

the repressed rage that might otherwise find outlet in self-destructive violence. In this sense, Baraka's narrative devotes itself to theorizing the kind of self-awareness that Mayfield demands in his B section. Considering that Parker's arrangement of *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue* elides this very section of Mayfield's song, it's notable that Baraka's recitation so effectively elaborates on Mayfield's call to "learn to know your side."

The 2004 Rome recording rides out in a joyous, carnivalesque ecstasy that builds from the reprise of Parker's "first line" over Burrell's driving riff-ostinato, to another passage of collectively improvised polyphony from the horns over a hard-swinging groove from Drake, before flaming-out in one last, softly smoldering turn through Parker's head melody. Throughout, Baraka focuses on repeated juxtapositions of only a few phrases, which he alternates with wordless singing: "that's what's in the marrow of your grandmama's hummin'," "we people people darker than blue," and "remembering the lost and what is comin'." These phrases reorient his recitation towards collective themes: cultural memory, group identity, historical awareness and solidarity in the change to come. The energetic group improvisation that grows out of this passage manifests the coming together of the collective, and the build-up of ensemble interaction towards the conclusion of the performance seems to open out to the future, suggesting that the achievement of Baraka's self-aware, heroic "black rider" is not the end of revolutionary action but only its beginning. As the performance draws to a close, the open-ended optimism expressed in the musicians' collaborative efforts seems to evoke the passage from the closing paragraphs of Baraka's 1966 essay, cited earlier: "The collection of wills is a simple unity like on the street. A

bigger music, and muscle, for the move necessary. The swell of a music, of action and reaction, a seeing, thrown in swift slick tone along the entire muscle of a people."<sup>96</sup>

This optimistic ending also resonates with another passage, written by Parker, that effectively situates this 2004 performance in relation to the eras of Baraka's essay and Mayfield's song, noting the changes in cultural and political realities, yet maintaining a determination to keep striving:

What happens to a cutting-edge musician when the edge is no longer sharp?

When the cries for freedom, clusters, tone runs, and poly-rhythms wear out, after 40 years of struggle in the music business we find ourselves in the same spot.

Every music seems to have superseded 'Great Black Music.' The question is, will our day ever come?

The answer that sings out most strongly is that our day came the minute we made a commitment to life. Each day we live and are allowed to play music and feel the warm sunshine is our day.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, Parker's ensemble continues to remake Mayfield's music anew for every performance, heeding the admonition with which he closes *We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue*:

"Pardon me brother / I know we've come a long, long way / but let us not be so satisfied / for tomorrow can be an even brighter day."

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96. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 241.

97. Parker, *who owns music?*, 44.

### Chapter 3. Recovery and Renewal in Marcus Roberts's *Portraits in Blue*

#### I. Two rhapsodies, race, and representation

When [Marcus Roberts] plays, the entire history of the jazz piano resonates. Styles that were practically dead are resuscitated, and a style that has never existed is created. He is a true original, a real jazzman, not afraid to swing and play the blues with authority, intelligence, abandon, and soul. Yes, with soul.

—Wynton Marsalis, *Sweet Swing Blues on the Road*<sup>1</sup>

As Duke Ellington said: generation is not really the issue; the issue to an artist is regeneration.

—Marcus Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*<sup>2</sup>

In 1995, Marcus Roberts brought together members of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and the Orchestra of St. Luke's, under the direction of Robert Sadin, to record the album *Portraits in Blue*.<sup>3</sup> Dedicated to interpreting three compositions for piano and orchestra—George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) and *'I Got Rhythm' Variations* (1934), and James P. Johnson's *Yamekraw* (1927)<sup>4</sup>—the project represented, for Roberts, a "new approach to integrating jazz and classical music."<sup>5</sup> The significance of the album is manifold. First, and perhaps most strikingly, it marks the premiere recording of the orchestral version in which

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1. Wynton Marsalis, Frank Stewart, *Sweet Swing Blues on the Road* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1994), 24.

2. Marcus Roberts, *Portraits in Blue* (New York: Sony Classical, 1996), CD.

3. Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*.

4. Roberts elides the subtitle "A Negro Rhapsody" from Johnson's 1927 piano score.

5. Marcus Roberts, "Milestones," *marcusroberts.com*, accessed June 6, 2014, <http://www.marcusroberts.com/milestones>.

Johnson's composition received its 1928 premiere performance; nevertheless, critical attention to the album has focussed almost exclusively on Roberts's interpretation of Gershwin's *Rhapsody*. This is not surprising: in spite of the likelihood that Johnson's work was written in response to Gershwin's,<sup>6</sup> it's fallen into obscurity, while *Rhapsody in Blue* has become one of the most often reinterpreted and recorded works of the twentieth century, as well as one of most pervasive symbols of American modernity.<sup>7</sup> Roberts's decision to juxtapose the dual 1920s rhapsodies of Gershwin and Johnson is therefore the second respect in which *Portraits in Blue* is compelling: it's a gesture that not only recovers Johnson's marginalized composition and highlights its relationship to Gershwin's canonical one, but recuperates Johnson as a composer of concert works. Especially in light of this recovery project, the third striking feature of *Portraits in Blue* involves the interpretations of the works themselves: for Roberts, the practice of "integrating jazz and classical music" involves substantial interventions, treating both Gershwin's and Johnson's compositions to varying degrees of improvisational play, from ad libbing over written orchestral parts, to extending piano cadenzas, to opening up formal ruptures involving passages of collective improvisation. While Roberts naturalizes this process with regard to performing Johnson's *Yamekraw*, he speaks of his approach to Gershwin's *Rhapsody* in terms of renewal, modernization, and Americanization. And this leads to the fourth respect in which the album is remarkable: in both the way he frames his project, and in terms of specific musical decisions he

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6. See John Howland, "Jazz Rhapsodies in Black and White: James P. Johnson's *Yamekraw*," *Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Symphonic Jazz* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 46-101.

7. See David Schiff, "Introduction," *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1-3; and Ryan Raul Bañagale, "Chapter 1: Setting the Stage for New Narratives" in "Rhapsodies in Blue: New Narratives for an Iconic American Composition," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2011), 1-48.

and his JALC cohort make, Roberts's interpretations of Gershwin's and Johnson's rhapsodies manifest views on race, musical genre, and American identity that engage with and critique the 1920s cultural politics in which both works participated, as well as subsequent historical narratives of genre and art music. In this last matter, the influence of Albert Murray, intellectual patriarch of Jazz at Lincoln Center, is strongly evident.

### **The path to *Portraits in Blue***

On the evening of February 21, 1992, the Concordia chamber orchestra and Jazz at Lincoln Center presented a concert in Avery Fisher Hall entitled "The James P. Johnson Jubilee."<sup>8</sup> The program was conceived as a revival, modeled on a 1945 tribute to Johnson's orchestral works at Carnegie Hall, and featured a number of compositions that had been secreted away in his family archive for decades, only recently recovered through the efforts of Concordia's director, Marin Alsop, and pianist, Leslie Stifelman.<sup>9</sup> The concert thus enacted a significant recuperative gesture, restoring to the public works which had been lost, and encouraging "[a] new chapter [to] be written about the life and music of James P. Johnson," a composer "whose extensive contributions to American music should have earned him . . . the greatest popular and critical acclaim."<sup>10</sup> In addition to the orchestral works, Marcus Roberts performed Johnson's solo stride piano compositions, and accompanied the singer Carrie Smith in a reconstruction of Johnson's recordings with Bessie Smith. Significantly, Roberts was the soloist

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8. Jon Pareles, "A Two-Fisted Pianist Who Bridged Legacies," *New York Times*, Feb. 24, 1992.

9. Leslie Stifelman, "James P. Johnson: A Composer Rescued," *Columbia Journal of American Studies* 1, no. 1 (1995), accessed March 29, 2014, <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/textarchive/cjas/11/12.html>.

10. Ibid.

on Johnson's *Yamekraw: A Negro Rhapsody*. This was Roberts's first performance with a symphony orchestra, and it set the precedent for subsequent orchestral collaborations in the coming decades. According to a 1996 article in *USA Today* following the release of *Portraits in Blue*, Roberts "first became interested in the possibilities of improvising with full orchestra" on this occasion, but "shied away from a significant transformation of [the] piece."<sup>11</sup>

Roberts's next engagement with a symphony orchestra came two years later, on April 15, 1994, when he joined the American Symphony Orchestra, again at Avery Fisher Hall, in a performance of Gershwin's *'I Got Rhythm' Variations*. This program was also conceived as a recuperation, in multiple senses of the word. Entitled "Common Ground: African-American and Jewish-American Composers, 1930-1955," the concert was "planned in the knowledge that over the past quarter-century a painful strain in the relations between Jewish Americans and African Americans has developed," and aimed to recuperate these relations by "presenting a moment of history when matters were different," featuring examples of intercultural exchange marked by "[a]ffection, honesty, curiosity and respect."<sup>12</sup> In juxtaposing works by Gershwin and Ellington —"two of the greatest figures of our art"— alongside Florence Price and Louis Gruenberg —"two less well known composers from the past"—the program also enacted a historical recuperation; the inclusion of then-living composers Morton Gould and Ulysses Kay carried this intercultural lineage into the present. On this occasion, it would seem that Roberts felt more confident in his role alongside the orchestra, as well as in his agency as an improvising

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11. David Patrick Stearns, "Marcus Roberts, Jazzing Up Gershwin's *Rhapsody*," *USA Today*, October 17, 1996.

12. Leon Botstein, "Common Ground: African-American and Jewish-American Composers, 1935-1955," *americansymphony.org*, April 15, 1994, accessed June 6, 2014, <http://americansymphony.org/common-ground-african-american-and-jewish-american-composers/>.

interpreter in the traditions of jazz, and he "used his own version" of Gershwin's *'I Got Rhythm'* *Variations*.<sup>13</sup>

1994 was also the year that Roberts signed as a recording artist with Columbia Records and Sony Classical Records, both subsidiaries of Sony Music Entertainment.<sup>14</sup> Roberts's inaugural release on Columbia was a trio album dedicated to Gershwin standards, *Gershwin for Lovers* (Columbia, 1994); his next two albums, timed for release in the same year, were *Portraits in Blue* (Sony Classical, 1996) and a trio album featuring original compositions, *Time and Circumstance* (Columbia, 1996). This dual jazz-and-classical album release was not without precedent: Wynton Marsalis, in whose groups Roberts played from 1985-90, made a similar gesture in 1983, pairing an album of Classical era trumpet concertos with an album by his jazz quintet.<sup>15</sup> Notably, Marsalis's 1983 albums were put out by CBS Masterworks (later to become Sony Classical) and Columbia; it seems likely, then, that the cross-genre album releases were an attempt to market Roberts in the same mold, perhaps even as Marsalis's protégé.

Nevertheless, while Roberts readily acknowledges the significance of his relationship with Marsalis—"a lot of musicians have been greatly influenced by Wynton's contributions . . . and I come directly from that soil"<sup>16</sup>—his project on *Portraits in Blue* is both more daring and more complex than any of the precedents set by Marsalis's classical releases from the 1980s and early '90s. Where Marsalis's albums had featured canonical works, primarily by European

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13. Stearns, "Jazzing Up Gershwin's *Rhapsody*."

14. Roberts, "Milestones."

15. Wynton Marsalis, *Haydn, Hummel, L. Mozart: Trumpet Concertos* (New York: CBS Masterworks, 1983), LP; Wynton Marsalis, *Think of One* (New York: Columbia Records, 1983), LP.

16. Larry Birnbaum, "Marcus Roberts: Tackling Gershwin," *Down Beat*, July 1996, 21.



composers, weighted heavily towards the Baroque and Classical eras, and interpreted in an idiomatically "straight" style, *Portraits in Blue* features repertoire that runs the gamut from problematically canonical to obscure, written by two Americans with popular music backgrounds, and interpreted in a way that departs significantly from the notated scores. Thus, in contrast to Roberts, whose "new approach to integrating jazz and classical music" manifests on the levels of ensemble, repertoire, and performance practice, the precedents in Marsalis's classical recordings effectively segregate his jazz and classical activities—the musical processes, historical repertoires, and cultural locations never to overlap.

The divergent classical releases of Roberts and Marsalis might be understood as the results of their different musical backgrounds. Marsalis had been lauded for his ability to straddle the worlds of classical music and jazz since early in his career, certified by his Juilliard education and his apprenticeship with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. Roberts, while having studied classical repertoire privately, was not trained as a classical performer. As he's noted, "I'm not really a classical pianist . . . I've always wanted to learn a concerto, but it takes a lot of work. And I know myself. I'm conditioned to be spontaneous, and conductors don't like those kinds of surprises."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, one might view his choice of repertoire on *Portraits in Blue* as a practical solution: by choosing compositions that are bound up in the materials and histories of popular music and jazz, he opens up a space for applying the interpretive practices of those idioms. However, I would argue that Roberts's choice of repertoire is more than expedient, and that it reflects larger cultural ambitions. As several critics have noted, the cultural capital of Marsalis's classical credentials contributed to his ability to advocate for jazz in the institutional space of

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17. Stearns, "Jazzing Up Gershwin's *Rhapsody*."

American high culture, culminating in his stewardship of Jazz at Lincoln Center.<sup>18</sup> That space having been secured, I contend that Roberts uses it, on *Portraits in Blue*, as a platform for articulating a revised vision of American high culture itself.

It's possible to view Roberts's project on *Portraits in Blue* as a response to the recuperative agendas of the Concordia and ASO concerts in which he'd participated. In putting out an album on Sony Classical that features works by Gershwin and Johnson, Roberts asserts both their worthiness for reinterpretation and their important place within the American concert music tradition. Furthermore, by situating Johnson's *Yamekraw* alongside Gershwin's *Rhapsody*, Roberts not only furnishes the premiere recording of the former, but places the two works on equal footing, and, notably, does so without any explicit commentary: in neither the liner notes nor in any interview does Roberts highlight the marginalization or recuperation of Johnson's work. Rather than presenting Johnson's composition as a victim of historical circumstance (much less American racism) in an apologia for its invisibility, he chooses not to highlight its invisibility at all. And it is in the casual manner that Roberts juxtaposes these two works, so disproportionately received historically, that his recuperative project speaks most loudly, if indirectly: by simply presenting Gershwin's and Johnson's compositions side by side, he highlights their interrelationship, and quietly affirms the place of an African American composer at the center of American concert music history.

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18. See Eric Porter, "'The Majesty of the Blues': Wynton Marsalis's Jazz Canon," *What is this Thing Called Jazz? African American Artists as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 287-334; Herman S. Gray, "Jazz Tradition, Institutional Formation, and Cultural Practice," *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 32-51; Stuart Nicholson, "Between Image and Artistry: The Wynton Marsalis Phenomenon," *Is Jazz Dead? (Or has it moved to a new address)* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 23-52.

It's also possible to interpret Roberts's project in dialogue with the cultural politics that framed the ASO program of "African-American and Jewish-American Composers." Just as Roberts never explicitly addresses *Yamekraw*'s marginalization or recuperation, he also never directly addresses questions of racial or ethnic identity; he does, however, seem to approach these topics obliquely through discussions of American identity. In the liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*, Roberts's writes,

George Gershwin was a great American musician who drew heavily from jazz for many of his Broadway shows, movie scores, and concert works. He went to those after-hours joints, hung out with James P. Johnson, watched the dances, and listened to people play and sing the blues. He realized that what Duke Ellington called 'rhythm and tune' was at the center of the expression of American life. Along with Ellington, he helped redefine the entire arena of American music.<sup>19</sup>

In this formulation, Gershwin's greatness stems from his acknowledgement of African American culture at the heart of American culture, and from his willingness to embrace and identify with it in his own music. Nevertheless, his vantage is that of an outsider—he "went," "watched," and "listened," but was not himself a member of the community. Thus, in discussing his interpretation of the *Rhapsody*, Roberts writes, "Gershwin's original score is based on his view of jazz from a European perspective. I wanted my version to reflect a jazz sensibility within a classical environment."<sup>20</sup> In a sense, then, Roberts's interpretation of the work inverts the perspective of its composer: if Gershwin is on the outside looking in (on jazz, on African American culture, and, ultimately, on American culture), Roberts re-envision his music from the inside, looking out. In contrast, Roberts situates Johnson as an American composer looking to

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19. Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*.

20. Ibid.

engage with European forms, describing *Yamekraw* as an "exploration of [the] blues using a constant dialogue between the jazz and classical musicians," one in which "[w]e can hear clearly the contrast and balance of European and American musical sensibilities."<sup>21</sup> The imposition of this ethnic-national frame has implications for understanding the interpretive practices Roberts brings to bear on the rhapsodies of both composers, as well as for interpreting the specific interventions he makes in each work.

### **Gershwin, jazz, and American assimilation**

The particularity of Gershwin's "European perspective" might be understood in terms of his status as a first-generation American, born of Russian-Jewish immigrants. In his monograph on the *Rhapsody in Blue*, David Schiff includes a discussion of early-twentieth-century Yiddish theater, blackface performance, and Jewish identity, all in the context of "Gershwin's passage through the melting pot."<sup>22</sup> As Schiff contends, the calculated misappropriation of African American culture in blackface became a means for Jewish entertainers "to drop their old identities and assimilate," transposing elements of Yiddish theater into mainstream American culture behind the mask of familiar racial stereotypes. "As the pariahs of Europe," he writes,

Jews could easily identify with the sufferings of the African-American; but they soon learned that American society would treat them far better than it would blacks. Yet while blacks might be lower in the social order than Jews, they were also, by being Christian, at once more American and more religious than the immigrant Jews, many of whom had abandoned any religious practice. African-Americans were also more embedded in American history, however tragically, than Jews would ever be. Jewish blackface was thus a complex phase of cultural

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21. Ibid.

22. Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue*, 94.

negotiation which partook of identification and indifference, idealization and condescension, admiration and envy.<sup>23</sup>

As Schiff also notes, Gershwin's identification with African American culture was nuanced, and he ultimately rejected blackface performance for *Porgy and Bess*. Nevertheless, the process of passing through African American culture on the path to American identity is evident in his *Rhapsody*, and his writings of the period evince anxieties over race, genre, and nationality that highlight both his desire to assimilate and the ambivalent complexity of the "cultural negotiation" involved.

Roberts's assignment of a "European perspective" to Gershwin is poignantly ironic, then, in the context of Gershwin's own attempts to present himself as an American deeply concerned with forging an American music. Following the successful premiere of his *Rhapsody in Blue* (which he'd initially intended to title *American Rhapsody*),<sup>24</sup> Gershwin published a series of articles that amounts to a polemic on jazz, art music, modernity, and American identity.<sup>25</sup> In his 1926 essay "Jazz is the Voice of the American Soul," Gershwin distances himself from his immigrant heritage, writing, "Having been born in New York and grown up among New Yorkers,

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23. Ibid., 98.

24. Ibid., 13.

25. These include: "Our New National Anthem: Broadway's Most Popular Modern Composer Discusses Jazz as an Art Form" (*Theatre Magazine*, May 1925), "Jazz is the Voice of the American Soul" (1926), "Does jazz belong to art? Foremost Composer of Syncopated Music Insists on Serious Appraisal" (*Singing I*, July 1926, 13-14), "Fifty Years of American Music . . . Young Composers, Freed from European Influences, Labor Toward Achieving a Distinctive American Musical Idiom" (*The American Hebrew*, November 1929, 47), and "The Composer in the Machine Age [1930]" (in *Revolt in the Arts*, ed. Oliver M. Saylor, New York: Coward-McGann, 1931). All of these are reprinted in *The Gershwin Reader*, eds. Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

I have heard the voice of [the American] soul . . . Though of Russian parentage, I owed no sensitiveness to melodious sounds from that source."<sup>26</sup> In concluding the article, he affirms,

My people are Americans. My time is today. Of tomorrow, and of my tomorrow, as an interpreter of American life in music, I am sure of but one thing: that the essence of future music will hold enough of the melody and harmony of today to reveal its origin. It will be sure to have a tincture of the derided yesterday, which has been accepted today and which perhaps tomorrow will be exalted—jazz.<sup>27</sup>

In his 1929 article "Fifty Years of American Music . . . Young Composers, Freed from European Influences, Labor Toward Achieving a Distinctive American Musical Idiom," Gershwin identifies jazz as "the only musical idiom in existence that could aptly express America," and reflexively maps it onto his own experience of his historical and cultural moment, writing:

And so, when I was eager to compose something larger and more permanent than mere songs, I did not for a moment think of abandoning the jazz idiom. My ideal was, first and foremost, to express myself, then, to express America. Somewhat vaguely I felt that it would be one and the same thing.<sup>28</sup>

In both instances, Gershwin conflates jazz with the articulation of American identity in such a way that access to one gives him access to the other. By embracing jazz as the expression of his people (Americans) and his time (today), Gershwin articulates his desire for assimilation.

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26. George Gershwin, "Jazz Is the Voice of the American Soul," *The Gershwin Reader*, 92.

27. *Ibid.*, 94.

28. Gershwin, "Fifty Years of American Music . . . Young Composers, Freed from European Influences, Labor Toward Achieving a Distinctive American Musical Idiom," *The Gershwin Reader*, 117.

In contrast, Gershwin positions himself as a critic of other Jewish American composers whose attempts "to express and interpret our country"<sup>29</sup> are undermined by their European sensibilities. In the same 1929 article, published in *American Hebrew* magazine, Gershwin traces the development of a music that is "something indigenous, something autochthonous, something deeply rooted in our soil." He lauds the contributions of his "teacher and friend" Rubin Goldmark, who was "among the very first to turn his eye towards the negro and to attempt to interpret America through the poignant strains of the spiritual," as well as those of Irving Berlin, who "by introducing and perfecting ragtime . . . had actually given us the first germ of an American musical idiom."<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, he criticizes the European provenance of "futurist" works by Leo Ornstein, the backward-looking vision of "early America" in Ernest Bloch's symphonic work, *America*, and allegedly inauthentic engagements with jazz by Aaron Copland and Louis Gruenberg. Ultimately, he concludes that these composers have "failed in their attempts at American music" because of their ties to the Old World:

Men like Bloch and Ornstein have been taught to think in terms of idioms employed by Brahms and Richard Strauss; Copland has been trained to think along the lines of Stravinsky and Schönberg. The result, when they attempt to compose American music, is that their training sticks to them and their American music becomes diluted with their European traditions. Fortunately, neither Irving Berlin nor I were taught by European masters—and so we were the free men whereas all others were slaves.<sup>31</sup>

Ironically, the Old World from which the assimilated Berlin and Gershwin are liberated is not formulated here as the ghettoized space of a Jewish subculture, but the dominant high-culture of

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29. Ibid., 117.

30. Ibid., 116.

31. Ibid., 118-119.

the "European masters." However, the language of "masters" and "slaves" is more appropriate to the identification with the African American experience that marks the passage through jazz.

What Gershwin intends by "jazz" is sometimes unclear, and his writings on it are often fraught with anxieties over racial and national identification. As he himself acknowledges in his 1930 article, "The Composer in the Machine Age,"

It is difficult to determine what enduring values, esthetically, jazz has contributed, because jazz is a word which has been used for at least five or six different types of music. It is really a conglomeration of many things. It has a little bit of ragtime, the blues, classicism, and spirituals. Basically, it is a matter of rhythm.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, there's an unmistakable sense in which jazz is informed by African American cultural production, even if one only takes stock of the "different types of music" listed above. In his overview of "the American idiom" from his 1929 article, Gershwin implicitly identifies Berlin as the progenitor of jazz, writing,

Jazz, of course, has a long and varied history. It dates from 1890 when such simple and naive songs as 'All Coons Look Alike to Me' were in their heyday. But for the purposes of this essay we need go no further back than 1904—the date when Irving Berlin first began composing.<sup>33</sup>

Thus the origin story of jazz runs the gamut from minstrelsy to more artful appropriations, but in either case the gaze is directed at African American culture. The implicit primacy of that cultural

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32. Gershwin, "The Composer in the Machine Age," *The Gershwin Reader*, 120.

33. Gershwin, "Fifty Years of American Music . . . Young Composers, Freed from European Influences, Labor Toward Achieving a Distinctive American Musical Idiom," *The Gershwin Reader*, 116.



location is underlined all the more forcefully by Gershwin's repeated denials. In his earliest article, "Our New National Anthem," he writes,

In speaking of jazz there is one superstition, and it is a superstition which must be destroyed. This is the superstition that jazz is essentially Negro. The Negroes, of course, take to jazz, but in its essence it is no more Negro than is syncopation, which exists in the music of all nations. Jazz is not Negro but American. It is the spontaneous expression of the nervous energy of modern American life.<sup>34</sup>

The violence of Gershwin's insistence that this "superstition . . . must be destroyed" seems indicative of the threat that it must have posed to his own ability to speak for and through jazz. If jazz is "essentially Negro" then Gershwin is an inauthentic interpreter, but if it's American then he can claim it as his birthright. One year later, in "Jazz is the Voice of the American Soul," Gershwin envisions the idiom as an amalgamation of cultural influences. Thus, in spite of his observation that jazz is "developed out of ragtime" and is "the plantation song improved and transformed into finer, bigger harmonies," he cautions,

I do not assert that the American soul is Negroid. But it is a combination that includes the wail, the whine, and the exultant note of the old 'mammy' songs of the South. It is black and white. It is all colors and all souls unified in the great melting pot of the world. Its dominant note is vibrant syncopation.<sup>35</sup>

In this vision of jazz and American identity, African American culture is subsumed as a fundamental element, but it is only one element. Moreover, it is an element that is freely interpreted and elaborated by non-African American artists. Throughout his writings, and even in the context of *Porgy in Bess*, the African American voice and body are bound to folk expressions

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34. Gershwin, "Our New National Anthem," *The Gershwin Reader*, 90.

35. Gershwin, "Jazz Is the Voice of the American Soul," *The Gershwin Reader*, 93.

—Negro spirituals, plantation songs, etc.—rather than their artful extension. Of the composers and performers whom Gershwin names in the mid-1920s as jazz practitioners—Irving Berlin, Paul Whiteman, Marion Harris, Al Jolson, the Revelers—none is African American; notably absent are the likes of W.C. Handy, blues singers like Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, or Bessie Smith, and James P. Johnson himself. Thus the credit goes to others for "developing" and "improving" the folk expressions of African American culture.

It's also important to note that, while instrumental in articulating his vision of American music and his own American identity, Gershwin's embrace of jazz is not without reservation, and his claim on "future music" is secured through his critical and artistic agency to guide jazz from its "derided yesterday" to its "exalted" tomorrow—that is, through his ability to assimilate jazz into a vision of American art music. In his article "Our New National Anthem," written shortly after the *Rhapsody*'s premiere, Gershwin devotes himself both to justifying his use of jazz and to qualifying its broader significance. As if to establish his reputability through critical distance, he states near the outset,

I am far from going to the extreme limit of believing that jazz is going to revolutionize music or even American music. Jazz will in time become absorbed into the great musical tradition as all other forms of music have been absorbed. It will affect that music, but it will be far from being a predominant element. It will in short find its place.<sup>36</sup>

The refrain of jazz "finding its place," and, even more emphatically, its "subordinate place," is revisited several times throughout the article. One of Gershwin's central conceits is that jazz, as

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36. Gershwin, "Our New National Anthem," *The Gershwin Reader*, 89.

of 1925, is "in a transitory stage"<sup>37</sup>: "The blatant jazz of ten years ago, crude, vulgar, and unadorned, is passing."<sup>38</sup> Later, he elaborates:

Beginning with crudity and vulgarity, [jazz] has gradually been freeing itself and moving towards a higher plane. At first it was mere discord for the sake of discord, a simple reveling in animal vigor. But slowly the meaning of that discord, its color, its power in the depiction of American sentiment, has been brought to life.<sup>39</sup>

The agency by which jazz moves "towards a higher plane" is the will of the artist who is able to extract the national character of the primitive idiom and refine it through craft. As Gershwin writes, in reference to his own creative process,

In my *Rhapsody in Blue* I have . . . [employed] jazz almost incidentally, just as I employ syncopation. I realize that jazz expresses something very definite and vital in American life, but I also realize that it expresses only one element. To express the richness of that life fully, a composer must employ melody, harmony, and counterpoint as every great composer of the past has employed them.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, in Gershwin's formulation, jazz, which is "[b]asically . . . a matter of rhythm," is in itself insufficient to an elevated artistic statement; as he reaffirms in 1930, "An entire composition written in jazz could not live."<sup>41</sup> Instead, Gershwin asserts, the goal is "to use [the] mechanics of

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37. Ibid., 91.

38. Ibid., 89.

39. Ibid., 90.

40. Ibid., 89.

41. Gershwin, "The Composer in the Machine Age," *The Gershwin Reader*, 120.

jazz . . . in larger forms, forms which [have] been handed down to us by the masters."<sup>42</sup> Or, as he writes, more pointedly, in 1925,

It is then as useless to deplore the triumph of jazz as it is to deplore the triumph of machinery. The thing to do is to domesticate both to our uses . . . The employment of jazz will [then] no longer dominate but only vitalize. It is for the trained musician who is also the creative artist to bring out this vitality and to heighten it with the eternal flame of beauty. When this time comes, and perhaps it is not so far away, jazz will be but one element in a great whole which will at last give a worthy musical expression to the spirit which is America.<sup>43</sup>

If, however, jazz is understood as not just "a matter of rhythm," but as a popular dance music furtively appropriated from African American sources, the domestication of its "animal vigor" takes on new implications. And from the broader perspective of the assimilation of the immigrant "creative artist," the subordination of jazz to the discipline of the "masters" becomes a means of achieving American identity by trading in a legacy of racial commodification.

### **Murray, the blues idiom, and the Omni-Americans**

Themes of musical genre, race, national identity, and assimilation figure prominently in the writings of Albert Murray, and his views enter into a dialogue with Gershwin's in ways that are productive for analyzing Roberts's discursive frame and interpretive decisions on *Portraits in Blue*. The significance of Murray's perspective in the formation of Jazz at Lincoln Center, and particularly his influence on the development of Wynton Marsalis's polemics, has been well-

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42. Gershwin, "Fifty Years of American Music . . . Young Composers, Freed from European Influences, Labor Toward Achieving a Distinctive American Musical Idiom," *The Gershwin Reader*, 117.

43. Gershwin, "Our New National Anthem," *The Gershwin Reader*, 91.

documented by Eric Porter.<sup>44</sup> Roberts met Murray through Marsalis; in a television appearance with Charlie Rose following the release of *Portraits in Blue*, Roberts recounted, "I was there during some [of Marsalis's encounters with Murray], and believe me, Albert Murray is just a complete, total genius."<sup>45</sup> Roberts's recourse to American identity as a means to obliquely address racial and ethnic cultural locations, as well as his use of integration as a metaphor for describing his cross-genre project on *Portraits in Blue*, are thrown into particular relief in the light of Murray's post-Civil Rights Era aesthetic and political theories. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has noted: "People who may not read Murray but like the *idea* of him reflexively label him an 'integrationist'; seldom do they take in the term's full complexity. In Murray's hands, integration wasn't an act of accommodation but an act of introjection."<sup>46</sup> Gates, who labels Murray and his longtime colleague Ralph Ellison "militant integrationists,"<sup>47</sup> continues:

In its bluntest form, their assertion was that the truest Americans were black Americans. For much of what was truly distinctive about America's 'national character' was rooted in the improvisatory prehistory of the blues . . . For generations, the word 'American' had tacitly connoted 'white.' Murray inverted the cultural assumption and the verbal conventions. In his discourse, 'American,' roughly speaking, means 'black.'<sup>48</sup>

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44. Eric Porter, "'The Majesty of the Blues': Wynton Marsalis's Jazz Canon," *What is this Thing Called Jazz? African American Artists as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 287-334.

45. Marcus Roberts, interviewed by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, Season 6, Episode 14, June 20, 1996.

46. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "King of Cats," *Albert Murray and the Aesthetic Imagination of a Nation* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 26.

47. *Ibid.*, 16.

48. *Ibid.*, 27.

As Porter pithily summarizes, in the context of Jazz at Lincoln Center, "By transforming black nationalism into a kind of American exceptionalism with a Negro core, then, Marsalis, [Stanley] Crouch, and Murray all have helped produce a vision that radically challenges the marginalization of black people from American experience."<sup>49</sup> Following on Gates, then, Roberts's "new approach to integrating jazz and classical music" on *Portraits in Blue* might also be heard as an "introjection," not only redressing the marginalization of Johnson's work through recuperation, but recovering the (African) American music previously "subordinated" to (and thus marginalized within) "European" forms and performance practices.

Significantly, both Murray and Gershwin postulate an American ideal that is ethnically integrated, an amalgamation of cultural sources, but their signal difference resides in notions of cultural ownership. Just as Gershwin envisions an American soul that is "black and white . . . all colors and all souls unified in the great melting pot of the world,"<sup>50</sup> for Murray, "American culture, even in its most rigidly segregated precincts, is patently and irrevocably composite. It is, regardless of all the hysterical protestations of those who would have it otherwise, incontestably mulatto."<sup>51</sup> Yet when it comes to the "blues idiom," as he often prefers to term it in his earlier writings, Murray does not share Gershwin's assessment that "Jazz is not Negro but American"—rather, it's both, arising from African American culture and elaborated by African American artists, while simultaneously the quintessential expression of American ideals. More broadly, as

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49. Porter, 326.

50. Gershwin, "Jazz is the Voice of the American Soul," *The Gershwin Reader*, 93.

51. Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture* (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1970; reprinted as *The Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 22. Page references are to the 1990 edition.

Gates concludes above, Murray asserts that the African American experience itself is a quintessential expression of America, not just in spite of systematic racism but because of it: "In point of fact," he writes, in his seminal essay "The Omni-Americans," "slavery and oppression may well have made black people more human and more American while it has made white people less human and less American."<sup>52</sup> Later, he continues, "Black Americans, not Americans devoted to whiteness, exemplify the open disposition toward change, diversity, unsettled situations, new structures and experience, that are prerequisite to the highest level of citizenship."<sup>53</sup> Thus Murray asserts that the "blues idiom," while grounded in the particularity of the African American experience, "represents a major American innovation of universal significance and potential . . . It provides 'emblems for a pioneer people who require resilience as a prime trait.'"<sup>54</sup>

In Murray's conception, the blues idiom extends beyond musical genre to address broader aesthetic and ethical concerns, yet the context in which they are articulated is the social ritual of the dance. "[W]hen the Negro musician or dancer swings the blues," he writes, "he is fulfilling the same fundamental existential requirement that determines the mission of the poet, the priest, and the medicine man. He is making an affirmative and hence exemplary and heroic response to that which André Malraux describes as *la condition humaine*." This stands in marked contrast to the "animal vigor" that Gershwin ascribes to jazz as dance music; in Murray's view, the dance is not a primitive act to be transcended, but the source of transcendence itself. He continues,

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52. Ibid., 36.

53. Ibid., 37.

54. Ibid., 59.

Extemporizing in response to the exigencies of the situation in which he finds himself, he is confronting, acknowledging, and contending with the infernal absurdities and ever-impending frustrations inherent in the nature of all existence by *playing with the possibilities that are also there*. Thus does man the player become man the stylizer and by the same token the humanizer of chaos; and thus does play become ritual, ceremony, and art; and thus also does the dance-beat improvisation of experience in the blues idiom become survival technique, esthetic equipment for living, and a central element in the dynamics of U.S. Negro life style.

Key to this formulation of ritual-into-art is the role of improvisation, and this stands, again, in contrast to Gershwin's conception of elevating jazz by employing its objective (or objectified) "mechanics" within larger forms, while prioritizing the artistic agency of the composer. In Murray's conception, the priority lies with the subjective agency of the musician-dancer who "play[s] with the possibilities" of given forms and materials in order to address the exigencies of the musical moment.

If the extemporaneous heroism of the blues idiom is a quintessential expression of American ideals, as noted above, it also provides the means by which African American culture is assimilated into American identity. Much of "The Omni-Americans" is devoted to debunking what Murray sees as an attempt to marginalize African American culture through sociological analyses of black pathology that he terms "the folklore of white supremacy."<sup>55</sup> It is against this marginalization that he asserts the centrality of the blues idiom:

One unmistakable objective of the white norm/black deviation survey data is to show how far outside the mainstream of American culture Negroes are. Another may well be to insinuate that they are unassimilable. The blues idiom, however, represents the most comprehensive and the most profound assimilation. It is the

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55. Ibid., 31.



product of a sensibility that is completely compatible with the *human* imperatives of modern times and American life.<sup>56</sup>

American culture is so inextricably bound up in the African American experience, Murray argues, that the process of American assimilation involves becoming part African American. In a passage that comments obliquely on the discussion of Gershwin and assimilation, above, Murray writes,

Many who readily and rightly oppose such antagonistic categories as Gentile and Jew, gleefully seize upon such designations as White People and Black People. But even as they struggle and finagle to become all-white (by playing up their color similarities and playing down their cultural differences), they inevitably acquire basic American characteristics—which is to say, Omni-American—that are part Negro and part Indian.<sup>57</sup>

This passage doesn't exactly describe Gershwin himself, whose musical engagements with African American culture were publicly evident, even if his writings were at times ambivalent. And, in a sense, there's only a fine gradation of difference between Murray's position here and Gershwin's assertion that the American soul is "black and white . . . all colors and all souls unified in the great melting pot of the world." Yet, in Gershwin's vision, the expression of this cultural amalgamation, jazz, is not "essentially Negro" but American, while, in Murray's vision, to be American is to be essentially Negro. The distinction then lies in who has primary claim to an autochthonous American expression, and in who gets the credit for elaborating it into art. Or, as Ralph Ellison puts it in a letter to Murray from 1971,

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56. Ibid., 59-60.

57. Ibid., 21.

At Newport, one of the critic-composers interrupted some remark I made concerning the relationship between Negro dance audiences and jazz bands, to say that he didn't believe that Jazz was connected with the life of any racial group in this country . . . I really don't have much patience anymore, Albert, and I didn't bite my tongue in telling this guy where he came from and who his daddy was—who his *black* daddy was.<sup>58</sup>

Thus the music appropriated for the expression of America is reclaimed as the property of African American culture, but, in the process, so is the broader American culture it engenders.

A similar reversal of the logic by which African American culture is appropriated in the service of American assimilation is articulated by Wynton Marsalis in 1986. One year after Marcus Roberts joined his ensemble, Wynton Marsalis published an article in *Ebony* magazine entitled "Why We Must Preserve Our Jazz Heritage." Paraphrasing and extending from a passage in Murray's *Stomping the Blues*, he writes:

Murray . . . points out that what jazz musicians did with the popular tunes of Gershwin and all those people was to show that the distance between them and those song writers was the huge gap between high art and folk art . . . That's what jazz musicians did: they took some low-grade Puccini imitations and made them into American songs. One of the reasons is that most of the best writers of popular songs in the 20s, the 30s, and the 40s were immigrants. They were new Americans. Negroes had been here for 300 years and they put the weight of centuries into what they did.<sup>59</sup>

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58. Ralph Ellison, *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Modern Library Classics, 2002), 247.

59. Wynton Marsalis, "Why We Must Preserve Our Jazz Heritage," *Ebony*, February 1986, 131-132. In *Stomping the Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), Murray writes: "Incidentally, sophisticated blues musicians extend, refine, and counterstate pop music, especially the thirty-two-bar show tune, in precisely the same manner as they do the traditional folk-type blues strain. Indeed, as the endless list of outstanding blues-idiom compositions derived from the songs of Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Harold Arlen, Vincent Youmans, and Walter Donaldson, among others, so clearly indicates, blues musicians proceed as if the Broadway musical were in fact a major source of relatively crude but fascinating folk materials!" (205).

Marsalis's contentions here mirror Schiff's assertions regarding Jewish blackface traditions and assimilation: "African-Americans were . . . more embedded in American history, however tragically, than Jews would ever be." Yet Marsalis's claim, true to Murray's influence, elides tragedy in favor of a triumphalist narrative, casting African Americans as the victors rather than the victims of American culture, even to the extent of taking pride in American cultural hegemony: "Nobody is more American than a Black person and that's why you see so many people all over the world influenced by the way Negroes put things into style."<sup>60</sup> Likewise, *contra* Gershwin, Marsalis is unequivocal about the cultural origins of jazz: "Jazz is something Negroes *invented* and it said the most profound things not only about us and the way we look at things, but about what modern democratic life is really about."<sup>61</sup>

### **Modernity, renewal, and the Armstrong Principle**

In his monograph on the *Rhapsody in Blue*, David Schiff briefly discusses Marcus Roberts's interpretation of Gershwin's composition, released just one year earlier. "Roberts," he writes, "builds his performance on the historical irony that Gershwin's *Rhapsody* predates most of jazz history. What would Gershwin have done had he heard Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines or Errol [*sic*] Garner?" Noting that Roberts's answers this question with "perhaps overly literal" historicist allusions—to both post-1924 jazz idioms and particular performers—as well as taking stock of the re-arrangement and dramatic expansion of the work through solo and ensemble improvisation, Schiff contrasts Roberts's "maxi-*Rhapsody*" with the contemporaneous vogue for

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60. Marsalis, "Why We Must Preserve Our Jazz Heritage," 132.

61. *Ibid.*, 131.

period reconstructions of the work's jazz-band premiere, concluding that the version on *Portraits in Blue* is "the polar extreme from 'authenticity'."<sup>62</sup> And yet there's an important sense in which Roberts lays claim to an entirely different sort of authenticity, one that emerges from the intersections of musical genre, ethnicity, and American identity articulated by Murray and Marsalis. In a *Down Beat* interview following the album's release, Roberts both confirms his historicist approach and explains the necessity of radical reinterpretation. Asserting that his version of the *Rhapsody* "takes advantage of the natural jazz sensibility of the piece," he continues,

What I mainly tried to do was to present what had happened since he wrote it. I wanted to establish a real organic relationship with jazz music without destroying what was written, but it's been completely changed. To play that piece from a jazz perspective means that you've got to swing; your whole rhythmic approach has to be coming from another place.<sup>63</sup>

In the liner notes to the album, following his description of the *Rhapsody* as Gershwin's "view of jazz from a European perspective," Roberts invokes the figure of Louis Armstrong in a gesture that frames notions of rhythm and swing in the context of national character:

It is important to remember that *Rhapsody in Blue* was written before Louis Armstrong taught everybody how to swing. Because of Armstrong's influence, swinging and playing the blues must be the foundation for the renewal of any jazz-based piece of music. This allows a piece to be transformed in various categories of musical style—melody, harmony, texture, form, and rhythm. Rhythm, as Gershwin himself said, is the essence of a culture's identity in music.

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62. Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue*, 69.

63. Birnbaum, "Tackling Gershwin," 20.

To make the rhythm more American, I made the bass and drums the foundation for the entire recording.<sup>64</sup>

The description of "mak[ing] the rhythm more American" is particularly telling, for it indicates that the "renewal" Roberts describes is not just a matter of bringing Gershwin's work up to date chronologically, but re-articulating it from a different cultural location. In this respect, Roberts's description of the project recalls Marsalis's assertions about jazz musicians taking "low-grade Puccini imitations and [making] them into American songs."<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the priority that Roberts places on the rhythm section as an index of American musical identity recalls the centrality of "dance-beat improvisation" to Murray's conceptions of aesthetics, ethics, modernity, and national spirit.

Roberts's reference to Louis Armstrong is also significant in light of Murray's influence. For Murray, Armstrong looms large as the grand-patriarch of the blues idiom, the "Promethean bringer of syncopated lightning from the land of the Titans" who "converted . . . multitudes as if by a spellbinding evangelist" to swinging the blues. Writing of Duke Ellington's *It Don't Mean a Thing if It Ain't Got that Swing*, Murray asserts that it was "as if Ellington . . . was declaring that for most intents and purposes the Armstrong Principle was universal."<sup>66</sup> In contrast to Gershwin's attempts to elevate jazz by subsuming its mechanics within the "larger forms . . . handed down to

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64. Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*.

65. Marsalis, "Why We Must Preserve Our Jazz Heritage," 132.

66. Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 148.

us by the masters,"<sup>67</sup> Murray asserts that it's Armstrong who raises it to the highest aesthetic level by elaborating upon and refining its immanent potential:

Not that Armstrong was ever to concern himself about the general cultural significance of his efforts, which were generally directed toward being as good a musician as he could become. But in the process, he took jazz from the level of popular entertainment and into the realm of a fine art that requires a level of consummate professional musicianship unexcelled anywhere in the world.<sup>68</sup>

It's Armstrong, Murray contends, who ultimately succeeds in crafting a uniquely American art music. Moreover, it's Armstrong's genius that secures the exceptional relationship of this American expression to modernity:

Yes, it was an American named Louis Armstrong, not such justly celebrated avant-garde Europeans as Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók, Georges Auric, Darius Milhaud, Louis Durey, Paul Hindemith, Arthur Honegger, Francis Poulenc, Germaine Tailleferre, or any of the heirs of the theories of Rimsky-Korsakov, Erik Satie, and Nadia Boulanger, whose music matched the innovations of such twentieth-century sensibilities as are represented in the visual art of Pablo Picasso, Braque, and Matisse, for instance, or in literature by Joyce, Proust, Mann, Malraux, Hemingway, Eliot, and Faulkner, or in architecture by the skyscraper, the Bauhaus, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe.<sup>69</sup>

Like Gershwin, Murray distinguishes the innovations of this modern American music from the works of composers bound to the Old World. Similarly, Murray's references to modernist architecture recall Gershwin's early writings on jazz:

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67. Gershwin, "Fifty Years of American Music . . . Young Composers, Freed from European Influences, Labor Toward Achieving a Distinctive American Musical Idiom," *The Gershwin Reader*, 117.

68. Albert Murray, *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 63.

69. *Ibid.*, 54.

Today with such structures as the Woolworth Tower and the new Hotel Shelton we begin to realize that the skyscraper can be as beautiful as it is original. The same result will happen, I feel certain, in the case of jazz. Ugly at first, it is already feeling the touch of the beautiful. When at last it takes its proper and subordinate place in music, none of us will regret that it has come.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, while both writers identify jazz with the same modernist landscape, their differences arrive in the role that jazz plays in articulating and transforming it: in Gershwin's vision jazz is subordinated to the tradition of great works signified by the single word "music," while in Murray's vision, by way of the Armstrong Principle, jazz is ascendant.

It's tempting, then, to read Roberts's "renewal" of *Rhapsody in Blue* as a subordination of Gershwin's conception of American music to the post-Armstrong vision articulated by Murray, a vision in which "swinging and playing the blues" make the work simultaneously more modern and more American. And yet this raises questions about Roberts's approach to Johnson's *Yamekraw*. In the liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*, Roberts writes,

*Yamekraw* . . . may have been Johnson's answer to *Rhapsody in Blue*. The piece was written as a portrait of a black settlement in Yamekraw, Georgia and has its basis in Negro folk music. It also has many references to Johnson's famous 'Charleston' groove, the most popular dance of the 1920s. All we had to do was to capture the piece's uplifting feeling and play it in the style that Johnson himself did.<sup>71</sup>

Roberts makes two assertions here that relate to the dialectics of identity and authenticity at play in his discussion of Gershwin's *Rhapsody*. First, he paraphrases the claim by Johnson's publisher Perry Bradford, from the foreword to the 1927 piano score, that *Yamekraw* is a "genuine Negro

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70. Gershwin, "Our New National Anthem," *The Gershwin Reader*, 90.

71. Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*.

treatise on spiritual, syncopated and 'blue' melodies."<sup>72</sup> As Howland has argued, this publisher's statement was part of a larger campaign to promote the work as a "racially 'authentic' attempt to employ black popular music and jazz in a concert-length work,"<sup>73</sup> positioning Johnson as "an artistic authority providing a mediated explanation of these 'folk expressions' for the outsider."<sup>74</sup> Second, Roberts implies that, unlike Gershwin's *Rhapsody*, Johnson's work has no need of revision along the lines of the Armstrong Principle. Yet, in spite of Roberts's claim to "play it in the style that Johnson himself did," and in a remarkable gesture for the recuperative premiere recording of the work in its orchestral form, Roberts and his ensemble do not interpret Johnson's score to the letter of the text. Instead, they approach it with many of the same practices that they bring to bear on Gershwin's work, including improvisation, pastiche, and formal revision. How these practices interact with the specific materials of Gershwin's and Johnson's respective rhapsodies, and what new meanings they make from those materials, will be the subject of the following analyses.

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72. "Foreword," *Yamekraw: A Negro Rhapsody* (New York: Perry Bradford, 1927).

73. Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 48.

74. *Ibid.*, 49.



## II. Roberts's rhapsodies

[T]he identity of each individual artist consists mainly of that unique combination of what he accepts among all the existing examples of stylization and is trying to extend, elaborate, and refine and maybe even transcend (as if to say: Yes, yes, yes, and also and also) on the one hand, and what he rejects as inadequate and misleading on the other and tries to counterstate with his own output (as if to say No, no, no; this is the way I see it, hear it, feel it).

—Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*<sup>75</sup>

### *Rhapsody in Blue*

The appearance of thematic materials in the 1942 orchestral score of *Rhapsody in Blue* is outlined in Table 3.1, after the outlines by Howland and Schiff.<sup>76</sup> Though there is general agreement over the principal themes themselves, there is little consensus about their formal relationship to one another. Thus, while Schiff's thematic outline and labels suffice as a frame of reference for discussing the interpretive decisions and formal alterations of Marcus Roberts's ensemble on *Portraits in Blue*, his assertion that "the *Rhapsody*, at least in its uncut version, is . . . a compressed one-movement symphony"<sup>77</sup> in four continuous sections need not be accepted without reservation. Instead, and in consideration of the work's unparalleled history of variant arrangements, performance traditions, and formal mutations, I find more meaning in Howland's assertion that *Rhapsody in Blue*, and, after it, *Yamekraw*, expand upon the episodic

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75. Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 205.

76. Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 68; Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue*, 7-9, 25-26. The 1942 score to *Rhapsody in Blue* (New York: Warner Bros., 1942) was orchestrated by Ferde Grofé, based upon the stock arrangement he made for the publisher T.B. Harms. For more information on the arranging history of the *Rhapsody*, see Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue*, and Bañagale, "Rhapsodies in Blue: New Narratives for an Iconic American 'Composition.'"

77. Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue*, 26.

arrangement routines of popular entertainment. Nevertheless, Schiff's characterization of the affective and dramatic functions of certain sections seems accurate, particularly with regard to the Ritornello statement that he labels the Trio (R.22), and proves productive for analyzing the significance of Roberts's revisions. I've thus also included Schiff's formal analysis in the table, for reference.

**Table 3.1. Formal outline of *Rhapsody in Blue*, 1942 orchestral score, after Howland/Schiff**

R.	Optional Cuts	M.	Thematic statements	Thematic fragments	Orchestration	Movements
		1		Ritornello	tutti	I. Molto moderato
1		11		Stride		
2		16		Ritornello		
		19		Tag		
3		21		Ritornello		
4		24		Tag	piano solo	cadenza
	A	30				
		38	Ritornello (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> ba <sup>3</sup> )			
5		41				
	B	65				cadenza
6-8		72	Ritornello (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> ba <sup>3</sup> )		tutti	II. Scherzo A
9-11		91	Train (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> ba <sup>3</sup> )			
12-13		115	Stride (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> ba <sup>3</sup> )			B
14-17		138	Shuffle (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> b <sup>1</sup> b <sup>2</sup> a <sup>3</sup> )			C
18		172			piano solo	B
19	C	181	Stride (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> ba <sup>3</sup> )			
20		200	Stride (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> ba <sup>3</sup> )			B'

21		215				
22-23		228	Ritornello (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> ba <sup>3</sup> )		tutti	Trio
24		243			piano solo	
	D	256				
25		260	Shuffle (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> b <sup>1</sup> b <sup>2</sup> )			C
26	E	276				
27		297				
	F	298				
28-29		302	Love (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> b <sup>1</sup> )		tutti	III. Andante moderato
30-31		324	Love (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> b <sup>1</sup> )			
32		346			piano solo	
		356	Love (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> b <sup>1</sup> )			
33		382		Tag		IV. Finale
	G	386		Tag		
	H	422				
34-36		424		Love	tutti	
37-38		460		Tag		
39		486	Stride (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> ba <sup>3</sup> )			
		504		Ritornello+Tag		codetta

The interpretive interventions of Roberts and his ensemble on *Rhapsody in Blue* can be grouped into three broad categories: improvisation over existing materials, stylistic alterations via arrangement, and formal ruptures. In the first category, members of the ensemble, whether individually or collectively, riff on their parts or supplant them with new material, but within the framework of the scored ensemble setting—that is, without interrupting the flow of the music as written, and without necessitating any structural changes. In the second category, arrangement

decisions render shifts in style or genre reference, often through alterations in rhythmic character, instrumental color, and expressive mood; this can occur with or without the significant presence of the sort of improvising-over described by the first category. In the third category, the form of the scored music is altered, interrupted, or extended, most often through the insertion of improvised solo cadenzas or passages of group improvisation, and sometimes through sectional repetitions with variations.

In a remarkable gesture that immediately destabilizes Gershwin's score, Roberts's interpretation begins with an intervention of the third category, above, that alters the work's formal design: the opening clarinet trill and glissando, one of the *Rhapsody*'s most recognizable tokens, is preempted by a brief, blues-inflected banjo solo (Figure 3.1). As Roberts explains in the liner notes,

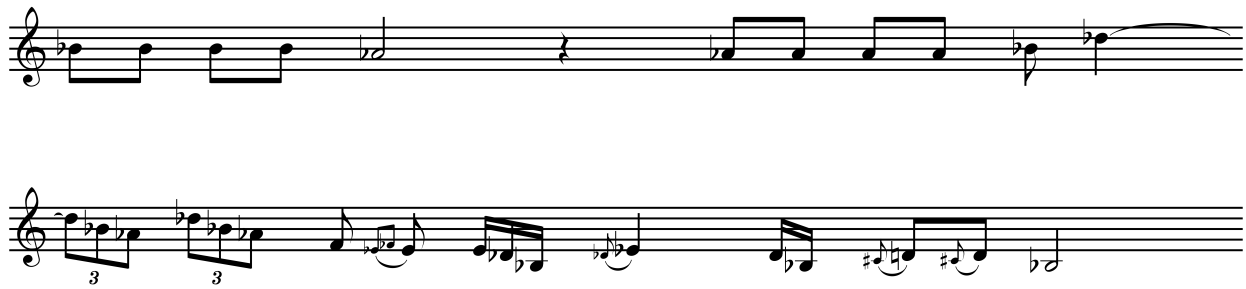
*Rhapsody in Blue* . . . starts with a big clarinet glissando. To show the impact of jazz on twentieth-century American music, I begin this version with a series of improvised statements . . . Banjo player James Chirillo opens the piece with what is actually the second theme. His improvisation is designed to establish a thematic relationship to the C-major jazz section that comes later.<sup>78</sup>

The "second theme" to which Roberts refers is Schiff's Stride theme, and the "C-major jazz section" is the most significant formal intervention enacted by Roberts and his ensemble, a series of improvised choruses extended from the Stride theme that occupies more than six minutes on the recording. Thus Roberts creates a narrative arch that ties one formal intervention to another, and in the process reframes the thematic content of the *Rhapsody*: by beginning with the "second theme" first, Roberts undermines the priority of Gershwin's Ritornello theme, and by

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78. Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*.

highlighting the relationship of Stride theme to the foreshadowed "jazz section," Roberts signals the ascendancy of jazz in his ensemble's interpretation.



79. Ibid.

based piece of music." This reinvestment of Gershwin's music in African American idioms will become one of the primary modes through which the *Rhapsody* is renewed.

Other examples of improvisation and paraphrase over scored materials feature similar stylistic reinvestments in the blues and African American musical culture. Appropriate to the invocation of Armstrong, the B section of the Stride theme eight measures after R.12 (6:02) is treated in the historical manner of New Orleans polyphony, featuring a paraphrase of the melody by Printup on trumpet and countermelodies in response by Nash on clarinet and Ronald Westray on trombone. Similarly, the recapitulation of the Love theme at R.35 (26:29) is given a "hot" 1920s reading by Printup on trumpet, over Roberts's peripatetic, syncopated, double-time replacement of the written accompaniment, only to break down at R.36 (26:43) into a swaggering, blues-based improvisation over a descending bass ostinato in the piano. Roberts's presentation of the Love theme from the preceding piano solo, at 10 measures after R.32 (23:53), is given a gospel rendition, in reference, Roberts writes, to his "experiences playing in church as a child."<sup>80</sup> Likewise, Roberts's articulation of the Ritornello theme in the first piano solo, three measures before R.5 (2:30) and following, is marked by blues figuration, culminating in an ecstatically ornamented statement of the theme's final phrase in C major (3:09) that replaces Gershwin's comical *f deciso* to *p scherzando* presentation at 11 measures after R.5.

Stylistic reinvestments in African American idioms are also the primary feature of the arranging interventions made in several sections of the *Rhapsody*. The central conceit that unifies these interventions is Robert's claim that "[making] the rhythm more American" is accomplished through "[making] the bass and drums the foundation for the entire recording."<sup>81</sup> The first

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80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.

passage to incorporate the drum set comes at the complete articulation of the Ritornello theme by the full ensemble (R.6, 4:40). In the liner notes to the album, Roberts describes this passage as "the first main *Rhapsody* theme on top of a shuffle-based New Orleans groove, anchored by bassist Roland Guerin and drummer Jason Marsalis," though the presence of the bass and drums is felt most strongly in the interstice between the first two phrases of the theme. In this two-measures the ensemble texture is thinned out, as it is in Gershwin's score, but the off-beat chords of the piano have been mapped onto the brass, and Gershwin's nervous, high-pitched articulation of the Tag cell in the flutes and oboes is replaced with a braying soprano saxophone solo, substituting the soulful for the frenetic (4:45). The ensemble texture is again made leaner at the entrance of the Train theme (R.9, 5:11), where a rhythm section of piano, bass, and drums provides the sole backdrop for the melodic lines. In this passage, Guerin eschews Gershwin's four-on-the-floor quarter-note bass in favor of the 3+3+2 eighth-note pattern, yielding a groove more strongly reminiscent of rhythm and blues.

While in the preceding two passages the alterations in the rhythm section serve to accentuate the patterns already inherent in Gershwin's accompaniments, Roberts and his ensemble also revisit these grooves later in the composition, superimposing them upon the written music in ways that alter its character. Formal returns and transformations of specific rhythmic profiles help create a sense of continuity and development that supports Roberts's claim about the foundational nature of the bass and drums. Particularly notable is the evolving setting of the Stride theme. At the first *tutti* appearance of the theme in Gershwin's score (R.12), Roberts's rhythm section revisits the 3+3+2 rhythmic pattern from the Train theme, replacing the relatively square quarter-note bass-and-chord alternation in Gershwin's accompaniment (5:50).

As will be discussed below, this presentation of the Stride theme gives way to the improvised choruses of Roberts's "C-major jazz section" (6:13), which alternates between two different grooves: a moderate 4/4 swing with a walking bass line, and a Latin jazz groove reminiscent of the mambo on Dizzy Gillespie's *Manteca*. When the ensemble returns to the Stride theme (12:16), it is recast over the swing groove of the preceding "jazz section," and the rhythmic profile of the theme itself is transformed by swung eighth notes. Remarkably, when the Stride theme is recapitulated by the full ensemble in the penultimate gesture of Gershwin's composition at R.39, it is recast over the Latin groove of the "jazz section." The long-range return of this rhythmic profile points back to the central, improvised section interpolated by Roberts and his ensemble, and it also mirrors the formal foreshadowing of the Stride-theme-based banjo solo at the outset. Thus Roberts uses novel presentations of the Stride theme to overlay a revised formal structure on the *Rhapsody*, one that emphasizes the ensemble's most prominent intervention in Gershwin's score: the central "jazz section."

Perhaps the most striking moment of stylistic overlay via arrangement arrives at the Ritornello statement at R.22. Schiff reads this passage in Gershwin's score as a comical Trio, and his reading is supported by Grofé's orchestration: the theme is presented in a sparse two-octave doubling by oboe and bassoon soloists, against the backdrop of *pizzicato* strings and slippery, grace-note-filled figures in the piano, lending the passage a *quasi buffo* character. In Schiff's analysis, this comical *tutti* Ritornello statement ironizes the "memory lapse" of the sudden and truncated presentation of the theme towards the end of the preceding piano solo (R.18-21), otherwise devoted to the Stride theme. In Roberts's interpretation, the piano soloist's inapt Ritornello statement is excised; instead, Roberts substantially revises and extends the solo



passage's rumination on the Stride theme through an internal repetition, bringing it to a quiet climax that seems ecstatic through its very sensitivity and chromaticism (R.20 and following, 16:41). In the dramatic wake of this elaborated piano solo, the ensemble's statement of the Ritornello at R.22 (18:18) serves a cathartic purpose, not unlike the function of the Trio in Gershwin's score, but its comical perspective is different. In a gesture that Roberts describes as "alto saxophonist Wes Anderson introduc[ing] the sensual side of Rhapsody's first theme,"<sup>82</sup> the instrumentation is pared down to a jazz quartet, with the melody accompanied by piano, bass, and drums. The *più mosso* tempo indication is discarded in favor of the languorous tempo of a romantic ballad, and Anderson's playing is breathy and rich in drawn-out *portamenti*. The effect is to reorient the character of this passage from the public hall of comic opera and musical theater to the clandestine intimacy of the nightclub. The sensuality to which Roberts alludes should be taken seriously; indeed, sensuality is an important topic in the discourses of Murray, Crouch, and Marsalis, and is itself ethnically marked. In his 1986 article, Marsalis describes jazz as, among other things, "the nobility of the race put into sound" and "the sensuousness of romance in our dialect."<sup>83</sup> In Crouch's writings, this romance is strongly associated with masculine potency. In this context, the humor of the passage should be understood sympathetically, as the knowing, subtle laughter of an insider experienced in "the sensuousness of romance in our dialect."

Other than the two examples of third-category intervention already mentioned—the banjo solo and the “C-major jazz section”—the most frequent formal interventions in Gershwin’s score arise in Roberts’s piano solos. Much of Roberts’s playing throughout, whether in a solo or

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82. Ibid.

83. Marsalis, "Why We Must Preserve Our Jazz Heritage," 131.

ensemble context, involves paraphrasing and improvising over scored materials, but in his hands Gershwin's solo passages are particularly mutable, and he includes several cadenzas that open up rifts in the score. Many of these are small, *rubato* interpolations at structural seams—at cadences, between thematic areas, etc.—but beyond these out-of-time moments, there are also larger instances when interruptions take the form of improvised choruses on cyclical harmonic progressions derived from the scored passages they replace.

One example comes towards the end of the first piano solo (R. 4-5), where Roberts replaces four bars of Gershwin's score (mm. 61-64) with a 19-bar passage that can be understood as four cycles through a 4-bar harmonic progression plus an extension of 3 bars tagged onto the final 4-bar iteration (3:35-4:08). In Gershwin's score, these four bars feature a series of four chords descending in parallel motion, represented in a reduced form in Figure 3.2a. Roberts extracts the bass line and the implications of dominant seventh chords from Gershwin's voicings, and turns the series of four harmonies into a 4-bar chord progression in B $\flat$  major, schematized in Figure 3.2b. Describing this passage in the liner notes, Roberts writes, "I wanted to create a modern dialogue with the entire history of American jazz piano. For example, you may hear the influences of Erroll Garner and Thelonious Monk at the end of the first big cadenza."<sup>84</sup> Here, then, Roberts superimposes a rhythmic groove and a cyclical harmonic progression as a means to idiomatic representation, turning a 4-bar transition from Gershwin's score into an aside on history, nation, and genre.

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84. Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*.

Figure 3.2a. Gershwin, reduction of chords in mm. 61-64, *Rhapsody in Blue*



Figure 3.2b. Roberts, chord progression replacing mm. 61-64 of *Rhapsody in Blue*



Another example of repurposing Gershwin's harmonic materials as a framework for improvisation comes in the final piano solo (R.32-33). At four measures after R.33, Gershwin sets a variant of the Tag cell over an active sixteenth-note accompaniment with an offbeat 2+3+3 rhythmic grouping. Roberts seems to have heard in this rhythmic pattern a "Latin tinge," and filters this passage through what he calls "the New Orleans rhythms of Jelly Roll Morton,"<sup>85</sup> in the process making it the basis for an extended improvisation (24:58-25:53). Roberts begins by paraphrasing Gershwin's score, performing an embellished version of the melody through the repeated 4-bar passage at four measures after R.33. Instead of moving on, however, Roberts extends the repetition in the score four more times, improvising melodically over the harmonic framework of alternating dominant and tonic chords in F# minor. By the time he arrives on the

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85. Ibid.

harmony V7/iv eight measures after R.33, the rhythmic pattern of the accompaniment has shifted to 3+3+2 sixteenth notes. After improvising over the subsequent four bars in Gershwin's score (V7/iv | V7/iv | iv | iv), Roberts returns to the dominant and tonic alternation for another twenty-eight bars, followed by a dramatic pause before rejoining Gershwin's score at the *sognando* statement of the Tag cell in its original form.

The most striking instance of an interpolated cyclical structure for improvisation is Roberts's "C-major jazz section" (6:13-12:15). Like the two instances in the piano solos described above, the "jazz section" begins as an extension of the Stride theme that precedes it, but its continuity is masked by the sudden change of ensemble texture and musical style. The section arrives at a *caesura* in Gershwin's score, where, at R.13, the *tutti* statement of the Stride theme gives way to the solos from the clarinet, trumpet, and horn that transition to the Shuffle theme at R.14. In Roberts's interpretation, the cadential second inversion G-major tonic of the downbeat at R.13 is shrouded in a cymbal crash, out of which a saxophone quartet emerges, with Wes Anderson soloing against the moderate 4/4 swing articulated by the piano, bass, and drums (6:13). The aural impression of this shift in ensemble and idiom seems not only a change of space but of time period, as if stepping from an imaginary 1920s concert or dance hall into a 1950s nightclub; the latter milieu is the same one that will be invoked by the saxophone quartet in the Trio, and, in this sense, a formal connection is created between these passages, bringing the Stride theme based "jazz section" into a long-range dialogue with the Ritornello statement of the Trio that comes later in the work.

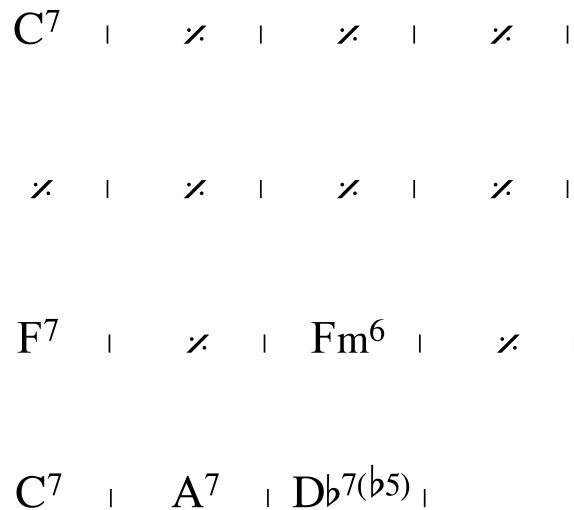
In spite of the abrupt reorientation of style, the improvised choruses that begin with Anderson's saxophone solo take the harmonic structure of the Stride theme as their foundation.

The formal outline of the "jazz section" is given in Table 3.2; as mentioned above, it makes use of two distinct grooves that are attached to two sections, labelled A and B. The A section, in a moderate 4/4 swing, is a 15-bar form in C major that implies a truncated 24-bar blues (Figure 3.3), but that is, in fact, based on the harmonic structure of Gershwin's Stride theme at R.12, amended so that it returns to the tonic rather than modulating to the dominant. The initial statement of the A section is labelled A' in Table 3.2 because it substitutes a G-minor harmony in the first 4-bar phrase, a change that facilitates transition from the cadential G-major harmony at R.13 in Gershwin's score. The B section, in a Latin jazz groove, is a 24-bar blues that realizes the formal implications of A, but does so in a more harmonically complex, modal setting. The overall form of the "jazz section" is driven by the contrasting presence of the B section and the subsequent return to A, a pattern that yields three iterations of a varied cyclical structure: A'AAAB AAAAB AAABB. The final reprise of the A section features Gershwin's Stride theme, and is, in a sense, a varied return to R.12 that is transformed by the swinging rhythm section and the soloists' collective improvisation—that is, through "swinging and playing the blues."

**Table 3.2. Formal outline of the "C-major jazz section" in Roberts's *Rhapsody in Blue***

timing	iteration	section	soloist(s)	arrangement details
6:13	I	A'	alto saxophone	saxophone riff
6:34		A	2 trumpets, one open, one with wah-wah mute	
6:56		A	soprano saxophone, clarinet	
7:17		A	2 pianos	
7:39		B	piano	B-section arrangement
8:12	II	A	2 tenor saxophones	brass-section arrangement
8:33		A	2 pianos	saxophone riff inverted
8:55		A	2 trombones	
9:16		A	(continued)	
9:37		B	banjo	woodwind-section arrangement
10:10	III	A	2 pianos	no accompaniment
10:30		A	(continued)	(continued)
10:50		A	(continued)	(continued)
11:11		B	2 trumpets, both with wah-wah mutes	B-section arrangement
11:43		B	2 wah-wah trumpets (continued), clarinet	B-section arrangement, swing groove
12:16	varied R.12	A	clarinet (continued), 2 trombones	Stride theme, swing groove

**Figure 3.3. 15-bar form of the A section in the "C-major jazz section" of Roberts's *Rhapsody in Blue***



The arranged riffs in the woodwinds and brass that appear intermittently throughout the A section build directly from the motivic materials of the Stride theme. The saxophone riff that accompanies the second A-section chorus of iteration I (6:34, Figure 3.4a) detaches the first four-note fragment of Gershwin's theme and repeats the figure every two bars, transposing it according to the harmonic context; this riff returns in an inverted form in the third A-section chorus of iteration II (8:55, Figure 3.4c). The brass section arrangement that marks the return to the A section in iteration II (Figure 3.4b, 8:12) juxtaposes a descending blues figure in the trombones with the Stride theme fragment in the trumpets, transposed to the third scale degree and chromatically harmonized first in parallel major thirds, then parallel minor sixths. The woodwind section arrangement that accompanies the fourth A-section chorus of iteration II (Figure 3.4d, 9:16) juxtaposes a reduced version of the Stride theme fragment, harmonized in parallel triads and melodically developed in the second half of the chorus, with a rhythmically

altered version of the descending blues figure from the earlier brass section arrangement (Figure 3.4b).

**Figure 3.4a. Saxophone riff, second A-section chorus, iteration I, "C-major jazz section" in Roberts's *Rhapsody in Blue***



**Figure 3.4b. Brass section arrangement, first A-section chorus, iteration II, "C-major jazz section" in Roberts's *Rhapsody in Blue***



[illegible]

The musical score for 'The Rose Tree' is presented in four staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody starts with a whole rest, followed by a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The second staff continues the melody with a half note C5, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note A4. The third staff features a half note G4, a quarter note F4, and a quarter note E4. The fourth staff concludes the melody with a half note D4, a quarter note C4, and a quarter note B3. The accompaniment is provided by the lower staves, featuring chords and single notes that support the melody. The piece ends with a final whole rest in the first staff.

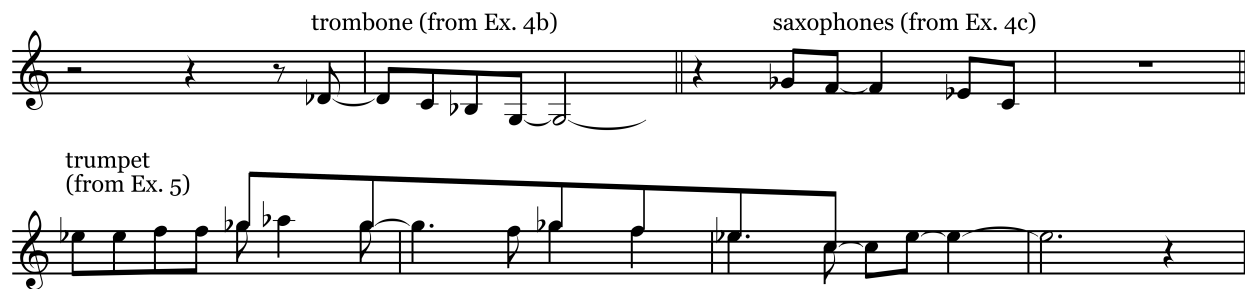
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Nevertheless, this B-section arrangement consists of the same musical materials described above. The first 8-bar phrase of the 24-bar blues form juxtaposes a reduced, inverted form of the Stride theme fragment, harmonized in parallel fourths/fifths (bars 1-2 and 5-6), with another version of the motive, in the bass register, that compresses the characteristic major-second interval to a minor second (bars 3-4 and 7-8). The subdominant area of the second 8-bar phrase (bars 9-12) features a melody that elaborates on the motivic outline of the descending blues figure from the brass and woodwind section arrangements in the A section (illustrated in Figure 3.6). The dominant and subdominant areas of the third 8-bar phrase (bars 17-20) feature the inverted form of the Stride theme fragment, transposed to F# and then E, and harmonized in parallel fifths below. Notably, this relatively elaborate B-section arrangement is elided in one instance: the banjo solo in iteration II is accompanied only by the rhythm section of piano, bass, and drums, and delicately at that. While this could be read as a practical necessity, in order not to overshadow the relatively quiet instrument, it also has a potent dramatic effect, highlighting the centrality of the banjo solo within the "jazz section," while also referring back to the prefatory banjo solo at the outset of the performance. This point of quiet recollection thus reaffirms the centrality of the "jazz section" itself, as well as the Stride theme, in Roberts's interpretation of the *Rhapsody*.

Figure 3.5. B-section arrangement, "C-major jazz section" in Roberts's *Rhapsody in Blue*

The musical score is presented in five systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The first system shows a treble staff with a whole note chord and a bass staff with a whole note chord. The second system shows a treble staff with a whole note chord and a bass staff with a whole note chord. The third system shows a treble staff with a whole note chord and a bass staff with a whole note chord. The fourth system shows a treble staff with a whole note chord and a bass staff with a whole note chord. The fifth system shows a treble staff with a whole note chord and a bass staff with a whole note chord.

**Figure 3.6. Descending blues figures in A- and B-section arrangements, "C-major jazz section" in Roberts's *Rhapsody in Blue***



From the discussion above, it should be clear that both the formal structures and arrangements of the "jazz section" emerge directly from the materials of Gershwin's score, but are developed in order to reclaim them for "the blues idiom," to use Murray's phrase. As Roberts writes about the Stride theme reprise that brings the section to a close,

when we state the second main *Rhapsody* theme in C major over a blues progression, we present the art of individual and group improvisation. Without ever losing the groove or the thread to the main theme, this group improvisation creates a mysterious, cacophonous effect . . . We used the fundamentals of jazz—call and response, blues, swing, riffing, and New Orleans polyphony—to transform the piece into a new artistic statement.<sup>86</sup>

Likewise, the other improvisatory interventions throughout Roberts's *Rhapsody* can be understood as attempts to create "a new artistic statement" by re-baptizing the work after a matrix of Afro-Latin idioms that Roberts calls simply American. Thus, we need not agree with David Schiff's analysis, when he notes that, in addition to filtering the *Rhapsody* through the lens of subsequent developments in jazz history, "Roberts also confronts Gershwin with the

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86. Ibid.

phenomenon of jazz improvisation . . . by inserting a long series of improvised choruses, only loosely related to the changes of Gershwin's tunes." Roberts, he contends, "thereby juxtaposes two modes of performance—re-creation and creation—and also two modes of listening—the cumulative mode with which we follow a composed piece from beginning to end, and the cyclical mode we use in listening to a series of improvised choruses." Ultimately, Schiff concludes, "the Gershwin-esque sources of the music soon turn into generic jazz that could be played in any setting."<sup>87</sup> On the contrary, the "Gershwin-esque" sources that Roberts and his ensemble extend through arrangement, parody, and improvisation are critical to the process by which Roberts goes about the "renewal" of this particular "jazz-based piece of music,"<sup>88</sup> and thereby makes new meanings from Gershwin's music. The interventions of Roberts and his ensemble are not simply "generic jazz" precisely because of the setting in which they actually occur. Furthermore, the developmental nature of the carefully arranged "jazz section" alone belies Schiff's false dichotomy between cumulative and cyclical modes of listening, and the manner in which this central section resonates with other interventions from the beginning to the end of the score reflects a large-scale formal revision.

In this context, it's interesting to consider the one section in Roberts's interpretation that remains essentially faithful to Gershwin's score, or at least to one of its performance traditions: the *tutti* presentation of the Love theme (R.28-31). At over two minutes in length, this passage of Roberts's recording (21:34-23:36) is remarkable for its lack of blues figuration, improvisation, or arrangement alterations. Moreover, it's performed in the fashion that's become commonplace for orchestral renditions of the work. As Schiff explains:

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87. Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue*, 69-70.

88. Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*.

Oddly enough, the most famous melody in twentieth-century concert music is never played as written . . . On the first Whiteman recording [1924] the band plays the Love theme *come scritto*: as an Andantino (slow fox-trot) 8+6+8 [bars]. Performed in this manner, the counter-melody seems sluggish to our ears. When the piano plays the theme alone, however, Gershwin accelerates during the first four bars of the counter-melody, then ritards in the last two. This change suggests (but avoids) the mechanical tempo relation which has become standard today but which Gershwin never observed: a halving of the tempo of the first two bars of the theme that puffs them up to their full romantic potential. It gives the famous head of the tune a "Grandioso" treatment while restoring the jazzy nervousness of the Confreyesque counter-melody.<sup>89</sup>

Indeed, the interpretation by Roberts and his ensemble embraces the "mechanical tempo relation" that Schiff describes, and the overall tempo of their Andantino is quite broad, as if "puffing up" its generically "classical" qualities. In the liner notes to the album, Roberts describes this passage as "the famous slow theme in E major featuring the Orchestra of St. Luke's."<sup>90</sup> Roberts cites the orchestra's contribution here in a manner that's similar to his other citations of soloists throughout the liner notes; in a sense, then, this passage is singled out as the token "classical" moment in the score, perhaps a nod to the European perspective. Thus, through framing the "classical" as the deviation from the norm, Roberts affirms the primacy of jazz in his vision of Gershwin's work. Importantly, this reclamation of the *Rhapsody* for jazz is aimed not at the devaluation of classical music, but at the establishment of mutual recognition in the space of high culture; in the liner notes, Roberts quotes trumpeter Printup as saying, "It was a monumental thing to have the jazz and classical worlds come together for this recording. All of the classical

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89. Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue*, 22.

90. Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*.

players respected us and we respected them."<sup>91</sup> It's also important to recall that Roberts follows the orchestra's "straight" presentation of the Love theme with a rendition of the piano solo, at ten measures after R.32, that filters it reverentially through the style of the sanctified church (23:53), thus subsuming Gershwin's score into the "blues idiom" once again.

### *Yamekraw*

The appearance of thematic materials in the 1928 orchestral score of *Yamekraw* is given in Table 3.3, after the outline by Howland for the 1927 solo piano version.<sup>92</sup> In spite of Howland's observations about the work's episodic formal design, I've grouped its strains and choruses into a larger, four-part scheme, based upon the predominance of certain themes and the harmonic structure that underlies them. The first section, in A $\flat$  major, is bounded by the reprise of Strain A at R.6; in this context, Strain B appears as contrasting material that suggests a rounded binary form. The second section, in G major, is more episodic, characterized by a series of blues choruses and shifts to the minor mode, but is unified by the presence of Strain C, either in full or in motivic fragments. The third section is more thematically varied than the second, and modulates more widely, but is bounded by Strain D and the key of G $\flat$  major. The predominance of Strain D in this section, in spite of the handful of other themes present, is emphasized in the orchestral score in a way that's absent in the solo piano version: at the arrival of Strain F, following the intercession of Strain E, Strain D is superimposed as a solo line, indicated for

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91. Ibid.

92. Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 61. The 1928 score of *Yamekraw: A Negro Rhapsody* (New York: Alfred and Co., 1928; repr. Flagstaff: William Grant Still Music, 1998) was orchestrated by William Grant Still. For more information on the arranging history of *Yamekraw*, see Howland, "Jazz Rhapsodies in Black and White," in *Ellington Uptown*.

either horn or trumpet; Strain F, in a unique appearance and played by the piano alone, is thus overshadowed by the refrain of Strain D. The final section is marked by the reprise of Strain A, in the original key of A $\flat$  major, with only a fleeting reference back to Strain D at m.479 providing contrast.

**Table 3.3. Formal outline of *Yamekraw*, 1928 orchestral score, after Howland**

R.	M.	Episodic sections	Motives	Key	Orchestration	Suggestion of larger form
	1			A $\flat$	tutti/piano solo	first section
	8				piano solo	
	15				tutti	
	17	Strain A				
3	27	Var. on A			piano solo	
4	41	Strain B (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> ba <sup>3</sup> )			tutti	
6	75	Var. on A			piano solo	
7	83				tutti	
8	93	prelude to Strain C		G	solo in trumpet	second section
	101	Strain C				
10	113	Blues chorus 1		Gm		
11	125	Blues chorus 2		G	piano solo	
	128				tutti	
12	139	False strain	Strain C in bass			
14	155	Var. on false strain from R. 12			piano solo	
15	169	Var. on prelude to Strain C		Gm	tutti, solo in clarinet	
16	183	Blues chorus 3		G	piano solo	



17	193	False return to Strain C		Gm	tutti	third section
19	208	Strain D (a)		G♭	solo in trumpet	
20	223	Strain D (b)		F♯m		
21	235	Strain D (a')		G♭	piano solo	
22	249		Strain D (a'), (a)		tutti/piano solo	
24	263	Var. on D (a)		D	tutti	
25	275	Quasi-blues episode			piano solo	
26	288	Strain D <sup>2</sup>		E♭	tutti	
28	320	Strain E (aab <sup>1</sup> b <sup>2</sup> a <sup>1</sup> )		B♭	solo in trumpet	
32	357	Strain F (a <sup>1</sup> a <sup>2</sup> a <sup>3</sup> a <sup>1</sup> ), Strain D in solo		E♭	solo in horn or trumpet	
33	385	Strain G		Cm		
34	405	Strain H		C♯m	solo in tenor saxophone	
36	431		Strain D (a)	F♯		
37	446		Var. Strain B	G♭		
38	457		Strain D (a)			
39	467	Strain A		A♭		fourth section
	479		Strain D (a)			
	481				piano solo	
	497	Strain A			tutti	

Roberts and his ensemble confront Johnson's work with a set of interpretive practices that are similar to those brought to bear on Gershwin's *Rhapsody*. Indeed, the same three categories of intervention identified earlier— improvisation over existing materials, stylistic alterations via arrangement, and formal ruptures—can all be found in the performance of *Yamekraw* on

*Portraits in Blue*. And yet the manner in which these practices are applied to Johnson's work is quite different, as is their cumulative effect on the sense of musical meaning. Ultimately, the interventions of Roberts and his ensemble hew more closely to Johnson's score, and might be understood as sympathetic gestures that buttress the written material rather than deconstruct it. Thus, while *Yamekraw*, too, is filtered through the historicist lens of subsequent developments in jazz, it isn't treated to the same revisionist dislocations of style and content, nor does Roberts go out of his way in the liner notes to reference the different performers and idioms (Morton, Garner, Monk, New Orleans) that influence his interpretation. Instead, as noted already, he claims to "capture the piece's uplifting feeling and play it in the style that Johnson himself did,"<sup>93</sup> arguing that "there [isn't] as much to do; [Johnson's] more naturally connected to jazz."<sup>94</sup>

As in his interpretation of the *Rhapsody*, Roberts paraphrases and improvises over much of the piano part throughout *Yamekraw*, but his contributions generally build upon the idiomatic blues figures of Johnson's score, often with the effect of updating them. For example, at the piano solo at Blues chorus 3 (R.16), Roberts begins the first two bars as written, but then breaks down into his own improvisation on the 12-bar blues that's embedded in the score. By the arrival on the subdominant in the fifth bar, Roberts's playing has little in common with the notated music other than the harmonic structure, but it's not a jarring effect because, in a sense, Roberts is just exchanging one contemporary blues chorus for another that's dated. A more significant intervention comes at the point where, in the orchestral score of Johnson's work, the refrain of Strain D is superimposed on Strain F, as mentioned above (R.32, 16:19). In the rendition by Roberts and his ensemble, the trombone takes over Strain D, and, perhaps in response to the

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93. Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*.

94. Roberts, quoted in Stearns, "Jazzing Up Gershwin's *Rhapsody*."

structural significance of this melody and the textural foreground that it occupies, Roberts eschews Strain F altogether, instead improvising a countermelody. This passage, too, is structurally a blues chorus, consisting of 24 bars in cut time. Thus the blues form, whether because of its familiarity or its idiomatic associations with improvisation, becomes the vehicle for substituting new musical materials.

The other members of the ensemble rarely improvise over Johnson's score, distinguishing them from Roberts's performance at the piano as well as from the ensemble's overall approach to *Rhapsody in Blue*. Those instances in which they do embellish melodic lines occur when they appear as soloists in the pared-down texture of the sections re-arranged for small jazz combo, described below. Moreover, their embellishments are often modest and do little to disrupt the contours of the written music, arriving as *roulades* at the ends of phrases—as in the trumpet solo before the *tutti* statement of Strain C (R.8), or the trombone solo on Strain D that supersedes Strain F (R.32)—or punctuating repeated phrases with blues licks, as in the trumpet solo at Strain E (R.28). Notably absent from the ensemble's interpretation of *Yamekraw* is the sort of ecstatic collective improvisation that plays a key role in their version of the *Rhapsody*, what Roberts describes as the "mysterious, cacophonous effect" of "New Orleans polyphony."<sup>95</sup> That the ensemble doesn't bring Johnson's work to this joyously irreverent space, and that their interpretation is relatively reserved overall, may have to do with a sense of reverence accompanying the premiere recording of the work in its orchestrated form.

Just as in the *Rhapsody*, alterations of arrangement play a significant role in Roberts's approach to Johnson's work. Most noticeable among these are passages in which the ensemble

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95. Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*.

texture is reduced to a small jazz combo with a featured soloist, supported by a rhythm section of piano, bass, and drums at its core. Thus, even though Roberts doesn't highlight it in the liner notes, the decision to "[make] the bass and drums the foundation for the entire recording"<sup>96</sup> is also an important aspect of revising *Yamekraw*. However, where Roberts and his ensemble often superimpose grooves on Gershwin's music that are at odds with and revise the rhythms of the scored accompaniment, leading to transformations in character and stylistic reference, the grooves they map onto Johnson's work generally match the rhythmic profile already present, and don't really change the underlying pulse. As such, they extend and support the stylistic models upon which Johnson builds his work.

Similar examples of this small jazz combo arrangement occur at the beginning of the section associated with Strain C (R.8, 5:17), and at the arrival of Strain E (R.28, 15:23), in both cases supporting Printup's solo trumpet. Both instances are preceded by passages for full orchestra, making the abrupt shift to the small ensemble all the more striking. As in the beginning of the "jazz section" of Roberts's *Rhapsody*, there's a sense in these moments of stepping into a new, more intimate venue, and perhaps a different historical era. In the prelude to Strain C, the result is a modernization of the quarter-note blues vamp that Johnson establishes in the score: the banjo and string section are excised, making the texture leaner and more supple, while the drums add rhythmic depth and a subtle swing by articulating accented offbeats. At the arrival of Strain E, the change in scoring is even smaller, though no less dramatically effective: only the string section is cut from Still's orchestration, while Roberts replaces the piano part with improvised comping of his own. Nevertheless, the interactions in the rhythm section, spurred by

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96. Ibid.

Printup's Armstrong-esque mannerisms on trumpet, lend the passage a rhythmic buoyancy reminiscent of the elder's Hot Fives and Sevens.

Another, more subtle arranging intervention is evident in Roberts's version of *Yamekraw*, one that's absent from his approach to the *Rhapsody*: small emendations to melodic lines and accompanimental figures in the score itself, with the apparent intent of improving upon them. Minor though these changes may be, they seem to take on significance in light of the premiere ensemble recording of Johnson's work. Unlike the passages of solo embellishment or the small jazz combo arrangements described above, episodes where a knowledgeable listener might infer points of departure from Johnson's score based on observations about style and content, these instances of revised ensemble parts in Johnson's work are, in a sense, laundered into authenticity, all the more so because they are juxtaposed with those other revisions that are all too obvious. Examples can be found in the rewritten melody and bass in the string section at m. 115 (Figure 3.7a, 6:13), the rewritten saxophone and trumpet parts at Strain G (Figure 3.7b, 16:46), and the added alto saxophone figure in response to Strain H (Figure 3.7c, 17:04). All of these examples have the effect of brining out generic blues figures, and thus blend into both Johnson's work and Roberts's other revisions effortlessly. Taken alongside other improvements to the orchestration, such as giving the alto saxophone line to the trombones in mm.459-460, a pattern emerges that seems consistent with the recuperative project of recording *Yamekraw* on *Portraits in Blue*: to present Johnson's heretofore little known work in the best light possible, with an authenticity rooted in musical and cultural affinities rather than a strict adherence to Johnson's score or to Still's orchestration.

Figure 3.7a. Rewritten string section, m. 115, in Roberts's *Yamekraw*

Orchestral score	<i>Portraits in Blue</i>
violin I	violin I
cello	cello
piano	

Figure 3.7b. Rewritten saxophones and trumpets, Strain G, R. 33, in Roberts's *Yamekraw*

Orchestral score	<i>Portraits in Blue</i>
saxophones and trumpets	trumpets
	saxophones

Figure 3.7c. Added alto saxophone response, Strain H, R. 34, in Roberts's *Yamekraw*

alto saxophone response
tenor saxophone

Less subtle are the formal ruptures opened in *Yamekraw* by passages of solo improvisation. As in Gershwin's *Rhapsody*, Roberts inserts improvised choruses into the piano parts, but, in keeping with the overall approach to Johnson's work, these interpolations signal

affinity and reverence more than critical distance. The first solo improvisation is incorporated into the piano solo on Strain A (R.3, 1:30), labelled Var. on A in Table 3.3. As Howland notes, Strain A suggests an incomplete 12-bar blues form, truncated after 10 bars just before R.3; as it appears in the piano solo variant, the final 4-bar phrase is replaced by a 6-bar extension, in transition to Strain B. Roberts begins the piano solo in paraphrase, presenting the first eight bars of the melody with his own embellishments, over a new accompaniment, but in the final phrase Roberts eschews Johnson's 6-bar extension, instead presenting the harmonic structure of Strain A in the 10-bar form of its first appearance. A harmonically ambiguous and metrically out-of-time chordal figuration elides the return to the head of a 12-bar blues in A $\flat$  major, but the form is clarified at the arrival of the subdominant, as well as metered time, at the second 4-bar phrase (2:10). Roberts improvises over the realization of the implied 12-bar blues from Strain A in a kind of reverie for two choruses, before returning decisively to a *grandioso* paraphrase of the piano solo at R.3 (3:07) that continues through to the arrival of full ensemble at Strain B.

Roberts's second solo interpolation is incorporated into the piano solo at R.14. Johnson's piano part takes place over the structure of a 12-bar blues chorus in G major, and is repeated in the score. It features a playful paraphrase of what Howland calls the "False strain" at R.12, in rippling triplets over the first 4-bar phrase; the second and third 4-bar phrases feature a syncopated chordal figuration that crosses the barline in a 3+3+2 quarter-note pattern. As in the earlier episode, Roberts begins by paraphrasing Johnson's piano part, but diverges towards the arrival on the subdominant, exaggerating Johnson's syncopated rhythms and using this breakdown to launch into his own six choruses on the blues (7:55-9:19). Robert's extended solo elaborates on the jocularly of Johnson's score, mixing accents and playing with metric

ambiguity in the style of stride piano (itself perhaps an homage to Johnson). Often, Roberts elides the return to the head, whether harmonically or metrically, only to confirm the formal arrival on the subdominant, and, in a sense, this can be understood as a play on the gesture in Johnson's piano part, where the peripatetic triplets, decorating a descending scale harmonized in sixths below, come to a halt on the syncopated figurations of the blues form's second phrase.

Finally, just as Roberts's version of the *Rhapsody* is centered on the decisive formal rupture of the "jazz section," his version of *Yamekraw* features a central section of improvised choruses for small jazz combo that, on the surface, seems to fulfill a similar role. Yet its scope is relatively limited, and it lacks the ensemble arrangement and snowballing collective improvisation that make the parallel intervention in Gershwin's work transformative; it also lacks the formal precursors (the banjo solo) and reverberations (the projected swing and Latin grooves, the return of the jazz quartet at the Trio) that elevate the *Rhapsody*'s "jazz section" to a large-scale revision. Nevertheless, the instrumentation and post-bop idiom of these jazz quartet choruses imposed on Johnson's work mirror the parallel intervention in the *Rhapsody*, creating a dialogue between the two moments in Roberts's interpretations.

The intervention in *Yamekraw* arrives at a moment when, following the presentation of the multi-sectional Strain D by the full ensemble, a variant of Strain D(a) is scored for alto saxophone solo over a 12-bar blues in D major, its harmonies outlined by descending tetrachords in a chugging, quarter-note bass line (R.24). At the seam where this episode begins, Roberts and his rhythm section introject a bar of the descending tetrachord in Guerin's walking bass, set against a moderate 4/4 swing, before alto saxophonist Wes Anderson jumps in with Johnson's melody as the point of departure for two choruses on the 12-bar blues (13:31). As at the outset of



the "jazz section" in Roberts's *Rhapsody*, the reorientation of sonic space and historical referents is startling, as if stepping into a Cannonball Adderley recording from the late '50s. Anderson's two choruses are followed by another three from Roberts, the last of which comes to a pedal on the dominant as the groove breaks down. After a flourish of arpeggiation that brings the pulse to a standstill, Roberts picks up the piano solo in Johnson's score at two bars before the *tutti* at Strain D<sup>2</sup> (R.26, 14:57). In contrast to the dramatic return to Gershwin's score in the *Rhapsody*, where the interventions of Roberts and his ensemble are integrated into a transfigured Stride theme, the impression here is not one of reintegration but of the end of a digression, or of correcting course after having gone astray. Notably, this five-chorus digression on the blues replaces two choruses of 12-bar blues in Johnson's score, the second of which features a unique melodic statement (labelled "quasi-blues episode" in Table 3.3, after Howland), that is itself, in the context of *Yamekraw*, something of a humorous aside. In this sense, the improvised choruses by Roberts and his ensemble here excise two passages from Johnson's score only to replace them with materials that fulfill a similar dramatic function.

### **Two rhapsodies, two perspectives**

In his book *Ellington Uptown*, Howland makes a compelling argument that, structurally, Gershwin's *Rhapsody* "looks like an elaborate expansion of the multistrain formal models of contemporary novelty ragtime or musical theater production numbers," and that, like Johnson's *Yamekraw* subsequently, it represents "an artful expansion of American popular music-arranging conventions."<sup>97</sup> In these popular traditions, which include "big band jazz, musical theater, and

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97. Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 67.

film music," Howland writes, "the tasks of composition, orchestration, and arranging each demanded a collaborative creative process."<sup>98</sup> The passage that follows applies to the entertainment industries of the 1920s, but Howland may as well be describing Roberts's working methods on *Portraits in Blue*:

These popular music traditions saw 'works' as dynamic, mutable texts. Beyond the division of compositional and arranging duties, creative collaboration could further include score contributions by band members, contributions of improvised and paraphrased solos that elaborate on written score passages, and band-specific employment of unique instrumental voices.<sup>99</sup>

As the liner notes to the album demonstrate, Roberts frequently credits the contributions of his ensemble improvisers in specific passages, as well as the arranging work of conductor Robert Sadin. In a sense, then, Roberts's project on *Portraits in Blue* builds upon the performance traditions in which the original works were conceived, and might be seen as a recuperation of these practices within the space of American high culture. Importantly, this is realized through a historiographic intervention that situates jazz, via the transformative power of Louis Armstrong, as the American paradigm in art music.

However, the process of updating the rhapsodies of both Gershwin and Johnson according to this post-Armstrong paradigm reveals historiographic assumptions about jazz itself, as well as its role in the formation of American identity. Roberts and his ensemble apply a similar set of interpretive practices to Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and Johnson's *Yamekraw*, revising both works according to the Armstrong Principle of "swinging and playing the blues," yet the

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98. Ibid., 66.

99. Ibid., 66.

transformation of Gershwin's work is not only more extensive but of a different quality. Where Johnson's score is revised and extended in order to amplify its connections to "the blues idiom"—including the 12-bar blues form itself—as if to say, in Murray's words, "Yes, yes, yes, and also and also," Gershwin's *Rhapsody* is preempted, broken open, and frequently pasted over—or, as Murray might put it, "counterstated"—as if to say, "No, no, no; this is the way I see it, hear it, feel it."<sup>100</sup> This reading supports Roberts's contention that he and his ensemble undertook a renewal of Gershwin's work, while playing *Yamekraw* "in the style that Johnson himself did."<sup>101</sup> In both cases, the emphasis falls on *style* as a manner of performance passed down through cultural lineage, and not on fidelity to the score or to notions of authentic period performance. Stylization—in the sense of extension, elaboration, and refinement, etc.—is an important concept in Murray's aesthetic theory, and the manner in which Roberts presents the two rhapsodies on *Portraits in Blue* might itself be understood as an elaboration on Marsalis's assertion, from his 1986 *Ebony* article, that "[n]obody is more American than a Black person and that's why you see so many people all over the world influenced by the way Negroes put things into style."<sup>102</sup> That is, as a reclamation that unambiguously acknowledges the African American paternity, to gloss Ellison, of the American music Gershwin claimed as his own.

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100. Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 205.

101. Roberts, liner notes to *Portraits in Blue*.

102. Marsalis, "Why We Must Preserve Our Jazz Heritage," 131-132.

## Chapter 4. Conclusion

In spite of the obvious differences of musical style between them, there are several common threads that connect the historicist projects by William Parker and Marcus Roberts discussed in this dissertation. These include an interpretive approach that treats musical content as mutable, with a particular emphasis on the subjective voice and agency of the improvising performer; a self-conscious reorientation of the original works away from their historical moments, turning them towards the moment of performance while simultaneously using them to represent alternate histories of genre; and a preoccupation with ethnic and national identity. Interestingly, for both Roberts and Parker, conceptions of the blues play a significant role in all of these practices and considerations. Likewise, conceptions of the blues figure prominently in the cultural theories of Amiri Baraka and Albert Murray, extending beyond the musicological to take on broader social and aesthetic dimensions. It's possible, then, to read the projects of Parker and Roberts in dialogue with one another in the context of the particular positions staked out by Murray and Baraka in the political landscape of post-Civil-Rights-Era America.

With this in mind, one might read the broad similarities between Roberts's and Parker's projects as indicative of their shared cultural lineage, and their differences as manifestations of "the same family looking at different things. Or looking at things differently."<sup>1</sup> Even though Baraka might have cringed at this as a misappropriation of his words, it's important to remember that, despite their sometimes fierce and bitter disagreements, the ideas and influences of writers from Baraka to Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and Stanley Crouch, are deeply intertwined.

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1. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 215.

Nevertheless, their differences are critical to understanding the larger political and cultural implications of Parker's and Roberts's revisionist projects. For extending beneath the surface of differences in musical style are deeper distinctions that, even while highlighting a shared grounding in the African American experience, do indeed reflect "different placements of spirit."<sup>2</sup>

One such distinction lies in historical frame of reference, not only with regard to historical musics revisited and revised, but also in terms of the pastiche of musical styles. Parker's approach to Mayfield's music filters his gospel-inflected, 1970s soul through a method of collective improvisation that is, on the levels of process and interpretive product, perpetually of the moment, but that is stylistically traceable to the "New Thing" of the '60s and '70s. Parker thus brings together the Civil-Rights and Black-Power-Era politics of Mayfield's popular music with the sounds, spirituality, and politics of the avant-garde—hence the "Unity Music" of Baraka's essay. In contrast, Roberts's approach to the symphonic jazz of Gershwin and Johnson reclaims these historiographically and generically ambiguous works of the 1920s by filtering them through subsequent developments in the canonical history of jazz after Louis Armstrong, yet the stylistic referents overlaid by Roberts and his ensemble only advance about as far forward historically as the music of Thelonious Monk. Thus the revisionist historicism of Roberts interpretations stops short of incorporating the post-Civil-Rights-Era developments of the Black Arts Movement, much less the engagements with popular and world musics in "fusion"—two historico-stylistic bugaboos of both Marsalis and Crouch. In a sense, then, the projects of Parker

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2. Jones [Baraka], "Changing Same," 214

and Roberts divide the history of African American culture and politics in the twentieth century into two parts, pre- and post-Civil-Rights Era.

Another distinction between the cultural politics of the projects by Parker and Roberts lies in their national frame of reference. For Roberts, the renewal of Gershwin's music and the recuperation of Johnson's are mapped reflexively onto the affirmation of American identity, and, as noted, this conception of Americanness seems influenced by the perspective of Albert Murray. It's important to understand this perspective, articulated from his seminal 1970 text *The Omni-Americans* onward, in response to the currents of black nationalism that arrived in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. Murray saw the tendencies of cultural separatism as fundamentally misguided, and argued for an embrace of hard-won centrality of "Negro" culture in America. As Gates puts it, "even as the clenched-fist crowd was scrambling for cultural crumbs, Murray was declaring the entire harvest board of American civilization to be his birthright," asserting, somewhat ironically, that "Murray was the ultimate black nationalist."<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Baraka's writings from the late '60s and early '70s, as epitomized by his essay "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," seek to articulate an autonomous space for a broader Afro-diasporan culture that resides, uncomfortably, within the United States. It's the awareness of this black culture's historical and continued oppression that fuels Baraka's fantastic narrative of revolt and catharsis on *We The People Who Are Darker than Blue*. As Baraka intones during another of Mayfield's iconic songs, "People Get Ready": "Countries want independence, nations want liberation, and the people want a revolution."<sup>4</sup>

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3. Gates, "King of Cats," 27.

4. Parker, *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*.

These historical and political discourses on race and nation play themselves out not only in the repertoire chosen by Parker and Roberts, and in the ways they themselves frame their interpretive choices, but in the processes by which they revise the music itself. In Roberts's approach to both Gershwin's *Rhapsody* and Johnson's *Yamekraw*, "swinging and playing the blues" functions as a mode of rhetorical critique along the lines of Gates's Signifyin(g), whether demonstrating affinity, by building upon the materials of the score—"trying to extend, elaborate, and refine and maybe even transcend," in Murray's terms<sup>5</sup>—or jocular reappraisal, by "counterstating" them. Nevertheless, in Roberts's praxis, improvisation remains circumscribed by the form established in the score or the interventions made via arrangement. Thus, for example, passages of collective improvisation in the *Rhapsody* are either limited by the phrase structure of Gershwin's themes, or occur in the extended interpolation of the "jazz section"—and, even then, the order of solo and sectional choruses seems carefully curated. One might see in this a model of socio-political organization, wherein individuals and groups work within an existing system or amend it in order to simultaneously assimilate and attempt to exert their own agency, both within the system and through it. In a sense, this is the model of militant integration ascribed by Gates to Ellison and Murray,<sup>6</sup> whereby American cultural identity is transformed by African American contributions, and the power of American political identity is reclaimed through the struggle against American racism.

Parker's approach to the music of Curtis Mayfield, a manifestation of his broader ensemble praxis of "self-conduction," employs improvisation as a mode of formal deconstruction and reconstruction. Rather than asking his performers to assimilate to musical forms that

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5. Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 205.

6. Gates, "King of Cats," 16.

circumscribe their contributions, Parker charges them with the agency of discovering both form and content for themselves, in dialogue with the collective and the given materials of his arrangements. Likewise, Parker's conception of "swing" resists any prescriptive identification with a rhythmic groove, but instead dissolves into metaphor: "Swing is any life-affirming gesture: bird singing in the tree, baby being born, little kid skipping down the street. All green plants swing. Salmon swim. Swing has nothing to do with music. Swing has to do with the restoration of humanity."<sup>7</sup> In fact, this statement should be read as a riposte to the sort of dogmatically defined jazz promulgated by Marsalis and Crouch. Parker's response is to gesture away from the constraints of "jazz"—and, in this case, music altogether—in order to articulate a vision in which the abandonment of preconceptions and the attentiveness to the living moment facilitate "the restoration of humanity." It is in this openness that Parker locates revolutionary potential, situating it against the late-stage capitalism that he identifies as the American ethos, and asserting that "To be effective against America's anti-life policies, we have to be radical in every area of our lives." Thus Parker's approach to the music of Mayfield, who he identifies as "a prophet, a preacher, a revolutionary, a humanist, and a griot,"<sup>8</sup> not only models but enacts his political ideal, itself a critique of American power rather than an assimilation to it.

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7. Parker, *who owns music?*, 76.

8. Parker, liner notes to *The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield*.



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