THE SOUNDS OF LIBERATION: RESISTANCE, CULTURAL RETENTION, AND PROGRESSIVE TRADITIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC

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by

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ABSTRACT

The cultural production of music in the Black community has traditionally operated as much more than a source of entertainment. In fact, my thesis illustrates how progressive traditions for social justice in Black music have acted as a source of agency and a tool for resistance against oppression. This study also explains how the music of African Americans has served as a primary mechanism for disseminating their cultural legacy. I have selected four Black artists who exhibit the aforementioned principles in their musical production. Bernice Johnson Reagon, John Coltrane, Curtis Mayfield and Gil Scott-Heron comprise the talented cadre of musicians that exemplify the progressive Black musical tradition for social justice in their respective genres of gospel, jazz, soul and spoken word. The methods utilized for my study include a socio-historical account of the origins of Black music, an overview of the artists' careers, and a lyrical analysis of selected songs created by each of the artists. This study will contribute to the body of literature surrounding the progressive roles, functions and utilities of African American music.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

My mother garners the nickname "gypsy" from her siblings due to the fact that she is always moving and relocating to new and different places. As a child, I became accustomed to the transient lifestyle and appreciated all various lessons and experiences I have taken away from my travels. I was born outside of Washington, DC in Takoma Park, Maryland in 1982; since I was two years old I haven't lived in the same house for over 4 years. I wasn't a military brat nor did my parents ship me off to various family members, but for one reason or another we just moved a lot. Being raised in an Islamic Afrocentric household gave me invaluable strength and wisdom when confronted with foreign, and sometimes hostile, environments. Having a strong sense of self and being knowledgeable of my heritage helped me overcome many obstacles throughout my life. My upbringing instilled in me a positive appreciation for my culture and taught me never to be ashamed of my people no matter how negatively we may be portrayed or perceived.

Studying in settings from where I was the only Black kid in the room to where there were only Black kids in the class has given me a lot of insight into race relations. I decided to attend Howard University after four years at E.O. Smith high school in Connecticut, where I was one of thirteen African American students in the entire school. The academic curriculum of my high school was challenging, but the homogenous demographic makeup of the school population made the environment trying at times. Howard presented me with Black people from all over the globe with various perspectives. It was a great experience that further exposed me to the many facets of the African Diasporic community. I have always had a passion and interest in Black culture and life, so after graduating from Howard I wanted to pursue my master's in Africana Studies. I love the field of Africana because it allows me the

interdisciplinary freedom to explore any aspect of the African Diaspora; just as often as I move from place to place, so does my specified interest change. The liberty to explore the contributions of Black people in every discipline from medicine to music is captivating for me. My interest shifted from politics in undergrad to cultural aesthetics in graduate school. Being in Africana at Cornell has spurred me to continue my studies in the field so that I may one-day relay the precious information and ideas I have been exposed to amongst my future students. I don't know to what subfield my curiosity will take me next, but I'm sure it will be in an area concerning the African Diaspora.

I dedicate this thesis to generations past and those to come:

Each One Teach One

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I acknowledge:

The creator, to whom all praise is due.

The ancestors for giving me their guidance and trust.

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ASA, PAC, BGPSA.

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Introduction

From the nascent stages of civilization and throughout history, the aesthetic productions of a society have served as a way to understand how people related to and interacted with their environment. Everything from their laws, value systems, religious practices, and public/private relationships are all articulated within the artistic creations of any given civilization. Sculptures, paintings, scripts and dances all have been integral parts of a civilization's cultural production; they tell the story of that given people. Each of these mediums of expression is important. In the case of the African American community, I assert that it is their musical production that has been a key factor in their sustained growth and promulgation.

Nowadays it is commonplace to hear individuals refer to music as the "universal language." This may be due to the fact that to enjoy music there are no prerequisites, except the ability to hear. Harmonious sound and rhythm are something that can be appreciated and liked by all individuals regardless of race, age, class, or gender. Music possesses this inherent ability to be consumed and appreciated by all persons from all walks of life. More importantly, just as the other aforementioned types of artistic expressions, music tells a story. The beat, rhythm, song, and even instrumentation all elicit messages; a blueprint that not only expresses from whence the music came but also the transformations it has undertaken. Being the oldest people on earth, the Africans have indeed gone through a long period of time. Their musical traditions have endured and remained an integral part of their lives. As I shall explore later in the chapter, music has always been a fundamental aspect of African life. It has been an art of both utility and function that is interwoven into the African cultural fabric, and it has never stopped telling the peoples' story.

In this study, I plan to illustrate how the music of African Americans has not only acted as a primary mechanism for retaining and disseminating their culture, it has

also been utilized as a source of resistance against oppression. I will also explain how the progressive Black[1] musical tradition in America has been a source of agency[2] and a tool of liberation for the Black community at large. Through music Blacks have been able to articulate their struggles, empower themselves, and resist oppressive forces. Joyce Joyce elucidates on the role Black music has played:

> The music of Black folk has always been the magnifying glass that illuminated the traditions and struggles of Black people. Thus music is the quintessential medium through which the artist can liberate the Black masses.[3]

Joyce's comments highlight the two main points of my thesis: 1) the African American progressive musical tradition has been a force of resistance against oppression and a source of agency for the Black community 2) and that the African American progressive[4] musical tradition has acted as a vital mechanism in retaining and disseminating African American cultural heritage. Renowned activist/poet LeRoi Jones illustrates how Black music has been indicative of the state of Black society:

> It seems possible to me that some kind of graph could be set up using samplings of Negro music proper to whatever moment of the Negro's social history was selected, and that in each grouping of songs a certain frequency of reference could pretty well determine his social, economic, and psychological states at that particular period.[5]

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[1] For purposes of this study I use the terms "African American," "Black" and "Negro" interchangeably.
[2] The term agency as it is used in my study is synonymous with empowerment.
[3] Joyce Joyce, "Afterword: Gil Scott-Heron: Larry Neal's Quintessential Artist," *So Far So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press), 75.
[4] The term progressive as it is used in my study is defined as favoring or implementing social reform or new, liberal ideas.
[5] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 65.

Throughout it's struggle for independence and equality in the United States, African Americans have established a progressive musical tradition that has sought to educate, liberate, and provide solace to them. For this study, I have chosen four Black musicians who exemplify this progressive tradition towards social justice and cultural retention. These individuals' musical talents span the genres of gospel, jazz, r&b/soul, and spoken word/poetry. The artists I have chosen respectively are: Bernice Johnson Reagon, John Coltrane, Curtis Mayfield, and Gil Scott-Heron. These four artists representing four different genres of Black music, are emblematic of how the progressive Black musical tradition pervades all arenas of African American life. Each of these artists also were either directly involved in the freedom liberation movements (i.e. Civil Rights and Black Power movements) from 1955 to 1975 or strongly influenced by the messages and sentiments espoused in those liberatory campaigns. The following chapters will highlight the lives and careers of these Black musicians and demonstrate how their artistic production contributed to cultural retention and the progressive Black musical tradition. The primary methods I enlisted for my research were archival and database research; primary and secondary sources such as books, articles, interviews; and musical transcript analysis.

African Musical Origins and Traits

For a proper analysis of Black music, one must have some understanding of the historical and cultural context from which it emerged. Therefore, I will initiate the discussion by examining the traditional roles, purposes, and general characteristics of music in Africa. Music has always been and remains an integral part of African cultures. Throughout the ages, African societies have utilized music in a wide array of ways that reflect their beliefs and value systems. Ancient African civilizations, such as that of the ancient Kushites and Egyptians show evidence of musical instruments

being used in secular, sacred, and military campaigns dating back further than 2000 B.C.[6] The 5th Dynasty tomb of Niankhknum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara exhibits hieroglyphs depicting religious rituals involving priestesses shaking rattles called "sistra," trumpeters and drummers announcing the coming of war, and feasts of celebration that were often accompanied by ensembles consisting of harps, flutes, and clarinets.[7] Hymns paying homage to the God Aten were also discovered in the tomb of Akhenaten dating back to 1450 B.C.[8] Music has been a fundamental and inherent feature in African culture and society since the earliest days of civilization.

One distinct feature that African musical traditions possess is their depth of integration into the various patterns of social, economic, and political life of the people. For example, the BaHutu of Rwanda have at least twenty-four different types of social songs, ranging from songs that are played for harvesting to songs deriding Europeans, while the Venda of South Africa have an elaborate classification of musical genre based upon differing levels of political leadership.[9] In Africa music is learned as part of one's cultural and practical education. It provides not only musical instruction but also a comprehensive preparation for life experiences. African children acquire the fundamental principles of music at an early age because musical training is an intrinsic part of their mutual aesthetic and linguistic education.[10] In his seminal text, *Blues People*, LeRoi Jones asserts that African music differentiates itself from Western song due to the functional utility of music for Africans. He states:

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[6] Karlton E. Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call "Jazz"*, (Ithaca: Hesteria Records & Publishing Company, 2000), 6.
[7] Lise Manniche, *Music and Musicians in Ancient Egypt*, (London: British Museum Press, 1991), 80.
[8] Maud Cuney-Hare, Negro Musicians and Their Music, (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1936), 3.
[9] Karlton E. Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call "Jazz"*, (Ithaca: Hesteria Records & Publishing Company, 2000), 43.
[10] Ibid., 38.

> Serious Western music, except for early religious music, has been strictly an "art" music. One would not think of any particular *use* for Haydn's symphonies, except perhaps the "cultivation of the soul." "Serious music" (a term that could only have extra-religious meaning in the West) has never been an integral part of the Westerner's life . . .[11]

The traditional African cultures did not separate art from life; the two elements were inextricably intertwined. In many African cultures, musicians are the acknowledged authorities on history and mythologies. For instance, in the centralized kingdoms like Dahomey, Benin, and Ashanti, if a drummer made a mistake when drumming the names of the chief's lineage, it could be a capital offense.[12] Song, dance and music are utilized as a means of addressing issues concerning all facets of life, from the mundane to the exalted; as ethnomusicologist J. H. Kwabena Nketia illustrates in the following passage:

> Ashanti children sing special songs to cure a bed wetter; in the Republic of Benin there are special songs sung when a child cuts its first teeth; among the Hausas of Nigeria, young people pay musicians to compose songs to help them court lovers or insult rivals; men working in a field may consider it essential to appoint some of their number to work by making music instead of putting their hands to the hoe; among the Hutus, men paddling a canoe will sing a different song depending on whether they are going with or against the current.[13]

Music accompanies all aspects of an individual's life, and the community participates freely in almost all musical celebrations. The functional integration of music and culture is exhibited in the communal characteristics of African musical tradition. The element of collective participation is a distinguishing trait of African music and art.

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[11] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 29.
[12] J.H. Kwabena Nketia, *Sources of Historical Data on the Musical Cultures of Africa* (Ghana: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1972), 3.
[13] J.H. Kwabena Nketia, *Music in African Cultures: A Review of the Meaning and Significance of Traditional African Music* (Ghana: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1972), 33.

Village members of the Ashanti people gather en masse during celebrations and act not only as an audience, but also as active participants through the dynamic of call-and-response. John Miller Chernoff describes this process as "a rhythmic phrase that recurs regularly amongst the chorus or response; the rhythms of a lead singer or musician vary and are recast against the steady repetition of the response."[14] This antiphonal singing technique is another seminal feature of African music. Musicologist Maud Cuney-Hare expresses her understanding of the role of call and response in African music:

> The songs of the Africans are chiefly a species of recitative or chant with a short chorus. The soloist gives the melody while a chorus sings a refrain, which at times are but ejaculations. The chief singer remains standing while the members of the chorus are seated around him; and the melody is given out, they turn to one another, each improvising in turn. Their power of invention and improvisation may last for hours.[15]

Many West African languages such as Yoruba and Swahili are based in tonality where a single word can have several meanings depending on the pitch or inflection applied by the speaker. This trait in the language allows for an early cultivation of musical sensibilities among African children where they can readily distinguish differences in musical pitch.[16]

The conventional Western/European ethno-musical analysis of African music has been largely biased and inequitable due to racist and subordinating views towards the African continent. The peculiar aspects of African music were deemed savage and divergent from the musical principles native to European style compositions.

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[14] John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 55.
[15] Maud Cuney-Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1936), 19.
[16] Karlton E. Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call "Jazz"* (Ithaca: Hesteria Records & Publishing Company, 2000), 38.

Historically, African music has even been described by leading European musicologists as "cacophonous" and "monotonous."[17] Musicologists of the 18th and 19th centuries, and some from the 20th, would often portray African music as an "aberration" of the diatonic scale. H.E. Krehbiel exposes his apparent bias in his analysis of the African musical form:

> There is a significance which I cannot fathom in the circumstance that the tones which seem *rebellious* to the Negroes' sense of intervallic propriety are the fourth and seventh of the diatonic major series and the fourth, sixth and seventh of the minor.[18]

Another primary differentiating aspect of African music that clearly sets it apart from European musical forms is the substantial role *rhythm* plays in the construction of songs. A. M. Jones writes "Rhythm is to the African what harmony is to the Europeans, and it is in the complex interweaving of contrasting rhythmic patterns that he finds his greatest aesthetic satisfaction."[19] Maud Cuney-Hare describes "Negro" music as:

> . . .differing from the majority of racial musical rhythms in the great variety and complexity of its accents which ignore any division of time that follows the natural pulse of a regular metrical beat. Accents are anticipated or are held over beyond their *expected* [my italics] time.[20]

Even when analyzing the basic musical properties of African music, Cuney-Hare exhibits her partiality with the use of terms such as "expected time" and "natural pulse." The paradigm from which she critiques the subject matter creates a hierarchy

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[17] H.E. Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folksongs* (New York, G. Schirmer, 1914), 73.
[18] Ibid.
[19] A.M. Jones, "African Rhythm," *Africa* 24 (1954): 27-39.
[20] Maud Cuney-Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1936), 15.

that looks upon the other as unnatural or substandard. Sidney Finkelstein asserts that it is erroneous to analyze African derived music from a Eurocentric perspective: it "attempts to explain one musical system in terms of another; to describe a non-diatonic music in diatonic terms."[21] The hegemonic nature of Eurocentrism places the European musical model as the standard to which all other music must comply, or risk being derogated as an inferior form of expression. Fortunately, many scholars such as Amiri Baraka challenged these prejudiced and inaccurate descriptions of the African musical aesthetic.

African music makes avid use of techniques known as polymeter and apart-playing which allow for cross-rhythms to be syncopated into one tune. Chernoff explains the process as:

> The establishment of multiple cross-rhythms as a background in almost all African music is what permits a stable base to seem fluid. Stable rhythmic patterns are broken up and seemingly rearranged by the shifting accents and emphases of other patterns. The same processes of relationship are at work among the drums of Agbekor or in any piece of music based on multiple rhythms, and *the basic organization of rhythm is the essential composition*, what an African might call the *beat* . . .[22]

Cross-rhythmic patterns are illustrated well by the drum orchestras found throughout the coastal rain forest belts of West Africa. Professor J. H. K. Nketia points out how these cross-rhythms are constructed:

> Generally the master drum carries the burden of rhythmic complexity and the supporting drums, graded in size, pitch and tone, set up rhythms against it and each other. The crossing of the beat must be established; after that is done, additional drums may be added with

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[21] Sidney Finkelstien, *Jazz: A People's Music*, (New York: Citadel, 1948), 68.
[22] John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 52.

> main beats of the bar coinciding with one or other of those already beating.[23]

It is these complex polymetric, contrapuntal, and polyphonic rhythmic effects indigenous to African music that were retained and replicated in the music of African slaves in America. Music has played such an essential role in the cultivation of African society that it even withstood the culturally destructive punishment wrought upon the African continent by the slave trade. As Samuel Floyd states, "African musical traits and cultural practices not only survived [the slave trade] but played a major role in the development and elaboration of African-American music."[24]

Slavery's Impact on African Music

The initiation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism ushered in a completely foreign and insidious era in African civilization. Between the early 16th and 19th centuries over 12 million Africans were kidnapped from their homeland and subjected to the most inhumane and appalling system of chattel slavery the world has ever seen. This institution was designed to reduce a human being to no more than a piece of property. The system of slavery, especially in America, feverishly sought to destroy all remnants of culture, religion, and humanity that the transplanted Africans possessed. The oppression faced by the enslaved Africans in America was far more insidious and permeating than just a condition of forced servitude. The Negro in America was denied more than just his/her freedom; he/she was denied all aspects of life that allowed him to be a human being. It was through this vile institution that the

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[23] Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues*, (London: Studio Vista, 1982), 35.
[24] Samuel Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

Negro forged for himself a new culture, identity, and resolve. To remain under the heel of an oppressor was never a conceivable option for the enslaved Africans. At every opportunity, they sought their freedom by appealing to, escaping from, or destroying their loathed captors. Thus the spirit of resistance was born in the collective psyches of the newly formulated Negro population. This mentality of resistance was translated and embedded into the culture of the Negro and manifested itself throughout all aspects of life.

The atmosphere and conditions of enslavement did not allow for the transplanted Africans to engage in any facets of their culture explicitly. The complete change in social, spiritual, economic, and political status forced the enslaved Africans to create a culture that reflected the contemporary dimensions of their current circumstances, but also retained the vital elements of their indigenous societies. Portia K. Maults assures us:

> The institution of slavery did not destroy the cultural legacy of slavery nor erase the memories of an African past. The survival of slaves in the New World depended on their ability to retain the ideals fundamental to African cultures. Although Africans were exposed to various European-derived traditions, they resisted cultural imprisonment by the larger society. Slaves adapted to life in the Americas by maintaining a perspective on the past. They survived an oppressive existence by creating new expressive forms out of African traditions, and they brought relevance to European-American customs by reshaping them to conform to African aesthetic ideals.[25]

In no other facet of the Black aesthetic was this cultural reformulation more apparent than in musical expression. W.E.B. Dubois wrote that Black music is "the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas . . . It remains

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[25] Portia K. Maults, "Africanism in African American Music," in *Africanism in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 185.

as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people."[26] Music became a way for Blacks to remain connected to their African heritage while protesting the bleak conditions they faced throughout history. By working within socio-cultural constraints, innovating and adapting musical styles, Blacks created a musical tradition distinctively their own, and that in itself was a form of defiance.[27] Whatever cultural mores Blacks could manage to perform had to be modified and covert in order to keep the white overseers from being alerted to the true nature of their activities. Initially, the music of the Africans was allowed on plantations and at various ordained locations such as Congo Square in New Orleans.[28]

Early accounts of Black music suggest that many African instruments were still in use when the Africans first arrived in America.[29] Native African instruments such as the drum, calabash, and kora were the primary indigenous devices permitted for use by the enslaved Africans.[30] At this time, the European slave masters were unaware of the cultural semblance of African music and instruments. As stated earlier, African music is *functional*; not just as an art form, but also as a cultural expression that possesses a great degree of utility. Drums especially were used as devices for communication.[31] Music was critical in the organization of early slave uprisings. Using drums to spread messages in a rhythmic language undeciphered by Whites, slaves could orchestrate revolts on land and on slave ships as well.[32] Eventually the link between drumming and the revolts was discovered and the playing

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[26] W.E.B Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1903), 265.
[27] Megan Sullivan, "African-American Music as Rebellion: from Slavesong to Hip-Hop," *Discoveries* 3, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2001), 21.
[28] Samuel Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 37.
[29] Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: Norton, 1983), 123.
[30] Samuel Charters, *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), 121.
[31] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 26.
[32] Megan Sullivan, "African-American Music as Rebellion: from Slavesong to Hip-Hop," *Discoveries* 3, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2001), 22.

of any native African instrument was outlawed throughout the colonies, with the exception of Congo Square in New Orleans. Karlton Hester illustrates the severity of the ban placed on African music:

> A decree was issued in Georgia in 1775 stated that "whatsoever master or overseer shall permit his slaves, at anytime hereafter to beat drums, blow horns, or other loud instruments, shall forfeit 30 shillings sterling for every such offense." However, the difficulty involved in enforcing this particular legislation was clear even in 1811 when lawmakers complained, "It is absolutely necessary to the safety of this province that all due care be taken to restrain Negroes from using or keeping drums."[33]

After the ban on playing their traditional music was established, the enslaved Africans had to rely on their powers of ingenuity, innovation, and improvisation. Improvisation is another seminal feature of African music that took upon a whole new dimension when introduced to the Americas within the constraints of enslavement. We shall elaborate further on the relevance of improvisation to the Black musical aesthetic when discussing the intricacies of jazz. Existing in such a deprived atmosphere, the enslaved Africans chose not to succumb to the slave masters' demands and retaliated by choosing to utilize whatever they could to sustain their musical aesthetic and cultural memory. The Africans began to adapt their customary polyrhythmic styles to European instruments and harmonic scales. They began using whatever means of rhythm making were at hand: European instruments, household items such as spoons, jugs, and washboards, metal wash basins, and even their own bodies were used as percussive surfaces to recreate the rhythms of the drum. This body slapping was referred to as "patting juba."[34] "Patting Juba" was usually done in

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[33] Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 62.
[34] Karlton E. Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call "Jazz"*, (Ithaca: Hesteria Records & Publishing Company, 2000), 88.

a circle of men who would take turns improvising virtuoso rhythm cadences using all parts of their body; other performers would accompany the juba patting with handclaps and foot stomps of alternating beats. Elements of this tradition serve as the basis for modern day tap dancing.[35] Even with these improvisations in place, the deprivation of instruments in the slave community compelled them to place greater focus on their vocal manifestations of song.

"Juba" was also the term coined for the leftover scraps and discarded food from the master's house that was fed to the slaves in troughs used for farm animals. In protest and for mental fortification, the slaves made songs criticizing the inhumane and unjust treatment they were subjected to. The following is an example:

> Juba this and Juba that
> Juba killed a yella' cat
> Get over double trouble, Juba
>
> We sift the meal,
> You give the husk,
> We cook the bread,
> You give me the crust.
> We fry your meat,
> You give me the skin.
> And that's where mama's trouble begin.
>
> Juba up, Juba down, Juba all around the town.
> Juba for ma, Juba for Pa.
> Juba for your brother-in-law.[36]

The enslaved Africans sang in the old African tradition, but injected a new content into their music, a content that specifically reflected the conditions of their oppression and their desire to transform their collective predicament. Work songs and

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[35] Ibid., 142.
[36] Ibid., 141.

'field hollers' became commonplace sounds on the plantation. Just as their African predecessors had employed song in their daily activities, so did the enslaved. Only now the significance and purpose of the song had been changed along with the circumstance and status of the enslaved Africans. These work songs were used as a means to combat the dehumanizing effects of slavery. They allowed for the enslaved Africans to simultaneously boost their collective morale and unify them towards the common goal of liberation.[37] Many times the enslaved Africans would make use of double-entendres in their work songs to codify the belligerent sentiments towards their masters. Hester expounds on this point:

> Utilization of the double entendre (dual meaning) allowed the slave to communicate more freely while under the oppressors' surveillance. Remnants of African language patterns as seen in such cryptic encoding, enabled the African American to cultivate new forms of communication enabling them to survive within a hostile environment.[38]

These work songs highlighted the hypocritical nature of the slaveocracy by illustrating how the enslaved did all the work yet received none of the fruits of their labor. Even in performance, dances like the 'cakewalk' mocked White dance styles under the direct observation of the unaware overseers.[39] The defiant and subversive attitudes present in the enslaved Africans' music were not limited to the secular songs of the workplace. In fact, the forced transference of the functions of the drum to the human body and voice transformed the Black church into the novel cultural institution that provided the space necessary to cultivate these new music-making skills and

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[37] Megan Sullivan, "African-American Music as Rebellion: from Slavesong to Hip-Hop," *Discoveries* 3, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2001), 22.
[38] Karlton E. Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call "Jazz"*, (Ithaca: Hesteria Records & Publishing Company, 2000), 134.
[39] Ibid., 145.

radical sensibilities among the enslaved population.[40] Angela Davis asserts the essential role the Black church played in fostering a mentality of resistance among them:

> Collective consciousness of freedom does not automatically accompany oppression. That consciousness must be actively created. For Black people in the United States during the era of slavery, the spiritual played a fundamental role in communicating the ingredients of that collective consciousness to masses of slaves.[41]

Many of the early independent Negro churches such as the African Union Church (est. 1807) combined with organizations like the Free African Society led what could be considered the first "Black" freedom movement.[42] Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were among the prominent Black ministers who insisted on the necessity for Africans to worship autonomously, separated from Whites; in doing so they would achieve an unprecedented degree of freedom for their captive brethren.[43] The Black church served as the only institution that permitted the slaves to congregate and exchange ideas without fear of reprisal, even though the churches were subjected to scrutiny, dissolution, and attack.

Religion was a primary device used by the oppressors to assist in the subjugation and assimilation of the enslaved populous. It was conjectured by Whites that if the African slaves would submit to "Christian" doctrines it would ingrain in them belief that the White man is God and should be revered as such. This, in turn, would make them more susceptible to accepting their abhorrent condition without

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[40] Megan Sullivan, "African-American Music as Rebellion: from Slavesong to Hip-Hop," *Discoveries* 3, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2001), 25.
[41] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 120.
[42] Karlton E. Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call "Jazz"*, (Ithaca: Hesteria Records & Publishing Company, 2000), 179.
[43] Ibid.

protest.[44] The ruling Whites' experiment in religious indoctrination of the Africans would prove to be a double-edged sword. While it may have imposed a foreign conception of God upon the Africans, they were able to fashion the belief system to incorporate and reflect their distinct values and traditions. Out of the imposition of Christianity upon the enslaved emerged one of the most effectual musical genres Blacks have utilized towards their liberation, the Negro spirituals. Sterling Stuckey discusses the protest role of the "Negro" spiritual:

> There seems to be small doubt that Christianity contributed in large measure to a spirit of patience, which militated against open rebellion among the bondsmen. Yet to overemphasize this point leads one to obscure a no less important reality: Christianity, after being reinterpreted and recast by slave bards, also contributed to that spirit of endurance which powered generations of bondsmen, bringing them to that decisive moment when for the first time a real choice was available to scores of thousands of them.[45]

The Negro spirituals acted as both a source of religious fortitude and as a mechanism to communicate, without detection by Whites, subversive messages of support, unity, revolt, and even codified directions to the Underground Railroad.[46] Gospel songs and hymns such as "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," "Steal Away," "Follow the Drinking Gourd," and "We Will Stand the Storm" acted as either fomentations, announcements, or consolations sung to aid escape from bondage or to boost the spirits of apprehensive slaves.[47] The idea of mobility was intrinsically tied to the notion of freedom for the enslaved Africans. To be able to leave the oppressive conditions of the south and head

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[44] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 37.
[45] Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore," in *Black and White in American Culture*, ed. Jules Chametzky and Sidney Kaplan (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1969), 183.
[46] Megan Sullivan, "African-American Music as Rebellion: from Slavesong to Hip-Hop," *Discoveries* 3, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2001), 25.
[47] Hildred Roach, *Black American Music: Past and Present* (Boston: Crescendo Publishing Co., 1973), 28.

north to 'the promised land' became an ethos embedded in the senses of the slaves, which coincided with many of the biblical myths. Biblical passages that dealt with exodus or freedom from bondage were interpreted by the slaves as prophecies of their liberation. Spirituals such as "Deep River" and "Go Down Moses" exemplify how the slaves utilized Biblical hymns to communicate subversive modes of escape. The lyrics to "Deep River" are as follows:

> Deep river, my home is over Jordan,
> Deep river, Lawd, I wan' to cross
> Over into camp ground.[48]

Professor of Music Lemuel Berry exclaims that this song is one of defiance, which expresses a deep desire to escape the bondage of slavery. "Home" and "camp" are both metaphorical references to the free northern territories. He also posits that the reference to the river "Jordan" actually represents the Ohio River, whereby crossing it the slaves would achieve their emancipation.[49] Another example of how the slaves asserted a revolutionary consciousness in their music is found in the lyrics of "Go Down Moses":

> Go down, Moses.
> Way down in Egypt land
> Tell ol' Pharaoh
> To let my people go!
> Thus spoke the Lord, bold Moses said,
> Let my people go.
> If not I'll smite your firstborn dead.
> Let my people go.[50]

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[48] Mary Ellison, *Lyrical Protest: Black Music's Struggle Against Discrimination* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 50.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Hildred Roach, *Black American Music: Past and Present* (Boston: Crescendo Publishing Co., 1973), 28.

The struggles of the Jewish people and their long-sought "Promised Land" proved a strong analogy for the enslaved Africans in America.[51]

The progressive tradition of the Negro spirituals carried with it the "spirit" of resistance throughout the many trials and tribulations the enslaved Africans faced while enduring oppression. Just as the strains of time and servitude were not enough to eradicate the unique African cultural sensibilities of the enslaved, the mentality of resistance that was created in this process was perpetuated and kept alive by their musical tradition. The old African dictum, "the spirit will not descend without song," was internalized and embodied in the slave hymns and spirituals.[52] The rebellious and progressive "spirit" of gospel traversed the trials and tribulations of slavery, emancipation, reconstruction; and found itself embodied in one of most prolific figures to ever emerge from the African American spiritual tradition: Bernice Johnson Reagon.

[51] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 39.
[52] Ibid., 41.

Chapter 2 - Gospel as Genesis: Bernice Johnson Reagon

"A people's art is the genesis of their freedom." - Claudia Jones[53]

Bernice Johnson was born October 4, 1942 in Albany, Georgia. From early on in her life Bernice's parents helped foster and encourage her interests in activism and song. Her mother, Beatrice, labored both as a housekeeper and field hand; her father, Jessie, was a Baptist minister and carpenter. Jessie Johnson had taken an active role in voter registration drives throughout Georgia from as early as 1945, and Beatrice was the primary agent in instilling in her daughter a strong sense of womanhood and activism. "She could always see that we could operate in a different world with more opportunities," states Reagon in an interview with the *Washington Post*.[54] As a preacher's daughter involved in the choir allowed Bernice was completely submerged in the Black musical tradition of gospel and spirituals. Her signature a cappella singing style was forged in the church throughout her youth, since the chapel didn't have a piano. Bernice always regarded singing as a natural and essential form of cultural and social expression and rarely did she envision what she was doing as a "performance."[55]

Bernice's activist disposition and commitment to challenge the status quo remained a constant with her throughout her life, to be enhanced with every obstacle she would confront. She was a strong and constant presence in the Albany Movement for civil rights for Blacks in Georgia. Using music as a tool to combat oppression, the

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[53] Claudia Jones, In *Left of Karl Marx* by Carole Boyce Davies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 105.
[54] Clifford Thompson, ed., *Current Biography Yearbook 1999* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1999), 484.
[55] Michael Kernan, "Around the Mall and Beyond: Conveying History Through Song," *Smithsonian Magazine,* February 1999, 34.

activists in the Albany Movement gave birth to many new freedom songs based on old church spirituals.[56] In 1959 she enrolled in Albany State College to pursue studies as a contralto soloist, but her dedication to the civil rights movement and involvement in various protest activities on and off campus put her at odds with the university's administration. In an attempt to quell the growing activism of the student body, Albany State College expelled those students taking part in civil disobedience demonstrations in the fall of 1961.[57] Among those expelled were Bernice Johnson and Rutha Mae Harris; both of whom would go on to further their involvement in the struggle by joining the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1962.[58] In an interview with Michael Kernan, Bernice says, "When the SNCC people came to town they found that the Albany sound was different. They'd heard students sing, but they had never heard black people of all ages sing at that power level."[59] In an effort to promote the causes of Black enfranchisement and voter registration, SNCC recruited groups of young advocates to travel and educate the southern public. With this goal in mind, a small group of four talented youths banded together to create the Freedom Singers.

The original members consisted of Charles Neblett, Cordell Reagon, Rutha Mae Harris, and Bernice Johnson. The quartet traveled throughout the south singing, advocating, and articulating the ideals expressed by SNCC and the Civil Rights movement on a tour that lasted from December 1962 to August 1963.[60] They performed in all types of venues from colleges, protest marches, and even jail cells to

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[56] Josh Dunson, *Freedom in the Air: Song Movements of the Sixties* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 63.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid, 64.
[59] Michael Kernan, "Around the Mall and Beyond: Conveying History Through Song," *Smithsonian Magazine,* February 1999, 32.
[60] Winston A. Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights 1960-1977* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), 43.

Carnegie Hall and the Newport Folk Festival in Rhode Island. The Freedom Singers were widely regarded as "the movement's singing newspaper; reporting and defining the actions and issues from the civil rights war zones where they were frequently arrested."[61] These organized or impromptu concerts allowed their music to function as a tool of communication; these gatherings were planned with the real motive of education, but they appeared to the outside world in the guise of entertainment.[62] The dissemination of knowledge under the "guise of entertainment" hearkens back to the established tactic of Blacks in America utilizing their musical talents as a subversive means of liberation. Just as the slave hymns transmitted convert messages of revolt and escape in a hostile environment, so did the songs of the Freedom Singers seek to empower and educate the Black southern populace through their melodies.

During their time in the original Freedom Singers Bernice Johnson and Cordell Reagon were wed; the marriage was short lived. After she was dismissed by Albany State, Bernice enrolled for a semester at Spellman College and studied history and voice. The original Freedom Singers disbanded in the fall of 1963, nonetheless Reagon continued to pursue her passion for music and social reform. Bernice released an album on Folkway Records in 1965 entitled *Folk Songs: The South*. The album was a compilation of folk songs Reagon had heard throughout her youth and travels. Tracks like "Amazing Grace" and "Been in the Storm" were descriptive of the content of the album. Bernice states:

> My history was wrapped carefully for me by my fore-parents in the songs of the church, the work fields, and the blues. Ever since this discovery I've been trying to find myself, using the first music I've ever known as a basic foundation for my search for truth.[63]

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[61] Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 294.
[62] Leslie Paige Rose, "The Freedom Singers of the Civil Rights Movement: Music Functioning for Freedom," *Applications of Research in Music Education* (2007): 61.
[63] Bernice Johnson Reagon, Liner notes from Folk Songs: The South (Folkways Records, 1965).

Bernice went on to organize and volunteer in various folk festivals but found herself dissatisfied with the interracial folk-music circles. In an interview with Hollie West from the Washington Post, Reagon states:

> I was trying to put my music in a socio-political context, but many white singers didn't want to address with any level of consistency the racism in this country. They focused on their own problems, like coal mining. Some of them would stop their music with the coal mining strikes of the 1940's. I'd get so mad and say to them, 'Can't you get any closer to the '60s than that?'[64]

Compelled to sing about issues that were more contemporary and pertinent to her community, Reagon took the initiative and assembled an all-female quartet called the Harambee Singers in 1966. Staying true to form, Reagon created the Harambee Singers with an implicit political and social activist agenda. Overtly radical, the Harambee Singers defined themselves as a Black nationalist, Pan-Africanist group, that did not sing to White people and also did not record any music due to their suspicions CIA surveillance.[65] The audiences they sang for were primarily Black studies departments and colleges, national Black conventions, community programs, and the independent schools, which were springing up all over the country at the time.[66] Author Katie King describes the Harambee Singers music as:

> …A blend of African-influenced songs with Western forms, including quartet and gospel choral songs, rhythm and blues, and jazz. This repertoire reflected a self-consciously created Black nation/culture with its own cultural history and uniquely synthesized music.[67]

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[64] Clifford Thompson, ed., *Current Biography Yearbook 1999* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1999), 485.
[65] Katie King, *Theory in its Feminist Travels* (Madison: Indiana University Press, 1994), 98.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.

Around the same time, Reagon sought to establish a social-studies program for teaching oral traditions within the Atlanta public school system, but she was rejected. She saw that finishing her formal education would be necessary for her to implement her plans, so she returned to Spelman and received her B.A. in history. Continuing to pursue her studies, she moved to Washington, DC in the early 1970's and attended Howard University. While working towards her doctorate, Reagon simultaneously headed a research group dubbed the African Diaspora Program for the Smithsonian Institution. As the only series to attempt to present African American culture on such a national and international scale, the program was unprecedented in Smithsonian history. Bernice Reagon's endurance and commitment to spreading the message of liberation for the Black community was unceasing. While managing her Ph. D work and the Smithsonian project, in 1972 she assumed the role of visiting lecturer at Ithaca College in upstate New York and served as vocal director of the D.C Black Repertory Theater Company.[68]

In her position as director of the D.C Black Repertory Theater, Reagon assembled an a cappella ensemble composed herself and four other African American women who assumed the name Sweet Honey in the Rock. The group's sound was built on complex five-part harmony; the styles of doo-wop, gospel, soul, jazz, blues, folk, rap, and traditional African and Caribbean music are coupled with socially relevant subject matter to produce a truly unique and wondrous sound.[69] As time progressed so did her career. Reagon received her Ph. D from Howard University in 1975 and acted as lecturer and visiting scholar in various academic institutions from her alma mater to the Portland State University. Sweet Honey in the Rock was signed

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[68] Ibid.
[69] Michael Kernan, "Around the Mall and Beyond: Conveying History Through Song," *Smithsonian Magazine,* February 1999, 34.

to a record deal with Flying Fish Records the following year and released their first album, entitled *Sweet Honey in the Rock* in 1976. The members included: Bernice Reagon, Carol Maillard, Louise Robinson, Patricia Johnson, and Evelyn Harris. That same year Reagon became the director of the Program in African American Culture (PAAC) in DC; a permanent program that grew out of the African Diaspora Project.[70] Enjoying success in both her academic and artistic endeavors, Reagon was delighted when Sweet Honey in the Rock was awarded a Grammy for best traditional folk recording for its version of Leadbelly's "Grey Goose."[71] Shortly after changing roles in the Smithsonian from director of PAAC to become curator in the Division of Community Life, in 1989 Reagon was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant. Bernice would go on to receive numerous awards and accolades throughout the 1990's including a Peabody Award for her production of *Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions*. This radio production consists of 26 one-hour segments and supplemental educational material that trace the development of sacred music and its reciprocal impact on Black history and culture.[72]

To have lived such a profoundly dedicated life is no easy task. In fact it is extraordinary, as Bernice Reagon explains to Marvette Perez in a 1997 interview:

> "I've had young people ask me how was I able to do so much. And I suggest that I'm not a good model, it really was over-extension. It's not a normal life to do what I did. But people who are oppressed cannot live a 'normal' life. Baby, you try to live a normal life if you're oppressed, you will never be free . . . I think you have to over-extend yourself."[73]

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[70] Bernice J. Reagon, "Pioneering African American Gospel Music Composers," in *We'll Understand it Better By and By,* ed. Bernice J. Reagon (London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 7.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Clifford Thompson, ed., *Current Biography Yearbook 1999* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1999), 485.
[73] Ibid.

Early Influences

The songs and music produced by Reagon in combination with her relentless drive for social justice truly makes her a major contributor to the Black progressive musical tradition in the twentieth century. Tapping into her rich heritage of musical resistance, Reagon employed gospel music to educate, inspire, and liberate the African diasporic community at large. Her revolutionary message was not limited to the shores of the United States; rather it was Pan-African in its scope and sought to speak to the disparate conditions of Blacks globally. But how did she manage to gain this revolutionary consciousness? What and who were her sources of influence?

Reagon received her inspiration from pioneers and seminal figures that emerged out of both the gospel and social activist traditions. During her youth, Reagon recalls listening to the voices of Mahalia Jackson, the Five Blind Boys of Jackson, the Roberta Martin Singers and the Davis Sisters and still considers them among her earliest influences as gospel artists.[74] Reagon maintains that she began to learn spirituals at a very early age, as her mother played gospel often during her pregnancy. "Over My Head, I See Trouble in the Air," "Witness For My Lord" and "Go Down Moses" were all songs taught to her in both school and church. Pioneering gospel music composers such as Charles Albert Tindley and Thomas Andrew Dorsey played a major role in advancing the tradition of spirituals into the twentieth century. Bernice cites Tindley as being influential in her life primarily due to his work as a songwriter of new sacred songs in the early years of the 20th century. Reverend Tindley was instrumental in creating many of the new gospel hymns in the early 1900's and produced a book of copyrighted hymns in 1916 entitled *Songs of*

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[74] Bernice J. Reagon, *If You Don't Go Don't Hinder Me* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 12.

Paradise.[75] His most popular song, "Stand By Me," is considered the second most well known hymn is Black Christendom, after "Precious Lord," the gospel hymn composed by Thomas Dorsey.[76] Dorsey is widely regarded as the 'father' of gospel music since it was he who actually coined the term "gospel" for the new sacred music being created by African Americans in the early 1900's.[77] Despite his renowned popularity and success in the genre, Reagon articulates that it was Dorsey's internal struggles that served as her greatest source of inspiration. Before he began composing spirituals, Dorsey was a top blues pianist for Ma Rainey's band.[78] Reconciling the two worlds of sacred and secular music proved to be a challenge for Dorsey; but he did so by combining in his compositions musical attributes and ideals that were more associated with 'juke joints' than the church. Initially these attempts were met with hesitancy and skepticism. Songs such as "Precious Lord" composed in the traditional gospel hymn style were praised and warmly received by the church. However, compositions like "Search Me Lord" with its strong blues riffs, breaks, and overtones troubled many.[79] Bernice Reagon recalls her own early experiences with the blues and how the music impacted her singing:

> My parents called the blues 'reals,' you weren't supposed to sing reals. But my brother would take the radio out of my parents' room and listen to the blues station, and since the boys' room was next to the girls' room, I'd hear them in my sleep. When I got old enough to buy records, the first one was by Howlin' Wolf—he's my favorite singer in the universe.[80]

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[75] Bernice J. Reagon, "Searching For Tindley," in *We'll Understand it Better By and By,* ed. Bernice J. Reagon (London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 38.
[76] Ibid, 39.
[77] Bernice J. Reagon, *If You Don't Go Don't Hinder Me* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 21.
[78] Ibid, 22.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Clifford Thompson, ed., *Current Biography Yearbook 1999* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1999), 483.

Reagon conceptualizes the role and function of the Black sacred music tradition as "a source of strength that helped us to survive spiritually and emotionally in our new places within and without. When studied carefully, our music culture documents a lot about how we saw ourselves in our movings."[81] Her assertion testifies to the nature of Black music being non-static, evolving art that not only retains the characteristics of Black culture but also disseminates them through expression. All Black music, regardless of genre, is informed and influenced by its preceding musical styles generated within a particular social context. Even though the church deemed blues and folk music to be unholy or "devilish," most spirituals and gospel hymns have been strongly influenced by the melodies and rhythms proverbial to blues music.

It was during the late 1960's that Bernice began to study African American history. While pursing her search for knowledge she was introduced to the lectures and writings of John Henrik Clarke, C.L.R James, Council Taylor, and W.E.B DuBois to name a few.[82] Their political ideologies and Pan-African sentiments struck a deep cord with Reagon and influenced her thinking on the role of the intellectual in transforming society. Descriptions of slave spirituals narrated by abolitionist Frederick Douglass conferred upon Reagon profound insight and an even deeper admiration for her musical tradition. Douglass states:

> They told a tale of woe, which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones, loud, long, and deep; breathing the prayer and compliant of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have

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[81] Bernice J. Reagon, '"Let Your Light Shine" – Historical Notes,' in *We Who Believe in Freedom*, ed. Bernice J. Reagon (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 15.
[82] Bernice J. Reagon, *If You Don't Go Don't Hinder Me* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 102.

> frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence, even now, afflicts my spirit, and while I am writing these lines, my tears are falling. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conceptions of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds.[83]

Douglass' personal connection and experience with the slave spirituals fortified his convictions to fight against the despicable institution of chattel slavery. He credits the spirituals with fostering in him the disposition that even though he was born into slavery the institution was fundamentally wrong. The hymns and songs of the enslaved Africans acted as a force of resistance and empowerment. Reagon states, "In a system like slavery, where open critique is dangerous, the spirituals by their sound become a dissenting voice."[84]

Heroine Inspiration

Bernice Reagon's progressive song and activism has always extended from beyond promoting civil rights or Pan-African ideals to the global community. She is a staunch advocate for women's rights and Black feminist praxis. Professor Patricia Hill Collins succinctly articulates the ideology of Black feminist thought best by stating:

> Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift that rejects additive approaches to oppression. Instead of starting with gender and then adding in other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class, and religion, Black feminist thought sees

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[83] Bernice J. Reagon, '"Let Your Light Shine" – Historical Notes,' in *We Who Believe in Freedom*, ed. Bernice J. Reagon (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 23.
[84] Bernice J. Reagon, *If You Don't Go Don't Hinder Me* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 103.

> these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination.[85]

Reagon has conducted a multifaceted attack on all forms of subjugation; never solely focusing her energies on purely racial issues. Bernice Reagon was one of the few women from the movement who was able to bridge the Black struggle and the movement of women.[86] Since Black women have historically been denied the stage to articulate and theorize about alternative conceptions of community, they have been the ones to forge the way in creating alternative communities that empower.[87] Aside from her mother, Reagon cites three Black heroines who in particular provided her with a model conception of what it means to be a Black woman. In her book, *If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me*, Reagon expresses that it was the lives of Bessie Jones, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman that showed her how Black progressive song/music is "nurturing, energy, and power for making a difference in the world in which you find yourself."[88] Reagon describes herself as the "twentieth-century daughter" of those three heroines.

Unlike Truth or Tubman, Bernice Reagon had the opportunity to personally work with Bessie Jones during her work with the Freedom Singers in 1963. Jones was part of the Georgia Sea Island Singers and specialized in reciting songs that had descended from slavery which were still part of the traditions on the islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina.[89] Each song carried with it the spirit of her ancestors and taught a lesson of how life was sustained during the times of African

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[85] Patricia H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 222.
[86] Barbara Omolade, "Bernice Reagon Wedding Political Action and Music," *The Black Scholar* (1985): 5
[87] Ibid.
[88] Bernice J. Reagon, *If You Don't Go Don't Hinder Me* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 105.
[89] Ibid, 108.

enslavement. Jones introduced Reagon to different dances, games and plays produced by enslaved Africans and showed how those activities were translated into agency for the oppressed. Jones' interpretation of what it meant to be a 'woman' disregarded the Anglo European Puritan conception of women's role in society. Her uninhibited views and definitions of womanhood intrigued and shaped Reagon's own perceptions of what is seen as morally acceptable and virtuous in regards to sexual practices. In Jones' family and culture sex was viewed as a natural practice for men and women to engage in and it was not to be shunned or thought of as something of which to be ashamed of. More importantly, there was no gender specific standard present that bestowed preference upon males. Reagon recalls that in her church if a woman was to have a child out of wedlock she would be viewed as a 'sinner' and need to seek the pardon of the church before she would be allowed back into the congregation. "I never saw a man beg the church pardon because of sex. I hated the rule!" exclaims Reagon.[90] Seeing first hand how Bessie Jones was able to negotiate the territory between what she believed to be true and the reality of living in a church-based community that has not fully relinquished or departed from patriarchic tendencies, solidified Reagon's resolve to crusade against oppression or discrimination in any form; even when it is found close to home.

Sojourner Truth was known for her sermons and speeches, and when she preached she would often sing. Reagon was so moved by a song that Sojourner Truth composed for a colored regiment from Michigan that fought in the Civil War, that she included in the repertoire of Sweet Honey in the Rock:

> We are (the valiant) colored Yankee soldiers
> Enlisted for the war
> We are fighting for the union

[90] Ibid, 114.

We are fighting for the law
We can shoot a Rebel further
Than a white man ever saw
As we go marching on.

Look there above the center
Where the flag is waving bright
We are going out of slavery
We are bound for freedom's light
We mean to show Jeff Davis
How the Africans can fight
As we go marching on.

We are done with hoeing cotton
We are done with hoeing cotton
We are colored Yankee soldiers
Just as sure as you are born
When the Rebels hear us shouting
They will think it's Gabriel's horn
As we go marching on . . .[91]

The bold content and ferocity of Sojourner Truth's songs compelled Bernice Reagon to study Truth's life in detail. Born into slavery, Truth was given the name Isabella and from an early age she had a close personal connection with God. She would often retreat to a concealed place on the plantation and speak her prayers to God.[92] In 1827 Truth managed to secure her freedom by bartering with her master, and soon thereafter slavery was abolished in New York. Nonetheless, under the new law only slaves born before 1799 would be emancipated, therefore her children still had to work for her previous master. Sojourner would not be denied her son and set upon the path to retrieve him by any means. After pleading with her son's owner to no avail, Sojourner asked God to help her attain his freedom. Miraculously a small group of Quakers came to her assistance and managed to take the issue to court where after a long legal

[91] Ibid, 119.
[92] Ibid, 121.

battle Sojourner was reunited with her child.[93] It was in the 1840's when Isabella took on the name Sojourner Truth to match her mission of preaching the gospel through song and fighting to abolish slavery. Throughout the mid 1840's and 50's Sojourner was avid in her work denouncing slavery and advocating for women's rights. One untitled song she created during the Abolitionist movement illustrates her tenacity:

> I am pleading for my people,
> A poor downtrodden race
> Who dwell in freedom's boasted land
> With no abiding place.
>
> I am pleading for the mothers
> Who gaze in wild despair
> Upon the hated auction block
> And see their children there.
>
> Whilst I bear upon my body
> The scars of many a gash
> I am pleading for my people
> Who groan beneath the lash.[94]

Truth went on to work for the Freedman's Hospital in Washington, DC at the end of the Civil War. While in DC she opposed segregation of street trolleys and gained a notable victory by having the Jim Crow car taken off of the trolleys. Sojourner Truth's activism and perseverance to free her people under the worst of circumstances made her not only a revolutionary, but also a model of Black resistance for the next generation of women freedom fighters like Bernice Reagon.

Last, but certainly not the least, Reagon speaks about how Harriet Tubman directly impacted her life. Tubman is well known for using songs and hymns as encoded directions and warning signals for the multitudes of enslaved Africans she led

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[93] Ibid, 125.
[94] Ibid, 127.

to the northern territories and their freedom. As 'conductor' of the Underground Railroad, Tubman used song as a subterfuge to communicate plans of escape to the enslaved. Reagon was introduced to the work of Harriet Tubman early in her life through the spiritual "Wade in the Water":

> Wade in the water, wade in the water children
> Wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water.
>
> See those children dressed in white
> The leader looks like that Israelite.
>
> See those children dressed in red
> They look like the children Moses led.
>
> See those children dressed in blue
> They look like my people marching through.
>
> Some say Peter and some say Paul
> Ain' but the one God made us all.
>
> Some come cripple and some come lame
> But I come stepping in Jesus name.[95]

Harriet Tubman was the composer of this song that is now a staple in the Black Christian church. Reagon admits to reciting this song for most of her pre-adult life without truly having an understanding of its veiled meaning. The themes of 'movement' and 'trouble' did not connect with Reagon on a personal level until she participated in her first march in Albany, Georgia. It was there that she had to move out of her comfort zone and confront the trouble that was keeping her people oppressed. Reagon describes the significance Tubman's song had to her:

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[95] Ibid, 128.

> When you move from the plantation in your life, you must also work to leave the plantation you hold inside. Survival on the plantation is connected to your agreeing in some limited way to be bound by its rules. When you decide to leave, you must be ready to leave that part of yourself that has moved in these old ways. In a way, that part of you must die. It would not do to move to the other side, to travel the journey with Harriet, to get to the land beyond slavery, and then find that you have taken the mindset of the plantation with you.[96]

Tubman was a powerful figure and the only woman that Reagon had ever known to be associated with the titles of Moses and General, which were traditionally bestowed upon males. Born Araminta Ross, Tubman was enslaved from birth but never accepted the position of servitude to which she was relegated. After experiencing a vision in 1844, Tubman made up her mind to escape her bondage and bring her two brothers with her; though her fearful siblings would end up leaving her on the journey and returning to their master. Her brothers had yet to shed the 'mindset of the plantation.' That was not an option for Harriet:

> I had reasoned dis out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have de oder; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted, and when de time came for me to go, de Lord would let dem take me.[97]

Driven by what she felt was her divine right to freedom, Harriet Tubman was successful in reaching the free northern territories. A revolutionary to the core, Tubman made a baffling nineteen journeys back into the south and brought scores of slaves to freedom including her brothers, sister, and aged parents. Reagon takes particular note of the courage and selflessness Tubman exhibited during her lifetime.

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[96] Ibid, 130.
[97] Ibid, 135.

Even though she had attained her personal freedom, Harriet Tubman felt obligated to return for her enslaved brethren. Her revolutionary consciousness informed her that she would not truly taste liberation until the chains fell from the bodies of all captured Africans. And she carried this message of liberation with her in the form of song. When she first left the plantation she was singing in order to send a message to those too afraid to make the journey with her:

> When dat ar ole chariot comes
> I'm gwine to lebe you
> I'm bound for the promised land
> Friends I'm gwine to lebe you.
>
> I'm sorry friends to lebe you
> Farewell, oh fare thee well
> But I'll meet you in de morning
> Fare thee well oh fare thee well.
>
> I'll meet you in de morning
> When you reach de promised land
> On the other side of Jordan
> For I'm bound for de promised land.[98]

This song and many others like it were all created and utilized to assist Tubman in goal of emancipating her brothers and sisters in bonds. The common traits that link all these revolutionary heroines are none too commonly found: unshakeable resolve, limitless courage, and a divine love and compassion toward others. These are the essential qualities of an avant-garde; a tradition in which Bernice Reagon locates herself.

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[98] Ibid, 134.

Role and Function of Gospel Music

In his book, *The Anthropology of Music*, Dr. Alan Merriam contextualizes the vital function that music plays in any given culture:

> When it is considered that music is used both as a summatory mark of many activities and as an integral part of many others, which could not be properly executed, or executed at all, without music, its importance is substantially magnified. There is probably no other human cultural activity which is so all-pervasive and which reaches into, shapes, and often controls so much of human behavior.[99]

This fundamental function of music within the African historical context plays a major role in how the cultural aesthetic is shaped in the Black community of America. Bernice Reagon views the spirituals as a source of ancestral pride and a message of freedom and deliverance. Gospel music and spirituals have been a part of Bernice Reagon's life since her birth, however it would not be until her involvement in the Civil Rights movement that she would feel an intense connection and intimate relationship with the words she had been reciting most of her life:

> One of the things about the singing in the [Civil Rights] movement was that it was more powerful, almost, than any singing I had heard in the church. It was basically church singing, a cappella singing, but there was a power that really was different for me. THE MOVEMENT changed my understanding of the church. There were songs that I heard for the first time, the lyrics, because of the movement, and they were church songs. The old people who were singing them were singing them out of their lives and their belief. But until I used my life to stand for right, I didn't understand the songs. I actually understood the crucifixion in a different way. I was able, because of the movement, to really understand lynching as a kind of crucifixion.[100]

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[99] Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 218.
[100] Rachel E. Harding and Vincent G. Harding, "Singing To Freedom," *Sojourners Magazine*, August 2004, 32.

Reagon explains that she experienced a "rebirth" that enabled her to wed both her love for music and her desire for political and social justice. "I was baptized when I was 11, but I was born again in the Civil Rights movement. That's when it happened for me."[101] After being released from her first stint in jail for participating in a protest march at Albany State, Reagon recalls her voice being so hoarse that she could not speak. She had been singing all throughout the night reminding her comrades of their purpose and urging them to remain steadfast to the cause. One song Bernice is credited with creating during the movement is "Freedom in the Air;" which was adapted from the spiritual "Over My Head I See Trouble In The Air." Once Black people saw they could use their familiar church spirituals in a context that was relevant to their current circumstance and struggle, 'freedom songs' were being constantly generated.[102] The old Negro work song "Keep Your Eyes on the Plow," was changed to "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" by the Freedom Singers; the prize symbolizing freedom and equality for the Black community.[103] The notoriously defiant tune "Aint Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round" was constantly modified with "police dogs," "Uncle Tom," "segregation," "fire hose," or "jailhouse" being substituted for "nobody."[104] Even the song which is often credited as the unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, "We Shall Overcome," originated by combining an old Baptist hymn, "I'll Be Alright," with the text of Rev. Charles Albert Tindley's 1901 spiritual, "I'll Overcome, Some Day."[105]

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[101] Ibid.
[102] Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 92.
[103] Josh Dunson, *Freedom in the Air: Song Movements of the Sixties* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 66.
[104] Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 75.
[105] Leslie Paige Rose, "The Freedom Singers of the Civil Rights Movement: Music Functioning for Freedom," *Applications of Research in Music Education* (2007): 65.

The spontaneous nature and rebellious content of the 'freedom songs' echo the skill and ingenuity that Bernice Reagon's enslaved African ancestors used when creating their hymns and spirituals. The Negro spirituals possess the qualities of timelessness and adaptability. These properties of progressive Black music provide the capability to reflect the sentiments and conditions of the Black community at any given stage in its development. Bernice Reagon harnessed the ability to transform religious and spiritual songs into radical anthems for political struggle. This concept can be dubbed the "evolution of resistance" in Black music. These songs can retain most of their original lyrics and content, but they are recomposed to be employed in secular situations where people are oppressed and exploited.

Lyrical Analysis

Now we shall directly engage the lyrical content of a few of the songs Bernice Reagon is responsible for creating. Reagon's music takes a radical stance against a myriad of social conditions and injustices, ranging from poverty to women's rights. "In This Land" is a scathing critique of the economic disparities that exist within the wealthiest country in the world, the United States of America:

> I don't understand (4x)
>
> It takes more that promises to feed a nation
> It takes more than pounds of surplus cheese
>
> I ain't got a lot of education so,
> Why don't somebody tell me please
>
> Why am I hungry?
> Why am I hungry?
> Why in this land?
>
> Why in this land of plenty
> My belly's soft and empty

I don't understand
I don't understand

It takes more than promises to house a nation
It takes more than sentiments and shacks

I ain't restin' since they closed the shelter
And the barn is shelter for my back

Why am I homeless?
Why am I homeless?
Why in this land?

Why's the ghetto crowded?
And you've got expensive housing
Why in this land?

I don't understand
I don't understand

It takes more than promises to clothe a nation
It takes more than hand-me-downs and rags

My clothes are tattered and my soul is battered
And I don't even own a plastic bag

Why am I naked?
Why am I shakin'?
Why in this land?

What can one person do with 200 pairs of shoes?
I don't understand
I don't understand…[106]

The lyrics of "In This Land" act as an indictment of the US government, asking why there are so many glaring economic gaps between the nations' wealthy and the downtrodden poor. With the abundance of resources in this country the singers "cannot understand" how these disparities continue to exist. Promises from statesmen

[106] Sweet Honey in the Rock, "In This Land, " *In This Land,* Earthbeat, 1992.

and politicians will not feed, clothe, or provide shelter for the disenfranchised. The song implicitly calls for a redistribution of wealth by urging the question "what can one person do with 200 pairs of shoes?" The greed and excesses that allow for some to indulge in frivolous spending should never take precedence over feeding a hungry child. Reagon compels the listener to examine closely the economic and humanitarian priorities of the country.

The next composition "(Women Should Be) A Priority," comments on the gender discrimination and inequality commonly faced by women. The song clearly illustrates Reagon's contempt for the inequalities generated in the patriarchic social hierarchy of the United States:

> TV's, movies, and the videos
> Use our image to create a sick sideshow
>
> Too many times seen as a sex symbol
> No real intelligence, just a brainless bimbo
>
> Not taken seriously for who she needs to be
> A human being with the right to be free
>
> Not misinterpreted so much of the time
> A no means yes? Only in a man's mind
>
> Women who struggle and fight take back the night
> So often viewed by others in the wrong light…[107]

"(Women Should Be) A Priority" criticizes the popular media and society at large for their role in the subordination of women. Reagon espouses the culturally revolutionary stance of destroying the patriarchic societal paradigm present in so much of the 'modern world.' Unlike White feminist traditions, Black woman cannot afford

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[107] Sweet Honey in the Rock, "(Women Should Be) A Priority," *In This Land,* Earthbeat, 1992.

to limit their visions of liberation solely to themselves. Expressed through her songs, Bernice Johnson Reagon understood, incorporated, and included the oppression and liberation struggles of dominated peoples around the globe:

> If you heard about Chile
> Then you heard about Soweto
> There the blood of oppression
> Runs deep as the mines
>
> The hands that choked the spirit
> Of Allende
> Pulled the trigger on the children
> In a muddy Soweto street
>
> The hands that turned the key
> In 10 Wilmington jail cells
> Put young Steve Mitchell
> In a dust hill grave
>
> The hands of oppression
> Are the hands of hunger
> The water of Chile
> Fill the banks of Cape Fear
>
> Chile your waters run red through Soweto
> The same hands—same waters.[108]

Bernice Reagon even adapted popular commercial hits to themes of struggle, revolution, and liberty. "Calypso Freedom" was fashioned from the 1957 Billboard hit "Day-O (Banana Boat Song)" performed by Harry Belafonte. Originally a traditional Jamaican calypso folk song, "Day-O" told of the struggles and hardships Caribbean banana plantation workers faced on the job. Reagon adopted the rhythm and harmony of the original production, but replaced the lyrics to reflect the goals of

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[108] Barbara Omolade, "Bernice Reagon Wedding Political Action and Music," *The Black Scholar* (1985): 6

the freedom movements. The song begins with a spoken definition of freedom, then transitions to into singing:

> Freedom means to be responsible. Freedom is the ability to exercise your God given right to be yourself anytime, anyplace, any space. Freedom means to achieve your goals. Freedom is free of labels and categories. Freedom means to be able to do whatever you want to.

Freedom, give us freedom
Freedom is coming and it wont be long (2x)

Well I took a trip on a Greyhound bus
Freedom is coming and it wont be long

I got to fight segregation now this we must
Freedom is coming and it wont be long

Freedom, Freedom
Freedom is coming and it wont be long (2x)

Well I took a trip down to Alabama way
Freedom is coming and it wont be long

Met a lot of violence on mothers day
Freedom is coming and it wont be long

Freedom, Freedom
Freedom is coming and it wont be long (2x)

On to Mississippi with speed we go
Freedom is coming and it wont be long

The blue shirted policemen meet us at the door
Freedom is coming and it wont be long

Freedom, Freedom
Freedom is coming and it wont be long (2x)

Well you can hinder me here, you can hinder me there
Freedom is coming and it wont be long

But I go right down on my knees and pray
Freedom is coming and it wont be long

Freedom, Freedom
Freedom is coming and it wont be long (2x)[109]

"Calypso Freedom" declares that freedom will be attained through direct struggle and confrontation with the forces of oppression. The lyrics inform the listener of the freedom rides that took place throughout the south in order to combat Jim Crow segregation.

Throughout her life and career Bernice Johnson Reagon produced songs that were both pertinent to the times and that called for social justice by attacking all facets of discrimination. Her commitment to the liberation of oppressed peoples was apparent in all aspects of her life; whether it was organizing student protest demonstrations at Albany State or heading the African Diaspora project at the Smithsonian Institute; Reagon has always been an activist. Employing the richness of her culture and musical heritage Reagon utilized the spiritual/gospel tradition to convey the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and justice. Her words function as both tools of education and liberation; keeping true to the essential role the spirituals played as an informative mechanism that disseminates African American culture and revolutionary messages of emancipation. Barbara Omolade expresses the function of the gospel tradition best when she states:

> Black (gospel) music is prophecy. It weds the political with the less tangible spirit, binds us to each other in new and clear and old ways…Our music is our history is our future. Without our own history we cannot understand the purpose and the process of our liberation. History that is hidden is not history and history that cannot be understood by our children, our mothers and fathers, our brothers and our sisters is irrelevant, no matter what the content or purpose.[110]

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[109] Sweet Honey in the Rock, "Calypso Freedom," *All For Freedom,* Music For Little People, 1989.
[110] Barbara Omolade, "Bernice Reagon Wedding Political Action and Music," *The Black Scholar* (1985): 9.

Chapter 3 – Blowin' Out of the Box: John Coltrane

"The Negro musician is a reflection of the Negro people as a social phenomenon. His purpose ought to be to liberate America aesthetically and socially from its inhumanity." - Archie Shepp[111]

"But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile." - Langston Hughes[112]

John William Coltrane is widely considered to be one of the most prolific and groundbreaking figures to emerge from the modern jazz scene. During his career Coltrane would produce over 100 studio and live recordings as a band member and solo artist. In 2007 the Pulitzer Prize Board bestowed upon Coltrane a Special Citation for his "masterful improvisation, supreme musicianship, and iconic centrality to the history of jazz." As we shall discuss, Coltrane's impact on reshaping and redefining the Western musical paradigm and asserting an African 'identity' within his music, has contributed greatly to the retention and propagation of the African

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[111] Archie Shepp, Quote in *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* by Frank Kofsky (New York: Pathfinder Press Inc., 1971), 9.
[112] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *Modern Black Nationalism*, ed. William Van Deburg (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 52-56.

American cultural aesthetic. But before we engage that discussion, let me first shed light on the origins and socio-political context in which "jazz" music emerged.

As the status and experiences of Blacks in America shifted and changed, so did the music. Black musical expression evolved along with Black life and circumstance; reflecting the emotions, desires, problems, and hopes of the Black community. Upon being emancipated from slavery in the aftermath of the Civil War, the freed Africans were confronted with an entirely new set of conditions and opportunities. The emancipation of the enslaved Africans proposed for them an existence (or at least the illusion of such) in which they could determine their own destiny; a chance at humanity that was impossible under slavery. Naturally, the feelings and dispositions of the newly created Black community were elucidated in the form of music. However, the music created in this post-emancipatory environment allowed for a much greater degree of uninhibited expression that had previously been under the exclusive domain of the Black church. The recently freed ex-slave community was introduced to the previously alien concepts of "leisure" and "solitude."[113] Though one could hardly consider the work of a sharecropper "leisurely," the level of independence Blacks then experienced during Reconstruction was unprecedented and it granted them a large measure of sovereignty over their own lives. This newfound status influenced Black music, not only in form but also in lyrics and content. No longer did the music have to be relegated to the realms of work, entertainment, or worship. As LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) states:

> The limited social and emotional alternatives of the work song could no longer contain the growing experience of this country that Negroes began to respond to. Also, the entrance of Negroes into the more complicated social situation of self-reliance proposed multitudes of social and cultural problems that they never had to deal with as slaves.

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[113] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1963), 61.

> The music of the Negro began to reflect these social and cultural complexities and change.[114]

Enter the Blues. Many historians suggest that Blues music is denoted as the "Blues" because it reflected the post-bellum despair and disappointment within the Black community after the carpetbaggers arrived.[115] The early Blues songs spoke of economic hardships and the plight faced by freed Blacks within the South and those who had migrated to the Northern states seeking employment and better financial opportunity, only to find a more subtle form of economic and psychological wage enslavement in their urban environments. The Blues spoke to issues of infidelity, poverty, anguish, and even love. Blues music derived directly from the work songs, shouts, and spirituals of the enslaved African community, yet it had a much more personal focus that centered on the exploits and outlook of the individual. Personal expression within the Black community was enlivened with the creation of blues music. Jones states:

> Early blues, as it came to differ from the shout and the Afro-Christian religious music, was also perhaps the most impressive expression of the Negro's individuality within the superstructure of American society.[116]

This novel expression of Black music denoted as 'the Blues' served as the basis for what we know today as 'jazz.' Karlton Hester elaborates:

> The blues is the foremost vehicle for individual expression in modern jazz. In the hands of the innovative jazz performer, the blues becomes a highly complex and progressive musical form harmonically and melodically, leading to an endless variety of chromatic and pantonal

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[114] Ibid, 62.
[115] Karlton E. Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call "Jazz"*, (Ithaca: Hesteria Records & Publishing Company, 2000), 148.
[116] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1963), 66.

> possibilities. It employs very few Western chords and, when properly executed, allows for the judicious imposition of virtually any note on a given chord.[117]

Historians commonly refer to New Orleans, Louisiana as the birthplace of jazz music. The music generated in Congo Square by the enslaved Africans created a sound that conjoined European harmonics and West African rhythms. It allowed for the meshing of elements of traditional African music with French quadrilles and minuets characteristic of the Napoleonic military marching bands.[118] As the popularity of this original sound grew, it spread throughout the South and eventually made its way into the urban centers of the Midwest and Northeast. In the early 1940's a musical movement emerged that shifted the focus and sound of contemporary swing music to make way for the developing innovative sound called bebop; which was based on harmonic improvisation and eighth notes rather than the melodic improvisation and quarter notes of swing.[119] Musicians like Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, and Miles Davis were at the forefront of this movement.[120] Traveling and carrying with it the nuances and experiences of Black culture, the music of this movement eventually came to rest upon the ears of one who not only would fully grasp it, but whose creative production would also issue forth a challenge to the musical aesthetic paradigms of the Western world. This individual was none other than John W. Coltrane.

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[117] Karlton E. Hester, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 7.
[118] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1963), 73.
[119] Richard Turner, "John Coltrane: A Biographical Sketch," *The Black Perspective in Music,* March 1975, 4.
[120] Ibid.

Master in the Making

John William Coltrane was born on September 23, 1926 in Hamlet, North Carolina. His parents, Alice and John Sr., were both amateur musicians and children of ministers; which exposed and inclined the younger John to begin his musical endeavors within the church.[121] His grandfather was a distinguished member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church. Ethnomusicologist Karlton Hester emphasizes the impact of being reared in the African American church had on Coltrane:

> The religious music found in the Black church accounts for much of the basic melodic and rhythmic orientation that shapes the knowledge of many of the blues and jazz performers who are rooted in this musical/spiritual experience.[122]

Coltrane's early youth was spent mastering the clarinet, but he would later transition to the alto saxophone as his primary instrument after receiving one for his birthday in 1943.[123] Coltrane cites Lester Young, Johnny Hodges, Charlie "Bird" Parker and Coleman Hawkins as some of the primary jazzmen who influenced and helped develop his own musical style:

> I found out about Coleman Hawkins after I learned of Lester. There were a lot of things that Hawkins was doing that I knew I'd have to learn somewhere along the line . . . the first time I heard Hawk, [Coleman Hawkins] I was fascinated by his arpeggios and the way he played. I got a copy of his *Body and Soul* and listened real hard to what he was doing. And even though I dug Pres [Lester Young], as I grew musically, I appreciated Hawk more and more.[124]

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[121] Karlton E. Hester, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 1.
[122] Ibid, 7.
[123] Ibid, 2.
[124] Don DeMicheal, "John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Critics," *Down Beat*, April 1962, 17.

Upon graduating from high school, John moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and enrolled in the Ornstein School of Music. From there he transferred to the Granoff Studios where he stood out as one of the best students in the history of the school. John began his professional career at nineteen playing for less than enthusiastic patrons in small bars in Philadelphia until he was drafted into the Navy in 1945, where he played in Dexter Culbertson's Naval Band.[125] In 1946 he was discharged from the Navy and joined up with Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson's rhythm and blues band. It was in Vinson's band that Coltrane switched from the alto to the tenor saxophone, which he initially didn't like due to the added weight, but he came to love the innovative sounds and musical depths he could explore on his new instrument. As Charlie Parker had been Coltrane's primary influence on the alto saxophone, Lester Young was John's authority on the tenor sax.[126] Coltrane toured with Vinson's band throughout most of 1947 and 1948; continuing to hone his skills, techniques, and confidence with side gigs with the Apollo Theater orchestra and rehearsals with fellow saxophone player Sonny Rollins.[127] It would be in late 1949 that Coltrane would seize the opportunity to join the Big Band of jazz great Dizzy Gillespie.[128] Unfortunately John's time with Dizzy's Band was cut short due to his problem with drug abuse and he was consequently was released from the group by 1951. In 1952 John had brief performing stints in the bands of Gay Crosse and Earl Bostic, about which he said, "I went with Earl Bostic, who I consider a very gifted musician. He showed me a lot of things on my horn. He has a fabulous technical facilities on his instrument and knows

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[125] J. C. Thomas, *Chasin' the Trane* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1976), 34.
[126] Don DeMicheal, "John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Critics," *Down Beat*, April 1962, 16.
[127] Karlton E. Hester, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 4.
[128] C.O. Simpkins, *Coltrane: A Biography* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1975), 41.

many a trick."[129] In 1953 John teamed up with the legendary Johnny Hodges; whom Coltrane cites as his "first main influence on alto."[130]

John was continually producing and performing music; all the while learning, expanding and perfecting his style. However, it wouldn't be until 1955 that a widespread audience would take notice of Coltrane's skill and distinct 'voice;' when he joined the band of renowned trumpeter Miles Davis. Although Coltrane and Davis differed in style and temperament (Davis' gruff and unsympathetic attitude sometimes frustrated the eager and inquisitive Coltrane), they eventually formed a complementary musical synergy that took the group and their music to new heights. Davis comments:

> The group I had with Coltrane made me and him a legend . . . put me on the map in the music world, with all those great albums we made for Prestige and later Columbia Records . . .(it) made all of us stars.[131]

It was during this time with Miles that Coltrane began to base his improvisational technique upon scales. The resulting "modal" approach to jazz improvisation became the most significant innovation to occur in jazz since bebop.[132] The first album on which Coltrane was featured, '*Round About Midnight,'* thrust him into the limelight and got him much attention from contemporary critics and the jazz public.[133] Author Barry McRae claims:

> …Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane were indisputably the most outstanding tenor saxophone players in an age dominated by their wind instrument. Their *radical** (my emphasis) note placement and other

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[129] Ibid, 42.
[130] J. C. Thomas, *Chasin' the Trane* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1976), 45.
[131] Miles Davis, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 147.
[132] Karlton E. Hester, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 11.
[133] Joe Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the Fifties* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1980), 147.

> stylistic characteristics influenced rhythm sections as well as front line jazz instrumentalists.[134]

Miles Davis decided to disband the Quintet in 1957 due to improprieties of band members, including Coltrane. Out of a job and still struggling with his drug addiction, in the summer of 57' Coltrane went into a deep meditation and reflected on his life for three days.[135] Upon emerging from his solitude Coltrane resolved to kick his drug habits and had a revitalized energy towards his music:

> During the year 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual wakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude I humbly asked to be given the means and the privilege to make others happy through music. I feel this has been granted through His grace. ALL PRAISE TO GOD.[136]

After his spiritual awakening, Coltrane returned to New York in the summer of 1957 and joined Thelonious Monk and his quartet. Working with Monk was a learning experience for Coltrane that nurtured his musical maturity and allowed for him to take his stylistic innovations to another level. "In Monk's band Coltrane expanded his harmonic conception, gained independence from the keyboard function of the rhythm section, and learned the principles of multiphonics on the saxophone."[137] John's short seven-month stint with Monk ended due to contractual requirements; by the end of 1957 Coltrane had reunited with Davis who had now formed a sextet that included the adeptness of Cannonball Adderley and Paul

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[134] Barry McRae, *The Jazz Cataclysm* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1985), 11.
* My emphasis on "radical" is to illustrate how divergent from mainstream musical norms Coltrane's production was.
[135] Richard Turner, "John Coltrane: A Biographical Sketch," *The Black Perspective in Music,* March 1975, 7.
[136] John Coltrane, liner notes of *A Love Supreme*, Impulse (A-77).
[137] Karlton E. Hester, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 25.

Chambers. The time spent with Monk had radically changed Coltrane's sound. Now his talent had developed to the point where he had full command of his instrument and was fully employing his experimental approach to the music. Coltrane states:

> About this time, I was trying for a sweeping sound. I started experimenting because I was striving for more individual development. I even tried long, rapid lines that Ira Gitler termed "sheets of sound" at the time. But actually, I was beginning to apply the three-on-one chord approach, and at that time the tendency was to play the entire scale of each chord.[138]

Tracks such as "So What" and "All Blues" from Davis' album *Kind of Blue* were instrumental in ushering in a new direction and sound of modern jazz. The recordings were composed of few chords that were related to a dominant mode in such a way that they permitted the soloist to continue his improvisation along a sort of blues scale without paying heed to the actual bar by bar modulation of the chords.[139] Coltrane released an album completely of his own compositions in 1959 entitled *Giant Steps*; the title track is of which is generally considered to have the most complex and difficult chord progression of any widely played jazz composition.[140] Dr. Ben Sidran elaborates on the importance and impact *Giant Steps* had on the jazz world:

> By juxtaposing clusters of five or seven notes against the four beats played by the rhythm section, John produced new kinds of tension that were resolved in unexpected places. This consequently caused the formation of new anticipations in the listener, and jazzmen began hailing this new feeling as "freedom."[141]

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[138] John Coltrane, In Collaboration with Don DeMichael. "Coltrane on Coltrane," *Down Beat*, September 1960, 17.
[139] Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), 137.
[140] Richard Turner, "John Coltrane: A Biographical Sketch," *The Black Perspective in Music,* March 1975, 7.
[141] Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), 138.

Freedom indeed. Coltrane's innovative techniques and style ushered in a new sound that sought to liberate the artist from the dictated confines of Westernized standards of music. John left Davis' group in 1960 to pursue his own career plans. After signing a deal with Atlantic Records Coltrane formed his own quartet. Coltrane's experimentation in sound extended even to his band, at times creating a quintet. Each member helped create a distinctive and original sound that Coltrane was striving for. John teamed with musicians such as Eric Dolphy, Reggie Workman, John Gilmore, and Billy Higgins to vary the musical output of the group; always producing something fresh and stimulating. After some switching of members, the core or "classic" Coltrane quartet became comprised of McCoy Tyner (piano), Elvin Jones (drums), Jimmy Garrison (bass), and Coltrane (tenor sax).[142] Ever the innovator, Coltrane began to play the soprano saxophone in early 1961. The band recorded classic tracks such as "My Favorite Things" and continued to push the creative envelope. John began utilizing more African and Indian motifs and sounds in his music and veered further away from the Western models of music. Not only was Coltrane seeking to expand his sound, he was also choosing to elicit an African theme in his music illustrating retention of his African cultural heritage. Coltrane began to release more and more recordings with Africa as his central topic.[143] The 1961 release of *Africa/Brass* included Coltrane's sixteen-minute ode to the motherland aptly titled, "Africa." His relationships with fellow musicians Ravi Shankar and Michael Olatunji helped encourage Coltrane to utilize these foreign influences.[144] As John's career progressed so did his unique sound and musical complexity. He continued to

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[142] Karlton E. Hester, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 81.
[143] Coltrane was also previously featured on an album on Savoy Records with trumpeter Wilber Harden in 1958 entitled *Gold Coast*, which featured African themed tracks such as "Tanganyika Strut" and "Dial Africa."
[144] C.O. Simpkins, *Coltrane: A Biography* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1975), 146.

implement polyrhythmic innovations into his music and look to African and eastern inspired sounds for his compositions.

John Coltrane worked with many of the jazz greats of the time ranging from Duke Ellington to Johnny Hartman.[145] As his creative mind grew so did his spiritual aptitude. Many who knew Coltrane would describe him as a deeply mystical person who sought to connect with higher power every time he played. John did not produce his music in a vacuum and always felt his musical expression served to articulate his views and concerns towards the current society. In response to a 1963 church bombing in Birmingham where four Black girls were killed, John composed "Alabama" in honor of the slain youths.[146] In December 1964 his group composed *A Love Supreme,* which is now heralded as the quartet's most famous record and a pivotal work in Coltrane's stylistic development.[147] The composition is a four-part ode to Coltrane's love and faith in God; and although not explicitly stated served as a eulogy of sorts for fellow musician Eric Dolphy who had passed away earlier the same year.[148] By 1965 Coltrane was creating music at a prolific rate and carrying out a more abstract and hypermetrical approach to his spontaneous compositions.[149] The musical and spiritual evolution of Coltrane is illustrated in each of his subsequent releases; with titles such as *Ascension*, *Meditations*, and *Om* Coltrane was exhibiting his desire to transcend the boundaries of conventional music and sound. 1966 would bring about major changes for the quartet. Displeased with the direction the musical production of the band was going McCoy Tyner and Elivin Jones left; subsequently John recruited Pharaoh Sanders (tenor sax), Alice Coltrane (piano), Rashied Ali

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[145] J. C. Thomas, *Chasin' the Trane* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1976), 249.
[146] Richard Turner, "John Coltrane: A Biographical Sketch," *The Black Perspective in Music,* March 1975, 12.
[147] Karlton E. Hester, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 96.
[148] Ibid., 96.
[149] Ibid., 103.

(drums) and retained Jimmy Garrison (bass) to form the his new quintet.[150] In these later years Coltrane continued to experiment by adding the bass clarinet and flute to his repertoire of instruments he would play.[151] Coltrane's *Concert in Japan* was a huge success but also quite taxing. He performed for three weeks straight, all the while battling cirrhosis of the liver.[152] Upon returning to the states John released what would be his last album, *Expression* in March of 1967. John's sentiment towards the liner notes of his last album seem to be a premonition of his final moments:

> I would like to put an album with absolutely no notes, just the titles of the songs and the personnel. By this point I don't know what else can be said in words about what I'm doing. Let the music speak for itself.[153]

Coltrane's body would succumb to the cirrhosis on July 17, 1967, but his spirit would live on through his timeless music.

Coltrane's Composition

The music of John Coltrane tapped into the historical vein of creativity, innovation and spontaneity that has been a part of the progressive Black musical tradition. Archie Shepp comments:

> When you listen to John…he's talking about Negro life from early New Orleans to right now. You see, he has a lot to express. Another thing he did was to underline the diversity of textures that were still possible on the horn. He's done an enormous amount to sensitize listeners to the scope of sound that is possible on the tenor and then on the soprano. There is no question that John Coltrane is a giant in this music.[154]

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[150] Bill Cole, *John Coltrane* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1976), 188.
[151] Ibid.
[152] C.O. Simpkins, *Coltrane: A Biography* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1975), 206.
[153] John Coltrane, liner notes on *Expression* (Impulse!, 1967).
[154] Bill Cole, *John Coltrane* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1976), 163.

Many consider him to be one of the great jazz musicians of all time. His authority is evident in the playing and acknowledgements of many of his esteemed contemporaries; including Cannonball Adderley, Pharaoh Sanders and Sonny Rollins. "Trane's playing was so bad by then that it even made Sonny go out and change *his* style – which was a great style – and go back to woodshedding…"[155] Lets take a moment to examine the inventive methods and the aspects of cultural assertion and retention that John implemented to create his musical masterpieces.

Coltrane imposed his own imprint on his music. He took the sounds, techniques and principles of the music he was hearing all around him, then fashioned it to replicate his own unique sense of expression. Musicologist Karlton Hester elaborates on Coltrane's early playing:

> During his first period, densely organized streams of notes became a part of his musical vocabulary along with a quadruple timing solo approach that was based on a sixteenth note (as opposed to the quarter note emphasis of Louis Armstrong and the eighth note basic unit that Charlie Parker utilized) which commonly incorporated carefully chosen melodic pitches often approached by sweeping runs.[156]

By 1961 Coltrane was at the helm of the avant-garde movement that was distinguishing itself from swing and ushering in the novel and insurgent sound of "free jazz."[157] John Coltrane's approach to and utilization of alternate timing techniques such as incorporating uneven subdivisions of the beat (i.e., note groupings of five, seven, eleven, etc.) into his production was a stylistic innovation with which Coltrane

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[155] Miles Davis, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 199.
[156] Karlton E. Hester, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 17.
[157] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1963), 88.

excelled.[158] Another distinctive creation of Coltrane's music was coined "sheets of sound" by editor and music critic Ira Gitler of *Down Beat* magazine.[159] This technique employs a sixteenth note and augments the melodic complexity by invoking more elaborate chords and a greater quantity of them; which in turn creates of heavier harmonic texture of the music.[160] In an interview with Don DeMicheal, Coltrane comments:

> I found that there were a certain number of chord progressions to play in a given time, and sometimes what I played didn't work out in eighth notes, sixteenth notes, or triplets. I had to put the notes in uneven groups like fives and sevens in order to get them all in.[161]

Giant Steps is a key composition in which these innovations are apparent. This album is widely considered to be Coltrane's first important recording as leader of a quartet.[162] The title composition explores an unprecedented number of chord changes, harmonic superimpositions and chord substitutions in incredibly rapid succession.[163] Coltrane connects with his ancestral roots and pays homage to his first wife and child on tracks such as "Naima" and "Syeeda's Song Flute." Author Richard Turner highlights the connection between Coltrane's *Giant Steps* and the Black liberation movements taking place concurrently:

> The musical *revolution* (my italics) that John Coltrane initiated with *Giant Steps* must be viewed as a part of, or at least in the context of, the Black Revolution, which began to demand nationwide attention in

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[158] Karlton E. Hester, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 22.
[159] Ira Gitler, "Trane on Track," *Down Beat,* October 1958), 16.
[160] Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder Press Inc. 1971), 161.
[161] Don DeMicheal, "John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Critics," *Down Beat*, April 1962, 17.
[162] Ekkeard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), 23.
[163] Karlton E. Hester, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 44.

> 1960. For just as Trane was seeking to free jazz of the confusing laws of bebop, Blacks throughout the nation were seeking to free themselves of the racially oppressive laws of White America. The Black yearning for freedom in 1960 had manifested itself not only in music, but also in the widespread sit-in demonstrations against segregated lunch counters.[164]

John Coltrane's music was pioneering, not only with the techniques employed but also in usage of foreign sounds and rhythms derived from non-Western cultures. In an interview with *Melody Maker* magazine on July 11, 1964 Coltrane states, "Right now I am concerned with African rhythms. But I do listen to all kinds of music all the time."[165] John incorporated the rich musical timbre and polyrhythmic complexities of African music into his compositions; evident in aptly titled recordings such as "Africa" and "Dahomey Dance." In compositions such as "Africa" and "India" Coltrane was trying to tell us that it is time to reassess Western value structures and to change the role of art in Western Society.[166] Coltrane's music evolves from an African tradition where there is considerable emphasis on collective improvisation.[167] This spontaneous or improvised tradition was amplified through the process of enslavement where Africans were stripped down to the bare minimums of their culture. In such an environment improvisation was no longer just a cultural nuance, but a matter of survival. Injecting this non-Western sound into the American musical mainstream allowed for John to reconnect his Black listeners to their African roots and awaken ideals of identity, agency and liberation within their consciousnesses. Manu Dibango comments on John's African-rooted sound:

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[164] Richard Turner, "John Coltrane: A Biographical Sketch," *The Black Perspective in Music,* March 1975, 9.
[165] *Melody Maker*, July 1964, 6.
[166] Richard Turner, "John Coltrane: A Biographical Sketch," *The Black Perspective in Music,* March 1975, 10.
[167] Karlton E. Hester, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 33.

> Afro [Black] people in America are learning about their roots. Musicians like John Coltrane did so much to make this connection between African people and Black people here in the states. Even if he didn't say it in words, he said it with his instrument. You know, in North Cameroon we have hautboy (African oboe) players who sound exactly like Coltrane, without ever having heard him.[168]

Coltrane's art initiated an aesthetic revolution that challenged and changed the conventional paradigms of Western music and art; acting as a force of resistance to the suppression of Black culture in America. Not only did John Coltrane's compositions change the traditional models of "high-quality" music it also reasserted traditional African musical qualities to the forefront of popular music. In doing so, Coltrane assisted in circulating, informing and reconnecting Blacks to their cultural heritage. His music served as a progressive voice for equality during the tumultuous and changing era of the mid-20th century. In an interview with music critic and author Frank Kofsky, Coltrane shares his view on the role of his artistic creations:

> *Kofsky*: Most of the musicians I have talked to are very concerned about changing society and they do see their music as an instrument by which society can be changed.
>
> *Coltrane*: Well, I think so. I think music is an instrument. It can create the initial thought patterns that can change the thinking of the people.[169]

While Coltrane is rarely seen as an outspoken social activist, he allowed for his musical creations to be his way of contributing to the progressive tradition for social justice found in Black music. During the interview, Kofsky asks Coltrane whether or

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[168] J. C. Thomas, *Chasin' the Trane* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1976), 202.
[169] Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder Press Inc., 1971), 227.

not he thinks the political and social issues facing Blacks as espoused by the late Malcolm X were important to him and if he consciously attempts to express that in his music; John responds by stating:

> Oh, they're definitely important…I tell you for myself, I make a conscious attempt, I think I can truthfully say that in music I make or I have tried to make a conscious attempt to change what I've found, [with] music. In other words, I've tried to say, "Well, this I *feel*, could be better, in my opinion, so I will try to do this to make it better." This is what I feel that we feel in any situation that we find ourselves in our lives, when there's something we think could be better, we must make an effort to try and make it better. So it's the same socially, musically, politically, and in any department of our lives.[170]

[170] Ibid.

Chapter 4 - Soul and The Struggle: Curtis Mayfield

> "Soul music is more than either secularized gospel or funkified jazz. Rather, it is a particular Africanization of Afro-American music with intent to appeal to the Black masses, especially geared to the Black ritual of attending parties and dances. Soul music is the populist application of be-bop's aim: racial self-consciousness among Black people in light of their rich musical heritage." - Cornell West[171]

The evolution of the Black musical tradition in America is not defined by a single innovational technique nor is it confined to any particular musical genre. Culture does not exist within a vacuum, therefore the economic, social and political factors of society will always have influence on the art that is produced. Black music acts as a barometer of the sentiments circulating throughout the community. As the political terrain for Blacks began to change after the historic Brown vs. Board of Education ruling, so did the style and content of the dominant forms of Black popular music. Bebop and "free jazz" came to symbolize the desire and pursuit to reclaim the critical edge of Black communal expression from mass consumer culture and American modernity.[172] Professor of Africana Studies, Marc Anthony Neal posits that, "In some regards the emergence of hard-bop, like that of soul music later, was simply a response by Black artists and the Black community to the intense co-modification and mass consumption of an organic Black music form."[173] By the end of the 1950's, modern jazz had been transformed from an "urban dance music and salve of working class misery into a concert music, appropriated by the mainstream cultural

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[171] Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 66.
[172] Marc A. Neal, *What the Music Said* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 26.
[173] Ibid, 27.

elite and later the Academy."[174] Rhythm and Blues, commonly known as R&B, became the first form of Black popular music to be exposed to the rampant mass consumerism that has defined the post World War II period. The emergence of R&B/Soul is owed in part to the decentralization of big band/swing music and the rise of vocalists in the recording industry. In the immediate postwar economy it was impractical to support the elaborate needs of a big band; which in turn made way for smaller combinations like quartets, trios and solo artists. Technological advances such as the electrical guitar and bass significantly enhanced the role of *rhythm* in the music, hence the term *rhythm and blues.*[175]

The trend of commoditizing, and consequently, alienating the music from the community in which it was produced would go on to become a widespread phenomenon. Author Paul Gilroy offers an insightful critique of the commercialization and commoditization of Black musical expression:

> The anti-capitalist politics that animate the social movement against racial subordination is not confined to the lyrical content of these musical cultures. The poetics involved recurrently deals with these themes, but the critique of capitalism is simultaneously revealed in the forms this expressive culture takes and in the performance aesthetic that governs them. There is here an immanent challenge to the commodity form to which black expressive culture is reduced in order to be sold. It is a challenge that is practiced rather than simply talked or sung about.[176]

Just as there were many artists who acquiesced to the popular demands of the market in hopes of financial prosperity, there were those who utilized their gifts to speak to the social climate surrounding them. Toward the end of the 1960's, the Black

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[174] Ibid, 29.
[175] Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 23.
[176] Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts* (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1993), 38.

popular music tradition came to reflect resistance to social injustices, disenfranchisement, and a new sense of political consciousness and affirmation.[177] Conscientious R&B artists, like their avant-garde jazz counterparts, reflected the changing political and social landscape of their worlds' in their music. Throughout his Curtis Mayfield was an extraordinary artist who articulated the struggles against blight and neglect present in the Black community while simultaneously espousing messages of Black pride, unity and love; He was a transnationalist, his message of harmony and empowerment encompassed all racial groups, not just African Americans. Not only did he bridge the gaps between R&B and soul, and then between soul and funk, he managed capture the optimism and tenacious spirit of the Civil Rights movement in his music.

The Impressions: Early Years

His family was part of the burgeoning Black urban community caused by the second mass migration of Black people to the North, Curtis Lee Mayfield Jr. was born on June 3, 1942 on Chicago's North Side. This poverty stricken area was known for its ghetto slums and the now notorious Cabrini Green housing project where Mayfield grew up. Struggle and sacrifice were not alien experiences to Mayfield. Raised without a father in the home, Curtis came under the strong guidance of his mother, Marion Washington and grandmother, Sadie Riley. As a child, Mayfield recalls his mother being an astute poet who recited the works of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and his grandmother studying to become a lay minister in the church.[178] Characteristic of so many talented Black artists, Mayfield honed his musical sensibilities in the church. Mayfield recognized the importance and relevance of music as more than simply a

[177] Marc A. Neal, *What the Music Said* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 26.
[178] Peter Burns, *Curtis Mayfield: People Never Give Up* (London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2001), 12.

production of harmonious sound. In an interview with *Mojo* magazine Curtis expresses how he envisioned the role of music during his youth:

> [My grandmother] was also a healer who used the power of spirit to cure physical ills. I saw music as an expression of the spirit, and I tried to use it to address social ills. Now, I'm not a preacher, but I figured a good use of music would be to lift people up and provide food for thought.[179]

Informed by the Black church tradition, Mayfield cites gospel as having the greatest impact on his musical sensibilities; even at a time when blues music was the predominant and popular sound among Chicagoan youths. He states:

> I definitely appreciated the blues…during those years all you heard was John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Little Walter…I came up with that, and I did admire them. But it just looked like my thing was to be a little different.[180]

Among his favorite and most admired artists were Sam Cooke and Ray Charles, who were also well rooted in the church. Both Cooke and Charles were masters at merging the secular and spiritual into their sound. Spirituals formed the backbone of Mayfield's artistry and his home, especially during his formative years, was steeped in it. Mayfield's family belonged to the Traveling Soul Spiritualist Church in which a few of his cousins were part of the Northern Jubilee Gospel Singers choral group. At the age of 10 Curtis received a guitar as gift from one of his cousins and being the musical prodigy that he was, Curtis proceeded to teach himself how to play. In fact, throughout his entire career Mayfield never took a formal lesson.[181] Curtis' desire and

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[179] Ben Edmonds, "Curtis Mayfield and Superfly: No Exit," *Mojo*, June 2002, 13.
[180] Chris Salewicz, "Keep on Pushing," *Face*, February 1985, 7.
[181] Bob Gulla, *Icons of R&B and Soul* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 236.

attraction to music was so great that he eventually became disinterested and unsatisfied with his schooling and dropped out to focus on writing, playing and performing. At 13 years of age he organized his first secular vocal group called the Alphatones.[182] Three years later Mayfield got his first break into the professional music business. In 1958 a native band from Tennessee called the Roosters had moved to Chicago and were looking to recruit members. Among the first recruits was a young Jerry Butler who at the time was a member of the Northern Jubilee Gospel Singers with Mayfield's cousins. Coincidentally, Butler would be the one to ask Mayfield to join the Roosters new ensemble. Mayfield joined at the age of 16.

Curtis acted as the primary instrumentalist for the group and he guided their musical direction. The Roosters adopted a slightly different singing style that was separate from the Blues and the popular doo-wop sound of the time. Based on gospel roots, the group clung to a spiritual sound and feel in their music that emphasized a "church-like harmony."[183] One mainstay of the group's later popularity was their ability to effectively secularize Black spirituals for mainstream audiences. Mayfield comments:

> All you had to do was just change some few lyrics. 'Keep on Pushing' was intended, written as a gospel song. But all I needed to do to lock it in with the Impressions was say 'I've got my strength' instead of 'God gave me strength and it don't make sense.' I've got my strength. Nothing else needed to be changed.[184]

After hiring Eddie Thomas as the their manager the groups' name was changed to Jerry Butler and the Impressions. Soon thereafter, almost by happenstance, the group

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[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Craig Werner, *Higher Ground: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield, and the Rise and Fall of American Soul* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005), 120.

was signed to Vee-Jay records. In the summer of 58' the group produced "For Your Precious Love," which became a hit record. At the behest of Vee-Jay records lead singer Jerry Butler left the group to pursue his solo career. Mayfield then took over as lead vocalist and chief composer. However, the group as it was never quite meshed and they ended up being dropped by the label in 1959. This setback did not deter Mayfield from pursuing his passion. In fact the situation presented him the opportunity to put one of the core principles of Black Power into practical application; economic self-determination.[185] After being dropped by Vee-Jay, Curtis and manager Eddie Thomas decided to create their own record label, Curtom. For Black artists at the time, this was a relatively novel move. During the mid-20th century few Black artists had managed to gain proprietorship of their music; with the exceptions of Mayfield's heroes Sam Cooke and Ray Charles who had both founded their own recording and publishing companies. Compelled not to allow his music to be held hostage by record executives, Mayfield sought control of his economic fate:

> It was important to me to own as much of myself as I could. So I found out where the Library of Congress was and how to record my own publishing company. Turned out it cost nothing to do either one.[186]

Having control of his artistry and its production was illustrative of how Curtis Mayfield not only sang about self-determination and agency but also implemented these tenets in his own life.

In early 1961 the Impressions would release the hit "Gypsy Woman," that led them to a contract with ABC-Paramount records. However, it seemed good fortune

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[185] Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (New York: Plume, 1998), 147.
[186] Craig Werner, *Higher Ground: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield, and the Rise and Fall of American Soul* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005), 161.

would be short lived for the Impressions when after a few disappointing song releases many group members left the band leaving behind a trio of Mayfield, Sam Gooden, and Fred Cash.[187] This new combination along with input from Chicago based producer Jimmy Pate, led the Impressions to their most successful period producing 10 Top 40 singles and 9 charting LP's in just five years.[188] The groups' gospel-powered voices along with big band brass and heavy rhythmic bass lines fused to create what would be known as the "Chicago Soul Sound."[189] The bubbling tensions and political struggles of the Black community and American society as a whole were laid bare with the onset of 1963. That year the American people witnessed the murder of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, the historic March on Washington led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The social and political climate of the country was ripe with anxiety and fear. Right on time, The Impressions released "It's Alright" which acted as melodic assuage to help calm the tensions of the American population. The song was immediately a hit and its inspirational message, dictated in the title, filled the airwaves. The resounding impact of "It's Alright" among the people further inspired Curtis to create music with a more direct and purposeful message.

> "I always believed that whatever I should speak or sing about should have some value. So while you're shakin' your leg [laughs], you can leave through that exit door with something in your head as well. I'm not totally about being just an entertainer making people grin. It means a little bit more to me than that."[190]

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[187] Bob Gulla, *Icons of R&B and Soul* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 238.
[188] Peter Burns, *Curtis Mayfield: People Never Give Up* (London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2001), 29.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Steven R. Rosen, "No Sad Songs," *Denver Post*, March 6, 1994.

Popularly referred to as a theme song of the Civil Rights movement, "Keep on Pushing" (released 1964) espoused the themes of perseverance, determination and assuredness to those in the struggle for liberation and equality. Theologian William C. Turner delivers his commentary on the significance of "Keep on Pushing":

> Pushing out into the larger world form the womb of the Black community was the mission of the Impressions' generation. With the help of these gentlemen of song, 'pushing' took place to the tune of music that had long been the property of Black people. "Keep on Pushing" was the needed encouragement when suddenly we were among the few of our race in the newly integrated schools…We were the objects of observation and suspicion. Thus for those who integrated dormitories, football squads, glee choirs, and fraternities, it did a world of good to hear melodic strains that said, "keep on pushing." Without pushing we would have been bruised and hurt…Pushing was the posture that produced our future.[191]

By 1965 Mayfield and the Impressions had permeated the musical mainstream. Now they had eight different songs on the Pop and R&B lists including the classic tune "People Get Ready." After Malcolm X's assassination in 1965, the freedom liberation movements of civil rights and Black power began to garnish a more radical edge. This influenced the Impressions to speak more directly about political concerns. They did so without attracting significant resistance from the establishment; that is until the release of their 1967 track "We're a Winner." The song's anthem-like theme of self-determination and demand for political expediency proved problematic for mainstream radio and even their recording label. Radio station WLS, which controlled a large portion of the national radio market, refused to play "We're a

[191] William C. Turner, "Keep on Pushing: The Impressions," Black Sacred Music 6, March 1992, 208.

Winner" and consequently ABC-Paramount and The Impressions decided to part ways in the summer of 1968.[192] Curtis comments on the content of "We're a Winner":

> "We're a Winner" had a social conscience; it was about a mass of people during a time of struggle, and when it broke, it was so much out of the ordinary. It wouldn't be what you'd call a crossover record during those times, but the demand of the people kept it struggling and happening, and it's still one of my favorite tunes.[193]

After leaving ABC-Paramount, the Impressions signed to Mayfield's label Curtom. The groups' next album *This Is My Country* was overtly political in its content and message and sold considerably in the winter of 1968 and. Songs like "Choice of Colors," "This Is My Country," and "Mighty, Mighty (Spade and Whitey)" all asserted themes of outrage, liberation, reparation and love. The songs were "declamatory exhortations, articulating the outrage and frustration of millions" following the hope-shattering assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy.[194] The struggle for equal rights had now become the epicenter of Mayfield's music. At the end of 1969 Mayfield decided to focus his energies into a solo career, however he would continue to produce for the Impressions on his label Curtom.

Mayfield Goes Solo

Mayfield's first solo album was released in September 1970 and soon became Curtom's best selling album to date; *Curtis* charted at number one on the Billboard Black Album list and 19 on the Billboard Pop Album list.

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[192] Wayne Edwards, David Nathan, and Alan Warner, People Get Ready! The Curtis Mayfield Story. Liner notes (Rhino, 1996)
[193] Ibid.
[194] Bob Gulla, *Icons of R&B and Soul* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 241.

> The material of *Curtis* would be his most potent and message oriented to date. The disc opened with "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below We're All Gonna Go," a bold opening salvo that became the album's first single. The set also included the anthemic "Move on Up," and the influential "We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue," a rallying cry for the African American community to band together.[195]

Challenging the stratified racist system in America presented Mayfield as a renegade in popular music, at a time when crossover appeal was being pushed by record executives for expanded sales. However, as popularity for Curtis' socially conscious records grew other popular R&B/Soul artists started creating music that spoke to the times and the movement. Mayfield's influence even reached the "crown prince" of Berry Gordy's Motown Records, Marvin Gaye; apparent in his release of the profoundly influential hit "What's Going On" in the spring of 1971. In the song were overt expressed concerns about inner-city deterioration, drug addiction, child abuse, the Vietnam War, political activism, and the declining state of the environment.[196] Mayfield would go on to drop his second album entitled *Roots* the same year. Mayfield was never idle. Throughout his career he was constantly either producing side projects for other artists such as Jerry Butler, Donny Hathaway, and Leroy Hutson or creating music for the Impressions. In 1972 writer Philip Fenty and producer Sig Shore presented Curtis with the opportunity to venture into uncharted territory; soundtrack scoring.

Director Gordon Parks Jr. was filming a movie about a Harlem drug dealer looking to make one last lucrative deal that would earn him enough cash to quit the drug trade. The now classic film was *Superfly*.[197] Mayfield readily accepted the offer

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[195] Ibid, 242.
[196] Marc A. Neal, *What the Music Said* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 56.
[197] Bill Friskics-Warren, *I'll Take You There: Pop Music and the Urge for Transcendence* (New York: Continuum International, 2005), 148.

and utilized the soundtrack of *Superfly* to propel the debilitating circumstances of impoverished urban Black life into the public sphere. While some criticize the film *Superfly* as glorifying violence, drugs, and sex Mayfield painted a much different picture through his lyrics and sound. Classic tracks like "Pusherman" and "Freddie's Dead" uncovered the seedy and deprived world of the Black ghetto in the 1970's; rather than present an image that glorified the pimp drug dealer stereotype Mayfield "exposes the pusher's false promise of transcendence and speaks for (and to) the ghetto's victims rather than its achievers."[198] Mayfield comments:

> For me when I first was reading it, it read very well. I mean al this was reality. We're not trying to sell it, but we're telling it to you like it is. But reading the script didn't tell you 'and the he took another hit of cocaine' and then about a minute later 'he took another hit.' So when I saw it visually, I thought, 'This is a cocaine infomercial.' Yet I didn't want to be part of that infomercial. So it was important to me that I left the glitter and all the social stuff and tried to go straight in the lyrics. I tried to tell the stories of the people in depth and not insult the intelligence of those who were spending their money.[199]

Curtis also released the soundtrack three months in advance of the film in order to introduce the public to the concepts presented in *Superfly* and so that they would already be familiar with the score. This strategy paid of both for the soundtrack and the film. The album went on to sell over a million copies and the film escaped the box office with over 12 million gross receipts.[200] The momentum generated from the *Superfly* soundtrack followed Curtis with the release of his next album *Back to the World* in 1973, which went gold. Mayfield would continue to compose music for movie soundtracks like *Claudine* and *Sparkle*; he also kept making music for other

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[198] Ibid, 149.
[199] Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (New York: Plume, 1998), 149.
[200] Bob Gulla, *Icons of R&B and Soul* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 243.

artists such as Donny Hathaway and Gladys Knight. However, as the 1970's proceeded the social and musical climate was shifting. No longer was the atmosphere charged with social activism and change, now music fans wanted to dance and forget about their problems through partying. Disco came to dominate the scene and the populous demanded more. Mayfield bucked the trend and stayed true to his radical tradition. Unfortunately his subsequent solo albums would not sell with any consistency. Undaunted and unwilling to compromise his art, Mayfield continued to address societies social ills by tackling controversial and taboo topics. He even confronted the issue of child molestation by composing the soundtrack for Miguel Pinero's 1977 film *Short Eyes*.

Due to its lackluster sales his Curtom label was forced to close in 1981; but that would not be the end of Mayfield. After signing with Ichiban records he went on to record *We Come in Peace with a Message of Love* (1985) and contribute to the soundtrack of *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* (1989). By 1990 his career was picking back up, but as he was getting ready for his European tour Mayfield would be cut down in a tragic accident that would leave him paralyzed from the neck down.

> My band was up there playing 'Superfly' as an intro and I had been called, so I had my guitar on. I'm walking up the ladder steps from the rear and as I take maybe three steps toward the front of the stage, that's all I remember.[201]

In a freak accident the stage-light scaffolding had fallen on top of Mayfield. The injury left him paralyzed, wheel chair bound and unable to play the guitar. Nonetheless Mayfield's indomitable spirit would persevere and he continued to dictate lyrics, culminating in his last album *New World Order* (1997). In 1995 Mayfield

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[201] Steven R. Rosen, "No Sad Songs," *Denver Post*, March 6, 1994.

received the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award and later in 1998 he would be inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.[202] Curtis Mayfield died peacefully on December 26, 1999. An obituary given by Martin Weil of the Washington Post summarizes the impact and effect of Mayfield's career:

> He was known as a man who expanded the horizons of Black popular song, to speak not only of the matters of the heart but also the issues of the street…Black music as we hear it today simply would not exist without him.[203]

The legacy of Mayfield and his music lives on in the songs and thoughts of artists ranging from Bruce Springsteen to Lil Wayne. Curtis is one of the few artists in history to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an Impression and as a solo artist. Mayfield stood as a prolific musician of his time challenging racism and asserting his holistic view of universal freedom and equality in his music.

Mayfield's Musical Mastery

Curtis Mayfield dedicated his career to contesting the dominant norms and racist stereotypes of his time. His music served as the voice of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements; taking the radical stance of asserting messages of Black pride, unity, and self-determination. Never bending to the will and whims of the pop music industry Mayfield poignantly expressed the plight and disregard evident in urban Black communities at a time where glorification of the drug life was prevalent. The music Mayfield created was an instrumental force in galvanizing the public behind the liberation movements of the 1950's and 60's. The concepts and messages of his songs greatly assisted in instilling a sense of agency and empowerment in the

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[202] Peter Burns, *Curtis Mayfield: People Never Give Up* (London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2001), 276.
[203] Martin Weil, *The Washington Post*, December 27, 1999.

minds of progressive political activists. In the same fashion as his artistic predecessors of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, Mayfield espoused similar ideals of Negritude throughout his music, especially in the 1960s. Challenging and deconstructing the negative images and notions of Blackness that have been embedded in the minds of so many Americans is an essential step in cultivating a progressive consciousness towards social justice for African Americans. One must first conceptualize him or herself in a positive light and view him/herself as deserving of equal treatment if one is to proceed in the fight for justice and liberation. The United States has propagated and perpetuated its negative and subordinate views of African Americans since the country's conception; therefore it becomes a necessity to counteract these myths and distortions of Black life with true articulations of their beautiful heritage and culture.

Let us take a moment to closely examine some of the songs Mayfield created that exhorted those messages. One of Mayfield's songs that was emblematic of the aspirations and successes of the Civil Rights movement is "We're a Winner":

> We're a winner
> And never let anybody say
> Boy, you can't make it
> 'Cause a feeble mind is in your way
> No more tears do we cry
> And we have finally dried our eyes
> And we're movin' on up
> Lawd have mercy
> We're movin' on up
>
> We're living proof in alls alert
> That we're two from the good Black earth
> And we're a winner
> And everybody knows it too
> We'll just keep on pushin'
> Like your leaders tell you to
> At last that blessed day has come
> And I don't care where you come from

We're all movin' on up
Lawd have mercy
We're movin' on up

Hey, hey
We're moving on up
Lawd have mercy
We're movin' on up

I don't mind leavin' here
To show the world we have no fear
'Cause we're a winner
And everybody knows it too
We'll just keep on pushin'
Like your leaders tell you to
At last that blessed day has come
And I don't care where you come from
We're just gon' move on up
Lawd have mercy
We're movin' on up
We'll just keep on pushin'
We're a winner
Lawd, baby
Everybody
Hey, you know we're movin' on up
We're a winner.[204]

The inspirational lyrics were considered by some to be inciting and had such an impact on the populous that it was banned on WLS and it resulted in the Impressions being released from their record deal with ABC-Paramount. Where many lesser musicians would have put their personal economic success before the political efforts of the Black community, Mayfield and the Impressions were uncompromising in their commitment to Black liberation.

And Curtis did not stop there. Take for instance the lyrics of "We People Who Are Darker Than Blue":

[204] The Impressions, *We're a Winner* (ABC-Paramount, 1967)

We people who are darker than blue
Are we gonna stand around this town
And let what others say come true?

Were just good for nothing they all figure
A boyish grown-up shiftless jigga
Now we can hardly stand for that
Or is that really where it's at?

We people who are darker than blue
This aint no time for segregating
Im talking brown and yellow too

High yella girl cant you tell
You're just the surface of our dark deep well
If your mind could really see
You'd know your color just as me

Pardon me brother as you stand in all your glory
I know you won't mind if I tell the whole story

Get yourself together, learn to know your sign
Shall we commit our own genocide
Before you check out your mind?

I know we've all got problems
That's why im here to say
Keep peace with me and I with you
Let me love in my own way

Now I know we have great respect
For the sister and mother it's even better yet
But there's the joker in the street
Loving one brother and killing the other
When the time comes and we are really free
There will be no brothers left you see

We people who are darker than blue
Don't let us hang around this town
And let what others say come true

Were just good for nothing they all figure
A boyish grown-up shiftless jigga
Now we can hardly stand for that

Or is that really where it's at?

Pardon me brother as you stand in all your glory
I know you won't mind if I tell the whole story

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.[205]

In this song Mayfield evokes ideas of proactive Black engagement, resisting and defying conventional Black stereotypes, and promoting racial pride and unification despite prevailing negative attitudes towards darker skinned African Americans; all themes striving to develop agency and self-empowerment. Author and music critic Bill Friskics-Warren states:

> With "We People Who Are Darker Than Blue" he (Mayfield) weds lamentation and uplift to articulate a uniquely Black ontology and ethic, a view of Black humanity and praxis as indelible in its way as that expressed in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Mayfield utters a prophetic word here, not one predictive of the future, but a word of judgment and encouragement born out of his rage over the oppression that he witnessed in his midst.[206]

Mayfield also evokes a double entendre in the title of the song. Darker than "Blue" is not simply a reference to skin color or pigment, but also a reference to the despair and pain Blacks had to face for centuries while fighting for their equality and humanity.

Lastly, Curtis Mayfield was one of the few artists to simultaneously depicted the ails of the urban Black community while eliciting a prescription for improvement; as evident in the song "Freddie's Dead":

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[205] Curtis Mayfield, *Curtis* (Curtom, 1970)
[206] Bill Friskics-Warren, *I'll Take You There: Pop Music and the Urge for Transcendence* (New York: Continuum International, 2005), 144.

Freddie's dead
That's what I said
Let the man rap a plan; 'said he'd send him home
But his hope was a rope, and he should have known

It's hard to understand
There was love in this man
I'm sure all would agree
That his misery
Was his woman and things
Now Freddie's dead
That's what I said

Everybody's misused him
Ripped him off and abused him
Another junkie playin'
Pushin' dope for the man
A terrible blow, but that's how it go
A Freddie's on the corner now
If you wanna be a junkie, wow
Remember, Freddie's dead

We're all built up with progress
But sometimes I must confess
We can deal with rockets and dreams
But reality what does it mean
Aint nothing said
Cause Freddie's dead

All I want is some peace of mind
With a little love I'm trying to find
This could be such a beautiful world
With a wonderful girl
Oh I need a woman child
Don't wanna be like Freddie now
Cause Freddie's dead

If you don't try
You're gonna die

Why can't we brothers protect one another
No one's serious
And it makes me furious
Don't be misled

Just think of Fred

Everybody's misused him
Ripped him off and abused him
Another junkie plan
Pushin' dope for the man

A Freddie's on the corner now
If you wanna be a junkie, wow
Remember, Freddie's dead.[207]

Curtis Mayfield was an artist who used his music to serve as a call for action against oppression, racism, and violence while simultaneously espousing themes of transcendence, peace, and unity. His lyrics promoted the concepts of racial justice and equality; that Black Power and democratic brotherhood were, however unlikely in the racially polarized climate of the late sixties, profoundly compatible concepts. His songs acted as a catalyst for developing a politically progressive consciousness among his listeners. Never one to back down from his principles, Mayfield not only asserted principles of self-determination and agency in his music, he put those concepts to use in his everyday life. He shared the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., of humanity without hatred or discrimination. His benevolent spirit lives on through his music and continues to inspire generations of musicians, activists, and students even today. In an interview with the *Detroit News* in 1997 Curtis elicits his appreciation of life:

> I feel the world is all we got. And in spite of all the hardship and struggle, to live, to breathe, to sleep, all the many earthly things and some godly things, and to be a human being, there's nothing really yet comparable. While there are hardships, every day you want to laugh some, you want to learn to cry. It's really simple: being here on Earth is just a powerful thing.[208]

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[207] Curtis Mayfield, *Superfly* soundtrack (Curtom, 1972).
[208] Bob Gulla, *Icons of R&B and Soul* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 246.

Chapter 5 – Poetry in Motion: Gil Scott-Heron

"The artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice, I had no alternative."

- Paul Robeson (1937)

The freedom liberation movements of the mid-20th century had far reaching influence throughout the Black community. As illustrated by the careers of Bernice Johnson Reagon, John Coltrane, and Curtis Mayfield, the music produced by many Black artists was intrinsically tied to the realities of the Black community and the challenges it faced. So was the case with Gil Scott-Heron; who would rise to immanence during the 1970's and act as a revolutionary voice of agency for the Black community. Prominent author and poet Larry Neal expresses the vital responsibility music has taken on in the Black community:

> …the key to where Black people need to go is in the music. Our music has always been the most dominant manifestation of what we are and feel; literature was just and afterthought, the step taken by the Negro bourgeoisie who desired acceptance in the white man's terms. And that is precisely why the literature has failed. It was the case of one elite addressing another elite. But our music is something else. The best of it has always operated at the core of our lives, forcing itself upon us as in a ritual. It has always, somehow, represented the collective psyche.[209]

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[209] Larry Neal, "And Shine Swam On," In *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. Ed. By LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, (New York: William Morrow, 1968), 534.

Achievements such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, earned by the trials and tribulations of social activists during this era was seemingly paving the way for a more egalitarian and less racially discriminatory America. However, the new face of America failed to reflect the aspirations sought by those involved in the struggles for liberation. The assassination of Dr. King in 1968 served to further "radicalize" elements of the Black community who did not see civil disobedience as a useful tactic in the fight for liberation. By the 1970's there was a profound shift in the struggle for equality as the fight for civil rights gave way to the demand for Black Power; to which the United States government firmly responded. Historians contest that during the time span of 1968 to 1972 Blacks experienced more state-sanctioned repression than any time other in the 20th century.[210] Marc Anthony Neal elaborates:

> The election of Richard M. Nixon, in concert with the continued surveillance and destabilization activities of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, left lasting impressions on the Civil Rights/Black Power movements . . .With blatant attacks on the Black Panthers—the December 1969 murders of Mark Clark and Fred Hampton being indicative—the shootings of Black students at Jackson State College in Mississippi and Southern University in Louisiana, and assaults on prisoners at Attica state prison in New York, the government made clear that being a dissenter–particularly an African American dissenter—was very dangerous.[211]

Unfortunately this adverse response and repression of the Black communities advances towards equality are not atypical. Political scientist Philip Klinkner explains in his book, *The Unsteady March* that history has shown us the usual outcome following any significant racial gains made by African Americans in the United States.

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[210] Marc A. Neal, *What the Music Said* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 55.
[211] Ibid.

Klinkner articulates on the concept of "White backlash" and states that it has accompanied nearly every major socio-political gain made by Blacks in America. "White backlash" conceptualizes that after significant strides toward racial equality are made by minority groups, i.e. Black Americans, White Americans generally retreat from supporting racially equitable initiatives and elicit a sentiment of "the Negro has got as much as he ought to have," if not too much."[212] This sentiment is usually then translated into policies and legislation that ultimately retards the progression of the Black community. Some historic examples of "White backlash" include: the failure to abolish slavery after Blacks fought in the Revolutionary War, the adoption of "Jim Crow" laws post-Civil War, and the neglectful policies towards minorities implemented by the government following the reforms of the Civil Rights movement.[213] Klinkner comments on the attitudes among Whites following the reform measures of the 1960's:

> In the wake of the modern changes, native Whites remained the majority and power center in America, but they were a dwindling majority that rightly felt themselves to be a less legally privileged and socially esteemed community than they had always been in the past. Unsurprisingly, many proved increasingly receptive to arguments from politicians and intellectuals suggesting covertly or overtly that Whites' anxieties and resentments about these changes were more than justified.[214]

The rising tensions between Blacks and the White establishment were increasingly being reflected in Black popular music. The songs on the radio began to articulate the notions of disenfranchisement faced by Blacks in America and began to take on a

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[212] Philip A. Klinkner and Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March* (Chicago: Univesity of Chicago Press, 1999), 73.
[213] Ibid, 289.
[214] Ibid.

more radical and aggressive tone. It would be within this heightened atmosphere of resistance and state sponsored suppression that the performance poetics of Gil Scott-Heron would emerge as a staunch new voice highlighting and lambasting the misdeeds, hypocrisies, and blatant neglect of the United States. Described by many as a modern-day griot, Gil Scott-Heron utilized the art of spoken word poetry to deliver his emphatic messages of resistance and revolution.

History & Early Years

As the freedom liberation movements of Civil Rights and Black Power were in their nascent stages, so was Gil Scott-Heron; his sensibilities and consciousness would come to be strongly influenced by the rhetoric and developments of these movements. Gil was born on April 1, 1949 in Chicago, Illinois but after his parents divorced he was relocated to Jackson, Tennessee to live with his grandmother, Lillie Scott. Later on in life Gil would pay tribute to his childhood family structure most would stereotype as a "broken home," stating that his family overcame the odds and instilled in him a strong sense of justice and integrity. Gil's familial roots were embedded in activism and the arts. Lillie was a civil rights campaigner who ignited Gil's passion for music and literature, and it would be in Jackson that Gil would gain his first major exposure to the discrimination and abuses aimed at Blacks during the 1950's. He was among the few Black students in the newly integrated schools of the South and he felt the brunt of his White classmates' disapproval.[215] Gil's grandmother gave him the strength to endure the ridicule of his White classmates by instilling in him a strong sense of self-respect and esteem. At the age of thirteen his grandmother passed away, so Gil returned to his mother and settled in Bronx, New York. His mother, Bobbie

[215] Dorian Lynskey, "Gil Scott-Heron: A Tribute to the Man," *Guardian Newspaper UK*, November 14, 2001.

Scott-Heron, was a singer in the New York Oratorial Society while his father, Giles was a soccer player renown for being the first Black athlete admitted into Glasgow's Celtic Football Club.[216] His nickname was "the Black arrow."

Gil Scott-Heron was an astute student and gifted writer early on in his life. Living in New York exposed Gil to many of the works done by Black authors and poets of the Harlem Renaissance such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin. The themes and ideas espoused by the Harlem Renaissance gave shape and definition to Scott-Heron's sense of being and identity. Gil even fell in love with the works of author Langston Hughes and strived to be on par with Hughes level of excellence in his own writings. While attending DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, Gil wrote a paper for his English class that his teacher was so impressed with Gil was offered a scholarship to enroll at Fieldston; a private Ivy League preparatory school.[217] Scott-Heron accepted, graduated, and went on to attend Lincoln University; following closely in the footsteps of his literary hero, Langston Hughes.[218] During his first year at Lincoln Gil found the strain of trying to fulfill his academic duties and satisfy his independent literary passions to be overwhelming. So, during the first semester of his sophomore year he decided to drop out and pursue his novel writing full time.[219] However, his time spent at Lincoln University wouldn't be a loss. While he was there Gil met classmate Brian Jackson. Their friendship and artistic relationship would grow over the years and Jackson would eventually become a seminal member of Gil's Midnight Band; but immediately Scott-Heron had pressing issues to deal with.

At 19 years old, virtually penniless and living in the back of a dry cleaning business where he was employed, Gil Scott-Heron describes the act of getting his first

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[216] Daatya L. Sanusi, "Gil Scott-Heron," *The New York Amsterdam News*, January 30, 2008.
[217] Roger St. Pierre, "Gil Scott-Heron: A Profile," *NME Magazine*, August 2, 1975.
[218] Dorian Lynskey, "Gil Scott-Heron: A Tribute to the Man," *Guardian Newspaper UK*, November 14, 2001.
[219] Gil Scott-Heron, *The Vulture* (Glasgow: Payback Press, 1970), viii.

novel entitled *The Vulture* published as nothing short of "a series of cosmic coincidences and intervention by 'the spirits' on my behalf.[220] Gil also published a volume of poetry entitled *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* along with *The Vulture* in 1970. *The Vulture* was a murder mystery thriller set in late 1960's New York. The story relates the murder of fictional character John Lee through the lives of four men. The novel and poem both titled "The Vulture," metaphorically presents the vulture as a harbinger of death that resides in the desperate and poverty stricken urban ghettoes of America:

> Standing in the ruins of another Black man's life,
> Or flying through the valley separating day and night.
> "I am death," cried the Vulture. "For the people of the light."
> Charon brought his raft from the sea that sails on souls,
> And saw the scavenger departing, taking warm hearts to the cold.
> He knew the ghetto was the haven for the meanest creature ever known.
> In a wilderness of heartbreak and a desert of despair,
> Evil's clarion of justice shrieks a cry of naked terror.
> Taking babies from their mamas and leaving grief beyond compare.
> So if you see the Vulture coming, flying circles in your mind,
> Remember there is no escaping for he will follow close behind.
> Only promise me a battle, battle for your soul and mine.[221]

Emerging with his particular vein of radical music and poetry in the post-civil rights era of the 1970's for Scott-Heron was no easy task. Author Marc Anthony Neal asserts that by the 1970's the Black popular music tradition was under attack by two primary forces: corporate America and the deterioration of Black public spaces.[222] The expansion in the popularity and commoditization of Black music in the 1970's allowed for more Black artists such as Earth, Wind, and Fire and The Jacksons to achieve great financial success; however it also granted corporate marketers

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[220] Ibid.
[221] Gil Scott-Heron, "The Vulture," *So Far So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press), 41.
[222] Marc A. Neal, *What the Music Said* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 106.

unprecedented control over the narrative of Black music. This corporate influence acted to further alienate the artist from their native Black creative sphere. Gil would prove to be one of the few artists of the time to be able to withstand the temptations of mainstream media dollars and never compromise his distinct message of revolution, empowerment and liberation. Even early on in his artistic career it was evident in Gil's work that he carried on the socially conscious tradition of activist poets such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Larry Neal. Dr. Haki Madhubuti asserts that Gil was

> …a young griot on the rise. His message was Black, political, historically accurate, urgent, uncompromising and mature. His was a fresh and much needed voice that hit the seventies with an anger burning bright…He had listened to and digested the works of Malcolm X, Nina Simone, Jimmy Reed and John Coltrane. In him we saw the poetic storytelling skills of Sterling Brown and the precise word usage of Margaret Walker Alexander and Gwendolyn Brooks.[223]

Recording Career

Gil would apparently still have the "sprits" working in his favor when he would meet up with record company owner Bob Thiele in 1970 and be signed to his record label Flying Dutchman Records.[224] Thiele had a tradition of recording acts deemed too stridently political and controversial for mainstream media; working with prominent Black artists the likes of Louis Armstrong and John Coltrane.[225] He even produced many of Coltrane's most notable works, including *A Love Supreme.*[226] Scott-Heron's first album release, *Small Talk and 125th and Lenox*, featured Gil's

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[223] Haki Madhubuti, "Introduction: Conscientious Wanderer: Gil Scott-Heron," *So Far So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press), i.
[224] Marc A. Neal, *What the Music Said* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 107.
[225] Simon Glickman, "Gil Scott-Heron Biography," Musicianguide.com, http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608000593/Gil-Scott-Heron.html
[226] Ibid.

recited poetry over sparse music and percussion to create a poignant production. In the liner notes of the album Scott-Heron states:

> I was introduced into what is laughingly referred to as civilization. The term itself demonstrates how mankind has managed to maintain a sense of humor throughout all of history's chaos. I am a Black man dedicated to expression; expression of the joy and pride of Blackness. I consider myself neither poet, composer nor musician. These are merely tools used by sensitive men to carve out a piece of beauty or truth that they hope may lead to peace and salvation.[227]

Small Talk at 125th and Lenox is widely considered one of Gil's classic and seminal albums. Recorded live at a nightclub in New York on 125th and Lenox, the album featured Gil Scott-Heron on vocals, guitar, and piano; David Barnes on percussion and vocals; and Eddie Knowles and Charlie Saunders on conga.[228] The subject matter ran the revolutionary gamut; exploring topics ranging from the ill placed priorities of government spending to the hypocritical superficiality of some would be Black activists and leaders. The 15-track listing included the now famous poems "Brother," "Whitey On The Moon," and "Who'll Pay Reparations On My Soul." There was even an early rendition of what is now one of Gil Scott-Heron's most emblematic poems, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." This song was a diatribe against mass media's trivialization of social upheaval and the seeming paralysis of those who watch via television.[229] It serves a wake up call-to-action for all who have fell into a post-Civil Rights lull of lethargy and complacency.

> You will not be able to stay home, brother.
> You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out.

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[227] Gil Scott-Heron, Liner notes of *Small Talk At 125 & Lenox* (Flying Dutchman, 1970).
[228] Ibid.
[229] Simon Glickman, "Gil Scott-Heron Biography," *Musicianguide.com*, http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608000593/Gil-Scott-Heron.html

> You will not be able to lose yourself on scag and skip out for beer during commercials
> Because the revolution will not be televised…[230]

While the track "Whitey On The Moon" is a jokingly poignant denunciation of the government's preoccupation with their space program while blatantly neglecting the living conditions of their impoverished citizens on Earth. Keeping in line with the African tradition of respecting one's ancestors, in the liner notes of the album Scott-Heron also pays homage to artists he felt were a profound influence on his work; some of those included are Billie Holliday, Otis Redding, Jose Feliciano, and John Coltrane.[231]

In 1971, with his second release on Flying Dutchman Records Scott-Heron tapped more into his musical roots and produced an album that has been described as "musical and literary genius."[232] For *Pieces of a Man* he enlisted the talents of legendary producer Johnny Pate (known for his work with Curtis Mayfield); pianist and long time friend Brian Jackson; renown bassist for Miles Davis, Ron Carter; Burt Jones on guitar; Herbert Laws on flute and saxophone and house drummer for Atlantic Records, Bernard "Pretty" Purdie.[233] Creating an eclectic blend of blues, jazz, and spoken word, Gil had an acclaimed hit with several classic recordings like the antidrug anthem "Home Is Where the Hatred Is" and "Lady Day and John Coltrane."[234] On "Lady Day and John Coltrane," Gil pays homage to the jazz legends of the past by inciting their music as a source of solace and relief from the hectic troubles of life; stating the soothing saxophone of Coltrane will "wash your troubles away."[235] "Home

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[230] Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," *So Far So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press), 46.
[231] Gil Scott-Heron, Liner notes of *Small Talk At 125 & Lenox* (Flying Dutchman, 1970).
[232] Marc A. Neal, *What the Music Said* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 107.
[233] Ibid.
[234] Ibid, 108.
[235] Gil Scott-Heron, "Lady Day and John Coltrane," *Pieces of a Man* (Flying Dutchman, 1971).

Is Where the Hatred Is," presents a grim and foreboding look into the devastating and far reaching effects drugs have on the Black community. In this track Scott-Heron laments that it wouldn't be a bad idea if he "never went home again" because his metaphorical "home" has been transformed into an inner existence plagued by narcotics and pain.

1972 would be a productive year for Gil who managed to release his third album, *Free Will* and publish his second book, *The Nigger Factory*. *The Nigger Factory* was a testament to Scott-Heron's ability to be critical of both the oppressive power structure and the Black intelligencia or "talented tenth" that would supposedly guide the Black community at large. The fictional story takes place on a university campus in Virginia and follows the experiences of student body president Earl Thomas. The novel presents itself as a challenge to scholarly middle and upper class Blacks to critically examine the educations they are receiving from institutions of higher learning. Scott-Heron urges that:

> The center of our intellectual attention must be thrust away from Greek, Western thought toward Eastern and Third World thought. Our examples in the arts must be Black and not White. Our natural creativity must be cultivated.[236]

Free Will would be Gil Scott-Heron's last album release on Flying Dutch Records after a dispute over creative production. However, the internal label disputes had not effect on Gil's performance. On his third album Gil continues to espouse themes of resistance, revolution, and reality through tracks with subject matter ranging from stark criticism of police policies, to an ode for John Coltrane. Tracks like "Wiggy," "No Knock," and "Get Out of the Ghetto Blues" span the issues of elitism within the

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[236] Gil Scott-Heron, "Author's Note," *The Nigger Factory* (Glasgow: Payback Press, 1970), 246.

Black community, Blacks having pride in their natural hair, and police brutality. "…And Then He Wrote Meditations," Gil's tribute to the man he regarded as the "master of the tenor saxophone," invokes the spirit of Coltrane's revolutionary sound through a faint rendition of "A Love Supreme." Scott-Heron continually makes it a point to revere the Black musical tradition from which he descends and continues to form; he even highlights the historic attempts of mainstream media to co-opt and commoditize Black music on the song entitled "Aint No New Thing." From his career's inception, Gil Scott-Heron has remained vigilant in the fight against all forms of oppression, covert and overt. His poetic prowess enables him to operate as the modern day griot; bringing awareness to injustice and disseminating African American cultural heritage. Author Craig Werner describes Scott-Heron's purpose as an artist:

> Scott-Heron belonged to a group of poets and musicians who believed they key to a successful struggle lay in taking their art directly to the streets. Like the Last Poets and the Watts Prophets, Scott-Heron subscribed to the concept of political performance outlined in Black Panther minister of culture Ed Bullins's "Short Statement on Street Theater." Militant artists, Bullins believed, should concentrate on establishing contact with groups unlikely to enter a theater: working people, gang members, junkies, prostitutes, street people.[237]

It is exactly the "street people" and those at the grassroots level whom the mainstream White media seek to alienate the progressive Black artist from; thereby depriving the Black community of a prominent advocate and voice of their interests.

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[237] Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (New York: Plume, 1998), 159.

After his split with Flying Dutchman Records Scott-Heron and Jackson were signed to Black-owned Strata-East Records, which at the time predominantly had contracts with Black artists who were deemed "socially conscious."[238] Released in 1974, *Winter In America* is widely considered by music critics Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson's best collaborative work. Having gained full creative reign over the production of the album, Scott-Heron and Jackson incorporated greater elements of "free jazz" and proto-rap style into their sound.[239] The title track, "Winter In America," is a stark and provocative depiction of life in America which editor Ron Wynn describes as "a moving, angry summation of the social injustices Scott-Heron felt had led the nation to a particularly dangerous period."[240] In his own words, Scott-Heron shares his definition of "winter":

> Winter is a metaphor—a term used not only to describe the season of ice, but this period of our lives through which we are traveling. In our hearts we feel that Spring is just around the corner; a Spring of brotherhood and united spirits among people of color. Everyone is moving, searching. There is a restlessness within our souls that keeps us questioning, discovering, struggling against a system that will not allow us space and time for fresh expression. Western Icemen have attempted to distort time. We approach Winter, the most depressing period in the history of the Western Empire, with threats of oil shortages and energy crises. But we, as Black people, have been a source of endless energy, endless beauty and endless determination. I have many things to tell you about tomorrow's love and light. We will see you in the Spring. In the interest of national security, please help us carry out our constitutional duty to overthrow the king.[241]

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[238] James Maycock, "Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson: Brothers in Arms," *Mojo*, December 2003.
[239] Ron Wynn, untitled editorial review of *Winter In America,* by Gil Scott-Heron, *Allmusic.com*, http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:gxfrxql5ld0e
[240] Ibid.
[241] Gil Scott-Heron, Liner notes of *Winter In America* (Strata-East, 1974).

Winter in America went on to become Scott-Heron's most acclaimed and successful album. The hit single, "The Bottle" (a fast paced, funky sermon on the detriments of alcoholism) helped propel the album to #6 on the 1974 Billboard Top Jazz Albums chart and #15 on the R&B charts.[242] Moving to the Strata-East label exhibits Scott-Heron's desire to not only profess ideals of Black self-determination in his music, but to also make it a practical reality. Unfortunately, the reproduction and distribution demands of the contemporary marketplace at the time were too much for Strata-East to handle. The limitation of smaller independent labels like Strata-East was a problem many Black artists had come to face. Many progressive musicians would have to choose between having greater control of their artistry and reaching a potentially larger fan base thereby increasing sales. Unlike the early years of rhythm and blues and soul, the marketplace was now dominated by corporate conglomerates whose access to promotional and distribution apparatuses greatly outmatched that of smaller independent companies.[243]

In 1975 Scott-Heron signed to Clive Davis' newly formed Arista Records; the label with which he would stay on for nearly ten years releasing a slew of albums. "Not only is he an excellent, poet, musician and performer—three qualities I look for that are rarely combined—but he's a leader of social thought," stated Davis in an interview with Rolling Stone Magazine.[244] Scott-Heron's first release on Arista, *The First Minute of a New Day*, featured an eight-man ensemble dubbed the Midnight Band. The members included (besides Scott-Heron and Jackson): Bilal Sunni Ali (flute, saxophone, harmonica); Danny Bowens (bass); Eddie Knowles (percussion, conga); Barnett Williams (percussion); Victor Brown (vocals, percussion); Charlie

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[242] Phil Hardy and Dave Laing, ed., *Faber Companion to 20th Century Popular Music* (New York: Faber & Faber, 1990), 133.
[243] Marc A. Neal, *What the Music Said* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 109.
[244] Simon Glickman, "Gil Scott-Heron Biography," *Musicianguide.com*, http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608000593/Gil-Scott-Heron.html

Saunders (congas, drums); Bob Adams (drums); and Victor Bowens (tambourine, bells).[245] The album included tracks such as "The Liberation Song (Red, Black and Green)" and "Aint No Such Thing as Superman"; which stayed in stride with Scott-Heron's themes of Black Nationalism and political agency. Scott-Heron highlights the apparent hypocrisy and continued corruption of the American government in "Pardon Our Analysis (We Beg Your Pardon)," by criticizing the presidential pardon issued to ex-president Richard Nixon by Gerald Ford.

Scott-Heron would continue to be a frontrunner for politically charged, revolutionary Black music on into the early 1990's on Arista Records. Gil's subsequent album releases would further showcase his poetic mastery and musical expansion. Select songs from his multiple album releases come to represent Gil Scott-Heron's consistent messages of rebellion against all oppressive forces, consolidation of resources within the Black community at large, and personal spiritual evolution. "Johannesburg" on Scott-Heron's 1976 *From South Africa to South Carolina*, was a denunciation of the South African system of apartheid and a proclamation of Pan-African unity and support for the subjugated Black South Africans.[246] On "Bicentennial Blues" Scott-Heron juxtaposes contemporary America with its "unsettling past" out of which it was born. Dr. Joyce Joyce explains:

> In defining 'the means and modes' associated with the blues, "Bicentennial Blues" meshes the folk and political history of Black Americans with an attack on the evils of commercialism. The pun on the prefix "bi" in "Bicentennial Blues" exemplifies his satiric use of a title to introduce the meaning of his songs. Playing on the sounds of these words, Scott-Heron admonishes Black Americans to become suspicious of "media-overkill," to be aware of the pitfalls of a history that should have taught them the evils of the "b-u-y syndrome." This

[245] Ibid.
[246] Ibid.

> timely [song] cautions Black people to be mindful of their economic-exploitative history in relationship to the dominant American culture.[247]

Scott-Heron offers us another glimpse into his personal battles with drug addiction on songs such as the 1979 release "Angel Dust" off his album *Secrets.* This soulful disco-themed track warns the youth about the dangers of getting hooked on narcotics. Tracks like "Song in the Wind" exhibit Gil's more esoteric and spiritual views as he calls to the wind to carry his message to mankind. Always the political educator and activist, after the infamous nuclear accident at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania Gil released his anti-nuclear anthem "Shut Em' Down" at the No Nukes concert series in Madison Square Garden. Shortly following the 1980 release of the aptly titled *1980* album, Scott-Heron's long-time friend and musical partner Brian Jackson left the group to pursue a solo career. Scott-Heron continued to explore jazzier territory as well as techno-funk sounds that were becoming more popular in Black music of the time. Even as Gil was incorporating more contemporary music into his sound, he did not compromise his subject matter and became increasingly isolated in his political militancy and radical lyrics. Reporter Len Brown observes:

> Unlike his peers, he is not afraid to seem a throwback to more outspoken times. Although protest songs are no longer in vogue, Scott-Heron remains a committed wave-maker, sweeping out onto the beach of public awareness such disturbing matters as drug abuse, poverty, police brutality, and international conflict.[248]

Gil would record three more albums on Arista, before being let go by the label in 1985. He collaborated with jazz legend Miles Davis on "Let Me See Your I.D." for

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[247] Joyce Joyce, "Afterword: Gil Scott-Heron: Larry Neal's Quintessential Artist," *So Far So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press), 75.
[248] Len Brown, "Gil Scott-Heron: World War Fighter," *NME*, July 1986.

the anti-apartheid benefit album Sun City, but otherwise stopped recording for several years, though he continued to tour and a documentary film *Black Wax* (1982) was made about him. The film, directed by Robert Mugge, followed Gil around metropolitan DC in popular areas like Howard University, as he recited poems and songs from his previous releases. Scott-Heron also managed to attain his master's degree from John Hopkins University while away from the studio. Gil's drug addiction would worsen as the years passed along and his health degenerated. Seeming to age twice as fast due to the effects of his cocaine habit, Scott-Heron frequently adorned a look of pallor and fatigue. During the late 1980's and early 90's the emergent Hip-Hop scene was growing in popularity and influence. Informed by the Black musical genres of jazz, funk, and soul of the mid to late 20th century, many hip-hop artists denote Gil Scott-Heron as a seminal influence, even the "Godfather" of hip-hop music. Ending a 12-year hiatus, Scott-Heron would return to the studio and produce a new album, *Spirits* (1994) after signing a deal with TVT Records. In an interview with Billboard Magazine Scott-Heron states, "I ain't saying I didn't invent rapping, I just cannot recall the circumstances." Saying of the young rappers, "they need to study music; there's not a lot of humor. They use a lot of slang and colloquialisms, and you don't really see inside the person. Instead you just get a lot of posturing."[249] The song entitled "Message to the Messengers" is a memorandum aimed at rappers to take responsibility for what they say in their rhymes and not just recite lines devoid of a social consciousness. The lyrics state:

> "I aint comin' at you with no disrespect / All I'm sayin' is you damn well got to be correct / Because if you're gonna be speaking for a whole generation / And you know enough to handle their education /

[249] Simon Glickman, "Gil Scott-Heron Biography," *Musicianguide.com*, http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608000593/Gil-Scott-Heron.html

> Be sure you know the real deal about past situations / And aint just repeating what you heard on a local TV station."[250]

Spirits presents Gil as an evolved sage-like elder now, more tempered and seasoned from time and experience. The title track, "Spirits" pays homage and gives recognition to the progenitors of the Black progressive musical tradition. In the liner notes to Spirits Scott-Heron emphasizes the importance of recognizing the "spirits" of African American ancestors and the history of the struggle for liberation; both acting to inform and guide the Black community in the present:

> In truth I call what I have been granted the opportunity to share 'gifts,' I would like to personally claim to be the source of the melodies and ideas that have come through me, but that is just the point. Many of the shapes of sound and concepts have come upon me from no place I can trace: Notes and chords I'd never learned, thoughts and pictures I'd never seen. And all as clear as a sky untouched by cloud or smog or smoke or haze. Suddenly. Magically. As if transferred to me without effort.[251]

With his return to recording and release of his book of poems entitled *Now and Then* in 2001, it seemed Gil Scott-Heron was regaining control over his life, however his old drug habit was still with him like the proverbial "monkey" that he could never quite get off his back. "Kick-it, quit-it, kick-it, quit-it" sums up Gil's many attempts to stop using cocaine on the song "The Other Side," but never to any avail. Previously in and out of jail on drug related charges, in 2006 Gil was arrested in New York for violation of parole and sentenced to 2 to 4 years in prison.[252] Scott-Heron has been performing at a few venues in New York City since his release in 2007 and is

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[250] Gil Scott-Heron, "Message to the Messengers," *Spirits*, TVT, 1994.
[251] Gil Scott-Heron, Liner notes of *Spirits*, TVT, 1994.
[252] Marcus Baram, "The Weary Bues; Hip-hop godfather Gil Scott-Heron's out on parole, trying to stay clean, and ready for Carnegie Hall," *New York Magazine*, June 2008.

reportedly in the process of publishing his new novel *The Last Holiday*. Gil Scott-Heron's unfortunate struggle with drug use over the years presents itself as a contradiction to his advocacy of agency and his role as a griot for the community. In order to truly embrace the traditional African title of "griot" one must uphold the standards and principles one professes. This tragic turn for such a gifted artist is a testament to the real life difficulties faced not only by the Black community, but also the artists it produces.

Scott-Heron's Spoken Word

It would be remiss of me not to present just a few of the songs that embody Gil Scott-Heron's lifelong commitment to articulating the struggles, journey's, and aspirations of the Pan-African community. One song in particular that is emblematic of Scott-Heron's serious and realistic call to action towards liberation is "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised":

> You will not be able to stay home, brother / You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out / You will not be able to lose yourself on scag and skip out for beer during commercials because / The revolution will not be televised.
>
> The revolution will not be televised / The revolution will not be brought to you by Xerox in four parts without commercial interruption / The revolution will not show you pictures of Nixon blowing a bugle and leading a charge by John Mitchell, General Abramson and Spiro Agnew to eat hog maws confiscated from a Harlem sanctuary / The revolution will not be televised.
>
> The revolution will not be brought to you by the Schaeffer Award Theater and will not star Natalie Wood and Steve McQueen or Bullwinkle and Julia / The revolution will not give your mouth sex appeal / The revolution will not get rid of the nubs / The revolution will not make you look five pounds thinner/ The revolution will not be televised, brother.

There will be no pictures of you and Willie Mae pushing that shopping cart down the block on the dead run / or trying to slide that color tv in stolen ambulance / NBC will not be able to predict the winner at 8:32 on reports from twenty-nine districts / The revolution will not be televised.

There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers on the instant replay / There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers on the instant replay / There will be no slow motion or still lifes of Roy Wilkins strolling thorough Watts in a red, black and green liberation jumpsuit that he has been saving for just the proper occasion.

Green Acres, Beverly Hillbillies and Hooterville Junction will no longer be so damned relevant / and women will not care if Dick finally got down with Jane on Search for Tomorrow/ because Black people will be in the streets looking for a brighter day.
The revolution will not be televised.

There will be no highlights on the Eleven O' Clock News / and no pictures of hairy armed women liberationists and Jackie Onassis blowing her nose /
The theme song will not be written by Jim Webb or Francis Scott Key nor sung by Glen Campbell, Tom Jones, Johnny Cash, Englebert Humperdink or Rare Earth / The revolution will not be televised.

The revolution will not be right back after a message about a white Tornado, white lightning, or White people / You will not have to worry about a dove in your bedroom, the tiger in your tank or the giant in your toilet bowl / The revolution will not go better with coke / The revolution will not fight germs that may cause bad breath / The revolution will put you in the driver's seat.

The revolution will not be televised / Will not be televised / Not be televised / be televised.
The revolution will be no re-run brothers.
The revolution will be LIVE.[253]

[253] Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," *So Far So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press), 46.

Author Craig Werner asserts that when Scott-Heron insisted, "the revolution will be *live*," he was challenging the Black Power movement to live up its professed ideals of self-determination and community involvement.[254]

Throughout his career Gil Scott-Heron has remained vigilant in carrying on the progressive tradition towards social justice that so many of his predecessors fought to keep alive. A self-proclaimed "Bluesologist" Scott-Heron took on the role of educator; translating and relaying the cultural heritage of African descended people in America through his spoken word performances. The song "Black History" is such an example:

> I was wondering about our yesterdays and started digging through the rubble / And to tell the truth somebody went to a hell of a lot of trouble / To make sure that when we looked things up we wouldn't fare too well / And that we would come with totally unreliable pictures of ourselves.
>
> But I've compiled what few facts I could, / I mean, such as they are / to see if I could shed a little bit of light and this is what I got so far:
> First, White folks discovered Africa and claimed it fair and square. / Cecil Rhodes couldn't have been robbing nobody / Cause he said there was nobody there / White folks brought all of the civilization since there wasn't none around. / They said "How could these folks be civilized when you never see nobody writing nothing down?" / And to prove all of their suspicions it didn't take too long / They found out there were whole groups of people—in plain sight! —running around with no clothes on. That's right! / The women, the men, the young and the old, righteous White folks covered their eyes / So no time was spent considering the environment. Hell no! / This here, this just wasn't civilized.
>
> And another way they knew we were backwards / or at least this is how we were taught / is that "Unlike the very civilized people of Europe" / These Black people actually fought! / And yes! There were some "rather crude implements" / And yes! There was "primitive art" / And yes! They were masters of hunting and fishing and courtesy came from

[254] Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (New York: Plume, 1998), 159.

> the heart. / And yes! There was medicine, love and religion, inter-tribal communication by drum / But not paper and pencils and other utensils / and hell, these folks never even heard of a gun.
>
> So this is why the colonies came to stabilize the land / Because The Dark Continent had copper and gold and the discoverers had themselves a plan / They would "discover" all the places with promise / You didn't need no titles or deeds / You could just appoint people to make everything legal / To sanction the trickery and greed / And out in the bushes if the natives got restless you could call that 'guerilla attack!" / And never have to describe that somebody finally got wise / And decided they wanted their things back.
>
> But still we are victims of word games / semantics is always a bitch: / Places once called underdeveloped and "backwards" / are now called "mineral rich" / And still it seems the game goes on with unity always just out of reach / Because Libya and Egypt used to be in Africa / But they've been moved to the "Middle East."
>
> There are examples galore I assure you / But if interpreting was left up to me / I'd be sure every time folks know this version wasn't mine / Which is why it is call "His-story."

At the end of the song Gil comments to the audience on his conception of revolution; stating that in order for progressive change to come about 'revolution' must initiate within the individual. Rebellion and violence in the street is not the revolution, but rather its results. His sentiment reflects the standpoint of Lerone Bennet Jr. regarding revolution as a state of consciousness that must begin in the "winding corridors of the mind."[255]

Even as his tortured genius continues to wrestle with the burdens of speaking truth to power and rescuing his community from the many perils and attacks that befall it, Gil Scott-Heron remains a seminal figure in the Black progressive musical tradition striving towards social justice. Throughout history the word has been the

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[255] Lerone Bennet Jr., "Of Time, Space, and Revolution," in *The Black Revolution: An Ebony Special Edition* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company Inc., 1970), 5.

primary vehicle for disseminating a message; for speaking truth to power. Gil's words continue to serve as an inspirational proclamation for social justice, resistance, and agency for the Pan-African community worldwide. As Dr. Joyce Joyce succinctly puts it, the works and legacy of Gil Scott-Heron are an exemplary demonstration of the power of the word and the people's need for that power.[256]

[256] Gil Scott-Heron, *So Far So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2001), 83.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The cultural aesthetic of a people act as a timeless link to their past, present, and even informs their future. For the African, music has been an intrinsic feature of his/her culture. Music has played a role in every facet of the African's society; seemingly omnipresent whether at work, leisure, or even war. It has carried with it the nuances, values and stories of an entire civilization; acting as a melodic multifaceted encyclopedia that informs a well as entertains. Musical productions transcend the limitations of ordinary linguistics and taps into the very soul of the agent, connecting him/her to deeper meanings of life. "The spirit will not descend without song"[257] embodies how the African saw music as a mechanism to connect with the divine.

The capability to withstand the culturally destructive force of chattel slavery exemplifies the resiliency of the musical tradition of the African people. The monumental transitions in both status and identity were not enough to divorce the enslaved Africans from their musical roots. The rhythm was embedded in their souls. No matter how hard the forces of oppression sought to eliminate any vestiges of culture and humanity from the enslaved African population, their musical aesthetic survived and resisted. African Americans utilized their music to function as a foundation for their agency; reformulating, reshaping and adapting the gospels to serve as songs for freedom. Blacks now existed in a hostile environment in which their music was covertly able to simultaneously transmit messages of resistance while keeping their community connected with their cultural heritage.

Thus, the progressive tradition towards social justice was established within Black music. To extend this progressive tradition and sustain the cultural legacy the

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[257] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 39.

African American community now became an impending responsibility of the Black artist. James Stewart comments:

> The Black artist must construct models, which correspond to his own reality. Our models must be consistent with a Black style, our natural aesthetic styles, and our moral and spiritual styles. In doing so we will be merely following the natural demands of our culture. These demands are suppressed in the larger (white) culture, but, nonetheless, are found in our music and in our spiritual and moral philosophy. Particularly in music, which happens to be the purest expression of the Black man in America.[258]

Constructing models that corresponded to their own realities is exactly what Bernice Johnson Reagon, John Coltrane, Curtis Mayfield, and Gil Scott-Heron did with their musical productions.

Bernice Johnson Reagon's life and career epitomizes the role of the Black revolutionary artists as described by Stewart. Bernice fully embraced her progressive Black musical tradition and gospel roots, utilizing them to liberate and bestow a sense of agency to her community. Her activism and involvement in SNCC, the Freedom Singers, Harambee Singers and other groups sought not only to educate the Black community about social issues, but also to pass along the legacy of resistance and inspiration so intrinsic to the Black progressive musical tradition. John Coltrane illustrated to all of America that the Black creative expression of jazz could be a vehicle of liberation, both in the spiritual and physical spheres. He harkened the African ancestral musical foundations of innovation and spontaneity, and utilized them to help resist suppression and carve out a permanent Black identity on the American

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[258] James Stewart, "The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist," in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, ed. LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal (New York: William and Morrow, 1968), 3-10.

musical landscape. Curtis Mayfield's soulful expressions exclaimed to the Black masses to reject and resist the negative images and stereotypes impinged upon them by mainstream White America. His songs brought the suffering of Blacks in the urban ghettos to mainstream attention. Mayfield enacted the principles of self-determination by establishing his record company and gaining control and proprietorship over his artistry. Gil Scott-Heron was a prolific poet whose career produced works that were "aesthetically poetic and beautiful musical renderings of Black cultural and political history."[259] Gil's spoken word bashed the oppressive and hypocritical system of American capitalism, exposed divisive classism within the Black community, and acted as a musical newspaper that kept the Black community informed on contemporary social issues; all the while managing to keep a satiric sense of humor.

The progressive Black musical tradition for social justice is not confined to these four individuals; there are numerous more who saw their gifts and talents as a means to liberate, not just the Black community, but humanity as a whole. However, these four artists in my opinion serve as stellar representations of the progressive Black musical tradition. These artists recognized the necessity to articulate the dynamic messages and stories of the people and communities from which they came. They dedicated their lives and talents to uphold the legacy of resistance and sought for the freedom of oppressed people worldwide through their own unique sounds; their "sounds of liberation." One of the limitations of my study was that I did not conduct any interviews or consult with any of the selected artists. If this were done it would have fortified my assertions with exclusive and current primary source data. I may utilize this study for future research and analysis of contemporary Black music. My

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[259] Joyce Joyce, "Afterword: Gil Scott-Heron: Larry Neal's Quintessential Artist," *So Far So Good* (Chicago: Third World Press), 74.

future project could perhaps analyze how and where contemporary Black musical genres such as hip-hop fit into the progressive Black musical tradition and its capacity to be utilized towards social justice.

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DISCOGRAPHY

Bernice Johnson Reagon

Group Albums:

- Sweet Honey in the Rock – Flying Fish Records (1976)
- The Other Side – Flying Fish Records (1986)
- Live at Carnegie Hall – Flying Fish Records (1988)
- Feel Something Drawing Me On – Flying Fish Records (1989)
- Breaths – Flying Fish Records (1989)
- All for Freedom – Music for Little People Records (1989)
- In This Land – Earthbeat Records (1992)
- I Got Shoes – Music for Little People (1992)
- Still on the Journey – Earthbeat (1993)
- Sacred Ground – Earthbeat (1995)
- …Twenty-Five… - Rykodisc (1998)
- Still the Same Me – Rounder/Umgd (2000)
- Raise Your Voice – Earthbeat (2005)
- Experience…101 – Appleseed Records (2007)

Solo Albums:

- Folk Songs: The South – Folkway Records (1965)
- River of Life/ Harmony: One – Flying Fish Records (1972)
- Give Your Hands to the Struggle – Paredon Records (1975)

*Bernice Johnson Reagon has also appeared on a multitude of compilation and tribute albums. A few include: *Sing for Freedom: Civil Rights Movement Songs*, *Lift Every Voice: Honoring the African American Musical Legacy*, and *Freedom Song (Original TV Soundtrack)*

John W. Coltrane

*Due to John Coltrane's extensive catalog I shall only list those albums on which he plays lead.

1957

- DAKAR – ORIGINAL JAZZ CLASSICS (OJC)
- COLTRANE – OJC
- LUSH LIFE – OJC
- TRANEING IN – OJC
- BLUE TRAIN – OJC
- CATTIN' WITH COLTRANE AND QUINICHETTE – OJC
- WHEELIN' AND DEALIN' – OJC
- THE BELIEVER – OJC
- THE LAST TRANE – OJC

1958

- SOULTRANE – OJC
- SETTIN' THE PACE – OJC
- BLACK PEARLS – OJC
- STANDARD COLTRANE – OJC
- THE STARDUST SESSION – OJC
- BAHIA – OJC
- COLTRANE TIME – BLUE NOTE
- BLUE TRANE: JOHN COLTRANE PLAYS THE BLUES – PRESTIGE
- LIKE SONNY – ROULETTE

1959

- GIANT STEPS – ATLANTIC
- COLTRANE JAZZ – ATLANTIC

1960

- THE AVANT-GARDE – ATLANTIC
- MY FAVORITE THINGS – ATLANTIC
- COLTRANE'S SOUND – ATLANTIC
- COLTRANE PLAYS THE BLUES - ATLANTIC

1961

- OLE' COLTRANE – ATLANTIC
- THE BEST OF JOHN COLTRANE – ATLANTIC
- THE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAPION – RHINO
- AFRICA/BRASS – IMPULSE!
- THE COMPLETE AFRICA/BRASS – IMPULSE!
- LIVE AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD – IMPULSE!
- IMPRESSIONS – IMPULSE!
- THE COMPLETE PARIS CONCERTS – MAGNETIC
- THE COMPLETE COPENHAGEN CONCERT – MAGNETIC
- EUROPEAN IMPRESSIONS – BANDSTAND
- LIVE IN STOCKHOLM, 1961 – CHARLY
- JOHN COLTRANE QUARTET WITH ERIC DOLPHY – BLACK LABEL
- JOHN COLTRANE MEETS ERIC DOLPHY – MOON

1962

- COLTRANE – IMPULSE!
- FROM THE ORIGINAL MASTER TAPES – IMPULSE!
- LIVE AT BIRDLAND – CHARLY
- THE EUROPEAN TOUR – PABLO LIVE
- THE COMPLETE GRAZ CONCERT VOL. 1 – MAGNETIC
- THE COMPLETE GRAZ CONCERT VOL. 2 – MAGNETIC
- THE COMPLETE STOCKHOLM CONCERT VOL. 1 – MAGNETIC
- THE COMPLETE STOCKHOLM CONCERT VOL. 2 – MAGNETIC
- STOCKHOLM ’62 THE COMPLETE SECOND CONCERT VOL. 1 – MAGNETIC
- STOCKHOLM ’62 THE COMPLETE SECOND CONCERT VOL. 2 – MAGNETIC
- VISIT TO SCANDINAVIA – JAZZ DOOR
- ON STAGE 1962 – ACCORD
- PROMISE – MOON
- BYE BYE BLACKBIRD – OJC
- BALLADS – IMPULSE!
- EV’RY TIME WE SAY GOODBYE – NATASHA
- LIVE AT BIRDLAND AND THE HALF NOTE – COOL & BLUE

1963

- COLTRANE LIVE AT BIRDLAND – IMPULSE!
- JOHN COLTRANE AND JOHNNY HARTMAN – IMPULSE!
- THE GENTLE SIDE OF JOHN COLTRANE – IMPULSE!
- THE PARIS CONCERT – OJC

- ’63 THE COMPLETE COPENHAGEN CONCERT VOL. 1 – MAGNETIC
- ’63 THE COMPLETE COPENHAGEN CONCERT VOL. 2 – MAGNETIC
- LIVE IN STOCKHOLM, 1963 – CHARLY
- AFRO BLUE IMPRESSIONS – PABLO LIVE
- NEWPORT ’63 – IMPULSE!

1964

- COAST TO COAST – MOON
- CRESCENT – IMPULSE!
- A LOVE SUPREME – IMPULSE!
- DEAR OLD STOCKHOLM – IMPULSE!

1965

- THE JOHN COLTRANE QUARTET PLAYS- IMPULSE!
- THE MAJOR WORKS OF JOHN COLTRANE – IMPULSE!
- TRANSITION – IMPULSE!
- NEW THING AT NEWPORT – IMPULSE!
- LIVE IN PARIS – CHARLY
- LIVE IN ATIBES, 1965 – FRENCH RADIO CLASSIC
- LOVE IN PARIS – LEJAZZ
- A LOVE SUPREME: LIVE IN CONCERT – BLACK LABEL
- LIVE IN PARIS – BLACK LABEL
- A LIVE SUPREME – MOON
- NEW YORK CITY ’65 VOL. 1 – MAGNETIC
- NEW YORK CITY ’65 VOL. 2 – MAGNETIC
- LIVE IN SEATTLE – IMPULSE!

- OM – IMPULSE!
- FIRST MEDITATIONS – IMPULSE!
- MEDITATIONS – IMPULSE!
- SUN SHIP – IMPULSE!

1966

- LIVE AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD AGAIN! – IMPULSE!
- LIVE IN JAPAN – IMPULSE!
- INTERSTELLAR SPACE – IMPULSE!
- STELLAR REGIONS – IMPULSE!

1967

- EXPRESSION – IMPULSE!
- A JOHN COLTRANE RETROSPECTIVE – IMPULSE!

Curtis L. Mayfield

Albums with The Impressions:

- The Impressions – Paramount (1963)
- Keep on Pushing – Paramount (1964)
- The Never Ending Impressions – Paramount (1964)
- One by One – Paramount (1965)
- Big 16 – Paramount (1965)
- People Get Ready - Paramount (1965)
- Ridin' High – Paramount (1966)
- The Fabulous Impressions – Paramount (1967)

- We're a Winner – Universal (1968)
- This is My Country – Curtom (1968)
- The Young Mods Forgotten Story – Curtom (1969)
- The Versatile Impressions – Paramount (1969)
- Amen – Curtom (1969)

Solo Studio Albums:

- Curtis – Curtom (1970)
- Roots – Curtom (1971)
- Super Fly – Curtom (1972)
- Back to the World – Curtom (1973)
- Got to Find a Way – Curtom (1974)
- Sweet Exorcist – Curtom (1974)
- There's No Place Like America Today - Curtom (1975)
- Give, Get, Take and Have – Curtom (1976)
- Short Eyes - Curtom (1977)
- Never Say You Can't Survive – Curtom (1977)
- Do It All Night – Curtom (1978)
- Heartbeat - Curtom (1979)
- Something To Believe In - Curtom (1980)
- The Right Combination (with Linda Clifford) – Curtom (1980)
- Love is the Place – Curtom (1982)
- Honesty – BoardWalk (1983)
- We Come in Peace with a Message of Love – Curtom (1985)
- Take It to the Streets – Curtom (1990)
- New World Order - Curtom (1997)

Gil Scott-Heron

- SMALL TALK AT 125TH AND LENOX AVE. – FLYING DUTCHMAN (1970)
- PIECES OF A MAN – FLYING DUTCHMAN (1971)
- FREE WILL – FLYING DUTCHMAN (1972)
- WINTER IN AMERICA – STRATA-EAST (1974)
- THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED – FLYING DUTCHMAN (1974)
- THE FIRST MINUTE OF A NEW DAY – ARISTA (1975)
- FROM SOUTH AFRICA TO SOUTH CAROLINA – ARISTA (1975)
- IT'S YOUR WORLD – ARISTA (1976)
- BRIDGES – ARISTA (1977)
- SECRETS – ARISTA (1978)
- THE MIND OF GIL SCOTT-HERON – ARISTA (1979)
- 1980 – ARISTA (1980)
- REAL EYES - ARISTA (1980)
- REFLECTIONS – ARISTA (1981)
- MOVING TARGET – ARISTA (1982)
- THE BEST OF GIL SCOTT-HERON – ARISTA (1984)
- TALES OF GIL SCOTT-HERON AND HIS AMNESIA EXPRESS – PEAK TOP (1990)
- GLORY – THE GIL SCOTT-HERON COLLECTION – ARISTA (1990)
- MINISTER OF INFORMATION – PEAK TOP (1994)
- SPIRITS – TVT RECORDS (1994)
- THE GIL SCOTT-HERON COLLECTION SAMPLER: 1974-1975 – TVT RECORDS (1998)

- GHETTO STYLE – CAMDEN RECORDS (1998)
- EVOLUTION (AND FLASHBACK) THE VERY BEST OF GIL SCOTT-HERON – BMG MUSIC (1999)
- GIL SCOTT-HERON & BRIAN JACKSON – MESSAGES (ANTHOLOGY) – SOUL BROTHER RECORDS (2005)