Improvisation, Race, and Sound Recording

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Is improvisation itself raced in American culture? Much scholarship has been written on the subject of the many derogatory associations imposed by Western culture upon jazz and other African American cultural expressions. Ellis Cashmore, in *The Black Culture Industry*, speaks of the early and mid twentieth century as "a period in which the embrace of black music was seen as a lurch toward primitivism" (56); Jan Neverdeen Pieterse, in *White on Black*, cites an English review of the cakewalk, describing it as "a grotesque, savage, and lustful heathen dance, quite proper in Ashanti, but shocking on the boards of a London Hall (145); while Frank Kofsky, in *Black Music, White Business*, indicts the bigotry and racism of the music industry: "jazz is perceived by white recording company managers as the second-class music of second-class people" (73).

Most intriguing, however, is the concern that arose in the 1920s amongst segregationists regarding the potential for sound recording technology to disseminate the musical equivalent of Toni Morrison's "dark, abiding, signing, Africanist presence" (5) to unwitting white listeners. In her article "Reading Music, Reading Records, Reading Race," Lisa Gitelman discusses the dilemma of "What happens to […] blackface when there is no face" (270): "All of this recorded blackness without the sight of black, white, or blackened skins was new and uncomfortable" (278). Burton Peretti, in *The Creation of Jazz*, similarly discusses recorded jazz as an auditory medium where one could not see colour, where African American musicians truly were "separate but equal" (155).

In response to this situation, the music recording industry in the United States appears to have become primarily concerned with blocking off inter-racial sociality. Segregationists began demanding that sound recordings list the race of all the musicians involved. The recording and marketing of jazz itself became segregated with the creation of Race Records in the 1920s and 30s, labels designed to supply the African American population with "appropriate" music. Most significantly, white musicians began adopting black musical styles, providing white audiences with enticing but safe and sanitized versions of the dark, African sounds of jazz and blues, instigating an insidious and pervasive trend of cultural appropriation that has ranged from Benny Goodman's use of Fletcher Henderson's arrangements to Elvis Presley's famous "borrowing" of Big Mama Thorton's song "Hound Dog."

While this trend, one of placing a white face on black music, has been studied extensively by cultural theorists and musicologists, another significant, related trend has been almost entirely overlooked. If white musicians can interpret, or translate, black music for white audiences, doesn't it then follow that white record producers and engineers can and have performed the same task? Surely the obvious racism of the American recording industry through much of the twentieth century had an effect on the processes through which black music was recorded and edited in the studio, and on the products, the "records," of these processes.

Consider the case of Duke Ellington's famous 1956 concert in Newport, RI. This concert proved to be Ellington's great comeback, reinvigorating a career that many music critics had consigned to the past. Much of the credit for this success lay with tenor

saxophonist Paul Gonsalves, whose extraordinary 27-chorus solo on "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue" drove the audience into such a frenzy that festival management and security feared there would be a riot. Following the concert, however, Ellington was informed by Columbia producer George Avakian that the live recordings of this momentous musical event were flawed (Schaap 21). Thus the Ellington Orchestra was assembled two days later to recreate the concert in the studio. During the recording session, Ellington apparently initially attempted to have Gonsalves recreate his now famous solo, but upon comparing the result with the tape from the concert, promptly declared, "It's hopeless […] Let's forget it." (Morton 205). Ultimately, the "flawed" live recordings of "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue" and "Jeep's Blues" were combined with a studio version of the "Newport Jazz Festival Suite." The resulting album, *Ellington at Newport*, became Ellington's best selling record, hailed for decades as one of the greatest live jazz recordings of all time, and its convoluted recording history did not come to light until Phil Schaap released the two-disc reissue, *Ellington at Newport 1956 (Complete)*, in 1999.

In his recent account of Ellington at Newport titled *Backstory in Blue*, John Fass Morton asserts that it was Ellington, not Avakian, who initially pushed for a studio session to patch up any mistakes from the concert performance. Columbia was supposedly "preparing to leverage its premier status in long-playing record technology to record its artists live at Newport" (45), while Avakian "was determined to advance live recording as an art" (64); in contrast, Ellington, according to Avakian, was concerned about the lack of rehearsal time for the "Festival Suite" and sought reassurance from him:

"Can we go into the studio and make any repairs that we want? Can you patch it in and make it sound as though it happened at the festival?" (108). Once the studio was booked, Ellington also apparently arranged for Billy Strayhorn to have a score while the performance took place so that he could "mark all the things that he hears bad" (109). This account is to some degree also supported by Phil Schaap, who claims in the liner notes to *Ellington at Newport 1956 (Complete)* that "Ellington was not troubled by the subterfuge of studio material being masked by canned applause" (21), having produced such recordings as early as 1929. In contrast to contemporary sensibilities about liveness, in 1956 this "subterfuge" was the order of the day, and the surprising development was not the studio session, but Ellington's subsequent refusal to rerecord Gonsalves' solo.

Avakian's account of the events at Newport in 1956, however, has been contested. Morton quotes Avakian claiming to have been acting in Ellington's best interests: "My goal was to save Duke's neck, pride, and reputation by salvaging what was the most important element in his mind of the performance at Newport—the 'Suite,' which, God knows, we could not release with glaring mistakes" (204). On the following page, however, he cites Schaap recounting how Gonsalves and fellow saxophonist Russell Procope "separately told him [Schaap] that Columbia wanted Ellington to rerecord the whole concert performance. Duke was quite steamed" (205). Schaap further tells Morton that "Ellington was disputing the contract" (205), a point he also emphasizes in his liner notes to *Ellington at Newport 1956 (Complete)*, where he claims, "that Irving Townsend salvaged this situation […] immediately replac[ing] Avakian as Duke's producer at Columbia" (22).

Why was Avakian so determined to recreate this performance that he, according to Schaap, apparently sabotaged his professional relationship with Ellington? Perhaps he was merely concerned with the quality of the recording of Gonsalves's solo. Prior to the concert, Avakian told the musicians to play their solos into the microphone marked with white tape; however, at the pivotal moment, Gonsalves stepped up to the wrong mike, one broadcasting for the federal radio system Voice of America. As a result, in order to capture the solo, the Columbia recording engineers had to boost the gain: thus, "along with the signal of the solo came a rising torrent of ambient noise with catalytic shouts from Duke, the band, and a surging audience" (Morton 205).

Avakian may also, however, have been concerned about the reaction, captured on record, of this surging audience. Numerous accounts of this concert have emphasized the audience's riotous response to Gonsalves' solo. A review from the *Morristown Record* from July 13, less than a week after the concert, states, "The session wound up in a real Chinese fire drill with the audience screaming for 'more'" (Flartey), while the *Bridgeport Post*, two days later, claims that "the closing night's performance of Duke Ellington's band […] so electrified the audience that fans were sparked into some high voltage dancing in the aisles" (Falk). More tellingly, Morton himself says, "The Newport '56 audience epically participated in the performance of 'Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue.' It joined an infectious conversation among Ellington and his band, who themselves were refraining the hypnotic drum talk of New Orleans's Congo Square" (232).

The vocabulary of these comments—such as "wound up," "electrified," "infectious," and "hypnotic"—echoes some familiar white stereotypes about black music

and culture. Cashmore describes how, in the decades following emancipation, Anglo-Saxon church leaders "were horrified at the overtly expressive aspects of worship" occurring in black churches: "Excessive emotionalism, wild dancing, howling, and screeching: these were regarded by whites as dangerous tendencies" (25). Pieterse similarly cites a jazz festival in Belgium in 1926 where new dance movements were described as originating "with the barbaric Negro tribes inciting to erotic madness" (145).

Let us then consider the "madness" that Newport Jazz Festival management and security saw unfolding before them and their reactions to it. According to Morton, during the performance of "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue," "the last vestige of order collapsed, as a human wave pushed folding chairs askew and out of line" (179), while "crowds outside the gate were clamoring for admission, some threatening to storm the wickets when refused" (180). Newport Jazz Festival producer George Wein states, in his autobiography, "The audience was swelling like a dangerous high tide" (154). Ellington himself, in his autobiography *Music is My Mistress*, describes how "Wein was walking up and down in front of the stage, walking in time to the music, with his face serious on the police side and smiling on our side" (227). Langston Hughes, in a review of the concert published in the *Age-Defender* on July 21, similarly describes how "the management begged Duke to stop playing, for fear, perhaps, the socialites in the boxes near the stage would get crushed in the rhythmic excitement." The audience of white, affluent New Englanders had apparently caught the "infectious conversation."

One audience member in particular merits special mention here: Elaine Anderson, the famous, though until recently mostly anonymous "Bedford Blonde." Morton devotes

several chapters of his book to recounting her life, paying particular attention to her marriage to retail tycoon Lawrence Anderson. Dubbed "The girl who launched 7000 cheers" on the original *Ellington at Newport* album cover, Anderson was actually nearly ejected from Freebody Park for her ecstatic dancing. According to Anderson's friend, Elaine Lorillard, Wein sent some Pinkerton men over midway through Gonsalves' solo to stop Anderson from dancing, and it was only the intercession of her husband, Louis Lorillard, that allowed Anderson's performance to continue (Morton 180-181). Morton also indicates that after the Ellington Orchestra finally left the stage for good, Larry was "exasperated by his wife's public display, which perhaps violated some final taboo in his eyes," and suggests that Anderson's dance "would prove to be a turning point in their marriage" (191). The "erotic madness" of the Ellington orchestra had not only captivated a crowd of white bourgeoisie, but had thoroughly possessed a striking blonde woman from one of its most aristocratic families.

After several decades of rock concerts, the commotion at Newport in 1956 may seem minor, almost inconsequential in comparison. Nevertheless, given the language of infection, hypnosis, and eroticism that pervades the discourse surrounding this concert, combined with the spectre of a white aristocrat's supple, blonde young wife being driven mad by the sounds of Congo Square, I wonder how much the prospect of disseminating this dangerous black presence to millions of white American listeners may have influenced Avakian and Columbia Record's desire to recast this performance in the studio. As Ellington trombonist John Sanders states, commenting on Gonsalves' solo, "It was all spontaneous. It just happened" (Morton 157). Perhaps Columbia initially found

this performance to be too spontaneous, too improvisational – particularly the white audience's indecorous role – to be distributed to the general public without proper mediation.

Ironically, on the *Ellington at Newport 1956 (Complete)* version of "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue," the sound of the surging audience heard on the original LP version is missing, for in combining the Columbia and VOA mono tracks to create a stereo sound, Schaap relied "on the VOA mike to bring forward the Gonsalves solo" (Morton 218). While both the studio and the live stereo versions of the "Festival Suite" are included on this remastered album, Schaap neither includes nor makes any mention of the previous mono version of "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue," a peculiar oversight given his renowned meticulous attention to detail. Here, I invite readers to listen to the attached audio files and compare the different technological constructions of this performance for themselves.

But for Ellington's unexpected protests, a unique aural perspective of an extraordinary musical event might never have reached the public. Indeed, but for Gonsalves' choreographic error, such a perspective might never have been recorded in the first place. These observations should prompt us to reevaluate how many other improvised jazz performances have been mediated and constructed by racial and commercial politics.

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