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CIVIL RIGHTS CALL OUT TO JAZZ AND AFRICA

INGRID MONSON

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*For Okolo M. Ewunike,
Sonja D. Williams,
and Solveig K. Daffinrud,
with all my heart*

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Freedom Sounds

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Introduction

OUTRAGED BY THE television images of white mobs and Arkansas National Guardsmen blocking the enrollment of nine African American students in Little Rock's Central High School in September 1957, Louis Armstrong called a reporter while on tour in Grand Forks, North Dakota, then sounded off on racial injustice: "My people—the Negroes—are not looking for anything—we just want a square shake. But when I see on television and read about a crowd in Arkansas spitting and cursing at a little colored girl—I think I have a right to get sore—and say something about it."¹ Armstrong criticized President Eisenhower for his foot-dragging during the crisis, described Governor Orval Faubus as an "uneducated plowboy," and withdrew in protest from a planned State Department tour of the Soviet Union. "The people over there ask me what's wrong with my country. What am I supposed to say? The way they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell."²

Armstrong was widely praised for his outspokenness by several fellow performers and public figures including Jackie Robinson, Eartha Kitt, and Pearl Bailey. In jazz circles, however, many musicians were surprised because Armstrong was not known for his political militancy, but rather for his tendency toward an accommodating onstage persona. This political outspokenness, which was something new for Armstrong, occurred a few months after he had been publicly criticized in the African American press—along with Duke Ellington and Nat King Cole—for continuing to accept engagements at segregated theaters.³ Armstrong probably realized that he did not need the State Department to be an ambassador for jazz, since in May 1956 he had made a wildly successful visit to the Gold Coast

(now Ghana) for the production of Edward R. Murrow's film *Satchmo the Great*.⁴ Armstrong performed for soon-to-be President Kwame Nkrumah and was overwhelmed by the enthusiastic reception he received in Africa.⁵

Armstrong's commentary on Little Rock links several issues: the domestic struggle for civil rights, the politics of the U.S. State Department jazz tours, and his own recent experience performing in Ghana in 1956.⁶ The trumpeter's story encapsulates the principal task of *Freedom Sounds*, which is to elucidate how these three larger social forces—the civil rights movement, the cold war, and anticolonialism—affected jazz and jazz musicians in the years between 1950, when the NAACP Legal Defense fund began the legal battle leading to *Brown v. Board of Education*, and 1967, the year John Coltrane died. The musical achievements of these years are among the most sacred to jazz musicians and their audiences and include the extraordinary contributions of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra, Art Blakey, Sarah Vaughan, Bill Evans, Sonny Rollins, Gil Evans, and Max Roach (to name only a few). This golden age of modern jazz established the aesthetic standards by which succeeding generations of jazz musicians have continued to measure themselves in the early twenty-first century, as well as a set of symbolic meanings that remain central to the identity of the genre.

The larger questions posed here are what combination of factors (and combinations of combinations) made this music possible? What effects, direct and indirect, did the struggle for racial equality have on aesthetics, the sense of mission musicians brought to their art, the diversity of music played and composed, and the symbolic meanings attached to the art form? What role did world affairs, especially African independence and anticolonialism, play in how African Americans came to envision their political and cultural liberation? In what ways did the ideas of aesthetic modernism mediate between music and politics?

Louis Armstrong's protest of the events in Little Rock also reminds us that moments of political activism were not confined to those musicians known for their outspokenness, such as Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, and Charles Mingus. The theme of politics and music in jazz has a long history, with both African and non-African American constituencies advancing claims for the social and political significance of music. Jazz improvisation has been cast as a quintessentially democratic and uniquely American art form, as well as an enduring symbol for freedom.⁷ It has been called a universal colorblind art, celebrated for defying the racial status

quo, and lauded as an inherently rebellious and progressive art form. Free jazz has been championed as the embodiment of revolutionary black nationalism, as well as a path toward deeper spiritual truth, universality, and internationalism. Jazz has been celebrated as the triumph of African American aesthetics in American music and as the ultimate embodiment of black pride, Afro-modernism, and genius.⁸ The music has perhaps been all of these things, though not at the same time and not to all constituencies.

In *Freedom Sounds* I am particularly interested in the arguments and debates that defined the scope of jazz as an aesthetic practice, a social community, and an economic livelihood—that is, what people fought about as well as agreed upon. Many of these arguments were about race and racism, even when the ostensible subject of discussion was something else, like harmonic choices or swinging. My aim is not only to capture the multiple points of view expressed about music and politics but also to understand the social and musical logic that informed them.

In addressing issues of race and culture *Freedom Sounds* extends a trend toward social and cultural histories of jazz that has been under way since the early 1990s. The works of Burton Peretti, Scott DeVeaux, William Kenney, Samuel Floyd, Ronald Radano, and David Stowe have contributed substantially to a historiography that has drawn attention to the structural role of Jim Crow segregation in shaping the emergence and practice of jazz in its most canonical years from early jazz to the mid-1960s and challenged the unquestioned status of modernism and biography in jazz history.⁹ The jazz artist as the iconoclastic hero, the nonconformist, the transcendent and self-determining subject, and the social critic is so tied up with the symbolic legacy of the music, especially since World War II, that it is difficult to challenge the primacy of these images without seeming to betray something fundamental and sacred about the music.

Yet far more is to be gained by viewing modernism historically and contextually, I maintain, than by continuing to accept its aesthetic presumptions as timeless truths. The familiar narratives of jazz historiography about the fifties and sixties have emphasized genius and heroism and the inexorable march toward the beauty of modern art. In doing so, they have been extraordinarily successful in legitimizing jazz and bringing greater respect and dignity to its artists. The many biographies, autobiographies, discographies, encyclopedias, and synoptic accounts of modern developments in musical style honor the individual achievements of the greatest

icons of the music, and compile an enormous amount of information on individual musicians and the recorded legacy of the music they have left behind.¹⁰

Nevertheless, a literature focused primarily on the individual tends to lose track of larger trends and historical circumstances shared across broader social constituencies. The parallels between debates in the civil rights movement and those in jazz constitute one such larger circumstance that *Freedom Sounds* investigates. During the civil rights movement, the intractable conflicts that emerged over race, leadership, strategy, and policy goals were quite similar in many respects to the arguments over race, power, aesthetics, and economics that took place in jazz. Another way to think of this is that the civil rights movement and jazz musicians drew from a common set of discourses (or ideas) that shaped the way disputes were conceived and the way in which various constituencies chose to put their ideas into practice. One irony of this period (which I take as a point of departure) is that, just as musicians were perfecting their relationship to modernism and most likely to declare the autonomy and transcendence of their art, they were simultaneously most likely to find themselves buffeted by the political forces around them, both domestic and international.

The Structural Role of Jim Crow

Any account of the politics of race in jazz during the 1950s and 1960s must surely begin with a recognition of the structural significance of Jim Crow policies for the musical world. To begin with, the history of this music called jazz, from its origins through the golden age, is coextensive with the history of Jim Crow segregation. In this sense, Jim Crow functioned as a structural condition over which the emergence of the genre took place, and its effects were not limited to the South. Shortly after *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)—the Supreme Court decision that established the doctrine of separate but equal—Buddy Bolden's band dazzled New Orleans with a distinctive sound that heralded the synthesis of ragtime, blues, spirituals, classical music, marches, and popular song that became jazz. At the other end of the period under study, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (which dismantled the legal basis for

racial segregation) saw the recording of John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, the flourishing of Miles Davis's second great quintet, and the experimentalism of Sun Ra's *Heliocentric Worlds*.¹¹ This is not to suggest that Jim Crow *caused* jazz but to recognize that, throughout the establishment and flourishing of the genre, discriminatory practices in the music industry and society indelibly shaped everyday life for musicians and their audiences. Segregation also concentrated a great deal of African American musical talent in the "racially expected" genres of jazz, blues, and gospel since opportunities in other genres, such as classical music, were limited.

White musicians also had to face the color line, although in a more selective sense. After leaving the clubs and bandstands on the "black side" of town, for example, white musicians and audience members were still eligible for the taken-for-granted rights and privileges of whiteness at midcentury (like hotel rooms, voting, radio and TV broadcast, and membership cards in white unions). Many were not fully aware of the impact of white privilege on their ability to cross the color line, get a meal, or find employment in a band that worked on television, and hence were quite unprepared for the political and racial tensions of the 1960s. Some came to resent the additional prestige and symbolic authority that blackness acquired in jazz during these years and in the early 1960s turned to charging reverse racism (a topic that is explored in chapter 7). Others were radicalized by the racial injustice they observed and found in the politicization of the music the inspiration to develop their own social consciences. An underlying premise of this book is that, during these years, everyone in the world of jazz had to cope with the politics of race in one form or another, whether through denial, engagement, withdrawal, strategic confrontation, cathartic rage, resentment, celebration, or sublimation.

Although multiple factors beyond race were clearly affecting the music—economics, recording technology, class, talent, gender, ethnicity, modernism, anticolonialism—the legal legacy of Jim Crow often elevated race to the category that trumped all. At moments of conflict, broader constellations of social factors were often reduced to or projected onto the single variable of race. The challenge for this volume is both to acknowledge the historical salience of the category of race in the history of jazz and also to delineate the way in which it is complicated by other sociological variables (such as class and gender) and the history of interracial debate.

Legal Definitions of Race

There are white Americans so to speak and black Americans. But any fool can see that the white people are not really white, and that black people are not black.

—Albert Murray

Although jazz musicians and their audiences generally accepted the obviousness of whether someone was black or white, it is important to recognize that defining and maintaining the line between the races was a major preoccupation of the Jim Crow years. The so-called one-drop rule of racial definition, which held that any traceable black ancestry was sufficient to render a person legally black, is something that developed in tandem with the codification of Jim Crow segregation laws of the late nineteenth century. According to F. James Davis, the fraction defining “who is black” fluctuated widely from century to century and from state to state and tended toward smaller proportions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From 1785 to 1910, for example, a mulatto or “colored person” in Virginia was defined as someone with one-quarter or greater black ancestry.¹² From 1910 to 1924 Virginia lowered the portion to one-sixteenth. After 1924 Virginia declared that a white person was legally required to have “no trace whatsoever” of black ancestry and no more than one-sixteenth Native American heritage.¹³

These changing legal definitions redefined many formerly “legally white” people as black. As George Schuyler reported, in 1940 a person of one-eighth African American heritage could legally marry a white person in Nebraska, Maryland, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, or South Carolina. The same marriage, however, would violate the miscegenation laws in Arizona, Montana, Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas.¹⁴ It is important to recognize the remoteness of the ancestry needed to be considered “colored”: A person who is one-eighth black has seven white great-grandparents and one black great-grandparent.

The one-drop rule was designed to maintain white purity and domination by assigning any intermixture to the legally subordinate category. The rule assuaged Southern white paranoia about the danger of “invisible blackness” by eliminating the category of mixed heritage by fiat. The strict binary racial classification of Jim Crow attempted to legislate a clear

division in a society that was far more hybrid than segregation laws admitted. Historically speaking, “colored” persons included many mixed ancestries—not only black-white but also black–Native American and black-Asian. Although “mulatto” came to mean strictly black-white intermixtures, in the eighteenth century the term also included black–Native American and European–Native American combinations.¹⁵ In addition to masking such intermixtures, the one-drop rule during the Jim Crow era also collapsed ethnic and cultural distinctions within populations of African descent. The impact of Caribbean populations of African descent (Cuban, Haitian, Puerto Rican, and Jamaican, for example), as well as that of the Creoles of color in Louisiana, are among the streams of cultural influence obscured by the system of binary racial classification.

In the social policy of the United States, ethnic distinctions among European immigrant groups were also collapsed by the emphasis on binary racial classification. As the historical literature on the social construction of “whiteness” has documented, the various European ethnic groups composing white America—from German to Irish to Italian—*became* collectively “white” through a process of marking their boundary from “blackness.”¹⁶ The one-drop-rule, in other words, also consolidated the category of “white” by focusing on the legal definition of “blackness.”

In general the jazz world of the forties, fifties, and sixties accepted definitions of black and white that were consistent with the framework of the one-drop rule. The fact that many black persons were white in appearance nevertheless confounded the enforcement of Jim Crow laws, a circumstance that some jazz musicians used to their advantage. Tenor saxophonist Earle Warren, for example, was light enough to “pass for white” for the purposes of purchasing food for the Count Basie band while on tour in the South. Members of Darlings of Rhythm (a predominantly African American all-women’s orchestra) also managed to turn the vagaries of the racial divide against Jim Crow. White musicians put on “nut brown powder” to darken themselves when performing in predominantly black bands in the South, rendering themselves sometimes darker than their lighter-skinned black band mates. When white trumpeter Toby Butler was arrested for violating Georgia’s segregation laws, the African American leader of the band (Jessie Turner) confused the authorities by insisting that Butler was her first cousin. Since the one-drop tradition made it entirely possible that Butler *was* Jessie Turner’s cousin, the police released her.¹⁷

Culture and Hybridity

American culture, even in its most rigidly segregated precincts, is patently and irrevocably composite. It is, regardless of all the hysterical protestations of those who would have it otherwise, incontestably mulatto. Indeed, for all the traditional antagonisms and obvious differences, the so-called black and so-called white people of the United State resemble nobody else in the world so much as they resemble each other.

—Albert Murray

Situations of such cultural hybridity (mixedness, mulattoiness) present daunting challenges to cultural analysts committed to neither denying difference and its structural persistence nor reifying culture into a biologically based essentialist paradigm of race. It is important to remember that mixedness may or may not be visible since, as Naomi Pabst has argued, there is a difference between “light-skinnedness” and “racially distinct parentage, which is not always marked by light skin.” In her view (and in Murray’s quote in the epigraph to this section), mixedness or hybridity “simply is and always was,” and categories are invariably “impure” and “already crossed.”¹⁸ If legal definitions of race in the United States artificially simplified a hybrid, mixed heritage, however, it is also true that a real and persistent color line exists that continues to define everyday social experience and perceptions in the United States.

My position presumes that culture is a dynamic process of synthesis through time, even without the complicating factor of cross-cultural hybridity, because cultures must reproduce themselves over time. Even in the hypothetical case of a purely endogamous, isolated cultural group, notions of cultural authenticity, identity, and legitimacy must necessarily be recreated and passed on in a process of intergenerational transmission, negotiation, contestation, and synthesis. Each generation must respond to unpredictable historical circumstances (weather, illness) and apply cultural principles to new historical situations, often subtly transforming them in the process. This is akin to what Amiri Baraka had in mind when he spoke of the “changing same.”¹⁹ What a community accepts as an authentic cultural expression in any given generation may consequently change over time in response to historical circumstances and communal debate—a social process not unlike improvising. This is not to deny that core issues

and problems recur in every generation, but to emphasize that creative and individual responses to the same problems continually arise.²⁰

Since the word “culture” is often used as a code word for “race,” I would like to be clear from the beginning that I take as my point of departure an anthropological concept of culture. More specifically, it is one that is informed by practice-based directions in anthropological theory emphasizing (1) culture as emerging from social practices in a process of contestation and engagement (which occurs over time, that is, history), (2) culture as inevitably mixed and partially overlapping with other cultures around it, and (3) cultures as not bound neatly to space or geography but rather mediated by recording, print, and broadcast media. Culture, then, is not simply about race or ethnicity, but also about the definition and redefinition of collectivities (including races, identities, classes, ethnic groups, genders) through various kinds of social practice, such as playing music, arguing about race, living in the same neighborhood, attending religious services, watching television, marriage, and political activism.²¹

People can and do share many social practices without sharing ethnicity or race, but these everyday activities of social life inevitably take place within the larger social structures of economics, law, and nation that, as we have seen, in the United States of the mid-twentieth century, continually reinscribed race as the single most important cultural, legal, and economic boundary marker. In talking about culture and race in this volume, then, it is crucial for us to keep in mind that, although the sociological variable of race often predicts the sharing of crucial kinds of social experience in the United States, race alone is not what makes culture; rather, it consists of configurations of social experience, gender, class, values, and history.

The problem only gets worse when we consider the impact of cross-cultural contact over time. In thinking about cultural groups that have interacted and mutually influenced one another, several crucial questions arise. What are the power relations that shape the contact or cultural overlap? Who profits from the contact? Is an area of cultural overlap enforced or voluntary for the participants? When does a borrower have a right to claim ownership? Which set of cultural values shapes the process by which divergent cultural elements and practices are shared and synthesized? Which values and ideologies, in other words, are dominant and hegemonic?

In the abstract it is possible to imagine a society in which cultural borrowing and synthesis proceed with relatively little anxiety over the contemporary reshaping of tradition, but in the world of jazz at the mid-twentieth century, racially stratified debates over authenticity, legitimacy, and white appropriation were highly polarized. The discourse of aesthetic modernism provided both a meeting ground for musicians from divergent backgrounds and a means of asserting deep cultural differences. From the early 1950s to the mid-1960s a general shift took place from a colorblind ideology on race within the jazz community to the assertion of a black-identified consciousness on the part of many African American musicians and their supporters. This discursive change closely parallels comparable developments in the civil rights movement, black nationalism, and black power (and, indeed, makes little sense without considering these contexts). If jazz ideology in the late forties and early fifties stressed integration and modernist aesthetic uplift, by the early sixties, many jazz musicians stressed cultural self-determination and the rejection of mainstream American culture.

However, this ideological shift in the jazz community was not simply a response to larger political issues, but also a reaction to everyday economic imbalances in the music industry, the inability of liberal, colorblind presumptions to address them, and the in-between status of jazz improvisation as neither popular nor classical music. In moments of power struggle—such as competition over jobs, pay scales, recording contracts, nightclub gigs, print media attention, and television and film contracts—the jazz world often divided into racialized debates over the relative merit of black and white performers. Arguments over who swung and who was the most innovative were often tacitly about race despite the insistence of the combatants that they were “colorblind.”

At the same time, blackness acquired a new level of dignity and prestige in jazz—among white audiences, as well as black—as the astonishing musical achievements of individuals such as Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Thelonious Monk were read against the backdrop of the struggle for civil rights and racial justice. If freedom and excellence were the goals, the synthesis of African American musical traditions and modernism accomplished by these musical visionaries symbolically encapsulated the dreams of the civil rights and black nationalist movements in ways that leading white musicians could not. Despite the common assumption that only the “music itself” should count in the evaluation of excellence, musicians,

audiences, and critics responded to the entire complex of sound, image, and cultural symbolism.

Black Nationalism and White Resentment

Many popular descriptions of the spectrum of liberal political opinion on race in the 1950s and 1960s divide the landscape into two opposing camps, those supporting integration and those advocating black nationalism. In this narrative, integrationists supported nonviolence, colorblind evaluations of individuals, and working within the framework of a liberal democracy to seek legal redress and compensation for racial injustice. Mainstream civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) are usually associated with this position. Black nationalists, on the other hand, emphasized black economic and political self-determination, cultural autonomy, and, in some cases, separatism. The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, US, and many other black liberation organizations are generally associated with this perspective.

As political scientist Michael Dawson has argued, the history of African American political ideology is far more complicated than this dualistic framework allows. What is key to keep in mind throughout this volume is that black liberal political ideology, as well as black nationalist (or other radical) political thinking, differed substantially from white liberal political opinion, especially on the questions of the accountability of the individual to the larger community and economics.

Since the role of individualism and individual expression plays such a central role in jazz aesthetics and the economic disparities between black and white performers during the 1950s and 1960s proved so contentious in interracial debates, I begin by presenting a brief summary of Dawson's analysis of the history of African American political ideology. If mainstream liberalism in the United States has emphasized, above all, individualism and equal opportunity in the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, black liberalism has consistently differed in two key dimensions. First, it has stressed not only equality of economic opportunity but also equality of outcome. African Americans have expected that equality of opportunity should lead to gaining a fair share of the American economic pie. In music,

the sense that African American excellence ought to translate into a fair economic return (one proportionate to the aesthetic contributions of African Americans) was a particularly strong concern during the 1950s and 1960s.

Second, African Americans have viewed their individual possibilities as linked to the fate of their larger racial community to a greater degree than other ethnic groups in the United States. Because African Americans have had minority status within a winner-takes-all form of democratic representation, the importance of collective responses to issues of community-wide importance has been an enduring theme in African American history. This emphasis on communal and collective bonds, Dawson argues, runs counter to mainstream individualistic liberal thought, and, furthermore, has been important in the thinking of black liberals such as Martin Luther King Jr., as well as black radicals from Malcolm X to Amiri Baraka.²² One important consequence of this collective orientation is that the African American community, through its activism and its periodicals, often held black performers to a high standard of political accountability.

Black nationalism (and black radicalism more broadly) has also been more variegated than popular understandings convey. According to Dawson, the key components of black nationalism since the time of Martin Delaney have placed an emphasis on black autonomy and varying levels of economic, social, and political separation from white Americans. While some organizations (for example, the Communist Party and the Nation of Islam) have emphasized the importance of establishing a separate black state, separatism, nevertheless, has *not* been the defining issue for black nationalism. More widely supported aspects of black nationalism include economic self-determination, cultural self-definition, and the development of autonomous black-led organizations. In the twentieth-century, black nationalism emphasized the special place of Africa as a historical, cultural, and spiritual homeland. Black Marxism, in addition, emphasized the connection between the U.S. struggle for racial justice and the national liberation struggles of the formerly colonized nations.²³

The breadth of African American political opinion is important to keep in mind as one observes the fractious charges and countercharges between white and black jazz musicians during the 1960s. African American emphasis on collectivity and the need to redress a history of economic discrimination were often taken as racially exclusionary or separatist by liberal whites, who appealed to the language of individualism and uni-

versality in an attempt to deflate the importance of black communal loyalties. Since an interest in collective self-determination was apparent in both African Americans who supported mainstream civil rights organizations and those who endorsed more radical organizations (from the Nation of Islam to the Black Panther Party), considerable interracial miscommunication took place (and continues to do so) over this issue.

Although most writing in jazz and African American studies has emphasized the changing consciousness of African Americans in response to the events of the civil rights movement and black radicalism, I suggest there was a corresponding change among racially liberal and radical whites. Many young progressive whites were inspired by the political activism and moral example of the civil rights and black power movements and began to evaluate themselves by some of the ethical standards they espoused. As political and cultural histories of the 1960s have often observed, it is no accident that the antiwar movement (Vietnam), the women's movement, and the gay liberation movement (and later countercultural movements) took the organizing tactics and moral rhetoric of the civil rights movement as a point of departure in articulating their own political strategies and demands for human rights. Just as Robin Kelley has argued for African American activists—that self-transformation and the ability to dream were just as much a part of the civil rights movement as the lunch-counter sit-ins and voter registration drives—so too did many young whites see rejecting the racial status quo of their parents' generation as key to their own self-transformation and moral vision.

Between 1950 and 1967 many white musicians, critics, and their audiences began to embrace more fully than previous generations African American musical and cultural standards as a benchmark for evaluating themselves aesthetically, morally, and politically. This is a crucial point in opening an alternative framework for thinking through several interracial tense questions in jazz studies, including (1) why the canonic figures in jazz, whether chosen by African or non-African American critics and musicians, are predominantly African American; (2) whether jazz is best thought of as African American music or American music, and (3) whether white participation in jazz has essentially amounted to appropriation, imitation, and cultural theft. The ultimate problem, it seems to me, is how to acknowledge the depth of the African American cultural impact on mainstream American musical and cultural aesthetics without denying the hybridity of the music and the complexity of the recursive relationships

between black and nonblack jazz players. In chapter 3 I propose a framework for considering these issues.

The years during which I researched and wrote this book have witnessed an enormous growth in what I term the “white resentment narrative” in jazz history and criticism. The last chapter of Gene Lee’s *Cats of Many Colors*, for example, rails against African American discrimination against white musicians in jazz. An often-cited essay by Terry Teachout accuses Wynton Marsalis and Jazz at Lincoln Center of antiwhite bias in hiring and programming, while suggesting that there is an overemphasis on African Americans in jazz history that can be explained only by an excess of black nationalist thinking and political correctness.²⁴ Richard Sudhalter, in *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contribution to Jazz, 1915–1945*, takes it one step further by arguing that emphasis on the African American roots of jazz amounts to a “black creationist canon” that, in his view, obscures the simple multicultural truth that “black and white once worked side by side, often defying the racial and social norms of their time to create a music whose graces reflected the combined effort.”²⁵ The former position is considered ideological while the latter is presented as historically accurate.

Nevertheless, these writers make use of liberal, individualist ideology to argue for a colorblind or race-neutral perspective that views music itself as above and beyond politics. Moreover, the argument is made with ideological purpose, that is, to redress an alleged grievance—that white musicians have been left out of jazz history and, when included, have been considered to be less authentic. As we will see, the current wave of white resentment narratives in jazz revisits similar debates that took place in the jazz community during the early 1960s as the musical world was politicized by the events of the civil rights movement and as African Americans increasingly demanded a more central place in jazz history. Although the jazz community has long been thought of as one characterized by greater interracial collaboration than has occurred in the rest of American society, it has less often been noted that it was among the first social scenes to develop the discourse of reverse racism.

My own position on ideology and politics is that no one stands outside the flow of the ideas, ideologies, discourses, and political interest in the world around us or fails to draw on ideas larger than themselves in making a case for one version of history or another. Since the writing of history is always an interpretive act (and in jazz history it is certainly not difficult to

find works that draw drastically different conclusions from the same set of “facts”), I believe that it is better to be explicit about one’s interpretive decisions and take pains to establish the ideological, political, and cultural contexts that make wildly different ideological positions plausible than to pretend that one is just presenting the facts—musical, historical, or otherwise.

Modernism and Modernity

In the 1950s and 1960s jazz successfully constructed itself ideologically, musically, and symbolically into a modern art music, even if the institutional trappings of this status did not come into being until thirty to forty years later. The relationship between jazz musicians and their publics with regard to the discourse of modernism is consequently a crucial theme underlying much of this volume. I am particularly interested in understanding how issues of race mediated between the aesthetic and political views of the modern. At the most general level, African Americans were more likely to see an inherent connection between music and politics than their white counterparts, who more frequently accepted the art-for-art’s-sake argument that music was ultimately individual and above and beyond politics. Yet a desire to be “modern” (in a sense including not only musical craft but also an entire “authentic” persona mixing aspects of rebellion, originality, social criticism, progressiveness, and being “true to oneself”) was an aspiration articulated on both sides of the color line.

The idea of the modern in jazz has accomplished various kinds of musical and political work throughout the history of jazz, some of it consonant with its uses in European art music, some of it decidedly dissonant. Although jazz has since its inception been considered a modern music, considerable debate has taken place throughout its history about whether its folk, popular, or art music qualities should be emphasized; about which label—“highbrow,” “middlebrow,” or “lowbrow”—is most appropriate to describe it; and about the musical standards by which it should be judged. The interest that both European and American modernist composers showed in jazz in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the tendency of European audiences to recognize the “art” in jazz and to treat its musicians accordingly, encouraged many jazz musicians to think of themselves as artists in a bohemian high art sense.²⁶ The conditions in the

music industry under which they labored, however, were decidedly those of music for popular entertainment, with all of the racial stratifications of the early to mid-twentieth century intact.

The success with which swing music conquered the marketplace in the 1930s and 1940s made it a commercial popular music, even though many of its musicians always considered it to be something above and beyond. Its advocates generally pointed to the sophistication of the music in harmonic, rhythmic, and technical terms, as well as the creative beauty of improvisation, to justify this sensibility. On these modernist criteria of form and content most musicians, black or white, generally agreed.

Bebop musicians extended the embrace of modernism by adding their disdain of the popular, as well as their interest in the same hallmarks of avant-garde modernism that interested “high art” experimental composers: formal experimentation and theoretical exploration; a politically vanguardist stance and the rhetoric of progress; and an alternation between the celebration of intuition and rationalism as the basis of art. Yet bebop did not embrace one of the most significant markers of avant-garde musical modernism: the break with tonality. Indeed, jazz after World War II arguably developed the most sophisticated and interesting tonal language of the twentieth century. The attempted break with tonality came later, in the free jazz of the early 1960s.²⁷

Since the topic of modernism is enormously broad, ranging from the entire history of Western thinking since the Enlightenment (in philosophy and social theory) to the specifically aesthetic movements of the twentieth century, including (to name only a few) surrealism, dada, constructivism, serialism, and jazz, it will be useful to draw some distinctions from the outset. Wherever possible I use the term “modernity” to refer to the expansive sense of Western thought since the Enlightenment and “modernism” to refer to the specifically musical and aesthetic aspects of jazz as musical art. Nevertheless, in the broader literature the words “modernism” and “modernist” can swing both ways. Where I intend the expansive sense, I explicitly say so.

Since historians, social and critical race theorists, anthropologists, and postcolonial theorists have argued for the last two decades that the concept of race and racism is deeply rooted in the history of the Western modernity, the parts of this volume that pertain to race and political history draw most heavily on the broader concept of modernity. I have found it helpful to think of the modern in this expanded sense as an overlapping

family of discourses expressed in political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and technological domains. If ideas of truth, transcendence, universality, freedom, autonomy, subjectivity, and progress are common across all of these categories, each one contains, in addition, a more particularized set of themes. The political domain has emphasized individual rights, the self-determining subject, secularism, progress, revolution, and nationalism; the economic field has emphasized industrialization, commodification, alienation, and the free market, as well as systematic critiques of the market system such as Marxism. The historical sphere has been invested in progress, teleology, rationality, and origins, while the technological realm has emphasized science as a mode of rationality. In aesthetics, what I am calling modernism includes a constellation of ideas about form and content, abstraction, individuality, iconoclasm, rebellion, the autonomy of art, authenticity, progress, and genius.²⁸

Although the broader project of modernity has celebrated individual freedom and the emancipatory potential of reason, the flourishing of slavery and imperialism concurrently created a far different experience of the modern for Africans, African Americans, and colonized populations. For Paul Gilroy this position at the vortex of the most glaring contradiction between modernity's professed ideals and its actual practice is critical in our understanding of the relationship of black political movements to the Western intellectual heritage: "A concept of modernity that is worth its salt ought, for example, to have something to contribute to an analysis of how the particular varieties of radicalism articulated through the revolts of enslaved people made selective use of the ideologies of the western Age of Revolution and then flowed into social movements of an anti-colonial and decidedly anti-capitalist type."²⁹

The civil rights movement drew upon the universalizing legacy of modernity to advance its cause. Civil rights attorneys emphasized the modern principles of political democracy, equality before the law, and individual freedom to highlight the gap between the rhetoric of equality and the actual denial of citizenship rights to African Americans. Similarly, bebop musicians drew upon broadly accepted ideas about the modern artist and universal musical standards to argue for the inclusion of African American musicians in the top ranks of modern music. Simply embracing aesthetic modernism, in this sense, was viewed as being of political consequence.

In Gilroy's view, this position of being both inside and outside of modern Western culture (like Du Bois's "double consciousness") is one of

the defining conditions of the Black Atlantic and fostered the development of black music and arts as a “counterculture of modernity.” By this he means a musical practice that was committed to the “idea of a better future” and embodied the style of agency that would be necessary for political transformation.³⁰ Nevertheless, black artistic expression in jazz also looked to the ancient past and religion as a source of cultural renewal, critique, and empowerment, often expressed in myths and rituals of an idealized African past. James Hall has suggested that the spiritual interests of musicians like John Coltrane should be seen as part of an “antimodern” stream in African American thought that both provided a deep critique of modernity and validated African American longings for community and nationhood. Robin Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams* has argued further that African American interest in a redemptive vision of Africa cannot simply be dismissed as romantic or utopian but rather should be seen as central to the development of an African American notion of freedom that is more than materialist.³¹

Whether this impulse is viewed as operating outside the legacy of Western modernism or as a counterculture of critique residing partly within and partly without it, *Freedom Sounds* shares with Hall’s and Kelley’s analyses the view that the turn toward non-Western modes of spiritual expression and ritual enactment in the jazz world was connected to an identification with both the anticolonial struggles of the emerging non-Western nations (in Africa and Asia) and the cultural heritage of the African continent in particular.

Intellectual Antecedents and Theoretical Frameworks

African American Studies

The flourishing of African American studies since the 1960s has made available to contemporary jazz scholars a “paradigm-shifting” body of work on African American social and cultural history, the civil rights movement, and interracial dynamics that was simply not available to writers working in the 1960s and 1970s. Recognition of African American studies as a resource for rethinking the questions that are asked of jazz history, music criticism, and cultural criticism has been a growing theme in recent scholarship not only because of its power to redress past exclusions,

but also because of the interdisciplinary affinity between the analytical problems raised by African American experience (double consciousness, racial oppression, hybridity, slavery, the underside of modernity) and the interpretive issues emphasized by poststructural and postmodern critiques of contemporary thought and society. The past fifteen years have witnessed an explosion of interdisciplinary scholarship on jazz that includes work from the fields of literature, music, history, ethnomusicology, dance, anthropology, film studies, diasporic studies, gender studies, and art history. One of the crucial themes common to this emerging literature on jazz cultural studies is attention to the issues of race, power, and internationalism.³²

As both Mae Henderson and Wahneema Lubiano have argued, African American intellectuals have been writing about these issues for the last hundred years in ways that anticipated the theoretical concerns of contemporary cultural studies, anthropology, poststructuralism, and post-colonialism.³³ I have been particularly interested in the writings of those who early on placed African American history and the struggle for racial justice in an international and African diasporic context, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Paul Robeson, as well as those who engaged actively with the field of anthropology, including Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, St. Clair Drake, and Amiri Baraka.³⁴

As Faye and Ira Harrison have argued, W.E.B. Du Bois ought to be counted among the intellectual ancestors of anthropology by virtue of his ethnographic methodology in *The Philadelphia Negro*, his dialogues with Franz Boas on race and culture, and his lifelong interest in Pan-Africanism. He has, in addition, been acknowledged for his formidable impact on the fields of sociology and history.³⁵ Because so many African American intellectuals operated on the margins or outside of academia altogether, it has been difficult for them to gain recognition for the resonances of their work with now widely utilized interdisciplinary paradigms in the humanities and social sciences. Du Bois's emphasis on global context, for example, and his role in developing Pan-Africanism as both an idea and a political movement demonstrated a broadness of vision that would be at home in the company of contemporary discussions of the African diaspora and globalization. His concept of "double consciousness" raised issues of cultural hybridity and the relational construction of identity that remain central to debates in cultural studies and poststructuralism.³⁶

A similar case could be made for the relevance of Amiri Baraka's *Blues People* to the fields of ethnomusicology, social theory, and the current

interdisciplinary renaissance in jazz scholarship.³⁷ Baraka's analysis of African retentions in African American music and culture demonstrates a deep engagement with Herskovits's *Myth of the Negro Past*, an anthropological work that put to rest the idea that Africans arrived in the United States without culture and without history. Baraka cites many of Herskovits's examples of African retentions in black religious, musical, and daily life that can arguably be said to emanate from Dahomean and Yoruba culture.³⁸

Yet more important than the specifics of particular African retentions in Baraka's analysis or indeed the many outdated historical facts cited in the text is his flair for creative social theorizing that combines anthropological understandings of syncretism with a Marxist conception of the dialectic. From anthropology comes the idea that African cultural continuities underlie the myriad ways in which African Americans have modified and reshaped European cultural forms, and from Marx and Hegel comes the idea of a dialectical synthesis in which the encounter of opposing forces will yield something "that must contain both ideas." Throughout *Blues People* Baraka applies these two concepts to the history of black music to yield spectacularly insightful comments on the meaning and significance of the music.³⁹

Baraka opened *Blues People* by stating that his task was "a strictly *theoretical* endeavor" designed to investigate his central hypothesis: that music reveals something of deep cultural significance about the nature of African American existence in America, and, by extension, the nature of American society as a whole.⁴⁰ I have argued elsewhere that Baraka ought to be recognized for his contributions to theorizing the relationship between music and race and that it is a mistake to view *Blues People* as a simply an artifact of cultural nationalism.⁴¹ By drawing attention to the shifting relationships between music and the symbolic and emotional meanings attached to it by various social groupings, Baraka did what many scholars are trying to do today—that is, analyze the role of music in shaping and affirming various kinds of social identities and its role in political and cultural resistance. The study of cultural identities (that is, the relationship among personal experience, racial and gender hierarchies, economics, and symbolic meanings attached to various forms of cultural expression) has been an enduring theme in recent work in African American studies, cultural studies, ethnomusicology, anthropology, and postcolonialism.⁴²

Du Bois and Baraka are just two African American intellectuals who have emphasized the central importance of music in African American cultural life. A fuller treatment of the relationship of jazz to African American intellectual history can be found in Eric Porter's elegant *What Is This Thing Called Jazz*.⁴³ My goal here is to establish that there are long-standing linkages between African American thought and broader theoretical debates in the social sciences and humanities.

Social Theory: Discourse, Structure, Practice

Freedom Sounds is less a traditional history than a critical essay on the relationships among the music, racism, and society in a particular historical period and what we have to learn from them. It is more concerned with explaining why the history of the music has always been contested ground—with issues of race tending to provoke the most incendiary debates—than with providing an exhaustive chronological narrative of the period. It is more interested in asking why such a profound proliferation of musical creativity occurred during a period of heightened political intensity, why the participants in stormy polemical battles cared so deeply, and why the core fights and disputes that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s have been so remarkably durable in their discursive shape and lingering animosities.

I have been particularly interested in the linkages between African American theorizations of race, identity, music, and politics and an eclectic mix of more often cited academic social theoretical literature that has been influential in the humanities and social sciences in the last quarter of a century. The literature that has influenced me the most includes the poststructural work of Michel Foucault, the sociology of Anthony Giddens, the practice theory inaugurated by Pierre Bourdieu, and the anthropology of Jean and John Comaroff and Sherry Ortner.⁴⁴ The concepts in this body of work have helped me keep the big picture in mind while sifting through the contradictions and paradoxical details that abound in the everyday lives of musicians. For I am ultimately less interested in establishing that jazz musicians of the 1950s and early 1960s were heroes and geniuses (something that has been demonstrated over and over again in the jazz literature) than in understanding how they navigated such contested social terrain in the process of earning that reputation.

Three basic social theoretical concepts circulate throughout the book and require some explanation: discourse, structure, and practice. Like all interpretive frameworks and analyses, this one is partial and incomplete and not meant to be an end in itself. These concepts are rather like the chord changes on a lead sheet: They serve as a general point of departure but can never be mistaken for improvised solos themselves, with all of their quirky and beautiful particularity.

By discourse, I mean ideas that are expressed most typically in language, are deployed in the process of framing arguments and justifying positions, and possess the authority and prestige to order how we think about the world. This is discourse in a sense that was put forth by Michel Foucault, and it is most useful in conjunction with his notion of discursive formations—constellations of discourses that together form networks of ideas that shape the ideological landscape and nature of debate in a particular historical period.⁴⁵ In jazz of the fifties and sixties a set of ideas about the modern artist is particularly important in understanding how jazz musicians chose to define themselves. By making themselves into artists and rebelling against the role of entertainer, jazz musicians made use of culturally prestigious discourses (art, the modern, genius) to assert a higher status for the improviser's art.⁴⁶ Likewise, the discourse of race had profound effects on how musicians defined themselves and on their interpretation of the role of the modern artist. In general, understanding how various constituencies within the jazz world appealed to the discursive formations of race, modernism, and modernity is crucial to the intellectual project of *Freedom Sounds*.⁴⁷

My usage of discourse departs from Foucault, however, by conceiving of music itself as a discourse. How can this be? Music is full of ideas that are evaluated by audiences and musicians, that acquire authority and prestige within particular aesthetic landscapes, and that are perceived to “say something” substantive about human experience and feeling. They furthermore function within constellations of musical ideas (styles) that form a context in which they are evaluated and perceived. Just as linguistic discourses form an interrelated matrix of meaning, so do the musical utterances of jazz improvisers form a larger network of musical meanings that are invoked and commented upon in the course of performance. When I speak of music as a discourse, I do not mean simply “talk about music” but also the relationships between the sounds themselves and the symbolic, social, political, and personal meanings that individuals,

collectivities, and institutions construct for them. If Charlie Parker's virtuosity, Dizzy Gillespie's flatted fifths, and Kenny Clarke's rhythmic bombs came to signify an attitude and a politics, we must ask for whom and by whom such meanings were created. The "music itself" is not external to a social and political account but rather a central player in the dialogue between art and meaning.⁴⁸

By structure, I mean the social structures, laws, social categories, technologies, and economic systems that define the terms of social experience for large groups of people. The demographic categories used in social analysis such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, educational level, and place of residence form one aspect of structure. Legal codes governing what is permitted and prohibited to members of various social groups and the system of economic exchange also form durable yet malleable configurations that shape what is possible for individuals. Although structures, as Anthony Giddens and William Sewell remind us, change through an accumulation of intended and unintended consequences in the course of social reproduction, structures change far more slowly than practices.

My understanding of social structure is informed by the thinking of Anthony Giddens, who views structure as dual, that is, as "both the medium and the outcome of practices which constitute social systems."⁴⁹ By this he means that structures shape what people can do, but, conversely, what people do also shapes the reproduction and transformation of structures. This is, in part, because the actions of individual agents have both intended and unintended consequences that undermine the stability of the system. For Giddens, an interplay always exists between structure and agency in the creation of social life. The choices individuals make in their everyday life, how they orient themselves to particular ideas and ideologies, and what actions they take on their behalf are all viewed as critical components to the making of both social structures and history.

Yet, there is always a collective component to agency since people must be able to coordinate their efforts with others to create collective projects. Furthermore, existing social structures empower individuals differently, according to their place in a configuration of social hierarchies and institutional organizations. As William Sewell has noted, "the agency of fathers, executives, or professors is greatly expanded by the places they occupy in patriarchal families, corporations, or universities and by their consequent authority to bind the collectivity by their actions."⁵⁰ Hence, it

is important to consider the social categories to which an individual belongs, as well as a person's position within institutional organizations. Of particular importance for jazz in the 1950s and 1960s is the structural persistence of Jim Crow practices in the music industry (including segregated unions, traveling conditions, performing venues, wages, and opportunities to appear in film and television). Black and white musicians occupied different positions within this racially defined institutional and economic structure that musical communion alone could not alter.

Despite the strength of both discourses and structures in defining the lead sheet over which the improvisation of social life takes place, it is ultimately practice that is of greatest interest in this volume. Practice is the third term—the wild card—for it is what people choose to do given the particular structural and discursive configurations in which they live. Practice is about agency in everyday life, that is, the implementation of cultural ideas, values, and structures through various kinds of social action. Practices can take many forms—musical, economic, sexual, ritual, and so on, but key to their difference from discourse is their stress on embodied knowledge and action. Pierre Bourdieu, a central figure in the development of practice theory, asserted that every society transmits embodied patterns learned by emulation of the actions of others (rather than transmitted by discourse) that serve to develop “practical mastery” of social life.⁵¹

Bourdieu had in mind the practical competence necessary to navigate everyday life within a particular culture, but its easy extension into the practicing of musicians is not hard to see. The activity of practicing—mastering scales, rhythms, harmony, patterns, repertory, and style by repeating passages over and over again—is simply part of what it is to be a musician. Once musicians have this musical knowledge “in their fingers” (and ears), they may no longer have to think consciously about the things they drilled into their bodies through practicing. Thus mimesis and repetition—of live or recorded sources—lead to embodied knowledge and the freeing of the conscious mind for creative aesthetic discovery and expression. For the improvising jazz musician, the true test has always been not the knowledge demonstrated through words but that put into musical practice on the bandstand.⁵²

In social theory, the idea of practice as social action is particularly useful for moving beyond a deterministic understanding of how structures and discourses shape social life and in mediating between micro- and macro-levels of musical and social analysis. Although the social categories one

occupies may be given—black, white, man, woman, rich, poor—through the creative deployment of various kinds of practices, an individual just might succeed in doing a whole host of things that are not predicted by the social categories to which they belong.

Indeed, aesthetic practice in twentieth-century America—musical practice in particular—has been extremely important in imagining a freer society than the one we inherited. In the late 1940s and early 1950s jazz drew upon a multiplicity of aesthetic perspectives in fashioning individual sounds, including the African American vernacular aesthetics, the aesthetics of the American popular song, the aesthetics of classical music, and also, for some artists, African diasporic sounds such as Afro-Cuban sacred and secular music, Nigerian talking drums, and Trinidadian calypso. Individual musicians, regardless of their ethnic home base, can and did exercise aesthetic agency by exploring musical aesthetics from both within and beyond their expected ethnic categories.

Cultural and social anthropologists who developed the idea of practice theory, in the sense in which I am using it here, have used it to move beyond an older concept of culture as bounded, holistic, and homogeneous and toward a concept that keeps difference, overlap, and contingency at the center.⁵³ In music, the idea of music as a musical and social practice has long been a productive theme in the field of ethnomusicology, where it has informed social constructionist work on a wide range of world music genres.⁵⁴ Timothy Taylor's work on global popular music and technology has been particularly important in bringing this perspective to popular music studies.⁵⁵ In my own work, practice theory served to ground my approach to the music in *Saying Something* in my use of the practice-based literature of linguistic anthropology and African American literary studies to talk about jazz improvisation as interactive, emergent, and socially communicative. In more recent work I have been interested in how musical practices and processes in their polyphonic complexity may offer a better theoretical model for thinking through the cross-cultural complexities of music and globalization than some current social theories.⁵⁶

Practice in Recent Jazz Studies

Practice in the sense used here has had a growing presence in recent work on African American music, most notably in the work of Travis Jackson,