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Bebop: the revolution

I'd been getting bored with the stereotyped changes [i.e. chords] that were being used all the time at the time, and I kept thinking there's bound to be something else. I could hear it sometimes but I couldn't play it. Well, that night, I was working over Cherokee, and, as I did, I found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the thing I'd been hearing. I came alive.
- Charlie Parker (Stearns 230)

A life that ended abruptly at the age of thirty-five. Yet in spite of the young saxophonist's tragic death, Parker's innovative experimentation laid the framework for a new wave of jazz in the early 1940s, backed by a revolution on social, economic, and musical fronts. Originating in clubs scattered throughout New York and Chicago, a revolutionary new style--"bebop"--embodied the rebellious spirit of its founders. Parker's freedom to "play the thing [he]'d been hearing" reflects the liberty of expression that underpinned the entirety of bebop's evolution; his coming "alive" speaks to an entire generation of African American musicians struggling to forge a creative path in a society that worked against them in every way. Not only did the new style assert creative independence from the previous era of stale, recycled ideas perpetuated by second-hand owners, it allowed the musicians to define their own role in society.

As the swing music of the 1930s gained popularity and traction among a mass audience, particularly among whites, its objectives tended more and more towards pleasing the wishes of this cultural group in particular. Whites had claimed ownership of the music, resulting in renowned figures such as Benny Goodman, a white bandleader who was dubbed the "King of Swing," dominating the jazz scene. Goodman's success opened the door for "formerly obscure white jazz

musicians" to become "money-making machines," (DeVeaux 128) while the music itself was heading in the direction of recycled clichés to please the crowd, rather than a voice for minorities. As black interest in and identification with the music faded, many longed for the freedom of expression they were losing in the typecasting of black musicians as "entertainers" for whites. Blacks yearned for jazz as a platform, a voice through which their culture could be heard among the clamor of oppression, and resented the constant commercial exploitation they experienced in the white-dominated recording industry. This narrative of African American innovation, followed by its appropriation, the development of an increasingly white audience, and finally a reaction is central to American musical history, and in many ways the story of bebop's inception fits seamlessly into this mold. However, the style's musical complexity and elusiveness also asserted its departure from this recurring theme. Through its deliberate disruptiveness, bebop acted as an economic, musical, and social revolution, a reaction by African Americans against the commercialization, appropriation, and discrimination of the Swing era.

Not only a product of stylistic evolution, jazz developed as an art form that was heavily shaped by its proponents' second-class citizenship, economic parasitism, and the accepted norms of what artistry truly meant. Amid the suppressive social conditions of a post-slavery culture in which Jim Crow reigned, quiet, underground resistance was the natural medium of expression, and "the music attempted to resolve at the level of style what the militancy fought out in the streets" (Gabbard 246). An alternative to physical confrontation, jazz provided an avenue through which an oppressed people could voice its social criticism, as well as reclaim, in a sense, the freedom of expression they had been stripped of. The fact that black musicians "were being exploited by white businessmen in the music industry, contributed to the creation of new music that, as [bop

trumpeter "Dizzy"] Gillespie says, 'reflect[ed] the way we felt' " (Panish 12). As Gillespie articulates, in no way could one separate the music from the cultural conditions from which it emerged. The two were intertwined, and the social realities had direct effects on the musical form itself, which evolved in the hands of real people who were subject to these same social challenges and obstacles. Jazz scholar Scott DeVeaux classifies the idea of "the artist working in isolation from… the outside world" as a "romantic myth," claiming that "a paradigm in jazz is not musical style," but a conglomeration of musical, social, and cultural aspects (DeVeaux 44-45). As DeVeaux indicates, the consideration of jazz as an art form is simultaneously the consideration of a host of social circumstances; to argue in the context of jazz is to comment on the set of societal influences that weighed in on its evolution. For instance, due to the closure of many dance halls during WWII, "large swing bands and orchestras broke up into more nimble small ensembles, among them the classic bebop quartet…" (Slawecki 2015). The resulting focus on the individual and shift from the monopolistic nature of large bands were core characteristics of the style itself, both of which emerged directly out of the economic circumstances of the period. Fundamentally, the social and musical aspects of jazz as an art form are one in the same, and any attempt to draw reasonable conclusions from either end requires recognition of their inherent entwinement.

As the precursor to bop, the Swing Era of the early 1930s through mid-1940s sparked the fire of rebellion with its conformity due to commercial pressures from a largely white audience. The music industry, with white bandleaders at the forefront, took the shape of whatever it was the public demanded, striving for profit rather than self-expression. As the music experienced aggressive appropriation, the "economics of the music industry changed, and jazz was increasingly dictated by popular tastes," (Sandke 154), becoming a "matter of endlessly repeated clichés"

(Berendt 16). Instead of allowing its innovators to freely pursue their musical aspirations, the recording industry and popular club venues repeatedly demanded the same crowd-pleasing content that had made a name for Swing as a genre, hoping to maximize revenue without taking any artistic risks. The monotonous nature of musical output in the jazz scene at the time emphasizes the attempts of the industry giants to squeeze every ounce of capital out of the musicians, without seeking to further the progress of the style as a whole. Despite black musicians' "attempts to broaden their audience and repertoire," they were "often rebuffed by recording executives who wanted them to remain faithful to their core fan base" (Sandke 154). Such restricting conditions discouraged African Americans from pursuing jazz altogether, and reduced the musician to a commercial tool, an object in the economic game ruled by white record producers and club owners. The "core fan base" that would offer the best chance at monetary success held the top priority of the majority of these white patrons, contextualizing the demand for a departure from the traditional, easily-marketable material of the Swing era.

The impacts of Swing reached further than the musicians, however, and as the scene became increasingly white, black consumers of jazz felt more and more the pressures of Jim Crow laws and an exclusive white-dominated musical culture. Among other injustices, the black musician "could not even invite his friends and family to watch him perform in many of the places where he played" (Collier 342) due to discriminatory practices exercised by most white-led jazz venues. As a result, "while the [52nd] Street probably featured more black than white musicians, its customers were almost uniformly white until the war years" (Sandke 153). In the face of such "whitewashing" in the popular jazz sphere, many black audience members were discouraged from continuing to support and engage with the music in a public setting. As African Americans

suffered from the maltreatment of exclusion from even seeing their relatives play, the need for a reestablishment of identity became immediate. Sponsors of the radio, which "had become the premier medium of mass entertainment," were "fearful of alienating southern audiences" and thus "only awarded contracts to the leading white bands" (Sandke 154). This blatant discrimination not only disadvantaged black musicians themselves, but also furthered the decline in African American consumption of jazz, as they had lost a group with whom to identify in the popular jazz scene. Since radio stations and club owners dictated public content, the increasingly white face of jazz pushed the majority of blacks in a different direction; they wanted something of their own, a new way of playing that could not be hijacked by a commercially-driven white power structure.

Having lost the right to self-expression in the sellout swing "industry," African Americans saw the seemingly unmarketable sounds of bop as a means by which to push back against the outright commercialization of popular jazz music, and establish the new style as an art form rather than a product. By the early 1940s, several innovative musicians, among them Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk, were independently experimenting with new sounds they hoped would bring an end to Swing's oppressive empire. Through the bebop revolution, "jazz took an irrevocable step. No longer would its complex and demanding virtuosity be offered, under false colors, to the public as a creature of the marketplace…" (DeVeaux 443). Such a transition signifies the shift from the perception of jazz music as a marketable product towards jazz as a medium of expression, to be appreciated in the arts context rather than the commercial one. In a 1966 article, tenor saxophonist Archie Shepp articulated the reality of black musicians struggling against commercial authoritarianism, saying that "jazz is the product of the whites… It is the progeny of the blacks… You own the music, and we make it" ("The New Jazz" Hentoff). Shepp's comment

expresses the attitudes of African American musicians towards their position as subordinate cogs in the machine of commercialized music, and reflects upon the social conditions that drove both bop and the later Civil Rights movement, from the perspective of a later generation of jazz musicians whose social agenda was drawn heavily from the aims of bebop's architects. In response to such a severe throttling of jazz artists, the proponents of bebop pushed in the opposite direction, using "the language of leftist political engagement to connect their music to a valorized counterculture, as well as to connect swing to a maligned--even fascist--mainstream…" (Solis 113-114). In distancing themselves from the mainstream, bop musicians expressed clearly that they *did not wish* to be incorporated into the popular sphere. In fact, they tried adamantly to create an *unmarketable* art form, in an effort to fully free themselves from the grasp of the white commercial domain. To do this, the bebop innovators harnessed the "uncompromising complexity of their art," using it as a force through which to declare "their creative independence from the marketplace" (DeVeaux 4). By reducing the commercial value of their creation, the beboppers simultaneously rejected the notions of jazz as a commercial device and forced listeners and producers alike to treat the music as art rather than entertainment. Their expression of self-sufficiency sent a strong message of autonomy, in an arena where musicians in a similar position had historically been helplessly dependent.

Reacting to the white co-optation of swing as a style and the constant commercial exploitation of black musicians, the architects of bebop created their own distinct mode of expression that was intentionally difficult to imitate, expanding their musical vocabulary into previously uncharted territory designed to steer bop away from the forces of appropriation that had taken advantage of Swing. As writer Amiri Baraka claimed, the founders fostered the " 'willfully

harsh, *anti-assimilationist* sound of bebop,' which at once reclaimed jazz from its brief cooptation by white 'swing' bandleaders…" (Gabbard 248). Since the driving force of Swing declared jazz a "white" art through forceful misappropriation and domination of the commercial sphere, bebop opened an avenue through which musicians could break free from the mold of swing music and therefore the oppressive industry that surrounded it. In asserting this divergence, bop musicians began to employ "unusual intervals and chords that swing musicians almost never explored such as the flatted fifth scale tone and altered ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords" ("Classic Bebop" Slawecki). They incorporated "freer use of uneven meters" such as five-four and experimented with "changes which arrangers believe would 'throw a curve' to older players" ("Bop: Skee, Re or Be…" Harman), as described in a 1948 news article on the emerging style. Such brash innovations spurred the panicked reaction to the new wave of jazz, though they allowed the musicians to elevate their music beyond the easily imitable clichés of Swing. In propagating such dramatic and startling changes to the musical form, the beboppers' message was clear: *If you want to take our music, you'll have to learn to play it first.* As renowned bebop pianist Thelonious Monk once said, "We are going to create something that they can't steal because they can't play it" (Gerard 23), highlighting the need felt by the bebop pioneers for a new and out-of-reach way of playing. In an era where a black-originated musical form had reached such heights of exploitation by whites, the idea of an inimitable medium of expression appeared extremely appealing to those who had witnessed their peers getting taken advantage of for years. Bebop musicians hoped to turn the tables and use their art to reclaim ownership of the style through a shift in musical structure that would beget what they hoped would be an escape from the relentless cooptation of the preceding era. This

reclaiming, however, would take place over the transformative careers of several unforgettable musicians.

A precursive figure to bebop who began his musical career in 1919, Louis Armstrong epitomized the black "entertainer" stereotype and was often at the mercy of the industry in which he operated, subject to commercial pressures and financial instability which led to a dynamic of servitude. Though his persona was one of the most well-known in his time, and he holds a place as one of the greatest musicians ever to contribute to the jazz scene, Armstrong's economic conditions and the limitations of the society in which he lived forced him into a position of subordinacy to the abusive industry. As a musician, and further, an African American, Armstrong found himself "being manipulated by the rival gangs that controlled many of the speakeasies where musicians worked" (Feather 15-16). As producer Leonard Feather expressed, Louis' "musical genius was, at the time, secondary to his role as a pawn in a sinister game he scarcely understood" (Feather 15-16). And so, the wishes of the artist (his musical aspirations) took a backseat to the whims of the white-dominated industry, who wanted merely an entertainer, someone they could limit to reassure themselves that blacks were incapable of performing at a serious artistic level. Once, when asked "Why don't you play *with* a band, not just in front of one?", Louis responded, "Man, you know I'd love it. I'm just doing what Mr. Glaser [Armstrong's white artistic manager] thinks is best for me. It's all strictly for the glory of the cash" (Feather 19). Clearly, Louis felt little to no freedom as far as artistic expression goes, and his entire public personality was determined by what would provide the greatest appeal to a largely white audience. Dizzy Gillespie later commented on Armstrong's demeanor, criticizing his "grinning in the face of white racism," and admitting that he "didn't want the white man to expect me to allow the same things Louis

Armstrong did" (Panish 13). This reaction fairly represents the general sentiment of those who considered themselves independent creators in the face of a belittling representation in the arts world, and captures the progression towards the greater artistic self-determination that was at the core of the emerging bebop style.

A pioneer of bebop, John Birks Gillespie's style signified a shift towards independent artistry, but his personality as Dizzy Gillespie played to the familiar stereotype of showmanship among black musicians. Gillespie, who became active in 1935 playing swing, could often be "observed dancing in the middle of someone else's turn in a stage show or putting on his metal trumpet derby [a mute shaped like a hat] and facing the backdrop instead of the audience" (Gitler 64), something Miles Davis would later do, but with a lack of comedic intent. With such eccentric behavior, at times the "general public was perhaps attracted more by all those accoutrements than by his musicianship" (Gitler 80). Through his amusing comportment, Gillespie clearly still had one foot in the Swing Era, and his ties to Armstrong's crowd-pleasing persona are evident. As Gitler suggests, much of Dizzy's virtuosity fell in the shadow of his onstage conduct, reflecting the same struggle of achieving true artistic recognition that Armstrong faced. However, Dizzy's situation did not perfectly mirror that of his charming Swing counterpart, revealed by his musical willingness to explore even at the expense of popularity. Gillespie's "use of flatted fifths had now become commonplace, although many fellow musicians still heard them as wrong notes" (Feather 153). Always willing to push the boundaries of jazz, even if it meant playing "wrong notes," the fearless creator behind the personality signified a departure from the standard conception of the black musician in that he was undaunted by the possibilities of experimentation. Once, while playing for Cab Calloway's big band, Dizzy "played a full chorus whose continuity and smooth flow of notes

was quite unlike anything normally expected in the swing era" (Feather 151-152). Such a lack of hesitation to experiment asserts Gillespie as a figure ahead of his time, always pushing the music's frontier and distancing himself from the norm. He did not shy away from forging his own style even in the midst of traditionalists, striving to defy what was "normally expected" and instead pursue his own ambitions, and affirming his role in the shift away from dependency among black musicians.

Continuing the transition to a greater freedom from categorization, late-bop trumpeter Miles Davis, who first emerged in 1944, cultivated a stubbornness and spirit of rebellion which fully embodied the reimagining of the black artist's role as a self-driven, self-sufficient creator. Davis' self-made financial stability also exemplifies the progression towards full independence; he once remarked, "I'm going to retire. I've got $1,000 a week coming in now so I don't have to work. And I've been playing for 22 years--a long time" (Alkyer 12). Such a degree of economic security puts Davis on the complete opposite end of the spectrum from Armstrong's dependence on his producers. This dramatic contrast represents perfectly the development of the black musician from a status of financial vulnerability to one of greater establishment, from commercial exploitation towards the freedom to express oneself artistically. But perhaps even more emblematic of the shift is Miles' attitude of nonchalance and indifference. Upon finishing a set, he "turns his back on the applauders, tilts his head and shakes it while he works an index finger inside an ear… Then, he walks slowly offstage" ("Miles Davis, Jazz Legend…" Wyatt & Leogrande). Davis' physical turning away from the crowd categorizes their approval as meaningless to him, an emphatic show of independence. His refusal to cater to the audience and expend himself for their pleasure provides a stark contrast with the Armstrong figures of Swing, and demonstrates how

thoroughly the politics of bop had been ingrained in later musicians who had experienced the revolution firsthand. When asked about his lack of showmanship, Miles responded, "Do doctors bow to their patients?" ("Miles Davis, Jazz Legend…" Wyatt & Leogrande). This cool demeanor so heavily embodied by Davis reflects the broader population of bebop musicians, in that their behavior encoded a message of separation from the stereotype of the historically dependent black performer. Bop musicians were "unnervingly cool," with "studied nonchalance" (DeVeaux 398), and their comportment acted as a "deliberate attempt to avoid playing the role of flamboyant black entertainer, which whites had come to expect" (Collier 360). Their refusal to comply with the norms of the industry makes clear why the title of "revolution" fits so aptly with the movement of bebop. Through such onstage behavior, the beboppers were able to distance themselves from the existing perceptions of blacks in the music industry, and establish that their role was one not of service towards an all-white audience, but of autonomy, and unrestrained artistic innovation.

Through the reactions of the public, bebop revealed itself as a revolution in many senses, yet it also secured a place in the recurring history of musical evolution, eventually falling victim to the very social traps it sought to evade. In a 1949 New York Times article entitled "Bebop Doesn't Make Child Musical Moron," parents are encouraged not to fear the "discordant wail of the latest bebop record," but to allow their children to study music such that, one day, they might appreciate "more recognizable and bearable forms" ("Bebop Doesn't Make Child…", *NY Times*). Such branding of the new style as immature or unmusical was the general reaction of the swing-enthused public at bebop's inception, the modern music being seen as rebellious and dangerous. Its proponents made no attempt to appease white culture, or "stay in their place" as entertainers, and thus the style served to make the broader white public uncomfortable. In further media, *Time*

magazine branded bebop " 'hot jazz overheated, with overdone lyrics full of bawdiness, references to narcotics and doubletalk,' " and "Los Angeles radio station KMPC indignantly banned all bebop from its airwaves" (DeVeaux 398). This panicked and critical reception of the music reveals its inherent rejection of the mainstream, to the extent that some media stations would go so far as to censor the style entirely. Through such resistance in the popular sphere, bebop began to reflect the cultural histories of its predecessors, from swing to the very origins of jazz as an art form. This same pattern of rebellious evolution, followed by rejection, and ultimately acceptance and appropriation puts bebop in the context of a set of recurrent historical circumstances and, in fact, makes its narrative seem all the more predictable. In this sense, bop was simply another revolution around the wheel of musical evolution.

The wave of 1950s appropriation known as the Beat movement was perhaps the greatest indicator of bebop's place in this recurring phenomenon, where self-proclaimed "hipsters," or "beatniks" borrowed mannerisms heavily from African American culture. The movement was framed by writer Norman Mailer's description of the beatnik's unique position as a "White Negro" (the title of his 1957 essay regarding the subject). The generation of youth Mailer described "looked to blackness--with bebop being perhaps its quintessential repository-- for the sensuality and emotion they found lacking in white, dominant culture" (McMichael 94). Despite the tireless efforts of its founders to resist the long arm of appropriation, bebop was at last losing its separation from white culture, and thus losing its status as an art form that could provide a definitive identity for black listeners and practitioners. In fact, the way in which the style was "received and mimed by many white listeners often reproduced the very kinds of oppressive relationships Parker and other black musicians of his generation hoped to shed: the

minstrelsy-based focus on the black male body as both a threat and a panacea" (McMichael 87). Even though bebop manifested as a revolution, the "oppressive relationships" of the swing era and the minstrel shows before that had persisted and thereby rendered bebop a failed attempt to prevent another cultural fatality due to white co-optation. In the sense of historical repetition, the emergence of the beatniks acted as the final step in bebop's evolution, completing the full circle of rebellion through appropriation, and replaying the same developments that had occurred with the Swing era just before.

However, it would be unfair to simply reduce bop to the reiteration of a predictable sociocultural pattern. To an extent, that is, the music's complexity and idiosyncrasy did allow it to succeed in certain respects in the fight against appropriation. Without careful study of bebop's legends, one could not truly master the style, nor could one simply "get by" reading arrangements as was possible with Swing. In this respect, the movement had created something new: a notion of independence enforced by a musical structure. Bebop was no attempt to capture a market; it was no attempt to charm the masses. Ultimately, its ideology arose from a willingness to contradict the public's understanding of jazz music, and in doing so, their understanding of the African American race. In many ways, "bebop redefined the tradition, indeed made it possible to keep playing jazz in the face of given musical and social facts without losing self-respect" (Gabbard 248). Pushing the extent to which a broader sociocultural statement could be made through the power of artistry, bebop's emergence may have replayed the all-too-familiar social panic associated with progress. However, its lasting effects extended far beyond the generation it enthralled, and served as the inception of the paradigm we know today as modern jazz. While the social, economic, and cultural revolution posed by the birth of bebop fit predictably with the cyclic history of musical evolution,

its innovations on the musical form itself asserted a departure from this phenomenon, breaking the mold and blazing a new trail in the realm of both African American artistic expression and jazz itself.

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