

Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II

Volume 24

Article 14

2019

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Recommended Citation

Claridad, Jonathan (2019) "Leaders and Players: The Role of Jazz Artists as Civil Rights Activists," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 24 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol24/iss1/14>

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Leaders and Players: The Role of Jazz Artists as Civil Rights Activists

Jonathan Claridad

The 1960s was a time for massive cultural movement, and a notable aspect of this period was the relationship between music and the political voices of the time. One such relationship was in part due to the tensions over civil rights rising to a head, bridging the political desires of African Americans to much of the music produced at the time, particularly in jazz. Even beyond simple civil rights advocacy, the music and writings of jazz artists were voices of challenge to much of the status quo. From Max Roach's condemnation of America's checkered past to Nina Simone's reclamation of both black and female artisanship, jazz musicians were at the forefront of expressing the suffering and the injustice that permeated the lives of African Americans. This deliberate expression of the cultural voice and grievances, as well as the inspirational examples they set with their lives, qualifies many of the jazz artists of the 1960s and 1970s as activist leaders.

The history of African American protest through artistic expression is important for contextualizing the specific calls to action of the 1960s that jazz artists made. Dating back to the days of slavery in the United States, music has been an incredibly important outlet of expression for African Americans. According to Santa Clara University Professor Reed, enslaved Africans in eighteenth century New Orleans would congregate in Congo Square, often called the "birthplace of jazz," on Sundays, despite constant threat, to sing, dance, and play music, taking solace in their one day of respite from lives of labor.¹ Such congregation is especially moving considering that many of these participants did not speak the same language, and had to rely on music and creative

¹ Joshua Reed, "Intro to Listening: Jazz," Lecture, Santa Clara University, 2017.

intent to connect with each other. This inciting moment in jazz history is also indicative of the style's particular relationship to protest, which would continue with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, an explosion of African American arts.² Much of the poetry, writing, and music produced in this era was very critical of how Americans had treated African Americans thus far, inspiring similarly critical African spirituals years later, such as Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," which provided commentary on the practice of lynchings in the South, and Paul Robeson's "Go Down Moses," which drew parallels between African slaves and the Hebrew Exodus. This explosion of politicized art brought the injustice dealt to African Americans into the limelight and was the impetus of the civil rights movement of the early 1960s. Additionally, the growing voice of discontent within the African American community received greater volume through the cultural microphone that is music.

Jazz artists served as gateways into the often-unheard thoughts and feelings of African Americans. A common message that jazz and blues musicians that promulgated during the 1960s was the lingering ramifications of institutionalized slavery in the United States. One piece that speaks to this theme is jazz/folk singer Nina Simone's song, "I Wish I Knew How it Would Feel to be Free." The piece contains lines full of a depressive longing, such as: "I wish you could know / What it means to be me / Then you'd see and agree / That every man should be free."³ Simone here is recounting how impossible a standard "freedom" is for African Americans within the current American society, and the suffering due to how far from realization that ideal is. She laments the lack of recognition for what should be an obvious blemish, and the "wishes" she makes seem to come from a place of defeatism. This remorse filled folk song is not an uplifting message, but more importantly it speaks to a greater issue of discontent in the black

² Reed, "Intro to Listening: Jazz," 2017.

³ Nina Simone, "I Wish I Knew How it Would Feel to be Free," Track 6 on *Silk and Soul*, RCA Victor, 1967, Record.

community and serves as a plea for awareness. This music carries a powerful sentiment, but more importantly, “their salience lies in the transmission of a more muddled, profound, and often unheard tension over how slavery—and the struggle against its continuance—is articulated and remembered.”⁴ The vocalization of such difficult yet prevalent emotions and experiences is an important step to cultural healing. Public awareness and opinion is a key motivator to cultural change, as we see with the success of Martin Luther King’s nonviolent approach that generated public sympathy in the face of violent opposition. For some artists, however, a quiet and spiritual approach like this is too passive.

The jazz of the 1960s also often served as more dramatic calls to action, and some works by jazz artists approached the subject of slavery with a far more aggressive tone. Bebop pioneer and drummer Max Roach collaborated with lyricist Oscar Brown to produce the *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, a gripping album filled with allusions to the oppression of African Americans in U.S. history. The lyrics of this album, such as that of the track “Driva Man,” point to strong emotions and realities: “Driva’ man de kind of boss/ Ride a man and lead a horse.”⁵ In this example we see Oscar Brown draw a parallel between the lives of African Americans to those of beasts of burden. “Driva’ Man” is the kind of song that makes listeners uncomfortable with its powerful message, and the way the words are accented with the striking of an anvil evokes such strong imagery of Southern chain gangs. The intense unease and malcontent of this album is made even more tangible with an image from the Greensboro Diner sit ins being featured on the cover. The association of the horrible realities of slave practices in the U.S. with specific and current discrimination was a powerful statement that undercuts the very notion of freedom in America. By approaching this difficult content with the

⁴ Bridget R. Cooks and Graham Eng-Wilmot, “Sound of the Break: Jazz and the Failures of Emancipation,” *American Quarterly*, 68, No. 2, June 2016: 315-340.

⁵ Max Roach, “Driva Man,” Track 1 on *We Insist: Freedom Now Suite*, Candid, 1960, Record.

music of his own band, thrusting the consequences of slavery even further into the public limelight, Max Roach served as a cultural guide. Stimulating important discussions in the public sphere is an important aspect of public leaders.

In addition to this potent discussion, jazz leaders guided Americans in the preservation of American history. Another track from *We Insist!*, “Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace,” delves even further into the suffocating discontent, taking the listener through a cascade of emotions.⁶ It opens with a singer improvising a melancholic melody, accompanied by a somber drum procession. Then the energy swells, as vocalist Abbey Lincoln wails over an explosive drum solo, a cacophony of rage and distress that builds and builds before dropping back off into the quiet melody, but now with an air of exhaustion, before Lincoln resigns into silence. The tension that this emotional experience generates is palpable. The amount of anger that fuels this song, and truly this entire album, is gut wrenching, as it reinvigorates a large amount of the pains that African Americans endured. By making present such buried suffering, Roach and Brown present the issue of slavery as one that both literally and figuratively harms the well-being of African Americans in the present, doing so in a way that is hard to ignore. This gripping memory of an unjust history forces Americans to confront the lingering consequences of racism that remain. In many ways, Roach’s *Freedom Suite* serves to simultaneously commemorate this struggle, as well as urge Americans to resolve it. The employment of music to recognize and comment on events also applied to several current events of the tumultuous 1960s.

An important aspect of leadership is the guidance of communities through particularly tough times. On September 15th, 1963, a small Baptist church in Birmingham Alabama was bombed by White supremacists, killing four innocent girls. This horrific event rocked the nation, and several cultural icons, including jazz

⁶ Max Roach, “Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace,” Track 3 on *We Insist: Freedom Now Suite*, Candid, 1960, Record.

musicians, responded to it in hopes of helping the country heal and preventing any similar tragedy in the future. Nina Simone and John Coltrane both wrote songs in response to this horrible event, but with very different approaches. Coltrane employed a subtle but striking title and mood in “Alabama,” and Simone with an aggressive and angry verbal denunciation in “Mississippi Goddam.” These differing approaches represent some of the different ways that jazz artists decided to lead and engage with their communities during the 1960s.

Nina Simone’s response to the Alabama church bombings was a call to arms in a similar vein to Roach’s *Freedom Suite*, but more contextualized to current events. “Mississippi Goddam,” attacks racial inequality in a much sterner tone than “I Wish I Knew How it Would Feel to be Free,” in part due to Simone’s, and the nation’s, visceral reaction to the church bombings. Simone refers to the song as a showtune and juxtaposes an energetic and rollicking shuffle with the emotionally charged lyrics that decry the nation for allowing racism to continue to exist in such bold form. Simone even ties in commentary about the state of faith in the country, with lines such as “Lord have mercy on this land of mine / We all gonna get it in due time / I don't belong here / I don't belong there / I've even stopped believing in prayer.”⁷ Simone demonstrates a feeling of her prayer lacking efficacy, feelings shared by much of the nation. Simone addressed these feelings with lines that speak to not only African Americans, but also to the many Christian communities that felt such horrific events were potentially faith shaking. Simone also demonizes and condemns the actions of the extremists with a righteous indignation, which simultaneously reflects poorly on even moderate forms of racial oppression. By appealing to Christian values, Simone reached out beyond the African American community with a plea of morality. As such, “Mississippi Goddam” is a rallying call to the entire

⁷ Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddam,” Track 7 on *Nina Simone in Concert*, Philips Records 1964, Record.

nation, born out of utter exasperation, in hopes that a collective national conscience will prevent future tragedies.

Saxophonist John Coltrane's "Alabama" is a much more somber approach to dealing with the events of the Birmingham church bombings.⁸ Coltrane was a very reflective man and musician, and by the early 1960s, he, "like countless other artists, had become increasingly aware of and influenced by the ugly racial wars being waged on the nation's streets. His music was a powerful medium that allowed him to express his anger, fear and, in 'Alabama,' his abject sadness."⁹ "Alabama" opens with a dark tone, like that of a funeral. A lonely saxophone played by the stoic Coltrane floats around, accompanied by McCoy Tyner on a foreboding piano that rumbles in the lower register, calling to mind images of death and despair, paying homage to both the little girls lost in Birmingham, as well as the great sense of loss that Americans felt in this time of suffering. The song then opens up into a slow, blues inspired groove, where Coltrane's tone is synonymous with grief. Where Simone called the nation to act against the circumstances that bred such tragedies, Coltrane called the people to really reflect on the lives lost. The distinction is important, as it reflects that the nation was not entirely up in arms over Birmingham, and Coltrane responded to many people's desire for consolation. The piece swells at the end, calling to mind images of funeral criers, before settling on a blue note of acceptance. This public grieving that Coltrane led was one of the ways in which he operated as a public figure that could guide his community.

Despite the disparate messages that Coltrane and Simone sent regarding the bombing in Birmingham, they achieve similar goals within the context of activism. When comparing "Mississippi Godam" and "Alabama," as well as *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, one historian notes that "on a casual listen they could not sound

⁸ John Coltrane, "Alabama," Track 4 on *Live at the Birdland*, Impulse A-50, 1964, Record.

⁹ Kevin Canfield "Keeping the Memory Alive; Coltrane's 'Alabama' Mourns Church Bombing Victims," *The Hartford Courant*, May 20, 2000.

more different, yet there is a continuous undercurrent of suffering and irrepressible grace that courses through this set of music.”¹⁰ These particular artists reveal the tensions that permeated American culture, and their work expresses the unheard voices of the time. Both of the pieces that commented on the Alabama bombing were performed on national television, allowing for widespread acknowledgement of the strong emotions felt by African Americans, as well as demonstrating the jazz community’s dedication to that goal of expression. This ability to realize and share the feelings of many is a key criterion of leadership, and it is often demonstrated by jazz artists of the 1960s who went out of their way to express the concerns of those who often lacked the platform to share their thoughts.

Many jazz players were community leaders by the virtue of their status as cultural icons. John Coltrane, for example, is a prolific name in jazz history whose influence extended much further beyond the music that he played. With his progressive musical endeavors, such as his innovations in Modal Jazz, and even with some of his writing and poetry, “Coltrane helped establish the template for the artistic aspirations of countless African American creative artists during the later civil rights and Black Power eras.”¹¹ There is no doubt that “Trane” is remembered for his mastery of his craft. However, even more than an artist, Coltrane served as an ideal that so many, both within and outside of the jazz community aspired to resemble. Beyond his pushing of the artistic envelope, John Coltrane was, as his friend and former band leader Miles Davis called him, “a spiritual kind of person.”¹² This spirituality, this desire to create with an almost religious purpose, permeates all of Coltrane’s work, and causes the art that he produced to resonate with so many people. Despite his

¹⁰ Cooks and Eng-Wilmot, “Sound of the Break: Jazz and the Failures of Emancipation,” 2016.

¹¹ Aaron Yale Heisler, “John Coltrane’s Pursuit of Elegance,” *African American Review* 48, No.4 (Winter 2015), 393-413.

¹² Canfield, “Keeping the Memory Alive.”

relatively short life, (an unfortunate trend of the time for both civil rights leaders and jazz musicians), Coltrane is often venerated as an activist due to this deep connection with and demonstration of his spirituality. His participation and prevalence in African American culture and voice were such that “by the time of his death in 1967, John Coltrane’s status as an icon of the civil rights era, and of the burgeoning Black Arts Movement, was already secure.”¹³ Coltrane achieved an almost monolithic importance due to the depth and authenticity of his work, and his work demonstrated an immense concern for justice. This concern of his trickles down to the artists who look up to him, whom we can loosely refer to as his followers, fostering a community similarly focused on justice. Not all artists, however, would be similarly recognized for their marks on the history of efforts pursuing American equality.

Nina Simone is also a figure in history that led people during the 60s with the way in which she lived. In stark contrast to Coltrane’s immense recognition as a participant of the Civil Rights movement, many historians, both of African American history and of jazz, overlook Nina Simone’s contributions to the fight against inequality, beyond her writing of critical pieces like “Mississippi Godam.” However, Simone, born Eunice Kathleen Waymon, lived a life that opposed so many preconceived notions about artisanship, such that she “matters not necessarily because she definitely caused a specific number of fans to change their behavior, but because the perspectives on black freedom and gender that she among others articulated circulated as widely as they did in the early 1960s.”¹⁴ Simone challenged several stereotypes with her career, such as those surrounding black jazz artists and female performers, and her efforts served to both undo

¹³ Yale Heisler, “John Coltrane’s Pursuit of Elegance.”

¹⁴ Ruth Feldstein, “‘I Don’t Trust You Anymore’: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s,” *Journal of American History* 91, No. 4 (March 2005), 1349-1379.

these prejudiced norms, as well as to inspire artists that followed her to not fall into those same trappings.

In early jazz history, there was this notion that jazz music was essentially an uneducated craft, undercutting the merit of many black performers. Some detractors even referred to many of the jazz greats as “naturals.”¹⁵ For example, this attitude of the inherent skill and musical aptitude of African American artists was sometimes applied to Charlie Parker by “high brow” critics, despite Parker’s obsession with extremely rigorous practice habits and his kickstarting of Bebop, a definitive era of jazz music. Another example of this condescending attitude toward jazz musicians is Billie Holiday, who was described as emotionally evocative yet “unrefined.”¹⁶ This characterization of black jazz artists as “naturally gifted” is deeply rooted in a history of prejudice, attempting to explain away the accomplishments of African Americans and maintain the superiority complex of the white majority.

Many artists were similarly looked down upon by a society that held this blatant prejudice. Nina Simone, however, was a classically trained pianist who studied at Julliard, flying in the face of such detractors.¹⁷ Since there is no question of how “refined” she was, Nina Simone serves as a prime example of the polar opposite of common stereotypes of black performers. Simone also challenged many conceptions of female jazz entertainers of the time, who were often looked down upon by their male peers, as she was both an accredited band leader and songwriter. Due to her classical upbringing and high popularity, Simone “straddled the worlds of high art and mass culture, of so-called authentic blackness and a universal genius that transcended race and gender.”¹⁸ Nina Simone reclaimed the meanings of the words “black” and “female” with the way that she defied cultural norms

¹⁵ Reed, “Intro to Listening: Jazz,” 2017.

¹⁶ Reed, “Intro to Listening: Jazz,” 2017.

¹⁷ Ruth Feldstein, “I Don't Trust You Anymore.”

¹⁸ Ruth Feldstein, “I Don't Trust You Anymore.”

and exploded into mass popularity. She was an artist that pushed boundaries not just with the work that she did, but with the life that she lived. That willingness to lead the way into a reevaluation of cultural norms is an essential and defining characteristic of civil rights leaders

Of course, even with their inspiring lives and politically salient work, not all of these entertainers were intentionally avid activists and protestors. Despite her involvement in the highly political piece, *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, vocalist Abbey Lincoln did not personally view herself as an activist. When interviewed recently about activism being a priority in her career, Lincoln stated that "It never really was, darling. I sang the 'Freedom Now Suite' with Max Roach, and I wore my hair natural when it wasn't popular. I was a glamour queen. I never was a freedom fighter."¹⁹ Just because Abbey Lincoln was an African American that definitely contributed to the civil rights movement, she did not define herself by her activism. However, while we should not rush to conclude that these artists that produced politically powerful works were all "activists" in a strict sense, I argue that it is important to recognize that the importance of some artistic works is not the political intent of the creators, but the way in which the creators demonstrate and guide a cultural mood. Abbey Lincoln may not have been an activist, but she did lead the African American community with her actions, just like Simone and Coltrane, in the way that she fostered a public voice against inequality.

When people think of civil rights leaders from the 1960s, many think of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, conjuring images of long philosophical speeches and figures leading protests in the streets. However, leadership and activism extend beyond these obvious examples of protest and limiting our discussion of activism to them also limits the way in which we view our own

¹⁹ Michael Miller, "They Call it Jazz, A-Razz-A-Matazz," *The State (Columbia, SC)*, May 25, 2003, E3.

efficacy. Many of the jazz artists of the 1960s were shining examples of activist leadership, in the way that they took to the forefront of the public view as public figures and guides, steering cultural discussion and change. This characterization of jazz musicians and singers as civil rights activists is an important concept, because it strengthens the idea that seemingly innocuous, but very human, actions such as creative endeavors hold great power within our multifaceted society.