

Seeing Jazz in Color: how musical struggle allows the art of jazz to persevere

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The stage should be dark.

The concert should be in a hall glowing with blue lights and oak-colored walls. The room should be bustling with hushed conversations and shoulders touching shoulders.

But it's empty.

Instead, the outdoor amphitheater of the Gogue Performing Arts Center is lit by the orange and pink rays of the Auburn, Alabama sunset. If it would have rained, the concert would have been cancelled. Because of COVID-19 precautions, the indoor auditorium was restricted. Large concerts had to take place outside to allow the audience to attend without danger of catching COVID-19.

Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra walk on to the stage, solo by solo, and for an untrained ear, the first several seconds of their jazz music seems like it had no rhythm or bars of time.

However, the jazz ensemble is playing the most intense rhythmic improvisations in music: swing jazz.

The music looks like Louisiana; the pale greens of the scales in the key of A, the coral pinks of the crescendos, the beach wave blues of the smooth jazz phrases, and the train tracks of old New Orleans when the dissonant notes are leaned into.

White, black, white, black, white, white, black, white, black, white, black, white, all over again seven times. Eighty-eight keys on a piano each unlock different colors of sound. In jazz music, the black keys are the keys that are used to paint the complex image of its history.

“My father used to say there is no such thing as keys. If you're a piano player, all your notes are the same,” Marsalis said.

Keys are for technical piano players; listening is for the jazz musicians.

Looking, turning, walking, moving, swaying, bobbing, closing eyes, opening them again. The seven members of the jazz septet have a respect for each other that could be seen, heard, and felt. The musicians were communicating with each other, and music was their language.

That night, the outdoor auditorium was presenting a drama, a romance, a comedy, and a thriller in just one act: a jazz performance. If the songs that were played were written in English instead of improvised in music, the book would be too heavy to carry.

And carried it was.

The history of jazz is a heavy one, but one that is essential to understanding the craft. Born between the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement, jazz music came from discrimination and racial struggle.

“I think we do a disservice to ourselves and the music if we don’t acknowledge all that has played an important role in developing this music. A lot of it is the struggle for civil rights,” Dr. Dave Camwell, professor of jazz studies at Troy University, said.

Though there was cultural variety during the end of the 1800s, New Orleans [lacked segregated slums](#) like the rest of the country fostered, allowing for streets that had offered a unique mixing pot of musical style and culture.

At the end of the 18th century, people of African descent, still clinging to the rich culture of their native land, consisted of over half of the population in New Orleans. This African culture mixed and melted into the pot of French and Catholic Europeans as well as Latinos in the area.

James K. Zimmerman, Senior Program Producer at the National Museum of African American History, [said that jazz comes from the African American community experience](#), much of which is based on the black church.

The ‘call and response’ component of African American praise and worship is revealed in jazz music; a trumpet player will play a statement solo, while a saxophone player will return with a response statement solo.

“It’s a musical conversation,” Zimmermann said.

The harmony between the Black Americans’ native rhythms of blues, spirituals, and dances with the brass instruments of the Cajun Creoles created the prototype of jazz at the turn of the 20th century. This flowering blossom of a prototype was sprung from a garden whose soil was poisoned with the stories and the sufferings of slavery.

The 13th amendment was passed in 1830 and was the result of the Civil War. This amendment legally freed all slaves in the United States, leaving souls who identified as slaves lost and searching for what it means to live free. Though free from slavery, African Americans’ calloused hands were soon to be tied at their backs once more by the bonds of Jim Crow laws in the 1890s.

In the fight for Civil Rights in the 1960s, jazz was used as Black American’s demand for freedom. It was used to protest. Max Roach’s ‘Freedom Now Suite’ was a 40-minute-long demand for racial equality through jazz. After having a difficult time finding an apartment in New York because of the color of his skin, Roach encourages us all to ‘do better’, as Marsalis describes before playing the first movement at his concert in Auburn.

“The album stands as an early musical testament to the burgeoning rage, anger and passion that would take the Civil Rights Movement from its early victory in Montgomery in 1955 into a future that would dramatically alter race relations in the United States,” Mark Anthony Neal of the North Carolina Arts [wrote in his story](#).

The question that America faces today is this: have we ignored the essential roots of our authentic classical music?

Will Scarpa is a student studying to be a mechanical engineer at Auburn University, but jazz music is what challenges him. The lack of overlap between the two worries him because music drives him, but engineering is where his career is headed toward. Nonetheless, he doesn’t see his life going somewhere where music isn’t.

“As you are playing you get dissatisfied with what is out there, so you reach for more abstract forms of music. Which is jazz,” Scarpa said.

For Scarpa, nothing is as fulfilling as jazz music.

Learning note names and reading music wasn't how Scarpa first found jazz. He became a jazz musician on his guitar through hearing, improvising, and responding. A trumpet weaves in, weaves out, a piano weaves in, weaves out, and his guitar will weave in, weave out. The challenge in the weaving is what Scarpa craves.

"It's a blank template on which you can express your emotions through music," Scarpa said.

But as Scarpa brought his passion for jazz to the collegiate level of academia, he began to learn to read notes on ledger lines and read music notes on a page. His eyes were also opened to the beginning of the birth of jazz.

"Originally formed by African Americans who couldn't afford instruments or get together in groups, these musicians didn't have any formal education of what musical notes are or what they were playing. They were getting together to improvise as they could," Scarpa said.

And for the racial struggle that is hidden in jazz music's undertones, Scarpa believes jazz music's history isn't known by many of the art form's current musicians.

"I don't think that many people think about the history itself, but I think the history is brought out today in rap and in other ways," Scarpa said.

Ways such as poetry, investigation, and faces that represent an important body.

Modern jazz has a face. Arguably, this face is that of jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis.

And, because music is 'the art of the invisible', as Marsalis describes, the musician includes his own thoughts and dreams and aspirations into the improvisation.

An internationally recognized name, Marsalis is a musician of all kinds: a soloist, composer, orchestra member, bandleader, and mentor. He is also son to the patriarch of the ['first family of jazz'](#), Ellis Marsalis Junior, a jazz pianist who raised his six children in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Ellis made the black and white keys sing with small jazz band in The Big Easy, where they played modern jazz, not typical for Louisiana at the time. '1960s John Coltrane jazz' was the style his band played, as Wynton recalls.

"They struggled; there was never a lot of audience for them, but they had a belief in music," Wynton said.

For his father, playing Black American music during the Civil Rights movement wasn't for much cause. Ellis Marsalis Jr. was a 'universal humanist,' and he didn't believe in the 'sides' of skin color.

But Wynton and his siblings were interested in sides.

"White versus black," as Wynton explained.

As a Black kid in the 1970s, Wynton and his siblings listened to Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, and 'soul train'. Meanwhile, white folks indulged in 'Sweet Home Alabama' by Lynyrd Skynyrd and other southern rock music.

Marsalis first put his hands on a trumpet at age six but began studying the instrument at age 12. Through his high school studies of trumpet, Marsalis was blind to the rich, struggle-saturated roots of the jazz music that he was beginning to fall in love with.

"You have to want to know something to learn it," Marsalis said. And the desire was lacking indeed.

But, even if Marsalis knew the history of jazz in his early years, that wouldn't have been sufficient; the point of jazz history isn't to know it. It's to play it.

It's to play the cries that the ancestors of jazz music wailed in the late 1800s amid their enslavement. It's to play the mingling of African and European culture with acknowledgement of both. It's to leave your tongue through the end of the bell protesting with Max Roach and his jazz band during the Civil Rights movement. Jazz history is knowing what emotions were felt and the events that caused them, and then to pour your soul into being there with those who lived jazz.

Marsalis describes the struggle represented in jazz as having the simplicity of the Bible, the simplicity of the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. It seems as simple as it sounds,

but it's complex because nobody wants to do unto others that you do unto yourself. You want to be first; I want to be first. But Marsalis doesn't associate selfishness with a skin color.

Marsalis teaches his students the value of respecting others through the way he acts. As the students see how he interacts with his colleagues, talking and philosophizing isn't as necessary.

"The philosophy is in the way we behave," Marsalis said.

Marsalis' goal for his students is to show them the 'sense of the human' - to envision a future where America isn't controlled by AI and robots. A belief in collective humanity.

From the surface, it's impossible to see a connection between a belief in human connectivity and a world-class jazz education. But, Marsalis takes his students into the depths of music history and theory to see this connection.

His world of knowledge is shaped by jazz music's three fundamentals; improvisation, giving confidence in the moment; swing, which is working with and listening to others; blues, which gives optimism that isn't naïve and doesn't need the obligatory happy ending.

Before COVID-19, Marsalis played 200 concerts each year for 40 years. After experiencing a year of concert-less quarantine, performing means more to Marsalis and other jazz musicians.

"I was always thankful to play for an audience because I saw my father play for nobody. I never took audience participation for granted, but now, it's meaningful," Marsalis said.

Looking at 2020, the year of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter tweets, Marsalis sees a belief in Americans' eyes that we can solve the centuries-old problem of racism by daily engagement and the Cliffs Notes version of the history of mankind. The problem with this belief, as Marsalis describes, is that racism isn't a Cliffs Notes issue; it's not one that can be solved by a flicker of angry and trendy emotion.

Music, too, has been popularized. It's been lessened, cheapened, and mass-produced. Yet, it's not a black or white issue, as Marsalis explains.

“We are Americans; it’s what we do. We try to figure out how to make things as cheaply as possible and make as much money from it as we can,” Marsalis said.

The root of the cheapening stems from how Americans come to music now-a-days: for its entertainment. The ideal pair of driving musical factors are entertainment and enrichment; one without the other leaves a culture robbing itself of the value of music.

Having the balance of entertainment and enrichment draws jazz musicians like Marsalis to feel the need to play music. They are compelled to play; they aren’t satisfied without it. It’s a search and hunger for the rich food of jazz.

“Music is always fighting for human freedoms,” Marsalis said.

Jazz is a sparkling sea of what a musician wants it to be. Many have gotten joyfully lost in its gracious waters; none have made it to the seafloor. Some wonder if its seafloor exists.

“There is a depth that allows you to grow older playing jazz and you never feel like you have done everything- there is always more to do,” Marsalis said.