

The Power In Our Music

“As I began to get into the history of the music, I found that this was impossible without, at the same time, getting deeper into the history of the people. That it was the history of the Afro-American people as text, as tale, as story, as exposition, narrative...that the music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection of Afro-American life, our words, the libretto, to those actual, lived lives. That the music was an orchestrated, vocalized, hummed, chanted, blown, beaten, scatted, corollary confirmation of the history... That the music was explaining the history as the history was explaining the music. And that both were expressions of and reflections of the people!” – Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*

This quote from Amiri Baraka’s seminal work entitled *Blues People* capsulizes the significance of African/Black music in the history, the culture, the lives of our people. Historical evidence indicates that music has played an integral role in the culture of African people, going all the way back to ancient Egypt (Kemet) (5,000-plus years ago) and up to the present, including every era in between. Music has always been a sacred component of African/Black people’s spiritual/religious expressions, rituals and ceremonies; music has always been an important vehicle for transmitting messages of encouragement and motivation for productive work; music has been a poignant vehicle for expressing the conditions of injustice in which people were living and the desire for those conditions to change; and music has been a vehicle for expressions of celebration of accomplishments in life, and for celebrating the beauty and joy in life itself.

Let’s focus here on the music of the past century, and its significance in relation to the conditions in which African/Black people have lived and the efforts to survive, address and improve those conditions. In the first half of the past century, “jazz” was the dominant musical form. Created by African/Black people in America, jazz had various manifestations that delivered varying messages. Jazz music became the dominant music in America, and the root of other American musical forms. Jazz was also a tool for Black people to express some of their inherent soulfulness, talent, creativity, pain, joy, passion, wit, humor, spirituality, social consciousness, colorfulness, expressiveness, and revolutionary spirit.

In the first half of the 1900s, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, two great jazz music pioneers, produced beautiful, cultured, complex, high-quality music that commanded respect and admiration, from Black folks and many White folks who were honest enough to acknowledge it. As Baraka states, “Armstrong was not rebelling against anything with his music. In fact, his music was one of the most beautiful refinements of

the Afro-American musical tradition.” Baraka continues, “Armstrong...played jazz that was securely within the traditions of Afro-American music. His tone was brassy, broad, and aggressively dramatic. He also relied heavily on the vocal blues tradition in his playing to amplify the expressiveness of his instrumental technique.” Regarding Ellington, Baraka states, “the music he came to make was as moving in terms of the older Afro-American musical tradition as it was a completely American expression. Duke’s sophistication was to a great extent the very quality that enabled him to integrate so perfectly the older blues traditions with...big-band music.” So in summary, even though their music was certainly not overtly rebellious, the music of Armstrong and Ellington and other pioneering Black musicians of that era was revolutionary in that, at a time when African/Black people in America were still subject to being treated as less than full citizens (based on a mentality in the dominant White society that often viewed them as less than fully human), they made music that had a profound impact on the American cultural landscape and commanded respect as being advanced and sophisticated expressions emanating from the very people who America sought to continue to devalue.

As jazz progressed into the be-bop era (1940s) and beyond, musicians such as Charlie Parker, Dizzie Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Art Ensemble of Chicago, Sun Ra, and numerous others made music—great, innovative music!—that explored new dimensions and was dynamic, anti-establishment, evolutionary and revolutionary. The pantheon of this music made statements to the effect that African/Black people in America were willing and able to establish their own cultural norms and community standards that were not seeking to assimilate into the mainstream American culture, but were seeking to establish a powerful alternative culture that expressed, with authority, Black people’s right to self-determination and a self-made authenticity. It is unmistakably clear that this music was influenced by, and in turn, influenced, the mindset and culture of the African-American community of those times. And since each generation stands on the foundation of those who came before, these influences are certainly a part of the fabric of the culture of African-Americans today.

Moving into the second half of the past century, there were numerous artists who made music that directly confronted and challenged the conditions faced by African/Black people in America and worldwide, challenged oppression, challenged the political and economic power structure of America and the West, and challenged African/Black people to raise their awareness, to resist, and to unite and organize for our empowerment. Again, building and expanding on the jazz tradition that came before, the iconic figures that come to mind are numerous: Nina Simone, Abbey Lincoln, The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Fela Kuti, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Miriam Makeba, Marvin Gaye, KRS-One, Public Enemy, and numerous others!

In the 1970s, Gil Scott-Heron sang for freedom from Apartheid for Africans in South Africa in “Johannesburg”, and sang for the completion of the freedom struggle of Black people in America in “Winter in America.” Marvin Gaye sang about the injustices in the treatment of Black folks in America and the war in Vietnam in “What’s Going On.” On his album “Mama Africa”, Peter Tosh sang that “Africa is the richest place, but it has the poorest race, and to me it’s just a disgrace”, and on the title track to his album “Equal Rights” sang that “we need equal rights and justice.” Bob Marley sang “Africa Unite” and sang about a “Blackman Redemption.” Fela Kuti sang protest songs against the dictators in African countries ruling and abusing the people as puppets for Western governments and multinational corporations (such as oil companies), with songs like “Colonial Mentality” and “Sorrow, Tears and Blood.” Public Enemy rapped about some of the negative conditions in the inner-city, but encouraged us to “Fight the Power” structure that ultimately produced such conditions, with the understanding that at some point the “Brothers Gonna Work It Out.”

I could go on and on in quoting the titles and lyrics of these great artists and how they poignantly and powerfully addressed the conditions of African/Black people and delivered messages aimed at uplifting our mindsets in order to ultimately uplift us as a people. These artists are reflections of the movements of African/Black people of the 1960s and 1970s, and the transformation of those movements into the 1980s on up to the present. They all realized the power of music as a change agent, and at the root of all movements for change, movements for justice, there has been powerful music that has inspired—and has been inspired by—such movements of the people. Therefore, we must continue to encourage and support the visionary musicians and other artists of our community, for they are a powerful reflection of us, and a valuable resource for us as the struggle for justice and well-being for our people continues.

I would be remiss if I didn’t address some of the not-so-positive music that exists among our people as well. In this day and age, hip-hop is the predominant musical form among our people, which has achieved tremendous popularity, commercial success, and radio airplay. Hip-hop music—or rap music—is a musical genre that demonstrates the creativity, skill, innovativeness, and knack for oral expression that is a constant feature of the culture and the music of African/Black people throughout history. However, much of rap music’s lyrical content has been influenced by mentalities that have resulted from centuries of the “miseducation” that has accompanied the oppression of African/Black people, resulting in many of us having low self-esteem, negative self-image, and negative behaviors that often accompany densely populated environments with high poverty and crime levels. A comprehensive analysis of the conditions that produce these circumstances and behaviors is beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that the music that emanates from this sub-culture is a reflection of the conditions, issues and problems in the sub-culture itself. The power of

music is such that it reflects and can help to reinforce negatives in a culture or sub-culture, just as it can reflect and help to reinforce and be a catalyst for positives. Music is powerful! So we must seek to educate our youth and our communities into positive, healthy and productive mindsets and lifestyles, and producing uplifting music can be a great tool in that endeavor.

But the silver lining to the negatives associated with hip-hop is, as The Wailers sang on their classic tune “Get Up, Stand Up”, “you can fool some people sometime, but you can’t fool all the people all the time, now we see the light, we’re gonna stand up for our rights.” As an example of this phenomenon, I point to the very recent release entitled “Distant Relatives” by rapper Nas and Bob Marley’s youngest son Damian, which is a very enlightened and uplifting musical collaboration—focusing on Africa and the condition of its people—emanating from the hip-hop world. Other examples of rappers with positive and powerful lyrics are Lauryn Hill, Common, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, and recently departed Guru, who teamed up with numerous iconic jazz artists, along with progressive R&B/soul and hip-hop artists, to produce an awesome series of albums entitled “Jazzmatazz.” And there are numerous other progressive artists making music today, some well-known and some not so well-known, who are continuing to make good, positive, conscious, progressive music.

The music ensemble that I am a part of, BlackNotes, follows in this tradition, particularly with its new release entitled “Legacy.” With a combination of cover tunes composed by some of the aforementioned artists—with unique BlackNotes arrangements—along with original BlackNotes compositions, we have produced high-quality music to spread messages that promote awareness, inspiration, enlightenment and empowerment for African/Black people. We feel that it is a part of our duty to continue in the sacred tradition established by the great artists and musicians that have come before us, musicians who contributed invaluable to our struggle for freedom from the legacy of oppression by promoting our legacy of cultural richness and our legacy of freedom of mind, body and spirit—as music has the power to do! Long live great Black music—ancient to the future! Check out our “Legacy”, and hear how we are doing our part to “keep the rhythm alive!”, to borrow a phrase from “Living Rhythm”, the signature BlackNotes tune from the new CD *Legacy*.

By Lasana K. Mack
Founder and Director, BlackNotes
www.BlackNotesZone.com
BlackNotesZone@gmail.com