

## **THE TRUE ROOTS OF AMERICAN MUSIC**

### **Duke Ellington, a legend in his own time.**

NEARLY EVERY FORM OF music and dance found in the Western Hemisphere since the landing of Columbus on "Hispaniola" in 1492, can be traced to the people of Africa. Whether it be Cuba, Columbia, Brazil or the United States, the music and dance has its "roots" in Africa. Unfortunately in the United States little attention is given to this fact. On the contrary, every effort possible is being made to demonstrate that white Americans shared in the original creation of what is now being called "American" music.

This latter impression is becoming more and more difficult to correct, because those who control the entertainment industry, via talent agencies, theaters, record companies, major festivals, radio and television networks, appear determined to distort the true history of music in America.

So complete is this distortion that most Americans are more familiar with white artists who imitate black artists, than they are with the original black artists themselves. In too many instances, the imitators become rich and famous, while the blacks whom they imitate remain poor and unknown.

Tommy Dorsey is well known, but few people recall "Tricky" Sam Nanton. Likewise Gene Krupa has become a household word, but Sid Catlett is all but unknown to the general public. Then there is Dave Brubeck, George Gershwin, Al Jolson and Stan Getz but who, except Jazz enthusiasts, recall Bud Powell, Billy Strayhorn, Janis Joplin, Bessie Smith or Lester Young? Whenever white musicians, some even well meaning, have taken this music abroad they have presented it as "American" music, leaving the impression that it is of European or white American origin. More critical is the fact that there is a growing movement to make jazz America's national music, without acknowledging its African Roots.

While this movement presents many famous AfricanAmerican musicians as entertainers and participants in the naturalization process, it nonetheless carries a subtle undertone with political and cultural motivations. One may ask, why is it necessary for white Americans, or any people in fact, to claim credit for the music transplanted from the shores of Africa? To answer this question we will have to turn back the pages of history to the time of the so-called American "settlers."

Most of the Europeans who settled in America initially came from the lower cultural strata of their countries. Others fled, in rebellion to the culture and lifestyle of their mother country. Some, such as the "crackers" (so called because of their indebtedness), were literally expelled. Thus, for all intent and purpose, the "settlers" purpose, the "settlers" brought no culture with them, especially no significant music or art forms.

In addition, the Europeans have never exhibited a culture which had "natural" universal appeal. Often, by force of arms, their lifestyles were, and still are, being imposed on various nations; however, it is usually acknowledged that the Europeans absorb more of the culture of the "conquered" than is the reverse.

Turning to the Africans who were brought to these shores, historical data indicates that they brought with them a heritage and a culture of universal appeal. Everywhere they are said to have gone, the people with whom they had contact borrowed some of their culture, especially music and dance. This was true historically for Rome, when the 10th Roman Legion, known as the African Corps, was used by Julius Caesar to defeat Pompey. The African "drum" played a significant part in Roman communications.

What about this strength of cultural influence in the United States, especially in the face of the "slave breaking" process? Dr. E. Franklin Frazer, in his book, "The Negro in the United States," points out that "the free Negro held a monopoly in the skill trades; this was especially true in music."

So absolute was the dominance of the blacks in music that most of the early white entertainers painted their faces black to give an authenticity to their performance. It was felt that a blackened face helped a white person to sing and dance better. Before the Civil War, the "black face" was done as a compliment to the black man's musical and dancing skills; it was only after the war that white entertainers did it to ridicule the blacks.

As we turn to jazz, let us review a description of the African as he made his impact upon New Orleans, the indisputable cradle of jazz in America. In his book "The Story of Jazz," Marshall Stearns quotes G. W. Gable saying see them, tall, well knitted Sene gales from Cape Verde, black as ebony, with intelligent, kindly eyes, long straight, shapely noses, (and those) from Gambia River, lighter of color, of cruder form, cunning that shows in their countenance, whose enslavement seems especially a shame, the merchants of Africa dwelling in towns, industrious thrifty, skilled in commerce and husbandry The dominant culture of the African people in New Orleans was Yoruba, and the major religion was Voudon, which in some aspects was practiced also by a number of whites. According to Stearns, the Catholic Church sought to outlaw the practice of Vodou.

Then, in Haiti, a major event "shook" the entire hemisphere. The African people threw both the French and Spanish off the Island and established two republics, one Haiti itself and the other The Dominican Republic. What followed was a combined force of European countries sailing to crush this "rebellion." The European forces failed, but France was able to exact a political price in terms of tax or debt payments for a number of years.

Illustration by Alex Mattison.

Stearns claims that because the drums were such a major factor in the success of the people of Haiti against the French (i.e. communications), these particular types of drums were actually

outlawed in New Orleans, with the exception of the famed "Congo Square" where the blacks were allowed to practice their culture.

Stearns states, "it was feared that the Vodou religion would go underground, so it was permitted to be practiced openly." Later, as we shall see, Congo Square became central to the development of jazz. "Private ceremonies" and "Public performances," preserving both rhythm and rituals, abetted the survival of musical forms in America, Stearns contends.

Following the Civil War, military bands took on a very African Character. With "freedom" granted to the slaves, there was a great deal more movement by blacks. Many secret societies evolved among them and, by and large, most developed marching bands which initially performed at funerals. The similarity of these "funeral rituals" with bands was strikingly similar to those performed in the West Indies and all over West Africa.

As tourism increased, the Congo Square became literally surrounded by houses of ill repute. Northerners, amazed by the sight of the area, nicknamed it "Storyville." It is significant to note that in every major city where jazz is played, there is at least one jazz club named "Storyville." formed to throw out the Yankee Carpet baggers, and to keep the "Negro" in his place. The end result was the restriction of freedom of movement again for blacks, including the Creole people of color, who had up until then been spared the abuse borne by the "ordinary" black people.

Lack of work, and little meaningful employment forced the musicians of Congo Square to seek work in night clubs and houses of prostitution. Consequently, though "below their dignity, the musicians developed a professionalism by working full time. The Creole, forced into a closer, natural relationship with his darker brother, now contributed his knowledge of notes and European instruments. At that time however, the Creoles lacked the ability to improvise, which is the heart of jazz. Later it became "natural" for them. Some noted Creoles, developing this ability, included Jelly Roll Morton, Kid Ory, Bechet and Celestin. In another development, whites, observing black musicians, copied their style and some became famous as "Dixieland" musicians in the 1880s.

Another such "white" movement became known as the "Cool School" of the 1950s. It was a movement by some white musicians who tried to imitate the "Bebop" of New York which had been designed by "concerned" black musicians to reunite jazz with its African roots and rid it of its European "impurities." These "impurities" were said to have been picked up during the so-called "swing" era.

The culture of African people in the United States, is seen by most white Americans as they "see" black (Afri can) people as a whole someone or something not to be respected, not to be taken seriously. Thus, white musicologists classify European music as "seri" implying that "black" music is not.

Actually this puts white America to Illustration by Alex Mattison. tally out of step with the rest of the world. In fact, the new Soviet leader, Andropov is an avid Miles Davis fan. The King of

Thailand is an excellent jazz musician, and the list of prominent world figures and their citizenry who respect acknowledging its African roots is numerous.

Throughout Europe now, there are schools of jazz, even specialized branches such as the "John Coltrane Coltrane" school. Noted author Frank Kofsky states that if whites are in the jazz world proper, they will tend to deny that it is foremost and firstly a black art, created and nurtured by African Americans. Secondly he says, if they are not in the jazz circles, they will accept that jazz is "black" but reject it as something durable or worthy.

Kofsky, a Caucasian himself, suggests in his book, "Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music," that it is understandable that white America would attempt to exert some kind of control over jazz, especially given its respectability the world over.

As we have seen earlier, white Americans have complete control of the American world of music. Most of those who write about jazz, for instance, are white, especially the critics, many of whom have no musical ability at all. Nevertheless they have the power to determine who will play, when they will play, where they will play and who will "make money," and who will "starve." Eubie Blake has been quoted as saying, "After the white writers learned to write syncopation, they did not need us anymore. From that time on work was very hard to find."

As we pointed out, there is now a major movement to make jazz America's national music, and the black man can be expected to be written out, no matter how many blacks are enlisted in the process. Kofsky himself points out that "recording companies, booking agencies, festival promoters, and nightclub owners make fortunes, while most black jazz musicians remain poor.

According to Richard Harrington, in a recent Washington Post Article, Tom Kendricks, director of operations at the Kennedy Center said that Roger Stevens, the Center's chairman, "is big on two things: the American musical and jazz, both being America's national music.

Stevens and George Wein, a longtime jazz promoter (Newport, etc.) are initiators of the June 5, 1983 "KOOL" Jazz Festivals in Washington at the Kennedy Center, and in Baltimore at the Civic Center. Kendricks was quoted as saying that this affair "gives you an opportunity to say in a very direct way that this is national music being highlighted in the national culture center. And then you get a double blessing in that it is a national event and a community event because of where it is."

It becomes imperative that such a movement as this must have "truth" and "justice" at its base. Blacks and whites who love jazz must establish a dialogue to maintain the authenticity of jazz, so that the opportunity for exploitation will vanish. As Black musicians must strive to gain more control over the direction of jazz movements such as the "national" drive. They must ensure that black musicians are not exploited "fodder, many (even \$1 million superstars), black athletes happen to be. A movement to educate black families in the history and musical culture of the African Americans, should be taken up by the "named" and unnamed true jazz musicians. This could develop national ethnic support and revenue so that jazz will not become another "sacred" art cheapened by crass commercialism.

This is no appeal for boycotting "festivals"; it is an appeal for increasing the quality of such events, the dignity and the authenticity of the movement. It is an appeal for the preservation of the historical roots of our musical culture and a fair return for the genealogical investment of the African and African American people.