Curated Primary Source Guide:

Essay #2, Music Option

**Essay Prompt:**

Write an essay in which you draw connections between two or three of the jazz albums discussed in class (*Bird & Diz; Kind of Blue; Heaven and Earth*) and the struggle for civil rights in the 1950s and 60s. You will strive to answer some of these questions: What was the relationship between jazz music and the black experience in the 1950s? What political points were jazz players trying to address in their music and recordings? Did jazz musicians take a stance on the debates over forms of protest? Judging by their music, which players looked up to MLKJ? Malcolm X? Amiri Baraka? Or do you think this is the wrong question, with jazz music instead being a “colorblind” space? Material can come from the albums, my civil rights lecture, the PDF excerpts by Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), MLKJ, Malcolm X, and the quotes and listening guide here below.

An ideal essay would feature a strong blend of historical facts about the Civil Rights Movement (eg from the lectures and PDFs) with an original analysis of the albums. This could be done with pages 1-2 about civil rights history and pages 3-4 as an album analysis. Or it could be interwoven, where you creatively blend the discussion of the various songs with examples of legislation, protests, and speeches.

DO NOT use outside sources for this assignment. This is an exercise in close reading of course materials. It is not an exercise in research. ​

**Quotes for Consideration for Essay #2, “The Sound of Civil Rights”:**

“You cannot raise a song and not feel yourself change.” “The singing suspends the confusion and points to a higher order, sometimes long enough for you to execute the next step. Therefore, singing will not set you free, but don’t try to get free without it.” (quoted in Monson, 58) --SNCC Freedom Singer Bernice Reagon

“Music has no color: It’s a raceless art. I don’t care if a musician is green as long as he’s talented.” --Miles Davis

“Sharp attacks, rough timbre, hard touch, and vibrato had for a long time been regarded as essential characteristics of the Negro’s sonority, whereas they were actually just characteristics of the hot idiom. [Black tenor sax player] Lester Young deserves the credit for showing that it is possible to avoid almost all these features and still produce authentic jazz.”

--Jazz critic André Holdeir

“[White pianist] Lennie Tristano was not content merely to feel something, he had to explore ideas, to experience them to think them through carefully, thoroughly, logically until he could fully grasp them and hold on to them.”

--Jazz Review in Metronome Magazine

“Jazz is America’s own. It is the music that grew out of a young and vigorous melting-pot nation. It is a product of all America, deriving much of its inspiration and creation from the Negro people. Jazz holds up no superficial bars. It is played and listened to by all peoples--in harmony, together. Pigmentation differences have no place in jazz. As in genuine democracy, only performance counts. --Norman Granz, producer of *Bird & Diz*

“The African definition of metaphorical or mystical coolness is more complicated...than Western notions of sang-froid, cooling off, or even icy determination. It is a special kind of cool...West, Central, and even East African languages reveals further nuances of 1) discretion 2) healing 3) rebirth 4) newness or purity.”

-Robert Farris Thompson, ethnographer, 1971.

“The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” -Ralph Ellison

\*\*note: cite these quotes like this.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Listening Guide:**

*Bird and Diz*. Charley Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. 1950, NYC.

*Note: All players here were African-Americans, with the exception of Buddy Rich on drums.*

The opening track “Bloomdido” provides you with a good introduction to the basic rules and form of jazz: it is an upbeat tune built on a form called “12 bar blues.”

Jazz works like this: each tune, at the most basic level, is very short: it is either 12 measures (a “12 bar blues”) or 32 measures (alternately called AABA form, Ballad form, TIn Pan Alley form, or American Popular Music form). In total, the tune only lasts about 40 seconds. That is it! Once it is done, the jazz musicians repeat the song, playing it through again and again. The first time, the star musician (here Diz and Bird together) plays the original melody.

Every subsequent time, a different musician on stage gets their own chance to perform their original interpretation of that melody, and they can show off and improvise as much as they want. This set of rules, or “jazz grammar,” is what makes jazz so lendable to comparisons with American democracy: you come to the country and learn the melody, and then you each get the chance to play it out as you wish.

The individual musical interpretations can be cooperative, recursive, or competitive. By cooperative, I mean that a player takes into account the musical statement of the previous time around and tries to perform a solo that works along the same lines. By recursive, I mean that the player incorporates material (rhythm, phrases) from the previous soloist, but then changes certain materials. Finally, the music can be competitive, with the player trying to outdo (through speed or range) the phrases of the previous player.

Listen to one such competition on the track called “Leapfrog.” Reflect on the meaning of the song title? What does it mean? Why is “Leapfrog” an appropriate image for the song, and for the nature of American capitalism in general? Could it also apply to race relations in the 1950s?

The song “Mohawk,” is a return to the blues form. The song opens with a quick piano riff that is designed to remind the listener of the song “Take the A Train”—a reference to NYC, more specifically to the experience of traveling to Harlem. So “Mohawk” opens with an invitation to a musical Harlem of sorts. That is where Dizzy and Bird will have their next chance to cooperate or compete. Which does this song sound like to you?

“Melancholy Baby” and “Oscar for Treadwell” might help us slow down on the political aspect. Melancholy Baby is an old classic of the American SongBook, written in 1912 and performed early by singers such as Bing Crosby and William Frawley (“Fred” on *I Love Lucy*). The lyrics are about love, although you could interpret them politically if you wanted.... check it out: “Each cloud has a silver lining, wait until the sun shines through.” On the tune, Dizzy plays trumpet with a mute. Does that have any meaning?

“Oscar for Treadwell” plays on the name of an old radio DJ named Oscar Treadwell. In a time when jazz was still struggling to gain popularity and an audience, he championed it on the radio. He even got a classical musical radio station to let him do jazz nights late in the evening. Because of this work, he earned the respect and appreciation of many jazz musicians like Parker, who voted here (playfully) to give him an Oscar for his work. Since Treadwell was a white DJ, how might his promotion of bebop to broader audiences (and jazz musician’s appreciation of his work) challenge Baraka’s argument (in “Blues People”) that bop was nonconformist music?

As you finish listening to the album, reflect on the overall sound of the album. Does it sound hopeful or anxious? Excited or stressed? This will prepare you to make some comparisons with the next album.

**Kind of Blue** – Miles Davis quintet. 1959, NYC.

*Note: This band, too, was mostly black players, with the exception of the introspective pianist Bill Evans. How does this contrast to the Miles Davis quote above?*

Kind of Blue was recorded in NYC in 1959, and opens with the track “So what?” This seems like an appropriate question with which to open your own brainstorm session on the album. So what? What has changed in the US since 1950? What civil rights movements have occurred and what laws have been passed?

Listen to the piano on that first track: it repeatedly grooves on two different chords, over and over and over. This is called a “vamp” and it is designed to let musicians groove. Bass player Paul Chambers adds to this groove by “walking” the bass line. Is it possible that Davis and other black residents in NYC are more able to “walk” through NYC?

Consider comparing the vamp on this track with the Benny Golson tune “Killer Joe.” (listen to it on youtube or spotify). The vamp is similar, and the opening lines might prepare you to envision the title character of the next song “Freddy Freeloader.”

As you listen to the next three tunes, note that they all use (or abuse) the blues form. So use this a chance to reflect on the blues. Does the sound of the album sound like Ellison’s description of the blues? Or is it different? Think of the different meanings of the name of the album “Kind of Blue.” What is your interpretation of the title? Then think about the different ways to interpret the names of the blues tracks: “All blues” “Freddy Freeloader” and “Blue in Green.” Be creative here and compare the titles to our series of quotes. What is the significance of having three blues tunes on an album with only five tunes?

I also want you to spend good time thinking about the title of the last track “Flamenco Sketches”, which is a foreshadowing of Miles Davis’ fascination with music and sounds from Spain. In what ways do you think Miles Davis might have identified with the tradition of Spanish gypsy music?

Finally, pick a track and listen to Davis’ trumpet playing. Is it loud or soft? singable or not? clean or dirty? aggressive or relaxed? daring or timid? How does this style compare with Dizzy’s playing of the trumpet on Bird and Diz? If you think this is political or racial, explain the significance of this style. If you think this is just a matter of personal preference and taste, then venture a reading as what Davis’ taste is.

Kamasi Washington

“Heaven and Earth”

Listening Guide

Kamasi Washington has quite the track record. He became known to the music world after arranging the music for Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp A Butterfly*. After that, he got the chance to start arranging and performing his own jazz tunes: he composes his own work, and he has got to be one of the best jazz composers alive today. His first two albums, *The Epic*, and *Harmony of Difference* were both received with critical acclaim.

Now he released his third disc: *Heaven and Earth*. It provides two and a half hours of intense, in-your-face, brilliance that will intimidate, overwhelm, and inspire. Washington plays tenor sax, and here he has a pretty big group joining him: piano, synthesize (an electric keyboard that makes all sorts of sounds), drums and percussion, a great bass player, and even a trumpet and trombone. Certain tracks also add in a choir and orchestra. So buckle up and get ready for an intense ride.

The first track is called “Fists of Fury” – it is a shout-out to a 1971 martial arts film starring Bruce Lee, who avenges the assassination of his teacher by killing all sorts of bad guys. Why might Washington start with a shout out to a 70s fighting flick? Here are the words:

I use hands to help my fellow man

I use hands to do just what I can

But when my hands are met with unjust injury

I turn my hands to fists of fury

Our time as victims is over.

We will no longer ask for justice.

Instead, we will take our retribution.

The tune is in G#, which means it is one of the more difficult keys to play in. You wouldn’t know it by listening (Washington has an incredible band), and the song takes the form of a modified blues (the song form that provides the basis for so much jazz, including the tunes on Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue*). On this tune ask yourself: why open with the blues? With a reference to the film? What do the lyrics mean?

The next track is called “Can your hear him?” The tune starts with a nice bass riff complimented by a heavy-handed, almost clunky piano bit. It sounds to me like a nod of the head to early big-fingered piano players like Ramsey Lewis and the Thelonius Monk. (Note that the Monk was supportive and involved in the Black Arts Movement headed up by Amiri Baraka).

Kamasi plays the opening melody, and then the trombone player echoes him. If you pay attention to the bass line (and if you have already listened to the other albums for class), you might recognize that the harmonic concept of the bass is mimicking the tune “So What” on Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue*. Its a riff that repeats, then goes up by a whole step, and then comes back down. (the move, from C to D, occurs at 1:02 in the song; it goes back down around 1:18). Imagine you are the bass player: what does it mean to move somewhere new, but still be playing the same riff? What does it mean to forward 60 years in time, but still face the same challenges of those that came before you?

By this time the band has already come (after four loops of the opening riff). The synthesizer and the choir make things start to feel ethereal (like we are taking our first steps off earth). I want you to listen to how the synthesizer and the choir sound like they are moving into another dimension. It first happens at the beginning when they come in, and then it happens throughout the whole 6:00-7:00 minute range. It is like they are layering blocks of sounds, one above the next, walking you up a musical staircase. How high can you get without leaving on earth?

This is probably a good time for you to begin asking yourself about the meaning of the name of the album: *Heaven and Earth*. Technically, it should probably be called *Earth and Heaven*, because it is a two-disc album, and the first disc is called Earth, and the second (beginning with “Space Traveller’s Lullaby”). The synth player on this track definitely wants us to ask the question of the title of the album; if you listen around at 3:48, the synth player acts like a UFO, flying between heaven and earth, trying to explore the distance between the two.

At the climax of Washington’s saxophone solo we are brought back to the question of the title. In my ears (and granted this a bit subjective), I hear the sax (7:08 – 7:18) literally singing these words: “I said can you hear? I said I said it I said can you HEAR Him?” This is the question of the title: “Can you hear him?” Who is the “him” that we are listening for? Miles Davis? Malcolm X? Amiri Baraka? Kamasi Washington? Someone else? Take a guess.

1. Ralph Ellison, Dr Oelze’s Essay Packet. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)