Curated Primary Source Guide:
Essay #2, Music Option

Essay Prompt:

Write an essay in which you draw connections between *Bird & Diz* and *Kind of Blue* and the struggle for civil rights in the 1950s and 60s. You will strive to answer at least one of these questions: What was the relationship between jazz music and the black experience in the 1950s? Did jazz musicians attempt to sonically construct race through their sounds and songs, or was jazz music a “colorblind” and “democratic” space? Material can come from the albums, the quotes below, my civil rights lecture, and the PDF excerpts by Ralph Ellison and Ira Gitler. Your analysis of the music can benefit from my “listening guide” handout (below).

Quotes for Consideration for Essay #2, Music Option:

“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.”


“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

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**Listening Guide:**

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

All black players, 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 works like this: the tune itself is actually very short: it is either 12 measures (a blues tune) or 32 measures (alternately called AABA form, Ballad form, Tin Pan Alley form, or American Popular Music form). In total, the tune only last 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 center 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

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¹ Ralph Ellison, Dr Oelze’s Essay Packet.
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 your musical introduction 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?

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

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

Integrated band.

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” “freedy 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?

Finally, pick a track and listen to Davis’ trumpet playing. Is it loud or soft? singable or not? clean or dirty? agressive 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.
Questions and Guides to Primary-Source PDFs:

Ellison, Invisible Man.

This PDF excerpt gives you the introduction to one of America’s best novels, written by African-American jazz critic Ralph Ellison. He begins with this vulnerable and rambling monologue on his own “invisibility,” a metaphor designed to describe his own experience of being black in the US.

Jazz, especially jazz tunes in the blues form, is central to the entire novel, and we see it come out here as Ellison listens to Armstrong’s “What did I do? (to be so black and blue).”

Understand: Hopefully you figured out that Ralph Ellison talks about invisibility as a way to describe the experience of being black in a prejudiced society. How and why does invisibility work as a description of Ellison’s experience?

Remember/Understand: Where is Ellison living? What objects does he mention are in his home? What is the symbolic significance of these objects?

Understand: Why does Ellison switch into italics halfway through? What comes out at that point? [descent into music; into the marijuana high; into the subconscious; and into history].

Apply: Think about this quote by Ellison:

“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.” -Ellison

How does this relate to the notion of “hibernation”? To “walking softly”?

Analyze: How does Ellison’s story of invisibility differ from WEB DuBois story of double-consciousness?

Ira Gitler, Cuttin Heads

This is a series of oral histories collected by Ira Gitler, about the bop years, and I have included the ones that talk about Charlie Parker (and the people he played with). I know they are winding and hard to get through, especially if you do not understand music theory. But see if you can at least answer these three questions:
1. (opening pages) Why was Charlie Parker called “the bird”? If I told you that this story was only a single version of many other explanations for the nickname, then what would you venture as your own explanation for why he may have earned this nickname?

2. (pg 70 and pg 82) - these are the places where we see the concept of cutting heads. What did Dizzy Gillespie probably mean when he said that he intended to “separate the sheep from the goats”?

3. Based on the details of these interviews — especially about the musicians’ lifestyles — how and why might they, too, have felt like “invisible men”? And how did hard bop jazz work to “bump people back”? (Ellison, pg 4)

What sense do we get of the motivation of the artists? And do we see these artists interested in politics or civil rights? or more interested in making artistic innovations and having a good time?