

From the Blues to Hip Hop: How African American Music Changed U.S. Culture and Moved the World

By Ethan Goffman



The Old Plantation, unknown artist, 1700s
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Slave_dance_to_banjo,_1780s.jpg

Jes Grew spreads through America following a strange course. Pine Bluff and Magnolia Arkansas are hit; Natchez, Meridian and Greenwood Mississippi report cases. Sporadic outbreaks occur in Nashville and Knoxville Tennessee as well as St. Louis where the bumping and grinding cause the Gov to call up the Guard. A mighty influence, Jes Grew infects all that it touches.

Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*

Satirist Ishmael Reed captures the infectious nature of African American music, which has appeared in a bewildering variety of styles since at least the 1890s. These have spread through the American public in seemingly inexplicable waves, entities that, without an understanding of their cultural context, seemingly “just grew” from out of nowhere. The major styles can be classified as blues, ragtime, jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, and rap. While each is unique, they have certain elements in common. Each blends African and European musical ideas, always with a strong rhythmic element. Often, outside the culture that creates these styles, they are at first looked down upon as strange, ugly, not really music. Yet repeatedly, they break through the boundaries in which they originated, moving into mainstream America and, ultimately, dispersing around the globe.

Beginning in the 16th Century, Africans were enslaved and brought to the new world. Separated from their languages and history, African Americans somehow managed to preserve something of their culture through the only medium available to them: music, originally limited to voice and rhythm (with an assist from the banjo, derived from African instruments), and closely associated with dance. The history of this blending and changing of the various cultures of Africa in an utterly new context is obscured by time and a lack of records.

For European Americans, the music of the slaves, and later of the freed slaves, was seen as primitive, as nonmusical. Explain two scholars, “Equating slave practices with ‘uncivilized’ African

rituals, Europeans most typically interpreted the music-making of Blacks with such pejorative terms as 'barbaric,' 'wild,' and 'nonsensical'" (Burnim & Maultsby 8). Yet many European Americans found this unfamiliar music compelling, and over the centuries and decades it began to be accepted, not only as entertainment but even, little by little, as serious music. In 1867, one scholar of African American music wrote that "A 'white tune,' so to speak, adopted by them 'in their own way' becomes a different thing. The words may be simply mangled, but the music is changed under an inspiration; it becomes a vital force" (qtd in Maultsby & Burnim 8). Later scholarship would echo and augment this understanding. Through the spoken voice, through drums, and later on guitars and an increasing variety of instruments, African American music evolved and spread.

The Early Blues

The blues came, at least partly, out of the songs slaves sung, out of field hollers and what W.E.B. DuBois termed the "Sorrow Songs." In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these coalesced into the quintessential African American music: "blues songs seem to turn up everywhere in the Deep South more or less simultaneously—in rural areas, small towns, and cities such as New Orleans and Memphis" (Evans 79). Often the blues were sung by a single individual, accompanying himself on a guitar. Love, sex, betrayal, poverty, drinking, bad luck, and an itinerant lifestyle are its themes.



W. C. Handy's "The Memphis Blues"
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Memphis_Blues_1.jpg

David Evans explains the European elements in the Blues as form and harmony, with African elements "particularly in the music's rhythmic, tonal, and timbral flexibility" (81). Important to the Blues is the "blue note," a flattened or altered note, often at the 3rd, 5th, or 7th degree of scale.¹

In 1912 W.C. Handy copyrighted "The Memphis Blues," widening the popularity of the term "the blues." Although Handy is often referred to as the "Father of the Blues," he was merely translating an already existing music into a more accessible format. In the next few years, the blues would become popular on the vaudeville circuit. By the 1920s, such singers as Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, accompanied by small

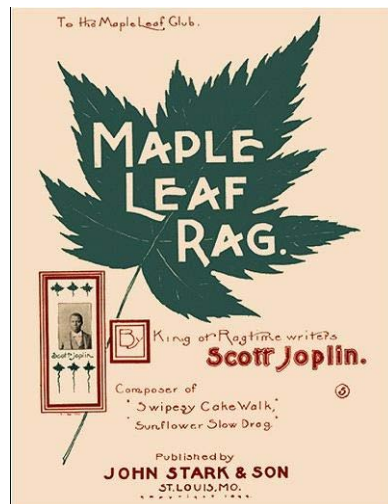
¹ Typical blues form is 12-bar blues which uses a standard I/V-I/IV-V-I/I chord progression.

orchestras, were popularizing the style on records.

Meanwhile the folk blues, primarily employing guitar and vocals (as well as harmonica), remained alive in the Mississippi Delta. Scarcely noticed by the outside world, delta blues and country blues were recorded on "race records" and sold to an African American audience. In the 1940s, the folklorist Alan Lomax travelled the Delta collecting and recording the music, bringing such undiscovered artists as McKinley Morganfield, better known as Muddy Waters, to a wider audience.

Alongside the early blues, African American spirituals filled churches and held communities together. In the 20th century these would evolve into gospel, with Thomas Dorsey the most recognized composer and conductor and Mahalia Jackson the paradigmatic singer. Black church music, however, has not penetrated mainstream American society like other forms and is not a focus of this article. Nevertheless, the church and its music have been influential in every form of African American music. The relationship with the blues is particularly close: "The struggle between the 'calling' of the blues and the calling of gospel is frequently understood as the struggle for the souls of individuals; gospel artists get filled with the Holy Spirit in church, while blues artists make deals with the devil at desolate crossroads" (Asma). Indeed, legendary early bluesman Robert Johnson was said to have derived his skill from the devil.

Ragtime, New Orleans Jazz and Big Band



A pre-1923 sheet music copy of Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag"

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maple_Leaf_Rag.PNG

Developing alongside the blues beginning in the 1890s, ragtime is a sophisticated music associated with solo piano. Ragtime refers both to a body of musical compositions and a way of approaching existing compositions, adding syncopation as well as "embellishing and decorating melodies," known as "ragging" (Harer 129). Related to the cakewalk, a dance form accompanied by music, ragtime was originally played in bars and brothels, but gained respectability when it began to be written down and published. Since pianos were located in many homes, particularly of the upper classes, this provided a vehicle for ragtime's dissemination.

While ragtime had numerous composers, both black and white, the most famous of these is Scott Joplin, whose "Maple Leaf Rag" became the standard for this style of music. (His piece "The Entertainer" would later become the theme music for the movie "The Sting.")

Ragtime may be seen as an antecedent to jazz, although the genres developed in parallel. Jazz appeared in the 1910s in New Orleans, a city that Charles Joyner describes "at the dawn of the twentieth century" as "a crossroads of musical traditions. . . . into its streets flowed black and white migrants from the countryside who encountered for the first time the city's cosmopolitan mix of European and African musical traditions" (7). While this turbulent blend of cultures served as a breeding ground for the new, jazz itself emerged as a meeting of blues music, often considered "lower class," with the more classically trained tradition of New Orleans' mixed race population. Blues singers such as Bessie Smith are often considered early jazz innovators, as the distinction between blues and jazz was still blurry.

But what is jazz? A simplistic way to look at it is as a syncopated version of the Blues. One element often considered essential to jazz is swing, a propulsive, danceable beat; as Duke Ellington said, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." Another crucial jazz element is improvisation—jazz musicians strive not to play the same piece in exactly the same way twice. Still another is the use of complex chord progressions. As the music has evolved over the years, the balance of these elements has changed.

From the start, the European musical establishment has considered jazz, like other African American forms, either a lesser form of music or not music at all. In 1928, Sigmund Spaeth argued that "music is the organization of sound toward beauty, and thus far jazz has merely distorted the organizing factors of rhythm, melody, harmony, and tone color." With time, of course, the elements of jazz came to seem normal to many listeners, yet later styles came along, themselves to be greeted as abominations. However, jazz came to be embraced by several 20th century composers, notably Aaron Copland, Maurice Ravel, and Igor Stravinsky.

Early New Orleans Jazz was relatively simple compared to what would come later. Group improvisation predominated, as did individual style. Because the amount of musical education varied greatly, and was often limited, early jazz took advantage of the strengths of the individual musicians.

Buddy Bolden is often considered the leader of the first jazz band, with Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton the first important jazz composer. Yet New Orleans jazz really took off with Louis Armstrong, the great trumpeter (who sidelined as a singer and the inventor of scat singing). Starting off in the King Oliver band, Armstrong had an overpowering tone and originality, which led to his becoming the first great jazz soloist. Indeed, after Armstrong, simultaneous group improvisation faded, with the soloist predominant in jazz ever since. Armstrong would soon make a

series of classic jazz recordings with his groups the Hot Fives and Hot Sevens, and would go on to become a world icon.



King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band with Louis Armstrong on trumpet
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If Armstrong was the greatest soloist in early jazz, the greatest composer was Duke Ellington. Originally from Washington, DC, Ellington would combine a cool dance band style with the hot blues to help usher in the Big Band era (Pierpont). While the Big Bands were large orchestras, and while the musical arranger played a huge part in their success, solo improvisers maintained a large role. Besides Ellington, other notable Big Band leaders were Fletcher Henderson and, a little later, Count Basie.

In a 1935 concert at the Palomar Ballroom, Benny Goodman brought the Big Band style to a larger, more respectable audience. Big Band became America's music, a single dominant style. Yet white jazz leaders, such as Goodman, Paul Whiteman and Glenn Miller, received most of the financial rewards. The pattern of white musicians reaping money and glory performing black styles is a recurring one; nevertheless, Goodman did his best to help the careers of black composers and musicians, such as Fletcher Henderson and Lionel Hampton.

Also propelling the popularity of the big bands were the singers. Love songs predominated, often from Broadway. While the music and lyrics could be simple, the singers' individual stylings added sophistication. Probably the two most important were Ella Fitzgerald, who mastered both a surprisingly cool yet nuanced style for love songs and a fast-tempo scatting approach, and the gutsier, bluesier Billie Holiday.

The arrival of World War II made continuation of the big bands difficult, as many of the musicians were drafted, and money was scarce to pay a large orchestra. By the war's end the peak days of the big band were over; America would never again have such a quintessential style of music popular with both blacks and whites.

Jump Blues, Rhythm and Blues, and Electric Blues

Following World War II jazz would split into a popular style and a more cerebral version (discussed in the next section on bebop and modern jazz). Jump blues, a kind of stripped-down Big Band with a regular beat and oriented around a singer, became a popular, danceable style. The

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master of jump blues was Louis Jordan, who wrote humorous songs about, among other things, chickens, parties gone bad, and that old blues standard – failed love affairs.

Jump blues was the first style to be called "Rhythm and Blues," which, Portia Maultsby explains, originated in 1949 as "a catch-all term first use by the music industry to market all styles of Black music recorded by Blacks for Black consumers" (246-7). The term has evolved over time; today's "R&B" sounds quite different from Rhythm and Blues of the 1950s.



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Muddy Waters
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Meanwhile, Muddy Waters, along with other southern blues artists, moved to Chicago and founded a new style of blues. The electric guitar soon became the standard blues instrument. In an artist such as Howlin' Wolf (Chester Burnett), the country blues are obvious, although in electrified form. Other artists, such as B.B. King, deploy a smoother, more urban style. Another important version of rhythm and blues was the vocal groups that began on street corners and coalesced in the popular "doo wop" style.

In entering white American society, rhythm and blues, with contributions from country and gospel, evolved into Rock and Roll, as memorialized by Muddy Waters in his song "The Blues Had a Baby, and they Called It Rock n' Roll." While early rock and roll had such African American artists as Little Richard and Chuck Berry, it was Elvis Presley who moved the style into mainstream America. Just as jazz had spread via such figures as Benny Goodman, Rock and Roll needed a white face to become mainstream. By the 1960s rock and roll had crossed the Atlantic to Britain; its rhythm and blues roots were central to such groups as the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin.

Bebop and Modern Jazz

Beginning in the late 1940s, such innovators as saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker and trumpeter John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie began the movement known as bebop, marked by increased speed and rhythmic and melodic complexity. Bebop moved jazz away from a popular, danceable style to a small group form dominated by soloists. In the process, jazz became an art music with a shrinking number of listeners. As the old big bands died, many of the band leaders derided bebop, questioning its musicality and relevance. Still, jazz remained culturally powerful, influencing the movement known as the Beats, which rebelled from the materialism of mainstream America.

As jazz became dominated by small groups with increasing virtuosity, the rhythm became more complex, and solos by the drums and bass, which had mainly played supporting roles, became frequent. While the basic format consisted of a group playing the melody followed by a number

of solos, modern jazz went rapidly through a number of phases. Pianist Thelonious Monk took a unique approach to bebop, experimenting with minimalism and time changes. Beginning in the late 1950s, Miles Davis was a prime mover in the "cool" school, which emphasized melody and "leaned toward an aesthetic that less is more" (Monson 158). Davis' style soon evolved into modal jazz, which deemphasized traditional chord changes, a style notable on the seminal album "Kind of Blue." During the same period, hard bop took a faster, noisier approach, with loud and complex rhythms. In the early 1960s, Davis' acolyte John Coltrane took the innovations of both hard bop and cool jazz in a fast and furious direction emphasizing long solos. Late in his career, Coltrane became a proponent of avant-garde jazz, which threw out traditional structure and is closely associated with free jazz, whose most famous exponent is Ornette Coleman.



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Miles Davis
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By the 1970s probably the greatest period of innovation in the history of jazz had played itself out. Miles Davis, loathe to repeat himself, was one of the leaders of the fusion movement, which mixed jazz with rock, often adding Indian and European classical influences. From the beginning, jazz fusion was largely associated with white musicians such as guitarist John McLaughlin. In the 1980s a group of young musicians, notably Wynton Marsalis, rebelled against fusion as musically insubstantial and called for a return to prior jazz forms. Marsalis worked "to actualize a longstanding dream: that

someday jazz would be treated as equal in stature to classical music" (Monson 165). Alongside that dream, however, the period of jazz's major innovations seems to have ended.

Soul and Funk

While modern jazz had a relatively small audience in the African American community, soul, which blends gospel with rhythm and blues, became the predominant popular form. Early soul can almost be seen as a secular form of gospel, in which worship of a human love object replaces worship of Jesus. Indeed Sam Cooke, the first great figure in soul, started out as a gospel singer and continued to perform gospel throughout his career. Cooke's music was beginning to move into social and political issues, in such songs as "A Change is Gonna Come," when he was shot dead in 1964 at the age of 33. Otis Redding, another crucial early soul artist, developed a rougher style, and died young in a plane crash.

Detroit's Motown defined soul through the 1960s. Founded by Berry Gordy, Jr., the label included such luminaries as Marvin Gaye, Gladys Knight, Stevie Wonder, and the Jackson Five.

Despite such individual talents, Motown functioned as an ensemble, employing a stable of writers and musicians, the latter known as the Funk Brothers, tightly controlled by the label. Originally noted for fluffy love songs, by the late 1960s Motown joined the spirit of the times, putting out a number of socially oriented songs.

Other giants of soul include Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin. Charles began his career as a jazz artist in the 1950s and achieved crossover success in the 1960s with such hits as "Georgia on My Mind." Considered the queen of soul, Franklin experimented with jazz early and also sang gospel throughout her career. She had her greatest success was in the late 1960s with such hits as "Respect," but her career is long and varied. She is adept at taking material from a variety of sources, re-envisioning it, and making it her own, as with her version of the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby."

Through the late 1960s and 1970s, soul moved to songs of political awareness and protest. Oddly, particularly considering its positioning at the height of the Civil Rights era, soul did not cross over to white artists as much as many other African American musical styles. Perhaps this is because many of the rock and roll artists in the late 1960s remained heavily influenced by blues.



James Brown at the Apollo Theatre in 1960

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:James_Brown_and_Flames.jpg

Funk is a style that came out of soul through the music of James Brown. Noted for its percussive electric bass, funk is characterized by long, danceable jams. Beginning in the 1960s, Sly and the Family Stone, an interracial group, mixed protest and party music while creating an ornate group persona. In the 1970s George Clinton, with his band Parliament-Funkadelic, took up and expanded the bounds of funk, employing such ornate devices as the Mother Ship in elaborate stage

shows with extended jams. Finally, Prince (Prince Rogers Nelson) and the New Power Generation took off in the 1980s with such hits as "When Doves Cry," melding rock influences into funk. All of these artists enjoyed at least some crossover appeal with white audiences.

Yet it was Michael Jackson who really burst the boundaries into which African American music can be confined. As late as 1982, the music video network MTV—at the time the arbiter of musical success—refused to play black music, until Jackson's *Thriller* album, which combines soul and funk. With its narrative-based videos marked by Jackson's stupendous dancing, *Thriller* went on to become the best selling album of all time.

Rap

Had the Civil Rights Movement led to real integration, rap music might never have arisen. Yet, despite a qualitative upgrade in the legal status of African Americans following the tumultuous 1960s, large pockets of black people remained economically cut off from mainstream America. In the 1970s and '80s, while soul music became increasingly slick and apolitical, something happened in the black inner city, specifically New York – more specifically the Bronx.

That something was rap, which came out of a dance party and club milieu overseen by a DJ, or Disc Jockey, who spun records. The MC, or Master of Ceremonies, was the other key figure in early rap, in charge of vocalizing a rapidfire string of rhymed phrases. Rap came out of “African-derived oral traditions of storytelling, ‘boasting’ (self-aggrandizement), ‘toasting’ (long narrative poems that sometimes bestow praises) and ‘playing the dozens’ (competitive and recreational exchange of verbal insults)” (Norfleet 353). The music has also been termed “postmodern” in that it borrows, or “samples,” rhythms and phrases from older recorded music, creating a kind of collage form.

James McBride describes the reaction of those used to older schools of music as rap became dominant: “I realize to my horror that rap--music seemingly without melody, sensibility, instruments, verse, or harmony, music with no beginning, end, or middle, music that doesn't even seem to be music--rules the world.” Once again what had seemed a strange abomination grew and spread.



Public Enemy
eLibrary

“Rappers Delight,” an extended party song by the Sugar Hill Gang, brought rap to a wider audience in 1979. In 1982 “The Message,” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, brought political consciousness to rap. Around this time rap became known by another term, hip hop: the two are often used interchangeably, although hip hop refers to the larger culture. Besides rapping and DJing, other key elements of hip hop include break dancing, graffiti, and spoken word. While most early rap was escapist, focused on dancing and partying, political and social themes became increasingly important in the late 1980s, notably in the group Public Enemy.

By the 1990s, however, a new trend became dominant: gangsta rap, fueled largely by the crack epidemic, which devastated black communities and led to a resurgent criminal element (George 42). While Snoop Dogg (Cordozar Calvin Broadus) may be the prototypical gangsta rapper, the

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problems associated with the genre were exemplified by the rivalry between the east and west coast, represented by two key figures: Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls (Christopher George Latore Wallace). By 1997 both had been shot dead, tragedies unsurprising given their lifestyles, and often blamed on the feud but with little real evidence (McGinty). Shakur has gone on to become a martyr, eulogized for the quality of his lyrics and the tragedy of his premature death.



Tupac Shakur memorial mural in Manhattan's Lower East Side
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Gangsta rap soon gained a huge commercial following among white suburban youth. Critics complain that this represents naked exploitation by record companies. For instance, Chuck D of Public Enemy decries, "appeals to the messages of death and destruction for our people...Too often we're weighed by the commercial of what sells and what's popular" (qtd in Christian). Indeed, much rap has been marked by violence and mi-

sogyny. References to women as "bitches" and "hos" (whores) abounded. Not surprisingly, this has led to extreme criticism, both inside and outside the African American community. Nelson George explains, "It's been said that African American culture is the most marketable pathology in the world" (xiii). While gangsta rap's defenders consider it as representing the social milieu of the African American underclass, its detractors believe it to be degrading and prone to being misunderstood among its many white fans.

Rap, meanwhile, has been declared past its prime, notably by Nas (Nasir Jones) , who proclaimed 'Hip Hop is Dead' as the title of his 2006 album. Yet the music continues to evolve, with new branches springing up, for instance in the appearance of a distinct southern style. George explains the continuing appeal of the music (and culture): "The truth is that hip hop—in its many guises—has reflected (and internalized) our society's woes so evocatively that it has grown from minority expression to mainstream appreciation" (211). Like past rebellious musics, from jazz to rock and roll, rap has appealed to teenage feelings of isolation in mainstream society. It joins a host of African American styles that go into remission, but reappear, crossbreed, thrive, and grow, often at the most unexpected times.

Conclusion

"You've taken my blues and gone."

--Langston Hughes

African American music has been an amazing cultural achievement, synthesizing African and European culture, often under extreme circumstances. Throughout its history, the music has rewarded its creators, but has rewarded those who borrowed from it and translated it to mainstream society far more, at least from a financial point of view. By the time rap came to the fore, the era of white performers gaining the most prominence was over, and the African Americans who created the music were recognized in the mainstream media and society. Still, complaints about musical separation continue. As late as 2003, one anonymous source explained: "the music is shared freely between races and cultures and is the great equalizer. But the music business is still separate and unequal" (Anonymous, *Ebony*).

However true this statement remains today, from a cultural point of view African American music has greatly enriched not just American but global society. If Louis Armstrong was the first internationally recognized superstar, and jazz musicians were seen as international ambassadors during the Cold War, if rhythm and blues inspired British rock groups that became more famous in the U.S. than their musical sources, rap, too, has spread across borders. It has become the latest example of the "Jes Grew" phenomenon, infusing itself into multiple musics around the world. Hip hop mogul Russell Simons explains that "Rappers in Israel, in Palestine and in Africa are imitating rappers in the United States. The poetry, the subject matter, comes from poverty and struggle" (qtd in Christian). Rap has also been synthesized into other musical forms, such as the Indian Bhangra, which began as a folk form and has become internationally popular.

African American music, then, was invented by one of the most marginalized groups in a country on its way to being a global superpower. Torn from the culture that created it, it has been re-envisioned and reinterpreted in a variety of new contexts, driven by its beat and by the feelings of rebellion and freedom it inspires. The music exists as a paradox. Created in a segregated and exploitative society, it remains a triumphant artistic achievement.

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