

History of african american musical tradition essay

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The African American musical tradition spans hundreds of years, and represents substantial changes and shifts that have affected not just African American culture, but American musical tradition as a whole. From the traditional African songs brought over in slavery, to Negro spirituals, to the eventual creation and evolution of jazz and hip hop, this tradition has gone through many changes to accommodate the needs and incorporation of many different elements of the African-American experience. In this essay, the evolution of African American musical tradition is outlined, detailing many of the turning points in said tradition and their influence, including the Harlem Renaissance and the hip hop revolution.

In slave-era black musical tradition, the level of isolation that an African local was from other cultures determined the level of retention of traditional musical and social culture. If an African community was sufficiently isolated, there were few other influences to change and mix up said musical influences. Also, the slave owners' ethnic background would determine cultural retention. Through absorption of Western styles of rhythm and song organization, songs like the field holler and the Negro spiritual became commonplace in slave communities and plantations, as slaves sang these songs to both get through the work day and to facilitate social, cultural and religious communication with each other and to God.

During the 1920s, the village of Harlem, New York, was the center stage for a revolution in art, music and culture for African-Americans. In the realm of music, one of the most important developments to come out of the Harlem Renaissance was the development of jazz music as a style and a way of life.

The “ New Negro Movement” came about as a result of a need to establish new identity for African-Americans after their freedom in the Civil War. There was still a great deal of racism present throughout the country, even in the comparatively enlightened cities of New York and Chicago, among others. The primary battlefield of this cultural movement was Harlem, New York, considered the “ cultural capital of black America.” A great number of blacks had moved to New York in order to become part of this burgeoning musical and art culture, as well as financial and job opportunities. This soon-to-be “ mecca for black music” came about due to this vast migration, making it the headquarters for the Renaissance many blacks knew was coming (Hilliard, 1989).

The origins of jazz music stem from spirituals and the blues, already existing forms of music that were created during the times of slavery; many African-Americans found employment as blues musicians through the development of this style. However, once the Harlem Renaissance came along, it became a large priority for blacks to integrate themselves into white culture, and music was the way to do it (Hilliard, 1989). White people came to appreciate anything black as a novelty; music was no exception. More and more white audiences came to appreciate the works of Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Miles Davis and the like. At the same time, black musicians wanted to advance their status in the white world while still maintaining their own identity. While performing for white audiences, they would still work with “ Negro materials” as they sang or composed. They would also exert their own

power through refusing to play for segregated audiences or leveraged their fame in order to speak against social evils such as racism (Hilliard, 1989).

The places and venues in which this revolution took place were just as important to the movement as the artists themselves. While the nightclubs were the training grounds for new jazz musicians, careers were made at places such as the Savoy Ballroom and Apollo Theater. Swing and jazz found their homes there, as evidenced by songs such as “ Stompin’ at the Savoy,” an ode to the importance of that venue. The Harlem Renaissance, however, has its capital in the still-existing Apollo Theater in New York City, where Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and many other prominent jazz artists found their start (Hilliard, 1989).

Jazz and the nightclub are inextricably linked; the development of the club experience in Harlem went hand in hand with honing and perfecting the jazz style of music. The fierce competition that came from having so many different musicians attempting to develop jazz led to perfectionists of all kinds, separating the wheat from the chaff until you had absolutely stellar musicians and performers, such as Duke Ellington, Willie “ The Lion” Smith, Jelly Roll Morton, and the like (“ Harlem Renaissance Music”, 2011). This is not to say this was the only place where black jazz artists studied their craft – many composers studied abroad in France and Germany, taking tips from Nadia Boulanger, a composer-teacher who managed to cultivate individual artistic attributes while enhancing their ability and craftsmanship (Southern, 1971).

The rent party became a large part of the underground jazz movement during the Renaissance – these were after hours parties that started as soon as the doors closed in many establishments, and popular artists would frequent them on a regular basis. They were called ‘rent parties’ because they were essentially fundraising events in order to pay the rent in the expensive Harleemn households many black musicians found themselves in. These impromptu parties formed the lifeblood of the after hours jazz renaissance, and became yet another forum for people to hone their craft.

Some of the most important black artists of the 20th century came directly from the vibrant musical landscape of the Harlem Renaissance. Louis Armstrong, along with Dizzy Gillespie, became an innovator of the trumpet, elevating this instrument above its lower-class origins; his career was started during the Harlem Renaissance, when he came to New York. Duke Ellington was part of the group of artists who revolutionized the piano and brought new swing styles to its performance; he is arguably the most important musician to come out of the Renaissance. These figures were part of the underground who found new fame as a part of the jazz movement, honing their skills in nightclubs and in smaller theaters before finding their career highs in concert halls (Hilliard, 1989).

One important figure in the advancement of black music in the Harlem Renaissance was Roland Hayes, a concert artist who became the first black man to gain widespread acceptance on an international scale. Due to his drive and artistry, white and black audiences alike wanted to attend his concerts, and was thought of as an artist before an African-American. He was

always optimistic about how important Negro folk music was to the movement – he claimed that Negroes had become ashamed of singing their “ crude little songs before white folks,” and this led to a sense of shame about their own identity. He claimed his purpose was to “ have [his] share in rediscovering the qualities [blacks] have almost let slip away from us” (Southern, 1971).

While the Harlem Renaissance had its roots in creating a new cultural movement for blacks, there was some resistance to it even within the black community. Many different groups had varying ideas on the best ways to reinvent their culture and cement themselves as a cultural and social force in America. There was a constant struggle during the Harlem Renaissance between upper class blacks who were attempting to assimilate themselves into the business culture of whites, particularly in the major cities, and the lower class blacks who were attempting to revolutionize music through the jazz movement. Jazz quickly turned into “ the people’s music,” being accepted by lower-class blacks wholeheartedly at first, but the black “ cultural elite” had a harder time with it. This is due to the fact that they did not want their culture to be thought of as ‘ base’ or ‘ lower-class,’ thus perpetuating black stereotypes (" Harlem Renaissance Music", 2011). Many of the mainstream in the Harlem Renaissance had a hard time adjusting to the nightclub culture and jazz music at first, attempting to separate themselves from these revolutionaries (Hilliard, 1989).

However, some of these differences started to be bridged through the development of the “ Harlem Stride Style” of piano, a development of piano

playing that elevated the jazz style of music beyond being that of “ low lifes” and somewhere towards the level of the black social elite. After all, while brass instruments were considered a Southern symbol of down-home classless music, the piano was thought to be an instrument for the rich; developing a uniquely Negro style for the piano and integrating brass instruments in the Harlem Stride Style to form a jazz band made it more palatable to the elite.

As jazz and rock music began to be appropriated by increasing numbers of white audiences, African-American communities reacted and evolved by developing hip hop. Hip hop has become a significant and strongly associated aspect of African-American culture, as it continues traditional African musical forms with contemporary inventions. Hip hop music can find its roots in Jamaican traditions of reggae and musical poetry - especially the practice of 'toasting' - which DJ Clive 'Cool Herc' Campbell brought to New York City from his native Jamaica. As he assimilated into the Bronx, he started his own musical career by incorporating these Jamaican forms into his works, which would form the creating the beginning stages and forms of what would become hip hop (Campbell & Chang, 2005). The hip hop movement started in big underground venues, starting the New York club scene that would elevate this style of music to prominence; rhythmic percussion and the use of funk song interludes were combined in what is called 'break-beat deejaying', creating deanceable beats. 'Rapping' was also created in this environment, as the deejays would speak in rhyme over these breakbeats, using syncopation to create wholly new lyrical beats that called

back to traditional African tribal dances and the field holler (Campbell & Chang, 2005).

At this time, hip hop started to take off as a cultural movement; it started to personify the gang and urban culture of the South Bronx of New York City. Graffiti, rap music, gang fashion and b-boying culture started to personify hip hop, as its influence grew. Competition is a big factor in the hip hop culture, which stemmed from the macho competitiveness and oneupmanship personified in street gangs. However, instead of the violence inherent in gang life, Afrika Bambaataa found merit in using those energies to creative pursuits. This led to the creation of the Zulu Nation, a conglomerate of all aspects of hip hop culture, from graffiti artists to rappers and more. With this step, hip hop started to become nationally recognized (Forman & Neal, 2004, p. 2).

In conclusion, the African American musical tradition evolved substantially to accommodate changes in the black experience from slavery to the hip hop era. Traditional African songs and stylings were incorporated into the slave experience, which then evolved into ragtime and jazz music. The Harlem Renaissance allowed for a turning point in black culture, especially in terms of black music. Jazz moved the essence of black music out of the spiritual and blues into a new type of music that was revolutionary, competitive, and slightly more acceptable by those in the black social elite, through its integration of the piano. Pioneers such as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and more carried jazz into the white mainstream, making it not only acceptable for all blacks, but by an increasingly interested white culture as well. African-

American music evolved even further to reflect the increasing disenfranchisement and poverty of low-income blacks and the gang and club culture, thus resulting in the development of hip hop and rap as innovative new styles of music - still borrowing from their traditional African roots.

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