Ideology and Aurality in the Vernacular Traditions of African-American Music (CA. 1890-1950)

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... nothing more clearly affirms one's "class," nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 18)

It is often difficult to identify precisely the impact of social history on music history; for the history of African-American music, especially, this problem is a central one. This study explores that aspect of social history involving relations between African Americans and European Americans. A useful way to approach the social-musical nexus is through the concept of ideology. And it would seem to be the case that, very often, the same structural relationships that give rise to ideology also bring into collision two paradigms for learning and transmitting music—paradigms, that is, of aurality and literacy. I am interested in exploring the benefits of working with these two broad topics together, especially as they are relevant to music from the first half of this century, the period of Scott Joplin, Charley Patton, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Mahalia Jackson, Robert Johnson, and Charlie Parker. Simply to make such a list of musicians is enough to draw attention to the tremendous diversity of style that marks this period and to suggest that this stylistic diversity owes a good deal to diversity in social experience. The entangled diversity of the vernacular traditions demands methodological flexibility in analysis. It demands an ability to respond to nuance and to varied combinations of musical codes, and for this I find a semi-
otic framework to be useful. The essay is organized in three parts. First is a sketch of general methodology. This is followed by reflections on practice, as organized around two different social orientations—first, the vocal styles of blues and gospel that, for the first half of this century, tended to stay mainly within the African-American community; and, second, the dance-based idioms of ragtime, jazz, and bebop that participated more routinely in a tradition of European-American patronage.

I

Of the main elements in my title, "African-American music" is perhaps least in need of definition. But to avoid confusion, I should explain that I am working with music made by people in the United States who trace their ancestry, at least partially, back to Africa through slavery.

The idea of "vernacular" music arises through the time-honored analogy between music and language. One historical reference for the linguistic concept is comparison between Latin and the vernacular languages of Europe. Two distinctions built into this usage of the term vernacular will be useful here: there is a distinction in social class, between an elite idiom and a common idiom; and there is a distinction involving transmission, one language being associated with writing and the other having evolved mainly through aural practice. These two distinctions provide a straightforward basis for the analogy between vernacular language and vernacular music. A vernacular idiom may find its way into the concert hall, but it has not evolved there. It has been sustained by diverse and well-distributed popular patronage—or, indeed, by day-to-day practice that does not depend on patronage—rather than by top-down, elite patronage. Independence from writing is of great importance, though, again, the matter is not absolute. Vernacular music may be written down at any time, for one purpose or another, and one genre or another may even give rise to a tradition that is conceived and disseminated in writing. But, substantially, vernacular music evolves independently of notation.

If a particular kind of music seems to stretch the umbrella concept of vernacular, then this is a tension that may be lived with and, one hopes, fruitfully exposed. Scott Joplin and Charlie Parker both worked with an awareness of European high-art music, and both moved away from the basic arena of the vernacular, though in different ways. It is not that we must place their music in one category or the other. Rather, the point is to analyze their departures from the dual markers of a vernacular idiom, aurality, and widely distributed popular patronage. There may be a mix of reasons for such departures, including the practical demand of making
money, the artistic demand of an unfettered imagination, and, as we shall see, ideology. There is some small evidence that Joplin thought of his ragtime compositions as belonging to the tradition of aurally transmitted dance music, played on strings (Joplin’s mother played banjo and his father played violin) and on piano. We may read Joplin as being motivated to transform this aural tradition into a notated one; in any event, Joplin’s commitment to musical literacy was central to his achievement. Parker, on the other hand, was not interested in disseminating his music through notation; indeed, his accomplishment may be regarded as the apotheosis of aural practice. But he is less limited by the demands of broadly distributed, popular patronage. It is doubtful that his innovative music from the mid-1940s could have found its first, nourishing patronage anywhere but New York City, where there was an audience of connoisseurs large enough to sustain a specialized—and in some ways elite—patronage. Joplin abandons aurality in favor of literacy (but he does not abandon popular patronage); Parker abandons popular patronage in favor of a kind of elite patronage (but he does not abandon aurality). Each departs from the fundamental premises of vernacular practice, as that concept is being defined here. Yet each idiom must be understood as having evolved through a vernacular practice.

Analysis of how ideology affects music can move in many different directions, depending on how one invokes the various shades of meaning that cluster around the word ideology and depending on how one thinks about the mysteries of musical meaning in general. Here I am interested in a fairly narrow definition of ideology. I am concerned neither with a vaguely conceived “system of thought” (a common use of ideology in cultural studies) nor with the explicit belief systems of organized political groups. Rather, ideology is considered as a more or less covert force that is shaped by relations of power and that may have an impact, more or less covertly, on music as a symbolic phenomenon. In a useful critique of the concept of ideology and its application in cultural analysis, John B. Thompson frames the matter in this way (italics in original): “To interpret ideology is to explicate the connection between the meaning mobilized by symbolic forms and the relations of domination which that meaning serves to establish and sustain” (1990, 293).

Thompson also gives an even more basic definition: “Ideology, broadly speaking, is meaning in the service of power” (7). Ideologically inflected meaning becomes more active and vivid when arrangements of power are particularly asymmetrical—that is, when there are severe imbalances

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1. It is reported that Joplin preferred to compose away from the piano and that he sometimes had difficulty playing his own compositions. Thus, his break with aurality would seem to have been complete.
in the distribution of power. In a traditional Marxist view, asymmetrical relations of power are organized through systematic distinctions of social class. In the United States, with its egalitarian ideals and its strong mythology of the self-made man, such distinctions have been de-emphasized, while distinctions based on race have been correspondingly emphasized. Louis Dumont argues that, in the United States, "racism fulfills an old function under a new form. It is as if it were representing in an egalitarian society a resurgence of what was differently and more directly and naturally expressed in a hierarchical society" (1977, 84).

Given the intermingling of racism with asymmetrical distributions of power in the United States, the ideological inflection of cultural symbols of African Americans would seem inevitable. And given the importance of African-American music within African-American culture, it is hard to imagine that it has escaped such mediation, no matter how much we might like to regard music as a pure art form, and no matter how difficult it may be to identify the subtle workings of ideology as it plays out in musical detail.

Thompson recognizes that the interpretation of ideological content in symbolic forms is always risky, since "the meaning of a symbolic form is not given, fixed determinate; to offer an interpretation is to project a possible meaning, one of several possible meanings which may diverge from, or conflict with, one another" (1990, 294). How true this is of music! Musical meaning is multivalent, as a rule. Can the meaning of a music be ideological for one person but not at all for another? That would seem to always be the case. We do not typically receive, from the creators of music, testimony explaining its ideological content. But these problems should not stop us from prying open the content of music, either at the point of its creation or at some point in its flexible movement through social fields that are highly charged with tensions of economic and political disparity.

My interest here is to work beneath the surface of genres by focusing analysis on stylistic codes. One way to pry open the ideological content of music—and, indeed, the ideological content of any aspect of symbolic culture—is through semiotic analysis, according to which one identifies a sign vehicle (the representamen in Peircean semiotics) that carries meaning in a given context. In this article I shall discuss the ideological inflection of four different stylistic codes: speechlike song, the polyrhythmic paradigm, the concept of a "piece" of music, and harmony.

2. Dumont's observation is glossed by Werner Sollors: "The concepts of the self-made man and of Jim Crow had their origins in the same culture at about the same time, whereas aristocratic societies had no need for either . . . It was not the hereditary privilege of aristocratic blue blood but the culturally constructed supposed liability of black blood that mattered most in the United States" (1986, 38).
Speechlike song. African-American singing commonly features speechlike inflections; by extension, the same inflections may mark instrumental performance. The broader context for this practice is that of an actively marked continuum from speech to song. Speech may be musical (by "musical," here, I mean a systematic use of precisely measured spectrums of pitch and time), and music may be speechlike (which is to say, a more casual organization of pitch and time). The African origins of the African-American practice are clear. Speechlike inflections may be used along with melismas to express heightened emotion. Bending of pitch may be divorced from speechlike inflections and used both as an expression of heightened emotion and as a syntactic principle for organizing melody (with the bent pitch having a cadential function). A blurred distinction between music and speech may also be achieved through the use of "dirty" timbre in the voice, such as growling or straining.

Polyrhythmic paradigm. The vague term polyrhythm may serve as a shorthand way of identifying a paradigm in which instruments and voices in the ensemble serve one of two basic functions. One or more parts function as a fixed rhythmic group, which has the purpose of establishing a regular temporal cycle. The cycle may be simply a brief ostinato, or it may be longer and more complicated. As a supplement to the fixed group, one or more parts function as a variable rhythmic group, which has the purpose of creating some kind of rhythmic clash against the foundation. Techniques for achieving rhythmic clash include additive rhythm, syncopation, slowing down or speeding up of the pulse, double time, off-beat accents, and polymeter. This paradigm is commonplace in sub-Saharan African cultures and in a great deal of African-American music. A fundamental point of analysis is that the activity of the variable group is always understood in terms of its relation to the cyclic foundation of the fixed group. As I have argued elsewhere, pitch relations may be used to reinforce and even duplicate, in an independent way, this basic syntactical arrangement.

The concept of a "piece" of music. In European-American music, the idea that music must be made to form a "piece" is almost always close at hand. To think in this way means that the music is conceived as substantially fixed and closed and as having a unique identity. Different from this

3. See List (1963). As List's study implies, there are many possible gradients along the axis that marks the range between speech and song. My use in the present article of the general category of speechlike song will serve to organize a general methodological framework. This sign vehicle, like the others, may demand more nuanced interpretation in response to actual variation in localized practice.

4. I analyze music from the Ewe people of Ghana in Brothers (1994), with citations of additional literature cited there. I argue that pitch relations are used in jazz to reinforce and even duplicate this syntactical arrangement.
is the typically African idea that a musical performance is neither fixed nor closed but, instead, substantially flexible and open-ended; there may be some generic identity, or the sense of distinct and unique identity may not be important at all. The flexible and open-ended orientation is evident in pure form in African-American practices like the ring shout and the jam session. When music is commodified, this orientation can cause problems, for which one solution is the "fade out" ending on commercial sound recordings.

_Harmony._ The word *harmony* is used here to mean rules for the formation and organization of vertical sonorities. Most likely, Africans brought harmonic styles with them to the United States. It would also seem likely, however, that such harmonic styles were quickly overshadowed in the American setting, due to the prominence of the harmonic system that slaves encountered in European-American music.

In semiotic analysis that builds on the philosophy of Charles Peirce, a sign vehicle may acquire meaning by indexing (a sense of pointing toward, by virtue of some kind of spatio-temporal association) an object. This connection is made sense of by an interpretant, and a triadic sign (object, representamen, and interpretant) is formed.⁵ Through associations in practice with either African Americans or European Americans, the four stylistic codes just described have served as sign vehicles indexing ethnic identity. By virtue of these associations, the signs may also index the "object" of ideological position.

Before approaching that analysis directly, I should clarify my use of semiotics. First, we may recognize the obvious point that ideological position is not the only meaning that sign vehicles carry. Indexical signs routinely point to more than one object, and such multivalence would seem to be especially characteristic of music.⁶ Not only does a sign vehicle routinely carry more than one indexical meaning, it may also carry iconic meaning (a chromatic melisma may be construed as intensely emo-

⁵. There is now a large body of literature on musical semiotics, but the approach most directly relevant to the present study is exemplified in Mertz and Parmentier (1985); see especially the introductory essay by Mertz, "Beyond Symbolic Anthropology: Introducing Semiotic Mediation" (1-22). As Mertz suggests: "This move 'beyond symbolic anthropology' does not deny the important role of symbols in culture, but it does seek to ground the study of such symboling in a broader analysis of signs at the theoretical level, and also in a contextual understanding of the place of signs in society. In an apparent paradox, studies that take this step into a seemingly more technical or intense semiotic are also increasingly concerned with social praxis; the old opposition of 'symbolic'-'idealist' versus 'praxis'- 'materialist' does not pertain" (1-2). For a persuasive application of this orientation to music, see Meintjes (1990).

⁶. "Now the point is that music is bound to demonstrate this because no musical utterance can ever be bound, even falsely, to a single essential signified. Language seems constantly to arrest itself at 'true meanings,' and it is the function of literary critics to do this;
tional by virtue of its resemblance to moaning; the iconic connection forms the basis for a stylistic convention in music). As a second clarification of my use of semiotics, I should note that any musical feature may index ideological position. When the Northern blues singer Ethel Waters bragged about the superiority of her diction, relative to that of African-American blues singers from the South, we may discover a basis for reading diction as an index of assimilation. It is possible to read criticism of Bessie Smith’s slower tempos, relative to the peppy tempos of Northern, show-style blues singers, in the same way. By putting special emphasis on the four sign vehicles described above, I do not mean to suggest that they are more important than all others. Yet I would emphasize their importance over a long period of time and in many diverse contexts. As a third clarification of my use of semiotics, I should explain that it will be useful and necessary both to focus on general sign vehicles, as I have identified them above, and to break down the analysis by making qualitative distinctions. Harmony, for example, serves as a general sign, and certain patterns of harmonic organization—harmonic styles—acquire more particular indexicality. And this brings us to one final clarification: the way these sign vehicles are interpreted (that is, our reading of the “interpretant”) will vary according to the context in which they were read. Thus, it is possible for the same sign vehicle to index different ideological positions, according to different contexts. The entangled diversity of the vernacular traditions of African-American music requires this kind of methodological flexibility.

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African-American music has been made in the context of a severely asymmetrical power structure, from the slave plantation through the present day. I would not wish to argue (though others have made such an argument) that this asymmetry has had an impact on all African-American music. To a degree, African-American music has evolved in relation to European-American social structures and cultural values. Yet the tradition also carries its own internal momentum, and this momentum may have nothing whatsoever to do with European-American prac—

7. Consider Mertz again: “[T]he pointing finger, or index, can only be understood as a sign carrying meaning in relation to the object it picks out. Context, then, is crucial for the index” (Mertz and Parmentier 1985, 4).
tice. But when African Americans have made music with a sense of how it is positioned in relation to the tastes and traditions of European America—that is, how they themselves are positioned in an asymmetrical power structure—musical meaning may be mediated by ideology.

From the very beginnings of the African-American experience in the United States, three different positions vis-à-vis European America have shaped the use of the four sign vehicles described above. First, African Americans have made for themselves music that deliberately resembles European-American music. We may describe this position as one of assimilation. Second, African Americans have made music not for themselves but for European Americans, and in doing so they have designed the music according to European-American taste. We may describe this position as cross over. Working in a cross-over context, the African-American musician may reveal a talent for mixing “his own” kind of music with musical qualities associated with European Americans. Such a mix would be the key to the cross-over position: if the musical product is exactly the same as the product circulating among European-American musicians, then the African-American musician holds no particular advantage over his European-American counterpart. In order to gain such an advantage, the musical product can be neither “purely” European American nor “purely” African American—how ever it is that a pure kind of musical identity is defined and perceived at any given moment. The blend of two traditions, the mixing of the familiar with the exotic, produces excitement.8 The third position that has shaped the use of the four sign vehicles described above is the situation of African Americans who set out independently, with an interest in highlighting differences between the two traditions. We may describe this third position as showing an interest in autonomy. In any given situation, more than one position may be present, and the sense of positioning may play out on a number of levels, from the most categorical sense of public stance to the subtlest details of stylistic nuance. These kinds of complications are typical of actual practice in the world. Still, it may be useful to isolate, in a rigorous way, these positions as analytical categories, while recognizing that the implied categorical simplicity is rarely in place in any pure way.

The assimilative position is clearly ideological. Pierre Bourdieu’s

8. My use of the term cross over differs slightly from its common use in marketing within the music industry. My use of the term is simpler and more purely sociological: I am talking about the interest held by an African-American musician in reaching a European-American audience. The marketing category is more elaborate, though, paradoxically, it is easier to quantify and study, since it depends not on an unarticulated point of view but on sales statistics and marketing strategies. For a recent discussion of the marketing phenomenon, with attention to stylistic nuances, see Brackett (1994) (with additional references on the term cross over cited on 794 n. 12).
notion of "symbolic capital" is applicable here. European-American cultural symbols are regarded as a source of prestige, and they may be accumulated and used in a way that is analogous to the accumulation and use of economic capital. In a social field of upward class mobility, symbolic capital may be valuable indeed. The presentation of Handel's Messiah by an African-American church in Chicago during the mid-1920s, for example, may be read in these terms.

The cross-over position is less clearly tied to ideology, as the concept is being used here. The hired musician must appeal to the audience. If the musician does not use stylistic codes with which the audience is familiar, then the musician is out of work. The cross-over musician may use the very stylistic codes that mark the assimilative position. But when used by cross-over musicians, these codes will not necessarily index an ideological position of assimilation. At the most basic level, the cross-over musician is interested not in the acquisition of symbolic capital but, rather, in the acquisition of skills that increase the value of his or her labor. The cross-over musician may be motivated to creatively exploit those skills, and these efforts may yield spectacular and unpredictable results. Nevertheless, the position vis-à-vis European-American culture is defined by the workings of the marketplace, not by ideology. The function of the stylistic code is technical rather than ideological; in Marxist terms, we are analyzing the workings of the "base" rather than "superstructure." To the extent that we are able to distinguish differences in position, we may be able to better understand varied uses of the same stylistic code. African-American musicians like Scott Joplin (who was interested in cross over and in assimilation) and Louis Armstrong (who was interested in cross over but not in assimilation) learned well the value of harmony. Their different uses of it reflect differences in position.

The position of cultural autonomy is also less clearly tied to ideology, as we have defined it. It is not motivated by the acquisition of symbolic capital. Yet this position may, very often, take shape in awareness of the assimilative position (and, in a more complicated situation, in awareness of cross over, as well), and to the extent that this is true, it is conditioned by ideology. Furthermore, in a context of economic and political disenfranchisement, cultural autonomy may receive special emphasis. The assertion of cultural autonomy may stand as a claim in the direction of—or, perhaps, as a substitute for—economic and political power. This analysis merges with the notion (discussed further below) that African Americans have, in response to European-American appropriations of

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10. On this historical milieu and the importance of concert programs, see Harris (1992).
their music, revitalized the core values of their own tradition in gestures of cultural independence. These three positions—assimilation, cross over, and autonomy—must have been formed from the very beginnings of the African-American experience in the United States through the workings of the slave plantation, where an asymmetrical power structure existed in virtually pure form. After emancipation, asymmetrical power structures continued in more modulated form, and they continue, of course, until the present day.

Ideological mediation frequently interacts with another general phenomenon that involves differences between paradigms for learning and transmitting music, paradigms, that is, of aurality and literacy. In the paradigm of aurality, music is learned and created "by ear," without the use of notation; in the paradigm of literacy, music is learned and created mainly (though not exclusively) through notation. Barely studied to date is the idea that the differences between these two paradigms outweigh expediency; the two paradigms may be understood as giving rise to contrasting musical styles and values. Because speechlike song is based on the casual inflections of speech (in contrast to the precisely measured steps of music), it is intrinsically bound to aurality. The practice cannot be learned and transmitted through notation. The polyrhythmic paradigm works in either system. Yet the musical results that flow through one system or the other will tend to vary in predictable ways. It would seem that harmony, as it developed in European music, could only have arisen through musical literacy. Yet established harmonic idioms may be absorbed with little or no use of notation, and this process has, undoubtably, led to important transformations of harmonic style within the vernacular traditions. Literacy is certainly not required in order to establish the idea that a piece of music is fixed and unique. Yet literacy will tend to emphasize this idea, while aurality will tend to de-emphasize or ignore it in favor of an open-ended approach. As I have said already, the same structural relationships that give rise to ideology have also brought into collision these two paradigms. Furthermore, since, in American society, verbal literacy is a source of power and legitimacy, special value has been placed on musical literacy and the stylistic codes that index it.

Through a vivid metaphor, W. C. Handy alludes to the mixing together of stylistic codes, associations of social class ("back rooms" versus "the parlor"), and paradigms of aurality and literacy:

At first folk melodies like these were kept in the back rooms of my mind while the parlor was reserved for dressed-up music. Musical books continued to get much of my attention. There was still an old copy of Steiner's *First Lessons in Harmony*, purchased back in Henderson for fifty cents. While traveling with the minstrels I had bought from Lyon and Healy a copy of
Moore’s *Encyclopedia of Music*. For a time books became a passion. I’m afraid I came to think that everything worth while was to be found in books. But the blues did not come from books. Suffering and hard luck were the midwives that birthed these songs. The blues were conceived in aching hearts. (1941, 75–76)

For present purposes, Handy’s last two sentences might be revised to read: “Aurality was the midwife that birthed these songs. The blues were conceived in the tradition of speechlike song.” In Handy’s metaphor, differences between the paradigms of aurality and literacy, between ideological positions, and between musical codes are assigned to different rooms in a musician’s mind. It is rare that we are able to build on such explicit acknowledgment of this kind of entanglement. But this rarity should not obscure the likelihood that these issues have forcefully shaped the vernacular traditions. The remainder of this essay represents an attempt to illustrate the analytical orientation already sketched through examples of musical activity during the first half of this century, the spectacular period that gave rise to ragtime, blues, gospel, jazz, and bebop. ¹¹

II

Ain’t too many more left. They got all these white kids now. Some of them can play good blues. They play so much, run a ring around you playin’ guitar, but they cannot vocal like the black man. (Muddy Waters, quoted in Palmer 1981, 260)

Some musical signs change and move through an ideologically conditioned field more easily than others. Singing styles do not move particularly well. It may be argued that, for the first half of this century especially, speechlike song stood as the strongest musical marker of in-group identity among African Americans. This status was gained mainly through the highlighted role of this style in blues and gospel. Observing that white musicians are able to capture the guitar style of blues more easily than its vocal style, Muddy Waters was not offering a racist judgment to the effect that whites are unqualified to sing the blues. He was simply acknowledging the status of vocal style as a deeply rooted marker of cultural identity. Among genres of African-American music that found a commercial market, blues and gospel remained, during the first half of this century, most firmly within the community. And this must

¹¹. Moving through some of the same themes developed in the present essay, although with a different emphasis, is Sidran (1971). Emphasizing sociological analysis of literature is Baker (1984).
have had something to do with the foregrounding in each genre of speechlike song.

It is easy to forget that the status of this stylistic code had to be attained, that it did not unfold inevitably, as a natural, unifying principle for a diverse community. For the formation of blues, the important steps seem to have occurred around 1900. It has been observed that, on first hearing, the blues sounded strange to both W. C. Handy, the so-called father of the blues, and Ma Rainey, the so-called mother of the blues (Palmer 1981, 44). In Florence, Alabama, Handy benefited from a musical education in public school that few schools today even try to match. His training enabled him, by age ten, to "catalogue almost any sound that came to my ears, using the tonic sol-fa system," and to sing "excerpts from the works of Wagner, Bizet and Verdi and other masters—all without instrumental accompaniment" (Handy 1941, 13–14). Given this training, it is not surprising that Delta blues accompanied by slide guitar sounded weird to him when he first heard it in Tutwiler, Mississippi, around 1903 (74). In due course, blues gained momentum as a defining feature of African-American culture, but at the beginning the idiom sounded unfamiliar to many.

Blues has been marked by its combination of three of the musical components highlighted in this study. In the blues of Charley Patton, to cite one musician of importance, speechlike song is accompanied by a texture that captures, to some extent, the polyrhythmic paradigm and also by the principle chords of the European-derived tonal system (tonic, subdominant, and dominant, or I, IV, and V). These three components had independent histories that came together during the last decades of the nineteenth century. There is no shortage of hypotheses about how to reconstruct the sketchy history of early blues. This is not the place to fully review this complicated historical problem, yet it is important to reflect on the formation of the idiom, given its status for African-American culture during the twentieth century and given the relevance to the idiom of all four sign vehicles sketched above. Different styles of blues probably evolved in parallel at various locations. The early history of the important tradition from the Mississippi Delta can be approached through the biography of Charley Patton (who was born in 1891), one of its first great practitioners.

Eddie "Son" House and other blues singers explained that the most important antecedent to the vocal style of blues was the field holler (quoted in Evans 1982, 42–43). House used the term long meter to describe the slow tempo and melismatic profile of the field holler; the term also identifies a practice of heterophonic religious singing. Field hollers tend to be ornate and melismatic, with preference for a "rip-saw tooth" melodic
profile—"a steep rise . . . followed by a gentle sloping down of the tune; then another sudden rise—then a gentle sloping down, and so on" (Oliver 1970, 62). This melodic idiom may have been localized and not particularly well known throughout the South; it may have had a rather narrow New World history that goes back, through the griot singers of West Africa, to an Islamic heritage. Yet the speechlike song tradition that was part of this vocal tradition would have been more familiar to most African Americans. Charley Patton appears to have apprenticed with a specialist in field hollers named Henry Sloan, sometimes providing guitar accompaniment to Sloan's field hollers and modeling his vocal style (Evans 1987, 140).

Patton also had a more traditional apprenticeship with a string band at Drew. A contemporary string band from Cleveland is described by Handy, whose minstrel orchestra performed there around this time. The local musicians asked if they could take the stage and play a few dances. Handy describes their performance:

They were led by a long-legged chocolate boy and their band consisted of just three pieces, a battered guitar, a mandolin and a worn-out bass. The music they made was pretty well in keeping with their looks. They struck up one of those over-and-over strains that seem to have no very clear beginning and certainly no ending at all. The strumming attained a disturbing monotony, but on and on it went, a kind of stuff that has long been associated with cane rows and levee camps. Their eyes rolled. Their shoulders swayed. And through it all that little agonizing strain persisted. . . . A rain of silver dollars began to fall around the outlandish, stomping feet. The dancers went wild. (1941, 76–77)

The combination of a vocal idiom derived from the field holler with a polyrhythmic paradigm that captured the excitement of a string dance-band—this is a satisfying way of conceiving Patton's blues style. Although, as Peter van der Merwe (1989) has argued, the antecedents to the blues may have been far more diverse and complex than this simple model would suggest, this would seem to be the key point in the establishment of blues as a firm marker of in-group identity: the two sign vehicles of speechlike song and the polyrhythmic paradigm, each closely associated with African-American ethnic identity, merged together.

These two sign vehicles also merged with harmony. One irony in the history of the blues is the use, again and again, decade after decade, of the

12. This is a description from A. M. Jones of a West African melody type. It is quoted by Paul Oliver, who develops the argument that griot singers carried on an African tradition that formed an important antecedent for blues.

13. Patton first apprenticed with a string band of mandolin, violin, guitar, and bass around 1905 at age 14; see Evans (1987, 139–141).
three main chords that define a "tonality" in the European-derived system of harmonic organization—the tonic, subdominant, and dominant. On the one hand, these chords form a harmonic formula that has, from very early on, stood as an identifying feature of the idiom. On the other hand, analysis of how harmony and melody interact is hardly straightforward; in the early period, especially, it is obscure. Patton's biography suggests that blues formed through a process by which European-American harmony was brought to an established melodic style. There is no reason to believe that the earlier, pre-blues history of the field holler made any use of harmony (contrary to the evolution of spirituals, for example, and contrary to the later history of the holler, which may have been touched by harmonic developments in blues). The question, then, is why harmony was brought to the blues, and what it means once it is there.

Harmony's firm role may have been established only when the idiom moved into the hands of the professional singer-guitarist (called "songster," "musicianer," or "music physicianer"; Oliver 1984, 20). Was harmony a mark of status for the professional musician, who, by adding chords to field hollers, classified himself as an accomplished musician worth paying—as opposed to an amateur musician who sang for free and for himself in a cotton field? Is it a mark of assimilation, an attempt to put African-American blues on an equal competitive footing with the other harmonically inflected kinds of music that the songsters mastered? Or did harmony find its firm role in the idiom by virtue of its function in song making, providing, perhaps, a sense of narrative periodicity in the unfolding of chorus after chorus, as well as the definition of a temporal cycle in the service of dancing? In any event, the main point may be that the chords are there because professional musicians put them there. The professional songsters may well have been encouraged to master harmony through their participation in a cross-over market; for one reason or another, they transferred chords from the European-American repertory that was part of their routine over to the blues. If cross-over participation encouraged harmonic mastery, however, it is unlikely that it had a direct effect on the formation of blues, a formation that, more likely, occurred largely if not exclusively within the African-American community. Gains

14. Consider, in this light, Richard Middleton's discussion of repetition and harmony in blues: "Often, however, the sequences are built not on 'narrative' harmonic progressions, but tonic-subdominant or tonic-dominant juxtapositions, in a way analogous to, and perhaps originating in, twelve-bar blues harmonic-structural practice; the effect is of quasi-musieomatic harmonic units, rather than a discursive flow" (1990, 276). Middleton's idea of how various aspects of repetition and other stylistic features relate to (either complementing or modifying or undermining) a sense of narrative that is provided by functional harmony offers much potential for development.
in research over the past few decades demonstrate how much remains to be done in sorting through the details of the early period; there is every reason to believe that there will be an opportunity to base musical and sociological points of interpretation on a better footing in the future.

* * * * *

The issue of how the concept of a “piece” of music may or may not enter into the vernacular traditions of African-American music been raised most directly by Christopher Small, who uses the word *musicking* ("the present participle of the regrettably non-existent verb ‘to music’") to emphasize his view that music is an activity, not an object (1987, 13). This is true of all music, Small feels, but it is particularly true of African and African-American music. One may appreciate the important point being made here, at the same time that one feels the need to develop it further, in a way that yet admits the force of the idea of a musical piece. Surely the concept of a piece is relevant for Duke Ellington, regarded by some as the greatest composer America has ever had. Ellington published his “pieces,” just as most composers do, though he did not regard the published product as fixed or complete. He performed his pieces for sound recordings, fully aware that they would remain fixed for eternity. He also performed them publicly, both in choreographed settings at the Cotton Club, where it was important that the piece stay pretty much the same from night to night, and for the dancing pleasure of patrons who might hear the piece but once, making it irrelevant whether it changed from night to night. Then he modified the piece over time, so that, for example, “New East St. Louis Toodle-Oo” establishes its independence from the original “East St. Louis Toodle-Oo,” as if to make a historical statement, to mark off the growth of a composer’s skill. These situations make clear that the piece is not fixed, but they also make clear that the concept is hardly irrelevant. Instead of dismissing the concept, we need to examine the details of how it surfaces and changes, from context to context. The idea that a musical performance should be shaped to form a piece is a contested issue in both blues and gospel, though for different reasons and with very different results.

Handy mentions the cyclic nature of the Delta string band performance that he witnessed in Cleveland—"They struck up one of those over-and-over strains that seem to have no very clear beginning and certainly no ending at all." Delta blues surely followed this model. David Evans describes the phenomenon of floating verses, and he develops the idea that early blues musicians had a very casual notion of a distinct identity for each piece. They frequently abandon the sense of a continuous narra-
tive. A single performance might go on indefinitely. The idea of a musical cycle is in force, as each chorus is more or less the same length, with more or less the same pattern of chords. Evans suggests that the reason we have only one or two recordings from many early blues musicians is that they found it difficult to meet the expectation of recording companies that every recorded title be unique. Condensing an open-ended performance of cycles into a three-minute recording was not difficult, but the musicians did not easily think of one piece as having lyrics and melody completely different from all others (Evans 1982, 70–75).

Surely Small’s idea of musicking applies also to the jam sessions that were so important for the growth of bebop. The performance is open-ended, and all that matters, with respect to form, is the grounding of the improvisation in a recurring cycle; most likely, the cycle will be defined as twelve-bar blues or thirty-two-bar song form. For commercial recordings, however, Charlie Parker sketched out “head” themes in taxi cabs on his way to sessions. The head is used to frame the improvisation, serving as introduction and closing material for the three-minute recording. The recorded performance then gets a name, just as a swing-era dance arrangement has a name, and musical identity is projected onto the head theme. For decades, musicians have memorized these themes. However modified and marginal it may be, the concept of a piece is in place. What drives the conception of a piece in both of these situations, blues recordings in the 1920s and bebop recordings in the 1940s, is the legal issue of copyright, as it is tied to commercial distribution. The recording itself—the material object of consumption—forces the issue of distinct identity. It is this focus on a document that seems to solidify the notion of distinct pieces, and we can discover in these cases how the aural tradition finds common ground with the written tradition, where the sense of “the piece” is tied to the visual representation of music through a written document. The legal rules of the marketplace force makers of vernacular music to participate in the practice of making distinct pieces, and participate they do. There can be no doubt that blues musicians in the 1920s and 1930s increasingly thought of their compositions as distinct pieces; Robert Johnson, in the mid-1930s, provides the splendid fruition of this trend.

For religious music, a set of issues more explicitly involving ideology move around the concept of a piece of music. A double heritage, European-American and African-American, is more overtly an issue with religious music than it is with other genres. On one side are hymns and anthems closely modeled on European-American practice; on the other is the open-ended approach to cyclic performance, an approach that dates back to refrain-based spirituals performed in a ring-shout setting (the
image of a "ring" signaling, in a precise and lovely analogy between
dance and music, the cyclic nature of the musical form). Commercial con-
cerns do not drive the issue of what the musical event has or does not
have to do with the concept of a piece of music. Rather, the issue is cen-
tered on the tension between two fundamentally different approaches to
worship. These tensions were acute during the third and fourth decades
of this century in Chicago, as a result of the Great Migration and the com-
ing together of people from many different religious and class back-
grounds.

Surrounding the struggle over musical technique is nothing less than a
struggle between a drive toward assimilation into the culture—and, by
association, economic power—of white society and an interest in pre-
serving familiar, African-derived practices from the rural South. African
Americans who came from the rural South to Chicago found an estab-
lished tradition that did its best to welcome them in, in the spirit of mis-
sionary expansion, at the same time that it resisted the practices they
brought with them. The various "old line churches" dealt with this strug-
gle differently, from street corner to street corner, year to year.\textsuperscript{15} An assim-
ilative agenda was led especially by black ministers trained in seminaries
sponsored by white missionaries. At one turn, this agenda opposes the
"corn field ditties" of indigenous practice; at another, the extroverted
style of experiential spirituality. This agenda was not shared evenly by
the immigrant population, who were often more interested in communal,
participatory practices that had served them well. As Michael Harris doc-
uments in \textit{The Rise of Gospel Blues} (1992), many of the most important
aspects of religion were contested. The following list of contested issues
may be drawn from Harris’s account.

- The mix of "folk" with "non-folk" preaching styles, the latter
  with an emphasis on "message" and the former more emo-
tionally charged

\textsuperscript{15} Of course, the assimilative push was not unique to Chicago. Handy describes this sit-
uation: "To me [the spirituals] have always been irresistible. In our Florence Methodist
church they were sung only moderately well—when they were used at all. The Methodists
went in for hymns sung with dignity and when they installed an organ the church came
near splitting. The Baptists went in for footpatting and rhythmical spiritual, body-swaying
long meters. . . . None of the dressed-up arrangements one sometimes hears on the concert
stage or on the radio for them. They knew a better way" (1941, 57). There is no mystery
about where the drive toward assimilation comes from: the controlling white majorities in
the Baptist denominations (and in Methodist and other Protestant sects, as well) assumed
the roles of missionaries and economic benefactors. White churches sponsored black col-
leges, where they trained ministers who became active agents for change. On the training
of ministers, see, for example, Harris (1992, 155), with further literature cited there.
Encouragement or discouragement of body motion, hand clapping, and congregational interjections

Congregational singing versus choir singing, and the establishment of special gospel services and additional gospel choirs

Repertory (spirituals, hymns, anthems, gospel songs, or European “classical” music)

Heterophonic texture versus precise harmonic control over the ensemble

A good description of tensions surrounding vocal style comes from Mahalia Jackson. Friends recognizing her great promise encouraged her to take voice lessons. Jackson described her first encounter with a teacher in Chicago:

First off, he had me sing the spiritual “Standing in the Need of Prayer.” I had such a rhythm inside of me that I kept picking up the beat and out of the corner of my eye I could see the Professor frowning. He held up his hand. “That’s no way to sing that song,” he said. “. . . you’ve got to learn to stop hollering. It will take time to build up your voice. The way you sing is not a credit to the Negro race. You’ve got to learn to sing songs so that white people can understand them.” (Jackson 1967, 58)

Jackson’s recorded performance of “Move On Up a Little Higher” in 1947 may be read as one resolution of the tensions over African-American religious and musical identity. Jackson thought of herself as preserving the songs that “came out of the swamps and cane fields and from around the railroad tracks.” The commercial success of this recording represents the foregrounding not of such songs themselves (the song was composed by William Herbert Brewster) but, to a significant degree, the style of singing with which those songs were associated. At the same time, some components of the harmonic style featured in solo gospel from this period index assimilation. In Black Metropolis, from 1945, Drake and Cayton observed how ministers seeking larger congregations “mixed folk and non-folk preaching styles in order to hold the ‘allegiance of the shouters and non-shouters’” (1945, 673). The total package of musical style in solo gospel

16. Harris’s remarks on the role of the choir are worth quoting: “Given its role in worship, its partnership with the church’s cultural mission, and the effectiveness of its monthly musicale, the choir may be considered one of the most visible cultural forces in old-line churches. So integral was the importance of culture to religion there that music became, in essence, a cultural ministry of those churches. Music in the old-line churches was thus more than sound; it was religious ideology” (1992, 109).

17. Surely this practice of mixing styles as a way to satisfy different tastes within a single congregation is ubiquitous today, at least in North Carolina and most likely in many other
may be read in the same way, as a blend of a recognizably African-American vocal style with an assimilative harmonic style.

Part of the solution to these tensions was the creation of a new repertory upon which group identity could be focused. The spectrum of possibilities that were active in Chicago during the Great Migration—a spectrum marked, on one side, by fixed, predetermined form, familiar, predictable, and neatly ordered, and on the other side, by cyclic, open-ended form, familiar at the same time that it encourages spontaneous participation—remains active within African-American churches to the present day. It seems important that there had to be pieces of music, rather than a reliance on aurally transmitted practices for organizing congregational participation. Thomas Dorsey’s modest explanation that, in the case of his own famous gospel songs, it is not the song but what the singer brings to the song that is important must be taken with a grain of salt. Dorsey was capable of capturing, in small gestures, stylistic markers of African-American identity (see Ex. 1).

Example 1. “Thank You All the Days of My Life” by Thomas Dorsey, mm. 1–3 (dated 1946 in Dorsey 1951, 10)

All that is needed, seemingly, to identify Dorsey’s “Thank You All the Days of My Life” with traditional African-American musical values is a little b-flat, serving as a blue note on the subdominant. The importance of Dorsey’s pieces during the 1930s is symbolized by the image of him patiently and successfully peddling, at the Baptist conventions and on his tours, thousands of copies of sheet music for his songs, five cents per places, as well. My thanks go to Percell Kelly, a musician who has worked, from a young age, in many different African-American denominations of various sizes and in various parts of the country, for his generous sharing with me of experience and insight about contemporary practices.
piece. The document is a point of focus around which the community gathers. There is an analogy to be made here with the head themes sketched out by Parker on his way to recording sessions, for in each case there is so much more to the musical event than what appears on paper. In contrast to the Delta bluesmen and the bebop improvisers, however, Dorsey is not modifying a musical inspiration that emerges from a paradigm of aurality in order to meet commercially conditioned demands that have been imposed upon him. Rather, his pieces represent a personal response to the tensions surrounding assimilation, and, as it happens, this response finds a niche in the marketplace.

For the history of blues, it may be appropriate to think of harmony as being brought to an established vocal style, but the history of gospel music must be analyzed somewhat differently. The complex history of African-American religious music features various stages of blending harmonic styles from European-American music with aspects of an African legacy. Peter van der Merwe’s (1989) interpretation of late nineteenth-century “parlour harmony” may turn out to be useful in sifting through the nuances of African-American religious music. At one turn, gospel borrows from the austerity of hymns, at another, from the sentimentality of what van der Merwe refers to as “parlour songs.” The transformation of harmonic styles in gospel music is no less important than the fact of borrowing. In the experiential intensity of some styles of African-American worship, the harmonic language of sentimentality becomes dramatically deepened. Future research may confirm the impression that the emotional charge of a sentimental gesture (for example, second inversion chords, diminished chords, prominent use of the subdominant before the tonic) becomes a spark that calls forth a religious experience. As always, context is all important. A surprising development is the taking up of gospel style into rhythm and blues in the early 1950s. Ray Charles (along with other musicians) transfers not only the melismas, the call-and-response, the straining, emotionally charged timbre of gospel but also its harmonic formulas. The harmonic style that had earlier stood as a marker of assimilation now indexes the in-group style of gospel; it now stands as a gesture of autonomy. There can be no better demonstration of how indexical meaning is completely dependent upon context.

* * * * *

The ideology of assimilation also conditions attitudes toward blues, although in a very different way and with different points of contention. When he arrived in Chicago in 1943, Muddy Waters’ sister told him that
people there didn’t listen to his kind of blues anymore (Palmer 1981, 15). A class-based reaction to traditional blues is signaled by Rufus Thomas, who speaks with reference to this same period:

At that time, the bigger and better black clubs in Memphis had a big band and a floor show. We had people like Duke Ellington and Count Basie coming through with their bands and playing in some of the theaters. The blues, with harmonica and guitar and so on, that was in the juke joints. Now I was born in the country, but I never lived there. I was raised in town. A person like me might want to go out and dig some blues occasionally. People from the so-called best of families did that from time to time. It was just a part of living. But that would be what they call slumming. When you decided you wanted to go slumming, that’s when you went out to dig some blues. (quoted in Palmer 1981, 229)

To bring the analysis beneath the surface of genre to a deeper level of musical style and what it represents, we may read into this observation from Muddy Waters himself: “Now B. B. King plays blues, but his blues is not as deep as my blues. He play a type of blues that can work in a higher class place, like to a higher class of peoples—they call ‘em urban blues” (quoted in Palmer 1981, 260). Palmer suggests that one key to Muddy Waters’ skill in singing “deep blues” is the fact that he grew up functionally illiterate. In Palmer’s view, the cognitive style of aurality yields greater sensitivity to vocal nuance, which deepens the blues (1981, 102). A general principle may be formed as a hypothesis: aurality, in African-American culture, fosters the speechlike inflections of blues, while literacy fosters a different set of musical values. The association of speechlike inflections with aurality may lie behind class-based rejection of blues. Muddy Waters identifies himself as one of the last, few practitioners of a deep style of singing blues, and this musical sign—not simply the surface of genre—is taken by assimilative African Americans as indexing illiteracy, which, in turn, indexes poverty. To put these matters in the context of the asymmetrical power structures that activate ideology, we may think of Alain Locke’s image of the African-American “flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern” (1925, 6). The chain of semiotic association is really very precise. Nothing classifies like music, and that is because music moves at the deepest levels of personal and social value.

III

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e., with the totality of users of the same set of signs of ideological communication. Thus various
different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes the arena of the class struggle. . . . By and large, it is thanks to this intersecting of accents that a sign maintains its vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development. (Volosinov 1973, 23)

If speechlike song has not moved well across ethnic boundaries, the histories of the polyrhythmic paradigm and of harmony are altogether different. These histories are bound up with the commonplace employment of African-American musicians in cross-over markets. A general rule would seem to hold true to a large degree: cross over (at least until recently) always demands some mastery of "common practice" European-American harmony. And since the vast majority of cross-over musicians have found work playing music for dancing, it is easy to understand why the polyrhythmic paradigm has moved freely across social boundaries, as well. From the slave plantation to the swing era ballroom, the format of black musicians playing for white dancers involves some combination of the polyrhythmic paradigm and harmony.

The astounding flow of stylistic innovation in the history of African-American music has much to do with the unleashing of creativity through new syntheses of these two stylistic codes. It also has something to do with patterns of pedagogy and apprenticeship. Any generalization about patterns of education typical of African-American musicians during the first half of this century should not be taken further than the evidence allows, and it should always be advanced with the understanding that biographical details vary from one extreme to the other, with all possible middle positions amply represented. Nevertheless, it seems to have been a routine experience for African-American musicians to learn more about harmony well after their careers were under way, as a way of advancing in the cross-over market. Furthermore, the acquisition of harmonic skill may come idiosyncratically rather than systematically, casually by "ear" rather than methodically by "textbook." An aural approach to learning harmony may be followed by more systematized learning through notation, supplemented with experiments on the keyboard. In other words, the learning of harmony is often located at the nexus between aurality and literacy. This process fosters an experimental attitude, yielding stylistic innovation.

This rich mix of powerful forces—the economic incentives of the cross-over market, the ideological associations of harmonic style as a musical code, an experimental model of learning—has stimulated the variety of harmonic practice in the vernacular traditions. Blues may have been formed through a process in which harmony was brought to an established vocal idiom; the ensuing reconciliation between harmony and
melody helped define the idiom. Harmonic styles in religious music have been conditioned by a long history of contest between the opposing forces of assimilation and autonomy. For musicians participating in the cross-over dance traditions, the expectation of harmonic mastery is always a given. In response to this expectation, however, practice has been remarkably flexible. Scott Joplin, Louis Armstrong, and Charlie Parker all spent their formative years making music for dancing, and each mastered harmony on a basic level as part of the expectations of that situation. Yet from this routine situation, these three innovators take harmony in different directions to make music that is not just for dancing. The evidence of ideological mediation is far less direct than it is for religious music, where ideological assumptions are made explicit in public debate. Yet the case can be made that ideology has something to do with the pronounced differences between their influential styles.

Legend asserts that Joplin benefited, at an early age, from “free lessons in piano, sight reading, and the principles to extend and confirm his natural instinct in harmony” from a German music teacher in Texarkana (Rudi Blesh, quoted in Albrecht 1979, 90). If there were such early lessons, then Joplin’s “natural instincts” may not have been entirely natural. By legend we also learn that in midlife Joplin attended a “Negro college” in Sedalia, Missouri, in order to improve his command of harmony (Berlin 1994, 33). Perhaps such tutoring gave Joplin an advantage over pianists who worked in an aural tradition and learned harmony less systematically. The demands of cross-over participation explain a great deal about how Joplin came to the harmonic style that he was to feature in his so-called (by John Stark, his publisher) classic ragtime. It was not accidental that Joplin found his cross-over niche as a composer, for he was suited to composition by temperament, aptitude, and training. Other ragtime musicians occupied other niches: Tony Jackson marketed a package of ragtime and cake-walk dancing, while Tom Turpin spun off various entrepreneurial activities; Louis Chauvin, a virtuoso pianist, presented himself as the “Black Paderewski” (Berlin 1994, 157). Joplin did not have a particularly good sense for business, and his performing abilities, though often successful and admired, could not match those of the leading pianists. His cross-over advantage was in composition.

An interest in assimilation may also manifest through his music. His widow Lottie Joplin described him as a “great man, a great man! He wanted to be a real leader. He wanted to free his people from poverty, ignorance, and superstition, just like the heroine of his ragtime opera,
"Treemonisha" (quoted in Berlin 1994, 193). Narrowly, this claim may be taken as a reference to the didactic message of Treemonisha. More broadly and more speculatively, we may imagine what Joplin thought about himself as a leader who was capable of transforming African-American musical culture through the assimilative beauty of his compositions.

The fact that Joplin cultivated so intensely the idea of composition in the mold of European classical music signals an assimilative agenda. Surely, part of Joplin’s sense of his own significance has to do with the idea of transforming an improvisatory tradition into a compositional tradition. He proudly acknowledges the ethnic identity of his music as “genuine negro ragtime” (quoted in Berlin 1994, 187). When he describes his own compositions as belonging to a “higher class” of ragtime (quoted in Berlin 1994, 178), we may infer that he sees himself as elevating African-American culture. Joplin’s mastery of harmony must have distinguished him from competitors who worked mainly in an aural tradition. It has been observed that the adopted Treemonisha, found under a tree by her parents and educated by whites, uses standard English in contrast to the black colloquialisms of almost everyone else in Joplin’s opera (the remainder of the population living “in dense ignorance, with no-one to guide them, as the white folks had moved away”). Language signals her educated status and her promise as a leader. It is possible to regard harmony in Joplin’s music in the same way, as indexing education, progress, and assimilation.

John Stark lays out one basis for this interpretation: “[T]hese instru-


21. The idea that aurally trained pianists were inferior in harmony was a frequently mentioned cliché for not only ragtime but later traditions as well. In The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, James Weldon Johnson describes a New York City pianist in an African-American cabaret: “It was music of a kind I had never heard before. It was music that demanded physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head in time with the beat. The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions, often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places, but in which the beat was never lost, produced a most curious effect” (quoted in Berlin 1994, 166). At a different time and place, and with respect to a different genre, Sonny Payne described the blues pianist Robert “Dudlow” Taylor: he was “a man that had no personality, nothing whatsoever but a good mind for the blues, a good heart and a good pair of hands. He didn’t know an A-minor chord from a B flat. He knew nothing about phrasing compared to a master of phrasing like Sonny Boy. I would not classify him as a piano picker, which is someone like Memphis Slim is. He was strictly a piano player” (quoted in Palmer 1981, 191).

22. See the discussion of Treemonisha, in light of Joplin’s biography and personality, by Berlin (1994, 205–206).
mental rags . . . are the perfection of type. . . . They have the genius of melody and the scholarship of harmonization. They are used in the drawing rooms and the parlors of culture” (quoted in Berlin 1994, 71). The cross-over market is signaled, along with upward aspiration toward the “parlors of culture.” Making it possible is the “scholarship of harmonization,” and the combination recalls Handy’s metaphor about the parlor of his mind being the place where he cultivated the harmonic system he learned from books. Monroe Rosenfeld, a journalist and songwriter, reinforces this view—and he relates it to the use of standard English—with praise tainted by racism. He describes Joplin as “a tutored student of harmony and an adept at bass and counterpoint; and, although his appearance would not indicate it, he is attractive socially because of the refinement of his speech and demeanor” (quoted in Berlin 1994, 120). The package of “scholarship” and “higher class” may be decoded to read “systematic assimilation of white culture.” Education is the path for advancing the race, and in this musical context, education is associated with musical literacy, careful attention to the details of organizing a composition (as opposed to an improvisation) and the scholarship of harmony. If, Treemonisha-like, Joplin’s aim was to advance the musical culture of his race, then literacy, compositional craft, and harmonic control were his means for doing so.

It is Joplin’s firm command of harmonic syntax that creates the impression that harmony is used as a source of control. And it is this sense of control, perhaps, that gives rise to the opinion that his music stands as the “whitest” among the vernacular genres of African-American music.23 But in his best work, there is a sense that harmony, melody, and rhythm all work together toward a single effect. This may be illustrated by the first strain of the “Maple Leaf Rag,” probably the most famous stretch of music Joplin ever wrote (see Ex. 2a). A good composer might have been satisfied with the polyrhythmic effect of the high e’-flats in the right hand; they imply an extended syncopation against the steady eighth notes in the bass (see Ex. 2b). This syncopated design is completely symmetrical. Joplin’s master touch is to enliven the symmetry with harmonic movement on beat 4 of measure 1. This slight harmonic disruption—the anticipation of the dominant by g’ in the right hand, and the suggestion of a diminished chord by a in the left hand—adds an additional layer of motion to the already vigorous polyrhythmic fabric. Without it, the harmonic rhythm, changing strictly by the bar, would fall stiffly into place as reinforcement to the strict symmetry of the rhythmic patterning.

Joplin brought a sense of fine craftsmanship to a melodic idiom that

23. For discussion of the opinion that ragtime is the “whitest of black music,” see Lem-Dworkin (1991, 2).
seems to be conditioned equally by the concerns of both polyrhythm and harmony. This melodic achievement may well have been his most significant accomplishment, his legacy to the next generation of dance-band musicians. Like his publisher and like admiring journalists, Joplin may have held harmony, form, counterpoint, and other compositional trappings in high regard. But the manner in which his melodies satisfy the concerns of both polyrhythm and harmony links him to the tradition of melodic improvisation that was cultivated by dance-band musicians like Armstrong and Parker. Despite the salient differences that distinguish them, it is the degree to which these three musicians share this melodic orientation that makes them seem to belong to a single, continuous tradition. As we turn to the very different social and stylistic contexts in which Armstrong and Parker worked, it is useful to bear this point in mind.24

Example 2

a. “Maple Leaf Rag” by Scott Joplin, mm. 1–2

b. Reduction of “Maple Leaf Rag,” mm. 1–2

24. In addition to whatever general influence Joplin exerted on popular music during the first decades of the century, a direct line of influence from Joplin through Joe Oliver (Armstrong’s mentor) to Armstrong may have been in place. Reportedly, Oliver “honored Joplin by having all of his sheet music bound into a single volume” (Berlin 1994, 242). Bunk Johnson also “played from the ‘Red Book of Rags,’ Scott Joplin’s numbers” (Tom Albert, quoted in Marquis 1978, 104).
During most times and at most places, learning music "by ear" has been the usual practice. The unusual emphasis in the European tradition on learning "by eye" goes hand in hand with a special role for harmony. It has been a common experience in the United States (and surely elsewhere, as well) for a musician to learn initially by ear and then, at some point, to learn more thoroughly the harmonic style associated with one genre or another. That experience would seem to be shared by the African-American slave, tutored in hymnody and psalmody by an evangelizing missionary, and by the white, suburban, adolescent guitarist who learns from repeated playback of the latest CD. By gaining greater mastery over harmony, musicians expand their participation and advance their competence. There is also the possibility of transforming the common harmonic practice along personal lines. For it would seem that learning harmony by ear encourages an experimental attitude toward the norms of common practice.

In jazz, especially, musicians have commonly forged idiosyncratic and experimental paths as they work with harmony. Benny Carter explained that "many musicians during [the swing] period could improvise very well, and still didn't know a C7 from an F diminished. They would know it by sound, but not by name, necessarily" (quoted in DeVeaux 1997, 67). Carter may have been thinking of the white saxophonist Art Pepper, who described different stages of apprenticeship in his own career:

When I went with Benny Carter I played all my jazz by ear. I was good at reading, but I didn't know about chord structure, harmony, composition. . . . Thanks to Benny, when I got with Stan I was able to play lead. But while it had been possible to play solos by ear with Benny, with Stan things were different. He had a syncopated style, very original; things were built on an eighth note, three quarter notes, and another eighth note. It wasn't easy to hear when you played a solo, and it got increasingly difficult. Finally, when we played the first record date that we did, on Capitol Records, and I did a solo on "Harlem Folk Dance," it was just impossible. That's when I realized that I had to learn something about chord structure and the theory of music, so I started asking the guys in the band, "What happens with this? What happens with that?" and I gradually learned to read the chords. Red Dorris helped me a lot. (Pepper and Pepper 1979, 48, 50)

Pepper's main stylistic model was Lester Young, who was known for his "linear" approach to improvisation. Young's brother Lee described how Lester

loved to play jam sessions and loved not to know the tune. . . . [I]f you were
playing a tune the instrumentalist—the soloist—didn’t know, well, it was fashionable for the pianist to turn around and say, E-flat-seventh, you know, D-flat, C Major—he wouldn’t want that. If he didn’t know the tune, he’d say, “Don’t call the chords to me. Just play the chords, and I’ll play.” And I’d seen him do it many a time, you know; they just started playing, and he didn’t know it, but he would play it. But he would say it confines you too much if you know it’s a Db7, you know, you start thinking of the only notes that will go in that chord, and he would say that’s not what he would hear. (Young 1991a, 36)

Young resisted learning notation in his teenage years (Young 1991b, 20). An aural approach to harmonic organization, rather than an approach through the systematic stages of written pedagogy, must have encouraged experiments concerning the relationship between an improvised melody and the accompanying harmonic foundation. With respect to this relationship, Young was one of the most innovative improvisers in the 1930s. The cross-over experience, with its nexus of African-American musicians playing for white dancers, also creates a nexus between aural-ity as a cognitive style and the textbook rules for harmony that were learned through notation by composers like Scott Joplin and W. C. Handy.

With all due respect to the importance of Louis Armstrong’s well-known childhood experience in the Colored Waif’s Home for Boys, where Peter Davis taught Armstrong to proudly play the cornet in the school’s marching band, it seems likely that most of Armstrong’s early training in the dance-band tradition was carried out with little or no reference to notation (Armstrong 1936, 36, 47, 64-65, 72). Armstrong explained that the opportunity to master musical notation came with a prestigious job on a Mississippi riverboat that he began in 1918; he acknowledged the steady tutoring there of David Jones. Before this, he had spent his formative years as a teenage professional in the dance-band tradition absorbing the musical culture of the “Uptown” New Orleanian musicians. These musicians worked mainly within an aural paradigm. Armstrong’s mastery of the improvisatory tradition got him the job on the riverboat as “hot soloist.” His ability put him in the company of musicians who were less skilled in improvisation but far more skilled in literacy. New Orleanian improvising musicians enjoyed increased demand for their music outside the city around this time, and Armstrong’s hiring on the riverboat should be understood in the context of this expansion. It is not merely symbolic that Armstrong’s mastery of musical literacy took place upon his departure from New Orleans; Armstrong’s achievement in the 1920s is inseparably tied to the Great Migration, to a new set of influences and demands that Armstrong, better than any of his other
New Orleanian colleagues, was able to absorb and match while holding true to the premises of the New Orleanian style that continued to form the basis for his success. One can only speculate about how his acquisition of literacy enhanced his understanding of harmony. In any event, harmonic control, folded into the traditional improvisatory model of the Uptown musicians, was crucial to his innovations in the mid-1920s.

One way to gloss the formation of New Orleanian jazz is by highlighting a period of intense and sustained contact between two musical cultures, one based on a paradigm of aurality, the other literacy. There is little doubt that Uptown, darker-skinned musicians like Armstrong, many of them direct descendants from slaves, were the driving force in the formation of jazz. But the role of the Creoles (*gens de couleurs*) was also important. This is not the place to thoroughly review the role played by Creole musicians, a role which is well known though still contested; yet the topic deserves mention because it illustrates well several themes important to this study.\textsuperscript{25} Perhaps the Uptown musicians would not have achieved what they did without the participation of the Creoles, participation that happened first through competitive rivalry, with bands from the two communities vying for the same jobs, and later through musicians sitting alongside one another in the same bands (influencing one another in the manner illustrated by Armstrong’s riverboat experience). Yet it is easy to overestimate the role of the Creoles, in part because of a conceptual slip familiar from older historiography. The Creoles occupied a middle position, socially, in the New Orleanian caste system, and this social position was based on their dual heritage, partly European and partly African. It seemed natural at one time to think of jazz in the same way, as occupying a middle position, culturally, between European and African music; jazz has been viewed as a neutral “fusion” of the two traditions, with the Creoles of mixed ancestry playing a central role in its formation.\textsuperscript{26} It cannot be denied that Creole musicians participated in the development of jazz; they had to, in order to compete for jobs. But the most important ingredients in early jazz flowed from the African legacy that was nourished in the Uptown musical culture of the string bands, the parade bands, and the blues. Creoles had long taken an assimilative stance, one compatible with the economic opportunities that the caste system offered them. Surely, the Uptown musicians learned something from them. But the important steps were taken when the Uptown musicians used what they learned in the service of their own set of values.

“Bolden cause all that,” was the explanation given by a begrudging Creole musician for how jazz came to be (Lomax 1950, 86). Buddy

\textsuperscript{25} For a recent discussion, see DeVeaux (1996).
\textsuperscript{26} See my discussion of jazz and the “fusion-theory” in Brothers (1994).
Bolden's legendary position in the history of New Orleanian jazz is analogous to that occupied by Charley Patton in the history of Mississippi blues. Bolden's first job as a dance-band musician was with a string band. The first use of a cornet in a string band must have sounded strange. In Bolden's hands, the wind instrument added bluesy inflections to the familiar polyrhythmic paradigm that was the specialty of the string bands. Bolden's famed loudness allowed him to cut through the layered texture and to stand out as a soloist, "calling his children home" (Louis Jones, quoted in Marquis 1978, 62) with the speechlike inflections of blues. "Buddy broke his heart when he played," was Dora Bass's description of the emotional appeal (quoted in Marquis 1978, 99). Bolden played various kinds of music on demand, but his specialties were ragtime and blues—especially blues. Bunk Johnson noted the significance of aurality: "Now here is the thing that made King Bolden's Band the first to play jazz. It was because they could not read at all" (quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff 1955, 36).27

This was the tradition that Armstrong inherited and transformed. From a young age, he excelled in playing blues, and his mastery of speechlike song is apparent not only in his solos in blues form but also in melodic nuances sprinkled throughout his work. Yet, as important as the idiom of blues is for Armstrong, his command of ragtime (or "hot music") is more central to his innovations from the 1920s. For it was in this genre, with its variety of rapidly changing chords, that he perfected his skill at harmonic improvisation and forged a new model for the jazz solo. Like Joplin, Armstrong brought a superb sense of craftsmanship to a melodic idiom that was conditioned equally by the concerns of both the polyrhythmic paradigm and harmonic rigor. This point may be appreciated by comparing Armstrong with his contemporary Bubber Miley. Miley (who imitated Joe Oliver's style, signaling the importance of New Orleans for the period) was a specialist in speechlike song transferred to the trumpet. While it is difficult, at times, to capture in musical notation some nuances of pitch and rhythm from Armstrong's solos, they can usually be transcribed without losing too much of the sense of what makes them melodically attractive. (Two books of transcribed solos were published during the 1920s, and Armstrong copyrighted others with the intention of capitalizing on just this possibility.) With Miley, by contrast, transcription cannot even begin to convey the appeal of his speechlike melody, with its constant flow of nuance in pitch and rhythm and with its variety of timbres. As important as Miley was, his solo style spawned only a marginal lineage. That lineage flourished mainly within the Ellington orchestra, where it served Ellington the composer with one

27. See also Marquis (1978, 99–111).
exotic color in a diverse compositional palette. The central line of the solo tradition in jazz flows from Armstrong's model, with its dazzling harmonic precision and vigorous polyrhythmic implications.

An interesting description, from a contemporary witness, Milt Hinton, of Armstrong's achievement recalls language we have already seen in descriptions of harmonic practice:

Here we had come up in a society in Chicago from, as I say, the twenties, where we were emulating, if you would say it, the white studio orchestra in the pit playing overtures. But then in our own ethnic way, after the overture was over, there would be a big trumpet solo by Louis Armstrong on "Saint Louis Blues" and going into one of these fantastic things which was quite creative. But the people would come on Sundays to the theater and they would be dressed. They would have on their tuxedoes with wing collars and it was like we were emulating white folks, like it was a big white theater you know. Then the orchestra played this little overture and then all of a sudden, we'd go right straight back into our own thing. Black people wanted to be like white people because they felt that this was the way to be; that you were right and you were white and this was the only way it could be. . . . We emulated white people because this was a very conditioned thing that had been brought down to us that this was the only way of life.

Louis had enough of the academic thing to read the music properly, and so this was the style. We were going to be just like downtown. And we'd sit there, my mother would have me by the hand, and we'd sit and listen to this overture which had a European environment. Then the people would be a little restless, and say "Well, that sounds nice," and applaud it. Then somebody would say "Hey baby, play so and so" and when Louis stood up and played one of his great solos, you could see everybody letting their hair down and say 'Well, it's great to be like that, but this is what really relates to us." (quoted in Lax 1974, 118)

It is only a small step to push Hinton's reference to "the academic thing"—conceived as a reference to musical notation—in the direction of Joplin's "scholarship of harmony" and Handy's high regard for the textbook rules of harmony. By the mid-1920s, Armstrong had indeed acquired enough of both musical literacy and harmonic control to compete with white musicians. No one would have described solos by Buddy Bolden or Bubber Miley in this same way. What is emphasized in this quotation is that even though Armstrong had mastered the musical practices of white culture, he still offered African Americans something that they recognized as their own. From the cross-over position, where harmonic control was expected, Armstrong moved forward by using harmony in the service of an idiom "that really relates to us."

Harmony is, for Armstrong, ideologically neutral, and it is for this reason that he is free to fold it back into a received aesthetic that he had mas-
tered at a young age. Elsewhere, I have suggested how Armstrong uses pitch relations not only to reinforce aspects of the polyrhythmic paradigm but also to duplicate, through a different set of techniques, the syntactical orientation that is more typically achieved (in West African music, for example) in purely rhythmic relations (Brothers 1994, 489–493). What Armstrong does is not conceptually different from what his improvisational colleagues are doing; they simply lack the technical command that he has acquired. The polyphonic texture of the older New Orleanian paradigm of collective improvisation is more casually ordered, from the point of view of harmonic precision, and heterophony stands as a not-so-distant antecedent. Armstrong’s harmonic precision is part of his improvisational brilliance. His innovation is very different from Joplin’s; it is also different from that associated with bebop, twenty years later, when there is an emphasis on a new conception, not just new ways of realizing the old conception.

One can imagine the argument that harmony is a matter for musicians to worry about, within the limited context of their professional concerns, but not a musical feature that matters very much to the lay, listening public. It would be a mistake to place too much importance on such a technical and abstract feature. Perhaps it is true, as Alec Wilder claimed, that “very few non-musicians hear any harmony, good or bad” (1972, 230). A nonmusician may hear harmony differently than a musician hears it, but do most nonmusicians, paying for the pleasure of music, really have no awareness of good and bad harmony? The average listener must hear harmony well enough. Harmony may be heard as melodic support, as a kind of ornament. The listener may be able to distinguish harmonic precision from harmonic imprecision, and in this, Armstrong’s accomplishment surely stood out. Or the listener may learn to associate harmonic formulas with ideological positions. It is perhaps not too different from being able to understand different styles of speaking and the different inflections associated with them. Not everyone will be able to readily explain, in technical language, how grammar, for example, has been manipulated, even while the ideological significance of such a manipulation may be obvious.

* * * * *

So many fleeting and arbitrary factors determine why music sounds the way it does, and the history of African-American dance music, especially, has been so closely bound up with faddish, commercially driven changes in taste that it may not be easy to isolate the impact of ideologi-
cal position. Yet it would seem that ideology and not merely the vicissitudes of fashion accounts for differences between music made by Joplin, Armstrong, and Parker. The half century that separates Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” from Parker’s “Koko” witnessed dramatic changes not only in musical style but also in the status of African-American musicians. Bebop is commonly thought of as a radical step taken by African-American musicians in the early 1940s toward cultural autonomy, and the opportunity to reflect on the role of social history in the formation of bebop will serve as an appropriate conclusion to this overview.

Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) described the “willfully harsh, anti-assimilationist sound of bebop” (italics in the original), the intention to “restore jazz, in some sense, to its original separateness, to drag it outside the mainstream of American culture again” (Jones 1963, 181, 184). Although Baraka’s analysis was based on a distorted view of swing (which he regarded as “tasteless commercialism” that had “no meaning for blues people”) his insights into bebop and into other aspects of the social history of African-American music history have been appropriately influential.²⁸ Building on Baraka’s views, Charles Keil (1966, 43–47) speaks of an “appropriation-revitalization process.” In response to white appropriation of their music, African-American musicians revitalize core values. From the revitalization comes a new style, which is eventually appropriated, and the process continues. Bebop may be read as a revitalization in response to the white appropriation of swing. Sociologists have found in this analytical model support for theories concerning the formation of ethnic identity. Ulf Hannerz, for example, writes that “black music has been undergoing a continuous revitalization as a reaction to the equally continuous assimilation of its forms into mainstream music. . . . [Thus] the desire to maintain ethnic boundaries despite cultural diffusion may be a source of cultural vitality in a multiethnic society” (quoted in Sollors 1986, 244). Also following Baraka is Werner Sollors, who finds in bebop an illustration of how “ethnicization and modernization often go hand in hand” (Sollors 1986, 245–246). Eric Lott, a historian of English literature, follows Baraka’s political orientation to read bebop as an attempt “to resolve at the level of style what the militancy [of the early 1940s] combated in the streets.” In Lott’s view, the slogan “double v,” referring to victory abroad in World War II and victory at home against racism, finds

²⁸ John Gennari’s study of jazz criticism includes extended commentary on Baraka, including this observation: “Having grown up with bebop and having derived from it a sense of the possibility of an assertive male ego, Baraka very much wants this music to be seen as a threshold in black-white relations, as a cultural fault line marking the distinction between slavery and freedom” (1993, 233).
its musical analogue in the uncompromising "double-time" tempos of bebop (Lott 1988, 597–605).29

The phenomenon of bebop in its early years is probably complicated enough to offer support for these theories and more. Certain things bebop is not, however, and certain aspects of what it is need to be clarified. Bebop is often thought of as doubly autonomous—that is, both as a gesture of ethnic autonomy, in the sense that we have been using this idea, and as a gesture of artistic autonomy. The inclinations toward art and ethnicity are understood as having sprung from a single impulse: bebop is a reaction against both the appropriation and the commercialization of swing. Yet today it is clear (clearer than it was in the early 1960s, perhaps) that early bebop musicians did not reject swing so much as they wanted to find their own niche inside of it. Few if any of the first-generation players in New York City were interested in sacrificing commercial success to the glories of art. In the words of Dizzy Gillespie, "If you want to make a living at music, you’ve got to sell it" (quoted in DeVeaux 1997, 437). Gillespie was not interested in a marginal career. The fulfillment of his dream would have been full-scale, all-American success.

Contrary to the line of sociological analysis cited above, it may be doubted that the first generation of bebop musicians designed their music with the intention of establishing an ethnic boundary.30 Bebop could not have grown and flourished without the patronage of European Americans in New York City during the 1940s. In contrast to this support was the hostile reception by traditionalist African-American audiences in the South. White players were welcomed into the movement if they could master the idiom. The rebelliousness of some young players was not focused racially as much as it was generationally. Some of Gillespie’s most bitter criticism was directed at older African-American swing musicians who impeded (or simply did not aid) his ascent through the dance-band industry. The double-time tempos and odd, chromatic harmonies were designed to discourage complacent swing musicians, not whites, generally. Gillespie’s rebelliousness, exemplified in the story of his knife-

29. Lott’s argument is anticipated by Frank Košky (1970, 56ff) and by Finklestein (1948). Influential on this point—and influential on Baraka’s book in general—is Eric Hobsbawm (Francis Newton), who writes, “[Modern jazz] has also been played as a manifesto—whether of revolt against capitalism or commercial culture, or of negro equality, or of something else,” and, “The musical revolutionism of the early 1940s is inconceivable without the political upheavals of the 1930s, which gave American negroes increased confidence, while at the same time bringing them closer to the apparently insurmountable barriers which stood between them and equality. The bebop revolution was political as much as musical” (Hobsbawm 1960, 77, 88).

30. Influentially, Fredrik Barth (1969, 15) has argued that it is “the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses,” thus putting emphasis on shifting content and relational definition.
wielding altercation with Cab Calloway, probably had more to do with childhood family experience than with the injustices of racism. In light of Frank Sulloway’s research on the roles of birth order and family dynamics in forming personality, the fact that Gillespie was last born in a family of nine children is highly significant (Sulloway 1996). Later-borns and especially last borns tend to be most open to radical innovations. The same tendency is fostered by authoritarian parenting and strong conflicts between child and one parent; Gillespie’s authoritarian father made Sunday-morning beatings a family routine (“for anything and everything that I’d done during the week”; Gillespie 1979, 1). In light of Sulloway’s massive and skillfully analyzed biographical inventories of scientists and political leaders, it is clear that these family dynamics predisposed Gillespie toward radicalism. His talent and perseverance enabled him to channel this inclination into a career of artistic discovery. Gillespie’s biography offers a classic example of an artist who was born to rebel.

Even though there is room for doubting the ethnicizing intentions of bebop, it is clear, still, that there is something anti-assimilationist about it—“anti-assimilationist” may not be quite the right term, but it points in the right direction. Details of texture, tempo, harmony, and melody distinguish bebop from the standard idiom of swing. Tempo and harmony become, in part, matters of virtuosity: the ability to improvise a very fast melody without sacrificing harmonic precision is a mark of professional accomplishment. The younger players used this kind of virtuosity to distinguish themselves in the competitive world of swing. Melody may be read as a refusal to play to popular taste. Armstrong insisted that bebop improvisers had abandoned the standards of beautiful melody, that they were just playing “routines,” little more than practice exercises.

Yet, while the distinguishing features may be read as markers of social separation, they also contribute to a coherent stylistic model. Texture, tempo, harmony, and improvised melody all work to intensify the syntax of the polyrhythmic paradigm. Texturally, the fixed group is now represented very lightly, while the variable group is very rich. All instruments except the bass participate in variable rhythms, to some degree; the piano “comps” and the drummer “drops bombs.” Melodically, it is true that the solo does not serve as a hook that draws in a general audience conditioned by popular taste. But Armstrong must also have recognized the kinship to his own style. The streamlined contours of melody draw attention to small details of phrasing that constantly enliven the polyrhythmic feeling against the steady pulse of fixed rhythms. Like Joplin’s melodies circa 1900 and like Armstrong’s from the 1920s, the melodies of bebop are conditioned equally by the concerns of both the polyrhythmic paradigm and harmonic rigor. The rapid tempos also serve the polyrhythmic para-
digm by speeding up harmonic rhythm and shifting attention to larger levels of phrasing. Armstrong's improvised melodies from the 1920s work against the steady background of two-bar modules. With bebop melodies from the 1940s, the fast tempo encourages one to hear the melodic contour against rapidly moving larger groups of four-bar half phrases.

Depending on how one heard it, harmony in early bebop was modern, progressive, strange, off-putting, or incoherent (ridiculed by Cab Calloway as "Chinese music"31). But virtually all of the distinguishing features came from swing. Coleman Hawkins and Art Tatum, two of the commercial giants of swing, were well studied by bebop innovators. "What [Parker and Gillespie] were doing was 'far out' to a lot of people, but it was just music to me," explained Coleman Hawkins (quoted in Dance 1974, 145). Like so much of bebop, harmonic technique must be regarded as an outgrowth of African-American musician's culture. The sense of progress associated previously with the acquisition of literacy and greater harmonic control—both tied to more effective participation in the cross-over market—was gradually, during the late 1930s and early 1940s, transformed into a sense of progressive modernism. (Progressive and modern are the terms used by musicians of the period and should be read in that context; see DeVeaux 1997.) Advanced harmony, especially, was central to the idea of being a progressive musician. As I have argued elsewhere, the experimental harmonic techniques of swing and bebop intensify the syntax of (what has been called here) the polyrhythmic paradigm (Brothers 1994, 493–499). Substitute harmonies and added tones, for example, heighten the sense of pulling the improvised melody away from the harmonic foundation without severing the tie to it. If a challenge to earlier musicians who had learned by ear was to assimilate more precisely an established style for forming and organizing chords, the challenge now issued was to participate in an innovative harmonic system that had emerged as a development within swing. The line between a progressive cross-over musician and a progressive modernist may be difficult to draw precisely. Yet it is this line that should draw our attention if our aim is to interpret bebop sociologically.

Relevant here is a change in position, from cross over (with, at times, a component of assimilation) to an emphasis on autonomy. It is not particularly obvious, however, how this autonomous motivation should be framed. The concept of a subculture may be useful. One often sees the term subculture used to describe African-American culture as a whole. This casual usage should be avoided, since African-American culture

31. One source for this well-known quotation is Danny Barker, quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff (1955, 344).
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does not stand, exclusively or even primarily, in an ancillary or "sub" position, relative to a larger, dominant culture. Subculture may be used more precisely to describe a culture that defines itself through such a relationship. In Dick Hebdige's (1979) phrase, subcultures are marked by "intentional difference," that is, by the intentionally different use of sign vehicles that are also used by the dominant culture. There would seem to be something intentionally different about early bebop, and the different use of musical codes would seem to have something to do with defining a social boundary.

As I have argued, it would not seem adequate to identify this boundary as one drawn around all of African-American culture. It is certainly true that all the bebop innovators were African American, and it is certainly true that traditional markers of African-American identity have been intensified in the style these innovators forged. But consider how different the style is from that arrived at in the early 1950s, when Ray Charles and others brought markers of African-American gospel music to rhythm and blues (producing a style that would later be known as "soul"). Soul had the effect of enhancing the sense of an autonomous cultural identity for a large group of African-American patrons. The patronage of early bebop was quite different, and the distinguished group that is marked as culturally autonomous may be very small indeed. It may be no larger than African-American musicians of a certain generation sharing certain musical proclivities. Just as bebop builds on the musical style of swing, so does the community of professional dance-band musicians that flourished during the swing era make the subcultural separation of bebop musicians possible. There was no American precedent for the large community of dance-band musicians that marks the height of the swing era. Here is the historic foundation for the "jazz community" as Alan Merriam and Raymond Mack phrase it, a community whose separate identity is fostered by "psychological, social and physical" isolation (Merriam and Mack 1960, 211). Part of the phenomenon of bebop is the subcultural identity of a younger group of musicians who broke away from this group.

It is clear that bebop was very much an outgrowth of the social experience of musicians. The essential social context was provided by the legendary jam sessions of Harlem and by the notorious tours of the swing bands, week after week, across the country. This social ground that nourished bebop was quite different from that associated with the origins of ragtime, blues, gospel, and even (though it is perhaps somewhat similar) early jazz. Bebop may be regarded as a musical manifestation of the subcultural identity constructed by a small group of progressive musicians. What made this musical manifestation possible was the traditional African-American avoidance of any strict distinction between creators
and performers of music. There were aspects of swing that allowed room for the creative contribution of the performer, but there was not enough room for any sense of subcultural identity among musicians to manifest musically. More centrally, bebop highlights the creative role of the improviser, the composer-performer, and this is what makes possible the musical manifestation of subcultural identity. In the autonomous, subcultural setting of bebop, the swing-era value placed on harmonic progress leads to a value placed on being "modern." Thus, harmonic modernism is a marker of subcultural identity (intentional difference) at the same time that it is a stylistic tool used to intensify the polyrhythmic paradigm that had long stood as a marker of African-American identity. Harmonic practice is not designed to reach African Americans per se; African Americans outside the subculture—even a sophisticated African-American musician like Cab Calloway—did not enjoy any particular advantage in the task of comprehending the strange harmonies. So it does not make sense to regard harmony as an attempt to mark an ethnic boundary, even though it fits into a syntactical model that can be analyzed in terms of traditional African-American values. What is defined is an elite subculture within the group of professional African-American musicians.

Contrary to some politically oriented interpretations, the style cannot be understood as typically subcultural, as (in Umberto Eco’s phrase) "semiotic guerrilla warfare" (quoted in Hebdige 1979, 105). It is the wholeness of the style, the determined way in which the various components are pushed in the service of a coherent artistic vision, that gets devalued when emphasis is placed on bebop as rebellion. With its emphasis on improvisation, the style may also be regarded as the apotheosis of African-American musicalaurality. Hobsbawm is surely correct to draw the analogy between the virtuosity of the bebop solo and the virtuosity of jive talk, two symbols of sophistication within African-American urban culture (1960, 219). The improvisational verbal arts, at which so many jazz musicians excelled, present the best analogy to the improvisational musical arts. From the standpoints of stylistic coherence and sophisticated exploration of possibilities within aurality, bebop may be regarded as an internal development within African-American culture. Apparently, it is necessary to assert that not all developments within African-American culture have been dictated by a sense of position vis-à-vis European-American culture. African-American musicians respond creatively in ways that have nothing to do with asymmetrical power structures.\(^{32}\)

32. This is in contradiction to Hobsbawm, who works from the basic premise that "All American negroes, like all members of oppressed and underprivileged peoples everywhere, are always protesting against their situation in one way or another, by the very modes of their behaviour, even if not consciously and deliberately" (1960, 267). Although I have argued
A poetic conclusion to this review of the relationship between social position and musical style may be found in this quotation from the New Orleanian guitarist Danny Barker, who describes a scene that tells much about the swing-bop nexus:

Well, Dizzy and Milt Hinton, between those two-and-a-half hour shows at the Cotton Club (and they were very strenuous shows) would retire to the roof. Dizzy would blow his new ideas in progressions, and he and Hinton would experiment on different ideas and melodic patterns, and they would suggest that I come up and join them. But after that two-and-a-half hour show, sometimes I’d go up and sometimes I wouldn’t. Because what they were doing called for a lot of mental concentration on harmonies. It was very interesting, but I couldn’t see going up there and wasting energies on something not commercial. (quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff 1955, 343)

The poetry is in the image of bebop growing on the rooftop of swing. Bebop was less a response to social crisis than it was a discovery, an intense exploration of possibilities within the paradigm of African-American aurality; the exploration was made possible by the relative luxury of the swing era, the period during which jazz found its greatest American success. Musicians from Barker’s generation mastered harmony according to the demands of cross-over participation (“something commercial”). Gillespie and his colleagues built on the achievement of their elders in the pursuit of an idiom that was accessible only to those willing to give the mental concentration that it demands.

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against the idea that the “intentionally different” use of harmony in bebop may be read as an attempt to define an ethnic boundary, I would suggest the possibility that, especially in some genres of African-American music after 1950, harmonic practice is more closely tied to an interest in establishing such a boundary—tied, that is, to an interest in autonomy. Specifically, the de-emphasis of harmony in modal jazz and in freely dissonant jazz may be read in these terms, and so may harmonically static music like funk and rap. Thus, the de-emphasis on harmony indexes autonomy, in these cases. With bebop, there is hardly a de-emphasis on harmony, and it may be the relatively nonideological orientation of the phenomenon that fosters creative manipulation of harmonic codes.


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8 **The Politics and Practice of "Crossover" in American Popular Music, 1963 to 1965**  
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25 **Review: What Did We Do to Be so Black and Blue?**  
Reviewed Work(s):  
   *Cats of Any Color: Jazz Black and White* by Gene Lees  
   *Reading Jazz* by David Meltzer  
   *Jazz: The American Theme Song* by James Lincoln Collier  
Scott DeVeaux  
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26 Solo and Cycle in African-American Jazz
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Review: What Did We Do to Be so Black and Blue?
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