

JAZZ AND THE BLUES: SELECTED WRITINGS

BY

WALLACE THURMAN, LANGSTON HUGHES,

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, JAMES BALDWIN,

MILES DAVIS & ALBERT MURRAY

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WALLACE THURMAN (1902–1934)

from *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929)

Arline's brother was mixing another highball. All around, people were laughing. There was much more laughter than there was talk, much more gesticulating and ogling than the usual means of expression called for. Everything seemed unrestrained, abandoned. Yet, Emma Lou was conscious of a note of artificiality, the same as she felt when she watched Arline and her fellow performers cavorting on the stage in "Cabaret Gal." This entire scene seemed staged, they were in a theater, only the proscenium arch had been obliterated. At last the audience and the actors were as one.

A call to order on the snare drum. A brutal sliding trumpet call on the trombone, a running minor scale by the clarinet and piano, an umpah, umpah by the bass horn, a combination four measure moan and strum by the saxophone and banjo, then a melodic ensemble, and the orchestra was playing another dance tune. Masses of people jumbled up the three entrances to the dance square and with difficulty, singled out their mates and became closely allied partners. Inadvertently, Emma Lou looked at Arline's brother. He blushed, and appeared uncomfortable. She realized immediately what was on his mind. He didn't know whether or not to ask her to dance with him. The ethics of the case were complex. She was a Negro and hired maid. But was she a hired maid after hours, and in this environment? Emma Lou had difficulty in suppressing a smile, then she decided to end the suspense.

"Why don't you two dance. No need of letting the music go to waste."

[Source]: *Harlem Renaissance: Five Novels of the 1920s*, ed. Rafia Zafar (New York: Library of America, 2011), pp. 754-55.

LANGSTON HUGHES (1902–1967)

from *Not Without Laughter* (1930)

Suddenly the footlights were lowered and the spotlight flared, steadied itself at the right of the stage, and waited. Then, stepping out from among the blue curtains, Harriett entered in a dress of glowing orange, flame-like against the ebony of her skin, barbaric, yet beautiful as a jungle princess. She swayed towards the footlights, while Billy teased the keys of the piano into a hesitating delicate jazz. Then she began to croon a new song—a popular version of an old Negro melody, refashioned with words from Broadway.

“Gee, Aunt Harrie’s prettier than ever!” Sandy exclaimed to his mother.

“Same old Harriett,” said Annjee. “But kinder hoarse.”

“Sings good, though,” Sandy cried when Harriett began to snap her fingers, putting a slow, rocking pep into the chorus, rolling her bright eyes to the tune of the melody as the piano rippled and cried under Billy Sanderlee’s swift fingers.

“She’s the same Harrie,” murmured Annjee.

When she appeared again, in an apron of blue calico, with a bandanna handkerchief knotted about her head, she walked very slowly. The man at the piano had begun to play blues—the old familiar folk-blues—and the audience settled into a receptive silence broken only by a “Lawdy! . . . Good Lawdy! Lawd!” from some southern lips at the back of the house, as Harriett sang:

Red sun, red sun, why don’t you rise today?
Red sun, O sun! Why don’t you rise today?
Ma heart is breakin’—ma baby’s gone away.

A few rows ahead of Annjee a woman cried out: “True, Lawd!” and swayed her body.

Little birds, little birds, ain’t you gonna sing this morn’?
Says, little chirpin’ birds, ain’t you gonna sing this morn’?
I cannot sleep—ma lovin’ man is gone.

“Whee-ee-e! . . . Hab mercy! . . . Moan it, gal!” exclamations and shouts broke loose in the understanding audience.

“Just like when papa used to play for her,” said Sandy. But Annjee was crying, remembering Jimboy, and fumbling in her bag for a handkerchief. On the stage the singer went on—as though singing to herself—her voice sinking to a bitter moan as the listeners rocked and swayed.

[Source]: *Harlem Renaissance: Four Novels of the 1930s*, ed. Rafia Zafar (New York: Library of America, 2011), pp. 213-14.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (1891–1960)

from “Folklore and Music” (1938)

Way back there when Hell wasn't no bigger than Maitland, man found out something about the laws of sound. He had found out something before he even stood erect to think. He found out that sounds could be assembled and manipulated and that such a collection of sound forms could become as definite and concrete as a war-axe or a food-tool. So he had language and song. Perhaps by some happy accident he found out about percussion sounds and spacing the intervals for tempo and rhythm. Anyway, it is evident that the sound-arts were the first inventions and that music and literature grew from the same root. Somewhere songs for sound-singing branched off from songs for story-telling until we arrive at prose.

The singing grew like this: First a singing word or syllable repeated over and over like frogs in a pond; then followed sung phrases and chanted sentences as more and more words were needed to portray the action of the battle, the chase, or the dance. Then man began to sing of his feelings or moods, as well as his actions, and it was found that the simple lyre was adequate to walk with the words expressing moods. The Negro blues songs, of which Florida has many fine examples, belong in the lyric class; that is, feelings set to strings. The oldest and most typical form of Negro blues is a line stating the mood of the singer repeated three times. The stress and variation is carried by the tune and the whole thing walks with rhythm. Look at “East Coast Blues” and see how:

Love ain't nothing but the *easy-going* heart disease;
Love ain't nothing but the easy-going heart *disease*;
Oh, *love* ain't *nothing* but the *easy-going* heart *disease*.

The next step going up is still a three-line stanza. The second line is a repetition of the first so far as the words go, but the third line is a “flip” line that rhymes with the others. The sample that follows is from a widespread blues song that originated in Palm Beach:

When you see me coming h'ist your window high;
When you see me coming h'ist your window high;
Done got blood-thirsty, don't care how I die.

Incidentally, this is the best known form as far as the commercial blues is concerned because in the early days of the commercial blues, Porter Grainger, who wrote most of these songs, followed this pattern exclusively.

[Source]: *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, & Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New York: Library of America, 1995), pp. 876-77.

JAMES BALDWIN (1924–1987)

from “Sonny’s Blues” (1957)

Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness.

And this tale, according to that face, that body, those strong hands on those strings, has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation. Listen, Creole seemed to be saying, listen. Now these are Sonny’s blues. He made the little black man on the drums know it, and the bright, brown man on the horn. Creole wasn’t trying any longer to get Sonny in the water. He was wishing him Godspeed. Then he stepped back, very slowly, filling the air with the immense suggestion that Sonny speak for himself.

Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn’t hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. Yet, there was no battle in his face now. I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth. He has made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother’s face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father’s brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel’s tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise. And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky.

[Source]: *James Baldwin: Early Novels & Stories*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), pp. 862-63.

ALBERT MURRAY (1916–2013)

from *The Hero and the Blues* (1973)

When Ellington creates blues-extension concertos in which the solo instrument states, asserts, alleges, quests, requests, or only implies, while the trumpets in the background sometimes mock and sometimes concur as the “woodwinds” moan or groan in the agony and ecstasy of sensual ambivalence and the trombones chant concurrence or signify misgivings and even suspicions (which are as likely to be bawdy as plaintive) with the rhythm section attesting and affirming, he is quite obviously engaged in a process of transforming the raw experience of American Negroes into what Malraux calls style. He is also stylizing his sense of the actual texture of all human existence not only in the United States or even the contemporary world at large, but also in all places throughout the ages.

Such is the nature, as well as the scope, authority, and implications of art. And it should be just as obvious that Ellington, who is not only a genius but who after all is no less dedicated to music (and no less accomplished at it) than a Herman Melville, a Mark Twain, or even a Henry James was to fiction, is likewise no less involved with what T. S. Eliot referred to as the “objective correlative” or the “objective equivalent” to feeling. Also obvious is that he is concerned (as Susanne K. Langer in *Problems of Art* points out that all artists are concerned) with the *life of human feeling* (which is to say, how it feels to be human) beyond everything else.

But what should be, if anything, most immediately obvious of all is that for Duke Ellington himself and for the members of his orchestra, textures of human feeling exist in music in terms of arrangements and compositions which are always related to other arrangements and compositions. Accordingly, the performance of an Ellington composition is not nearly so dependent upon the personal feelings of his musicians as upon their attitude toward music and styles of other musicians. The performer’s personal feelings do count for something, of course, but only insofar as he can relate them to his musical imagination and his musical technique. The feelings which incompetent arrangements and inept performances seem most likely to involve are confusion, annoyance, boredom and, mercifully, indifference.

Sooner or later those who are truly interested in the promotion of black consciousness or of a black dimension in American literature are likely to discover that “black esthetics,” as the saying goes, is not as some agitprop rhetoricians seem to think, simply a matter of a group of spokesmen getting together and *deciding* and then prescribing how black experience is to be translated into poetry, drama, fiction and painting, but rather of *realizing what any raw material of any experience must undergo in order to become art*. How do you give esthetic articulation to the everyday facts of life? The problem of every writer is how to make his personal sense of experience part of the artistic tradition of mankind at large.

[Source]: *Albert Murray: Collected Essays & Memoirs*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Paul Devlin (New York: Library of America, 2016), pp. 396-97.

ALBERT MURRAY (1916–2013)

from *Stomping the Blues* (1976)

American usage of the blues as a term for depressed spirits, despondency, and melancholy dates, according to *The Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles*, at least as far back as 1807, when Washington Irving used the following sentence in *Salamagundi XI*: “He concluded his harangue with a sigh, and I saw that he was still under the influence of a whole legion of the blues.” And no less of a national figure than Thomas Jefferson is on record as having written in 1810: “We have something of the blue devils at times.”

Other instances have been documented by the *Dictionary of American English* as follows: 1820, *Western Carolinian*, 18 July, “The fact is he was but recently convalescent from a severe spell of the blues”; 1837, *Southern Literary Messenger III*, 387, “I shall have a fit of the blues if I stay here”; 1850, *N. Kingsley Diary*, 143, “Some are beginning to get the blues on most horribly”; 1866, Gregg, *Life in the Army*, “It was well for me that day that I was able to look on the brightest side of the case and avoid a severe attack of the blues”; 1871, *Scribner’s Monthly I*, 489, “The Silence alone is enough to give a well man the blues”; 1883, *Harper’s Magazine*, Dec., 55, “Come to me when you have the blues.”

All of which suggests that blues music bears a vernacular relationship to the blues that is much if not very nearly the same as that which the spirituals bear to the Christianity of frontier America. Musicologists have indeed traced numerous rhythmic, structural, and sonic elements of the spirituals to African sources, but the fact remains that the spirituals as a specific musical idiom are both indigenous and peculiar to the religious experience of Africans transplanted to the United States. They are a product of the interaction of certain elements derived from African religious and musical sensibilities with European-derived music and religion. But this interaction only took place in the United States. Not in Africa, for all the Africans converted by European missionaries; and not in Europe, and not even in the Caribbean and Latin American countries.

Likewise, the actual historical as well as geographic circumstances, and consequently the conceptual framework in terms of which the blues as such are first perceived, defined, and then responded to by musicians and dancers is not West African, nor is it European. Nor Euro-African. It is Afro-U.S.

[Source]: *Albert Murray: Collected Essays & Memoirs*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Paul Devlin (New York: Library of America, 2016), pp. 439-40.

MILES DAVIS (1926-1991)

from *Miles Davis: The Autobiography* (1989)

Meanwhile, Bird was forming a new band and asked me to come with him, and I did. The two records Bird had recorded for Dial out in Los Angeles had been released. I was on one and Howard McGhee was on the other, I think. They had been released in late 1946 and were now big jazz hits. So, with 52nd Street open again and Bird back in town, the club owners wanted Bird. Everybody was after him. They wanted small bands again and they felt that Bird would pack them in. They offered him \$800 a week for four weeks at the Three Deuces. He hired me, Max Roach, Tommy Potter, and Duke Jordan on piano. He paid me and Max \$135 a week and Tommy and Duke \$125. Bird made the most he had ever made in his life, \$280 a week. It didn't matter to me that I was making \$65 a week less than what I had made in B's band; all I wanted to do was play with Bird and Max and make some good music.

I felt good about it, and Bird was clear-eyed, not like the crazed look he had in California. He was slimmer and seemed happy with Doris. She had gone out to California to get him when he got out of Camarillo, and accompanied him east on the train. Man, Doris loved her Charlie Parker. She would do anything for him. Bird seemed happy and ready to go. We opened in April 1947, opposite Lennie Tristano's trio.

I was really happy to be playing with Bird again, because playing with him brought out the best in me at the time. He could play so many different styles and never repeat the same musical idea. His creativity and musical ideas were endless. He used to turn the rhythm section around every night. Say we would be playing a blues. Bird would start on the eleventh bar. As the rhythm section stayed where they were, then Bird would play in such a way that it made the rhythm section sound like it was on 1 and 3 instead of 2 and 4. Nobody could keep up with Bird back in those days except maybe Dizzy.

[Source]: *The Cool School: Writing from America's Hip Underground*, ed. Glenn O'Brien (New York: Library of America, 2013), p. 24.

ALBERT MURRAY (1916–2013)

from “The Twentieth-Century American Herald” (1994)

Louis Armstrong claimed that he was born on the Fourth of July in 1900. True or not, such a birth date was not only appropriate to the status he achieved as a twentieth-century American legend, but it is entirely consistent with the crucial role he came to play as the quintessential embodiment of the spirit of his native land as it is expressed in contemporary music.

Moreover, if as some researchers now report, the date given by Armstrong was a personal choice rather than a documented fact, the symbolism of the choice may well suggest that Armstrong was not unaware of the fact that he was in effect a culture hero (not unlike, say, Prometheus), the bringer of indispensable existential equipment for the survival of humanity.

In any case, what the elegant innovations of his trumpet and vocal improvisations added up to was the American musical equivalent of “*emblems for a pioneer people who require resilience as a prime trait.*”

Nor, given the transitional nature of life in the twentieth-century world at large, is such resiliency or ability to maintain equilibrium through swinging and improvising any less an imperative for experiment-oriented people in the contemporary world elsewhere.

Whether he was born on July 4, 1900, or on August 4, 1901, as recorded in military conscription records of 1918, Louis Armstrong was destined to make music that is if anything even more representative of American affirmation and promise in the face of adversity than the festive reiterations of the most elaborate display of any Fourth of July fireworks. And it is received as such around the globe. Indeed, during the years following World War II, the sound of Ambassador Satchmo came to have more worldwide appeal than the image of Yankee Doodle Dandy ever did, not to mention the poster image of Uncle Sam, who by then had become synonymous with Uncle Sugar.

Generally acknowledged or not, much goes to show that it was through Louis Armstrong’s definitive influence on jazz that the United States has registered its strongest impact on contemporary aesthetic procedure.

[Source]: *Albert Murray: Collected Essays & Memoirs*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Paul Devlin (New York: Library of America, 2016), pp. 561-62.

ALBERT MURRAY (1916–2013)

from “Made in America: The Achievement of Duke Ellington” (2001)

When Ellington made his first trip abroad in 1933, such items as “East St. Louis Toodle-oo,” “Mood Indigo,” “Lightnin’ Louie,” “Creole Love Call,” and “Rockin’ in Rhythm,” among others, created for performance in nightclubs, dance halls, popular stage shows, popular music records, and radio broadcasts, had gained him the status of a new celebrity in the American world of popular entertainment, but he was of little or no concern to “regular” music critics and theorists in America. In Europe, however, his musicianship was regarded as a matter for serious analysis not only as quintessentially American music but also as it related to contemporary European music on its own terms.

In England, for example, as Barry Ulanov reports in his biography of Ellington, Constant Lambert wrote: “*The orchestration of nearly all the numbers shows an intensely musical instinct, and after hearing what Ellington can do with fourteen players in pieces like ‘Jive Stomp’ and ‘Mood Indigo’ the average modern composer who splashes about with eighty players in the Respighi manner must feel chastened. All this is clearly apparent to anyone who visits the Palladium, but what may not be so apparent is that Ellington is no mere band leader and arranger, but a composer of uncommon merit, probably the first composer of real character to come out of America.*”

The European trip, during which it became quite obvious to Ellington that his approach to music was a matter of serious attention and even admiration and emulation by such highly regarded concert hall composers as Auric, Durey, Hindemith, Honegger, Poulenc, and Tailleferre, came about almost ten years before his band made its debut at Carnegie Hall in January 1943. There had been concert performances on several American college campuses during the mid 1930s, but the Carnegie Hall concert symbolized the achievement of the ultimate level of musical prestige in the United States.

Ellington, who is said to have declined an invitation to participate in the “From Spirituals to Swing” extravaganza of American folk and entertainment circuit music staged there in 1938–39 by a jazz enthusiast and booster named John Hammond, certainly seems to have regarded his performance of a program of his own arrangements and compositions at Carnegie Hall as a very special historic achievement not only for his personal career but also for the idiom of American music that he represented.

[Source]: *Albert Murray: Collected Essays & Memoirs*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Paul Devlin (New York: Library of America, 2016), pp. 756-57.

ALBERT MURRAY (1916–2013)

from “Jazz: Notes Toward a Definition” (2004)

Jazz music, as is also the case with the old down-home spirituals, gospel and jubilee songs, jumps, shouts, and moans, is essentially an American vernacular or idiomatic modification of musical conventions imported from Europe, beginning back during the time of the early settlers of the original colonies.

Specifically, jazz as such began as a secular dance music that evolved from ragtime piano music, brass-band music, and the guitar, vocal, harmonica, barroom, honky-tonk, and juke-joint music called the blues, which generates an atmosphere of groovy delight and festive well-being in the very process of recounting a tale of woe. As any church member will testify, generating a Dionysian atmosphere is precisely what honky-tonks, juke joints, barrooms, and gin mills are all about.

In any case, the jazz musician’s blues should not be confused with the torch singer’s lament, which is a matter of wearing one’s heart on one’s sleeve because one has loved unwisely and not well and has become not the one and only, but the lonely, “ain’t these tears in these eyes telling you.” In this sense, Billie Holiday’s famous recording “Strange Fruit” is not blues music. It is a political torch song, a lament about unrequited patriotic love. We have loved and fought and died for this country for all these many years, the song asserts, because it has been our official homeland for this many generations, and now just look at what some of these other folks think they have a right to do to somebody because they want to think that they are better than them.

Actually, “Strange Fruit” is not even written in any of the established blues stanzas. “The St. Louis Blues,” by contrast, is also about unrequited love, but it is written in the most widely used blues form, the twelve-bar blues chorus. And what it inspires, whether in up-tempo or in slow drag, regardless of the words, is not regret and despair, but elegance and good-time movement. (For a jazz musician’s inflection of a famous torch song, listen to Roy Eldridge’s rendition of “After You’ve Gone” of 1937, and also the Jazz at the Philharmonic version of 1946, featuring Mel Powell, Charlie Parker, Howard McGhee, Lester Young, and others.)

[Source]: *Albert Murray: Collected Essays & Memoirs*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Paul Devlin (New York: Library of America, 2016), pp. 905-906.