Reflections on Jazz and the Politics of Race

Tom McIntosh

I'd certainly like to express my thanks to Jim Merod for this invitation. That composition you just heard ["With Malice Toward None"] was the very first one I ever wrote. It was the pianist, Gene Keyes, who, after hearing a playback of it in the Chess recording studio, in Chicago, decided it reminded him of that quote from Lincoln's address. Charlie Mingus loved it, and he asked me to do a special arrangement for his band. However, he took the liberty of announcing to the public that he was changing the title. He said that, henceforth, it was going to be called "Malice Toward Those Who Deserve It."

It seems to me that the first question I need to address today is, In what way have popular music and the politics of race affected my association with jazz? I would like to start by saying that, as a kid, the popular music of the day was Louis Armstrong's Hot Five. My mother regarded jazz

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as sinful, and so it was forbidden in the house. I recall at age six singing a lyric from a Louis Armstrong song. It went, "Momma, let me lay it on you, Momma let me lay it on you. I'll give you everything in the whole wide world. Momma let me lay it on you." My mother told me she never wanted to hear that lyric again. So, that framed my attitude toward this music. It should also be noted that I yearned for musical freedom in my formative years, around the age of ten. I remember listening to a recording of Al Goodman playing "Oh, Danny Boy," and I remember saying in my heart at that moment that I had to be a musician and express myself in accordance with what I was hearing. Nevertheless, because it was the Depression, and because of my mom and dad's attitude, I received no training.

I did have a high school teacher who initiated a scholarship for me and two other students. She went to the Peabody Conservatory, which is the most prestigious school for music in Baltimore, Maryland. I got a two-year scholarship as a result. This was in voice. But my heart, at that time, was in boxing, football, and those things. The teacher insisted that I go for the scholarship. What was interesting about this is that I was granted the scholarship but, at that time, it was forbidden by law for blacks to attend a white university, which Peabody was. And so, an arrangement was made whereby a teacher from Peabody would come to a black school that was convenient for me. And that is how I got my first formal understanding of what music was about, how it was constructed, and so forth.

The teacher noted that I had a gift for theory. I didn't know what she was talking about at the time. All the songs that I was taught were European songs. In fact, it should also be noted that in black schools at this time—the early forties—all the school songs were really chants that praised black men and that were set to the tunes of Irish songs, such as "Believe in Me" and "All Those Endearing Charms," and songs like that. On one occasion, someone invited a gospel group to perform at the high school, an auditorium performance. This got by the principal. He had no knowledge of what he was going to hear. The whole school was just in an uproar to hear this raw black musical experience, and the principal was very, very offended. In fact, he conferred with the faculty as to how this got by him. This was never to happen again.

Not long after, I was drafted, in 1946. All the black troops that were on the ship that went over to Europe as occupation troops were ultimately reassigned to a laundry company. Our job was to keep the white soldiers clean in and around Nuremberg. There were several excellent jazz musicians in this laundry company. They made me appreciate the importance of

developing my musical ability. So, I used to hang around them as they would come in, in the evening, looking for something to do. One was an excellent guitarist, another played saxophone, and still another played trumpet. I used to beat myself up for not taking music seriously.

A brilliant pianist named Allen Tinney (who jammed with Charlie Parker before being drafted) was the sergeant in command of the army band in Zirndorf [a village near Nuremberg]. He "was delighted to discover" these musicians in the laundry company, since the band was scheduled to play a crucial parade the very next week. In fact, Sergeant Tinney declared, "This is a godsend," when he learned that the saxophonist was primarily a tuba player, since the band had no one to play this all-important military instrument.[1] However, he immediately recognized that one tuba in the center of the band would block the view of the drum major for most of the band, and that putting it on either side of the band would make all marching formations look lopsided. So, having taken one look at me, a bystander, he said, "Hey, you've got broad shoulders . . ."

When the parade in question was over, Sergeant Tinney reported that the colonel of the post was very pleased by the band's performance, and, without further ado, welcomed the musicians from the laundry company as "new members of the band." Sensing my feelings of rejection and anger with myself for not developing my musical potential, Sergeant Tinney took me aside and said, "Look, you did us a favor, now it's my turn to do you one," adding, "I'll let you stay in the band if you learn to play some marches on that tuba in six months." I then felt that God was paving the way for me to have one last chance to develop the musical talent granted me, stirring me to vow to become the best musician I could be.

Now, I'd like for you to back up to the music lessons at Peabody and see me sitting every week waiting for my private instruction. There was a girl who was among the recipients of scholarships, a girl named Frieda Jones. She and I used to sing duets in high school. The politics of race impelled us to imitate the duets of Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald, who were big media favorites at the time. The teacher taught Frieda to sing a song called "Estrellita," which was an art song written by a man named Manual Ponce, and it was Mexican in spirit. I thought it was very pleasant, but I never paid much attention to it. Years later, however, hearing "Estrellita" as a jazz arrangement for trombone moved me to really hear the sheer beauty of the

1. The sousaphone—a tuba that wraps around the player's body to balance a huge, top-heavy bell—is used in marching bands.

music. I got a sense of Mexican culture and what the song was about. I said, "Oh my goodness, I can see it. Guys looking at mountains and looking at clear spaces! Listen to that line and the harmony."

It turned out that the trombonist who was featured on this number had to go to the hospital and was confined there for several weeks. It was then that I decided I was going to be a trombone player rather than a tuba player. In short order—in fact, in several weeks—I was invited to join the dance band. As a result, I became a trombonist and decided to make music my career in the army. I saw no opportunities, when I left Baltimore, for any meaningful employment other than working in the postal service, which had just opened up to blacks in 1946. That certainly didn't seem to offer any great future. So I decided to stay where I was, in Germany, learning to play an instrument and getting familiar with my own musical culture, at age twenty.

At age twenty-six, I became a master sergeant. This was at the time that President Truman had ordered that all army bases be integrated. I thus became the first black noncommissioned officer (to my knowledge) to command an otherwise all-white army band. No conflict over "race" ever surfaced. When the Korean War broke out, a group of young men came in and just hounded me: "Get out of this army. You've got abilities, and you should get recognition," they told me. They insisted that there were many opportunities in New York. So I decided to get out and go to Juilliard Music School.

When I got to Juilliard, I was immediately invited to take part in a symphony orchestra that was to perform for what they called, at that time, Negro History Week. They wanted blacks to be visible in the normally all-white symphony orchestra. So, because I played for that, I was able to get into the Musicians Union.

It didn't take me long to notice that, at Juilliard, one of the most notable schools in the country, jazz did not exist. In fact, any black music wasn't really worth considering, it seemed. I got into a serious debate with my teacher, Peter Mennen, who later became the president of the university. I had to prove my point, and I did just what Jim Merod did for you: I brought in recordings and provoked questions. "Well," we were told, "jazz musicians can play fast and play high, but they really can't sustain it." I would turn the record over and prove otherwise. Ultimately, the class publicly confessed that I had won all the arguments. But it did not make any difference, none whatsoever.

Living in New York City in the fifties was a gas. I met my wife, and it

was just really a very exciting time and place. Dizzy Gillespie was forming a new band, and I was hoping that I could get in that. He was essentially my main idol. I'll never forget the first time I met him. He looked at me and said, "McIntosh, one of these days, you and I are gonna play in a symphony orchestra." Why he said that, I don't know. But it came true about ten years ago. I reminded him of his prophecy.

I mention New York to point out the politics of race there. I was privileged to move into a building there where several classical musicians lived. As soon as the owner of the building discovered that I was black, I had to go. Of course, the question is, How did I get into the building in the first place? Well, my wife is Caucasian. She gave the owner a check, and he accepted it very enthusiastically. When he discovered that her husband was black, and also a jazz musician, I had to go. But the experience there was also very encouraging. There was a woman who lived in the neighborhood who used to hear me practicing. One day, I went into the laundromat, and she said, "Oh, you're the one! I hear you playing all the time. It's just beautiful. Please keep practicing. If you move, please tell me where you move to."

Such praise led me to become much more serious in my dedication to composition. I was soon invited to Hollywood to score a motion picture. It was the first time a black man wrote a script, directed it, and also claimed to write music. The problem was that I was really hired as a ghostwriter. At that time, the Musicians Union had just been integrated, and so I paid dues. So there was no problem there, as far as I was concerned, about the politics of race. But I was disturbed, really stunned, to discover that Las Vegas had just overcome its racial difficulties, as far as musicians were concerned. There are some horrible stories about the way jazz musicians were treated in Las Vegas. Lena Horne, for example, was the very first black performer to be able to stay in a hotel where she worked.

[*Comment from the audience*]: But they burned her sheets!

Thank you. Did everyone hear his comment? The hotel stipulated that her sheets, the ones she slept on, had to be burned daily. Such anecdotes give you a picture of my experience with the politics of race and popular music, its bearing on me as a jazz musician.

Many have wondered, if jazz is inspired by African Americans, how is it that blacks don't support it? In fact, for the last forty years, if you go to any jazz concert, you will see that there are very, very few blacks present. My observation is that blacks have every reason to mistrust, to be suspicious of, anything European. Jazz, early on, decided to embrace certain harmonic formulae from Europe, with Asian concepts in melody and so forth.

Jazz insisted on having a universal musical array in its arsenal rather than simply dealing with black experience. This is one of the factors that turned many blacks away, especially the present generation of blacks. It should be noted that one of the primary functions of popular American music is to accompany the youthful yearning for sexual experimentation. Indeed, one of the dominant forces in the birth of jazz was the use of music to stimulate the sexual urges of prostitutes and their potential customers. That is, when Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and Kenny Clarke jointly elevated jazz above the needs of brothels and speakeasies, in an all-out effort to make African American music attain the status of European classical music, most black and white Americans rejected "modern jazz" at the direction of the media, led by American network television.

The other factor in this equation is that blacks have traditionally reacted to what the media said about its experience. As a black performer, my point is that the politics of race have always demanded that African Americans redefine their musical values according to what the media say is best for the mass consumption of European American consumers. So, we have this history: jazz was the popular music defined by whites. This was called the Jazz Age. That went into Dixieland, in which white musicians learned, quite properly, the disciplines of what Louis Armstrong and his crew were doing. From Dixieland, we had swing. Many people argue that jazz was at its all-time popular high point then, because everyone loved swing. It was the popular music. After swing came bebop. I believe all else that has followed in the name of popular music—namely, "rhythm and blues," "rockabilly," "rock 'n' roll," "disco," and "rap"—are media-inspired, negative, popular reactions to "modern jazz." I see this whole chain, really, as a reaction to whatever seems to be appealing to the majority of music consumers.

Why is jazz important? Why should it be taken out of the museum? Why is it of any real value? If you look at it, and listen carefully, jazz has always insisted on self-expression, imagination, experimentation, boldness, consideration of the players and the audience, with a view to fraternity.

As Jim Merod mentioned, I've written a screenplay. Its central aim is to demonstrate that jazz is a microcosm of what the science of anthropology calls "the universal norm." This embodies the conviction that every individual has the natural right to express creative potential to the full, not destructive, potential without any interference from any other individual or institution in the universe. The universe will judge each individual according to that maximum.

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JM: Surely, after such a set of meditations, we have some questions for Tom McIntosh.

Q: What was the movie? The title of your script?

TM: I was invited to Hollywood to score a film titled *The Learning Tree.* The name of the script I have written about the plight of jazz is *Virus of the Muses.*

Q: Last year, when I saw Dizzy Gillespie, I thought I was in a predominantly white upper-class area, and that's why I thought the people in the audience were nonblack, mainly older people, but now, with the news you've given me, I'm curious about what Dizzy Gillespie and other black musicians generally think about playing to predominantly nonblack crowds.

TM: Jazz has never concerned itself with color. Can you play?—*that's* the question. For jazz musicians, black, Asians, whoever, the main thing is, can you play? It has been distressing, very distressing, to see "one's own people" not appreciating our own heritage. Believe me, that heritage is about freedom. My observation is that popular music—American popular music—has been caught in a three-way cultural struggle. The dominant force at one time in history was the Holy Roman Church, and it decided that all music should be rid of stress. As a result, we had music with no stress, even though humanity was engaging in all kinds of primitive dances and so forth. The Church said, "No, this cannot be part of the dominant musical culture." Then, when the Renaissance came along, musicians went to the other extreme and decided there must be stress on every beat, on every measure. The African American was the first to come along to say, "This is nonsense. You can put stress anywhere you want. You do not have to have a musical law." I like to use the example of being confronted with the phrase "Oh Mar-y, don't you weep, don't you mourn." English grammar demands that the phrase begin on the fourth beat as a pickup to four elongated, evenly spaced pulses or "beats." But history shows that the slaves chose to ignore the rules of European rhythm, as well as the rules of English grammar, to sing, "Oh Mary, DON' CHA WEEP, DON' CHA MOURN." That is, they superimposed an independent rhythm with free accents inspired by units twice as fast as the underlying elongated four beats, creating two rhythms that shift in and out of sync with each other at strategic moments in the song (like so-called Latin rhythms). My argument with the rock culture

is that it grabbed hold of that early charm and perverted it. It has locked into the very first popular expression of poly–African American rhythms, which is the hand clap on the second and fourth beats, with simultaneous foot-tapping on the first and third beats of music in 4/4 meter. That is, rock does away with the downbeat and gives you the backbeat. It will not allow any movement from that framework. I view the whole pop phenomenon as a return to slavery, with an African twist.

Q: I was interested in a couple of things you said that don't sound like they go together. I couldn't tell whether it was a contradiction, or an evolution, or what. You said the origins of jazz were to stimulate sex. Then, at the end of your talk, you spoke about a list of qualities in jazz, including creativity and self-expression, that led to fraternity. But sexuality and sensuality weren't part of that. Is that a different way of looking at this, or what?

TM: I think your comment is correct. You already said it. It's an evolution. Jazz musicians always recognized that their musical art was being used to stimulate the most primitive urges in the human condition with a view to selling drinks, or what have you. The movement to "modern jazz," however, followed the trail blazed by Duke Ellington, demanding that jazz musicians and jazz audiences treat their art with all due respect, accepting all commercial attachments only as a means toward this end. As a result, you had music—jazz—going into Carnegie Hall, into concert halls, and being performed by black men. Benny Goodman took the swing band into Carnegie Hall earlier than that, but the first time blacks were allowed in was under the helm of people like Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie, because they simply decided they were going to be true to the music, to the exclusion of all distracting needs. They were intent on being artists in the truest sense, giving humanity what they believed to be real emotional needs, rather than what the media told the democratic majority it wanted.

Q: I wanted to raise a question with all due respect to your experience in jazz, which I'm really not very familiar with: this ideal of universalizing, of evolution as being a desired goal for jazz. I wonder what you think about what Leroi Jones wrote in *Blues People*—about jazz having an earlier form in blues, a form that couldn't be universalized, that was resistant and recalcitrant because it was black, about black blues. What do you think of that, and does that pose another alternative to this notion of universalizing translated into terms for everybody?

TM: The fact is that rock culture has universalized blues. The universality of blues is an established fact. So it has been done, but it never could have

been done by blacks. Blacks are now privileged to become heroes in the media, because the heroism is exactly what the media said blacks should be back in the thirties, namely ignorant people who are just raw and only have an interest in sex and so forth. You now have the media saying, "By all means, you can be a hero." But Dizzy Gillespie will never be a hero to the American public, because he's a hero in the true sense of the word. I still see questions in your face.

Q: The idea of universalizing . . . you said the lower drives, a stimulant to sexuality and so forth. I wonder if that isn't another way of talking about a form that can't be universalized?

TM: First of all, please don't misunderstand. I am not against sex. [LAUGHTER] Maybe this might help: I think the vitality in black freedom rose out of the fact that African music never made a distinction between secular music and spiritual music or religious music. In other words, the African sees no difference between worship—music to worship God by—and music to have sex by, because that's the same energy. They're intertwined. European culture as translated into American culture has always made that distinction. As a result, anything that makes the body shake or move in any way—that kind of music—has always been taboo. Genuine jazz musicians have brought about a real balance of those two forces. You can't help but want to move. You feel disturbed and joyful, whatever the music is aimed at doing. At the same time, you also recognize that you're being lifted above anything base to something generally humane for all of us.

Q: Thank you. Where do you see the blues, or where does the blues fit into your taxonomy? What's interesting is that when black people start regarding jazz as art, there's a sort of split. It seems like the swing jazz tradition goes into R&B. Like Louis Jordan, for example.

TM: Right.

Q: And that evolves into rock, but there's a very strong blues connection right there.

TM: Blacks learned early on that music is part of every experience. When you go to work, do you sing? When it's a camp meeting, you sing. So, there's always some kind of music involved. And music at home ultimately became the blues. So it was a way of just simply saying, "I'm very sad, but let me laugh at it because I'm outside the forces that are making me sad." So there you get the blues. Jazz always had great respect for the blues. No serious jazz player ever divorces himself from the blues, but he never says

it is the be-all and the end-all. This is my argument: The politics of race pigeonholes everything, and this is what is selling. Are you this or that? To real jazz musicians, all such concerns are nonsense. The jazz artist simply wants to express himself as any other artist does. Whatever it comes out to be, that's what it is. So, there isn't any labeling in the real jazz experience. It's just musical expression, but always with deep respect for each one of these: gospel, blues, spirituals, rhythm and blues, that whole history. Swing . . . anything that is legitimate, that stands up to the test of time. You can't hear Tommy Flanagan and not hear a whole history of black music.

JM: Tom, in our discussions over the course of time, you talked to me of your experience with the crucial historical break that took place—I think you've located it about 1948—with the breaking of the musicians' strike. The entire economics of musicians' relationship to recording and to the industry was changed by placing singers up front as the heroic totems of all energy. They became the ones who got paid. Musicians who normally would have gotten their fair cut were relegated to background instrumentation. I suspect that many people here might not know about that crucial watershed moment.

TM: It *was* 1948. I was not a part of it because I was still in the army in Germany, but I heard about it, and, of course, when I came back, the details were still dim. What had occurred, essentially, is that the record industry was making huge sums on the swing era, mainly all the big bands of the day: Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Harry James, Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey. The big bands, the bandleaders, wanted a bigger share of the profits, and, as a result, all of the musicians in the country went out on strike. No recordings. No performances. The recording industry was in a pickle. And the legal counsel for the recording industry sensed that the bandleaders had a noose around their neck because all the bands had signed contracts with professed nonmusicians. Who? The singers in the band. All the singers—Peggy Lee, Frank Sinatra, and Martha Tilton, all those people. They were excellent, but they professed that they were not musicians. So, musicians were saying that they would not perform for the recording industry unless more funds came. As a result, the record company decided to take the singers out of each band and make them the stars. Hire the band to support them without the bandleader. Because contracts were signed with bandleaders, it was they who were essentially out on strike. But musicians across the board were supportive. Tommy Dorsey saw that he had, for years, built up a huge fan club around the country. People came to see Tommy Dorsey. He hired a man named Frank Sinatra to sing two or

three times a night in his band. So then it turned out that Frank Sinatra's name was on the marquee, and Dorsey was forgotten about. Dorsey said, "I've created a monster," not meaning that there was anything wrong with Sinatra's singing. In fact, Frank Sinatra tells the world that everything he has learned about the art of singing came from listening to this marvelous musician [Tommy Dorsey] take breaths in the right places and do all kinds of tricks. Sinatra learned all those things, and all of the singers learned their great tricks, from jazz musicians. But once professed nonmusicians became the stars of the profession, the way was opened for a second wave, people who had no training whatsoever. For the first time, the industry was being controlled by people who knew nothing about the art. I mean, no one would hail someone as the greatest of all aviators because he sold more airplanes than any licensed pilot. But that's essentially what happened. I can guarantee you that if the likes of Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Harry James, and people like that were at the helm of the music industry, Elvis Presley would never, ever have become a superstar. Whether you consider that a loss or a gain, I don't know, but I think that's a fact.

JM: The situation may be worse than that if you consider "heavy metal" and a variety of immensely nonmusical noises that sell millions of albums. But, in the broad frame of your remarks today, Tom, when we look at popular culture, the politics of race not only enter into the politics of capitalism. At some point, we need to articulate the way in which the politics of race and the politics of capitalism play together and, also, resist one another.