The Culture of Jazz

Jazz as Critical Culture

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It was love of jazz that led me into anthropology in the first place. I had wanted to study the historical connection between African music and jazz. Many things happened along the way. I entered a doctoral program in history, concentrating on colonialism. It was, however, my misfortune to wind up with a dissertation director who was politically to the right of Genghis Kahn. This scholar told me I wrote like a (expletive deleted) anthropologist.

Fortunately, there was another historian who appreciated cultural history and anthropologists. John Larkin suggested that I might be happier with anthropologists and gave me a name, Raoul Naroll. Naroll was in charge of new admissions and told me that a new man was coming to the department who would be delighted to guide my work in Africa. Charles Frantz was his name.

Chuck did indeed guide my work and in the course of time I completed my fieldwork and dissertation. I wrote on religious and identity change. It seemed a far cry from any kind of music but in my spare time in the field, I listened to music and discussed it along the way. The idea of looking at what I saw as the roots of jazz never left me.

Some years later in the mid-1980s, I decided I needed a new area within anthropology. I did not think I would be going back to Nigeria again. I was wrong on that count. I did go back twice more after the mid-1980s. But I was frustrated in not working at a school with anthropologists nor in teaching anthropology except very rarely. I looked for an area where my research and teaching might come together. That area was jazz.

I thought that I would write a book on Nightlife: The Yeomen of Jazz. It was going to be about all those excellent musicians who do not receive appropriate attention, even among jazz fans. My wife was supportive and agreed that living near the jazz center of the world was an opportunity for me. She even
came with me to an early evening performance in a club—something that was fashionable at that time.

Also fashionable was the fact that it was a piano-bass duo. This fact was but one more indication that the City has never truly appreciated its great treasure. At the time there was a noise ordinance, which restricted the use of drummers in certain areas. Therefore, groups in what may be the noisiest city in the world often had to play without use of drummer. The pianist in this midtown duo was Danny Mixon.

Good luck usually plays a role in fieldwork. Danny, fortunately, is a gregarious person. He loved talking about his work and jazz in general. His bassist was not so outgoing. He felt underappreciated and often took it out on those who at the least would have been fans and at most could have aided his career. However, Danny took an interest in my work and his interest led to further contacts, primary among them was Frank Foster, a fine saxophonist and composer, who had played with the Count Basie Band and was soon to become leader of the Basie Ghost Band.

As is usual in fieldwork, one contact led to another and I soon discovered the difference between working in a foreign country and working in one’s own back yard. There were the late night calls but these awakened my wife and at the time young children. There were the requests for favors and all the usual give and take found in all field work. However, my general love for the music expanded and was in danger of taking over my life—a situation that for a single person would have been a delight.

I picked up my saxophone again and took lessons. I studied music theory so I could more easily converse with musicians. Of course, I attended many performances in all different sorts of venues—from outdoor events, to libraries, to small clubs, to great concert halls and many venues in between. I have lost count of the interviews I conducted in person and on the phone. Some musicians came to my home; some performed for classes. For a time Tony Sossa and I had a cable TV show and we drew great musicians to the show. I also put on some performances at my college. Additionally, I spent time in various archives—the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian, the Rutger’s Jazz Archives, the Schoenberg and the Louis Armstrong Archives.

Looking back I am exhausted thinking of all I did. However, it became obvious that I could not keep up the pace. Ironically, two more trips to Nigeria intervened and my deep involvement in jazz research slowed down. During my Fulbright in Nigeria I did study a jazz band there and hope one day to sort through my videos and tapes to write about it. It is always there in the back of my head. I did write about some of my Nigerian music experiences. Some of the material is found in this book.
However, there is a good deal more and I hope that when I retire there will be time. Meanwhile, I still do some music reviews, attend concerts in various venues and listen to the music. The internet has made obtaining and listening to all phases of jazz much easier—and less expensive. The MP3 player has changed my collecting and listening habits.

I was surprised at the number of jazz material I have gathered. There are many more pieces than I would have thought possible. Not all are included here. At the same time I have continued to write on other topics—ethnicity, religion, marriage and the family, and Italian Americans. It is amazing to me how these topics have entered into my work on jazz. At this stage of life, one looks back as well as forward and assesses one’s work. Hidden connections appear. The role of jazz and its influence is quite obvious to me now.

When asked his religion, Charlie Parker stated “Jazz is my religion.” I know what Bird meant. While jazz is not my religion, it plays a big role in my understanding of spirituality. Perhaps, a line from my brief speech when I introduced Dizzy Gillespie to the Elizabeth Seton College audience sums it up best. “From when I was a small boy, I dreamed of one day appearing on the same stage as Dizzy. Of course, I hoped I would be playing the sax alongside him. However, I’ll settle for introducing him.”

There were worse things I could have settled for in life. Being a fan rather than a performer has not been too bad at all. I hope some of that enthusiasm come through in these pages.
Chapter One

The Culture of Jazz and Jazz as Critical Culture

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?
—Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

Neil Leonard states, “For all true believers jazz answered needs that traditional faith did not address. While the music had different meanings for different followers—black, white, male female, young, old, rich or poor, in various psychological states and social situations—for all devotees it provided some form of ecstasy or catharsis transcending the limitations, dreariness and desperation of ordinary existence.”

Moreover, he continues,

As earthy blues, exalted anthem, or something in between, jazz could energize the most jaded will. Jazz is an active agent, a powerful force whose ecstasies, whether subtly insinuated or supplied in lightening illuminations, altered personality and society. Through cajolery, charm, warmth, surprise, shock or outrage it could brush aside the most entrenched tradition, the most oppressive custom, and inspire subversive social behavior. Consider how the jazzy music of the Twenties went hand in hand with the upheavals in manners and morals of that time, how bop was the cry of street-wise young rebels in the Forties, and how the “New thing” of the Sixties was closely allied to the “Black Power” impulse of the day. Clearly jazz is more than a passive flower, a glorious cultural ornament affirming humanity, it is also a powerful social force which has cut broadly and deeply, its prophets, rituals and myths touching not only individual souls but large groups bringing intimations of magic and the sacred to an era whose enormous changes have depleted conventional faiths.

It is this power of jazz to propel social change and energize its acolytes, its touch of the sacred, which I wish to develop in this work.
Pratt (1990:7) notes that popular music in general has expressive and instrumental political functions. He quotes John Coltrane, a major jazz influence, as stating that a person’s sound reveals his personality, the way he thinks and interprets the world (Sidran 1981:14). Pratt notes, correctly, that in performance that interpretation may change. Indeed, jazz performance is one in which fellow musicians and the audience sway the musician, providing at times new insights and facets on reality. This openness in jazz is one of its hallmarks and often jazz musicians cite it as a sacred characteristic.

In conformity with the sacred nature of jazz role reversal and rituals of rebellion are common modes of behavior and communication. Armstrong’s demonstration of the power of music and humor to subvert pompous platitudes regarding the established order of things provides an entrée to the theoretical relationship between music and humor and the uses to which an accomplished artist may put that relationship. This sacred Trickster quality was an integral part of Louis Armstrong’s persona, one that he was well aware of and used with consummate skill to comment on and subvert mainstream conception of reality. An example of this power of subversion explodes from his recording of Laughin’ Louie.

**LAUGHIN’ LOUIE**

There are a number of jokes on the record ‘‘Laughin’ Louie.’’ The first joke is the fact that Armstrong always referred to himself as ‘‘Louis.’’ He joked that white folks always pronounced his name as ‘‘Louie.’’ In fact, on one poster his name is wrongly spelled ‘‘Lewis,’’ obviously following his own pronunciation. So, it is not a far stretch to see the title as Armstrong laughing at those who think they are superior but cannot even pronounce his name correctly.

What else is Louis laughing at? Well, he is laughing at the fact that he and his Vipers recorded ‘‘Laughin’ Louie’’ while high on marijuana. In 1931 Armstrong was high much of the time and ‘‘viper’’ was a slang expression for a pothead (Bergreen 1997: 332, 360). The fact that he could use the expression for his band and even for his tune, ‘‘Song of the Vipers’’ was but another in-joke on Satchmo’s part at the expense of polite society.

Additionally, to many people’s amazement, Armstrong liked the Guy Lombardo big band sound. In 1931, Armstrong was fronting a ‘‘sweet’’ big band, one that featured whining saxophones as well as strict adherence to playing the melody the way it was written. At the same time, the band was reminiscent of Paul Whiteman’s in including ‘‘hot’’ players. The mixture of Armstrong’s melodic but hot trumpet over the sweet sound of his band is often funny. Whether Satchmo intended it to be humorous or not is arguable
but it has its unique charm and humor in any case. It does contrast an overly up-tight style of music with a looser and even more sophisticated one. It also contrasts a mistaken notion of a “correct” way to play jazz that fits all musicians with his own catholic tastes.

Of course, the joke could just as well be on the hipsters who put down Guy Lombardo’s music. Armstrong, along with other jazz musicians, is an innate fusionist. They merge all sorts of music into jazz, adapting it to the idiom. Throughout his life, Armstrong flatly stated that he liked Lombardo’s music. It is there in his music, just as Puccini’s arias are there.

The New Orleans tradition is a Creole one that delights in mixing categories in a rich gumbo. It is also clear that in this period Armstrong was reveling in Black Culture and eager to share it with his audience. He included a great deal of inside jokes in his versions of popular songs. For example, his version of Hoagy Carmichael’s “Old Rocking Chair” contains this response to Jack Teagarden’s vocal statement that he is going to tan Louis’s hide, “My hide’s already tanned, Father!” Furthermore, Teagarden was white; a white trombonist who was slightly older than Armstrong and had early recognized his genius. The two had been close friends since the 1920s and cooperated in mocking racial stereotypes. The sly reference to miscegenation, a taboo subject in mixed company, slid by the censors.

Armstrong gave white audiences a peak at Black entertainment by performing vaudeville routines featuring a stock character, the corrupt Black Preacher, and many versions have been recorded. He referred often to his love for New Orleans food, early poverty, and details of black life. He turned them all into gentle jokes so that he could get on with his own love for life and over his own pain. Moreover, Armstrong mocked received opinion about the dangers of pot smoking through his viper jokes. Many in his audience did not know that “viper” was a nickname for pot and its users. The recording “Laughin’ Louie” is filled with Armstrong’s famous nonsense words, stammering, and bar after bar of laughter. Again, one asks what the joke is.

Armstrong is Brer Rabbit again laughing at those who seek to best him. Armstrong was able to survive during the Depression when the market for “race records”, those records aimed primarily at a Black audience, had ended. He did so by following in the footsteps of other black performers, using race humor to his advantage.

There is a long history of Africans and African-Americans using humor to overcome hardships and to subvert ideas that endanger their survival. The use of humor, of course, offers a deniability of malice. The phrase “only kidding” was one that Armstrong often used. The article “African-American Humor” in Aileen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen’s Encyclopedia of 20th Century American Humor (2000) offers numerous examples of this practice.
In West Africa, the original home of more than 50 percent of American slaves, anthropologists have found cultures with many of the same characteristics that African-Americans rely on for their humor: extensive wordplay and punning, signifying (verbal put downs), the mocking of an enemy’s relatives, the chanting and singing of ridicule verses, bent-knee dancing, an admiration for the Trickster, and aggressive joking that demands verbal quickness and wit (Nilsen and Nilsen 2000: 14). Salamone (1990), Keil (1979, 1992), and Crouch (2000), among others, have also noted similarities in the use of humor among Africans and African-Americans, and more particularly they have noted this similarity among African-Americans and African musicians.

**DIZZY GILLESPIE—CRAZY LIKE A FOX**

Dizzy Gillespie, for example, continued the Trickster tradition in jazz. Dizzy, born John Birks Gillespie in 1917 was given his nickname early in his career. The bandleader Teddy Hill gave him the nickname because of his crazy antics on stage. For example, Dizzy used to come to rehearsals dressed in a hat, gloves, and overcoat, which he kept on throughout the rehearsal no matter the temperature. However, Hill always added, “Diz crazy? Diz was crazy like a fox.” He claimed, quite rightly, that Diz was a stable person, “the most stable of us all”. Hill, as most jazz musicians, thought quite highly of Diz. He gave him his first recorded solo and featured him at Minton’s Playhouse, one of the fabled “birthplaces” of be-bop.

It is important to note that Dizzy’s humor was not common among his fellow modernists. In fact, as he later acknowledged, it was related to the type of humor that Louis Armstrong used because he was such a great showman. Many modern musicians, who acted “cool,” turning their backs on their audiences and failing to acknowledge applause or announce tunes, put down Armstrong as an “Uncle Tom” whose antics kept jazz in the show business category. They want jazz to be considered high art in a league with classical music and separate from entertainment. Diz, who was a close friend of Armstrong’s, used humor to draw people to the new jazz. Even though both Diz and Satch recorded parodies of the other’s music, their uncanny ability to reproduce it showed they had listened closely to it. Indeed, material in the Louis Armstrong archives shows that his taste in music included not only opera, classics, pop tunes, but the most modern of jazz recordings. His recorded comments while listening with musician friends, shows his ability to critique the musicianship of performers. He rated Gillespie quite highly on all accounts.

Just as Armstrong used humor to bring his superb music to audiences that had not heard his music before, so, too, did Gillespie. Audiences found
humor, correctly, in the twists and turns of bop tunes and extended lines. If humor is built on surprise, then bop was an appropriate vehicle for humor. Charlie Parker is often caught on recordings, laughing out loud, especially when he and Diz played together and finished each other’s phrases, as friends finish one another’s jokes. Diz’s dress was another humorous sales technique for bop. His infamous bop glasses, string ties, and, above all, his beret gave bop a sartorial identity, which all but squares found humorous. There was a trickster humor about bop, which many missed, although many sensed its subversive nature, questioning the status quo and seeking to replace old, unjust verities with new equitable ones. Bop was the musical language of the post-war African-American but its roots went deeper than that. Try as some of its adherents did to deny the fact, it partook of the humor of the African trickster, just as Satchmo did and Gillespie came to admit he did as well.

THE TRICKSTER AND THE DIZ

The Trickster myth is found in clearly recognizable form among both aboriginal tribes and modern societies. We encounter it among the ancient Greeks, the Chinese, and the Japanese and in the Semitic world as well. Many of the Trickster’s traits were perpetuated in the figure of the mediaeval jester, and have survived right up to the present day in the Punch-and-Judy plays and in the clown. Although repeatedly combined with other myths and frequently drastically reorganized and reinterpreted, its basic plot seems always to have succeeded in reasserting itself. (Radin 1955: ix)

We have a fundamental figure here, which is both general and specific. There appears a general need for the Trickster but a need clothed in specific features of a culture. The Trickster can be creator and destroyer, one who gives and one who takes, one who tricks and is tricked. The Trickster inspires awe and affection at the same time. Seemingly, the Trickster is one who gives into primal impulses without thinking. But I would argue that he is sly as a fox, who does, at least at times, clearly see the results of his behavior but who can get away with much because of his humor.

I have argued that powerful, sacred African figures require humor so that the audience can approach them (Salamone 1995: 3–7; Salamone 1976: 208–210). The informality prevalent in American jazz allows the royalty to temper the awe inherent in their status in order to permit youngsters to approach them. I suggest that much the same practice can be found in Nigeria. For example, I worked with a traditional priest who was one of the more powerful “doctors” in Nigeria. However, in order to encourage clients rather
than discourage them, he cloaked his power beneath a persona of humor. This humorous presentation drew people to him whom he might otherwise have frightened away (Salamone 1976). Similarly, giants such as Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie and Louis Armstrong shared an ability to draw people to themselves. Doing so enabled them to work their music for the good of the people while being open to further innovations. Although the Bori was an African trickster, I have not gone on a diversion here.

I am explicitly suggesting that Gillespie and Armstrong, among others, are in that same tradition. They clearly used humor to draw people to them. They would do almost anything to make the audience receptive to their message, for their music did indeed have a message. For Gillespie and Armstrong before him that music was, in fact, “spiritual”. I once asked Dizzy about why he said it was spiritual. “Makes the other fellow sound good,” he replied with his usual arch wit.

Additionally, there is an African tradition which holds that the musician has a sacred duty to stand up to oppression and speak the truth to power. In that task, Gillespie followed a long tradition of African musicians. It is no accident, I think, that the Yoruba musician Fela Anakulapi-Kuti studied and worked with Gillespie early in his career. Even Fela’s claim to be The Black President has traces of Gillespie’s half-humorous Presidential candidacy. Fela combined various aspects of African based music into his style. Interestingly, its foundation was the jazz of Gillespie and Charlie Parker, which he heard as a young man and which he used to create something different for Nigerian music, something he deemed would be revolutionary. He put on a mask of the Trickster to perform. Mocking those whom he deemed had betrayed Africa, the colonialists and their African collaborators.

**THE HUMOR OF SUBVERSION**

Dizzy would often open his performances by saying he would like to introduce the band. Band members would then turn to one another and shake hands, giving their names to each other, smiling and nodding. The routine, which I saw repeated many times, never got stale. Diz would sometimes stand aside and raise his eyebrows bemusedly at the audience. Eventually, he would get to introduce the musicians in the band, for Diz was a fair man who gave each person his due.

I remember one night in the winter of 1957–58 when he arrived in the middle of a blizzard to perform in Rochester, NY. He was late, something unusual for him. The audience, however, waited for him, knowing that somehow he’d make it through the storm. In those days, Diz traveled by car
along the Birdland Circuit and he was coming in from Detroit. As the band scrambled to take off their heavy, snow-laden coats and assemble their instruments, Diz began to play solo trumpet.

The audience laughed as they recognized a current hit “Tequila” by the Champs. They stopped laughing when they realized Diz had bested them again because he was playing it straight. He took the novelty tune and reimagined it as a lovely then torrid Latin tune. One by one the band members joined in as they assembled their instruments.

After ten minutes or so, Diz then began his spiel. He apologized for being late. “I was playing a benefit for the Ku Klux Klan at the White Citizens’ Hall in Montgomery Alabama.” As the crowd broke up, he launched into “Manteca” (Grease) with his then new opening chant, “I’ll never go back to Georgia. No, I’ll never go back to Georgia.” Again, as the crowd and it was a crowd despite the snow, roared with laughter, he launched into a brilliant high-note solo, complete with all the pyrotechnics of which he was capable in his prime.

I reminded Diz of this performance thirty years later when he was performing at Elizabeth Seton College. He remembered it with a smile and repeated the opening of his solo for me vocally. It was then that he talked about humor and the spirituality of music, among many other topics. Diz took his role as a teacher/musician seriously, reminding me of Chaucer’s scholar “Gladly would he learn and gladly teach.”

There was another routine he had when doing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” his version of “Swing Low, Sweet Cadillac”. The song is not only an American spiritual but according to the saxophonist Archie Shepp comes from an African religious song. Diz began his version with a Yoruba chant from Chano Pozo, a Cuban Santeria. The chant often drew befuddled laughs from the audience, and Diz played it up big. For him humor and spirituality were not polar opposites but complementary principles. Humor was a means of leading people to the spiritual.

As he told me, “When Chano Pozo came, the music all came together.” Again, once Diz finished his chanting, also setting the cross-rhythms of his tempo, he started the song, in the midst of which he took a brilliant solo. When the tenor sax player James Moody was present, there would be two brilliant solos. Then the piece would end with Dizzy’s tag line, “Old Cadillacs never die. The finance company just tows them away!”

The examples could continue. Just what was this once wild bad boy of jazz getting at? What did his great dancing in front of his band mean? His mugging with his frog like checks? His tilted bell on his horn? His African robes later in life? His pointedly supercilious vocabulary? His outrageous twists and turns, with his deeply serious playing on frivolous tunes and his humor