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THE RHETORIC OF JAZZ

Gregory Clark

"This is triumphant music."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

The music King is describing here is jazz. He placed this description at the conceptual center of a foreword he wrote for the program book of the 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival—the only writing we have from King about jazz (Jackson and Dempsey 2011, 62). To describe jazz music as “triumphant” is to treat it first and foremost as a music with a message. For King, in his short essay, that message is a persistent affirmation of the equality of individuals in the ongoing collaborative project that is democratic life. People hearing jazz worldwide have received that message, particularly in the music made in the United States in direct response to the fact that the founding promises of the nation have not been fully realized in the lives of the people from whose experiences this music has come. In my reading, King’s point in his foreword essay is this: whether by way of a bandstand display of democracy-in-practice through which the music is made, or in instrumental sounds and sung lyrics composed to confront this persistent injustice directly, jazz expresses a demand for full equality and consequent individual freedom for everyone. But recognizing the reality that this is still (adapting Langston Hughes) a demand deferred, he pointed also to the message of consolation he finds in jazz music, of hope that things will get better.

For King, jazz is triumphant first because it expresses all that even while located historically in a nation that insists on professing democratic values as it fails, egregiously at times, to attend to their conscientious public practice, and second because in one way or another jazz can almost always be heard as music made in protest of that. Even when manifest as an eclectic global music in which its American origins can at times hardly be heard, jazz music still looks and sounds distinctly democratic. As Malachi Favors, longtime bassist in the Chicago Art Ensemble, once reminded a bandmate, “We’re preaching freedom, whether we like it or not” (Jarman 1977, 98). Favors’s reminder acknowledges at work in jazz what philosopher Richard Weaver described at work in our communication in general: “We are all of us preachers in private or public capacities. We have no sooner uttered words”—or made music—“than we have given impulse to other people to look at the world, or some small part of it, in our way” (1970, 225). Giving others that impulse to understand and aspire in a particular way is the effect of most every message we send. When we try to make that happen, whether the change we seek is trivial or urgently important, we use rhetoric.
Definitions of rhetoric typically point to the capacity for influence that is inherent in our use of words. But we also wield influence without words. Wordless expression most certainly “preaches” as readily as words do, in the terms of metaphor Favors and Weaver both used, by presenting people with opportunities to occupy new perspectives, to inhabit at least imaginatively a new kind of experience of the world that is alternative or even alien to their own.

So, *rhetoric* might be best understood as a term that refers to the ways that influence, wielded by words or wordlessly, can prompt people to change what Kenneth Burke called their “orientation” (1984, 309). Burke defined *orientation* as a complex of attitudes that follows from the experiences that shape a person’s sense of self, both individually and in relation to others. Attitudes are what follow from perceptions, interpretations, judgments, commitments, and aspirations, and they shape a person’s thoughts and actions. Applied to the work of jazz studies, rhetoric understood in this way suggests a method that focuses critical attention on the music as communication in order to understand not so much what jazz *is* as what it *does*—on its influences on those who listen. In what follows, I’ll use that method to explain some of the ways that jazz conveys an advocacy message: prompting listeners indirectly or directly to recognize how people who value individual equality and freedom can and ought to interact as they form and then maintain groups and communities. I’ll do that first by offering a bit more definitional explanation of rhetoric. Then, with a relatively stable concept of rhetoric at hand, I’ll explore the message jazz tends to send, advocating the kind of equality among associating individuals that enables both personally and politically their democratic relationships.

**Defining Rhetoric**

*Rhetoric* first emerged as a definable term as Plato and Aristotle and other educators described systematically the knowledge and skills that were required of the Athenian elite to practice their democracy. Since then, those descriptions have been elaborated and extended, revised, and complicated in that Greco-Roman tradition as the need to teach people to self-govern as groups both in public and in private has continued. The idea of rhetoric that has developed through that process is much more expansive than the common concept of rhetoric as persuasion. Persuasion does the work of influence through argumentation, but that is just one model of influence. As a purpose and consequence of communication, influence operates much more broadly than that as disparate individuals try find ways to establish and maintain the kind of agreements that enable them to pursue with others projects and purposes that require their cooperation.

Jazz is often described as the music of freedom, the sound of democracy. That description marks the start of an understanding of this music as rhetorical in the way it shows those who pay attention to jazz being made how democratic cooperation ought to work. On the bandstand, an ensemble of individual musicians displays in action an intimate sort of democracy as each one adapts to the other’s playing in ways that enable their distinct musical voices to contribute constructively to the music they are making. The intensely collaborative process of a jazz ensemble’s performance, seen and heard, makes audiences witness to the fact that people can cooperate and still remain themselves; they can interact productively in a profoundly collaborative way. A band’s display of that is subtly rhetorical: people see and hear an ensemble making space for each separate voice; they notice individual musicians expressing new ideas or heightened feelings in response to other’s performances; and from the audience they watch musicians nudge each other toward making music none of them could have made nor imagined before. Witnessing that, these people might find themselves considering the possibility that such things can happen off the bandstand as well, that they might find themselves doing outside the music what improvising jazz musicians do within it: encountering firsthand a new “worldview,” as Wynton Marsalis puts it, that confronts them with the possibility that “this [the way things are] could be like *this* [a better way that ought to be]” (2007).
What audiences witness here is *dialog*, with that term understood as the name we give an ongoing exchange of rhetorical statements among people whose shared circumstances demand their collective attention and cooperative action. In operating principle, dialog requires that each participant acknowledge others as equal voices in a collaborative project of determining what they will together believe and do. Rhetoric at its most constructive works within the collaborative conversation of a dialog where each statement that would wield influence is made as a response to a previous statement and anticipates a critical response that is likely to prompt the person who made the last statement to change. Through this process of mutual critique and revision, the wisdom of many is brought to bear on a shared problem at hand. By contrast, rhetoric at its most destructive works to undermine the possibility of that kind of collaborative composition of shared knowledge by diminishing or excluding some voices while amplifying and authorizing others in ways that force the opinions of some on others, rendering participants fundamentally unequal. Both of kinds of interaction will be called dialog, but the first practice is what dialog ought to be while the second is at best its dishonest double.

The problem is that in practice even the purest dialog readily falls into patterns of exchange that fail to make space for the voices of everyone who will be affected by decisions the discussants will make. That begins when participants in this process refuse to submit themselves to what Thomas Docherty calls “the possibility of [their own] transformation” there (2006, xiii)—to the possibility that they might change their positions in response to the influence of others. To be willing to submit oneself to that possibility in dialog requires ready recognition of the essential equality of everyone engaged. Most people, it seems, will not do that. So, typically, what begins as dialog soon becomes the familiar clash of competing monologues that is really a competitive debate. In our intimate and informal dialogs as well as in our public and political ones, the decisions that affect us seem to be most frequently made through exchanges that establish winners and losers. So when a jazz performance offers eloquent display of cooperation in action, the message implicit there about equality and democratic citizenship is probably not noticed by those who recognize only voices that confront them directly in battles about social control and civic privilege. That’s when jazz music is made to state that message directly in ways that demand change from those who would dominate others in the project of their self-government. Both kinds of statements—the display of what ought to be and the direct and explicit demand for change—are acts of jazz rhetoric.

**After Dialog**

Because the way jazz music is made can itself be understood as a democratic dialog of individual musical statements made and remade in response to each other in the collaboration of an improvising ensemble, performers can at times find themselves exercising equality almost to perfection. Of course, there are structures of authority that apply. There is a leader who sets the agenda, and various dynamics of personal power and professional prestige are in operation. Still, we can recognize even in the music of a carefully composed Duke Ellington Orchestra performance a strong sense of equal recognition for all musicians who do their work that is, in itself, a rhetorical statement rejecting the manipulative sort of discourse that may have the general form of dialog but is designed to preserve the dominance of some and minimize the voices of others.

Much if not most jazz music works rhetorically in the implicit way of democratic display. But after implied statements have failed to influence or effect any change within a governing public discourse, there is and always has been in the American tradition jazz music that tries to intervene in or circumvent that discourse to insist that the principle of civic equality be put into immediate practice. Since the model jazz offers of democracy fully realized, though often appreciated and acknowledged, rarely generates serious discussion or influences public decisions, this is jazz music...
made and played as protest. As Wynton Marsalis has noted, “a work of art is always some type of protest. If it affirms something it protests something else” (2007b). It seems that this protest is always present in jazz—it is just the way that message is delivered that differs.

In the United States, there has always been jazz music that directly confronts the racism experienced by African Americans. For people who understand the social and political context of this music, a protest of that is always present in the music for those who will hear it. After playing a sample track in a recent presentation I mentioned offhand that in these rhythms, these changes, these voicings, and these timbres, I hear some of the sorrow out of which jazz music comes. When a white member in the audience objected, saying “I didn’t hear that. I didn’t hear it at all,” my co-presenter, who is African American, said something like, “I heard it. I always do. I can’t not hear that.” In jazz, he was saying, the protest has always been present from the beginning for those who understand where the music comes from, and even people beyond American borders who struggle with the sorrows of racism and failures of freedom have heard the message and embraced the music.

To illustrate all this, I will describe briefly two recent, rhetorically explicit works of jazz that protest at length and in concrete detail injustices African Americans experience as a consequence of racism. Both focus on a representative example of that problem that is mostly ignored in political discourse in the United States: the fact that a grossly disproportionate number of black men are in prison. The first of these works is Wynton Marsalis’s 2007 quintet recording, From the Plantation to the Penitentiary, a suite of jazz performances that sustains a graphic and pointed protest from first composition to last. The second work, Louis Reyes Rivera’s Jazz in Jail (2016), is not music. Rather, it is an epic poem made of ragged rhythms and jazz-like images that recount in Whitmanesque detail a story of oppressed American people of color led by a spirit-man named Jazz who embodies their collective experience. My purpose in offering these examples is to show how, when political and moral dialogs fail, jazz music can move beyond modeling equalitarian democracy to open dissent of injustice that is ignored by the powerful.

From the Plantation to the Penitentiary is a suite of seven compositions, most with vocals, made of music that varies from spare, harsh, and dissonant to rich, multidimensional, and romantic, sometimes within a single tune. The compositions all swing rhythmically in the jazz convention, but they also swing hard in mood: from hope to despair, from love to violence, from wisdom to blind anger, back and forth in a dizzying encounter with the sort of life that so many African Americans experience. Like Coltrane’s “Alabama,” the instrumental compositions in the suite identify the target of protest with a title and then the music speaks for itself. The tunes with lyrics that sharpen the point of the instrumentals are sung frank and unornamented by Jennifer Sanon and, in the final track, by an outraged Marsalis himself. As an example of a confrontational message asserted both in words and wordlessly that offers listeners a richly imaginative and emotionally potent vicarious experience of the situation protested, From the Plantation to the Penitentiary is masterful.

The first track, titled “From the Plantation to the Penitentiary,” begins with drumbeats that sound like a whip on flesh under horns playing in tones that seem darker than minor key. Over this Sanon sings an almost atonal narrative of what a life is like that must be lived day after day “in the name of freedom, in chains.” On the second track, “Find Me,” the arrangement shifts back and forth from what sounds like orchestral ballad to dissonant disorder as Sanon describes “shattered people” who roam city streets, invisible, and hopeless. In a phrase that addresses American listeners directly, she corners them to ask, “Oh say can you see?” On a later track titled “Supercapitalism,” Sanon sings for some time a frantic chant of “Gimme that. Gimme this. Gimme that,” the rhythm of the phrase repeated back aggressively by the band. The last track, “Where Y’All At,” is a high velocity, in-your-face rap voiced by Marsalis over vibrant New Orleans jazz to confront his listeners with this: “you 60s radicals,” you “righteous revolutionaries and Camus readers, Liberal students and equal rights pleaders. . . . Where Y’All at”—where are you in the face of all that? All this subjects
listeners to a sustained encounter with images of harrowing way of life that makes an insistent protest that seems to me irresistibly transformative for those who engage it (Marsalis 2007a).

Transformative too is the experience of reading Rivera’s Jazz in Jail, a novelistic poem that immerses readers in a heavily annotated catalog of peoples and music that have flowed out of the African diaspora in the Americas. Here “Jazz” is personified as representative voice for all those who have resisted and demanded recognition and change in the face of deeply rooted racism that pervades the United States. The experience of reading Jazz in Jail is epic—like as it pushes relentlessly through an extended parable that makes painfully concrete what it looks and feels like to have one’s opportunities persistently and systematically stunted. As the story goes, Jazz is put in jail, along with all those who have played the music—many, many by name—as well as those who have listened and affirmed its message. The poem tells story after story of their struggle there until the police, politicians, developers, and corporate executives—those of the ruling class—conclude that these people are too many to hold and, more to the point, keeping them in prison costs those who imprison them too much because there these folks aren’t available for exploitation. Besides, they still play jazz in there anyway. In the end all are let out of jail, Jazz and the woman-spirit Freedom are reunited as lovers and as patriarch and matriarch of the jazz people. Here’s the final scene:

In front of the stoop / where the Haunt of Freedom lives / a crowd of music gathers . . .

and there announce upon the steps / the birth of one who comes from both / the breath of Jazz and Freedom Now.

(Rivera 2016, 150)

What Marsalis’s suite and Rivera’s poem do rhetorically in relation to politics as usual can be explained in terms of Cornel West’s concept of “deep democracy” as described in his Democracy Matters. Calling himself a “democratic truth teller” (2004, 68) who is “first and foremost a bluesman—a jazzman in the life of the mind” (2000, xv), West is an activist academic philosopher who insists that democracy become “more a verb than a noun,” that it be treated as “more a dynamic striving and collective movement than a static order or stationary status quo.” This is his description of civic and political processes that look more like what a jazz ensemble does on a bandstand than what we learn in a civics class (West 2004, 68). In the terms I have been using, democracy practiced as a verb would be enacted in intensely equilitarian dialogs that would find ways to include rather than exclude even inconvenient statements because that seems to be what is required to keep dialog democratic. And because democracy fails when the dialogs that sustain it don’t engage everyone its decisions would affect, the “dynamic striving and collective movement” of deep democracy would insist upon a place for all and then push participants toward the “deeper soul-searching” and “penetrating visions and truth-telling” (West 2004, 67) that can lead them toward realizing together “a vision of everyday people renouncing narrow self-interest and creating a web of caring under harsh American circumstances” (West 2004, 95).

Danielle Allen draws upon Aristotle to develop some practical terms that describe what that would require in her book, Talking to Strangers. This sort of dialog, she explains, must be built on “political friendship” that is put into practice in the rhetorical exchanges people use to govern themselves. In language that aligns with Docherty’s point that genuinely democratic dialog demands that participants accept and acknowledge the possibility of their own “transformation” there, Allen notes that equality and democracy require of individuals shifting degrees of sacrifice as majorities rule and minorities acquiesce. It is political friendship that manages that, she explains, as “a set of hard-won, complicated habits that are used to bridge trouble, difficulty, and differences of personality, experience, and aspiration” (2004, xxii) by creating situations where “the diverse negative effects of collective political actions, and even of just decisions, can be distributed equally, and constantly re-distributed over time, on the basis of consensual interactions”
That would enact a society of democratic “equity,” her name for “the arena of public decision making where resolutions can be achieved only when citizens and politicians establish conditions in which adversaries can yield” (2004, 141). The interaction ongoing on the ground there would be speaking and listening, insisting and relenting, learning and teaching, demanding what you want and then compromising to make the process collectively productive. Such interaction is inherently rhetorical and, more specifically, dialogical.

From the Plantation to the Penitentiary and Jazz in Jail can be understood rhetorically as turns taken in this most demanding sort of dialog—or, more precisely, as statements that attempt to initiate the sort of exchange that acknowledges even enemies as equals in a community that needs to cooperate. The problem is, there aren’t many Americans who have heard Marsalis’s suite or read Rivera’s poem. What Marsalis and Rivera both face is the fact that relatively few of the people among those their works would address are likely to allow the “transformation” demanded, to compromise and change in response. What follows from that fact is a realization that deeply democratic dialog on this fundamental American problem does not yet exist. In the terms of Keith Gilyard’s distillation of West’s doctrine, whether their voices can find a place in the ruling dialogs or not, deep democrats must continue to work rhetorically to sustain “a relentless examination of received wisdom coupled with a willingness to adopt the role of . . . a frank and fearless speaker in confrontation with irresponsible power.” And while they voice more or less constantly “an abiding concern with justice and the plight of the less privileged,” these people must respond to the inevitable discouragement of their situation by maintaining the attitude of “tragicomic hope,” that “indomitable, keep-on-pushing sensibility reflective of the African American freedom struggle, blues and jazz” that this music teaches is the only alternative to despair (2008, 5).

From the Plantation to the Penitentiary and Jazz in Jail are elegant examples of aesthetic expression that, rhetorically, does just that. The living images they present of people facing again and again the fact that at some level their very humanity is denied, might prompt in a few of those who encounter these jazz works significant and productive changes in understanding and attitude. But in general, these works probably won’t make much progress toward solving the problem they protest. So, for those whose lives feel diminished by racism, jazz provides something else: a message of consolation and hope that someday and somehow the things will change. That is what enables them to continue trying to make space for their voices in the dialogs of governance and find ways to protest when they are not heard there.

Consolation

West has few illusions about the possibility of deep democracy in America. What is required to hold people together in such rigorous and difficult dialog is not only good will (which is already lacking) and the shared humility manifest in a common willingness to be persuaded (which seems absent altogether). What keeps a person at that work is a willingness to become what West calls “a freedom fighter against those obstacles that stand in the way of a rich individuality” (2004, 74). The fight at hand involves an insistent assertion of equality expressed over and over again in the “profoundly democratic action of taking back power over one’s life” (2004, 94). But because this is a utopian project and, so, just out of reach, West seems to offer it up not as a plan of action but a North Star toward which people can continually navigate fueled by that attitude of “subversive joy and revolutionary patience” (1998, 165) that is expressed in “the painful eloquence of the blues” and “most exuberantly in the improvisational virtuosity of jazz” (2004, 16). That attitude can, along the way, open people “to the humanity of individuals and to the interiority of their personalities” (2004, 100) in ways that allow them some empathy for others and some consolation for themselves.
When Aristotle wrote down the rhetorical patterns he observed in Athenian political practice he described three categories of rhetoric-in-use: deliberative rhetoric—statements made among legislators and designated “deciders” about how to solve public problems; judicial rhetoric—statements made among those who must judge guilt, innocence, and punishment; and epideictic rhetoric—statements made to prompt people to remember and reaffirm their commitment to bonds of their community that are neglected or eroding. Aristotle didn’t explain epideictic rhetoric much beyond that, but a rich body of theory has developed since. Here epideictic rhetoric is described as more aesthetic than analytical, more like literature in its address than argument, and more or less narrative in its shape and poetic in its form in order to bring disparate people experientially into a world it presents as if already shared.

Kenneth Burke, whose ideas about aesthetic expression Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray drew upon extensively as they developed their own theories and practices of African American literature, described art of all sorts operating rhetorically as “equipment for living,” by which he meant providing people with experiences that can define and guide their responses to difficult shared “situations” they are likely to face. (1974, 293). One of those situations is when dialog fails. Dialog fails when in this process through which people negotiate their commonality some participants simply do not open themselves to the influence of others. That is the rhetorical situation faced by Marsalis and Rivera: the rhetorical effect of their work is limited by the fact that most Americans won’t engage, much less seriously consider, what they have to say. As their demand for equality is locked out of the deliberative and judicial discussions that maintain the social order of the nation and culture where they live, epideictic rhetoric is their only option. But it is a potentially powerful one. Epideictic rhetoric has always carried the bad rap of impracticality. But while deliberative and judicial dialogs do decide particular practical matters, epideictic rhetoric reminds groups of people of lasting principles, values, and collective aspirations that are the bonds that should hold and guide them. It is those matters that jazz music addresses and in that is both hope and consolation.

Here is Martin Luther King, Jr.’s full description of that most important message of jazz:

God has wrought many things out of oppression. He has endowed his creatures with the capacity to create and from this capacity has flowed the sweet songs of sorrow and of joy that have allowed man to cope with his environment in many situations. Jazz speaks of life. The blues tell the stories of life’s difficulties, and if you will think for a moment, you will realize that they take the harshest realities of life and put them into music only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph. This is triumphant music.

King must certainly have had in mind two environments those who would read what he wrote about jazz in 1964 would be coping with: racial strife at home in America and Cold War conflicts that would be a shadow on the minds of everyone at a jazz festival held in the shadow of the Berlin Wall. So, he described what that kind of coping looks and sounds like: “When life itself offers no order and meaning the musician creates an order and meaning from the sounds of the earth which flow through his instrument.” That, he continued, is how much of the power of our Freedom Movement in the United States has come from this music. It has strengthened us with its powerful rhythms when courage began to fail. It has calmed us with its rich harmonies when spirits began to lag.

(Kenneth Burke once explained that political change must begin with changes in attitudes (Burke 1969, 50). Jazz music invites a change of attitude that, on the one hand, acknowledges...
injustice as intransigent, and cooperative dialog as susceptible to being coopted by self-serving contenders for control. Still, jazz persists in insisting, subtly or not, that self-government in every setting, public or private, best proceeds through the dialog of equals. It demonstrates that while this is difficult, if people prepare for and commit themselves to this process, it can be done. And until then, jazz reminds, those who suffer when the democracy of dialog fails can continue working toward that goal comforted and energized by the “subversive joy and revolutionary patience” they can hear in this music.

“What it all represents,” wrote Albert Murray of jazz, “is an attitude toward the nature of human experience (and the alternatives of human adjustment) that is both elemental and comprehensive.” In jazz, the attitude is expressed in two messages. The first message is “about confronting the complexities inherent in the human situation and about improvising or experimenting or riffing or otherwise playing with . . . possibilities that are also inherent in the obstacles, the disjunctures, and the jeopardy.” The second is “about perseverance and about resilience and thus also about the maintenance of equilibrium despite precarious circumstances and about achieving elegance in the very process of coping” (1989, 250–251). These messages offer “equipment for living” that includes consolation and hope. King knew that and ended his note about jazz for Berlin with this:

In the particular struggle of the Negro in America there is something akin to the universal struggle of modern man. Everybody has the blues. Everybody longs for meaning, Everybody needs to love and be loved. Everybody needs to clap hands and be happy. Everybody longs for Faith. In music, especially that broad category called Jazz, there is a stepping stone toward all of these.

Whatever jazz is, whatever it means, what jazz does may be what matters most. And what jazz does is preach democracy, with democracy understood as a way of life people make and maintain from the equality that enables them to work together to make and sustain community. The idea of democracy promises a way of life that is still unrealized, but jazz keeps its potential present for those who will listen, reminding them of ways to make debates into dialogs and make their dialogs dig “deeper” into individual and community both. In times of social and political discouragement, jazz offers vivid display and insistent assertion of this ideal in music that sounds like equality and democratic hope.

References