

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Jazz Has Always Been Protest Music. Can It Meet This Moment?

Over the past 50 years, the music has become entrenched in academic institutions. As a result, it's often inaccessible to, and disconnected from, many of the very people who created it: young Black Americans.



By Giovanni Russonello

Sept. 3, 2020

If the Black Lives Matter movement has an anthem, it's probably Kendrick Lamar's "Alright." Five years after its release, it's still chanted en masse by demonstrators and blasted from car stereos at protests, fluttering in the air like a liberation flag.

Like many revolutionary anthems past, this one is the work of young jazz-trained musicians. Terrace Martin's shivering alto saxophone and Thundercat's gauzy vocals are as powerful as the track's spitfire refrain: "Can you hear me, can you feel me?/We gon' be all right."

Mr. Martin, Thundercat and the famed saxophonist Kamasi Washington came up together in Los Angeles's Leimert Park scene, where Black music, poetry, theater and dance have blended for decades. Romantically, it's the kind of place you'd imagine as the backbone of the jazz world, like Spike Lee's *Bed-Stuy* of the 1980s or Dizzy Gillespie's *Harlem* in the '40s. But today, local scenes like this one are barely surviving. It's the Ivory Tower, not the city, that has become the tradition's main thoroughfare.

The music known as jazz grew up in New Orleans, in the decades after Emancipation, as Black and Creole people founded social clubs with their own marching bands. As it evolved, jazz remained a resistance music precisely because it was the sound of Black Americans building something together, in the face of repression. But at the end of the 1960s, just as calls for Black Power were motivating musicians to create their own publishing houses, venues and record labels, a new force emerged: Schools and universities across the country began welcoming jazz as America's so-called "classical music," canonizing its older styles and effectively freezing it in place.

This year, the pandemic and the protest movement against racial injustice have created a moment of enormous potential. Conversations about radical change and new beginnings have crept into seemingly every aspect of American life. But as jazz musicians reckon with the events of 2020, they have found themselves torn between the music's roots in Black organizing and its present-day life in the academy.

The very institutional acceptance that many musicians sought in the mid-to-late-20th century has hitched jazz to a broken and still-segregated education system. Partly as a result, the music has become inaccessible to, and disconnected from, many of the very people who created it: young Black Americans, poorer people and others at the societal margins.

Of the more than 500 students who graduate from American universities with jazz degrees each year, less than 10 percent are Black, according to Department of Education statistics compiled by DataUSA. In 2017, the last year with data available, precisely 1 percent of jazz-degree grads were Black women.

"The education is the anchor," the saxophonist J.D. Allen, 47, said in a recent interview. "We should be questioning our education system. Is it working? Is there a pipeline into the university for indigenous Black Americans to play their music, and learn their music? I don't think that exists."

Over the past five or 10 years, a number of musicians have helped pull jazz back into the cultural conversation, usually with message-driven music. It's no coincidence that, like Mr. Lamar's colleagues in Leimert Park, virtually all of them come from strong city scenes and learned much of what they know outside of school.



The flutist Nicole Mitchell took over the jazz studies program at the University of Pittsburgh last year. "The music is about community," she said. Emily Berl for The New York Times

That's noticeable in the calypso futurism of the London saxophonist Shabaka Hutchings, and in the surrealist suites of the Chicago-based flutist Nicole Mitchell and her Black Earth Ensemble. The markings of outsiderism are all over Georgia Anne Muldrow's new album with her Jyoti project, "Mama You Can Bet," full of dusty, sample-based jazz collages, recorded alone in her Los Angeles studio.

Raised by musicians in Leimert Park, Ms. Muldrow remembers feeling immediately affronted when she enrolled in the New School's jazz program. "I was like, 'What are you trying to teach people?' I was the worst student of all time," Ms. Muldrow said in an interview, laughing as she remembered that she hadn't lasted a full year. "At the center of the teaching would always be the idea that jazz is not about race. And it absolutely is. It was absolutely about where people weren't allowed to go, which made them travel in their music."

Inspired in part by the Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) theater artists who this summer published a 29-page list of demands for their industry, and by the female and nonbinary musicians who formed the We Have Voice collective, Mr. Allen and a number of other musicians recently began holding Zoom meetings. The group, which includes artists on three continents, has titled itself the We Insist! Collective in a reference to the rebel music of Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln and Oscar Brown Jr.; late last month it released a manifesto and charter listing 10 demands for the schools and other institutions that compose jazz's mainstream economy.

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Educational institutions must commit to revamping their curriculums around an anti-racist understanding, the collective wrote. A Black Public Arts Fund must be created to help increase the representation of African-American students in jazz programs. And educational institutions should work in partnership with "grass-roots local community organizations," recognizing where the music has historically grown.

"The story of jazz is that of the pursuit of Black liberation, and that liberation can only happen through the dismantling of racism and patriarchy," the manifesto reads.

Black musicians have built institutions since before the word "jazz" was even used. In 1910, James Reese Europe organized the Clef Club, effectively a union and booking agency for Black musicians in New York with its own large ensemble. But as white audiences fell in love with the music too, white entrepreneurs stepped in to handle the record labels, the publishing companies and the best-paying clubs.

The civil rights movement progressed and white liberal audiences recognized jazz musicians to be some of the country's great artistic leaders, but they rarely treated those musicians as the scholars and thought-leaders that they were. White journalists, historians and broadcasters reserved that job for themselves.

At the midway point of the 1960s, after releasing his masterpiece, "A Love Supreme," John Coltrane started a large ensemble with deeply spiritual intentions; he was abdicating the throne as jazz's mainstream hero, and moving beyond many critics' comprehension. That same year, a collective of musicians in Chicago formed the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, supporting each other in creating new music and educating young people on the South Side. Months earlier, in a series of concerts known as the October Revolution in Jazz, musicians in New York had seized the gears of concert presentation, breaking with the clubs.

"I think the music is rising, in my estimation. It's rising into something else. And so we'll have to find this kind of place to be played in," Coltrane said at the time, calling for musicians to lead the way through "self-help."

Somehow, it was in this moment that jazz programs began to spring up in academia, declaring the music's history basically complete and assembling rigid curriculums based on bebop theory.

When the saxophonist and former Coltrane collaborator Archie Shepp was offered a job at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1969, he hoped to teach the music as he was playing it: in conversation with African diasporic culture, in collaboration with theater artists and dancers, in spaces designed around the ethics of the music itself.

"I quickly learned that that was not too feasible, and mine was a point of view that was not welcomed," Mr. Shepp, 83, said in an interview. He proposed setting up a program in African-American music within the music department, but was shut down; he landed in African-American studies instead. "The idea of Black music input or some nonwhite element being integrated into the academic experience was immediately rejected," he said.

Mr. Shepp was one of the various cutting-edge musicians who were invited to teach at the university level around this time, but never fully embraced by music departments. "They were not willing to tolerate an Archie Shepp or a Max Roach, a Sun Ra or a Cecil Taylor," the historian Robin D.G. Kelley said in an interview. "They kicked them out and said, let's open the doors to 'professionals'" — primarily white instructors who weren't top-tier public performers.

Combined with the resegregation of public education and the defunding of arts programs in many cities, the effects of academicization have been profound, and ironic. Jazz got a crucial nudge into the academy from Wynton Marsalis and his fellow young neo-traditionalists, who were guarding against what they saw as the corruptions of fusion and free jazz. But even the music made by the ace students in academic programs nowadays rarely upholds the qualities Mr. Marsalis meant to protect: the swing rhythm at the music's core; a clear commitment to the blues; focus on lyricism.

When the esteemed drummer Billy Hart, now 79, took his first university teaching job in the 1990s, he got the sense that the academy was finally ready to hire real practitioners. "It became some kind of fad," he said dryly in an interview. "They decided that the students would be better suited if they had somebody that had experience."

Naledi Masilo, a jazz undergrad at the New England Conservatory and the president of its Black Student Union, said that with the events of this summer, she and other Black students felt called to speak up.

"Until the recent uprising and Black consciousness on all of these school campuses, there weren't many conversations had on campus on a deep level about what role Blackness plays in this music," Ms. Masilo said. "It was especially shocking to me in this jazz program, where there's only three Black students and three Black faculty. There was a disconnect — how are you teaching this music without giving any real influence to the people and the culture?" (After publication, the chair of the school's Jazz Studies department said there are currently five students and six faculty members who identify as Black.)

The students made three immediate demands, calling for action within the month. A group of N.E.C. alumni followed with a forceful letter of its own, co-signing the students' ultimatums and adding more — including that the jazz department be renamed the department of Black American music.

Jason Moran, the MacArthur-winning pianist and multidisciplinary artist, is a professor at N.E.C., where he advises the Black Student Union. He tells his students to bear in mind that they should always be in tension with the institutions they seek to change. "An underground movement has to be underground," he said in an interview.

In his own classroom, he rejects the notion of having a written curriculum. "What I talk about in my classes between my students and I, the kinds of conversations we have to break down about repertoire — who wrote what and why — is not on a syllabus," he said. "You would never detect it if you searched it, because I don't teach that way."

Some schools are starting to approach the integration of humanities, history and artistic instruction that Mr. Shepp and others had in mind 50 years ago. One is Harvard University's Creative Practice and Critical Inquiry doctoral program, recently founded by the pianist Vijay Iyer and driven by a mostly female faculty from a variety of global traditions. Another is the Berklee Institute for Jazz and Gender Justice, founded by the drummer Terri Lyne Carrington, who conceived of the program with activists including Angela Davis.

Ms. Mitchell, the Chicago-based flutist, took over the jazz studies program at the University of Pittsburgh last year, stepping in after the death of its prior director, Geri Allen. Founded by the saxophonist Nathan Davis in 1970 as a concession to Black student activists, Pitt's jazz program was attractive to Ms. Mitchell because of its focus on scholarship and musicology, as well as learning the notes.

Upon arriving, she proposed that the jazz program partner with the school's Center for African-American Poetry to open a small venue in the community engagement center that Pitt was building in a historically Black neighborhood. The administration immediately said yes.

"This will be place for local musicians to perform, for students to connect with local musicians," Ms. Mitchell said.

"The music is about community," she added. "So if a student graduates and doesn't have any connection to community, that's a real rip-off for that student in terms of what they're supposed to be gaining. And it's also a rip-off for the future of the music."