

jazz

columbia university press new york

1998

edited by robert g. o'meally

JAZZ

the jazz cadence

of american culture

ML/3508/J38/1998

Res Pur

chapter 10

STANLEY CROUCH

Blues to Be Constitutional: A Long Look at the Wild Wherefores of Our Democratic Lives as Symbolized in the Making of Rhythm and Tune*

Part I: Blue Rebellion Breakdown

I stand here not as a scholar of the Constitution but as a student of the human soul, which is what any writer with the ambition to capture the whys and wherefores of our lives must be. Before I have finished this talk, I hope to have examined the metaphor of the Constitution as it applies to a number of things in our society, and I hope also to have looked at a few of the elements that threaten not so much the democratic institutions of this country as much as they tend to lessen the morale necessary to work at the heroic expansion of this democracy into the unlit back streets and thickets of our civilization. I have chosen to be that ambitious. And in the process of expressing my ambition, I might kick off another version of a good number of the pitched intellectual battles I have had with people whom we continue to mistakenly describe by their color, since no one has ever seen anyone who is actually white or black, red or yellow, however close a few here or there might be. That level of imprecise identification in such a technologically advanced society is one of the ironies of our time and our place in the history of America and of the world.

As a writer, I find it ironic that I began working on these ideas in public at Harvard University in 1992, when I spoke on the thirty-seventh anniversary of the death of Charlie Parker, whose consciousness was swallowed by the grim reaper in Manhattan's Fifth Avenue Stanhope Hotel on March 12, 1955. It was

*Delivered on April 7, 1995, at Michigan State University, for The Symposium on Science, Reason, and Modern Democracy.

nearly ten years after the performance of *Koko*—a harmonic skullcracker built on the chords of *Cherokee*—had announced Parker's ability to extend our expectations of jazz improvisation. Legend lays it down that the virtuoso Kansas City alto saxophonist died while laughing at an act on a television variety show, an electronic update of the minstrel and vaudeville tradition Parker had so poorly fought against throughout his career. A statistic of his own excesses, the innovative genius had been nursed round the clock by not a Jewish princess but a Jewish baroness, one who had driven North African ambulances during World War II yet survived to so scandalize her Rothschild family that, so continues the legend, she was paid off to badly drive her Bentley and enthusiastically host her Negro jam sessions out of sight and out of earshot.

Parker is a man I have come to know quite well since I began working on his biography in 1982. But Parker is most important to what I have to say today because he represents both the achievement and the myth of jazz as well as the trouble we Americans have deciding whether we will aspire to the heroic individuality symbolized by Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., or sink down into the anarchic individuality represented by Billy the Kid and the various bad boys our society has had crushes on for over a century. However great his talent surely was, Parker was celebrated as much in the half light and the darkness of the night world for his antics, his irresponsible behavior, his ability to embody what Rimbaud called "the love of sacrilege." He was a giant of a bluesman and a jazz improviser of astounding gifts, but his position in the world and in the overview this address seeks has much to do with praise he received for being an outlaw, a sort of praise that speaks directly to a number of our dilemmas.

Since our actual preparation for becoming a democratic society was outside the law, dumping tea in Boston Harbor while disguised as Indians and fomenting rebellion, since our moral assaults on the limitations of our democracy were expressed in the illegal actions of the abolitionists who worked the Underground Railroad and predicted the sorts of activities that people of conscience would later replicate when spiriting Jews beyond the death camp clutches of the Nazis, it is not hard to understand why we have such a high position in our pantheon for the bad boy. We love riotous outsiders as much as we once loved the sort of eloquence we no longer hear from our politicians. And in our straining against the constraints of modern civilization, we, like Baudelaire and Rimbaud, have a love of symbolic violence.

That symbolic violence has two sides, one rooted in a democratic assertion, an expression of the culture's vitality, a breaking away from European convention in pursuit of a social vision that eventually allowed for recognition and success beyond the limitations of family line and class. The other is a set of appetites focused on the exotic, bedeviled by a nostalgia for the mud, given to a love of sensationalism that completely hollows out a pretentious vulgarity. From the moment Americans joyously dumped that tea into Boston Harbor, we were in the process of rebelling against what was then a traditional denial of the colonized underdog's access to dialogue. But that Indian disguise also exhibited perhaps the first burst of what would evolve into the love of the ethnic mask as witnessed in burnt cork

stage presentations and the cinematic symbol of Al Jolson's jazz singer moving from eastern European provincialism into the Negro rhythmic bustle of American popular art.

Since the rise of American nationalism that took off at an express tempo following the War of 1812, our art has as frequently reflected disdain as celebration. We love to make fun of the rules and prick those who think themselves superior for all the wrong reasons, especially since our democracy tells us that the little David of the common man can knock down the Goliath of wealth, unfairness, privilege. We believe the smart money can always be wrong. In the first third of the nineteenth century, the Yankee Brother Jonathan and the backwoodsman Davey Crockett often outwitted the stuffed shirt, as would the burnt cork minstrel show figures who stood in for the rural whites endangered by the con men of the big city. Our art tends to pull for the underestimated and the outsider, perhaps because so many of us originate in groups and classes that were once outside the grand shindig of American civilization, noses pressed against the ballroom's huge windows. We have great faith in the possibility of the upset. There is no American who doesn't understand well the statement "They said it couldn't be done, but we did it."

That dictum is basic to our national character and underlies the virtues of our society as much as it does the vulgar volleys against convention we presently find so worrisome in popular art. What we are now witnessing is a distorted version of our own understanding of the battle between the old and the new that is basic to an improvisational society such as ours, where policy is invented to redress previous shortcomings or to express attitudinal shifts. It is central to being an American that one doesn't necessarily believe that limitations will last very long, primarily because we have seen so many changes take place in everything from technology to the ongoing adjustments of policy. It is part of our history, from Eli Whitney, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and the Wright brothers in the machinery of modern life to Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and Sandra Day O'Connor in political influence and high national office.

But what we see as tendencies in our contemporary popular art is what has happened to the extension of identification with the outsider to a love of the scandalizing bad boy. This is a love that has evolved in our century from the silver screen gangster to MTV gangster rap, introducing a few other kinds of bad boys along the way. We have moved swiftly from the cardboard goody-goody to Cagney, to Bogart, to Edgar G. Robinson, motorcycled forward to Brando and James Dean, hopped the racial fence to play out sadomasochistic rituals with Miles Davis, Malcolm X, and now Spike Lee, not leaving out all of the adolescent rock-and-roll intoxication our society guzzles to the point of hangovers left now by Prince or Madonna or Public Enemy. As Gregory Peck says, "The audience loves the bad guy because he will come up with a surprise."

Those surprises were first seen in our century in slapstick, with the many variations on the pie in the face of the society man and matron. That harmless disdain for smugness and pretension made us laugh when the superficially bad boy and comic figure, from Chaplin's Afro-balletic tramp to Eddie Murphy's *Beverly Hills Cop*, unleashed chaos at the pompous gathering. But Peck's observation says

much about the dark glamour that surrounds the worst of rock and the lowest of rap, where the canonization of antisocial posturing and the obnoxious appropriation of the racial stereotype has been basic to rock criticism at least since the elevation of the Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix. As rock critic Gregory Sandow says, "It's all about the love of the outlaw. The outlaw is going against everything you want to fight in the society, he's doing all the things you would like to do and being the way you would like to be. He's beyond the pale of convention, and if he's black, it's even better."

Sandow's observation is corroborated when one reads the bulk of rock writers on the subject of rap, they who were so quick to shout down racists or fume about Jesse Helms and the 2 Live Crew obscenity trial, but are almost always willing to indulge their own appetites for contemporary coon shows, for the brute glamour of this racial replay—and affirmation—of "the love of sacrilege," of the extensions of Jolson's statement, "You ain't heard nothing yet." For these writers, and perhaps for the bulk of white rap fans, the surliest rap recordings and videos function as experiences somewhere between viewing the natives boiling the middle class in a pot of profanity and the thrill of gawking at a killer shark in an audio aquarium. For Negro rap fans we see another version of the love of the noble savage, the woolly-headed person from the street who can't be assimilated, who is safe from our American version of the temptation of the West.

All of those tendencies clearly express our young people's dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of our culture, but it is a dissatisfaction had on the cheap. In the world of the prematurely cynical, the bad boy reigns, for he represents retreat into pouting anarchy. Of course, our kind of capitalism doggedly allows for almost any kind of successful career, even one that earns millions or television time or tenure selling defeatist visions, playing on or cultivating appetites for ersatz savagery, trumpeting segregation and substandard levels of scholarship on the campuses of our best universities. At the lowest and highest levels, say from Louis Farrakhan or from some professor of "victim studies," we hear all of the carping about the meaninglessness of American democracy, of the tainted moral character of the men who attended the Constitutional Convention and whipped the tragically optimistic fundamentals of our social contract into championship form.

Behind that carping, when what we discover is not merely opportunistic, we learn something quite distinct about the maudlin as it relates to the cynical. We come to understand that unearned cynicism, much more frequently than not, is no more than a brittle version of sentimentality. It is a failure of morale, a cowardly flight from the engagement that comes of understanding the elemental shortcomings of human existence as well as the founding fathers of this country did. Those given to no more than carping are unprepared to address the tragic optimism at the center of the metaphor that is the Constitution. They know nothing of heroic engagement, the engagement that would not allow one to misunderstand the singing of "We Shall Overcome" in the town square of Prague as Dubček stood on a balcony looking into the faces he had been exiled from seeing in the flesh by the Communist party. It is an engagement that would not allow one to miss the meaning of the Red Chinese troops having to destroy a crudely built Statue of Liberty with even cruder means when the night was filled with the famil-

iar violence of totalitarianism in Tiananmen Square. That engagement would recognize that the very success of our struggle to extend democracy has inspired the world, and much of that extending has been the result of the efforts of people at war with the social limitations that were so severely imposed upon Negro Americans.

One cannot speak of Negro culture in this country without speaking of the blues. The blues, which I shall soon talk about in detail, have much to do with the vision of the Constitution, primarily because you play the blues to rid yourself of the blues, just as the nature of our democracy allows us to remove the blues of government by using the government. The blues is a music about human will and human frailty, just as the brilliance of the Constitution is that it recognizes grand human possibility with the same clarity that it does human frailty, which is why I say it has a tragic base. Just as the blues assumes that any man or any woman can be unfaithful, the Constitution assumes that nothing is innately good, that nothing is lasting—nothing, that is, other than the perpetual danger of abused power. One might even say that the document looks upon power as essentially a dangerous thing that must never be allowed to go the way it would were it handled by the worst among us, many of whom remain unrecognized until given the chance to push their ideas on the world. The very idea of the amendment brings into government the process of social redemption through policy. By redemption I mean that the Constitution recognizes that there may be times in the future when what we now think of as hard fact might be no more than a nationally accepted prejudice, one strong enough to influence and infect policy. So you use the government to rid yourself of the blues of government.

The Constitution is also a blues document because it takes a hard swinging position against the sentimentality residing in the idea of a divine right of kings. Sentimentality is excess and so is any conception of an inheritance connected to a sense of the chosen people. The Constitution moves against that overstatement with the same sort of definition Jesus had when his striking down the idea of a chosen people prefigured what we now think of as democracy, an open forum for entry that has nothing to do with any aspect of one's identity other than his or her humanity. I must make clear that I am not talking so much about religion here as I am about the idea that the availability of universal salvation is a precursor of the idea of universal access to fairness that underlies our democratic contract. Universal salvation means that no one's identity is static, that one need only repent and be born anew. That is what I meant earlier about social redemption: every policy structured to correct previous shortcomings in the national sensibility that have led to prejudicial doctrines or unfair treatment is a form of governmental repentance. Once again, using the government to rid the blues of government.

Yet the Constitution, like the blues singer willing to publicly take apart his own shortcomings, perceives human beings as neither demons nor angels but some mysterious combination of both. That is why the revelations of scandal and abuse that rise and fall throughout our history, including our deeply human susceptibility to hypocrisy and corruption, prove out the accuracy of the Constitution. Every

time we learn of something unfair that has happened to a so-called minority group, or even a majority group like American women, we perceive anew how well the framers prepared us to face the tar and feathers our ideals are periodically dipped in—even if those framers might have been willing to tar brush some ideals themselves! Every time there is any sort of scandal or we learn another terrible thing about some president or some hanky-panky in governmental contracts, we see more clearly how important freedom of the press is and how important it is for public figures to have to account for their actions. Ask Boss Tweed, ask Richard Nixon; both were felled by the press. The framers of this blues document could see it all and they knew that for a society to sustain any kind of vitality it had to be able to arrive at decisions through discourse that could stand up to the present or lighten the burdens wrought by the lowest aspects of the past.

In essence, then, the Constitution is a document that functions like the blues-based music of jazz: it values improvisation, the freedom to constantly reinterpret the meanings of our documents. It casts a cold eye on human beings and on the laws they make; it assumes that evil will not forever be allowed to pass by. And the fact that a good number of young Negro musicians are leading the movement that is revitalizing jazz suggests a strong future for this country. I find this true because of what it takes for young Negroes to break free of all the trends that overtake them perhaps even more comprehensively than they do the rest of American youth. I find this true because Afro-American culture is essentially oral, and any oral culture is in danger of being dictated to by whoever has command of the microphone.

There is a large dream in the world of jazz, and that dream is much richer than anything one will encounter in the ethnic sentimentality of Afrocentric propaganda. What those young jazz musicians symbolize is a freedom from the taste-making of mass media and an embracing of a vision that has much more to do with aesthetic satisfaction than the gold rush culture of popular entertainment, where one takes the clichés of adolescent narcissism into the side of the mountain rather than a pickaxe, some pans, and a burro. These are young Americans who have not been suckers for the identity achieved through unearned cynical rebellion; they seek individuality through affirmation, which puts them at war with the silly attire and hairdos that descend directly from the rebel-without-a-cause vision of youth that Hollywood began selling adolescent Americans nearly forty years ago, when the anti-hero started to emerge. Less in awe of youth than of quality, those who would be jazz musicians would also *be* adults, not just shriek for adult privileges, then cry foul when the responsibilities are passed out. They have a healthy respect for the men and women who laid an astonishing tradition down. In their wit, their good grooming, their disdain for drugs, and their command of the down-home and the ambitious, they suggest that though America may presently be down on one knee, the champ is about to rise and begin taking names.

But in order to get you to truly appreciate the direction these young musicians are taking, I should conclude this talk with a longish discussion of what the blues and jazz traditions offer us in the way of democratic metaphors, aesthetic actions closely related to the way in which our very society is organized.

Part II: Blues to Be There

Transition Riff on the Big Feeling

I am quite sure that jazz is the highest American musical form because it is the most comprehensive, possessing an epic frame of emotional and intellectual reference, sensual clarity, and spiritual radiance. But if it wasn't for the blues, there would be no jazz as we know it, for blues first broke most clearly with the light and maudlin nature of popular music. Blues came up from this land around the turn of the century. We all know that blues seeped out of the Negro, but we should be aware of the fact that it also called backward into the central units of the national experience with such accuracy that it came to form the emotional basis of the most indelible secular American music. That is why it had such importance—not because it took wing on the breath, voice, and fingers of an embattled ethnic group, but because the feelings of the form came to magnetize everything from slavery to war to exploration to Indian fighting to natural disaster, from the woes of the soul lost in unhappy love to the mysteries, terrors, and celebrations of the life that stretched north from the backwoods to the steel and concrete monuments of the big city. It became, therefore, the aesthetic hymn of the culture, the twentieth-century music that spoke of and to modern experience in a way that no music of European or Third World origin ever has.

In a number of ways, the blues singer became the sound and the repository of the nation's myth and the nation's sense of tragic recognition. It was probably the sense of tragic recognition, given its pulsation by the dance rhythms of the music, that provided blues with the charisma that influenced so many other styles, from jazz to Tin Pan Alley to rock. In the music of the blues the listener was rescued from the sentimentality that so often threatens the soul of this culture, either overdoing the trivial or coating the significant with a hardening and disfiguring syrup. Surely, the Negroes who first came to hear the blues weren't at all looking for anything sentimental, since the heritage of the work song and the spiritual had already brought them cheek to jowl with the burdens of experience, expectation, and fantasy. In the sweat- and ache-laden work song, the demanding duties of hard labor were met with rhythm, and that rhythm, which never failed to flex its pulse in the church, was the underlying factor that brought together the listeners, that allowed for physical responses in the dance halls and the juke joints where blues emerged as the music of folk professionals. Blues all night in guitar keys, the development of a common source of images, a midnight-hour atmosphere of everyday people out to rhythmically *scratch their own—and somebody else's—itching, sensual essences*.

Yet there was always, as with any art given to the lyrical, a spiritual essence that referred as much to the desire for transcendence as it did to any particular tale of love and loss or love and celebration. In both cases, what was sometimes rightfully considered lewd could also constitute a sense of romantic completeness that was expressed with equal authority by men and women, that fact itself a motion toward women's liberation and the recognition of libidinous lore that transcended gender conventions. In fact, the first popular blues singers who rose to profes-

sional status were women such as Bessie Smith. And with the evolution of the blues singer into the jazz musician, an art came forward that was based in the rocky ground and the swamp mud of elemental experience while rising toward the stars with the intellectual determination of a sequoia. It was also symbolic, as had been the erotic wholeness basic to blues, of American democracy.

Part III: The Democratic Swing of American Life

In 1938, the great German novelist Thomas Mann, who had fled Nazism in his homeland, delivered a lecture from one end of America to another that was published as a small volume under the title *The Coming Victory of Democracy*. It is only sixty-five pages in length, and there are a few aspects of it that are now outdated, but the overall sense of the world and the observations Mann provides about democracy connect very strongly to the processes and the implications of jazz, which brings a fresh confluence of directness and nuance not only to the making of music but to the body of critical thought its very existence has challenged in vital ways that are peculiarly American.

The vision of jazz performance and the most fundamental aspects of its aesthetic are quite close to Mann's description of democratic thought. "We must define democracy as that form of government and of society which is inspired above every other with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man." The demands on and the respect for the individual in the jazz band put democracy into aesthetic action. Each performer must bring technical skill, imagination, and the ability to create coherent statements through improvised interplay with the rest of the musicians. That interplay takes its direction from the melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and timbral elements of the piece being performed, and each player must have a remarkably strong sense of what constitutes the *making* of music as opposed to the *rendering* of music, which is what performers of European concert music do. The improvising jazz musician must work right in the heat and the pressure of the moment, giving form and order in a mobile environment, where choices must be constantly assessed and reacted to in one way or another. The success of jazz is a victory for democracy, and a symbol of the aesthetic dignity, which is finally spiritual, that performers can achieve and express as they go about inventing music and meeting the challenge of the moment.

Those challenges are so substantial that their literal and symbolic meanings are many, saying extraordinary things about our collective past as well as the dangers and the potential of the present. In fact, improvisational skill is such an imposing gift that the marvelously original Albert Murray has written in *The Hero and the Blues*, "Improvisation is the ultimate human (i.e., heroic) endowment." The very history of America's development bears this out, as does much of the history that preceded it. But perhaps no society so significant has emerged over the last five centuries that has made improvisation so basic to its sensibility. Even the conflict between Cortés and the Aztecs, for all its horrific dimensions, pivoted on the element of improvisation. As the French writer and critic Tzvetan Todorov observes in his startling *The Conquest of America*, "It is remarkable to see Cortés not only

constantly practicing the art of adaption and improvisation, but also being aware of it and claiming it as the very principle of conduct: 'I shall always take care to add whatever seems to me most fitting, for the great size and diversity of the lands which are being discovered each day and the many new secrets which we have learned from the discoveries make it necessary that for new circumstances there be new considerations and decisions; should it appear in anything I now say or might say to your Majesty that I contradict what I have said in the past, Your Highness may be assured that it is because a new fact elicits a new opinion.'

That quote sounds more than a little like an attitude foreshadowing the constitutional vision of amendments spoken of earlier, and it is also similar in tone and content to the way jazz musicians have explained how different nights, different moods, and different fellow musicians can bring about drastically dissimilar versions of the same songs. Part of the emotion of jazz results from the excitement and the satisfaction of making the most of the present, or what the technocrats now call "real time." Todorov follows that quote with an idea that is basic to the conception of improvising jazz: "Concern for coherence has yielded to concern for the truth of each particular action."

In jazz, however, *comprehension* of each particular action, the artistic truth of it, will bring from the better and more inspired players reactions resulting in overall coherence. And it is the achievement of coherence in the present that is the great performing contribution jazz has made to the art of this century.

I

Just as American democracy, however periodically flawed in intent and realization, is a political, cultural, economic, and social rejection of the automated limitations of class and caste, jazz is an art in which improvisation declares an aesthetic rejection of the preconceptions that stifle individual and collective invention. But the very history of Afro-Americans has always been dominated by a symbolic war against the social and artistic assembly line, especially since stereotypes are actually forms of intellectual and emotional automation. In fact, slavery was a forerunner of the nation's social compartmentalization, especially the sort upheld by the pieties of stereotypes. Those stereotypes maintained that certain people came off an assembly line in nature and one needn't assume them capable of the endless possibilities of human revelation. They had a natural place, which was inferior, and they were sometimes to be pitied and guided, sometimes feared and controlled, but were never to be considered more than predictable primitives who functioned best in subservient positions.

The aesthetic revelation in the present that is so central to jazz improvisation repudiated such attitudes and rejected what Charlie Parker called "stereotyped changes." But long before the emergence of Parker, the level of virtuoso craftsmanship that evolved in the improvising world of jazz redefined both instrumental sound and technique in an ensemble where this idiomatic American music met all the criteria demanded of musical artistry. Even virtuosity took on a new meaning, a meaning steeped in unprecedented liberation. And it was no coincidence that this frontier of artistry came from Afro-Americans and eventually spoke to

and for all. As this writer pointed out in an essay called "Body and Soul," "Given the attempts to depersonalize human beings on the plantation, or reduce them to the simplicity of animals, it is understandable that a belief in the dignity of the Negro and the joyous importance of the individual resulted in what is probably the century's most radical assault on Western musical convention. Jazzmen supplied a new perspective on time, a sense of how freedom and discipline could coexist within the demands of ensemble improvisation, where the moment was bulldogged, tied, and given shape. As with the Italian artists of the Renaissance, their art was collective and focused by a common body of themes, but for jazzmen, the human imagination in motion was the measure of all things."

The degree of freedom introduced into Western music by black Americans has touched some of the few truly good jazz writers deeply and has inspired in them ideas of substantial significance in twentieth-century aesthetics. Getting beyond the noble savage school that shapes the thinking of too many jazz critics of whatever hue or background, Martin Williams points out in his largely superb *The Jazz Tradition* that there has never been a music in the Western world that allowed for so much improvisation on the parts of so many, which raises telling issues. Williams articulates the depth and meaning of this improvisational freedom quite clearly when he writes, "In all its styles, jazz involves some degree of collective ensemble improvisation, and in this it differs from Western music even at those times in its history when improvisation was required. The high degree of individuality, together with the mutual respect and co-operation required in a jazz ensemble carry with them philosophical implications that are so exciting and far-reaching that one almost hesitates to contemplate them. It is as if jazz were saying to us that not only is far greater individuality possible to man than he has so far allowed himself, but that such individuality, far from being a threat to a co-operative social structure, can actually enhance society."

Williams also makes an observation that helps clarify the human *wholeness* jazz proposes through its bold performance conventions: "The Greeks, as José Ortega y Gasset has pointed out, made the mistake of assuming that since man is the unique thinking animal (or so they concluded him to be), his thinking function is his superior function. Man is at his best when he thinks. And traditionally, Western man has accepted this view of himself. But to a jazz musician, thought and feeling, reflection and emotion, come together uniquely, and resolve in the act of doing." This artistically extends Mann's phrase "a new and modern relationship between mind and life" from *The Coming Victory of Democracy*. That new relationship in this context demands a cooperation between the brain and the body that is perhaps fresh to Western art, since the levels of perception, conception, and execution take place at such express velocities that they go far beyond what even the most sophisticated information about the consciousness is presently capable of assessing. These musicians hear what is played by their fellow performers, are inspired to inventions of their own, hold their places in the forms of the songs, and send tasks to their muscles that must be executed so swiftly that all functions of mind and body come together with intimidating speed. In the process, a bold and unprecedented radiance is brought to the performing ensemble. The

music of jazz uniquely proves out Mann's dictum that "to come close to art means to come close to life, and if an appreciation of the dignity of man is the moral definition of democracy, then its psychological definition arises out of its determination to reconcile and combine knowledge and art, mind and life, thought and deed."

2

Though the skills that make for jazz are the result of a musical evolution that probably began the moment African slaves started reordering music they heard from and were taught by the slave masters, this writer would again say that it is a dangerous simplification to hear jazz primarily as a music protesting the social conditions of Afro-Americans, even if its seminal inventors were often subjected to social limitations based on race. That reduces the monumental human achievement of a sustained artistic vision that allows for the expression of every passion, from delicate affection to snarling rage at the very demons of life at large, those tragic elements that no amount of money, power, or social inclusion will hold at bay. If social problems in and of themselves were the only things that provoke the creation of great art, a century as bloody as ours would have inspired far more original and profound aesthetic achievement than it has. No, the miracle of this improvisational art is the fact that the techniques Africans arrived with evolved into *aesthetic conceptions* that reinvented every kind of American music they came in contact with, from folk to religious music to dance tunes, and finally achieved the order that is jazz, where all those aspects of American musical expression were brought together for a fresh synthesis.

That fresh synthesis was the product of a down-home aristocracy of men and women whose origins cut across class and caste, who might or might not be able to read music, might or might not have used conventional technique, but who all had in common the ability to *make musical* sense during the act of playing. In no way did their rising to artistic prominence from the bottom, middle, or top of the social strata on the steam of their own individual talents and wills conflict with the collective concerns of the music. By doing so, they actually enhanced our understanding of the music's democratic richness, proving through their work what Mann meant when he said, "Real democracy, as we understand it, can never dispense with aristocratic attributes—if the word 'aristocratic' is used, not in the sense of birth or any sort of privilege, but in a spiritual sense." A jazz musician would probably say *soul*, knowing that those who possess the deepest spiritual connection to the music can come from anywhere and *have* often enough to affirm the merit system of aesthetic expression. It is actually the whole point of democracy itself: a society is best off and most in touch with the vital when it eliminates all irrational restrictions on talent, dedication, and skill.

No matter what class or sex or religion or race or shape or height, if you can cut the mustard, you should be up there playing or singing or having your compositions performed. You should, in fact, after all the practice and the discipline necessary to push your art into the air as a professional, be taking on the ultimate democratic challenge, which means bringing into the aesthetic arena the funda-

mentals of Constitutional discourse, checks and balances, policy, and the amendments in which you symbolically use government to rid yourself of the blues of government. When that challenge is met, children, we hear the lucidity rising into the air that is the bittersweet truth of the blues to be there—what Hernando Cortés predicted, what the framers put together, and what we, and our descendants, as all-American children of the Constitution, will continue to reinterpret until the end of our time in the quicksand of history.