uptown conversation

the new jazz studio

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Songs of the Unsung:

The Darby Hicks History of Jazz

Nobody agrees on anything about jazz (except that it survived beautifully and blossomed), but everybody thinks they know all about it, anywhere in the world. There is an interesting ownership of jazz.

— Toni Morrison

Beware of the prevailing view of “jazz” as some kind of history lesson that you have to sit through because it’s good for you. . . . Understand that this is a living art form whose most esteemed practitioners are continually evolving and engaging with the world around them.

— Vijay Iyer

They get to think in a memory kind of way about all this jazz; but these people don’t seem to know it’s more than a memory thing. They don’t seem to know it’s happening right here where they’re listening to it, just as much as it ever did in memory.

— Sidney Bechet

New members of Harlan Leonard's Territory jazz band in the 1940s began to hear about Darby Hicks as soon as they were hired. None of them recognized his name, but evidently the musicians in their new band knew him well. "Oh yes, I heard about you," a band veteran would say upon being introduced to the new recruit, "Darby Hicks told me that you can't play a lick." If a musician failed to hit a high note or adjust to a key change, someone would always say, "Darby Hicks would have nailed that." Even worse, Darby Hicks seemed to know them. Senior members of the band would pull newcomers aside and confide to them, "Darby Hicks
was talking about you last night, man. He was saying some terrible things about you, and about your sister, and about your mother, and even about your grandmother too." At this point the initiate often reached the breaking point and exploded in anger, vowing to settle things with Darby Hicks directly by challenging him to a fight.

Darby Hicks did not exist. The musicians made up a name they could use to tease newcomers, to initiate them into the band with an in-joke. Eventually the new band members would become insiders and play the same trick on those who joined the aggregation after them. The "Darby Hicks" story worked because musicians are competitive, proud, and sensitive to peer pressure, because reputations have professional and personal consequences. The story served a disciplinary function for the band as well, placing newcomers on notice that they were being watched, evaluated, and judged. Whatever the new band members thought of their own talent when they entered the band, they soon learned that they had not measured up to the standards of Darby Hicks. Whatever music they were about to play did not matter, because it could never be as good as the music Darby Hicks had already played.1

Ken Burns's film Jazz has more than a little of Darby Hicks in it, although the name is never mentioned. Its opening and establishing shot presents the high-rise buildings of New York City's skyline illuminated at night during the 1920s as the sounds of automobile horns transform into the sounds of the brass horns of a jazz ensemble. This opening serves to prefigure a connection between black music and modernity as a central focus of the film. A second connection becomes evident immediately as Wynton Marsalis's voice provides a sound bridge to a close-up of his face. Marsalis declares, "Jazz embodies America," and then explains that jazz music is something that can tell us who "we" are. The trumpeter virtuoso then identifies collective improvisation as jazz's core concept and key achievement. He notes that Bach improvised while playing his own compositions on the keyboard, but relates that accomplishment to a secondary level because Bach did not improvise with other musicians as jazz artists must do. Thus, in rapid order in its first three scenes, Jazz (the film) links jazz (the music) to three key signifiers: modernity, America, and the apex of artistic genius.

The opening scenes of Jazz brilliantly encapsulate much of what follows during the more than twenty hours of film stretched over ten episodes. Burns and his fellow filmmakers compress the infinitely diverse and plural practices that make up the world of jazz into one time—modernity, one place—"America," and one subjectivity—the heroic artist who turns adversity and alienation into aesthetic triumph. As the opening shots of the New York skyline suggest, the film depicts jazz as the quintessential creation of modernity, an art form shaped by the technological and social complexities of the twentieth-century city.

A linear developmental narrative traces the journey of jazz across space, from its origins in the rural areas of the southern U.S. and Europe to the racially mixed and ethnically diverse cities of the twentieth century. The same developmental narrative governs the growth of jazz's key styles from the foundational ensemble style pioneered by Dixieland innovators in New Orleans during the 1910s and 1920s to the section-playing, written arrangements, powerful sounds, and rhythms of swing bands in Kansas City, Chicago, and New York during the 1930s, to ultimate fulfillment in the sophisticated styles of bebop players in New York and Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s. The film presents jazz as an art form that emerged from urbanization and industrialization, that fused folk forms with modern improvisation, and that echoed the upheavals of modernity with artistry oriented toward originality and innovation. In this narrative, jazz had a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Jazz music not only has its designated proper time in this film, but it also occupies a discrete physical space: the geographic and juridical boundaries of the United States of America. Jazz music's importance in this film comes from its identity as the most important art form to originate in the United States, from its value as a metaphorical representation of the tensions between diversity and unity that define "American" society. When Wynton Marsalis begins the film proclaiming that "jazz objectifies America" and that it can tell us who "we" are, the audience is being interpellated as national subjects, as "Americans." But as Jazz proceeds, we see that Marsalis's comments mean even more, that in this film jazz has metonymic rather than merely metaphorical significance. It not only reflects the nation, it somehow constitutes it. In this film, the story of jazz is also the story of America. The ability of black and white jazz musicians to blend European and African musical traditions into a new synthesis despite the rigidly racist and segregated nature of the nation's social (and musical) institutions is what makes jazz music quintessentially American.

As a means of staking a claim by blacks for inclusion in the celebratory nationalism of the American nation that has routinely excluded them, this narrative strategy makes sense. It urges white nationalists to acknowledge the importance of black people to the national project, while allowing blacks to see themselves as key contributors to a project in which all Americans presumably take pride. In addition, Jazz pays homage to artists who deserve to be honored while it recalls a history that very much needs to be told. Yet by telling the story as a narrative about modern time and American space, the film necessarily, and regretfully, occludes other temporal and spatial dimensions of jazz that also need to be illuminated.

The privileged time of modernity and the privileged space of America come together in Jazz to draw attention to a privileged social subject: the heroic creative artist. Louis Armstrong serves as the anchor of this project, the prototypical genius who played better (louder, higher, longer) than anyone else and whose creative innovations influenced everyone else. The film's narrative voices use the word genius again and again, frequently by connecting Armstrong, Ellington, or Parker to Bach, Mozart, Beethoven or some other recognized genius of the classical canon.

In this formulation, each instrument has its own history and its own exemplary performer. Louis Armstrong perfects the possibilities of the trumpet. Lester Young and Charlie Parker define the limits of artistry on the tenor saxophone. Multinstrumentalism is only a footnote to this story. Yet in the lives of individual musicians a dialogic history of moving from one instrument to another has often led to innovations undreamed of by single instrument players. Lionel Hampton
and Lester Young explored scales extensively when they took up melodic instruments (vibes and saxophones) because they started out as drummers who had not had to think very much about harmony and melody. Under the tutelage of his father, Young learned to play clarinet, piano, flute, and piccolo. The unique sound that Lester Young acquired out of the tenor swung much to his previous playing on the C Melody and alto saxophones.7

Within the heroic narrative the particularities of black experience and American white supremacy serve as little more than dramatic background for the emergence of individuals who turn adversity into aesthetic perfection through their art. Wynton Marsalis describes the triumphs over adversity by Armstrong and the other geniuses of jazz as part of a universal process that takes place in all societies. Consequently, for Marsalis, racism's relationship to jazz is only as the historically specific obstacle to genius that these artists faced, more part of a general pattern than a constitutive force. "It happened to be racism," in this case Marsalis observes, "but it is always something."

The narrative strategies deployed by the producers of jazz are understandable, logical, and part of a long and honorable tradition. They reflect the efforts by Houston Baker and Paul Gilroy to claim a central place for African Americans in the history of modernism. They echo the insistence of Albert Murray on "the inescapably mulatto" character of "American" culture and on the indelible contributions by blacks to the national narrative. They continue the claims made by Billy Taylor, Grover Sales, Reginald Buckner, and many others for the canonization of jazz as "America's classical music." Yet, like any historical narrative, the evidence and arguments advanced in jazz are partial, perspectival, and interested. In telling its own truths about time, place, and subjectivity, the film directs our attention away from the many other temporalities, spaces, and subject positions that are central to the story of jazz.

It is not incorrect to view jazz as an exemplary modernist creation of the twentieth-century city, but doing so suppresses other temporalities and spaces equally responsible for the art. The migrant to the city who fashions a new art out of alienation is a recurring story in the history of modernism, but to tell the story that way privileges the community of artistic practices that migrants create in the city over the community of shared historical experience they leave behind and, in some cases, even bring with them to the metropolis. When Lee Young moved to Los Angeles from New Orleans, Mutt Carey took him into his band without an audition because he already had a long history with the Young family that included walking Lee Young to grade school when they both lived in New Orleans. Black migrants to urban areas have rarely been afforded the luxury of cutting off contact with their previous places of residence. Black urban life has always entailed secondary migrations from regional gateway cities like Memphis, New Orleans, and Atlanta to large metropolitan centers like Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. Survival strategies often required moving back and forth between cities, maintaining contacts with family and friends in the countryside, using the dispersal of the black population as a way to counter shortages of opportunities and resources in any one place.8

In the version of modernity described in jazz, art becomes a specialized and autonomous activity detached from tradition, something created by alienated individuals rather than historical communities. Modernist aesthetics place value on the work of art itself, not in the broader social relations and practices that shape artistic creation and reception. The aestheticization of alienation is seen as an end in itself, as an episode in the history of art rather than as an individual and collective strategy for living better in the world by calling new realities into being through performance.

This celebration of modernism masks the creative tensions in black culture between modernity and tradition. As Farah Jasmine Griffin explains in her brilliant analysis of the African American "migration narrative," black artists' enthusiasm for modernity has often been tempered by the pull of the past, by the power of "talkative ancestors" warning against a form of freedom based upon detachment from tradition. The honor that elite white artists and critics reserve for high modernism understandably generates a desire among African Americans to celebrate the dynamic presence of African Americans within it. But this prestige comes at a high price when it diverts attention away from the even more impressive African American tradition of refusing to be absorbed completely by either tradition or modernity, but instead to fashion a dynamic fusion built upon a dialectical relationship between the past and present.9

It is not incorrect to view jazz as a quintessential expression of U.S. national identity, as an art form that emerged from contacts between European and African musical traditions on the North American continent. But the added prestige that jazz seems to acquire from its association with celebratory nationalism comes at the expense of appreciating jazz's capacity to create identities far more fluid and flexible than the citizen-subject of the nation state.

Duke Ellington may be quintessentially "American" to Wynton Marsalis and Ken Burns, but when the South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim started playing with the Ellington band in Switzerland he did not think of his boss as a citizen of any particular nation, but rather as "the wise old man in the village—the extended village."2 Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie invoked Africa as well as America when they performed with dancer Asadata Dafora and an assortment of Cuban and African drummers at New York benefits for the African Academy of Arts and Research in the 1940s. Mary Lou Williams and Datora staged a two-day Carnegie Hall show in 1945 structured around the links between African and Western music and dance.10

The story of jazz as a joint creation of black and white Americans does little to help us understand how light-skinned Puerto Ricans like Louis "King" García and Miguel Ángel Duchene wound up playing for white bandleaders Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and Paul Whiteman while dark-skinned Puerto Ricans played with bands led by Fletcher Henderson and Noble Sissle. Can a celebratory equation between jazz and "America" lead us to a productive understanding of Rafael Hernandez who played in James Reese Europe's African American Fifteenth Regimental Band in France during World War I, but with the Trio Borinquen (made up of two Puerto Ricans and a Dominican) in Cuba, Mexico, New York,
and San Juan in the succeeding decades? Are we still dealing with “American” culture when Sidney Bechet moves to France, Albert Nicholas to Egypt, Buck Clayton to China, Randy Weston to Morocco, Art Blakey to Kenya, Hampton Hawes to Japan, and Teddy Weathersford to India? Did Django Reinhardt cease being Belgian by playing jazz? Did Tosフィh エ atushi cease being Japanese? Does music made in America (the continent) by Machito, Tito Puente, Mongo Santamaria, or Carlos "Patato" Valdés count as jazz in America (the country)? Does the celebratory America of Jazz prepare us adequately for the Charles Mingus compositions "They Trespass the Land of the Sacred Sioux," "Remember Rockefeller at Attica," or "Once There Was a Holding Corporation Called Old America."

It is not incorrect to view jazz as a crucible of heroic artistry. Jazz musicians have discursively transposed the hard facts of slavery, migration, industrialization, and urbanization in U.S. history into aesthetically rich and complex creations. Their harmonious balance between individual solos and collective improvisation provides a metaphorical solution to one of the recurrent dilemmas of social life in the U.S.—how to encourage individuality without selfishness and how to encourage civic mindedness without totalitarianism. The formal complexities of jazz composition, the risks and rewards of collective improvisation, and the artistic virtuosity demonstrated by its most accomplished performers make jazz a logical and suitable site for the exploration of art as transcendence and existential fulfillment.

Yet this emphasis on the heroic individual depends upon hierarchies that are not universally accepted among jazz artists and audiences. The history of Western culture is replete with linear developmental narratives that attach art forms to celebratory nationalisms and to canons of great works and artists, but it does not necessarily follow that placing jazz within that pantheon elevates it or even helps explain it. Jazz's emphasis on immediacy, on involvement, and on engagement encourages a sensibility entirely at odds with the romanticization of the alienated artist that is so central to the Western tradition. The jazz sensibility prizes connection rather than canonization, it finds value in the social relations that playing and listening creates rather than in the notes and chords and rhythms all by themselves. As New Orleans drummer Baby Dodds emphasized when speaking about how social connection rather than social alienation permeated the spirit of the bands in which he played, "When the leader of an orchestra would hire a new man there was no jealousy in the gang. Everybody took him in as a brother, and he was treated accordingly. If a fellow came to work with anything, even a sandwich or an orange, the new man would be offered a piece of it. That's the way they were. They believed in harmony."

Some musicians left successful orchestras to return to communities that offered them a greater sense of social connection. That sensibility is what informed Horace Tapscott's decision to leave the Lionel Hampton Band in the late 1950s and devote the remaining forty years of his life to playing and teaching in community based art and music collectives. Sun Ra summarized this school of thought eloquently when he explained, "Musicians often play wonderful things, bring together wonderful sounds, but it doesn't mean a thing. Not for themselves, not for other people. Everyone says that's wonderful, that's the work of a great musician. Of course, that's true, but what's the significance of it? People don't get better because of the music even though they certainly need help. I believe that every artist should realize that. That his work has no meaning whatsoever unless he helps people with it."

The story of jazz artists as heroic individuals also overlooks the gender relations structuring entry into the world of playing jazz for a living. Women musicians Melba Liston, Clara Bryant, and Mary Lou Williams can only be minor supporting players in this drama of heroic male artistry. Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday are revered as interpreters and icons but not acknowledged for their expressly musical contributions. Although jazz acknowledges the roles played by supportive wives and partners in the success of individual male musicians, the broader structures of power that segregated women into "girl" bands, that relegated women players to local rather than national exposure, that defined the music of Nina Simone or Donah Washington as somehow outside the world of jazz are never systematically addressed in the film, although they have been investigated, analyzed, and critiqued in recent books by Eric Porter, Sherrie Tucker, and Ingrid Monson, among others.

Moreover, the separation of music from other art forms obscures the broader creative activities in which musicians have been engaged. The creation of new social relations through art has taken many unexpected forms for jazz musicians, not all of them limited to playing music. In the early 1960s, Charlie Mingus worked with Max Roach and Jo Jones on plans to open a "school of arts, music, and gymnastics" in New York. Reed player Roscoe Mitchell, trombonist Lester Lashley, and trumpeter Bobby Bradford were also accomplished painters, while painter/collagist Romare Bearden composed songs including "Scabrous," which he wrote with Billy Eckstine. The mingling between members of different races celebrated in Jazz did not occur early or unproblematically in most places. For example, in Oklahoma City, interracial dances did not take place until the Young Communist League deliberately crossed the color line in 1932 by promoting an interracial dance featuring the Blue Devils in that city's Forest Park.

Tenor saxophonist Lester Young and clarinetist Wilton Crawley sometimes found the English language inadequate for their purposes, expressing their creativity by inventing and speaking languages that they made up. One day Crawley accidentally boarded a train filled with mental patients and spoke to them so successfully the authorities took him to the sanitarium too. Young's original wordplay complemented the originality of his artistry on the saxophone. The same person who signaled other musicians to go to the "bridge" of a song by shouting "George Washington," who said "I feel a draft" to indicate that he was picking up bad vibrations, and who indicated a conversation was over by saying "doom" also used different fingerings and variations in density and tone to make his playing mimic the sounds of vernacular speech.

The pure musicality of artistic innovators in Jazz emerged out of a performance tradition that often privileged participation and sensation over cerebral virtuosity. Crawley would disassemble his clarinet during choruses and juggle all six pieces in the air while tap dancing. Charley Siegels entertained audiences at Langford's
nightspot in Minneapolis in 1927 by playing the trumpet in the style of Louis Armstrong with one hand while mimicking the style of Earl Hines on piano with the other hand. In the early days of his career, Lester Young delighted carnival audiences by dancing the Charleston while he played the saxophone. He amazed his band mates during the days he played with Count Basie’s Orchestra by turning the mouthpiece of the saxophone upside down and holding the instrument over his head as if it were a pipe that he was smoking. At one recording session in 1947, the assembled musicians watched in amazement as Young sat across the room from them on the other side of the studio during fifteen of the sixteen-bar introduction they devised to “East of the Sun.” Then, halfway through the sixteenth bar, Young jumped into the air “like a gazelle” and ran over to the microphone to begin an amazing solo.17

Even within music, jazz does not exist in a vacuum isolated from other genres. Horace Tapscott’s neighbors in Houston included rhythm and blues musicians Floyd Dixon, Amos Milburn, and Johnny Guitar Watson.18 Lester Young’s work with Johnny Otis and others in small combos after World War II developed the core musical features of rhythm and blues, yet Young also insisted repeatedly that he admired the singing of pop performers including Frank Sinatra and Jo Stafford.19 Preston Love and Tapscott worked together in the West Coast Motown band backing up Diana Ross, The Temptations, The Four Tops, and other Motown acts when they toured California, Oregon, and Washington during the 1960s and 1970s.20 The dancing performed by the Motown acts on those tours was choreographed by Cholly Atkins under the supervision of stage manager Maurice King, a former jazz saxophone player who had met Preston Love backstage at the Apollo Theatre in New York in 1944 when Love played alto saxophone for the Lucky Millinder Orchestra and King managed the International Sweethearts of Rhythm.21

Trumpeter Phil Cohran played rhythm and blues in Jay McShann’s band when that group was the house band for Don Robey’s Duke and Peacock record labels in Houston, and he also played behind blues singer Walter Brown. Later Cohran worked with jazz composer Oliver Nelson and played trumpet in Sun Ra’s Arkestra before founding the Afro Arts Theatre in Chicago to produce plays, poetry, films, theatre, dance, and music. The Artistic Heritage Ensemble started by Cohran later became the Pharaohs, who in turn provided the nucleus for the rhythm and blues jazz fusion group Earth, Wind, and Fire. Cohran invented an amplified mbira that he called the “frankiphone” (named after his mother “Frankie” Cohran). Earth, Wind, and Fire’s Maurice White never played music with Cohran, but he heard him play many times and became skilled on the electric thumb piano because of his admiration for Cohran’s playing.22

The grand narrative of modernity, nationalism, and alienated artistry presented by jazz is understandable and plausible but incomplete. Yet its perspectival partiality is not random, but rather a way of serving a pernicious set of interests. The film purports to honor modernist innovation, social struggle, and artistic indifference to popular success, yet its own form is calculatedly conservative and commercial. Jazz is a “Darby Hicks” history of jazz that interpellates viewers as consumers rather than creators. The important history of jazz has already happened, it tells us. Jazz’s consummate artists are already known and its effects already incorporated into the glory of the nation state. There is nothing left for viewers to do but to honor—and, more important, to purchase—relics and souvenirs of an art greater than ourselves. Darby Hicks has decreed that all the great art has already happened.

Consequently, the film is a spectator’s story aimed at generating a canon to be consumed. Viewers are not encouraged to make jazz music, to support contemporary jazz artists, or to even to advocate jazz education. But they are urged to buy the nine-part home video version of Jazz produced and distributed by Time Warner AOL, the nearly twenty albums of recorded music on Columbia/Sony promoting the show’s artists and “greatest hits,” and the book published by Knopf as a companion to the broadcast of the television program underwritten by General Motors. Thus a film purporting to honor modernist innovation actually promotes nostalgic satisfaction. The film celebrates the centrality of African Americans to the national experience but voices no demands for either rights or recognition on behalf of contemporary African American people. The film venerates the struggles of alienated artists to rise above the formulaic patterns of commercial culture, but comes into existence and enjoys wide exposure only because it works so well to augment the commercial reach and scope of a fully integrated marketing campaign linking “educational” public television to media conglomerates.

Horace Tapscott’s autobiography, Songs of the Unsung, offers an alternative to the Darby Hicks history of jazz. Even the titles of the two works reflect the profound difference between them: Jazz is encyclopedic, comprehensive, and canonical, while Songs of the Unsung searches for the obscured, the underappreciated, and the as yet unknown. Tapscott’s opening sentences do not reference the New York skyline of Jazz, but instead start the story in the segregated hospital named after Confederate leader Jefferson Davis in Houston, Texas where he was born. Tapscott does not designate the modernist city of immigrant and exiled artists meeting each other through their work as the crucible of jazz, but instead details the ways in which his neighbors in the Houston ghetto (and later in Los Angeles) nurtured and sustained a musical culture. The film Jazz opens with Wynton Marsalis claiming that “jazz objectifies America,” while Songs of the Unsung starts with Tapscott telling us that with his birth he was “locked here on this earth.” While Jazz delivers a story about heroic individuals, Tapscott’s autobiography delineates a collective world “where everyone was family,” where the goal was to “gain some respect as a whole people,” where “we had to learn things in groups,” and where “how many mentors you’d have in a day was impossible to count.”23

Songs of the Unsung presents jazz as the conscious product of collective activity in decidedly loci community space. The modernist city and the nation pale in significance in Tapscott’s account in comparison to the home, the neighborhood, and the community. Physical space far more specific than the “city” shaped his encounter with music, and these spaces had meaning because they were connected to a supportive community network. Tapscott remembers his mother placing the family piano inside the front door of their home in Houston “so when you came in my
house, you had to play the piano to get to the couch.” The family moved to Los Angeles in 1944 when Horace was nine, and his mother immediately connected him to resources in the black community. As soon as they got off the train at Union Station she arranged to have them taken to meet Horace’s new teacher, Harry Southard, a barber who lived at 52nd and Central. “We hadn’t gotten to the house yet,” Tapscott recalls in wonder. “I don’t know where I live. And before we get there I’m introduced to my music teacher.”

Like many of his fellow musicians, Tapscott drew inspiration from the city itself, from the sights and sounds on Central Avenue, the ghetto’s main thoroughfare in those days. It was not just that a network of neighborhood musicians played together in high school bands and orchestras and then became employed in Central Avenue clubs, but rather that the avenue itself pulsed with the sounds of jazz. Buddy Collette and Charles Mingus lived on 69th Street and 108th Street, respectively, but often had to take a streetcar to rehearse with bands downtown. Mingus would frequently carry the bass on his back to 108th Street where he and Collette could catch the Pacific Electric interurban Red Cars downtown. Collette recalled, “Mingus was so excited about playing, he’d get on the car and zip the cover off his bass, and we’d start jamming on the streetcar. . . . He was always a very open guy with his thoughts: ‘Let’s play! Are we gonna play today?’ And I’d say ‘Well, OK,’ and get the alto out, and the conductor and the moron would wave—they didn’t mind.”

Like so many of the artists described in Jazz, Horace Tapscott immigrated to a big city and found fellowship within a community of musicians. But the subject position he developed from those experiences was the polar opposite of the isolated heroic individual artist celebrated by Jazz. He learned to think of himself as a responsible part of a larger collectivity. After he graduated from high school, his mother and sister saved up money to send him to the prestigious Juilliard School of Music in New York, his sister’s share coming from the money she had been saving for her own college education. But Tapscott turned down their offer because he felt he would be giving up too much by leaving his community. “No thank you,” he told them. “I appreciate it. I love you. But I have the best right here. You already put me in the best atmosphere, and I can’t leave. It was SWU, ‘Sidewalk University,’ because these cats would be on your case all the time.”

Tapscott’s sense of the links between “place” and “people” influenced the most important decision of his life. On tour with the Lionel Hampton Band, surrounded by great musicians and performing with them every night, making more money than he had ever made before, he realized he was miserable. He felt that audiences didn’t really listen to the music the band played, and that the musicians were wasting their talents playing only the things that would bring them another recording date or another tour. He decided to get off the road, go home to Los Angeles, and set up a new kind of space capable of giving rise to a different kind of subjectivity.

Back in Los Angeles, Tapscott started the Pan Afrikan People’s Orchestra, or, as he called it, the Ark (short for Arkestra, a spelling he borrowed from Sun Ra). The Ark was a locally based group set up to preserve, teach, show, and perform the music of black Americans and Pan-African music, “to preserve it by playing it and writing it and taking it to the community” (86). The members of the Ark taught music, theatre, poetry, art, and dance to their neighbors in South Central Los Angeles. They played concerts in the parks, in auditoriums, and in their own rehearsal space. They played every day, rarely for money, but somehow they supported themselves. “Everybody became part of the scene,” Tapscott recalls. “No one was left out, and everyone felt like they were a part of it. There were people who had a lot to say and didn’t have anywhere to say it” (186).

The Ark revolved around the arts, but it advanced an understanding of the arts that embedded them in the everyday life of the community. At some performances, the admission charge was a can of beans. Ark members would deliver personally the food they collected to people who were hungry “and somebody else would be happy because they’d have something to eat that day” (197). Professional artists with global reputations donated their services to the Ark including William Marshall, Marija Gibbs, and Rahsaan Roland Kirk (who told Tapscott that his mission was to see to it that every kid in the neighborhood learned to play two horns at once). But Tapscott did not acknowledge that the Ark was a success until one day when for some reason the group could not hold its usual noisy rehearsals or performances. A wing on Central Avenue stopped him and asked, “Hey man, where’s our band?” By calling it “our” band, the derelict expressed the community’s sense of ownership of the Ark, and to Tapscott, nothing could do more to honor their efforts (89, 143, 148).

Eager to expand their activities beyond the Arkestra, Tapscott and his group started calling themselves the Underground Musicians Association (UGMA), and later the Union of God’s Musicians and Artists Ascension (UGMAA). They recognized that their pro-black and pro-Africa sentiments made them unwelcome in white supremacist America, “because we played and talked about being black, about Africa, about preserving our culture, it scared them.” he recalls (88). But it was not just race consciousness that made the UGMA seem subversive, it was their distance from the heroic individualism so celebrated in Jazz. Tapscott observes,

In those early days, UGMA became a very dangerous commodity to the community, because of our comradeship and because of what we were saying about what was happening in the community. People started caring about each other and that was dangerous. We watched each other’s back and took care of each other as a group. That became intimidating, to the point where we were called a gang or a ‘perversion against the country.’ Everywhere we went, the whole group would be with me. We’d be in cars, four or five of us, all the time, and we’d go to places together, not only to play but also to listen. (198)

The sense of collectivity that UGMA cultivated was not only physical. The group ran classes for children in reading, writing, and spelling as well as instruction in playing instruments, singing, and drawing. They were rooted in their local community, but from that vantage point they developed a global perspective. Newspapers from all over the world appeared at the UGMA house, and visiting speaker-
provided firsthand reports of struggles by oppressed people around the globe. "Our concern was our particular area and black people," Tapscott recalls, but we sympathized with people's struggles around the world" (90). Saying that "jazz objectives America" as Wynton Marsalis did not necessarily be a compliment to jazz from Tapscott's perspective. Instead, in his account, America becomes the local point of entry into a wider world. For example, remembering concerts that he played with pianist Andrew Hill in Oakland, California, Tapscott recalls "this young Chinese kid sitting up front and bowing to me... He said his name was Jon Jiang" (182). Tapscott relates that moment as the start of his friendship with Jiang, now one of the world's leading composers. They collaborated on the 1998 Asian American Jazz Festival, for which Tapscott wrote an original piece, "The Two Shades of Soul." Tapscott claims, "Chinese music has never been foreign to me, because I can hear a lot of things within it." But, by way of elaboration, he then makes a social point, remembering, "When I was growing up in Houston, there was a Chinese guy who used to run the local food store across the street from us and who would let us have food when we needed it just by signing a piece of paper. He was the first Asian I'd seen in my life. I've never forgotten that and have always felt a kind of kinship with the Chinese people" (ibid.).

The new spaces created by the Ark encouraged the formation of new subject positions. Tapscott did not believe that autonomy was a proper goal for art—quite the contrary. His compositions and playing (first on the trombone and later on the piano) drew upon a rhythmic complexity he gleaned from everyday life, from the way people walked down the street to the rhythmic patterns of work. "Every time I write something, it's about what I've been a part of or seen," he maintained. "If the community changes, then so goes the music" (206).

Songs of the Unsung presents a story about jazz that contains no linear developmental narrative, no canon of great art or artists, and no embrace of modernist time or American space. It rejects the idea of the isolated and alienated artist, investing meaning in the power of art to transform social relations and our sense of the self. "Our music is contributive, rather than competitive," Tapscott insisted, and a contributive person is someone far less likely to be hurt by Darby Hicks than a competitive one would be.

To fans of Jazz, Horace Tapscott's story probably seems eccentric and parochial, little more than an engaging footnote to the real history of the art. But the particularities of Tapscott's tale should not detract our attention from the more general truths it contains. Racism might just be the particular historical obstacle in the way of artistic genius to Wynton Marsalis, but it is a part and parcel of the music business to Horace Tapscott. From his perspective, the music industry does not just happen to reflect a legacy of racism that exists outside it in the broader society, rather one of the core functions of the music industry and its categories is to produce and reproduce racism every day. Collective improvisation may be a wonderful artistic metaphor for social relations in Wynton Marsalis's universe, but it is a form of social organization and oppositional struggle in Horace Tapscott's world.

Modernist time, American space, and heroic artistry cannot be considered universal simply because they claim universal validity. Preston Love, Horace Tapscott's bandmate in the Motown West Coast touring band of the 1960s, provides a perspective very similar to Tapscott's in his splendid autobiography A Thousand Honey Creeks Later: My Life in Music From Bop to Motown and Beyond. Unlike the linear development of jazz from New Orleans to Chicago to New York that Ken Burns and Wynton Marsalis use to connect jazz to the modernist city, Love tells the history of jazz from the vantage point of a working musician in Honey Creek, Iowa; Guthrie, Oklahoma; Big Spring, Texas; Alma, Nebraska; St. Cloud, Minnesota; and Roswell, New Mexico. He recognizes Minneapolis and Albuquerque as key venues in the life of Lester Young. Love pays proper tribute to jazz greats he encountered in his life as a musician—Jo Jones, Freddie Green, Lester Young, Count Basie, and Dizzy Gillespie—but he also argues for the value of spontaneous moments when unheralded players reached extraordinary heights, like the chord changes that he heard George Salzbury play one night at the College Inn in Boulder, Colorado, the alto saxophone solo by Frank Sleet on Jimmy Witherspoon's "T'Ain't Nobody's Business," and Buster Bowers's innovative playing on electric bass in small jazz clubs in Amarillo, Texas and Clovis, New Mexico in 1955.

The life and career of Sun Ra also testifies to the limits of thinking about jazz as coterminous with modernist time, American space, and artistic heroism. Sun Ra refused to acknowledge that he had a birthday or even a year in which he was born, demurring, "Me and time never got along so good—we just sort of ignore each other." Although observers noted his close resemblance to Herman "Sonny" Blount, born in Birmingham, Alabama on May 22, 1914, Sun Ra did not claim Alabama, America, or even the planet Earth as his space. "I had this touch of sadness in the midst of other people's parties," he explained. "Other people were having a good time, but I would have a moment of loneliness and sadness. It puzzled me, therefore I had to analyze that, and I decided I was different, that's all. I might have come from somewhere else." He claimed "somewhere else" was outer space, perhaps Saturn. He encapsulated his strategic disidentification with modernist time, American space, and artistic individualism all in one sentence when he told an interviewer, "Liberty, too, is not all it's cracked up to be; even the liberty bell is cracked, for that matter, and it was liberty that led people to the use of crack."

Of course, the versions of jazz narrated by Horace Tapscott, Sun Ra, and Preston Love are also partial, perspectival, and interested. The collectivity Tapscott celebrates included women, but in subordinate and secondary roles. Sun Ra's Arkestra was a dictatorship, not a democracy, an aggregation in which the band leader determined what clothes band members could wear, what instruments they would play, and even what color the walls would be in the hotel rooms where they stayed. Preston Love's pantheon includes Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin and Big Mama Thornton but not Melba Liston, Clara Bryant, Alma Hightower, or Vi Redd.

At stake here is not just an issue of a comprehensive mainstream narrative versus the eccentric tales told by imaginative outsiders. Our entire understanding of
music may hinge on what kinds of histories we value. Christopher Small rightly urges us to learn from the great African traditions that inform jazz music, to "learn to love the creative act more than the created object," and to not let our respect for the relics of the past inhibit our capacity to create culture relevant to our own experiences. The history of jazz as creative act rather than created object can be represented in a infinitely diverse and plural number of equally true narratives.

Instead of the linear progression from genius to genius and the constant references to Bach that propelled Ken Burns’s film, it would be possible to present the history of jazz through many different narratives, perhaps as a history of rhythmic time created in unexpected places. This is a history that might include the Whiteman Sisters as well as the Four Step Brothers, Josephine Baker and Mac Barnes as well as Buck and Bubbles, Shorty Snowden and Big Bea as well as Stretch Jones and Little Bea.

Instead of modernist time, this would be a history of dance time, starting with ragtime, not as a showcase for the personal "genius" of Scott Joplin but as a site where African attitudes toward rhythm (and polyrhythm) became prominent in U.S. popular culture. The difference between the rhythmic concepts in ragtime's right-hand melodies and left-hand bass accompaniment and the genre’s additive rhythms (eight semiquavers divided into 2/16 and 1/8) evidenced a taste for multiple patterns at the same time that it opened the door for future rhythmic innovations. Rather than the era that gave rise to Dixieland and swing, the 1920s and 1930s could be seen as a movement from the fox-trot to the jitterbug and Lindy hop. More than a way to distribute music more effectively to a broader audience, the development of electrical recording techniques would be seen as a shift that enabled bass and drums to replace tuba and banjo as the key sources of rhythm. Such a story would feature the tap dancing of John "Bubbles" Sublette, who was dancing "four heavy beats to the bar and no counting" fourteen years before the Count Basie band came east and popularized swing. This narrative would honor the moment in 1932 when Bennie Moten began to generate a different kind of rhythm and momentum for dancers by replacing the banjo with the guitar and substituting the string bass for the tuba. The transition from swing to boogie in this story would not focus on the emergence of the saxophone over the trumpet or the small ensemble over the big band as much as it would highlight how string bass players and frontline instrumentalists began to assume responsibility for keeping time so that drummers could be free to experiment with polyrhythms and provide rhythmic accents for soloists.

The distinctive creators of "dance time" would not be the virtuoso instrumentalists of modernist time but rather virtuoso "conversationals" like drummer Max Roach and dancers Earl Basie (better known by his stage name, Groundhog) and Baby Laurence. "I learned a lot listening to Hog’s feet," Roach acknowledged, explaining that the multiple tones and variations in pitch that he produced on the drums were simulations of how Groundhog dropped his heels and stamped his feet. For his part, Groundhog claimed that "Max taught me how to drum parodies when he was working with Benny Carter. I lie in bed and listen to a metronome for two hours every night, inventing new combinations. I don’t like to repeat a step unless it’s necessary to help the audience catch on." Roach usually reserved his collaborations with Baby Laurence for an "encore" in which the drummer and dancer would exchange rhythms through "call and response."

Horace Tapscott took some of his time signatures from the rhythms that he encountered on Central Avenue, not in the performances of other musicians, but in the pace of people carrying out their everyday chores and tasks. "When I’m walking down the street I might do something in five or I might do something in six that could run into five," he explained, adding, "I might see somebody walking and think what time is that. Every day, you see different patterns and rhythms going on, and it’s just paying attention to what’s around you."

From the perspective of modernist time, Sun Ra’s contributions to jazz might seem small. But from the vantage point of dance time, his attitudes toward rhythm make him an important part of a broader collective artistic effort to change the relationships between the drums and the rest of the orchestra, to put the drums up front. He objected to composers who wrote melodies but left it up to the musicians playing drums, bass, and piano to provide the rhythm. "For me," he explained, the note is in my mind at the same time as the rhythm, My music is a music of precision. I know exactly the rhythm that must animate my music, and only this rhythm is valid." His band once included as many as five drummers, not to mention the bells, congas, tympani, timbales, and other rhythm instruments that he distributed to horn and reed players. During the recording session that ultimately produced Island of the Sun, one of the Arkestra’s regular drummers could not play the rhythm that Sun Ra wrote for him. The composer and band leader asked the drummer’s female companion, a dancer, to play the part and she got it immediately.

When critics described his music as “far out,” Sun Ra replied that “there’s humor in all my music. It always has rhythm. No matter how far out I may be, you can always dance to it.” Such a history might even have room for the rhythmic and sonic achievements of hip hop, techno, electronica, and other contemporary forms built around the sounds of drums, bass guitars, and the far sonic booms of Roland TR-808 drum machines.

By telling the history of jazz through the dialogic and collective inventions and improvisations of dancers and drummers, as part of a process that moved the drums “up front,” we would have a useful alternative to the heroic narrative of modernist time, American space, and artistic virtuosity authored by Ken Burns, Wynton Marsalis, Stanley Crouch, and Albert Murray. Both histories are "true" in the sense that they rely on presenting verified facts in a linear chronology and fashion a developmental narrative about changing forms of musical expression. But the two stories lead us in very different directions. The heroic narrative is designed as a genealogy of elitist blackness. It was consciously designed to counter the perceived excess of democratic thinking among black intellectuals, as Marsalis argued when he contended that black professionals “are so gullible and worried about being accused of not identifying with the man in the street that they refuse to discern with the interest in quality that makes for a true elite.” This black elite, like the
white elite it hopes to join, derives its legitimacy precisely from its distance from the majority of the population. For Wynton Marsalis, "the biggest problem with democracy, and with our education, is that every opinion becomes law and fact, just because it exists... Yet we mustn’t forget that beneath all those opinions there is an underlying truth and reality."

One might also say, however, that "all those opinions" evidence multiple, conflicting, and contradictory realities and truths. Efforts to identify and honor a classical black tradition in a country historically ruled by elite whites follow an understandable and ideologically overdetermined logic. Yet there is more to be learned from the history and enduring creativity of black music than this. Los Angeles newspaper editor Charletta Buss used to urge her constituents to look beyond the desire to see "the faces in high places," to think about how the exclusion of blacks from full citizenship and social membership in U.S. society was symptomatic of larger problems that could not be cured by integration alone, that called instead for fundamentally new ways of knowing, thinking, and being. The true genius of black music has not been confined to the production of individual "geniuses," but rather has been manifest in the plurality of new social relationships that the music has helped bring into being. The created objects and creative artists celebrated in Jazz do not tell us enough about the broader African American imagination and activism that gave them determinate shape. As Vincent Harding explains, "This people has not come through this pain in order to attain equal opportunity with the pain inflectors of this nation and this world. It has not been healed in order to join the inflectors of wounds. There must be some other reason for pain than equal opportunity employment with the pain deliverers."

With its compression of modernist time, American space, and artistic struggle, the opening sequence of Ken Burns’s Jazz captures a part of the truth about the history of Jazz. But I suggest we turn to another compression of time, space, and struggle for an even truer and more useful understanding. It occurs in a story that Clara Bryant tells in an oral history interview about Jazz on Central Avenue, a story that encapsulates more of the actual history of Jazz in this country than all ten episodes of Jazz. Bryant related how hard it was to get paid by Curtice Mosby, owner of Central Avenue’s Club Alabam. Mosby promised musicians good wages but was slow to keep his promises. Some times he would pay the right amount to keep in good standing with the musicians’ union, but then demand kickback from artists before he’d let them play again. Bryant tells us, one night blind singer Al Hibbler came to the club to demand money that Mosby owed him. “You’d better give me my money or I’ll shoot you,” Hibbler screamed, drawing a pistol from his pocket. Then evidently remembering that his vision was impaired, Hibbler shouted, “Say something so I’ll know where you are.”

One joke about one artist and one club owner on one night in one city might not seem like an adequate substitute for the monumental reach and scope of Jazz. But Al Hibbler’s anger helps us see a side of the music business and the American dream that was largely absent from Ken Burns’s film. It may be true that Jazz objects America, but it does so at least as powerfully through the promises that it breaks as the ones it keeps. Even Darby Hicks knew that.
SALIM WASHINGTON

"All the Things You Could Be by Now": Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus and the Limits of Avant-Garde Jazz

The entire history of jazz, with its rapid advancements of styles and genres, could be understood as an avant-garde movement. As historians attempt to frame jazz as the quintessential American music, it has become a symbol of United States culture and is beginning to gain some of the intellectual prestige and institutional support previously reserved for the European art music tradition. As the more celebrated cultural and educational institutions of the country help jazz gain the reputation of a respectable, bourgeois art, its official face accepts an increasingly restrictive view of what is "real jazz" and what is not. This is not only a matter of personnel and repertoire but also of aesthetic criteria and social/political orientation. The emerging canon of jazz history frames jazz as an American music rather than as an African American music. No widely accepted jazz history text denies that the music is an African American creation, or that most of its innovators have been black. In many dominant narratives, however, certain black social and aesthetic practices are routinely marginalized, if not rendered invisible. One way that these important emphases tend to be lost or misrepresented is by severing the avant-garde character from the mainstream of the music. Rather than explain avant-garde aesthetics as a primary principle of the music, jazz writers and critics have often chosen to isolate the avant-garde as a style practiced by a fringe element of the jazz community.

With the normative influence of repertoire bands like the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, recording canons such as the Smithsonian jazz compilations, and "official" histories such as Ken Burns's film documentary Jazz, there is a diminution of the perceived connection between jazz's canonical performances and recordings...