

Keeping Time

Readings
in Jazz
History

Edited by
**Robert
Walser**

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don't mean nothing, and first people get curious about it just because it's new, but soon they get tired of it because it's really no good and you got no melody to remember and no beat to dance to. So they're all poor again and nobody is working, and that's what that modern malice done for you.

MEZZROW: Because they're full of a frustration, full of neuroses, and then they blow their top 'cause they don't know where to go from here. All they know is they want to be different, but that's not enough, you can't be negative all the time, you got to be positive about it, you can't just say all the time "That's old, that stinks, let's do something new, let's be different." Different what way? Go where? You can't take no for an answer all the time. You got to have a tradition. They lost it. Now they're like babes in the wood, crying for mammy. Poor little guys, and one after the other blows his top. They ought to see a psycho-analyst before they start playing music. We made a blues about it for King Jazz, and we called it *The Blues and Freud*.

BIGARD: But we're in a new age now, man. It's a nervous age, you got to bring it out in your music.

ARMSTRONG: When they're down, you gotta help them up, not push them in still deeper.

BIGARD: You can say that because you're a genius. I'm just an average clarinet player. . . . It's all so easy for you to talk because you're an exception in everything. We others just got to keep scuffling, and if they want us to play bop, we gotta play bop. It don't matter if we like it or not.

ARMSTRONG: No, that's because I got some respect for the old folks who played trumpet before me. I'm not trying to carve them and do something different. That's the sure way to lose your style. They say to you "I got to be different. I got to develop a style of my own." And then all they do is try and not play like you do. That's not the way to do anything right. That's the sure way you'll never get any style of your own. . . . You see, pops, it's worst with the trumpet players because the trumpet is an instrument full of temptation. All the young cats want to kill papa, so they start forcing their tone. Did you listen to — last night? He was trying to do my piece, make fun of me. But did you hear his tone? 'Nuff said. . . .

Pops, I'll tell you what it's all about. Just look at the Street today.¹ Don't let me tell you nothing. Just look at the Street. They've thrown out the bands and put in a lot of chicks taking their clothes off. That's what that bop music has done for the business. And look at them young cats too proud to play their horns if you don't pay them more than the old-timers. 'Cause if they play for fun they aren't king no more. So they're not working but once in a while and then they play one note and nobody knows if it's the right note or just one of them weird things where you can always make like that was just the note you were trying to hit. And that's what they call science. Not play their horns the natural way.

¹52nd Street in New York, particularly between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, where many of the city's most famous jazz nightclubs flourished from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s.

Not play the melody. And then they're surprised they get thrown out and have strippers put in their place.

BIGARD: Well, I don't know.

ARMSTRONG: Well, you oughta know. pops, you've been around long enough. Look at the legit composers always going back to folk tunes, the simple things, where it all comes from. So they'll come back to us when all the shouting about bop and science is over, because they can't make up their own tunes, and all they can do is embroider it so much you can't see the design no more.

MEZZROW: But it won't last.

ARMSTRONG: It can't last. They always say "Jazz is dead" and then they always come back to jazz.

Source: "Bop Will Kill Business Unless It Kills Itself First"—Louis Armstrong, *Down Beat*, April 7, 1948, pp. 2–3.

LIKE RAGTIME, HOT JAZZ, SWING, FREE JAZZ, blues, rock, and rap—or, for that matter, twelfth-century polyphony and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*—bebop was initially attacked as unmusical and immoral. Some jazz critics and musicians condemned the new style, but more damaging was the sensationalistic media coverage it received. With his beret, goatee, and horn-rimmed glasses, Dizzy (John Birks) Gillespie (1917–1993) became the genre's icon. Offended by popular conceptions of the music and its subculture, Gillespie devoted a chapter of his 1979 autobiography, *To Be, Or Not . . . To Bop*, to setting the record straight.

Gillespie had established himself as a player in the big swing bands of Teddy Hill, Cab Calloway, Earl Hines, Duke Ellington, and others; he later led a big band himself, where he experimented successfully with Afro-Cuban rhythms and percussion instruments. But he is best remembered for his work in small combos, where he and alto saxophonist Charlie Parker set new speed records for instrumental virtuosity and musical imagination. One of the most influential trumpeters in history, Gillespie is usually given chief credit, along with Parker, for developing the genre of bebop during the early 1940s.

In this chapter, Gillespie challenges eleven popular myths about bebop, minimizing the importance of fashions and drugs so that he can underscore the seriousness, artistry, and creativity of the music. Without abandoning the sense of hilarity that won him his nickname, he explains the music's complex social context, where strategies for operating in a racist environment included searching for African roots, converting to Islam, and taking great pride in African-American heroes such as heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis or singer, actor, and black activist Paul Robeson.

Source: Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser. *To Be, Or Not . . . To Bop* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), excerpted from pp. 278–302 and facing p. 483.

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"The Cult of Bebop"

Around 1946, jive-ass stories about “beboppers” circulated and began popping up in the news. Generally, I felt happy for the publicity, but I found it disturbing to have modern jazz musicians and their followers characterized in a way that was often sinister and downright vicious. This image wasn’t altogether the fault of the press because many followers, trying to be “in,” were actually doing some of the things the press accused beboppers of—and worse. I wondered whether all the “weird” publicity actually drew some of these way-out elements to us and did the music more harm than good. Stereotypes, which exploited whatever our weaknesses might be, emerged. Suable things were said, but nothing about the good we were doing and our contributions to music.

Time magazine, March 25, 1946, remarked: “As such things usually do, it began on Manhattan’s 52nd Street. A bandleader named John (Dizzy) Gillespie, looking for a way to emphasize the more beautiful notes in ‘Swing,’ explained: ‘When you hum it, you just naturally say bebop, be-de-bop. . . .’”

“Today, the bigwig of bebop is a scat named Harry (the Hipster) Gibson, who in moments of supreme pianistic ecstasy throws his feet on the keyboard. No. 2 man is Bulee (Slim) Gaillard, a skyscraping zooty Negro guitarist. Gibson and Gaillard have recorded such hip numbers as ‘Cement Mixer,’ which has sold more than 20,000 discs in Los Angeles alone; ‘Yeproc Here-say,’ ‘Dreisix Cents,’ and ‘Who Put the Benzedrine in Mrs. Murphy’s Oval-tine?’”

The article discussed a ban on radio broadcasts of bebop records in Los Angeles where station KMPC considered it a “degenerative influence on youth” and described how the “nightclub where Gibson and Gaillard played” was “more crowded than ever” with teen-agers who wanted to be bebopped. “What bebop amounts to: hot jazz overheated, with overdone lyrics full of bawdiness, references to narcotics and doubletalk.”

Once it got inside the marketplace, our style was subverted by the press and music industry. First, the personalities and weaknesses of the in people started becoming more important, in the public eye, than the music itself. Then they diluted the music. They took what were otherwise blues and pop tunes, added “mop, mop” accents and lyrics about abusing drugs wherever they could and called the noise that resulted bebop. Labeled bebop like our music, this synthetic sound was played heavily on commercial radio everywhere, giving bebop a bad name. No matter how bad the imitation sounded, youngsters and people who were musically untrained liked it, and it sold well because it maintained a very danceable beat. The accusations in the press pointed to me as one of the prime movers behind this. I should’ve sued, even though the chances of winning in court were slim. It was all bullshit.

Keeping in mind that a well-told lie usually contains a germ of truth, let’s examine the charges and see how many of those stereotypes actually applied to me.

Lie number one was that beboppers wore wild clothes and dark glasses at night. Watch the fashions of the forties on the late show, long coats, almost down to your knees and full trousers. I wore drape suits like everyone else and dressed no differently from the average leading man of the day. It was beautiful. I became pretty dandified, I guess, later during the bebop era

when my pants were pegged slightly at the bottom, but not unlike the modestly flared bottoms on the slacks of the smart set today.

We had costumes for the stage—uniforms with wide lapels and belts—given to us by a tailor in Chicago who designed them, but we didn’t wear them offstage. Later, we removed the wide lapels and sported little tan cashmere jackets with no lapels. This was a trendsetting innovation because it made no sense at all to pay for a wide lapel. *Esquire* magazine, 1943, America’s leading influence on men’s fashions, considered us elegant, though bold, and printed our photographs.

Perhaps I remembered France and started wearing the beret. But I used it as headgear I could stuff into my pocket and keep moving. I used to lose my hat a lot. I liked to wear a hat like most of the guys then, and the hats I kept losing cost five dollars apiece. At a few recording sessions when I couldn’t lay my hands on a mute, I covered the bell of the trumpet with the beret. Since I’d been designated their “leader,” cats just picked up the style.

My first pair of eyeglasses, some rimless eyeglasses, came from Maurice Guilden, an optometrist at the Theresa Hotel, but they’d get broken all the time, so I picked up a pair of horn rims. I never wore glasses until 1940. As a child, I had some minor problems with vision. When I’d wake up in the morning, I couldn’t open my eyelids—they’d stick together. My mother gave me a piece of cotton; someone told her that urine would help. Every time I urinated, I took a piece of cotton and dabbed my eyes with it. It cured me. I read now without glasses and only use glasses for distance. Someone coming from the night who saw me wearing dark glasses onstage to shield my eyes from the glare of the spotlights might misinterpret their meaning. Wearing dark glasses at night could only worsen my eyesight. I never wore dark glasses at night. I had to be careful about my eyes because I needed them to see music.

Lie number two was that only beboppers wore beards, goatees, and other facial hair and adornments. I used to shave under my lip. That spot prickled and itched with scraping. The hair growing back felt uncomfortable under my mouthpiece, so I let the hair grow into a goatee during my days with Cab Calloway. Now a trademark, that tuft of hair cushions my mouthpiece and is quite useful to me as a player; at least I’ve always thought it allowed me to play more effectively. Girls like my goatee too.

I used to wear a mustache, thinking you couldn’t play well without one. One day I cut it off accidentally and had to play, and I’ve been playing without a mustache ever since. Some guy called me “weird” because he looked at me and thought he saw only half a mustache. The dark spot above my upper lip is actually a callus that formed because of my embouchure. The right side of my upper lip curls down into the mouthpiece when I form my embouchure to play.

Many modern jazz musicians wore no facial hair at all. Anyway, we weren’t the only ones during those days with hair on our faces. What about Clark Gable?

Number three: that beboppers spoke mostly in slang or tried to talk like Negroes is not so untrue. We used a few “pig Latin” words like “ofay.” Pig Latin as a way of speaking emerged among blacks long before our time as

a secret language for keeping children and the uninitiated from listening to adult conversations. Also, blacks had a lot of words they brought with them from Africa, some of which crept over into general usage, like “yum-yum.”

Most bebop language came about because some guy said something and it stuck. Another guy started using it, then another one, and before you knew it, we had a whole language. “Mezz” meant “pot,” because Mezz Mezzrow was selling the best pot. When’s the “eagle gonna” fly, the American eagle, meant payday. A “razor” implied the draft from a window in winter with cold air coming in, since it cut like a razor. We added some colorful and creative concepts to the English language, but I can’t think of any word besides bebop that I actually invented. Daddy-O Daylie, a disc jockey in Chicago, originated much more of the hip language during our era than I did.

We didn’t have to try; as black people we just naturally spoke that way. People who wished to communicate with us had to consider our manner of speech, and sometimes they adopted it. As we played with musical notes, bending them into new and different meanings that constantly changed, we played with words.

Number four: that beboppers had a penchant for loose sex and partners racially different from themselves, especially black men who desired white women, was a lie.

It’s easy for a white person to become associated with jazz musicians, because most of the places we play are owned and patronized by whites. A good example is Pannonica Koenigswater, the baroness, who is the daughter of a Rothschild. She’ll be noticed when she shows up in a jazz club over two or three times. Nica has helped jazz musicians, financially. She saw to it that a lotta guys who had no place to stay had a roof or put some money in their pockets. She’s willing to spend a lot to help. There’s not too much difference between black and white women, but you’ll find that to gain a point, a white woman will do almost anything to help if it’s something that she likes. There’s almost nothing, if a white woman sees it’s to her advantage, that she won’t do because she’s been taught that the world is hers to do with as she wants. This shocks the average black musician who realizes that black women wouldn’t generally accept giving so much without receiving something definite in return.

A black woman might say: “I’ll love him . . . but not my money.” But a white woman will give anything, even her money, to show her own strength. She’ll be there on the job, every night, sitting there supporting her own good-ies. She’ll do it for kicks, whatever is her kick. Many white women were great fans and supporters of modern jazz and brought along white males to hear our music. That’s a secret of this business: Where a woman goes, the man goes.

“Where you wanna go, baby?”

“I wanna go hear Dizzy.”

“O.K., that’s where we go.” The man may not support you, but the woman does, and he spends his money.¹

¹Here Gillespie echoes the author of “Here’s the Lowdown on ‘Two Kinds of Women’”—but without the resentment! See “Jazz and Gender During the War Years,” earlier in this volume.

As a patron of the arts in this society, the white woman’s role, since white males have been so preoccupied with making money, brought her into close contact with modern jazz musicians and created relationships that were often very helpful to the growth of our art. Some of these relationships became very personal and even sexual but not necessarily so. Often, they were supportive friendships which the musicians and their patrons enjoyed. Personally, I haven’t received much help from white female benefactors. All the help I needed, I got from my wife—an outspoken black woman, who will not let me mess with the money—to whom I’ve been married since 1940. Regarding friendships across racial lines, because white males would sometimes lend their personal support to our music, the bebop era, socially speaking, was a major concrete effort of progressive-thinking black and white males and females to tear down and abolish the ignorance and racial barriers that were stifling the growth of any true culture in modern America.

Number five: that beboppers used and abused drugs and alcohol is not completely a lie either. They used to tell jokes about it. One bebopper walked up to another and said, “Are you gonna flat your fifths tonight?” The other one answered, “No, I’m going to drink mine.” That’s a typical joke about beboppers.

When I came to New York, in 1937, I didn’t drink or smoke marijuana. “You gonna be a square, muthafucka!” Charlie Shavers said and turned me on to smoking pot. Now, certainly, we were not the only ones. Some of the older musicians had been smoking reefers for forty and fifty years. Jazz musicians, the old ones and the young ones, almost all of them that I knew smoked pot, but I wouldn’t call that drug abuse.

The first guy I knew to “take off” was Steve, a trumpet player with Jimmie Lunceford, a young college kid who came to New York and got hung up on dope. Everybody talked about him and said, “That guy’s a dope addict! Stay away from him because he uses shit.” Boy, to say that was really stupid, because how else could you help that kinda guy?

Dope, heroin abuse, really got to be a major problem during the bebop era, especially in the late forties, and a lotta guys died from it. Cats were always getting “busted” with drugs by the police, and they had a saying, “To get the best band, go to KY.” That meant the “best band” was in Lexington, Kentucky, at the federal narcotics hospital. Why did it happen? The style of life moved so fast, and cats were struggling to keep up. It was wartime, everybody was uptight. They probably wanted something to take their minds off all the killing and dying and the cares of this world. The war in Vietnam most likely excited the recent upsurge in heroin abuse, together with federal narcotics control policies which, strangely, at certain points in history, encouraged narcotics abuse, especially among young blacks.

Everybody at one time or another smoked marijuana, and then coke became popular—I did that one too; but I never had any desire to use hard drugs, a drug that would make you a slave. I always shied away from anything powerful enough to make me dependent, because realizing that everything here comes and goes, why be dependent on any one thing? I never even tried hard drugs. One time on Fifty-second Street a guy gave me something I took for coke and it turned out to be horse. I snorted it and puked

up in the street. If I had found him, he would have suffered bodily harm, but I never saw him again.

With drugs like benzedrine, we played practical jokes. One record date for Continental, with Rubberlegs Williams, a blues singer, I especially remember. Somebody had this date—Clyde Hart, I believe. He got Charlie Parker, me, Oscar Pettiford, Don Byas, Trummy Young, and Specs Powell. The music didn't work up quite right at first. Now, at that time, we used to break open inhalers and put the stuff into coffee or Coca-Cola; it was a kick then. During a break at this record date, Charlie dropped some into Rubberlegs's coffee. Rubberlegs didn't drink or smoke or anything. He couldn't taste it. So we went on with the record date. Rubberlegs began moaning and crying as he was singing. You should hear those records! But I wouldn't condone doing that now; Rubberlegs might've gotten sick or something. The whole point is that, like most Americans, we were really ignorant about the helpful or deleterious effects of drugs on human beings, and before we concluded anything about drugs or used them and got snagged, we should have understood what we were doing. That holds true for the individual or the society, I believe.

The drug scourge of the forties victimized black musicians first, before hitting any other large segment of the black community. But if a cat had his head together, nothing like that, requiring his own indulgence, could've stopped him. I've always believed that. I knew several guys that were real hip, musically, and hip about life who never got high. Getting high wasn't one of the prerequisites for being hip, and to say it was would be inaccurate.

Number six is really a trick: that beboppers tended to express unpatriotic attitudes regarding segregation, economic injustice, and the American way of life.

We never wished to be restricted to just an American context, for we were creators in an art form which grew from universal roots and which had proved it possessed universal appeal. Damn right! We refused to accept racism, poverty, or economic exploitation, nor would we live out uncreative humdrum lives merely for the sake of survival. But there was nothing unpatriotic about it. If America wouldn't honor its Constitution and respect us as men, we couldn't give a shit about the American way. And they made it damn near un-American to appreciate our music.

Music drew Charlie Parker and me together, but Charlie Parker used to read a lot too. As a great reader, he knew about everything, and we used to discuss politics, philosophy, and life-style. I remember him mentioning Baudelaire—I think he died of syphilis—and Charlie used to talk about him all the time. Charlie was very much interested in the social order, and we'd have these long conversations about it, and music. We discussed local politics, too, people like Vito Marcantonio, and what he'd tried to do for the little man in New York. We liked Marcantonio's ideas because as musicians we weren't paid well at all for what we created.

There were a bunch of musicians more socially minded, who were closely connected with the Communist Party. Those guys stayed busy anywhere labor was concerned. I never got that involved politically. I would picket, if

necessary, and remember twice being on a picket line. I can't remember just what it was I was picketing for, but they had me walking around with a sign. Now, I would never cross a picket line.

Paul Robeson became the forerunner of Martin Luther King. I'll always remember Paul Robeson as a politically-committed artist. A few enlightened musicians recognized the importance of Paul Robeson, amongst them Teddy Wilson, Frankie Newton, and Pete Seeger—all of them very outspoken politically. Pete Seeger is so warm; if you meet Pete Seeger, he just melts, he's so warm. He's a great man.

In my religious faith—the Baha'i faith—the Bab is the forerunner of Baha'u'llah, the prophet. "Bab" means gate, and Paul Robeson was the "gate" to Martin Luther King. The people in power made Paul Robeson a martyr, but he didn't die immediately from his persecution. He became a martyr because if you are strangled for your principles, whether it's physical strangulation or mental strangulation or social strangulation, you suffer. The dues that Paul Robeson paid were worse than the dues Martin Luther King paid. Martin Luther only paid his life, quick, for his views, but Paul Robeson had to suffer a very long time.

When the play *Othello* opened in New York with Paul Robeson, Jose Ferrer, and Uta Hagen, I went to the theater to see it. I was sitting way up in the highest balcony. Paul Robeson's voice sounded like we were talking together in a room. That's how strong his voice was coming from the stage, three miles away. Paul Robeson, big as he was, looked about as big as a cigar from where I was sitting. But his voice was right up there next to me.

I dug Paul Robeson right away, from the first words. A lot of black people were against Paul Robeson; he was trying to help them and they were talking against him, like he was a communist. I heard him speak on many occasions and, man, talk about a speaker! He could really speak. And he was fearless! You never hear people speak out like he did with everything arrayed against you and come out like he did. Man, I'll remember Paul Robeson until I die. He was something else.

Paul Robeson became "Mr. Incorruptibility." No one could get to him because that's the rarest quality in man, incorruptibility. Nothing supersedes that because, man, there are so many ways to corrupt a personality. Paul Robeson stands as a hero of mine and he was truly the father of Malcolm X, another dynamic personality who I talked to a lot. Oh, I loved Malcolm, and you couldn't corrupt Malcolm or Paul. We have a lot of leaders that money corrupts, and power. You give them a little money and some power, and they nut. They go nuts with it. Both Malcolm and Paul Robeson, you couldn't get to them. The people in power tried all means at their disposal to get them. So they killed Malcolm X and they destroyed Paul Robeson. But they stood up all the time. Even dying, their heads were up.

One time, on the Rudy Vallee show, I should've acted more politically. Rudy Vallee says, introducing me, "What's in the Ubangi department tonight?"²

²"Ubangi" is a general name for various groups of people who live in the Congo Basin of Africa. Vallee (and others) used it as a demeaning reference to African Americans.

I almost walked off the show. I wanted to sue him but figured there wasn't any money in it, so I just forgot about it and we played. Musicians today would never accept that, but then, somehow, the money and the chance to be heard seemed more important.

We had other fighters, like Joe Louis, who was beautiful. I've known Joe Louis since way, way back when I hung out in Sugar Ray's all the time, playing checkers. Sugar Ray's a good checker player, but dig Joe Louis. He'd come down to hear me play, and people would want Joe Louis to have a ringside seat. He'd be waaay over in a corner someplace, sitting there digging the music. If you announced him, "Ladies and gentlemen, the heavy-weight champion of the world, Joe Louis, is sitting over there," he'd stand up to take a bow and wave his hands one time. You look around again, he's gone. Other guys I know would want a ringside seat, want you to announce them and maybe come up on the stage. But Joe Louis was like that. He was always shy, beautiful dude. He had mother wit.

It's very good to know you're a part of something that has directly influenced your own cultural history. But where being black is concerned, it's only what I represent, not me, myself. I pay very little attention to "Dizzy Gillespie," but I'm happy to have made a contribution. To be a "hero" in the black community, all you have to do is make the white folks look up to you and recognize the fact that you've contributed something worthwhile. Laugh, but it's the truth. Black people appreciate my playing in the same way I looked up to Paul Robeson or to Joe Louis. When Joe would knock out someone, I'd say, "Hey . . . !" and feel like I'd scored a knockout. Just because of his prowess in his field and because he's black like me.

Oh, there was a guy in Harlem, up there on the corner all the time preaching. Boy, could he talk about white people! He'd get a little soap box. I don't know his name, but everybody knew him. He wasn't dressed all fancy, or nothing, and then he had a flag, an American flag. Ha! Ha! That's how I became involved with the African movement, standing out there listening to him. An African fellow named Kingsley Azumba Mbadiwe asked me who I was and where I came from. I knew all the right answers. That was pretty hip being from South Carolina and not having been in New York too long. Our friendship grew from there; and I became attached to this African brother. One time, after the Harlem riots, 1945, Mbadiwe told me, "Man, these white people are funny here."

"Whaddayou mean . . . ?"

"Well, they told me to stay outta Harlem," he said.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"They say that it's dangerous for me up here. I might get killed."

"What'd you tell them?"

"Well, I asked them how they gonna distinguish me from anybody else up here? I look just like the rest of them."

Heh, heh, heh. It was at that time I observed that the white people didn't like the "spooks" over here to get too close to the Africans. They didn't want us—the spooks over here—to know anything about Africa. They wanted you to just think you're somebody dangling out there, not like the white Americans who can tell you they're German or French or Italian. They

didn't want us to know we have a line so that when you'd ask us, all we could say was we were "colored." It's strange how the white people tried to keep us separate from the Africans and from our heritage. That's why, today, you don't hear in our music, as much as you do in other parts of the world, African heritage, because they took our drums away from us. If you go to Brazil, to Bahia where there is a large black population, you find a lot of African in their music; you go to Cuba, you find they retained their heritage; in the West Indies, you find a lot. In fact, I went to Kenya and heard those cats play and I said, "You guys sound like you're playing calypso from the West Indies."

A guy laughed and he said to me, "Don't forget, we were first!"

But over here, they took our drums away from us, for the simple reason of self-protection when they found out those cats could communicate four or five miles with the drums. They took our language away from us and made us speak English. In slavery times, if they found out that two slaves could speak the same African language, they sold off one. As far as our heritage goes, a few words creeped in like *buckra*—I used to hear my mother say, "that ole poor buckra"—buckra meant white. But with those few exceptions when they took our drums away, our music developed along a monorhythmic line. It wasn't polyrhythmic like African music. I always knew rhythm or I was interested in it, and it was this interest in rhythm that led me to seize every opportunity to find out about these connections with Africa and African music.

Charlie Parker and I played benefits for the African students in New York and the African Academy of Arts and Research which was headed by Kingsley Azumba Mbadiwe. Eventually, Mbadiwe wound up becoming a minister of state in Nigeria under one of those regimes, but over here, as head of the African Academy, he arranged for us to play some benefit concerts at the Diplomat Hotel which should've been recorded. Just me, Bird, and Max Roach, with African drummers and Cuban drummers; no bass, nothing else. We also played for a dancer they had, named Asadata Dafora.* (A-S-A-D-A-T-A D-A-F-O-R-A—if you can say it, you can spell it.) Those concerts for the African Academy of Arts and Research turned out to be tremendous. Through that experience, Charlie Parker and I found the connections between Afro-Cuban and African music and discovered the identity of our music with theirs. Those concerts should definitely have been recorded, because we had a ball, discovering our identity.

Within the society, we did the same thing we did with the music. First we learned the proper way and then we improvised on that. It seemed the natural thing to do because the style or mode of life among black folks went the same way as the direction of the music. Yes, sometimes the music comes

*The first African dancer to present African dance in concert form in the United States. Dafora is called "one of the pioneer exponents of African Negro dance and culture." Born in Sierra Leone in 1890, Mr. Dafora studied and performed as a singer at La Scala before coming in 1929 to the United States where he died in 1965. Dafora also staged the voodoo scene in the Orson Welles production of *Macbeth*.

first and the life-style reflects the music because music is some very strong stuff, though life in itself is bigger. Artists are always in the vanguard of social change, but we didn't go out and make speeches or say "Let's play eight bars of protest." We just played our music and let it go at that. The music proclaimed our identity; it made every statement we truly wanted to make.

Number seven: that "beboppers" expressed a preference for religions other than Christianity may be considered only a half-truth, because most black musicians, including those from the bebop era, received their initial exposure and influence in music through the black church. And it remained with them throughout their lives. For social and religious reasons, a large number of modern jazz musicians did begin to turn toward Islam during the forties, a movement completely in line with the idea of freedom of religion.

Rudy Powell, from Edgar Hayes's band, became one of the first jazz musicians I knew to accept Islam; he became an Ahmidyah Muslim. Other musicians followed, it seemed to me, for social rather than religious reasons, if you can separate the two.

"Man, if you join the Muslim faith, you ain't colored no more, you'll be white," they'd say. "You get a new name and you don't have to be a nigger no more." So everybody started joining because they considered it a big advantage not to be black during the time of segregation. I thought of joining, but it occurred to me that a lot of them spooks were simply trying to be anything other than a spook at that time. They had no idea of black consciousness; all they were trying to do was escape the stigma of being "colored." When these cats found out that Idrees Sulieman, who joined the Muslim faith about that time, could go into these white restaurants and bring out sandwiches to the other guys because he wasn't colored—and he looked like the inside of the chimney—they started enrolling in droves.

Musicians started having it printed on their police cards where it said "race," "W" for white.³ Kenny Clarke had one and he showed it to me. He said, "See, nigger, I ain't no spook; I'm white, 'W.'" He changed his name to Arabic, Liaquat Ali Salaam. Another cat who had been my roommate at Laurinburg, Oliver Mesheux, got involved in an altercation about race down in Delaware. He went into this restaurant, and they said they didn't serve colored in there. So he said, "I don't blame you. But I don't have to go under the rules of colored because my name is Mustafa Dalil."

Didn't ask him no more questions. "How do you do?" the guy said.

When I first applied for my police card, I knew what the guys were doing, but not being a Muslim, I wouldn't allow the police to type anything in that spot under race. I wouldn't reply to the race question on the application black. When the cop started to type something in there, I asked him, "What are you gonna put down there, C for me?"

"You're colored, ain't you?"

"Colored . . . ? No."

"Well, what are you, white?"

"No, don't put nothing on there," I said. "Just give me the card." They left it open. I wouldn't let them type me in W for white nor C for colored; just made them leave it blank. WC is a toilet in Europe.

As time went on, I kept considering converting to Islam but mostly because of the social reasons. I didn't know very much about the religion, but I could dig the idea that Muhammad was a prophet. I believed that, and there were very few Christians who believed that Muhammad had the word of God with him. The idea of polygamous marriage in Islam, I didn't care for too much. In our society, a man can only take care of one woman. If he does a good job of that, he'll be doing well. Polygamy had its place in the society for which it was intended, as a social custom, but social orders change and each age develops its own mores. Polygamy was acceptable during one part of our development, but most women wouldn't accept that today. People worry about all the women with no husbands, and I don't have any answer for that. Whatever happens, the question should be resolved legitimately and in the way necessary for the advancement of society.

The movement among jazz musicians toward Islam created quite a stir, especially with the surge of the Zionist movement for creation and establishment of the State of Israel. A lot of friction arose between Jews and Muslims, which took the form of a semiboycott in New York of jazz musicians with Muslim names. Maybe a Jewish guy, in a booking agency that Muslim musicians worked from, would throw work another way instead of throwing to the Muslim. Also, many of the agents couldn't pull the same tricks on Muslims that they pulled on the rest of us. The Muslims received knowledge about themselves that we didn't have and that we had no access to; so therefore they tended to act differently toward the people running the entertainment business. Much of the entertainment business was run by Jews. Generally, the Muslims fared well in spite of that, because though we had some who were Muslim in name only, others really had knowledge and were taking care of business.

Near the end of the forties, the newspapers really got worried about whether I'd convert to Islam. In 1948 *Life* magazine published a big picture story, supposedly about the music. They conned me into allowing them to photograph me down on my knees, arms outstretched, supposedly bowing to Mecca. It turned out to be a trick bag. It's of the few things in my whole career I'm ashamed of, because I wasn't a Muslim. They tricked me into committing a sacrilege. The newspapers figured that if the "king of bebop" converted, thousands of beboppers would follow suit, and reporters questioned me about whether I planned to quit and forsake Christianity. But that lesson from *Life* taught me to leave them hanging. I told them that on my trips through the South, the members of my band were denied the right of worshipping in churches of their own faith because colored folks couldn't pray with white folks down there. "Don't say I'm forsaking Christianity," I said, "because Christianity is forsaking me—or better, people who claim to be Christian just ain't. It says in the Bible to love thy brother, but people don't

³From 1940 to 1967, New York City required everyone who worked in a nightclub, including jazz and other popular musicians, to be fingerprinted and to carry a special "cabaret card." Police could confiscate the cards for drug violations or other offenses, preventing musicians from working in the city. Ostensibly a means of combating organized crime, the system reflected racism and class prejudice and disrupted the careers of even major stars.

practice what the Bible preaches. In Islam, there is no color line. Everybody is treated like equals."

With one reporter, since I didn't know much about the Muslim faith, I called on our saxophonist, formerly named Bill Evans, who'd recently accepted Islam to give this reporter some accurate information.

"What's your new name?" I asked him.

"Yusef Abdul Lateef," he replied. Yusef Lateef told us how a Muslim missionary, Kahlil Ahmed Nasir, had converted many modern jazz musicians in New York to Islam and how he read the Quran daily and strictly observed the prayer and dietary regulations of the religion. I told the reporter that I'd been studying the Quran myself, and although I hadn't converted yet, I knew one couldn't drink alcohol or eat pork as a Muslim. Also I said I felt quite intrigued by the beautiful sound of the word "Quran," and found it "out of this world," "way out," as we used to say. The guy went back to his paper and reported that Dizzy Gillespie and his "beboppers" were "way out" on the subject of religion. He tried to ridicule me as being too strange, weird, and exotic to merit serious attention.* Most of the Muslim guys who were sincere in the beginning went on believing and practicing the faith.

Number eight: that beboppers threatened to destroy pop, blues, and old-time music like Dixieland jazz is almost totally false.

It's true, melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically, we found most pop music too bland and mechanically unexciting to suit our tastes. But we didn't attempt to destroy it—we simply built on top of it by substituting our own melodies, harmonies, and rhythms over the pop music format and then improvised on that. We always substituted; that's why no one could ever charge us with stealing songs or collect any royalties for recording material under copyright. We only utilized the pop song format as a take-off point for improvisation, which to us was much more important. Eventually, pop music survived by slowly adopting the changes we made.

Beboppers couldn't destroy the blues without seriously injuring themselves. The modern jazz musicians always remained very close to the blues musician. That was a characteristic of the bopper. He stayed in close contact with his blues counterpart. I always had good friendships with T-Bone Walker, B. B. King, Joe Turner, Cousin Joe, Muddy Waters—all those guys—because we knew where our music came from. Ain't no need of denying your father. That's a fool, and there were few fools in this movement. Technical differences existed between modern jazz and blues musicians. However, modern jazz musicians would have to know the blues.

Another story is that we looked down on guys who couldn't read [music]. Erroll Garner couldn't read and we certainly didn't look down on him, even though he never played our type of music. A modern jazz musician

*Playing on this, sometimes in Europe I'd wear a turban. People would see me on the streets and think of me as an Arab or a Hindu. They didn't know what to think, really, because I'd pretend I didn't speak English and listen to them talk about me. Sometimes Americans would think I was some kind of "Mohammedan" nobleman. You wouldn't believe some of the things they'd say in ignorance. So to know me, study me very closely; give me your attention and above all come to my concert.

wouldn't necessarily have to read well to be able to create, but you couldn't get a job unless you read music; you had to read music to get in a band.

The bopper knew the blues well. He knew Latin influence and had a built-in sense of time, allowing him to set up his phrases properly. He knew chord changes, intervals, and how to get from one key to another smoothly. He knew the music of Charlie Parker and had to be a consummate musician. In the current age of bebop, a musician would also have to know about the techniques of rock music.

Ever since the days at Minton's we had standards to measure expertise in our music. Some guys couldn't satisfy them. Remember Demon, who used to come to play down at Minton's; he came to play, but he never did, and he would play with anybody, even Coleman Hawkins. Demon'd get up on the stand and play choruses that wouldn't say shit, but he'd be there. We'd get so tired of seeing this muthafucka. But he'd be there, and so we let him play. Everybody had a chance to make a contribution to the music.

The squabble between the boppers and the "moldy figs," who played or listened exclusively to Dixieland jazz, arose because the older musicians insisted on attacking our music and putting it down. Ooooh, they were very much against our music, because it required more than what they were doing. They'd say, "That music ain't shit, man!" They really did, but then you noticed some of the older guys started playing our riffs, a few of them, like Henry "Red" Allen. The others remained hostile to it.

Dave Tough was playing down at Eddie Condon's once, and I went down there to see Dave because he and his wife are good friends of mine. When he looked up and saw me, he says, "You the gamest muthafucka I ever seen in my life."

"Whaddayou mean?" I said.

"Muthafucka, you liable to get lynched down in here!" he said. That was funny. I laughed my ass off. Eddie Condon's and Nick's in the Village were the strongholds of Dixieland jazz.

Louis Armstrong criticized us but not me personally, not for playing the trumpet, never. He always said bad things about the guys who copied me, but I never read where he said that I wasn't a good trumpet player, that I couldn't play my instrument. But when he started talking about bebop, "Aww, that's slop! No melody." Louis Armstrong couldn't hear what we were doing. Pops wasn't schooled enough musically to hear the changes and harmonics we played. Pops's beauty as a melodic player and a "blower" caused all of us to play the way we did, especially trumpet players, but his age wasn't equipped to go as far, musically, as we did. Chronologically, I knew that Louis Armstrong was our progenitor as King Oliver and Buddy Bolden had been his progenitors. I knew how their styles developed and had been knowing it all the time; so Louis's statements about bebop didn't bother me. I knew that I came through Roy Eldridge, a follower of Louis Armstrong. I wouldn't say anything. I wouldn't make any statements about the older guys' playing because I respected them too much.

Time 1/28/47 quoted me: "Louis Armstrong was the one who popularized the trumpet more than anyone else—he sold the trumpet to the public. He sold it, man."

"Nowadays in jazz we know more about chords, progressions—and we try to work out different rhythms and things that they didn't think about when Louis Armstrong blew. In his day all he did was play strictly from the soul, just strictly from his heart he just played. He didn't think about no chords—he didn't know nothing about no chords. Now, what we in the younger generation take from Louis Armstrong . . . is the soul."

I criticized Louis for other things, such as his "plantation image." We didn't appreciate that about Louis Armstrong, and if anybody asked me about a certain public image of him, handkerchief over his head, grinning in the face of white racism, I never hesitated to say I didn't like it. I didn't want the white man to expect me to allow the same things Louis Armstrong did. Hell, I had my own way of "Tomming." Every generation of blacks since slavery has had to develop its own way of Tomming, of accommodating itself to a basically unjust situation. Take the comedians from Step 'n Fetchit days—there are new comedians now who don't want to be bothered with "Ah yasuh, boss. . . ." But that doesn't stop them from cracking a joke about how badly they've been mistreated. Later on, I began to recognize what I had considered Pops's grinning in the face of racism as his absolute refusal to let anything, even anger about racism, steal the joy from his life and erase his fantastic smile. Coming from a younger generation, I misjudged him.

Entrenched artists, or the entrenched society, always attack anything that's new coming in—in religion, in social upheavals, in any field. It has something to do with living and dying and the fear among the old of being replaced by the new. Louis Armstrong never played our music, but that shouldn't have kept him from feeling or understanding it. Pops thought that it was his duty to attack! The leader always attacks first; so as the leader of the old school, Pops felt that it was his duty to attack us. At least he could gain some publicity, even if he were overwhelmed musically.

"It's a buncha trash! They don't know what they're doing, them boys, running off."

Mezz Mezzrow knocked us every time he'd say something to the newspapers over in Europe about bebop. "They'd never play two notes where a hundred notes are due."

Later, when I went to Europe in 1948, they put a knife in my hand, and Mezz Mezzrow was holding his head down like I was gonna chop it off. They printed headlines: DIZZY IS GONNA CARVE MEZZ MEZZROW. . . . Thank goodness this is the age of enlightenment, and we don't have to put down the new anymore; that ferocious competition between the generations has passed.

In our personal lives, Pops and I were actually very good friends. He came to my major concerts and made some nice statements about me in the press. We should've made some albums together, I thought, just to have for the people who came behind us, about twenty albums. It seemed like a good idea some years later, but Pops was so captivated by Joe Glaser, his booking agent, he said, "Speak to Papa Joe." Of course that idea fizzled because Joe Glaser, who also booked me at the time, didn't want anybody encroaching on Louis Armstrong. Pops really had no interest in learning any new music; he was just satisfied to do his thing. And then *Hello Dolly!* came along and

catapulted him into super, super fame. Wonder if that's gonna happen to me? I wonder. Playing all these years, then all of a sudden get one number that makes a big hero out of you. History repeating itself.

Number nine: that beboppers expressed disdain for "squares" is mostly true.

A "square" and a "lame" were synonymous, and they accepted the complete life-style, including the music, dictated by the establishment. They rejected the concept of creative alternatives, and they were just the opposite of "hip," which meant "in the know," "wise," or one with "knowledge" of life and how to live.* Musically, a square would chew the cud. He'd spend his money at the Roseland Ballroom to hear a dance band playing standards, rather than extend his ear and spirit to take an odyssey in bebop at the Royal Roost. Oblivious to the changes which replaced old, outmoded expressions with newer, modern ones, squares said "hep" rather than "hip." They were apathetic to, or actively opposed to, almost everything we stood for, like intelligence, sensitivity, creativity, change, wisdom, joy, courage, peace, togetherness, and integrity. To put them down in some small way for the sharp-cornered shape of their boxed-in personalities, what better description than "square"?

Also, in those days, there were supposedly hip guys who really were squares, pseudohip cats. How do you distinguish between the pseudo and the truly hip? Well, first, a really hip guy wouldn't have any racial prejudice, one way or the other, because he would know the hip way to live is with your brother. Every human being, unless he shows differently, is your brother.

Number ten: that beboppers put down as "commercial" people who were trying to make money is 50 per cent a lie, only half true. We all wanted to make money, preferably by playing modern jazz. We appreciated people who tried to help us—and they were very few—because we needed all the help we could get. Even during the heyday of bebop, none of us made much money. Many people who pretended to help really were there for a rip-off. New modern jazz nightclubs like the Royal Roost, which had yellow leather seats and a milk bar for teenagers, and the Clique were opening every day, all over the country. Bebop was featured on the Great White Way, Broadway, at both the Paramount and the Strand theaters. We received a lot of publicity but very little money.

People with enough bucks and foresight to invest in bebop made some money. I mean more than just a little bit. All the big money went to the guys who owned the music, not to the guys who played it. The businessmen made much more than the musicians, because without money to invest in producing their own music, and sometimes managing poorly what they earned, the modern jazz musicians fell victim to the forces of the market. Somehow, the jazz businessman always became the owner and got back more than his "fair" share, usually at the player's expense. More was stolen from us during the bebop era than in the entire history of jazz, up to that point. They stole a

*"Hip cat" comes from Wolof, "hipicat"—a man who is aware or has his eyes open.

lot of our music, all kinds of stuff. You'd look up and see somebody else's name on your composition and say, "What'd he have to do with it?" But you couldn't do much about it. Blatant commercialism we disliked because it debased the quality of our music. Our protests against being cheated and ripped off never meant we stood against making money. The question of being politically inclined against commercialism or trying to take over anything never figured too prominently with me. The people who stole couldn't create, so I just kept interested in creating the music, mostly, and tried to make sure my works were protected.

Number eleven: that beboppers acted weird and foolish is a damned lie. They tell stories about people coming to my house at all hours of the day and night, but they didn't do it. They knew better than to ring my bell at four o'clock in the morning. Monk and Charlie Parker came up there one time and said, "I got something for you."

I say, "O.K., hand it to me through the door!" I've been married all my life and wasn't free to do all that. I could go to most of their houses, anytime, because they were always alone or had some broad. Lorraine never stood for too much fooling. My wife would never allow me to do that.

Beboppers were by no means fools. For a generation of Americans and young people around the world, who reached maturity during the 1940s, bebop symbolized a rebellion against the rigidities of the old order, an outcry for change in almost every field, especially in music. The bopper wanted to impress the world with a new stamp, the uniquely modern design of a new generation coming of age.

Dizzy's Desiderata

Drawing on lessons learned over the course of his career, Gillespie sketched this guide to achieving musical excellence in jazz. *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop* includes a photograph of his handwritten notes.

SOME OF THE PREREQUISITES FOR A SUCCESSFUL JAZZ MUSICIAN

- I. Mastery of the Instrument—important because when you think of something to play, you must say it quickly, because you don't have time to figure how—[with] chords changing so quickly.
- II. Style—which I think is the most difficult to master—inasmuch as there are not too many truly distinctive styles in all of jazz.
- III. Taste—is a process of elimination—some phrases that you play may be technically correct but do not portray the particular *mood* that you are trying for.
- IV. Communication—after all, you make your profession jazz first, because you love it, and second, as a means of livelihood. So if there is no direct communication with the audience for whom you are playing—there goes your living.

- V. Chord Progressions—as there are rules that govern you biologically and physically, there are rules that govern your taste musically. Therefore it is of prime interest and to one's advantage to learn the keyboard of the piano, as it is the basic instrument for Western music, which jazz is an integral part of.
- VI. Rhythm—which includes all of the other attributes, because you may have all of these others and don't have the *rhythmic* sense to put them together; that would negate all of your other accomplishments.

A SOMETIME JAZZ MUSICIAN AND FREELANCE photographer before he became a writer, Ralph Ellison (1914–1994) is best known for his novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and for *Shadow and Act* (1964), the collection of essays on literature, music, and cultural politics from which this one is drawn. This essay is about the 1940s, but it could not have been written then; as much as any selection in this volume, it directly addresses the problem of "keeping time." Ellison's purpose is to conjure up vivid images of bebop's early days even as he probes the faultiness of such recollections. With bebop, as with so many innovations, what seemed rebellious and risky now seems historical and pioneering, even to those who remember it firsthand. We have no way to think about the past apart from the present in which it is being thought about, and since the present is complex and conflicted, so are our collective memories. Ellison discusses the varying reception of jazz in terms of clashing sensibilities, concluding with an insightful analysis of the jam session as the jazz musicians' academy, where traditions and innovations meet in a delicate balance of individual competition with communal validation and interdependence.

That which we do is what we are. That which we remember is, more often than not, that which we would like to have been; or that which we hope to be. Thus our memory and our identity are ever at odds; our history ever a tall tale told by inattentive idealists.

It has been a long time now, and not many remember how it was in the old days; not really. Not even those who were there to see and hear as it happened, who were pressed in the crowds beneath the dim rosy lights of the bar in the smoke-veiled room, and who shared, night after night, the mysterious spell created by the talk, the laughter, grease paint, powder, perfume, sweat, alcohol and food—all blended and simmering, like a stew on the

Source: Ralph Ellison, "The Golden Age, Time Past," *Esquire*, January 1959; reprinted in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), pp. 199–212.

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"The Golden Age, Time Past"