Black Music Matters

Funk, Jazz and the Academy

Ed Sarath
Music example

• Bobby McFerrin, Esperanza Spalding playing/singing Eddie Harris’ Freedom Jazz Dance at the 2012 Emmy Awards
Christopher Small

By any reasonable reckoning of the function of music in human life, the Afro-American tradition is the major music of the west in the 20th century, of far greater human significance than those remnants of the great European classical tradition that are to be heard today in the concert halls and opera houses of the industrial world, east and west.

Music of the Common Tongue, p.4
Half-century plus of music studies change discourse
(aka Adventures in Stasis)

• Tanglewood, 1967

• Vision 20/20, 2000

• College Music Society Task Force Manifesto 2014

• CMS Summits 1.0 (2016), 2.0 (2019)
Lingering Aversion to Musical Blackness

• Jazz forays into popular music since at least the 1970s absent in popular music deliberations (let alone mainstream discourse)

• Students denied powerful tools for contemporary navigation, including:

  • Improvisation, and . . .

  • Rhythm
Black Atlantic Rhythm


Funk at the junction point of two major black rhythmic streams

Embodied musical racism
Curricular and cultural ramifications for music studies

• Multiculturalism needs to give way to transculturalism

• Ethnology to epistemology (in turn fuels ethnological diversity)

• Foundational curricular rebuilding

• Identity shift
“It is easier to move a cemetery than change a curriculum”
Woodrow Wilson
**Black Music Matters: Jazz, Funk and the Academy**  
Ed Sarath, University of Michigan

Power Point slide titles and commentary

1. Black Music Matters: Jazz, Funk and the Academy  
   This talk situates funk and its close relationship with jazz within the overarching context of black music in higher education. Jazz musicians since the 1970s have made substantive forays into funk, with extraordinary and important results that have transformed the horizons of jazz and funk and beyond. Particularly noteworthy is that at least four members of the legendary Miles Davis quintet of the 1960s went on to do important work in jazz-funk. Miles himself and his recordings Bitches Brew, Tutu, Live Evil, etc. Herbie Hancock with Head Hunters and Watermelon Man. Wayne Shorter with Weather Report. Tony Williams with his group Lifetime.

2. Music example  
   Bobby McFerrin, Esperanza Spalding playing/singing Eddie Harris’ Freedom Jazz Dance at the 2012 Emmy Awards.

   This is my recent book, which goes deep into the creative, artistic, social justice, and spiritual dimensions of jazz, and the ramifications thereof for the future of music studies and education at large, and society.

4. Christopher Small  
   By any reasonable reckoning of the function of music in human life, the Afro-American tradition is the major music of the west in the 20th century, of far greater human significance than those remnants of the great European classical tradition that are to be heard today in the concert halls and opera houses of the industrial world, east and west. Music of the Common Tongue, p.4

   This passage, from Small’s 1987 book, is among the most important in terms of its ramifications for contemporary musicology and the music studies change conversation, yet has scarcely informed the change conversation. Black music remains, at best, an add-on.

5. Half-century plus of music studies change discourse  
   (aka Adventures in Stasis)

   The history of music studies change visioning, going back to (at least) the 1967 Tanglewood Symposium, has yielded minimal results in terms of the foundational reform needed in late 20th and early 21st century musical worlds. I was a key member in what is
arguably the most recent of these efforts—the College Music Society Task Force, I was lead author of its widely cited Manifesto. Still, most post-Manifesto discourse remains confined to additive approaches to reform.

6. Lingering Aversion to Musical Blackness
   This is my phrase to describe chronic marginalization of the seminal contributions of African American culture in music studies change visioning. I argue that the severing in popular music discourse of recent years of black foundations of that musical wave is the most recent example, and causes a kind of hegemonic domino effect. From the pop/black music divide, jazz is distanced from the curricular conversation, thus depriving music students powerful skills for popular music and beyond.

   I argue that this is among the most important 25 pages in the past half century of musicology in its ramifications for music studies and navigation. Pressing shows that BAR is not only pervasive in the West, but also globally, and in addition seems to exhibit resonance with deep dimensions of consciousness that may powerfully underscore the significance of the black rhythmic heritage. Needless to say, funk is a prominent manifestation of BAR.

8. Curricular and cultural ramifications for music studies
   If music studies is to truly align with contemporary musical practice, ornamental change will not suffice. Only foundational overhaul will do. Multiculturalism needs to give way to transculturalism. Ethnological diversity needs to be grounded in epistemological diversity. All is rooted in a creative identity shift with black music occupying an important place, not to replace conventional Euroclassical hegemony with Afrocentric hegemony, but rather to place from and center skills for unprecedented navigation that are inherent in black music.

9. “It is easier to move a cemetery than change a curriculum”
   *Woodrow Wilson*

   Efforts to advance black music in the academy, and obstacles inherent therein, exemplify Wilson’s observation. Hence the importance of initiatives such as the U-D Funk Symposium in establishing a backdrop of informed critical inquiry and receptivity to the depth, and global ramifications, of black music.