

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Wakin' Us Up

Blues & Jazz Musical Evolution and Social Revolution

By Tayna Teglo
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Editor's Note: Following is the first in a series of articles by writer Tanya Teglo on African American culture and social issues. They will continue throughout February as Americans celebrate Black History Month. The articles were first published as part of the 2021 Erie Blues & Jazz Festival.

Music festivals can serve as a platform to awaken people's social consciousness. As part of this year's Erie Blues & Jazz Festival, we would like to take the opportunity to demonstrate how blues and jazz, and all forms of music, can increase social awareness. From its earliest roots, blues and jazz music served as an outlet for social consciousness that has been part of the African American community throughout history. In many cases, this social consciousness had to be veiled through things like humor, writing, and music. As a society, we are once again at a crucial point where we all must try to understand what it means to be a socially conscious human being. Music great Stevie Wonder described what it means to be socially conscious:

Conscious people, no matter your color or political persuasion, religion or geography, you know the truth. You're not deaf like those that don't want to hear, or become blind when they choose not to see. You will do something about it, because we can't take the chance someone else will do what we have to do. We can't put it in the hands of fate. [1]

Various issues that have plagued the African American community have increased the need for all of us to become more socially aware. Writers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes, as well as musicians such as Louis Jordan, Big Bill Broonzy, Marvin Gaye, Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen, and others, have embraced the idea and duty of increasing social consciousness in America and around the world. Writers and musicians have increased self-awareness and an identity in the African American community while speaking out against the issue of police brutality. While blues and jazz music and the issues they addressed may have originally been intended for the African American community, they have influenced and helped to create many other genres and musical styles, spreading

their messages broadly across American culture.

Throughout African American history, social issues such as police brutality had to be sung or written about in subtle coded ways using a technique that will forever be attributed to author W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois lent authority to the idea of double consciousness, double meaning, and made masking a staple in African American culture. In his work “The Souls of Black Folk,” William Edward Burghardt Du Bois explained the idea of double consciousness:

The Negro ... a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. [2]

Finding one’s identity and a sense of respect in America was a struggle that blues and jazz artists often sung about. Big Bill Broonzy recorded “[Black, Brown, and White,](#)” in which he sang: “They said if you was white should be all right. If you was brown stick around, but as you black, oh brother Get back, get back, get back.” [3]

The idea of knowing that American society was not set up to value someone who was African American was not only sung about in songs but written about by poets as well. Langston Hughes commented on the search for identity and what it felt like to live in a society in which one struggled to achieve his or her goals. He questioned what became of the individual and how he or she would react. His poem titled “Harlem” poses the problem in a unique way:

What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up Like a raisin in the sun
Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over – Like a syrupy
sweet? Maybe it sags Like a heavy load Or does it explode? [4]

As the African American community struggled to find its own identity, many elements in American society served as a reminder that if someone were black or of a different race, he or she was not viewed or given the same treatment as those within the majority. This inequality continues to this day. How a group views and has been treated by authority figures can undermine its sense of self-worth and identity.

The issue of police brutality has had a long history of creating a great social stigma and fear in the African American community, giving journalists and musicians an avenue to sing and fight against this particular injustice. African American newspapers like *The Pittsburgh Courier* and *The Chicago Defender* often carried columns that spoke about social issues and injustices that affected the African American community. In 1949, newspaper columnist Nat D. Williams took the opportunity to use his pen to speak out against police brutality, but he did so in a comical manner:

Most of the time the average officer didn’t get down to down-right laughing until he was ‘laughing fit to kill’ while busily applying his billy, black-jack, foot, fist, or pistol barrel to the anatomy of some poor and unfortunate son or daughter of Ham. A white officer said, ‘that in most cases when the

average Negro is approached for questioning by an officer, the first thing the Negro replies to any question, however mild or undiscriminating, is 'Suh?' So, in order to save time and thus avoid obstructing the process of law and order, many officers had found it an effective and profitable technique just to knock the 'suh' out of the suspect and then go ahead with the questioning and the arrest. [5]

The Memphis Police Department made an effort to improve community relations and curtail crime by hiring African American police officers in 1951. Williams remembered that there was a cultural shift on Beale Street because the people were tired of "harboring murderers, thieves, confidence men, crap shooters, and the like in their respectableness."

Williams also wanted citizens to be wary that just because an African American police officer was hired or on the scene, it did not necessarily mean easier treatment of the community at the hands of the police. "Negro officers will arrest them just as quickly as white officers when they are violating the law. ... The average Negro seems to feel that when an officer of the colored persuasion walks up to him ... African American officers, know the proper procedure in such incidences [of violence] ... is the immediate application of a nightstick or blackjack." [6] The efforts that were made in Memphis by the police department did not signify a trend. Musicians were still singing about the issue of police brutality and finding an identity in blues and jazz music.

The song, "Saturday Night Fish Fry" sung by Louis Jordan, who was a jazz and jump blues artist, appeared to be talking about a fun social gathering, but it highlighted the issue of police brutality. The lyrics were:

Now the women were screamin' and jumpin' and yellin'. The bottles was flyin' and the fish was smellin'. And way up above all the noise they made Somebody hollered, 'Better get out of here, this is a raid'. Now I didn't know we was breakin' the law. But somebody reached up and hit me on the jaw. They had us blocked off from the front to the back. And they was puttin' 'em in the wagon like potato sacks. Now I tried to crawl under a bathtub when the policeman said, 'Where you goin' there, bub?' Now they got us out of there like a house afire. Put us all in that Black Maria. Now, they might have missed a pitiful few, but they got poor me and my buddy too we headed for jail in a dazed condition. They booked each one of us on suspicion now my chick came down and went for my bail. And finally got me out of that rotten jail. Now if you ever want to get a fist in your eye just mention a Saturday night fish fry. I don't care how many fish in the sea, but don't ever mention a fish to me. [7]

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Author and historian Tanya Teglo specializes in African American history. She has written articles for many academic journals, including “Nat D. Williams: Beale Street Historian” for the West Tennessee Historical Society Papers, as well as “WDIA and the Black Press: A Powerful Partnership” for the Tennessee Historical Quarterly. Teglo has also spent many years serving the disabled community, having been a member of various committees and workgroups in Pennsylvania government dealing with disability policy. In addition to writing and research, she has taken an active role in assisting her alma mater, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, in enhancing its disability services.

End Notes

- [1] Quote from Stevie Wonder is available [here](#), from You Tube accessed September 23, 2020
- [2] W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of Black Folk,” 1903, p. 2.
- [3] Big Bill Broonzy, “Black, Brown, and White,” recorded 1951.
- [4] Langston Hughes, “Harlem,” 1951. It is available [here](#).
- [5] Nat D Williams, “Down On Beale Here He is Now,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*. June 2, 1951, p 18.
- [6] Ibid
- [7] Louis Jordan, “Saturday Night Fish Fry,” 1949, which can be found [here](#).

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