

An Invisible Native: Jazz and the Musical Standard of Blackness in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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In Miles Davis' 1989 self-titled autobiography, he remarks on the limitless power of jazz and music, noting that music should have "no boundaries, no limits to where it could grow and go, no restrictions on its creativity" (205). The art of jazz music is the freedom that it gives both its players and its listeners. Like most art forms, there is a basic structure or foundation that creates the parameters and characteristics; however, the subsequent offshoots of these foundations allow for greater freedom and creative expression for the musicians. With this limitless creative potential, as Davis asserts, musicians add to the "voice" of the piece, as a shape-shifter of sorts, creating a new musical reality and exerting a new personal freedom. Early jazz represented the new physical, emotional, and musical reality of African Americans at the time of the genre's inception. As authentically native African American musical forms, jazz and blues were born out of the experiences of the enslaved, the oppressed, and the downtrodden to become the hybridized musical manifestations of the black experience in white America and the tense collaboration between cultures and history. The fluidity and evolution of these forms, however, also represents the change in existence for blacks. As one part of the collective whole of black culture, it is often hard to segregate history from these subsets of culture. Aspects of culture act like pools of water; they provide a source of reflection for historical events that can oft be relayed in a sterile and detached manner.

A student of jazz can see that as the Great Migration takes off and blacks migrate from the South to the North, they

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take with them a music and culture that, at first may be authentically Southern in nature; however, as blacks settle in different regions of the United States, the music shifts to become a more accurate reflection of the heterogeneous lives of northern and southern blacks. These changes and culturally migratory patterns can also be seen in many works in the canon of African American literature. Literary critics acknowledge this in the many blues-styled poems of Langston Hughes. Hughes' poems not only include examples of the 12-bar blues structure and its patterns of repetition and rhyming, but his poems also play off of the major themes present in blues: depression, loneliness, loss of a job, loss of a loved one, and adversities of black living. And while Hughes' blues poems are the most obvious examples of literature reflecting music reflecting history, he is not the only African American author to do so. According to John McCluskey, author of "Two-Steppin': Richard Wright's Encounters with Blue-Jazz," the "successes of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown brought this idiom to a central position in developing literary tradition" (332). In Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, there exists the connection and relationship between elements and forms of jazz and the structured existence of black maleness in the attempts of Bigger and *Invisible Man* to assert their individuality in a world that would prefer that they "stay in the pocket" and play the "standards." The symbol of this standard existence for IM comes in the form of Louis Armstrong, a traditional jazz trumpeter. Bigger Thomas, however, finds little solace and comfort in remaining on the path that standard jazz – or the prescribed standard black existence – has set for him. Much like free jazz – often called avant-garde jazz – Bigger breaks down the standards set for black existence and forges his own path free of structure and form to embrace the chaotic and frenzied life of liberation through individuality and violence that in some way asserts a humanness unchained.

Standards – both jazz and blues – are those songs or tunes that are typically and universally accepted as "must-knows" by musicians of the genre. In the jazz realm, Duke Ellington's "Take the A Train" and Bobby Troupe's "Get Your Kicks (On Route 66)" are songs that are expected to be in the repertoire of even the most novice individual to dare call himself or herself a jazz musician. While these are the original composers of these songs, many artists and groups have covered each song over the years. Some have remained authentic to the original composition, while others have maintained the core framework but have taken creative liberties with melodic and instrumental adornment. While standards can be subjected to the regional influences in which they "reside," standards fail to disappear. They travel, they morph, and they are accepted as the norm. One has crafted a benchmark base of knowledge or expertise in the expectation of another. Musical standards also become standards because there is a sense of admiration and a desire to duplicate: the song is of such high quality or character that it is worthy of imitation as the form of flattery. In this, the standard serves a two-fold purpose – not only does it reflect a

certain sense of value that other musicians have for the work, but it also serves as a form of reverence to the original composer. By playing and replaying the standard, the musician makes the statement that he or she finds value in and a sense of connection to the work and engages in a form of revelatory praise for the creator of this piece by the sheer playing of the piece alone. Standards also become an expectation on the part of the listening audience affirming that the musician is aware of the listener's needs and validates their affinity by living up to the expectation of play.

If music is to serve as the metaphor of life, it is not impossible to see how and for what purpose standards are used in the lives and expectations of others. Ellison's musical training in and appreciation for jazz serve as not only a springboard for *Invisible Man*'s hibernation, but also as catalysts for his transformation. The prologue of the novel begins with IM, now renaming himself Jack-the-Bear, reflecting on the events that have led him below ground. In his state of hibernation, however, he is able to move beyond *hearing* music and now *feeling* it with his entire physical being. IM has been listening to the music of Louis Armstrong and notes that he desires to "hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue' – all at the same time" (Ellison 8). Armstrong is symbolic not only in his association with the start of commercialized jazz in the United States, but for IM, Armstrong is a kindred spirit, another, as he notes, who is "unaware that he is invisible" (8). Like Armstrong, IM's earlier actions in the novel are executed while he exists in a state of blissful ignorance to his invisibility. In that time, he makes what he considers to be strides for himself. IM sees that either because of or in spite of Armstrong's invisibility, he creates music most likened to poetry.

Armstrong's place in jazz history belies a paradox that precipitates this existence of invisibility for IM. Just as Armstrong is heralded as the catalyst to move jazz from a strictly collaborative effort to the stand-alone soloist, his relationship with the white audience who would go on to praise and adore him has left an unsettling feeling with both jazz musicians and novice music appreciators alike. Armstrong, nicknamed Satchmo, smiled freely and broadly for critics and audiences alike. His exaggerated affect and over-emoting became identifying traits of an Armstrong performance; however, many African Americans felt uneasy about a stage persona that seemed to keep the black man and entertainer in an unending vaudeville or Chitlin' Circuit tour. Miles Davis notes that his own unwillingness to play up to white critics often made him the brunt of their reviews. He writes:

"The critics were [...] putting me down, and I think some of it had to do with my attitude, because I ain't never been no grinner, or someone who went out of his way to kiss somebody's ass, especially a critic. [...] As much as I love Dizzy and loved Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, I always hated the way they used to laugh and grin for the audiences. I know why they did it – to make money and because they were entertainers as well as trumpet players. They had families to feed." (83)

While Davis' middle class, mid-Western upbringing makes him see Gillespie and Armstrong's actions in a different light, for IM, a product of the South, he is initially able to understand Armstrong's words and actions, allowing them to provide comfort and reassurance in his time of retreat and hibernation. James Harding, author of "Adorno, Ellison, and the Critique of Jazz" (1995), writes:

[F]or the invisible man, Armstrong's significance derives from an ability to create poetic meaning out of a situation with which the invisible man is only beginning to come to terms. Of central importance is invisible man's distinction between the 'covert' and the overt, because it is here that through literature he imitates Armstrong and develops [...] a 'minor literature' within the major cultural tradition which can afford him no visible recognition. (134)

For IM, the actions and words of Armstrong do not merely signal Armstrong's knowledge of his invisibility, but also point to the power in his awareness of his invisibility. While Armstrong's career was spent wooing the white audiences and critics alike, Davis, and now IM, are aware that his actions served a purpose. Unlike IM, who spends a majority of the novel ignorant to his invisibility, Armstrong is able to elicit a sense of power from that knowledge and asserts his visibility and ultimate legacy in the annals of jazz history.

Because IM is now cognizant of the nature and depths of his invisibility, he can now move from the covert to the overt. Harding notes that this notion of moving from the covert to the overt, "or the 'minor' and the 'major,' is implicit in the invisible man's act of self-naming..." (135). When Ellison has IM proclaim to the reader to "[c]all me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation," he extends the symbolic meaning of hibernation to that of a jazz allusion. The real Jack-the-Bear was a 1930s jazz musician most noted for his place in soloing or "cutting." Alongside Armstrong, Jack-the-Bear "forged musical innovations in improvised 'cutting contests' (135). These cutting contests can today be likened to non-competitive jam sessions. Important in these sessions is the individual musician's ability to tap into, assert, and feel comfortable with his or her musical or instrumental identity. Ellison notes in his essay "The Golden Age, Time Past" from his collection of essays in *Shadow and Act*, that the jazzman must move beyond the level of novice in his knowledge and execution of the fundamentals and standards of jazz. Only after he has acquired and possessed that knowledge can he move into forging his own musical identity. He writes that "after the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of his instrument and the traditional techniques of jazz – the intonations, the mute work, manipulation of timbre, the body of traditional styles – he must 'find himself,' must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul" (208-209). In these jam sessions or "cutting contests," the listener sees the covert, minor, or subculture within jazz culture, one that exists for the "enjoyment of the players themselves" (Harding 135). As it merges into the accepted main culture or the "major" that is presented, the covert

moves to the overt. For the likes of Armstrong and Jack-the-Bear, while these jam sessions allowed them time to sharpen and define their individual style and "voice" within a group, there was still the expectation that each musician could grasp this pseudo-libratory identity within the confines of a typical jazz standard.

Within society, there exist certain standards of behavior that are deemed acceptable. There are standards set by parents for the lives and futures of their children. Much like the A-section of jazz – the primary section of the tune, typically eight bars, and the main theme of the song – these measures are set forth early on for children (*A Passion for Jazz*). Children work off of these standards and set their decorum and personal aspirations within the framework of this beau ideal. Opportunities for children to assert that knowledge are granted by way of life experiences where a child can aver such knowledge both in the presence and absence of an adult. Using the analogy of jazz, this is best exemplified with the solo. During the jazz break, the soloist must play without musical accompaniment, making one's knowledge of the pattern and theme as set forth by the A-section that much more important. This concept not only aligns itself with the analogous abilities of IM, but also aligns itself with Ellison's support and admiration of standard jazz. A standard jazz solo asks that the soloing musician pattern his or her solo after the chords and chord progressions already existent in the song, essentially functioning as a compliment to the melody (Litweiler 158). Because it does not deviate from the set rhythm or groove that is set and continues to remain "in the pocket," there are limited opportunities to branch out and exert *true* individuality.

In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the reader finds IM as a fiercely determined young man gaining knowledge and discipline at a traditional agricultural and vocational southern Historically Black College/University. The A-section of his life, however, is set in his grandfather's dying words, words so disturbing that they cause the adults in the room to move with rushed angst, but words that will set a course that veers from the traditional standard that has been marked for blacks and black men. "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. [...] I've been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (Ellison 16). IM lives with the theme that has been set for him, however uncomfortable and innately wrong it seems. In jazz, a theme or pre-planned melodic ideal is repeated throughout. For a weaker or more novice player, there is heavy reliance on this pattern because there does not exist enough knowledge, experience, or confidence to break from it. Those who dare venture off course, most often find themselves out of key, rhythm, and sync with the basic melody. For IM, the pre-planned melody for black men - as set by his grandfather's parting curse, Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the university, and the Great Founder - is to be educated in the ways of *survival* in the white world. It

is to appease the white man to gain security for the black man. IM has neither conceptualized nor mastered that pattern because he has not reconciled himself to following the A-section that was initiated in the dying words of his grandfather. IM's first attempt at a standard jazz solo occurs at the battle royal. The parameters have been set for IM – he is surrounded and blindfolded by a group of unseen but known “important” white men in the community who possess the financial means and perhaps the desire to offer IM a scholarship to attend college. While IM has had to endure a dehumanizing and brutal event with a group of other black boys who look like him but are not like him, he is finally given the opportunity to give the speech which he has prepared with much attention and pride. In the midst of his speech – or solo – he misspeaks and uses the words “social equality” instead of “social responsibility.” While a small skip in the beat of the song that is his speech, the audience of vulture-like white men become rowdy as they notice his mistake. IM has muddled his initiatory solo but regroups and shuffles to the next.

This opportunity avails itself to IM when he is assigned as the driver for Mr. Norton, an influential and rich trustee on the Board at his college. Upon Mr. Norton's request, IM drives Norton to some of the more unsavory parts of the college town, parts which do not reflect the desired image of the upwardly mobile and educated black in post-Reconstruction America. When Bledsoe chastises IM for taking the trustee Mr. Norton to the “other side of the tracks,” IM cannot understand Bledsoe's rage; he merely did what Mr. Norton had ordered of him. Bledsoe snaps back, “Why didn't you make an excuse? [...] My God, boy! You're black and living in the South – did you forget how to lie? [...] Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!” (139). IM acts much like a musician ill-prepared for an improvisational solo during a break in the music. While the parameters of the solo have been set, down to the chords and meter, IM fails at his second solo attempt.

Much of the remaining experiences for IM in the novel work from the perspective of a jazz standard. Throughout *Invisible Man*, Ellison places IM in repeating scenarios that give him the opportunity to flex his knowledge of the pattern and the groove; however, IM fails to grasp the rhythm until the very end. He misses the message that Brockaway gives. He cannot fathom the betrayal he feels by the Brotherhood. For IM, jazz and the likes of Louis Armstrong do not serve the purpose of validating his identity; instead, they seek to validate his invisibility. As IM recognizes that the Brotherhood has manipulated and used him to advance a purpose that is not his own, he must reconnect and reconcile with Armstrong, as this reconciliation marks his awareness of the confines within the jazz standard, the limited freedom apparent in his soloing opportunities, and how these standards – even the transition to bebop – cannot escape the clutches of those in power who commercialize it for their identity and not the musician's. Harding proposes that IM “turns to jazz and the recordings of Armstrong [...] [as] a reinstatement of the

‘double-voiced’ tools repressed by those whose interest in the black community was never more than a calculated ploy in a larger struggle for power” (145). It is not until his encounter with Sybil that he realizes the standard set for him; the A-section that “kicked off” his life's song has not faded. It is still working clearly as the base structure for the song. It is *the* standard. IM is given the freedom to move the song into double-time, which is symbolized when he begins running wildly through Harlem. As IM finally succumbs to the groove – that inert feeling of rightness in the rhythm, his rhythm – he comes to the startling epiphany that his role in these sociological standards requires him to abandon his hopes of asserting and inserting himself between the beats and instead fall “in the pocket” or rest perfectly in time with the center of the beat. When IM is “in the pocket,” his individual identity and sense of freedom are removed and he becomes invisible. IM cannot deviate from the set key, rhythm, chords, or syncopation. He must fall in line with the A-section and abandon any hopes of crafting a new identity above ground and within the standard framework established by traditional jazz.

These “standards” are analogous to the expectation, perception, and creation of black male identity. IM's existence exemplifies the paradox that is jazz which, according to Kevin Bell, author of “The Embrace of Entropy: Ralph Ellison and the Freedom Principle of Jazz Invisible,” “lies in the tension between the imperative to repeat antecedent structures and the necessity to do so in a way that expresses originality” (22). In jazz and in *Invisible Man*, there persists the question of staying in the groove or moving to the freedom of improvisation. Bell argues that in *Invisible Man*, Ellison “is concerned ultimately with how these dimensions are inflected by varying, even contradictory, modalities or notions of the philosophical, which is to say, the material question of freedom” (23). The major obstacle to this true sense of freedom, however, is that the jazz standards and the solo opportunities available are not true chances to engage in authentic improvisation. While the soloist is given anywhere from eight to 12 bars in which to exert identity, authority, and individuality, there are still primary constraints that contain one's musicality. IM fails at his solos because the standards that have been set for him have not prepared him for a changing world and culture. He is asked to engage in the same solo act but finds his true desires contradictory to outside expectations. He cannot improvise. “[T]he improvisatory skills of jazz musicians reflect the ...flexibility and immediacy of response which have been necessary for black American survival” (Harding 136). In this, Bledsoe's words ring most true. While IM should have known that taking Norton by the Trueblood property and The Golden Day was a decision that did not work in the favor of his school or his people, and while he should have known that the battle royal was more than a mere oratory contest, IM is incapable of improvising in situations that include different chords and parts but possess the same rhythm.

Thus, in the epilogue of *Invisible Man*, the reader finds the newly self-named

Jack-the-Bear in hibernation and deep contemplation about the path or jazz form chosen. In imitating the “old” ways of Armstrong, the Great Founder, Bledsoe, even the Brotherhood, IM realizes that “in music, the concept of representation or imitation as a way of correlating art and reality is not particularly fruitful [...] The myth of progress has beaten and excluded [him]” (Harding 146). Tracing IM’s descent to the “lower frequencies,” the reader has watched his fruitless attempts at imitation. The disillusionment that IM feels is a sense of betrayal by that which had been drilled in his head as the guarantee of black male success. He knows the standards, and for some reason is never prepared for the form of solo identity given. IM, in his isolation, sees that the standard jazz of yesteryear has left him as a relic of old, much like the statue of the Great Founder or Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I do to Be So Black and Blue.” Armstrong, while positing himself as a legend in jazz in his own right, has been left behind in the quickly evolving and changing world of jazz. IM ponders this in the epilogue, reflecting, “...I do not know whether accepting this lesson has placed me in the rear or the *avant-garde*” (572). Historically, the *avant-garde* would place him on the cutting edge and allow for total individual and musical freedom. Within *avant-garde*, the seeming chaos of notes finds some constraint within a loose and more ambiguous pattern. IM relays:

In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals. Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out. I must emerge. And there’s still a conflict within me [...] [w]ith Louis Armstrong... (580-581)

The conflict for IM is that the standard groove of the traditional system in which he attempts to operate – jazz for continuity of the analogy – has been paradoxically *comfortably uncomfortable*. He desires to be different and to elicit different responses as evidence of his life; however, the format in which he has to work does not allow for total resolution of that conflict. Invisibility has afforded IM “a slightly different sense of time [...] never quite on the beat...[s]ometimes [...] ahead and sometimes behind” (8). Past experiences have spotlighted IM behind the beat. His new resolve, perhaps inspired by the freedom of *avant-garde* jazz, is to leave the old (Armstrong) behind. IM gives no definitive response to the dilemma between the standard and the *avant-garde*, indicative of the unresolved disdain Ellison felt “for the nominal conjoining of the concepts in the term and practice of ‘free jazz’” (Bell 23).

For Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, jazz is a conscious and continuous thread, symbolic of the transition of ideas and goals for the African American community. In Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, however, the use of jazz and the comparative elements of free or *avant-garde* jazz, while not as overtly clear and conscious as *Invisible Man*,

symbolizes Bigger Thomas’ rejection of the standards for African American men and their assertion of identity and align with the controlled chaos of the freer forms of jazz. A radical offshoot of standard, bebop, bop, and hard bop jazz, *avant-garde* or free jazz breaks free from the traditional structural constraints of jazz. According to John Litweiler, author of *The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958*, free jazz works in opposition to standard jazz by breaking down the traditional conventions of the music form, discarding the fixed chords and changes, and manipulating the meter by incorporating a “general pulsation and swing without regular meter” (158). Where standard jazz works from the premise of a formulaic construct, free jazz abandons not only the rhythmic but the melodic components, as well. Free jazz works directly from the theory of collaborative improvisation. According to Bell, “[i]n free jazz [...] [the] implication is jettisoned in favor of the contradictory and dissonant work of sonic research pursued by musical thinkers freeing themselves of the premodern imperatives of meaning, valuation, and denotation [...] free[ing] themselves of all critical and commercial visibility” (23). Because compositions of this genre begin with a very loose form composed of instrumental contributions of varying meter, sound, and rhythm, free jazz allows a sense of musical independence that embraces the instrumental individuality of the players. As each musician seeks to exert a sense of musical freedom, the cacophony of sounds creates a veil of invisibility for the individual; however, in this, a greater sense of visibility for the collective group is revealed. An additional result of this improvisational effort is that that which is initially perceived to be atonal and discordant somehow takes shape and form, creating chaotic harmony. “This esthetic risk, a symphonic formalizing of abyss, an arranging of tonally incongruous information and harmonic discontinuity [...] in the material shapes of dissonant chordal voicings, stumbling or absent time signatures, and syncopated notational accents, is a reverberation of contingency and finitude inherited from elsewhere” (Bell 21-22). The “elsewhere” to which Bell refers can be the grounding force in free jazz. While standard jazz is the hybridization of African and European tones and meters, according to Eileen Southern, author of *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, free jazz works from the premise of a more native origin, seeking to remove many of the constraints of the European structure by relying more heavily on the atonality of the non-Western music of Africa, Arabia, and India (496-497). By rejecting the European influences present in structured, fundamental jazz, the musician embraces the freedom present in the atonality and informality in the approach to music. It is, in essence, renouncing the European to embrace the African.

Those musicians and theorists critical of free jazz often focus on the lack of form as a lack of musical integrity and discipline. As Ellison stood on the sidelines of the *avant-garde* jazz movement, many of his critical essays stand in opposition to free jazz, viewing it “as ‘chaotic,’ and even pathological, developments in American improvisational music [...] constitut[ing] the abjection of ‘form,’ and diminution

of feeling, a mere posture of detachment and false intellectualism" (Bell 23-24). It is Richard Wright, however, who posits himself as a supporter of this freedom of thought in musical expression. In addition to Wright's embrace of a more radical political, personal, and literary ideology, his time in France – where the first guitar recording of avant-garde jazz is claimed to have occurred – may have had an impact on the disordered construct of Bigger Thomas' life in Wright's most controversial novel *Native Son*.

The novel begins with an auditory overload of sounds that symbolizes the main character Bigger Thomas' chaotic, unstructured, and frenzied life. Wright opens the novel, writing, "Brrrrrrrrrrriiiiiinnngggggg! An alarm clock clanged in the dark and silent room. A bedspring creaked. A woman's voice sang out impatiently ...[a] surly grunt sounded above the tinny ring of metal. Naked feet swished dryly across the planks in the wooden floor and the clang ceased abruptly" (3). Bigger's life is seen in the discordant sounds that create an odd cacophony of music. There is no steady rhythm to the day, to his existence; however, the sounds of his life are intentional and together work to loosely manipulate and create form and structure to his life. Additionally, in Wright's immediate appeal to the reader's auditory senses, he creates a beat for Bigger's life that is dissonant, noisy, and that makes the reader slightly uncomfortable.

As with early jazz musicians who stood on the cusp of a changing and evolving musical art form, Bigger stands at the crossroads of either adopting the standard that has distantly been set for him, or rejecting that for an adoption of that which juxtaposes itself to those ideals. Early on in the novel, Bigger is conflicted. He hangs with a group of delinquents. He hates his family. His future is bleak, and the only option is accepting a job that seeks to strip him of any chance of manhood, freedom, and individuality. As the driver for the Daltons, Bigger has slipped into an invisibility that has been predetermined for him and many other black men like him. His job as driver, forces him into a duplicitous identity – one that caters to the white notions of "safe" black men, and the other that is atonally and discordantly his and his alone. In the presence of the Daltons, Bigger finds himself adopting the affected speech accepted by whites and seen as a sign of their own superiority. When addressing the Daltons, Bigger says "yessum" and finds himself disgusted at the noticeable shift in speech. Analogous to jazz, Bigger does not want to embrace the standard, but finds it almost involuntary. Such an immediate notice of this standard that has been ingrained in him contrasts with the chaotic and free rhythm of his own existence and place Bigger in the position of choosing which school of jazz – or thought – he will embrace as he asserts his identity.

What Bigger finds at every turn leading up to the murder of Mary is that society has embraced and come to expect a standard that he has no desire to adopt. While Mary and her Communist boyfriend Jan are supposed to be radical, open-minded thinkers, they not only place Bigger in the uncomfortable and dangerous

scenario of a more intimate working relationship with them, but also place him in the situation of having to adhere to a standard that stands in contrast to the intellectualism they purport to embody. As Jan and Mary carry on about their desires to connect with and support the black race, they seamlessly drift into stereotyped and caricatured notions of blackness and black musicality. Mary reflects on the major contributions that could be had with blacks in the Communist Party and exclaims, "They have so much emotion! What a people! [...] And their songs – the spirituals! Aren't they marvelous? Say, Bigger, can you sing? [...] Aw, Bigger...[c]ome on, Bigger, and help us sing ["Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"]" (77). Like the intrusion of whites on the early Bebop scene, the black jazz contribution serves only as the background ambient music of the white majority. The commercialized version of blackness can be likened to the early years of Armstrong where his clowning and insistent appeal to the white audiences and critics allowed him access to them and allowed them access to black culture.

Bigger wants no part of this standard life. His resentment turns to boiling anger. This anger, once coupled with a standard fear for the black man – being alone with a white woman – only forces Bigger to react impulsively. This impulse, in aligning itself with the analogy of jazz within the context of the novel, is most clearly symbolized by the accidental overkill of Mary. As the novice player embarks on a form that truly allows freedom and independence from the constraints of chord and meter, there is a tendency to either do too much or too little. Bigger's fear forces him to attack the beat of the free jazz composition and inadvertently kill his opportunity for free expression. Bigger has fallen into a role that has already been the standard deviant identity for black men. He has touched freedom of expression, but with nervous and slippery fingers lets it stray from his grasp.

This loss, however, turns itself into something much greater for Bigger. Much like the manner in which he "lost" himself in movies, newspapers, or magazines, the loss in the frenzy and freedom of his life is made more apparent after the murder of Mary. Instead of shrinking back in horror at the dismemberment and mutilation of Mary, Bigger finds a part of himself and opts to assert that new self throughout the remainder of the novel. He remarks that he had to "lose himself [...]" so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black" (240). It is not to say that in what Ellison would deem as the pathological notion of free jazz that Bigger has found his true murderous self. Instead, what Bigger finds is the spark of asserted individuality from the point after he murders Mary. Mary's murder is involuntary. When Bigger kills his girlfriend Bessie, he has now *chosen* to totally abandon the life set as the standard for the black man. Paradoxically, however, he also aligns himself with another standard – that of the black brute and criminal. Thus a true sense of a free or avant-garde life eludes Bigger. As he flees through the city, he is assaulted with sounds of both the standard and the avant-garde. Bigger hears "[t]he throb puls[ing] on, insistent

and [...] hundreds of black men and women, beating drums with their fingers [...] his heart pounding, his ears filled with the sound of singing, and shouting" (253). The native African sounds of black men and women drumming are symbolic of the removal of European musical constraints and an adoption of the African musical tradition. Additionally, as Bigger remains in hiding, he faintly overhears the music of "surrender" and "resignation" in the traditional African American hymn "Steal Away." Those parts of free jazz that are most fundamental to the school and thought are the sounds that Bigger hears before his ultimate capture and imprisonment. As the authorities close in on him, he hears a siren sounding, "throbs of motors, shouts [...] from the streets, [...] screams of women and curses of men [...] footsteps on the stairs [...] a medley of crashing sounds [...]" (257). Even at the conclusion of Bigger's life as a "free" man, the reader is presented with that same dissonant, noisy, and unsettling rhythm of his life.

For both IM and Bigger Thomas, the desire to assert one's own sense of freedom and individuality serve as primary and necessary components of life. As each character works to find a vehicle of expression, they must contend with a world and a force that oftentimes stands in opposition to that very innate desire. In Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, he writes:

It is when we seek to express ourselves that the paradoxical cleavage in our lives shows most [...] [a]lone together with our black folk [...], we play our guitars, trumpets, and pianos, beating out rough and infectious rhythms that create an instant appeal among all classes of people. Why is our music so contagious? Why is it that those who deny us are willing to sing our songs? Perhaps it is because so many [...] feel deep down just as we feel. Our big brass horns, our huge noisy drums and whirring violins make a flood of melodies whose poignancy is heightened by our latent fear and uneasiness, by our love of the sensual, and by our feverish hunger for life. (127-128)

It is through the rhythms of jazz, however, that one is most apt to isolate and identify that hunger for life, expression, and true freedom that both Ellison and Wright portray through the lives of *Invisible Man* and Bigger Thomas. Though each stands in uncertainty about which form of musical expression best symbolizes their lives, the reader walks away very clear in the notion that authentic and individual expression are essential to having a life of worth. While Ellison may see the avant-garde as a potential pathology in music, perhaps Wright counters that the true pathology lies in the society that disables and prevents its members from freedom of expression.

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