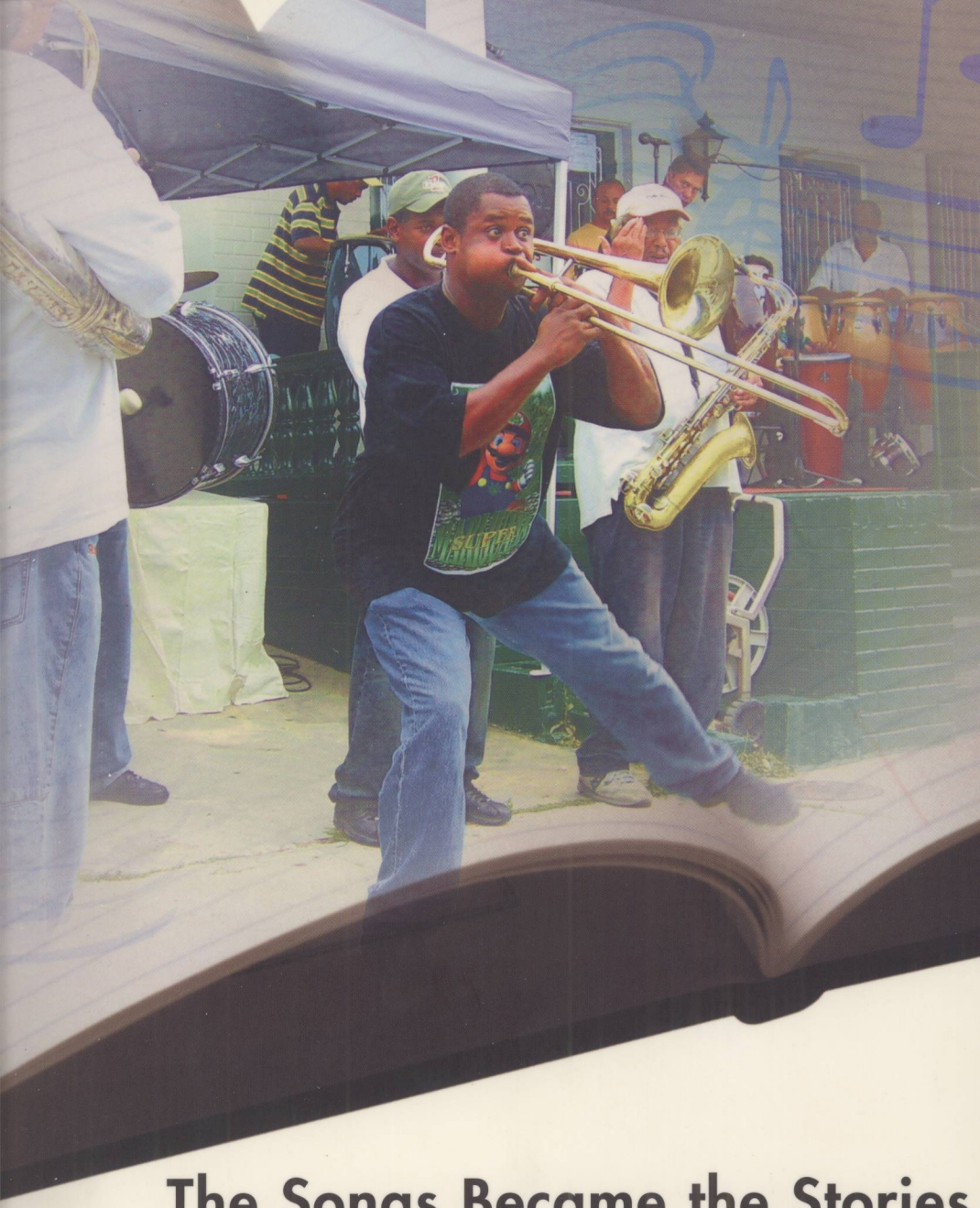


The Songs Became the Stories

The Music in African-American Fiction 1970–2005

Robert H. Cataliotti

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PETER LANG
New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt am Main • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cataliotti, Robert H.
The songs became the stories: the music in African-American fiction, 1970–2005 / Robert H. Cataliotti.
p. cm. — (African-American literature and culture; v. 14)
Continues: The music in African American fiction, 1995.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. American fiction—African American authors—History and criticism. 2. African Americans—Songs and music—History and criticism. 3. Music in literature. 4. African Americans—Intellectual life. 5. African Americans—Race identity. 6. African Americans in literature. I. Title.
PS374.N4C39 813'.5409357808996073—dc22 2006101458
ISBN 978-0-8204-8850-9
ISSN 1528-3887

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Bibliothek**.
Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the "Deutsche Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at http://dnb.ddb.de/.

Cover design by Joshua Hanson

Cover photo: "Young Rascals Brass Band at the Backstreet Museum, New Orleans, July 2006," courtesy of Ann Cobb

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council of Library Resources.



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29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006
www.peterlang.com

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Printed in the United States of America

Preface:
"The Opener":
The Tradition of Representing Music in African-American Literature

"In my mind, the way I play, I try not to be a repeater pencil. You dig?"

Lester Young

The tenor saxophonist Lester "Pres" Young was one of the most innovative and influential improvisers to advance the jazz tradition. His articulation of the musical philosophy that he tries "not to be a repeater pencil" when he plays is emblematic of his dedication to the spontaneous creativity and originality that are the cornerstones of jazz, the most sophisticated form of African-American musical expression. Young even applied his improvisational creativity to the language that he spoke, and he is credited with coining numerous hipster terms—such as the use of "dig" to signify "understand," "cool" to indicate approval, and "bread" to denote "money."[1] His distinctive sound on his horn often evoked the cry of the human voice, and in his solos Young always placed a premium on telling a story. The intersection of music making and language is testified to in the saxophonist's unique, metaphorical construction that casts his trademark stance with his sideways-held tenor saxophone as a "pencil" that enables him to tell his stories. Young's impulse to imbue his musical expression with linguistic qualities mirrors the impulse of many African-American writers to imbue their written expression with musical qualities. In his poem "Pres Spoke in a Language" (1979), Amiri Baraka is drawn to the nexus of music and language represented by Young's artistry because he "had a language / and a life, like, / all his own" (262). This jazzman, who lived "in the teeming whole of us," inspires the poem's persona with his dedication to improvisational individuality within the communal context of the jazz tradition. Like many other writers throughout

the development of the African-American literary tradition, Baraka represents the black musician as a creative role model and communal spokesperson.

"The Songs Became The Stories": The Music in African-American Fiction, 1970–2005 continues the examination of the tradition of representing music in fiction, which began in *The Music in African-American Fiction* (1995). The initial study traces the manner in which black music and musicians have been represented in the fiction produced by African-American writers from the antebellum years through the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Throughout the development of African-American literature, there consistently have been black writers who looked to African-American music for subject matter, modes of exploring thematic concerns, and artistic paradigms. The juxtaposition of two diverse representations of music—Frederick Douglass describing the impact of hearing spirituals on an antebellum Maryland plantation and Amiri Baraka contemplating the sound of jazz in a Newark prison during a 1960s urban uprising—bear witness to the profound and extensive influence African-American music has had on black writers.

A foundational text in the African-American literary tradition, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845), delineates the development of a revolutionary consciousness. Douglass narrates his transition from a beastlike drudge devoid of self-awareness or identity to a self-reliant individual, master rhetorician and activist dedicated to communal liberation. He asserts that the initial spark in this development came from hearing the music created by his fellow African-Americans in bondage: "To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception" (263). He admits that this understanding was not necessarily literal but often came on a visceral, spiritual level from somewhere in the sound: "The thought came out—if not in the word, in the sound; —and as frequently in the one as in the other" (262). The message, however, was crystal clear: "Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains" (263). African-American music provides Douglass with the "first glimmering conception" to resist oppression, to elevate himself and his people, and he demonstrates the profundity of what is revealed in the music as he writes his narrative: "The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek" (263).

The testimony that Douglass heard in every tone of the music continued to ring true for black writers into the late twentieth century. Baraka's poem

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"AM/TRAK" (1979), a paean to the late jazz saxophonist and composer John Coltrane, is a biographical collage that identifies Coltrane's musical experiences and creative achievements as essential milestones and sources of revolutionary inspiration in the movement from racial oppression toward freedom. In the last section of the poem, the narrative persona shifts the focus from Coltrane's life to Baraka's own autobiography. He asserts that while he was in solitary confinement in July 1967 he learned of Coltrane's death: "Tanks rolling thru Newark / & whistled all I knew of Trane / my knowledge heartbeat." The final lines of the poem seem to take place at some point following his release from prison, and the persona asserts that listening to Coltrane's *Meditations* album, "told me what to do" (272). The music of Coltrane leads Baraka down freedom's track. The poignancy of Coltrane's music, which the persona describes as "my knowledge heartbeat," has an impact on both an intellectual and a spiritual level. It infuses him with vitality and provides him with a purpose; he knows he must "organize" in order to subvert oppression and maintain the movement toward individual and communal freedom.

What is striking about the juxtaposition of these texts, which are far removed from each other in terms of historical context and genre, is that in each one the impulse to resist oppression is found in the *sound* of African-American music, and that impulse is acted upon through the construction of a written testimony. Yet, the power both Douglass and Baraka locate in African-American music should not be surprising because of the integral role it has played in the history and culture of black people in America. The music and other forms of folk expression that enslaved Africans forged in America were both artistic and functional. Reasons for producing these expressive forms went beyond creative expression and entertainment. Music and other folk forms that developed were also aimed at physical and psychic survival. Field hollers and work songs provided timing for unrelenting tasks and relieved the drudgery of forced labor. The cosmology of the spirituals provided hope and drive to "keep on keepin' on" with the promise of deliverance from oppression in *this* world. Communal performances built group solidarity and allowed for both praise and censure of individuals. The insider codes and double entendres of lyrics and tales enabled communication and organization, despite the imposition of rigid restrictions, and ultimately were tools of subversion and resistance used for the attainment of freedom.[2]

Stolen from their homeland, enslaved Africans attempted to sustain a connection to their identity and culture through music and other oral forms

that were carried with them and adapted to the foreign, brutal and violent environment in which they found themselves. The expressive forms they developed were survival mechanisms, tools of resistance, and testimonies to their impulse to be free. They were rebuttals to the attempts by their enslavers to erase the humanity of these African people, and they functioned as powerful touchstones of racial identity. Certainly "African" culture was not monolithic, but these newly formed communities of enslaved men and women of various regional and tribal backgrounds quickly recognized common expressive elements that were re-membered, revised and reconstructed to for the foundation of African-American oral tradition. Three of these retentions that are essential building blocks in the evolution of this tradition are call and response, improvisation and sophisticated rhythmic sensibility.

The call and response performance pattern is present throughout the African-American oral tradition, from the earliest expressive forms, such as spirituals and work songs, to the musical dialogues between a gospel singer and a choir or a jazz soloist and a horn section; from the interaction of a guitarist and harmonica player in a blues duo to the interplay between a hip-hop emcee and a deejay. Call and response, however, is more than just a performance pattern in the African-American oral tradition; it defines a relationship between the artist and the community, an individual/communal duality that places the artist in a representative role. Improvisation is an approach to performance that focuses on the artist's ability to create spontaneously. Unlike literary traditions where the emphasis is often placed on the performance of an authoritative version of a given text, in an oral tradition a premium is placed upon the artist's ability to display a mastery of form and technique *and* interact with other performers and the audience. The basic text in an oral tradition, whether it is a song or a story or a sermon, provides performers with an opportunity to fashion something uniquely their own within a communal context. Rhythm is often the dominant element in many forms of African music, and it is fashioned with remarkable sophistication. Techniques such as a dominant pulse beat, polyrhythms and syncopation provide a propulsive, infectious underpinning to these forms and a link to an ineffable, life-affirming spiritual essence that is found at the source of African-based creative expressions. Of course, the recognition and fear of this spiritual power expressed through rhythm is one of the reasons that slave masters banned drums. The melding of these retentions with Eurocentric elements, such as song forms, lyrical content, melodies, sophisticated harmonic sensibilities

and, eventually, European instruments and instrumental techniques resulted in the formation of distinctively *African-American* musical expressions.

Slave masters, especially in the original thirteen colonies, attempted to disrupt cohesion and loyalty among slave populations by bringing together Africans of different tribal and regional backgrounds. One result of this strategy was that it led Africans who spoke different dialects or languages to employ the language of the masters to facilitate communication. Enslaved Africans, who primarily came from an oral tradition, soon recognized the power that Europeans wielded with the written word. The acquisition of literacy, like their drums that could also function as effective communicators, was denied, and the ability to read and write became a tool with which African-Americans testified to their desire to be free. Many of the initial efforts produced by black writers were modeled on European forms; the sermons, petitions, poems, and narratives they wrote reflected the same styles and standards employed by white writers. Yet, African-American writers developed a number of antislavery rhetorical strategies. The physical neglect and brutality of slavery, the hypocrisy of American democracy and Christianity, the violation of the family, the dehumanization of the masters were incorporated with remarkable variation into their texts. They also signaled that their ability to produce these texts testified to their intellectual ability and essential humanity. Ultimately, this awareness of and response to each other provided the basis for the African-American literary tradition.[3]

While early African-American writers may have had to labor under white editorial control and tailor their texts to both fulfill the expectations and avoid offending the sensibilities of white readers, they developed literary strategies to assert their independence and construct identities as black men and women.[4] The incorporation of elements drawn from the African-American oral tradition into their texts was one of the strategies employed by a number of writers to stake out a black literary territory. In addition to providing verisimilitude for their texts, perhaps the representation of the music and other forms that emerged from the African-American oral tradition, such as trickster tales or the sound and cadences of black speech rendered in dialect, was appealing to black writers because these folk idioms, which were linked directly to an African heritage and forged almost completely inside their own culture, were emblematic of a distinctive black American identity. Early African-American music, particularly the spirituals, was the most vibrant and inventive expressive form to emerge from black folk culture. This cultural production

that testified to the African-American people's sorrow and triumph, their wit and determination, their history and future, their essential humanity, belonged to them alone and was undoubtedly a source of cultural pride and an artistic inspiration for many African-American writers. In addition to Douglass, the representation of music was incorporated into the slave narratives of a number of nineteenth-century authors, including William Wells Brown (1847), Henry Bibb (1849), Solomon Northup (1853) and Harriet Jacobs (1861).

Representations of music and musicians in the African-American literary tradition can be found in drama and poetry; however, these imaginative genres are amenable to the influence of orality, particularly musical elements and techniques. Creating fiction that bridges the oral and literary traditions was a crucial challenge for African-American writers, and the representation of music is one of the strategies that was employed to forge a distinctly black literary voice. Following an examination of slave narratives, *The Music in African-American Fiction* begins its historical overview of the representation of music with the first novel written by an African-American, William Wells Brown's *Clotel; Or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853). The tradition of representing music in fiction which began with *Clotel* was continued by such pioneering writers as Martin Delany in *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1861–62); Pauline E. Hopkins in *Contending Forces* (1900) and *Of One Blood Or, the Hidden Self* (1902–03). James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) is permeated with the representation of music and paved the way for a number of texts produced by writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance: Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929); Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930); and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). New levels of complexity and resonance in the representation of music in fiction were attained in such landmark texts as: Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1939) and *Native Son* (1940); Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and "Solo on the Drums" (1947); James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" (1948); and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). During the 1960s, this tradition was extended with William Melvin Kelley's *A Drop of Patience* (1965); Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966); and texts associated with the Black Arts Movement: Amiri Baraka's "The Screamers" (1963); and Henry Dumas's "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" (1966).

Over one hundred years after Brown's groundbreaking introduction of the representation of music in *Clotel*, the music had a profound influence on

the Black Arts Movement's articulation of an artistic agenda that gave voice to the politics of Black Power.[5] In the essay, "The Black Arts Movement" (1968), Larry Neal asserts that the movement "envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of black America" (62). Neal calls for art that is informed by a revolutionary, nationalistic consciousness through the formulation of a "black aesthetic": "In order to perform this task the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology. The Black Arts and Black Power concepts both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood" (62). Neal and his colleagues were not interested in converting or reforming whites through protest literature; they wanted to produce literature that would have relevance and an immediacy that "speaks directly to black people" (63). The music that emanated from the African-American cultural tradition provided them with a trenchant paradigm. In his essay, "And Shine Swam On," which appeared as the Afterword to *Black Fire* (1968), Neal calls for black literature to emulate the music's ability to operate "at the core of our lives, forcing itself upon us as in a ritual":

> What this has all been leading us to say is that the poet must become a performer, the way James Brown is a performer—loud, gaudy, racy. He must take his work where his people are: Harlem, Watts, Philadelphia, Chicago, and the rural South. He must learn to embellish the context in which the work is executed; and where possible, link the work to all usable aspects of the music. For the context of the work is as important as the work itself. Poets must learn to sing, dance and chant their works, tearing into the substance of their individual people to a deeper understanding of what this thing is all about, be a kind of priest, a black magician, working juju with the word of the world. (655)

Clearly, the call and response, the improvisation and the rhythmic energy that provide the foundation for African-American music provide building blocks that can enable the black writer to bring literature to the people. This attraction to the music provides insight into why the Black Arts Movement's emphasis was on poetry and drama, genres conducive to public performance.

The predominance of the Black Arts Movement's agenda diminished with the waning of the demonstrative political and cultural turmoil and protest of the 1960s. The focus of the literature shifted from the direct immediacy of the "taking it to the streets," public performance emphasis of Black Arts Movement poetry and drama to the more introspective genre of fiction. The lessons of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements had not been lost, and although the

political and cultural dictums of the Black Arts Movement became creatively restrictive, the revolution in consciousness propagated by its participants provided the writers of the succeeding generation with myriad possibilities for their explorations of the black experience in America. The last three decades of the twentieth century saw a tremendous outpouring of creativity and innovation in African-American fiction, and, like the lineage of their predecessors reaching back to the beginning of the literary tradition, this next generation of writers looked to the oral tradition, especially the music, for inspiration. Post-Black Arts Movement writers have consistently created a nexus between fiction and music, like the gospel singer in John Edgar Wideman's story "The Songs of Reba Love Jackson." (1981), who 'put her stories in the songs she had heard all her life so the songs became the stories" (104).[6] *"The Songs Became The Stories": The Music in African-American Fiction, 1970–2005* examines the tradition of "representing" music and musicians in post-Black Arts Movement fiction in terms of how black writers have improvised upon and extended these representations and incorporated them into their stories. The analysis also probes how the representation of music and musicians in black fiction has continued to be constructed as *representative* of the sensibilities of African-Americans and has provided paradigms for the artistic productions of black writers in the formulation of an African-American literary tradition. Finally, the representation of music in post-Black Arts Movement fiction is examined in terms of the unique impact African-Americans and their music have on American culture and the definition of a national identity.

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Acknowledgments

This project would never have come to fruition without the support, consultation, and editing of Ann Cobb. Her efforts were above and beyond the call of duty; I thank her from the bottom of my heart. I must acknowledge the contributions of William J. Harris, Stacey Olster and the late Gerald B. Nelson to the successful completion of my dissertation, which ultimately became *The Music in African-American Fiction*. This book was originally conceived as the second half of that dissertation, and I thank them for helping shape the conception of the sequel. The work I did in preparing the text and accompanying compact disc for *Call & Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African-American Literary Tradition* significantly contributed to my understanding of the connections between African-American music and literature, and I thank Patricia Hill and her editors for providing me with that opportunity. The subsequent work I did in producing and annotating the Smithsonian Folkways compact disc, *Every Tone A Testimony* provided me with crucial background material and insights when I was writing these essays. I thank the Folkways staff, past and present, for their support and cooperation, especially Mary Monseur, Tony Seeger, Jeff Place, Pete Reiniger, Atesh Sonneborn, Dan Sheehy and Stephanie Smith. My colleagues in the Department of Humanities and Media at Coppin State University were the source of valuable feedback as I read drafts of these chapters at seminars over the years. I appreciate their patience and interest.

A debt of gratitude is owed to my friends and fellow music lovers/experts, including Terrence Kelsey (and his *Song Journey*), Rob McLerran, Peter Fassoulis, Spencer Bohren, Washboard Chaz Leary, Don DeBacker, Shannon Powell, Leroy Jones, Paula Rangell, Gerard "The Guvna" Rigney (WWOZ, New Orleans), Jamie Dell'Appa, Ken "Snakebite" Jacobs, Doug Sutherland, Sal Fallica, Paul Gass, David Scott, John Magnie, and the late Anthony Iglio. I must also express heartfelt appreciation to the musicians who agreed to participate in the interviews from which many of the quotes included in this book were taken: Randy Weston, Charles Neville, the late George "Big Nick" Nicholas, the late Earl King, Abbey Lincoln, Sonny Rollins and Wynton Marsalis. Finally, I would like to thank Carlyle Van Thompson for taking an interest in and ultimately deciding to publish this book.

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I
"What Good Is A Liturgy Without A Text?"

"they ban your
oom boom ba boom
you in deep deep
trouble"

from "Wise 1" by Amiri Baraka

"Tipitina-oona-molla-walla-golla-tra-ma-tra-la-lal-la."

from "Tipitina" by Professor Longhair

"I try to show that it's not a matter of going to music school and learning notes—how in Africa they have music for funerals, for marriages and for healing, and how we, the descendants of Africa, 440 years later, still maintain the same basic things in our music: the call and response, the improvisation, the tremendous emphasis on rhythm, the whole respect of the ancestors."

Randy Weston

"Kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe."

from a Georgia Sea Island Flying African Tale

"We sing these old songs because we made our daddy a promise. He tell us that one of these days he gonna leave us, but though he leave us he still be with us as long as we keep these old songs up. We promise him, long as we live, we sisters and brothers, we will remain singing these songs."

Mrs. Janie Hunter

"Everybody understands what I mean when I sing something like this here:
Oooooooohhhh-uhh-Whhooooooo Yeah Oooohh-whoooo
That's what I'm talkin' about when I sing the blues."

from "I Chose to Sing the Blues" by Ray Charles

1. "Synthesizing the HooDoo of VooDoo": The Music as [Dis]embodied Hero in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*

"*I wish someone would tell me what diddie wa diddie means.*"
from "Diddie Wa Diddie" by Blind Blake

A strikingly innovative example of a contemporary writer improvising on the established tropes of representing music in African-American fiction, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) spans the history of African-derived artistic sensibility in a kind of whirlwind post-modern jazz solo. *Mumbo Jumbo*[1] is a multi-voiced testimony to the existence and vitality of an African-American literary tradition, which emerged from an oral tradition extending back to the roots of civilization in Africa. Like a Mardi Gras parade composed of African-American musicians and writers, references to or appearances by William Wells Brown, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Arna Bontemps, the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, Scott Joplin, W. C. Handy, Jelly Roll Morton, Ethel Waters, Bessie Smith, Fats Waller, Clarence Williams, Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Mahalia Jackson, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Otis Redding, march through Reed's text.[2]

Mumbo Jumbo opens with the outbreak of the "Jes Grew" epidemic in New Orleans. The mayor has been summoned to the Saint Louis Cathedral, which has been converted into an infirmary to quarantine Jes Grew victims. The head physician attempts to explain the gravity of the situation to the mayor: "Don't you understand, if this Jes Grew becomes pandemic it will mean the end of Civilization As We Know It?" (4). And that "end" is just what Reed is after; *Mumbo Jumbo* is about subverting Eurocentric, white male dominated, Western culture. It's about illustrating that there is and always has been an African-American cultural tradition (in fact, that there are a multiplicity of cultural traditions) that reaches back through the

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