

Jazz as a Black American Art Form: Definitions of the Jazz Preservation Act

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Jazz music and culture have experienced a surge in popularity after the passage of the Jazz Preservation Act (JPA) in 1987. This resolution defined jazz as a black American art form, thus using race, national identity, and cultural value as key aspects in making jazz one of the nation's most subsidized arts. Led by new cultural institutions and educational programs, millions of Americans have engaged with the history and canon of jazz that represent the values endorsed by the JPA. Record companies, book publishers, archivists, academia, and private foundations have also contributed to the effort to preserve jazz music and history. Such preservation has not always been a simple process, especially in identifying jazz with black culture and with America as a whole. This has required a careful balancing of social and musical aspects of jazz. For instance, many consider two of the most important aspects of jazz to be the blues aesthetic, which inevitably expresses racist oppression in America, and the democratic ethic, wherein each musician's individual expression equally contributes to the whole. Balanced explanations of race and nationality are useful not only for musicologists, but also for musicians and teachers wishing to use jazz as an example of both national achievement and confrontation with racism. Another important aspect of the JPA is the definition of jazz as a "high" art. While there remains a vocal contingent of critics arguing against the JPA's definitions of jazz, such results will not likely see many calling for an end to its programs, but rather a more open interpretation of what it means to be America's music.

On 13 June 1993, President Bill Clinton addressed a crowd at the White House that included, among the usual dignitaries, some of the most famous names in jazz. Clark Terry, Wynton Marsalis, Illinois Jacquet, Dorothy Donegan, Herbie Hancock, John Lewis, Rosemary Clooney, and Joe Williams were among the guests invited to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Newport Jazz Festival.¹ In his scripted remarks, President Clinton eulogized the role of jazz in American culture, alluding both to the contributions of black musicians and to the international position of jazz:

It's especially important that we should be together here in America's house to celebrate that most American of all forms of musical expression, jazz. Jazz is really

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¹ George Wein and Nate Chinen, *Myself among Others: A life in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2003), 494.

America's classical music. Like the country itself, and especially like the people who created it, jazz is a music born of struggle but played in celebration.²

Neither the occasion nor the language used by President Clinton was entirely unique. There had previously been several celebrations for jazz at the White House, including President Nixon's seventieth birthday celebration for Duke Ellington in 1969 and President Carter's commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Newport Jazz Festival in 1978.³ What was different about this occasion was that the White House crowd was also celebrating what one newspaper reviewer called "America's recently rekindled love affair with its own music, jazz."⁴

The renewed affections resulted from the passage of the Jazz Preservation Act (JPA) in 1987, which has since had a notable impact on American foreign and cultural policy, education, and media industries.⁵ The JPA was a government mandate to preserve a history and canon that it defined, primarily, through a wide variety of publicly supported jazz performances, historical studies, and educational initiatives. As with President Clinton's remarks above, the JPA identified jazz as a black American art form. Sponsored by John Conyers Jr., a Democratic representative from Detroit and leading member of the Congressional Black Caucus, the resolution received support from both parties, and there was little debate. In his comments to the House concerning the resolution, Conyers remarked,

I want to tell the Members that if my life in the Congress could follow the ease with which I gathered signatures for this measure, I could make some revolutionary progress in the struggles around issues on which I work so hard, but this was truly a bipartisan endeavor.⁶

There were no dissenters in the House vote in September, or the Senate vote in December.

Conyers's success was partially due to contemporary developments both in the jazz industry and in federal bodies such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Although faced with a proposed budget cut of 50 percent by President Reagan in 1981, the NEA emerged under chairman Frank Hodsoll as an advocate for "projects that advance the art forms or bring a diversity of

² Howard Reich, "Jazz at the White House: Newport stars, the Clintons and WTTW Celebrate America's Music", *Chicago Tribune*, 12 Sept. 1993, 3.

³ Amy Lee, 'Jazz at the White House', *Christian Science Monitor*, 7 June 1988, 34; Duke Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress* (New York: Da Capo, 1973), 424–33. For the 1978 celebration see Wein and Chinen, 414–19.

⁴ Reich, 3.

⁵ H. R. 57, 100th Congress (1987).

⁶ 100th Cong. Rec. 24933 (1987).

art to a broader audience.”⁷ The pre-1970s styles of jazz fit perfectly into this rubric, as they appealed across a wide spectrum, could be played in a concert setting, had enormous potential for education, and had an important and underrepresented historical value, especially for African Americans. If concentrating primarily on these older styles was too conservative for some in the jazz community, it was a relief for the NEA, which had been continuously embroiled by debates about using public funds to support inaccessible, avant-garde art.⁸ The NEA started the Jazz Masters fellowships in 1982, with the first three awards given to giants of the jazz canon: Roy Eldridge, Dizzy Gillespie, and Sun Ra.⁹ This program was the first significant national award for jazz and a culmination of the efforts of several important jazz advocates who worked either for the NEA or for the National Council on the Arts (NCA). Among these were Duke Ellington (1968–74), Billy Taylor (1972–78), and David Baker (1987–94) in the NCA and A. B. Spellman in the NEA (1975–2005). Spellman was instrumental in creating the Jazz Masters fellowships, and remembered,

In 1975 when I came here ... most of the arts establishments simply would not touch [jazz] ... On the National Council on the Arts the attitude, unfortunately, was the same. Billy Taylor and I had many heated arguments with council members about giving some parity to jazz with classical music in the guidelines of the Arts Endowment. David Baker had many arguments with several council members, including, of course, the late pianist and cultural critic Sam Lipman, again about jazz as a fine arts form. And, of course, David was able to change Sam’s point of view.¹⁰

As Spellman made clear, the definition of jazz was integral to its role in federal funding schemes such as the NEA. Being recognized as a fine art allowed jazz to adopt the approach of classical music institutions while focusing on black American contributions that had long been ignored by funding bodies. Race was not explicitly stated in the aims of the Jazz Masters fellowships, but arranger Gil Evans, popularly known for his work with

⁷ Frank Hodson, “Supporting the Arts in the Eighties: The View from the National Endowment for the Arts,” *Annals of the American Society of Political and Social Science*, 471 (1984), 84–88. See also Douglas P. Starr, “Private and Government Sources: Funding the Arts,” *Music Educators Journal*, 69, 8 (1983), 43–45, 43; Claiborne deB. Pell, “Federal Support for the Arts Has a Future,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 471 (1984), 102–6, 103.

⁸ See Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds., *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965–2008* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts), 2009.

⁹ NEA, “NEA Jazz Masters,” available at <http://www.nea.gov/national/jazz/index.html>, visited 3 March 2008.

¹⁰ Bauerlein and Grantham, 50.

Miles Davis, was the sole white recipient during its first twelve years, amongst thirty-six of his black colleagues.

Complementing developments in favor of jazz in the NEA was the emergence of a group of musicians commonly dubbed the “Young Lions” after their appearance under that title in Carnegie Hall in July of 1982. Leading this group of new stars was trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, at the time a twenty-one-year-old sideman of legendary drummer and band leader Art Blakey. Marsalis was immensely talented as well as articulately outspoken about “real” jazz, representing a far more politically acceptable return to the musical and sartorial styles of the 1950s and 1960s and publicly shunning the contemporary pop-rock-fusion vogue in jazz exemplified by Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock.¹¹ Consequently, what the Young Lions presented to jazz advocates like John Conyers Jr. was a group of talented musicians able to embody, and therefore to “preserve,” their social and musical history of jazz in America. Conyers recognized Marsalis’s potential to promote the vision of the JPA, and so the day after the resolution passed, Conyers and the Congressional Black Caucus invited Marsalis to lead their celebrations by hosting a panel on jazz.¹²

If the Jazz Preservation Act’s definition of jazz as a black American art form was conceptually influenced by its predecessors, it was also necessarily rooted in the practicalities of its goals. The first half of the JPA’s text defined jazz and its contribution to America, but the second half was centered on the proclamation that “it is the sense of the Congress that Jazz is hereby designated as a rare and valuable national American treasure to which we should devote our attention, support, and resources to make certain it is preserved, understood, and promulgated.”¹³ One of the primary ways in which Congress showed its support was through institutions created to represent its new cultural status.¹⁴ These institutions have been the foundation of the government’s effort to engage the public in America and abroad with jazz. They not only host their own repertory orchestras, they lead in efforts at music education that have reached millions of children and adults. American educational programs in particular have developed rapidly and were a specific focus of the JPA, which stated that it was “important for the youth of America to recognize and understand jazz as a significant part of their cultural and intellectual heritage.”¹⁵

¹¹ Richard Harrington, “Wynton Marsalis, Young Lion of Jazz,” *Washington Post*, 15 Dec. 1984, D1; Richard Harrington, “Marsalis: Jazzy AND Classical,” *Washington Post*, 4 Sept. 1983, D10.

¹² 100th Cong. Rec. 24934 (1987).

¹³ H. R. 57, 100th Congress (1987).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

On a national level, two institutions have been the center of most of the funding and media attention: Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC) in New York and Smithsonian Jazz in Washington, DC.¹⁶ Their repertory orchestras are led by Wynton Marsalis and David Baker respectively. These organizations have grown immensely in the past twenty years with NEA funding, and each has their own educational curricula and programs, archival work, events, and recordings.¹⁷ Their success in attracting audiences and teaching school-children about jazz has been in part due to the definition of jazz as a black American art form. Being recognized by Congress as “high” art has been essential to gaining access to music classrooms, as well as building the programs and facilities that attract millions of dollars in public and private funding. Within the classroom, the issues of race and American national identity have allowed jazz to be addressed not only as music, but as an integral part of American social and political life in the twentieth century. Jazz is not only introduced under the subject of music, but also in history, social studies, and politics. Race and national identity have also been central to the performances of the repertory orchestras, which often address these issues in their printed material and stage presentations, and in commissioned work such as Wynton Marsalis’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Blood on the Fields*.¹⁸ Identification of jazz as indigenous American music has also continued the State Department’s sponsorship of international jazz tours meant to promote American culture and democracy, including JALC’s program The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad.¹⁹

¹⁶ Jazz at Lincoln Centre, “Jazz at Lincoln Centre Profile,” available at http://www.jazzatlincolncenter.org/about/a_profile.html, visited 15 Aug. 2007; “Smithsonian Jazz,” available at <http://www.smithsonianjazz.org/>, visited 3 March 2008.

¹⁷ For federally sponsored online educational programs see Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, “Jazz in America,” available at <http://www.jazzinamerica.org/home.asp>, visited 3 March 2008; Jazz at Lincoln Centre, “NEA Jazz in the Schools,” available at <http://www.neajazzintheschools.org/home.php>, visited 3 March 2008; “Smithsonian Jazz”; Public Broadcasting Service, “Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns,” available at <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/>, visited 3 March 2008.

¹⁸ Wynton Marsalis, *Blood on the Fields*, Columbia Records, 1995. The Pulitzer was awarded in 1997, and is the only jazz piece ever to have won.

¹⁹ The first State Department tour was undertaken in 1956 under the direction of Dizzy Gillespie. Many others followed, including Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Benny Goodman. See Dizzy Gillespie and Al Fraser, *To Be, or not ... To Bop: Memoirs* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), 413–27; Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress*, 301–89. For more on The Rhythm Road, see Jazz at Lincoln Center, “The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad Program,” available at <http://www.jalc.org/TheRoad/index.html>, visited 17 April 2008; Fred Kaplan, “When Ambassadors had Rhythm,” *New York Times*, 29 June 2008, 17. For more detailed work on the State Department tours see Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo*

As these institutions first sparked the country's rekindled "love affair" with jazz, they helped draw attention and funding to foundations that were already working locally to promote jazz. Some of these, such as the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz (TMIJ), the Jazz Foundation of America, and Jazz Institute Chicago, have their own educational programs, concert series, and competitions.²⁰ The TMIJ in particular has grown into one of the largest national organizations for jazz, attracting funding from national governmental bodies such as the US Commission of Fine Arts, the NEA, and the Department of State.²¹ The growing interest in jazz during the 1990s consequently drew the attention of music- and book-publishing industries, which attempted to capitalize on record reissues and reprints of jazz histories and autobiographies.²² All of these developments drew the attention of scholars across America, and university jazz departments and studies started to flourish in the early to mid-1990s.²³

Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War (London: Harvard University Press, 2004).

- ²⁰ Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, "Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz," available at <http://www.monkinstitute.org/>, visited 3 March 2008; Jazz Foundation, "Jazz Foundation of America," available at <http://www.jazzfoundation.org/>, visited 3 March 2008; Jazz Institute of Chicago, "Jazz Institute of Chicago," available at <http://jazzinchicago.org/>, visited 3 March 2008.
- ²¹ The TMIJ was founded in 1986 by Monk's son, Thelonious Sphere Monk Jr., who has enjoyed close connections to Washington, DC. He helped George Wein organize the party at the White House under President Clinton. Wein said of the concert, "I noticed during the [presidential] campaign that Thelonious Monk's son, T. S. Monk, Jr., was President Bill Clinton's man for jazz. I knew that I could go directly to the social secretary of the White House, as I had before, but I felt it was best to call T. S. Monk first. The wife of Tom Carter, who was chairman of the Monk Foundation, worked for Vice President Al Gore." Wein and Chinen, *Myself*, 493. Wynton Marsalis joined T. S. Monk as a supporter of Clinton at campaign rallies. See Gwen Ifill, "Campaign Down to Last Hours – Hectic Pace for Clinton at the Finish," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 Nov. 1992, A1.
- ²² For example, see John L. Walters, "Kind of Overkill: Miles Davis Wouldn't Have Wanted His Outtakes Made Public, So Why All the Box Sets?," *The Guardian*, 10 Feb. 2006, E3. One major publisher of jazz books is Da Capo Press, which has done a large number of reprints in the past 20 years. For a listing see Da Capo Press, "Listing of Jazz Books," available at <http://www.perseusbooksgroup.com/dacapo/subjectbooks.do?subjectCid=MUS025000&imprintCid=DC>, visited 15 May 2008.
- ²³ Examples of seminal works from this period include *Black American Literature Forum's* 1991 special issue on jazz literature, which included Scott DeVaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum*, 25, 3 (1991), 525–60; and John Gennari, "Jazz Criticism: Its Development and Ideologies," *Black American Literature Forum*, 25, 3 (1991), 449–523. See also William Howland Kenney, *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Krin Gabbard, ed., *Representing Jazz* (London: Duke University Press, 1995); *idem*, ed., *Jazz among the Discourses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

These activities show the accumulation of over twenty years of effort connecting form and function in government-sponsored programs for jazz. Their success has ensured that institutions such as JALC and Smithsonian Jazz remain the leading jazz proselytizers favored in Washington DC, a group that have been labeled “neoclassicists” by their critics. This group comprises some of the most influential names in the jazz industry, including Wynton Marsalis, Stanley Crouch, Albert Murray, David Baker, and Billy Taylor. For the most part, the rhetorical battles between these figures and their critics had begun before the JPA, but the new outpouring of resources and legitimacy on neoclassical jazz placed much more at stake.²⁴ Critics complained that publicly supported musicians and critics promoted a narrow definition of authentic jazz and a particular stance on the histories of race and discrimination in the industry, when these had been sources of disagreement, competition, and creativity since the release of the first jazz record in 1917.

Perhaps the most controversial definition of jazz under the JPA is that of jazz as a fine or “high” art. Because of its importance to their institutional status, members of the JALC including Marsalis, Crouch, and Murray have been vociferous supporters of this concept. Crouch called jazz the “highest American musical form,” a form that others referred to as “America’s classical music.”²⁵ Associations between jazz and classical music were first developed in the 1920s by musicians such as Paul Whiteman, who became the country’s most famous band leader by blending the two styles and commissioning works such as George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. Much like Whiteman, JALC wanted to take advantage of the accessibility and national identity of jazz while gaining the prestige and financial support bestowed by Western culture on artistic, “serious” music. Nonetheless, on musical and racial issues JALC’s project stood in stark contrast to Whiteman. Their acknowledgment of jazz as both a black music and a classical art form confronted another legacy from the 1920s tacitly accepted by Whiteman, namely

²⁴ For an example of the ongoing nature of the debate see Larry Kart, “The Death of Jazz”, *Chicago Tribune*, 24 Feb. 1985, 4; *idem*, “Part II of the Death of Jazz: An Update on the Status of the Neoclassical Trend”, *Chicago Tribune*, 4 May 1986, 10; Larry Kart, “Provocative Opinion: The Death of Jazz?”, *Black Music Research Journal*, 10, 1 (1990), 76–81.

²⁵ Stanley Crouch, “Blues to Be Constitutional: A Long Look at the Wild Wherefores of our Democratic Lives as Symbolized in the Making of Rhythm and Tune,” in Stanley Crouch, ed., *The All-American Skin Game, or, the Decoy of Race* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 13. For seminal works see Grover Sales, *Jazz: America’s Classical Music* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1984); Billy Taylor, “Jazz: America’s Classical Music,” *Black Perspective in Music*, 14, 1 (1986), 21–25.

the racist images of jazz as degenerate, unsophisticated music incapable of emotional depth.²⁶

This view of jazz was stubbornly persistent for decades as many classical critics defended their genre as the sole high art form in music. Even when mainstream jazz critics and musicians had begun to accept the end of jazz as popular dance music in the mid-1940s, the development of concert forms such as bebop had not come with a new artistic status. To many of those looking down from the bastions of classical music such as concert halls and music conservatories, jazz remained an inhabitant of nightclubs and was at its worst the hedonistic inspiration of a counterculture rife with drug use and miscegenation.²⁷ For example, conservative music critic Winthrop Sargeant's famous 1946 article "'Hot Jazz' vs 'Fine Art'" derided the "lofty critical language" of writers like Leonard Feather who supported bebop. Sargeant complained,

They have even argued that the great musical issue of the day is that of jazzism vs "classicism," that jazz is in some way the American successor to the venerable art of concert music, its tunesmiths and improvising virtuosos the latter-day equivalents of so many Beethovens and Wagners. Bach, after all, used to improvise too.²⁸

Sargeant's dismissive comments can be seen as exactly the type of criticism challenged by the JPA, for Sargeant believed that jazz

is not a music in the sense that an opera or a symphony is music ... [jazz] exhibits no intellectual complexities, makes a simple, direct emotional appeal that may be felt by people who are not even remotely interested in music as an art.²⁹

Still, advocates such as Billy Taylor and Stanley Crouch did not question Sargeant's formulation of the artistic qualities of music so much as assert that jazz fitted into that formula.

In reality, jazz had often occupied an ambiguous position between art and popular music, as epitomized in the career of one of the most famous jazz composers, Duke Ellington. He was at various times accused by critics of either pandering to audience expectations for financial reward or, as in the case of his 1943 extended composition *Black, Brown and Beige*, of being

²⁶ See John R. McMahon, "Unspeakable Jazz Must Go!", *Ladies Home Journal*, Dec. 1921, in Karl Koenig, ed., *Jazz in Print (1856-1929)* (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2002), 160-63; Henry T. Finck, "Jazz - Lowbrow and Highbrow," *Etude*, Aug. 1924, in *ibid.*, 336.

²⁷ See Benard Gendron, "A Short Stay in the Sun: The Reception of Bebop, 1944-1950," *Library Chronicle*, 24, 1-2 (1994), 137-59; Eric Lott, "Double V, Double-Time: Bebop's Politics of Style," in Gabbard, *Jazz among the Discourses*, 243-55.

²⁸ Winthrop Sargeant, "'Hot Jazz' vs 'Fine Art,'" in Andrew Clark, ed., *Riffs and Choruses* (New York: Continuum) 2001, 71.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

“pretentious” and of going beyond his place.³⁰ The tension between the rhetoric of popularity and that of art remained through to the 1980s, in part prompted by the commercial and critical success of the Young Lions as well as some incendiary talk from Wynton Marsalis. Marsalis had a high-profile conflict with Miles Davis throughout the 1980s that epitomized the two positions. Marsalis claimed that Davis’s fusion bands “ain’t playing nothing” and that he had “sold out,” while Davis in turn said, “Who does Marsalis think he is? The savior of jazz?”³¹ The nature of their debate transformed when the subject of artistic quality and cultural value had more practical implications concerning public funding. The preservation of jazz brought up factors beyond musical tastes or ideologies by giving more weight to the social and political contexts of jazz’s artistic status.

Billy Taylor, an influential jazz educator and musician, was one of the first to articulate the materiality of these contexts through essays such as “Jazz: America’s Classical Music.”³² The foundation of Taylor’s argument was that jazz was uniquely American and was socially worthy of being considered art: “As an important musical language, it has developed steadily from a single expression of the consciousness of black people into a national music that expresses American ideals and attitudes to Americans and to people from other cultures all around the world.” Although this could be said of other genres based on the blues, such as R&B and rock and roll, Taylor made the distinction that, “Though it is often fun to play, jazz is *very serious* music.”³³ This quality of seriousness was essential to the creation of the JPA and had practical implications. As Taylor well knew, classical music was the subject of most of the formal study and public endowments for music. If jazz was to compete in these realms, it needed to be equally worthy, serious, and “classical.”³⁴

³⁰ Critic Mike Levin called Ellington’s 1948–49 work “derivative, depending on memories of past splendors.” See Michael Levin, “Reputation Shredded, Duke Should Disband, Mix Claims,” *Down Beat*, 17 June 1949, 12; John Hammond accused Ellington of trying to work outside his three-minute dance tunes by viciously condemning his *Black, Brown and Beige*. See John Hammond and Irving Townsend, *John Hammond On Record* (New York: Ridge Press, 1977), 133. See also David Schiff, “Built Pieces: Like Igor Stravinsky, Duke Ellington Was a Brilliant Assembler of Other People’s Music,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 275, 1 (1995), 94.

³¹ Karen Harris, “When Marsalis Talks, It’s Brash; When His Trumpet Talks, It’s Beautiful,” *Dallas Morning News*, 25 Jan. 1985, 22; Leslie Rubenstein, “Wynton Marsalis – A Gentleman with a Horn: Mild-Mannered Jazz Genius Can Rub His Peers the Wrong Way,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 Sept. 1986, 39.

³² Taylor. Billy Taylor has also served as the artistic director at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC since 1994, hosting concerts under the umbrella of Jazz at the Kennedy Center. ³³ *Ibid.*, 21. Italics in original. ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

Consequently, the effort to define jazz as “America’s classical music” had to privilege certain aspects of jazz history. For Wynton Marsalis, this meant that any style of jazz that was not sufficiently artistic and classical should be excised from the genre. He was particularly dismissive of jazz fusion and believed its simplified musical structures and appeal for popularity threatened the artistic qualities of jazz. Fusion’s adoption of rock and roll elements provided the perfect excuse for its dismissal from jazz history:

What fusion does is it relieves us, our country, of the problem of dealing with jazz and the contribution of the Negro to the mythology of America. The question in jazz has always been: is it pop music or is it a classical music? And I don’t mean classical in terms of European music, but I mean does it have formal aspects that make it worthy of study, and does it carry pertinent mythic information about being American. The thing that these musicians did in the 1970s is they relieved all of the cultural pressure that Duke Ellington placed on our nation to address the music seriously and teach it, which would make us deal with ourselves and our racism, which everyone knows is our greatest problem...³⁵

Ellington was a particularly important figure for Marsalis since he was seen by critics as the greatest jazz composer. Marsalis finds that the intellectual complexity of his compositions gave his music “formal aspects that make it worthy of study.” Furthermore, Marsalis saw Ellington’s music as containing “information about being American,” and thus it served perfectly his promotion of jazz as America’s classical music.

However, privileging composition over the collective improvisation of fusion risked undermining the system of value that had first distinguished jazz from classical European music and placed black music at the center of American culture. Jazz had first gained its status as particularly American and “worthy of study” by challenging the system of musical value that Marsalis accepts. What first attracted many to jazz was the secondary importance of composition. Improvisation made the musician the composer of the tune, with the melody and harmony subsumed by his or her personal expression. This quality had been long discouraged by classical musicians, as typified by the objections of an editorial in 1910:

There are so many so-called “players” who think that an excellent ear, and the possession of some ability at natural transposition, gives one the right to improve upon or substitute an accompaniment for that of some composer who has spent perhaps a lifetime in study.³⁶

³⁵ Lolis Eric Elie, “An Interview with Wynton Marsalis,” *Callaloo*, 13, 2 (1990), 282.

³⁶ Edith Lynwood Winn, “Questions and Answers,” *Jacob’s Orchestra Monthly*, Sept. 1910, in Koenig, *Jazz in Print*, 84.

The use of improvisation popularly accompanied the racial stereotype of “natural” playing by black musicians, which contrasted with the learned methods of European music. However, for a small but influential group of European classical composers, including Darius Milhaud, Igor Stravinsky, and Dmitri Shostakovich, it also represented a value found in jazz they felt would influence the development of classical music.³⁷

Despite Wynton Marsalis’s respect for improvisation and its essential place in jazz music and history, he concluded that the classical sophistication of jazz was at times compromised by the focus on improvisational solos. Marsalis explained to an interviewer that the problem with jazz after 1940 was that “a lot of sophistication was cut out, because you have a genius like Charlie Parker who mastered single-line playing. So single-line playing became elevated over the mastery and genius of somebody like Duke Ellington, who had control over many lines.” While the interviewer was momentarily taken aback, Marsalis explained his logic by comparing the examples of Charlie Parker’s solos in 1945 to Duke Ellington’s 1938 extended piece *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*. His conclusion was that Parker’s work was definitely not more sophisticated in any way, shape or form. It might make people mad, but I’m sorry. If you give any musician in the world a pen and paper, play those two records and say which one you would rather transcribe, they’d definitely pick Bird’s music.³⁸

The formula for Marsalis was based on a directly proportional system: simpler harmonies and arrangement made the “level of social statement much simpler.”³⁹

Wynton Marsalis was certainly not alone in these beliefs, but his high public profile meant that he drew a lot of criticism. Among his detractors were those who also used concepts such as “social statement” to forward their position that jazz should always be technically innovative and a reflection of contemporary times. For instance, scholar Lee Brown saw Marsalis’s career as an effort to perpetuate the elevation of “serious music,” which removes jazz from the social milieu that had originally made it popular and subversive. Brown quips,

Were I to wave a wand and retrieve something, it might be the seething funkiness and unbuttoned vitality of Vine Street in Kansas City around 1937. For the culture

³⁷ See Chris Goddard, *Jazz Away from Home* (London: Paddington Press, 1979), 123; Karen C. C. Dalton and Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes,” *Critical Inquiry*, 24, 4 (1998), 903–34, 907; S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union 1917–1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 62–63.

³⁸ “Bird” was a common nickname for Parker. Elie, 279.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

that Marsalis wants to save, we have to shift the scene to the chic venues of Lincoln Center.⁴⁰

While many critics and musicians agreed with Brown's assessment, in the context of government funding of the arts "seething funkiness" was little competition for "America's classical music."

The debate about the definitions of the JPA, however vitriolic at times, has remained largely within the small community of jazz musicians, journalists, aficionados, and academics whose lives or livelihoods were most profoundly affected. However, the goals of the JPA and its funding bodies were to reach well beyond this group to bring a basic knowledge of jazz to as many as possible. Only by creating an enduring conception of jazz could it be "preserved," and so it was inevitable that the narrative of jazz history and the constituents of its canon used in publicly sponsored programs would be considered overly simplified and conservative by those with more extensive knowledge. This is certainly the case with regard to race. In the atmosphere of intense debate about neoclassicist jazz that started in the 1980s, the focus on black musicians and traditions was often divisive and emotional and has continued to be a challenge for JALC and other publicly supported programs. In many ways, the debate about role of race in jazz mirrored contemporary discussions in America often referred to as the "Culture Wars." Just as intense as the internal debates about jazz, the Culture Wars tried to resolve the role of government in funding arts and humanities and the level of control Congress should have over their content.⁴¹ Other issues were tangential but influential to the Wars, namely Affirmative Action in the Reagan and Bush years and "political correctness" during Clinton's tenure.⁴² Both of these issues created an extensive debate about race in America and the government's role in mediating race relations and identity politics.⁴³

As a result, one of the essential challenges posed by the JPA was finding a politically acceptable balance between identifying jazz as representative of

⁴⁰ Lee Brown, "Jazz: America's Classical Music?", *Philosophy and Literature*, 26 (2002), 157–72, 169.

⁴¹ For more on Congressional struggles with Reagan over the NEA see Margaret Jane Wyszomirski, "Congress, Presidents, and the Arts: Collaboration and Struggle," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 499 (1988), 124–135.

⁴² For more on Reagan's attitudes against Affirmative Action see James C. Musselwhite Jr., "The Impacts of New Federalism on Public/Private Partnerships," *Publius*, 16, 1 (1986), 113–31. For more on political correctness in the 1990s see Andrew Ross, Manthia Diawara, Alexander Doty, Wahneema Lubiano, Tricia Rose, Ella Shohat, Lynn Spigel, Robert Stam, and Michele Wallace, "A Symposium on Popular Culture and Political Correctness," *Social Text*, 36 (1993), 1–39.

⁴³ See Richard Jensen, "The Culture Wars, 1965–1995: A Historian's Map," *Journal of Social History*, 29 (1995), 17–37.

black American culture, and of the country as a whole. In the words of the JPA, jazz brought “to this country and the world a uniquely American musical synthesis and culture through the African American experience.”⁴⁴ While a majority of innovations in jazz came from black musicians, specific reference to their experience became controversial among musicians and critics because it was perceived as marginalizing the contributions of others based on race.⁴⁵ However controversial, recognizing jazz as a form of black music was essential to the purpose of John Conyers Jr. and the Congressional Black Caucus when proposing the resolution, as well as to those who were going to implement it. That is perhaps why Conyers read a statement by Larry Ridley, professor of music at Rutgers University, into the congressional record. After citing the importance of the Emancipation Proclamation and Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s to African Americans, Ridley called the JPA “landmark legislation” that “is significant because it recognizes the cultural and artistic contributions of African Americans as progenitors in the evolution of America’s indigenous art form – Jazz.”⁴⁶

This position has been firmly supported by musicological analysis, which has provided the most widespread agreement on the black and American origins of jazz. This consensus had built up over several decades preceding the JPA, and has only increased with the spate of jazz histories published in the last twenty years. This scholarship uniformly argues for jazz’s black musical foundations, with special emphasis on African music and black American forms of ragtime and the blues.⁴⁷ Scholars commonly depict the unique timbre, harmony, melody, rhythm and improvisation that are key

⁴⁴ H. R. 57, 100th Congress (1987).

⁴⁵ Richard Sudhalter’s work on white jazz musicians is exemplary of this sentiment and scholarship. See Richard M. Sudhalter, *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contribution to Jazz, 1915–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁶ 100th Cong. Rec. 38284 (1987).

⁴⁷ This was the case with seminal works and more recent volumes, for example Schuller’s introductory chapter, “The Origins,” focuses on African and European music, gospel, blues and ragtime – Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 3–62; Collier’s first chapter, “The Precursors,” covers the African roots, American transplantation, the blues and ragtime – James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (London: Hart-Davis MacGibbon, 1978), 3–56; Gioia’s “Prehistory of Jazz” covers African music, blues and ragtime – Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3–28; Ward’s chapter “Gumbo: Beginnings to 1907” covers New Orleans’s music, ragtime, blues, church music and also Buddy Bolden, Jelly Roll Morton and Sidney Bechet – Geoffrey Ward, *Jazz: A History of America’s Music* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 2000, 1–35; Hasse’s chapter “The Emergence of Jazz” covers African and European music, New Orleans’s music, blues, and ragtime – John Edward Hasse, *Jazz: The First Century* (New York: William Morrow), 2000, 1–24; Dicaire covers the blues, ragtime, and black New Orleans culture in his

elements of jazz as developing from black music and reflecting black experiences and history. Geoffrey Ward's judgment epitomizes the social commentary inherent in this approach: "Jazz music belongs to all Americans, has come to be seen by the rest of the world as the symbol of all that is best about us, but it was created by people routinely denied the most basic benefits of being American."⁴⁸

Establishing the link between the musical freedom and improvisation of jazz, issues of race, and "all that is best" about America also addresses the JPA's definitions of jazz as a microcosm of democratic function. In language indicative of its Cold War era origins, the JPA asserted that jazz "makes evident to the world an outstanding artistic model of individual expression and democratic cooperation within the creative process, thus fulfilling the highest ideals and aspirations of our republic."⁴⁹ Representing jazz as "democratic" music has been a central element to the work of JALC members such as Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch, and scholars such as Ken Burns, John Edward Hasse, Garry Hagberg, and Scott Saul. Hasse's comments in his introduction to *Jazz: The First Century* are representative:

The jazz musician, through inflections and stylings, puts his or her own distinctive stamp on the material, making something personal out of something shared. Like democracy at its best, a jazz band maintains an optimum balance between the individual and the group and upholds the value of both.⁵⁰

Here the jazz band is itself a model of democracy arbitrated solely upon musical values and talent. This approach does not deny the history and importance of racial discrimination in jazz but externalizes it, locating it socially within the contexts of American society and the American music industry, and musically within its aesthetics.

The democratic model is admittedly idealistic, and the concern of many of those mentioned above has been to focus on the potential of this democratic model of jazz to transcend social and political barriers. As stated in the JPA, jazz has contributed to a fuller realization of the promise of American democracy, as it has been "a unifying force, bridging cultural, religious,

introduction – David Dicaire, *The Jazz Musicians of the Early Years, to 1945* (London: McFarland & Company, 2003), 1–3.

⁴⁸ Ward, 2. This is similar to President Clinton's comment, quoted above at note 2.

⁴⁹ H. R. 57, 100th Congress (1987).

⁵⁰ Hasse, ix. See also Wynton Marsalis, "Wynton Marsalis," available at <http://www.wyntonmarsalis.org/>, visited 17 April 2008; Crouch, "Constitutional"; Ken Burns, dir., *Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns*, PBS Paramount, 2001; Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Aint: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6.

ethnic, and age differences in our diverse society.”⁵¹ In the words of trumpeter Quincy Jones, jazz has the “power to make men forget their differences and come together.”⁵² The idea of cultural and social convergence through jazz resonated well with one of the most common images of American history in which the nation functions as a “melting pot.”⁵³ Although the African elements of jazz first brought it popularity, their application to European musical contexts reflected America’s diverse culture and made the music distinct from its antecedents in both continents, and thus a “uniquely American musical synthesis.”⁵⁴ This view of jazz has been favored by musicologists throughout the twentieth century. For instance, Gunther Schuller’s writing on the origins of jazz showed the impact of America’s social environment on the music: “It seems in retrospect almost inevitable that America, the great ethnic melting pot, would procreate a music compounded of African rhythmic, formal, sonoric and expressive elements and European rhythmic and harmonic practices.”⁵⁵ Since most of the innovators in jazz were black musicians, jazz writers have often portrayed them as the crucible in which these elements and practices melded together.

The contradictions between presenting jazz as a model of democracy and transcendence, and as a product and subject of racism, have brought much criticism. Perhaps no one has attracted more than director Ken Burns for his film *Jazz*.⁵⁶ Burns’s nineteen-hour documentary built on the work of a variety of historians, as well as JALC, by juxtaposing images of jazz as a model of democracy and “what is best about us” against the racism that black musicians faced and “turned into great art.”⁵⁷ Despite a viewing audience for *Jazz* numbering an estimated twenty-three million and an impressive financial return, Burns was disappointed by the preponderance of scathing reviews criticizing his perspective.⁵⁸ They cite his multimillion-dollar budget and nineteen hours of footage as ample resources to make a more nuanced and chronologically complete history of jazz.

⁵¹ H. R. 57, 100th Congress (1987).

⁵² Hasse, iv.

⁵³ See Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot: Drama in Four Acts* (New York: Macmillan, 1909).

⁵⁴ H. R. 57, 100th Congress (1987).

⁵⁵ Schuller, 3. For more recent examples see Hasse, 3–4; Ward, xxi.

⁵⁶ Burns, *Jazz*.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Dan Harlan, “Ken Burns and the Coming Crisis of Academic History,” *Rethinking History*, 7, 2 (2003), 170. For other examples of academic criticism of Burns see Euan Staples, “‘You Can’t Steal a Gift’: Narrative of Nation in Ken Burns’s *Jazz*,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, 21, 2 (2002), 15–32; Theodore Gracyk, “Jazz after *Jazz*: Ken Burns and the Construction of Jazz History,” *Philosophy and Literature*, 26 (2002), 173–87; Steven F. Pond, “Jamming the Reception: Ken Burns, Jazz, and the Problem of ‘America’s Music,’” *Notes*, 60, 1 (2003), 11–45.

While these criticisms have merit, they do not take into account that *Jazz* was the political and musical product of years of government programs on jazz and a faithful representation of the definitions present in the JPA. It is precisely Ken Burns's positivist vision of jazz, especially concerning race, that has thrived in Washington, DC throughout several changes in administration and ideology. Burns, along with scriptwriter Geoffrey Ward, sees race as not only a central question to American life, but also an essential element to the true preservation of jazz as a black American art form.⁵⁹ Ward commented to one newspaper reviewer, "It just kills me that kids don't listen to this music today, especially black kids, but kids in general ... So if this film gets a few kids more into jazz, that will be a very good thing."⁶⁰ Hence Burns gave prominence to Wynton Marsalis as a talking head, demonstrator, and charismatic role model. Marsalis's role can be summed up in the comment made by Newport Jazz Festival founder George Wein in the final episode:

And I listened to him play, and I started to cry. I couldn't believe it because I never thought I'd hear a young black musician play that way. And I could hear he had been listening to Louis Armstrong. And that meant so much to me because the only young musicians that paid attention to Louis Armstrong were white musicians. Young African American musicians did not pay attention to Louis Armstrong.⁶¹

Such comments have even more significance when considering the only significant study on the demographics of jazz listeners, which was carried out by the NEA in 1982. It found that the jazz audience was predominantly "urban, young, white, well-educated, and from high-income-level households."⁶² As Burns clearly demonstrated, to be the definitive music of America, jazz needed to represent far more.

Whether or not critics and musicians agreed with Burns, the support supplied by the JPA meant that there had to be some method of "preserving" jazz. There was no shortage of musicians and critics who were in favor of public support for jazz, so most at least tacitly accepted the idea of identifying jazz as a black American art form. Indeed, the logic behind the support for organizations such as JALC was hard to rebut:

Today at the Lincoln Center young players are again being apprenticed and educated, and casually integrated audiences are sitting and swinging together. They are

⁵⁹ Philip Elwood, "The Racial Side of Jazz and Blues: Ken Burns's Series Surprised Many Fans", *San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 Jan. 2001, B2; Mark Feeny, "In the World of Ken Burns's *Jazz*, Race Matters," *Boston Globe*, 28 Jan. 2001, N1.

⁶⁰ Howard Reich, "Heat's on Burns's *Jazz*," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 Nov. 2000, 1.

⁶¹ Burns, *Jazz*.

⁶² Harold Horowitz, "The American Jazz Audience," quoted in Willard Jenkins, "Where's the Jazz Audience?," *Antioch Review*, 57, 3 (1999), 355–62, 359.

doing so to the musical arrangements of a man universally acknowledged to be a master musician and perhaps the most ambitious composer alive. If this is “conservatism,” it’s of a kind sorely needed by a nation that chews up and spits out its great black artists. Our culture has little that is more deserving of conservation than the legacy of Armstrong, Ellington and the great canon of American jazz.⁶³

With such acceptance being given by the majority, the pronouncements of jazz educators like Billy Taylor have become increasingly difficult to question. Jazz, as America’s classical music, “defines the national character and the national culture ... No matter when or where it is composed and performed, from the ‘good old days’ to the present, jazz, our ubiquitous American music speaks to and for each generation – especially the generation that creates it.”⁶⁴ For all of the opposition to neoclassicism there has not been a halt to comments like that of singer Tony Bennett: “Every civilization is known by its culture, and jazz is America’s greatest contribution to the world – it is our ‘classical’ music.”⁶⁵

Indeed, the programs under the JPA are still expanding in scope and accessibility. The executive director of the International Association of Jazz Education, Bill McFarlin, suggested in 2007 that the health of jazz education had dramatically increased under the JPA: “I don’t have empirical data, but I would have to guess that the jazz education industry has quadrupled in the last 20 years.” The association’s director of education, Greg Carroll, concurred, “I can recall back in the early ‘60s, when it was sort of taboo for jazz to be presented in the classroom. Now it’s unusual if a music program does not have a jazz program embedded within it.”⁶⁶ The Internet curricula have been an important part of this expansion because of their unique multimedia potential and instant accessibility. In 2006 alone, the NEA Jazz in the Schools website had over four million users, while TMIJ’s Jazz in America has grown to an estimated twelve million.⁶⁷ A similar result has been seen commercially, especially after the 2001 release of Ken Burns’s *Jazz*, which doubled the share of jazz in total record sales.⁶⁸ While there remains a vocal contingent of critics arguing against the JPA’s definitions of jazz, such results will not likely see many calling for an end to its programs, but rather a more open interpretation of what it means to be America’s music.

⁶³ Eric Alterman, “Jazz at the Center: Jazz at the Lincoln Center Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis Criticises Paternalism among Jazz Critics”, *The Nation*, 264, 18 (1997), 9.

⁶⁴ Taylor, “Jazz: America’s Classical Music,” 22. ⁶⁵ Hasse, v.

⁶⁶ Nate Chinen, “Jazz is Alive and Well. In the Classroom, Anyway,” *New York Times*, 7 Jan. 2007, 1. ⁶⁷ Ibid.; “Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz”.

⁶⁸ Nekesa Mumbi Moody, “Ken Burns’ Jazz Breathes New Life into Field, PBS Documentary Sets Compact Disc Sales Afire,” *Dallas Morning News*, 5 Feb. 2001, 23A.