

## HEAR THAT LONG SNAKE MOAN

By Michael Ventura

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*But don't hunt for dissonance;  
Because, in the end, there is no dissonance.  
When the music is heard people dance.*

■ Antonio Machado,

▪ Translated by Robert Bly

*The Voodoo ceremonies of Haiti are danced around a centerpost, a kind of maypole through which the gods pass from where they dwell into the ceremony. This essay is the centerpost for this book. It is nothing less than a history of my country. Of course, a country has an amazing number of interlocking histories. This is a history of its music, its dancing – and yet not even those, but the longing they expressed. As such, with this enormous subject, it is the longest chapter in the book. A scholarly work, putting together facts which, to my knowledge, have not yet been seen as a coherent whole; yet, while we must concentrate on facts and sources and such, this is as much a meditation as an essay on history. A meditation on the music and a meditation within the music.*

*Every true work of culture is a work of resurrection, a work of remembrance that creates the remembered moment anew and blends it with the present moment to create the possibilities of the future. How does American music do this? For only when we see clearly the meaning that this music incorporated can we understand both the history of this music and the history that this music made.*

“Rock’n’roll” is a word from the depth -- resonant as Chaucer’s English. Each of its parts is both verb and noun. “Rock,” the noun (*Rock the noun!*), is a most basic object. Hard. “Upon this rock I will build my church,” said Jesus. An object-word that defies scale – it can fit into your hand, a rock, or it could be the whole planet. While as a verb, it leaps from the sturdiness of its noun-definition into movement, back and forth, oscillating, going from yin to yang and back again, rocking. “Roll” is sweet, as a noun. Lush. Soft. Eschewing every traditional Anglo-Saxon word for the female organ, recently freed New Orleans slaves were calling the cunt a “jelly roll” over 100 years ago. So juicy did they find the expression that it came to mean cock as well as cunt, both genders singing about “my jelly roll.” The first great jazz composer called himself Jelly Roll Morton. Then there’s “roll of fat,” “roll of bills” – that kind of roll. And as a verb (*Roll the verb!*), it can move and it can move and it might never stop, end over end over infinity. Oceans roll.

Putting the two together, “rock’n’roll” was a term from the juke joints of the South, long in use by the forties, when a music started being heard that had no name, wasn’t jazz and wasn’t simply blues and wasn’t Cajun, but had all those elements and could not be ignored. In those juke joints “rock’n’roll” hadn’t meant the name of a music, it meant “to fuck.” “Rock,” by itself, had pretty much meant that, in those circles, since the twenties at least. “Rock’n’roll” was a juicy elaboration of an old usage. When, finally, in the mid-

fifties, the songs started being played by white people and aired on the radio – “Rock Around the Clock,” “Good Rockin’ Tonight,” “Reelin’ And A-Rockin’” – the meaning hadn’t changed. The word was so prevalent that the music began to be called “rock’n’roll” by disc jockeys who either didn’t know what they were saying or were too shy to admit what they knew. The term stuck.

But it had a meaning with yet another root. For since roughly the turn of the century, and possibly much longer, in the singing churches of the blacks, when the songs were yelled and sung and the hands were clapped and the sweat was pouring and people were testifying, fainting, speaking in tongues, being at least transported and often saved, which meant to be overwhelmed by the Holy Ghost – that was called “rockin’ the church.” “They made the church rock.” Upon *that* rock their church was built, more than on the stone of Peter. And the screams of rock that go right through you – high pitched screams that aren’t joy and aren’t agony but sound like both together, and sometimes like the human equivalent of microphone feedback, screams that yet are beautiful in their raw and naked and utterly committed flight out of the throat; the screams of Little Richard and Janis Joplin and Aretha Franklin and James Brown and Bruce Springsteen – those screams came straight out of those churches. You can hear them on virtually any recording of black church music – either field recordings from the little shack-like rural churches, or more sophisticated gospel recordings by people who sing the music as professionals. Such a scream. What can we call it but a holy scream? Unlike anything in Western music before it.

We will try to enter that scream, insofar as an essay’s prose can, and to enter the scream is, first, to contemplate Africa. To be precise, the west coast of Africa.

That American music is rooted in Africa is a cliché, and clichés are useless. But to trace that root is a revelation. It’s a root that goes so deep that some of our most common terms – terms often associated with the music – are from African languages that haven’t been spoken on this continent conversationally in close to two centuries. Robert Farris Thompson, the art and music historian, has found that “funky” is from the Ki-Kongo *lu-fuki*, meaning “positive sweat.” Which is virtually what it means, in a metaphoric sense, in American language. He notes that now the Bakongo people use the American “funky” and their own *lu-fuki* interchangeably “to praise persons for the integrity of their art.” It’s a word that’s been around America for a long time. Song titles place it in New Orleans circa 1900, and it was apparently well-established by then. *Which means this word is not slang. This is a word in the American language.* Its roots and longevity prove that, whether or not the word has found its way into our dictionaries and our middle-class usage.

*Mojo*, a word found in many a rock and blues tune, is Ki-Kongo for “soul.” In North America for at least a century it has meant an object that’s been invested with spirit power, soul power, and has the capacity to cure or heal or influence. “I got my mojo workin’,” one song says. When my family moved not long ago, one of the movers, a black carrying a box of mine labeled “Voodoo,” looked at me humorously and took his “mojo stone” out of his pocket to show me. When I asked to hold it, he wouldn’t let me.

Again, this isn’t jive-talk or a fad of speech. Its usage is too firmly rooted and too constant. This is our language.

Our “boogie” comes from the Ki-Kongon *mbugi*, meaning, according to Thompson, “devilishly good.” *Juke*, as in our jukebox and juke joint (which often did not have juke

boxes) is the Mande-kan word for “bad,” for among righteous blacks as well as righteous whites, this was bad music played by bad people in bad places.

Robert Farris Thompson thinks that “jazz” and “jism” likely derive from the Ki-Kongo *dinza*, which means “to ejaculate.” And the use of the concept “cool” among the Yoruba people of Africa is precisely the same as its use as popularized by jazz musicians in New York forty years ago – another usage that’s remained constant with us. Said one Yoruba informant to Thompson, “Coolness is the correct way you represent yourself to a human being.”

In his remarkable book *Flash of the Spirit* Thompson writes:

*Like character, coolness ought to be internalized as a governing principle for a person to merit the high praise, “His heart is cool” (okan e tutu). In becoming sophisticated, a Yoruba adept learns to differentiate between forms of spiritual coolness... So heavily charged is this concept with ideas of beauty and correctness that a fine carnelian bead or a passage of exciting drumming may be praised as “cool.”*

*Coolness, then, is a part of character... To the degree that we live generously and discreetly, exhibiting grace under pressure, our appearance and our acts gradually assume virtual royal power. As we become noble, fully realizing the spark of creative goodness God endowed us with... we find the confidence to cope with all kinds of situations. This is ashe. This is character. This is mystic coolness. All one. Paradise is regained, for Yoruba art returns the idea of heaven to mankind wherever ancient ideal attitudes are genuinely manifested.*

Coolness doesn’t mean coldness. Cool art is passionate art. In American culture, Miles Davis has been the exemplar of this aesthetic. When in 1949 and 1950 he was making the recordings – with, it should be noted, white musicians like Gerry Mulligan, Lee Konitz, Gunther Schuller and Gil Evans, as well as blacks like J.J. Johnson, John Lewis, Kenny Clarke and Max Roach – Davis would call those sessions “birth of the cool.” But those sessions might better have been called “rebirth of the cool.” They were, in music, a restatement of this African philosophy in American terms. That has been the life of all Miles Davis’s music, and he himself has been absolutely sure of this.

Sidney Bechet, the great New Orleans reed player, feeling these linkages instinctively, called his music “the remembering song. There’s so much to remember,” he said, speaking of “the long long song that started back there” – back in the South, and further back still, in Africa.

To re-member. To put back together.

“Back there” are the people of Kongo, Dohemy, and Yorubaland. These were not jungle bunnies living, insensate, under an eternal sun. They were at once tribal and urban. It is hard, after so many bad movies and so many encrusted lies, to think of them as urban, and it is hard for a Western mind to conceive of “tribal” and “urban” together; yet as late as the mid-nineteenth century the Yoruba city of Abeokuta ran six miles along the bank of the Ogun River and had a population estimated at 200,000. Its craft industries thrived – ironwork, carpentry, tailoring, farming, tool-making, textiles. And this urban culture had been thriving for centuries, a city probably older than, say, New York is now.

Here, intact, a little more than a century ago, was a mature culture which had not chosen to go the way of monotheism and the father gods, but had, like India, kept its polytheistic pantheon rooted in the Great Mother religions – or rather, in the religious impulse we now identify with the Great Mother. They shared with the Hopi, with the ancient Irish and Welsh and all Druid peoples, as well as with the Chinese and the Egyptians, the mother symbol of the serpent – as Thompson puts it, “ancient Yoruba image of coolness, peace and power.” And they shared with pre-Christianist Europe – the so-called pagan religions – the conviction that religious worship is a *bodily* celebration, a dance of the entire community; or, as it would have been called in Europe when such belief had been driven underground, a “sabbat.” The mind-body split that governs European thought seems never to have entered African religion, African consciousness – at least not until imported there by missionaries. To meditate was to dance.

Hence in this culture the drum is so sacred as an instrument that some are built for display. They are too holy to touch. “An instrument of significant silence, not reverberation,” is Thompson’s phrase. It’s as though such a drum is there to say that within the astonishingly complex rhythms of Africa – rhythms which Western musical notation is too crude, rhythmically, to express – within the multi-toned din is a core of quietude, of calm, the focused silence of the Master, the silence out of which revelation rises. Sometimes such a drum is six feet high.

This is the drum within. It exists in all people. As quiet a man as Thoreau heard it and spoke of it. What else was the “different drummer” that allowed him to know that violence can be met with peace, and that “the sun is but a morning star”?

“Westerners always stay in temperate zones when they’re looking for philosophy,” Thompson said in an interview in *Rolling Stone*. “Jews become Buddhists, Methodists become Bahais; they never go south.” What would they find if they did? What is the metaphysical goal of African thought?

Africans don’t conceive of the other world – the world of the spirit, the divine – as existing above this one, or below it, or even alongside it. Neither heaven nor hell, nor Olympus nor Hades, nor the Australian Dreamtime. For the African, the human world and the spirit world *intersect*. Their sign for this is the cross, but it has nothing to do with the Christianist cross, which impales a man in helpless agony upon the intersection. That is what the West feels. In Africa, the cross is of two roads intersecting to flow into each other, to nourish each other. The earthly and the spirit worlds meet at right angles, and everything that is most important happens at the spot where they meet, which is neither solely of one world nor the other.

The metaphysical goal of the African way is to *experience* the intense meeting of both worlds at the crossroads. Writes Thompson, “Ritual contact with divinity underscores the religious aspirations of the Yoruba. To become possessed by the spirit of the Yoruba deity, which is a *formal goal* of the religion, is to ‘make the god,’ to capture numinous flowing force *within one’s body*.” (Italics mine.)

Spurred by the holy drums, deep in the meditation of the dance, one is literally entered by a god or a goddess. Goddesses may enter men, and gods may enter women. Westerners call this “possession.” That’s too crude a concept for this, though good writers describing the phenomenon have been forced to use it; we have no other word or concept that comes close. But instead of possession, it seems more accurate to think of “a flowing through.” The one flows through the other. As Maya Deren put it in her study of

Haitian Voodoo, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*: “*The loa [spirit], then, partakes of the head that bears it. The principle is modified by the person.*” (Deren’s italics.) The body, literally, becomes the crossroads. Human and divine are united within it – and it can happen to anyone.

What a frightening, utterly terrifying concept to our Western minds. Far from inflating the ego, the experience demolishes it while the state lasts. People who’ve been in this state commonly can’t remember what they’ve said or done, and part of the function of the ceremony is to have witnesses who will later tell them what the god said through them. In the West we are so frightened of such states that we assume, when we see them in isolated cases, that they are symptoms of psychosis, if we are charitable; if we are not, we assume – as the first Westerners to see such things assumed – that this is possession by the Devil, and that anything, anything at all, is justified in blotting it out. It is no wonder we tend not to “go south” for our philosophy.

In Abomey, Africa, these deities that speak through humans are called *vodun*. The word means “mysteries.” From their *vodun* comes our “Voodoo.” And it is to Voodoo that we must look for the roots of our music.

To get to Voodoo conceptually we must, as the Africans actually did, go through slavery. Slavery is not race-specific. Africa practiced slavery long before the whites came. The whites did not bring a strange idea. And several strong African tribes grew rich by enslaving their neighbors and selling them to whites. (Later, in the New World, it was not uncommon for “free people of color” to own slaves.) The Atlantic slave trade could not have existed without the complicity of African profiteers.

This doesn’t lift the onus of slavery from Christianist whites. But it gives us some idea of the depths, the complexities, of a slave’s agony. Where could one find one’s being? Sold by one’s kind to another kind. Taken under unspeakable conditions in a vehicle, and across an expanse, as inescapable to them as though a UFO were to take one of us to another galaxy. And then to see, in the eyes of your captors, not only brutality and fear but the linked impulses of revulsion and attraction – revulsion freely expressed and attraction twisted into rape and murder. And this went on for 300 years. How could one feel one’s being?

We can measure the strength of the metaphysics of Africa – we can gauge the depth of its relevance to the human condition everywhere – by the bare fact that it survived through this centuries-long ideal. “Lord, you made the night too long,” Louis Armstrong once sang. He expressed his feeling through a music that had come through that night. The slaves kept their mysteries, kept their *vodun*, and their mysteries kept them.

Their effort may not be easily understood by a generation whose arts are more and more dependent upon the generosity of corporate foundations, universities, and government grants. The anthropologist Alfred Metraux described it like this in his classic *Voodoo in Haiti*:

*The degree of [the African’s] attachment to his gods may be measured by the amount of energy he spent in honoring them – and this at the risk of the terrible punishment meted out to those who took part in pagan ceremonies in which the colonists saw nothing but sorcery... The overexertion was so crushing that the life of a Negro sold to a plantation in Saint-Dominique was reckoned*

*at never more than ten years. We can but admire the devotion of those slaves who sacrificed their rest and their sleep to resurrect the religions of their tribes – this under the very eyes of the Whites, and in the most precarious conditions. Think what energy, what courage it took to enable the songs and rites due to each god to be handed down across the generations!*

In the West Indies these practices survived. In North America they largely didn't. Except in New Orleans, slaves (of different owners) were not allowed to gather in groups, even for entertainment. Again except in New Orleans, drums were forbidden. In place of drumming, North American slaves developed what we now know as tap dancing, but the loss of the drum meant the loss of their ceremonies. Their Africa survived in silence, without form, waiting for the evolution of new forms to revive it. For the survival of Africa in African forms we have to look to the West Indies. There were reliable accounts dating from the late 1700s until the present describing ceremonies in which African metaphysics not only survived but thrived.

The stately impression we are given of the depth of African life is nothing like the vibes we get from the word "voodoo." Voodoo is the African aesthetic shattered and then desperately put back together. More than simply "put back together," it has been recreated to serve its people under the shattering impact of slavery and poverty. Voodoo is not so much Africa *in* the New World as it is Africa meeting the New World, absorbing it and being absorbed by it, and *re-forming* the ancient metaphysics according to what it now had to face.

How many metaphysics, ever, have been tested under such fire?

A vast synthesis had to occur. Tribes, thrown together, had to sift through what they had most in common and discard what had previously kept them apart. People who were separated by class and caste within the tribal structure had to come together on new terms. Catholicism had to be dealt with. From the late 1700s to this day Haitian Voodooos profess themselves to be good Catholics, and Catholic prayers have become an integral part of Voodoo ceremony – and had obviously been so for a long while when the fact was finally noted by white observers around 1820. Catholicism employed saint worship, and had indeed fostered saint worship as an accommodation to pagan converts, so Voodoo presented nothing new. Africans, for their part, loved Catholic iconography. They felt they were seeing pictures of their gods. Saint Patrick holding a scepter and commanding snakes was obviously, as far as they were concerned, a shaman – a *hungan* – with a power-stick (in the popular print, the saint's scepter looks much like the ceremonial staff passed from speaker to speaker in some tribal councils as a symbol of the right and authority to speak); he was communing with serpents. This became a favorite depiction of Damballah-wedo, the great serpent spirit. In Saint James on his horse, wielding his sword, they saw their warrior spirit Ogu. Writes Thompson, "Everywhere in *vodun* art, one universe abuts another."

But the religion keeps the same goal. The *hungan* may be healer, personal adviser, and political broker, but his – or, for a *mambo*, hers, for women are as numerous and powerful as men in this religion – most important function is to organize and preside over the ceremonies in which the *loa*, the gods, "ride" the body of the worshiper. The ecstasy *and* morality of *vodun* intersect in this phenomenon. The god is seen as the rider, the person is seen as the horse, and they come together in the dance. When the god speaks

through the person *about* that person, almost every sentence is prefaced with the phrase “Tell my horse...” – because the “horse” will have no memory of the “ride” when it is over, and will have to be told by others. The morality implicit in this is stated best in Maya Deren’s favorite Haitian proverb: *Great gods cannot ride little horses.*

“There’s a whole language of possession,” Thompson writes, “a different expression and stance for each god.” All the accounts are clear that a god is instantly recognized by its movements, and the movements are different for each. So if the ceremony is to honor Ghede, their equivalent of Hermes, perhaps Erzulie, their Aphrodite, shows up uninvited. But she is recognizable whether she rides a man or a woman because of her distinctive movements and behavior. This suggests a psychic suppleness that has to be staggering to any Westerner. Staggering, and frightening, if we are honest with ourselves. We may speak of a new model of the psyche, we may even be learning to experience life in a way that is more true to the many-faced psyches are structured – which is to say, the way we were created to live – but here are people who can *dance* it!

Here are people who can, to use Jungian terminology, *embody* an archetype – any single Voodoo worshiper may embody many during a lifetime of ceremonies. They will dance it, speak it, make love through it, manifest it in every possible way, entering and leaving the experience *without psychosis*, without “mind-expanding” drugs, and while having the support and help of their community, for all of this is integral with their daily lives.

Can there be much doubt that this is a metaphysical achievement as great as, say, the building the Chartres or the writing of the Bhagavad-Gita? It’s no wonder that they risked so much to keep their metaphysics alive. These people built their cathedrals and wrote their scripture within their bodies, by means of a system that could be passed from one generation to the next. That system was rhythm.

In Haitian Voodoo, as in Africa, the drum is holy. The drummer is seen merely as the servant of the drum – he has no influence within the hierarchy of the religion, but through his drum he has great influence on the ceremony. Each *loa* prefers a fundamentally different rhythm, and the drummer knows them all and all their variations. He can often invoke possession by what he plays, though a drummer would never play a rhythm that would go contrary to the ceremony’s structure as set by the *hungan* or *mambo*. There are drums which are ceremonially fed the night before a gathering, and then “put to bed” to bolster their strength. And here, too, are the drums of silence.

The drumming and dancing together form an entity from which, in Metraux’s words (and my italics), “emanates a power *that affects the supernatural world...* If the music and dancing please the spirits to such an extent that they are affected, even against their will, then it is because *they themselves are dancers* who allow themselves to be carried away by the supernatural power of rhythm.”

To dance is to meditate because the universe dances. And, because the universe dances, “he who does not dance does not know what happens.” [Jesus, in The Acts of John, translated by Elaine Pagels]

This is, literally, the body and soul of Voodoo, but it is not what Westerners think of when they think of Voodoo. They think of drums, perhaps, but also of potions, spells, sorcery and zombies. Much of what’s lumped together by Westerners that way are forms of healing and forms of prayer. Some of it is sorcery in the classic sense, invoking the supernatural for the control of others. I mention these only to note that Voodoo, like

Judeo-Christianism, has its nether side, but it defines that nether area differently. For Judeo-Christianism the nether side *is* the body. The Fall came about through the body. The apple was *eaten*. The Fall *became* the body. The resulting mind-body split pervades everything. Even when Westerners go East for philosophy, to India especially, they often seek techniques for controlling and pacifying the body, which still, to their “enlightened” minds, is evil meat. Kundalini especially turns sex (body energy) into mind (spirit energy).

The nether side of Voodoo is completely different. Its witchy potions, amulets and evil spells *are* for interfering with and controlling the body, but the *implication* is that the body’s progress is natural, even, as in the dance, holy, while manipulation is not. Manipulation is unclean. And to create a zombie (a corpse brought back to life) is the ultimate evil magic, because a body then is not allowed to go to its rest and join the *loa*, perhaps to become a *loa* itself.

I mention these to emphasize that even in its perverse forms – and every religion has its perverse forms – Voodoo consistently emphasizes that the holy and the earthly *are supposed to* meld in the body itself, and that to split the mind from the body is to do evil.

Voodoo is fundamentally African, yet there is more than Africa in Voodoo. Metraux mentions Masonic elements, and he states that the Voodooos “have kept alive beliefs and rituals inherited from the ancient religions of the classical East and the Aegean world.” The mythologist Joseph Campbell, who edited Deren’s book *Divine Horsemen*, says in his forward that the “day to day epiphanies of Voudoun” are what the Greeks called being “full of the God,” and that this is fundamentally the same experience “as precipitated much of the mythology preserved in Greek and Roman documents...” he also believed that it’s possible “to recognize the well-preserved lineaments in Haitian Voodoo of an esoteric philosophy of the Gnostic-Hermetic-Kabbalistic order.”

I don’t mean to get so academic, but remember, we’re on the trail of the metaphysics of American music. It’s a very winding trail, it goes through jungles, and there are places where it’s completely overgrown. The major studies don’t mention that Africans were not the only slaves in the West Indies; they were not even the only slaves who had a non-Christian – usually called, in unconsciously slanted language, “pre-Christian” – cosmology. In the 1650s, after Oliver Cromwell had conquered Ireland in a series of massacres, he left his brother, Henry, as the island’s governor. In the next decade Henry sold thousands of Irish people, mostly women and children, as slaves to the West Indies. Estimates range between 30,000 and 80,000. The higher number seems quite likely, in the light of a letter Henry Cromwell wrote to a slaver, saying “it is not in the least doubted you may have such a number of them as you think fitt [sic]... I desire to express as much zeal in this design as you could wish.” This Henry of the Uprighte Harte, as he called himself, said in another letter to a slaver who wanted only girls, “I think it might be of like advantage fitt to sende 1500 or 2000 young boys aforementioned. We could well spare them...”

The Irish slaves, most of them women, were mated with the Africans. There is “a tradition” – as historians sometimes call something which they have good reason to believe but can’t prove – that up to the early nineteenth century there were blacks on some of the islands who spoke Gaelic. In any case, the West Indian accent becomes much more comprehensible when the Irish slaves are taken into account. If you don’t know



anyone from there, listen to the language in a film like *The Harder They Come*. The Irish tinge is unmistakable.

Why were these people sold into slavery? Henry gives us clues: “Concerning the young women, although we must use force takeinge them up, yet it beinge so much to their owne goode...” And in another letter, the one in which he suggests some men be taken too: “who knows but that it may be the meanes to make them Englishmen, I mean rather Christians.” In other words, Henry was trying to sell off as many pagans as he could. This was at the height of the English witch-craze, which was a pogrom against those who still adhered to the Celtic religions. Ireland was the stronghold for the old beliefs. This, better than anything else, explains the mercilessness of Cromwell’s massacres there. How widespread would such beliefs have been? I know a woman whose Irish grandmother, in the 1950s, still referred to Christianity as “the new religion,” and taught her granddaughter what she could remember of the old Celtic rites. Jeanne Moreau’s film *L’Adolescente* tells of a similar experience she had with her grandmother in rural France in the late 1930s. Such stories speak of traditions that had strength through the nineteenth century in Europe. In Cromwell’s time “sabbats” are well-documented throughout the continent, and in Ireland the old ways were more a way of life than anywhere else.

And so we find, in West Indian Voodoo, a centerpost, a gaily painted pole very like the maypole that survives in Europe from Celtic pagan celebration, at the center of every ceremony. You see it plainly in Maya Deren’s 1949 footage, made into a documentary in the 1950s, titled, as is her book, *Divine Horsemen*. The gods are said to enter through the centerpost, and the dances for most ceremonies revolve around the centerpost. We don’t find this in the accounts from Africa. It speaks of a definite Irish-pagan influence. Virtually every account of Voodoo notes, at some point, how similar are its sorcery practices to the practices of European witchcraft, but no one has, to my knowledge, mentioned the connection with Irish slaves.

We will never have evidence, but nevertheless we have a good case: practicing pagans from Ireland infused their beliefs with the Africans, mingling in Voodoo two great streams of non-Christianist metaphysics. The snake, after all, was a holy symbol to both – Saint Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland, the classic statue of the Virgin Mary with her bare foot crushing a snake, were political cartoons in the sense that they symbolized Catholic domination over Celtic paganism. In their beliefs and symbology the pagan Irish were closer to Africa than to Puritan England. This is part of our buried history, and as we bring it out into the light it will become more important.

All of them – the many, many Africans who created Voodoo and the, let’s say, 40,000 Irish who gave to Voodoo some of their flourishes and sorcery – would have their revenge. Jazz and rock’n’roll would evolve from Voodoo, carrying within them a metaphysical antidote for both the ravages of the mind-body split codified by Christianity and the onset of technology. The twentieth century would dance as no other had, and, through that dance, secrets would be passed. First North America, and then the whole world, would – like the old blues says – “hear that long snake moan.”

The questions of how Haitian Voodoo came to the continental United States, and the question of why jazz originated in New Orleans, are in fact parts of the same question. These questions haven’t been joined before because people who wrote extensively about

Voodoo haven't known much about American music, and people who've documented the history of American music, while establishing the beginning of the music in New Orleans, haven't considered *why* the music should have begun there rather than elsewhere. They've celebrated the facts without trying to interpret them.

New Orleans was unique in the south in more ways than one. It was the largest city, and an important port through which the whole world passed. Until the Louisiana Purchase it was a Spanish and French city with a large population of "free people of color" (33 percent of its population in 1788, 25 percent in 1810). So it was the only major city in the United States that was not Anglo-Saxon and not Protestant, and not even all white. Here was the same brand of Catholicism that had lived easily with African metaphysics in the West Indies. And, as I've said, believers in Voodoo usually proclaim themselves good Catholics.

A fascinating aside: while Catholicism and Voodoo blend, Protestantism and Voodoo are always at odds. A Haitian saying goes, "If you want the *loa* to leave you alone – become a Protestant." Metraux observed that some Voodoos become Protestants not out of faith but because "they felt themselves to be the target of angry *loa* and saw in Protestantism a refuge. Hence Protestantism beckons as though it were a shelter, or more precisely a magic circle, where people cannot be got at by *loa* or demons." In Protestantism we have the mind-body split at its most virulent, and anything which threatens the single-"I," egocentric view of the psyche is looked on with horror. A poverty of religious art. A Puritan morality trying to fulfill the function of spirituality. An equation of goodness with denial. It is no wonder Voodoo is beyond their toleration.

To return to New Orleans: finally, it was the only place in the United States where slaves (of different owners) were allowed to gather among themselves for their "entertainments," as they were called, and, most importantly, to play drums: therefore, it was the only place where slaves were allowed to form a culture of their own.

Yet white people in Louisiana knew and felt threatened by Voodoo. In 1782 Governor Galvez banned the buying of any blacks from Martinique because Voodoo was so strong there that they "would make the lives of the citizens unsafe." Ten years later blacks from Santo Domingo and Haiti were also banned. Whites had reason to be afraid. Haiti was at the beginning of the slave revolution that would make it the second republic of the New World and the location of the first successful black independence movement. Haitian historians fix the beginning of the revolution at a Voodoo ceremony on August 14, 1791, and believe Voodoo to be responsible for giving the slaves the unity that made their victory possible.

The Louisiana ban was lifted in 1803, though the Haitian turmoil was at its height (independence would be proclaimed in 1804). War continued in Haiti for some time, however, and many West Indians, including free blacks, emigrated to New Orleans because of the conflict. Robert Tallant, in his *Voodoo in New Orleans*, cites this as "the beginning of organized Voodoo" there, though the word "organized" may be too much of a word for what happened.

Every history of jazz goes back to the slave celebrations in a field that came to be called Congo Square, in what was then the center of New Orleans. (Interestingly, the Oumas Indians once used the field for their corn feasts and considered it holy ground.) On Sundays, slaves from all over the city arrived, watched over by white police and an encircling throng of white spectators. The festivities were described in writing by

fascinated and shocked spectators again and again. One of the best is from Henry Edward Durrell, written in 1853, the heyday of the Congo Square dances:

*Let a stranger to New Orleans visit of an afternoon of one of its holy days, the public squares in the lower portion of the city, and he will find them filled with its African population, tricked out with every variety of show costume, joyous, wild, and in the full exercise of real saturnalia...*

*Upon entering the square, the visitor finds the multitude packed in groups of close, narrow circles, of a central area of only a few feet; and there in the center of each circle sits the musician, astride a barrel, strong-headed, which he beats with two sticks, to a strange measure incessantly, like mad, for hours together, while the perspiration literally rolls in streams and wets the ground; and there, labor the dancers male and female, under an inspiration of possession, which takes from their limbs all sense of weariness, and gives to them a rapidity and a duration of motion that will hardly be found elsewhere outside of mere machinery. The head rests upon the breast, or is thrown back upon the shoulders, the eyes closed, or glaring, while the arms, amid cries, and shouts, and sharp ejaculations, float upon the air, or keep time, with the hands patting the thighs, to a music which is seemingly eternal.*

Keep in mind that Metraux observed in Haiti a century later: “The classic distinction between dances sacred and profane is not always very clear... at certain public jollifications dances are done which differ little or not at all from ritual dances.”

This seems especially true of the Congo Square dances when you learn why Congo Square happened in the first place. The dances were an attempt by the city government to deal with the increase in Voodoo that had resulted from the recent Haitian immigration. It was feared that Voodoo meetings were being held to work sorcery against whites, and perhaps to plot revolution, so in 1817 the Municipal Council forbade slaves to congregate for any reason, including dancing, except in designated places on Sundays. Congo Square was the major place.

This is the way of things. It was precisely by trying to stop Voodoo that, for the first time in the New World, African music and dancing was presented both for Africans and whites as an end in itself, a form of its own. Here was the metaphysics of Africa set loose from the forms of Africa. For this form of *performance* wasn't African. In the ceremonies of Voodoo there is no audience. Some may dance and some may watch, but those roles may change several times in a ceremony, and all are participants. In Congo Square, African music was put into a Western form of presentation. From 1817 until the early 1870s, these dances went on with few interruptions, the dance and music focused upon for their own sake by both participants and spectators. It is likely that this was the first time blacks became aware of the music *as music* instead of strictly as a part of ceremony. Which means that in Congo Square, African metaphysics first became subsumed in the music. A secret within the music instead of the object of the music. A possibility embodied by the music, instead of the music existing strictly as this metaphysics' *technique*. On the one hand, something marvelous was lost. On the other, only by separating the music from the religion could either the music or metaphysics within it leave their origins and deeply influence a wider sphere.

In his forward to Maya Deren's book, Joseph Campbell quotes Ananda K. Coomaraswamy as saying, "The content of folklore is metaphysical... *So long as the material of folklore is transmitted, so long is the ground available on which the superstructure of full initiatory understanding can be built.*" (Coomaraswamy's italics.) In African culture, what they are calling folklore is at least as much musical as verbal. One day the music would carry initiations to people who would only vaguely sense they were being initiated, but who would feel compelled to join the dance. As happens with initiations, their dance would change their lives.

It is time to speak of Marie Laveau. In New Orleans she is a legend, but stories are told of her – conversationally and in print – without any attempt to assess her significance. If you go to her tomb in the oldest cemetery of the city – St. Louis Cemetery #1, right near where Storyville used to stand, and a brief walk from the old site of Congo Square – you will see fresh offerings and old ones, tidbits that are the remains of Voodoo charms, and chalked X's people have made to help their prayers find Marie. I suspected some tourist-conscious caretaker of doing it until I saw people – not tourists – leave plastic flowers. As for me, I left a note of thanks, for the more I consider the achievements of Marie Laveau, the more I feel her to be one of the most important Americans of the nineteenth century.

Yet what we know of her is piecemeal, though her name still resonates in New Orleans a century after her death. Marie Laveau was what we once would call a witch and now might call a shaman. In Haiti she would have been called a *mambo* and in New Orleans she was called a queen. She was racially a mixture of black, Indian, and white. Her father was said to be a wealthy white planter, and her marriage certificate says she was illegitimate. A free woman of color – virtually all the New Orleans "doctors" (hungans) and queens were free blacks – both her first husband Jacques Paris and her second, deGlapon (whom she never officially married, but lived with for decades and to whom she bore, it is said, fifteen children!) came from Haiti. The first official record of her is of her first marriage in 1819. The marriage contract called her "a native of New Orleans," but the innovations she would bring to Voodoo were Haitian. By 1830, she was considered the queen of all the New Orleans Voodoos.

The dances on Congo Square hadn't stopped or even distracted the practice of Voodoo. Out on Bayou St. John and Lake Pontchartrain huge ceremonies occurred regularly. They would continue till nearly the end of the nineteenth century. When Marie Laveau became queen – overpowering, and, it is said, sometimes causing the death of other queens who wouldn't become subordinate to her – she presided both at Congo Square dances and at the lake ceremonies, as well as at the many smaller gatherings that were held for initiates alone. She is said to have given New Orleans Voodoo the Haitian stamp of Catholicism, and to have maintained throughout her long reign – she died in 1881 – that her people were Catholics and that she offered Voodoo to God.

White New Orleans knew her as a powerful woman. In her early years as hairdresser to New Orleans' elite, and she is said to have developed an intelligence network of hairdressers, servants, and slaves to ferret out the most embarrassing secrets of the white rich and to use them for blackmail. This seems to have made her invulnerable to the law. Over the years she was in court many times, on various charges and in various suits, and never lost a case. Neither her ceremonies nor her house (or houses) of prostitution were ever raided, at least as far as court records show. And she could come and go at will

visiting the prisons (which she apparently did strictly as a lay Catholic, spending a great deal of time with prisoners who had been sentenced to death, bringing food, building altars, and praying with them). She opened the huge ceremonies on Lake Ponchartrain and Bayou St. John to whites and went so far as to invite the press at times. (From the beginning of the nineteenth century, whites – especially women – were heavily involved in Voodoo, especially the more orgiastic practices, and it was common, in the raids, for half the people to be arrested to be whites. This no doubt contributed to the southern saying that “there ain’t no white people in New Orleans,” and Bessie Smith’s line to the effect that New Orleans is a right fine place, “whatever the folks do, the white folk do it too.”) In 1850 the *Daily Picayune* referred to Marie Laveau in an article as “the head of the Voudou women,” and she was still presiding over the more important lakeside ceremonies in 1869, when the *New Orleans Times* gave the last description of her doing so.

One of Robert Tallant’s informants, an old man speaking around 1940, remembered what his grandfather told him as a boy: “Marie Laveau had a dance she did all by herself. She would wrap that snake around her shoulders and she’d shake and twist herself like she was a snake. Her feet would never move. She had another dance she did wit’ a fish. She’d hold a big redfish behind her head and do her snake dance. My grandfather said that was something to see.” This is virtually the same dance that Moreau de Saint-Mary described at the end of Haiti’s colonial period: the *mambo* stands on a box in which the snake lies “and is penetrated by the god; she writhes; her whole body is convulsed and the oracle speaks from her mouths.” (The snake in the box is also described in many accounts of the nineteenth century New Orleans ceremonies.)

If we put it all together we see a black woman strong enough to have real authority in a time when neither blacks nor women had any, in the South, right through the Civil War and Reconstruction. We see a woman who was a shaman, and therefore, to have any reputation, had to be a healer as well as a hexer. A woman through whom gods and goddesses – or, if you prefer, archetypes – spoke, and who could induce this state in others. A woman who felt deeply enough about her theology to enforce its particular tenets – Voodoo-Catholicism – on her people. A woman who was hustler enough to make money through the gullibility of whites (and blacks, too, no doubt), tough enough to make more through prostitution, and cunning enough to protect herself and her religion from white law. And this money was not spent on herself: she lived most of her life on St. Anne Street in the Latin Quarter, with her virtual tribe of children and grandchildren, and had all the expenses of being a *mambo* – in Haiti it’s the shaman’s responsibility to provide the means for the ceremonies. It must have taken a steady flow of money just to keep up her work. *And* she was a dancer – by all accounts an incredible one, even among a society of incredible dancers. How many other figures have we in our history with such a range, with such long-lasting authority, and whose power – political, social, and spiritual – had nothing to back it up but her own intensity?

It is clear, both from the facts as we have them and from the power of her legend, that Marie Laveau centered and anchored what might otherwise have been continually more scattered and dissipating practices, especially with the shocks of the Civil War and Reconstruction – practices which, significantly, were ended on a large scale very soon after her death. Her centering effect can’t be underestimated. What elsewhere in the South was a people who had to disguise its expression and conceal its spirit became in

her reign a true culture, a culture that felt its identity deeply *as a culture*. And only out of such intensely felt culture could a creation like jazz be born.

Our accounts of Voodoo in New Orleans at that time are by whites who could not see past its strangeness and sensuality, but there's no reason to suppose it was any less a vehicle for African metaphysics than Haiti's, especially in the light of the astonishing musical flowering that soon came out of those people. Marie Laveau did not "create" this cultural moment – but it's fair to assume that a person of her range was aware of what was at stake. She saw a role to be played in that world and she played it to the hilt, helping to coalesce a scattered and oppressed people into a culture. Out of that intensely localized culture would come a music that would leave its mark on the whole world, a music born out of what music historian Alan Lomax calls "a moment of cultural ecstasy." The shaman Marie Laveau is – along with the Indian medicine men, the Puritan preachers, the Mormon prophets, and our greatest revivalists – one of the major religious figures in American history.

The last account we have of her was an article published in 1886 by George W. Cable, a journalist considered in the South of that day second only to Mark Twain:

*I saw once, in extreme old age, the famed Marie Laveau. Her dwelling was in the quadroom quarter of New Orleans, but a step or two from Congo Square... In the center of the small room whose ancient cypress floor was worn with scrubbing, sprinkled with crumbs of soft brick – a Creole affectation of superior cleanliness – sat, quaking with feebleness in an ill-looking old rocking chair, her body bowed, her wild, gray witch's tresses hanging about her shriveled, yellow neck, the queen of the Voodoos. Three generations of her children were within the faint beckon of her helpless, wagging wrist and fingers. They said she was over a hundred years old, and there was nothing to cast doubt upon the statement. Yet withal one could hardly help but see that the face, now so withered, had once been handsome and commanding. There was still a faint shadow of departed beauty in the forehead, the spark of an old fire in the sunken, glistening eyes, and a vestige of imperiousness in the fine, slightly aquiline nose, and even about her silent, weebegone mouth... Her daughter was also present, a woman of some seventy years, and a most striking and majestic figure. In features, stature and bearing she was regal. One had but to look at her, and impute her brilliances – too untamable and severe to be called charms and graces – to her mother, and remember what New Orleans was long years ago, to understand how the name of Marie Laveau should have driven itself inextricably into the traditions of the town and the times.*

On June 16, 1881, New Orleans' newspapers announced that Marie Laveau was dead. They printed long, nostalgic articles about her. The *Times Democrat* wrote, "Much evil dies with her, but should we not add, a little poetry as well?" By "evil" they meant everything associated with the drum. But the "evil" they spoke of was just beginning.

American music starts here. At least, American music as we've known it. Within ten years of Marie Laveau's death the brass bands of New Orleans would be playing sounds no one had ever heard before. How important was Voodoo, the African metaphysical

system, to that time and place? There are contemporary accounts of large Voodoo celebrations on Lake Ponchartrain as late as 1875, and in 1895 they were written of as the quite recent past. All the men who were first playing jazz in the 1880s and 1890s would likely have known them firsthand, and most of them would be old enough to remember the dances of Congo Square as children (the dances were stopped in 1875 when New Orleans enacted its first Jim Crow laws, forbidding blacks to gather in a public park). In the redlight neighborhood known by musicians as “the District” and in legend as Storyville, Voodoo was, as one recorder has it, “the true religion.” Al Rose, in *Storyville*, writes that “an association of Storyville madams, which met regularly, agreed to refuse to use the services of Lala and other [Voodoo] practitioners on each other.” The favorite queen of the madams was Eulalie Echo. They were always requesting her services for cures and hexes. Her real name was Laura Hunter, and she raised Jelly Roll Morton. She was his godmother.

What was the strength of these forms? How seriously were they taken at that late date?

They show both a conscious and unconscious survival of the old ways. The best example of their conscious survival are the “Indians” of New Orleans, “gangs” of black men who dress head to foot in elaborate costumes of bright feathers, with huge headdresses, a true spectacle as they sing their songs in the parades of Mardi Gras. They give us some fascinating clues.

In 1938, Alan Lomax sat Jelly Roll Morton down at a piano and for five weeks recorded a verbal and musical autobiography. Morton described the Indians as he saw them in New Orleans in his youth. He was born in 1885, and he remembered them from his earliest boyhood. In 1938 Morton hadn’t lived in New Orleans, or even been there, for more than twenty years, but he sings the refrains of the black Indians – so-called nonsense words that have no literal meaning in any language spoken in New Orleans or anywhere else. In the mid-1970s, one of these “tribes,” the Wild Tchoupitoulas, recorded an album produced by the superb New Orleans rhythm-and-blues artist Allen Tossaint and co-produced, with background rhythm and vocals, by another living repository of New Orleans music, the Neville Brothers. Some of the tunes are credited to the Nevilles, some to “Big Chief” George Landry, then leader of the Wild Tchoupitoulas; but incorporated into these compositions as introductions and melodies are *precisely the same melodies, and precisely the same “nonsense” syllables*, that Jelly Roll Morton recorded forty years before, remembered from his boyhood nearly fifty years before that. When you remember that the black Indians were well established by the time Norton was born, you’re looking at precise musical preservation, in spite of the onslaught of media, for well over a century.

In Maya Deren’s 1949 documentary, you see Haitians on parade in exactly the same costumes; you see them in Brazil’s celebrations too. Deren’s footage of Haitian ceremonies show them opening with two flag-bearers flanking a sword-bearer, corresponding exactly to the “flag-boys” and “knife-boys” of the New Orleans “Indians” in their ritual place as they parade. The authentic Voodoo ceremony filmed in Marcel Camus’ *Black Orpheus* (1958) in Rio de Janeiro, shows the *hungan* in Indian headdress and with a ceremonial bow hung around his shoulder. In Haiti and Brazil the connection with Voodoo is clear and strong; in New Orleans, nobody’s saying. The point is that *forms* which were certainly begun before the Civil War, and perhaps in Haiti much earlier, and clearly connected with Voodoo, have remained constant and vital in New

Orleans until today. And spirit always adheres to forms. *That is why forms survive.* Because even when specifics are forgotten, a form can retain the aura of what originated it and so pass on not the doctrine but the sense of life.

A far less conscious but far more important survival of African metaphysics in North America manifests itself in the black Sanctified and Holiness churches – where even today in the services, the women wear white dresses, with white kerchief-like headpieces, that are identical to what the Haitian Voodoo women wear in ceremonies photographed by Maya Deren. But the relationship of black churches to Africa goes far deeper than that. As James Baldwin puts it in *The Devil Finds Work*, “The blacks did not so much use Christian symbols as recognize them – recognize them for what they were before Christians came along – and, thus, reinvest these symbols with their original energy.”

Even free blacks were not allowed to have their own Christianist churches in North America until the 1840s. The movement grew in the 1850s, and after the Civil War it was everywhere. But 300 years is a long time to worship Jesus with African forms, and the style of the black church was instantly recognizable as African. Jefferson Hamilton of New England described one of the earliest churches in Louisiana in April of 1840: “The meeting commences with singing, through the whole congregation; loud and louder still were the devotions – and oh! what music, what devotion, what streaming eyes, and throbbing hearts; my blood ran quick in my veins, and quicker still... It seems as though the roof would rise from the walls, and some of them would go up, soul and body both.”

*Soul and body both.* From the first, there was no mind-body split in the *practice* of African Christianity, though the doctrine was just as fundamentalist, just as Puritan. The *style* of southern fundamentalism, as we know it today, white and black, came straight out of African churches. Watch Jimmy Swaggart preach on television, and then see Ousmane Sembene’s Senegalese film *Ceddo*, and you see that style of address and retort that most fundamentalist preachers use is the formal style of an African tribal meeting. There’s literally no difference but that in the tribal setting, as presented by Sembene, the Africans are more formal and have more decorum.

This is the bind the South has been in for at least a century and a half. A religion of denial worshipped with a religious *practice* that is anything but denial – the church sending out two contradictory signals at the same time, one to the body and one to the mind. So it should be no surprise that rhythm and blues and rock’n’roll leaped from the South. Little Richard, Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, Janis Joplin, all would rise out of places within a day’s drive to New Orleans, and they would sing their music with holy fury, with bodily abandon, that simply had never been seen before in Western performance. Little Richard would end up as a Pentacostal preacher doing *his same act* to a Christianist liturgy – so would soul singer Al Green. Elvis Presley would contritely record the spirituals of his youth. Jerry Lee Lewis, who was a preacher for a short time in his youth, would be convinced that he was possessed by the Devil but would play anyway – “I’m draggin’ the audience t’Hell with me,” he would say. Virtually all the most influential black singers would begin (and this is still so) in church: Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, Marvin Gaye, and on and on, the list too long to write here. A doctrine that denied the body, preached by a practice that excited the body, would eventually drive the body into fulfilling itself elsewhere. Amidst all denials, the worshipper would long for the body-mind unity felt when the church as “rocking.” In those churches the African metaphysic and the Western metaphysic would blend, clash,



feed and battle each other, in each and every soul. It is no wonder there is such weeping in a fundamentalist service.

The style of a Jimmy Swaggart (who, by the way, is Jerry Lee Lewis' cousin) would contradict every word he preached, and both he and his listeners would be ensnared in that contradiction, and this would be the source of the terrible tension that drives their unchecked paranoias.

W.E.B. DuBois described black Christianist religion as a meeting of three elements: "The Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy." It is in the frenzy that, with both black and white fundamentalists, we find African Voodoo absolutely intact, with merely the symbols changed. The object of Voodoo ceremony is possession by the god. Possession by the Holy Ghost is as much "a formal goal of the religion" in Holiness and Pentecostal churches as possession is in Voodoo. Writes Paul Oliver in his *Songsters and Saints*, "Placing oneself in the hands of God, the supplicant sought possession by the Holy Spirit... Glossolalia, or uttering unintelligible syllables believed to be the language of the Holy Ghost, was evidence to many that the speaker was possessed by the Holy Spirit... and this was an essential part of the process of sanctification. People possessed of the Spirit in church might 'fall out' in a trance and might even require to be forcibly held down or controlled until they came around."

Metraux observed the relationship, too, saying that "a pentacostal preacher describing his feelings when 'the spirit was upon him,' listed to me exactly the same symptoms as those which I heard from the mouths of people who had been possessed by the *loa*... Undeniably the ecstasy which breaks out during the ceremonies of certain Protestant sects in the South of the United States reflects a survival, if not of the rites, then at least of the religious behavior."

The wild movements of the "horse" mounted by the godly "rider"; the wild speech, including speaking in tongues, which on Haiti is sometimes referred to as "talking with Africa"; the unpredictability of the possession, how, excited by the music, the frenzy can strike people who don't want it and don't believe in it – you find all of these central Voodoo phenomena in most black and white fundamentalist churches. Maya Deren tells of first resisting and then being overpowered by a god during a ceremony she was observing; James Baldwin, in *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, describes suddenly being possessed against his will by the Holy Ghost. Maya Deren described the climax of her involuntary-possession experience as "a white darkness"; Baldwin, after an infinitely more detailed and subtle passage, says, "the darkness, for a moment only, was filled with a light I could not bear." It should be no surprise that Baldwin's Christianist sense of the experience separates the light and dark at the climax, while Deren's Voodoo sense of the same experience blends both into "a white darkness."

So. We are in New Orleans, circa 1890. We know the depth and range of the African metaphysic as it is alive in the black culture of that moment. The twentieth century is already taking hold. Congo Square has been empty for fifteen years, to become a quiet park and then, in our day, a sports auditorium. (That Indian holy ground seems destined to be the place where people release themselves in abandon.) Bayou St. John and Lake Pontchartrain have seen the last time that thousands would gather in a Voodoo celebration. What observers would describe as genuinely African drumming and dancing would continue in New Orleans into the first part of the twentieth century, but it would

no longer be focal to the life there. The African metaphysic was about to blend with black-American needs, European instruments, and Euro-American musical forms to create the first great wave of American music.

The brass band was already an American tradition when Sousa's marches swept the country in the 1890s. In New Orleans, the brass band blended with another living African tradition, vivid in Voodoo: ancestor worship. Not to hire musicians, not to sing, not to feast at a death, would have been sacrilegious. The liturgy was Christianist now, but the impulse for the ceremony was African – or, to use another word, pagan. For it is no accident that what most closely resembles an old New Orleans funeral is an Irish wake – these are the two modern cultures that are most in touch with their non-Christian roots.

The more socially acceptable, light-complexioned, and financially well-off Creole musicians – many of whom came from free people of color and not from slaves – tended to play their instruments “correctly,” to read music, and to play for white functions. The darker, poorer, slave-rooted Negroes – as they were called at the time, distinguishing them from Creoles – played a very different music, closer both to Africa and to the blues. These were the people who came directly out of the Congo Square dances and the Lake Pontchartrain celebrations, and they played their Western instruments with the simultaneity, interchange, and percussive force of African music. They looked to their instruments for a different sound entirely, and got it. They played a lot of blues – which was the sound Africans had created when, in the United States, they had been deprived of their drums, forbidden to sing their tribal songs, and usually even forbidden, during slavery, to have their own Christianist churches. The blues was everything African that had been lost, distilled into a sound where it could be found again. And the blues was the losing and the finding, as well. One man could play the blues. So it was a form that allowed one man to preserve, add to, and pass on what in its native form had taken a tribe. Its beat was so implicit that the African, for the first time, didn't need a drum. The holy drum, the drum that is always silent, lived in the blues. One man with a guitar could play the blues and his entire tradition would be alive in his playing. Louis de Lisle “Big Eye” Nelson, considered the first man in New Orleans to play a “hot” clarinet, told Alan Lomax from his final sickbed in the 1940s, “The blues? Ain't no first blues. The blues always been. Blues is what cause the fellows to start jazzing.”

Everyone there at the time said that the first man to play what came to be called “jazz” was the cornet player Buddy Bolden, sometime in the early 1890s. And what he usually played was the blues.

Here was the African metaphysic distilled by American circumstances into an extraordinary supple form and played on European instruments with African simultaneity in an American-marching-band lineup. Here was the fruit of the hundred years' cohesion of New Orleans black culture – the sense of shared heritage, the sense of identity, fostered and exemplified by Marie Laveau. Here was a metaphysics finding, for the first time, an authentically American voice. What had been played at Congo Square was African music. What was played by Sousa and the popular songsters of the time was still a music derivative of Europe – especially of English music halls and Scotch-Irish airs. What Buddy Bolden started to play was American music. Within thirty years its impact would make an American tune instantly distinguishable from a European tune, no matter how strait-laced the music. And it would be a music, in all its forms, that would reject

Puritan America. Even at its mildest it would have a beat, and in that beat would be everything that denied the split between the mind and the body.

In rural blues, all this had been and would be implicit in the tense containment of the form. In Buddy Bolden's music, the implicit would instantly become the explicit.

Buddy Bolden. "On these old, slow blues," trombonist Bill Matthews remembered, "that boy could make the women jump out the window. On those old slow, low-down blues, he had a moan in his cornet that went all through you, just like you were in church or something." Words as close as we'll get to how Buddy Bolden sounded – no black jazz was recorded until 1920, and none recorded extensively until 1923; a precious quarter century lost – but it's significant that people talking about this very secular music very often reach for sacred images. "Like you were in church or something."

"His ability of playing had one indispensable feature, 'the trance.' He had the ability," wrote Harnett Kane in 1949 from descriptions of people who'd been there, "to immerse himself into the music until nothing mattered but himself and the cornet in fast communication."

Eighty years after Buddy Bolden, the jazz pianist and composer Cecil Taylor would use the same word that Kane's informants had used: "Most people don't have any idea what improvisation is... It means the magical lifting of one's spirits to a state of trance... It means experiencing oneself as another kind of living organism, much in the way of a plant, a tree – the growth, you see, that's what it is... it's not what to do with 'energy.' It has to do with religious forces."

Another musician-composer, Sun Ra: "I wanna... put them in a sort of dream state between myth and reality. I'm dealing with myth, magic, things of great value."

And Cecil Taylor once more: "Part of what this music about is not to be delineated exactly. It's about magic, capturing spirits."

Thus here are the terms of Voodoo made explicit as the aesthetic of an art.

As for Buddy Bolden, we only know for sure one thing he ever said. Many have quoted it, but the New Orleans trombonist Kid Ory put it best when he remembered: "I used to hear Bolden play every chance I got. I'd go to the where he was [to be] playing, and there wouldn't be a soul around. Then, when it was time to start the dance, he'd say, 'Let's call the children home.' And he'd put his horn out the window and blow, and everyone would come running."

Let's call the children home.

That's what this music is for.

The music was nurtured and grew from Voodoo, but as soon as it was itself and no longer strictly African it kept Voodoo's metaphysic wordless within it and jettisoned the trappings. The overt practice of Voodoo faded at the very moment the music was born, as though it had done its job here. Voodoo imagery would live in the lyrics and song titles through all the music's forms – jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, rock'n'roll and even some gospel – until the present, and many of the mojos sung about were real indeed. There is a lot of Voodoo practiced in the United States even now, particularly in New York, but it is furtive, scattered.

On a deeper level of consciousness, the archetypal snake, Damballah, would be sung of constantly and take many meanings. "I got a great long snake crawling around my room" is something Blind Lemon Jefferson, the first great rural blues singer to record, would

sing in the 1920s; Joe Ely would rock the same line in the 1980s, and in both cases the image would overpower the song and the singers would have to wail a mystery that included sex but was more than sex. Willie Dixon would write Voodoo lyrics that Muddy Waters would make famous; the old blues singer, Victoria Spivey, when she formed her own small record label in the 1960s, would use her logo a woman dancing with a snake. In the late 1970s Irma Thomas, the New Orleans singer, would record a tune called “Princess Lala” – based on Lala, a famous Voodoo queen in the New Orleans of the 1930s and 1940s – with a fairly accurate Voodoo practice described in the lyric. And there would be Voodoo rumors all along: that Buddy Bolden’s eventual insanity was a hex (though a man through whom so much numinous force was pouring might well break under the pressure after a few years); that Robert Johnson, the great blues player of the 1930s whose style and rhythms were a direct source for rock’n’roll, sold his soul to the Devil to play and sing like he did, and that he was done in by Voodoo; and the mourners at Jelly Roll Morton’s funeral would say that his godmother, Eulalie Echo, a queen of Storyville, had sold his soul for her power when she was young and ruined his chance for happiness (though he had plenty of soul to play with – nobody ever played with more – for forty years). These are serious people saying these things, and it would be unwise to discount them out of hand. If you *think* your soul’s been sold to the Devil, that could profoundly change your life, whether or not “soul” or “Devil” or a process of exchange exists. But we are interested here in how the metaphysics lived on in the music, not the practices, now, by what evidence there is, mostly degenerated from transcendence to sorcery. These Voodoo nuances linger as a kind of coda to the direct influence of indigenous African religion on American culture. From here, the African metaphysic will be felt all in the music, all in the body, its direct lineage to Africa a thing of the past.

The histories of jazz and rock’n’roll are usually considered separately, yet when taken together they tell a very different story. It is the story of how the American sense of the body changed and deepened in the twentieth century – how Americans began the slow, painful process, still barely started now, of transcending the mind-body split they’d inherited from European culture.

Much of what would be unique to the twentieth century appeared in its first few years. Around 1895 Buddy Bolden played the first jazz. In 1899 Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* and Scott Joplin wrote “Maple Leaf Rag.” In 1901 Marconi received radio signals from across the Atlantic. In 1903 the first feature film was shown in New York; Detroit had become the center of the automobile invention that had grown through the 1890s; the Wright Brothers took their first flight; and Marie and Pierre Curie were awarded the Nobel Prize for their work with radium, and their theories of radioactivity. In 1905 Einstein published his special theory of relativity. A tremendous energy was felt in the air, especially in the United States. No culture had ever been assaulted by such radical changes in so short a period, not before or since (for all the changes since have simply been extensions of these). Freud, Marconi, Edison, the Curies, and Einstein were demolishing the mechanical, linear outlook that had been Western thought for 500 years.

Henry Adams felt this with more clarity than anyone else of his time. Writing in 1906 in *The Education of Henry Adams*, he said, “Evidently the new American would need to

think in contradictions, and instead of Kant's famous four antinomies, the new universe would know no law that could not be proved by its anti-law."

Most people felt the changes inarticulately but no less profoundly. The very *air* of daily life was changing. This was not the pastoral time our conservatives would like to imagine it was. Children by the thousands were being worked mercilessly as virtual slave labor. Six- and seven-day work weeks, twelve-hour days, no benefits, and nominal pay were taken for granted by most people – a situation kept constant by a continual flow of desperate immigrants who needed any work they could get. The middle class was rising on their backs, and each immigrant wave strove to rise on the backs of the wave that followed it. When we look at the silent films of that time, especially the documentary footage, the flickering fast-speed gestures of the people seem peculiarly appropriate. They felt that their world was speeding up under them like a treadmill going out of control, and they raced in jerky awkward strides to keep up. Adams' description of New York in 1905 is only one of many of its kind by travelers in that America: "The outline of the city became frantic in its effort to explain something that defied meaning. Power seemed to have outgrown its servitude and exerted its freedom. The cylinder had exploded, and thrown great masses of stone and steam against the sky. The city had the air of movement and hysteria, and the citizens were crying, in every accent of anger and alarm, that the new forces must at any cost be brought under control. Prosperity never before imagined, speed never reached by anything but a meteor, had made the world irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable and afraid."

The description serves our year as well as his, but that just underscores how frightening it must have been to a world not yet used to being so frightened. We have a pretty good idea why we're afraid, by now. Their fear was much more instinctive, much less clear, and so it must have been even more disorienting in many ways than ours. Seen this way, it becomes less surprising that, only nine years after Adams' description, the world, unable to stand it anymore, exploded into the worst conflagration it had ever known – a slaughter so out of proportion to its rather trivial causes that it staggers the senses. Frightened people slaying frightened people in a mad fever to release the tension, and we have been doing it ever since, in a century that seems to begin and end every day.

For the most part, most of the time, most Western music – highbrow and lowbrow – could neither express nor release that tension. Even the greatest Western music, on the order of Bach and Mozart and Beethoven, was spiritual rather than physical. The mind-body split that defined Western culture was in its music as well. When you felt transported by Mozart or Brahms, it wasn't your body that was transported. The sensation often described is a body yearning to follow where its spirit has gone – the sense of a body being tugged upward, rising a little where you sit. And you almost always sit. And, for the most part, you sit comparatively still. The music doesn't change your body.

The classical dance that grew from this music had a stiff, straight back and moved in almost geometrical lines. The folk dances of the West were also physically contained, with linear gestures. The feet might move with wonderful flurries and intricate precision, but the hips and spine were kept rigid. That way, the energy that lived in the hips and the loins would proceed through proper channels – and those channels were defined well outside the dance. Western movement and music were as linear as its thought.

In 1899, Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" swept the United States. Joplin was working out of the "sporting houses" in Sedalia and St. Louis, Missouri, and his rag was

influenced by the blues, by Sousa marches, by European music, and by the sounds from New Orleans. Hectic but well-formed, it contained both the frantic air of the new and the poise of the old, as most good ragtime did during the next twenty years of the form's popularity. Joplin's piece perfectly suited both the instincts and the hesitations of his time. Respectable orchestras like John Philip Sousa's could record rags and remain respectable. The dances ragtime inspired were wilder than most dances had been but still had decorum. The twentieth century could be admitted without necessarily being joined. The great beauty of Joplin's music is how his sadness flows over the beat. A grief lives in his sounds: never defiant, like the blues; almost defeated, but profound. In the slower pieces it is, for me, very like the tone of Henry Adams' prose.

Music that had been listened to for generations was overwhelmed by Joplin's, because people needed a music that was both satisfying in itself and a way of experiencing their time – especially as even the best verbal ways had been outstripped. There was very little of the African metaphysic in Joplin's music, at least as compared to New Orleans jazz, but it cultivated the public's receptivity to that metaphysic.

That metaphysic continued "underground," as far as mainstream culture was concerned, until 1917, when some Italian-Americans from New Orleans calling themselves the Original Dixieland Jass Band, and claiming to have invented the music, recorded "Livery Stable Blues" and "The Original Dixieland One-Step." The world had gone mad, madder than anyone had ever thought it could, and ragtime was too mannerly to handle it. The ODJB's records were wild. They're still wild. With none of the musicianship, depth, or suppleness of the black New Orleans players who would have to wait another six years to record, the ODJB yet had a sound that pulled out all the stops. Every instrument is playing at once, full speed ahead, over a pounding drum. It's a giddy music, barely under control, and there's no way to dance to it but to wiggle your legs and flail your arms. Decorum is no longer important and no longer possible.

Their records sold in the millions, in numbers that would have made them superhits even in today's vastly larger market. The numbers were unheard-of then. Nearly everyone who owned a Victrola must have owned an ODJB record. What a desperate way for a still-Victorian people to behave. What a need gaped under their giddiness. In the war, bodies were fed into a bloody maw. In the living rooms back home, bodies were being coaxed to imitate the world's hysteria. In that imitation must have been some solace. The body, long forgotten, was chasing wildly after the mind.

By 1918 black bands, mostly migrated from New Orleans after the closing of Storyville the previous year, were playing in the influential night spots of Chicago and New York. From 1923, they recorded. We take for granted now that this was called the "jazz age" – a word most Americans hadn't heard before 1917. The image of upper-crust college students in raccoon coats dancing the Charleston to a Dixieland band is a cliché for us. We take for granted that Al Jolson, the first great American pop star, sang in black face, in black style, and danced with black moves. And danced with black moves. We take for granted that black tap dancing, as soon as it was widely seen, became *the* dance form of American show business. Minstrel shows in blackface had been a staple of American culture for a long time, but they had not saturated the culture. But now, here was this thing called jazz, and people seemed to need it.

Within six years of ODJB's first recordings, and a little more than twenty years after Joplin's first published rag, American popular culture had gone black – in its music, in its

dance, in its fashions, in its language, in virtually everything but its imagery which, except for blackface, remained relentlessly white. On the screen, blacks were ridiculed and worse. Offscreen, they were (and are) slavishly imitated. It's no coincidence that the same years saw the fierce resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan, inspired by D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, and that in 1919 northern cities saw their first race riots (described powerfully in James T. Farrell's novel *Studs Lonigan*). America was at war with itself as it had not been since 1865. What the body heard and felt was good, and the nation couldn't get enough of it. But Euro-American thought and values couldn't handle it, much less honor it.

In social terms, whites projected the mind-body split onto the whole country: whites were the mind, blacks were the body. Blacks were supposed to be incredibly potent, incredibly sexy, incredibly tough, and they had the infamous "natural sense of rhythm" – everything whites wanted and missed in their bodies were projected onto blacks. Christianity had always despised the body, and so most of its people despised blacks.

On the one hand, these are crude generalities. On the other hand, the realities they express are no less crude. James Baldwin puts it this way: "The root of the white man's hatred is terror, a bottomless and nameless terror, which focuses on the black, surfacing, and concentrating on this dread figure, an entity which lives only in his mind." Bottomless, yes, but perhaps not so nameless. It is the Christianist terror of having a body at all. The terror of that body's Original Sin, the terror of that body's death, the revulsion at that body's needs and functions, and the terror that one's very soul will be judged by how much control one was able to exert upon this filthy and insistent body. It is a terror expressed in every facet of Western life, a terror compacted into a tension beyond endurance, a tension that gave Western man the need to control every body he found – and he thanked his furious God that he found black bodies, because they were the screen on which he could project everything he feared and hated about his own. This is what made slavery so *appealing*. All that buying of black bodies, coveting of black bodies, putting black bodies up on the block, comparing them, assessing them, owning them – here at last the body could be both reviled and controlled.

Of course, all this had been around before the jazz age. But the heightened virulence of racism during this time has to be seen as a reaction to the sudden leap of black culture into such a central place in American life, becoming and remaining its dominant musical expression. This event brought to surface all our most dread diseases, all our most feared contradictions.

This was the first necessary step in a process of healing that has been taking place at the deepest levels of our culture ever since, and that continues its difficult way even as we speak. It is the great strength of this music that it has been able both to reveal the disease and further its healing. And the disease, again and again, whether manifesting itself as racism or an armaments rest, is the Western divorce of consciousness from flesh. "In the beginning was the Word," "I think therefore I am." The Second Coming will appear and the whore of Babylon (the body) will be dismembered by God. Every day even the most inarticulate among us live this out. And every day the very same people seek not to live it out, or why would so many fixate on a music, surround themselves with a music, in which lives a metaphysic that sees the body as *embodied*, as empowered, with numinous force?

By 1930, African rhythm – not African beats, but European beats transformed by the African – had entered American life to stay. Which is to say, the *technical language* and the *technique* of African metaphysics was a language we were all beginning, wordlessly, to know. America was excited by it. America was moving to it. America was resisting it. American intellectuals were pooh-poohing it. But the dialectic had been joined.

In the thirties and on into the forties, big-band jazz would be the dominant form, both commercially and, for a time, creatively. In Count Basie's band and Jay McShann's, Duke Ellington's and Earl Hines' and Benny Goodman, many of the soloists who were moving toward modern jazz, *mental* jazz, earned their living, deepened their art, and did some of their best work. But another tradition was going on at the same time that would be at least as important, and again it was going on among the poorest blacks, and again it was a matter of dancing. [*Note, 2006: This paragraph ignores the enormous influence of Swing Era dancing. Rich or poor, black or white, Americans never danced better. Swing remained our basic style of dancing well into the rock'n'roll era. Swing woke up the American body.*]

This was the blues that was being played in small cramped shacks – honky tonks, juke joints, barrel houses – at the edge of nearly every small town in the South, west into Texas, north into Chicago. When white intellectuals started to discover rural blues in significant numbers, in the late fifties and early sixties, they were discovering it out of context; for them, on records or in “folk music” settings it was strictly a music to be listened to. In the joints where it was played in its heyday, it was a dancing music. Sometimes it was a piano, sometimes a combination of instruments, and often just one man with a guitar, but people came to mingle, to gamble, and to dance. The relationship of musician to dancer was exactly the same as the relation of drummer to dancer in Haitian Voodoo, where a drummer worked closely with the dance and could often evoke possession at will. Texas barrelhouse piano player Robert Shaw put it this way much later: “When you listen to what I'm playing, you got to see in your mind all them gals out there swinging their butts and getting the mens excited. Otherwise you ain't got this music rightly understood. I could sit there and throw my hands down and make them gals do anything. I told them when to shake it and when to hold it back. That's what this music is for.”

Music historians have usually treated jazz separately from the stream that combines blues, rhythm and blues, and rock'n'roll, so they've failed to see the full scope of what happened musically in the years after the Second World War. In jazz, the big bands faded quickly after the war was over. There were no longer millions of lonely boys to be entertained everywhere, so the big bands became too costly to keep up. Only the most famous survived, and not in the manner to which they'd been accustomed. Radio and jukebox fare thinned as a result. It was mostly insipid show music now, not the full-bodied jazz people had danced to so furiously during the war. At the same time, the new jazz of Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and their cohorts, was a complex, intense music that was listened to, not danced to – the first African or African-influenced music ever primarily for listening. In this sense it was as non-African as Mozart. Yet, unlike European music, rhythm was its core; often melody and harmony were played almost as an aspect of rhythm. Many melodies (Dizzy Gillespie's “Salt Peanuts,” Thelonius Monk's “Mysterioso”) were generated by the rhythm. It was as though the African metaphysic, in order to continue itself, now needed to meditate about itself – to explore



its own complexities in a way that the religious music of Africa could not (it hadn't developed forms with which to meditate upon *itself*, as Western music had, and this was what jazz was now doing). In modern jazz more than in any previous form, improvisation would take the role that possession by the god had once taken, solos would be longer, more intricate, and less and less based upon Western laws of harmony and melody – a true entering into, and remaining in, another state of being, and *thinking* musically within that state. By the early sixties artists like Cecil Taylor and John Coltrane would be openly insisting that such meditation was precisely the object of their music.

To play for dancing was to focus on the listener; in this new jazz, for the first time, the focus was entirely on the musician. Ideally, the listener listened intently enough to join the improviser's trance. That was understood as the listener's job, the listener's act of creation. That made possible a depth of thought – thought expressed musically but thought nonetheless – fully the equal of European musical thought, but with the intensity, the rhythm and the constellation of meanings that had come out of Africa; and the "subject matter" was purely twentieth century. I submit that if you want a commentary on, say, James Hillman's book *The Dream and the Underworld*, listen to Cecil Taylor's *Live in the Black Forest*, Miles Davis' *In a Silent Way* or *Bitches' Brew*, Charles Mingus' *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*. Conversely, if you want to delve into that music verbally, even interpretively, read Hillman's book. Ornette Coleman and R.D. Laing, Rahsaan Roland Kirk and Joseph Chilton Pearce, Charles Mingus and William Irwin Thompson, Thelonious Monk and Robert Bly are brothers, dealing with the same subject matter in different mediums.

But these musicians paid a price for the tremendous concentration they achieved. They had largely left the dance behind. And, leaving the dance behind, they'd left the dancers. Not the dancing artists, who spent all their energies on their dances, but the rest of us, who, both knowingly and unconsciously, were still yearning for the dance to take us up and return our bodies to our hungry spirits. So it is no coincidence that the very same years – the mid-forties – that modern, mental jazz first got recorded were the years that rhythm and blues made its appearance. The dance *would be danced*. It would not be denied or stopped. It seemed to have a will of its own.

People who complain that amplified music is show-biz hype overlook the fact that the first musicians to start playing electrically amplified instruments regularly were backwoods, rural-blues players. Arthur "Big Boy" Cruddup was the first to accompany his singing on electric guitar for a record, in 1942. Over the next several years he made very popular "race" records, doing electrically the rhythms and feels that Robert Johnson had recorded acoustically in 1936. (In 1954, Elvis Presley's first recordings would be Big Boy Cruddup numbers, often imitating Cruddup's delivery note-for-note.) Sonny Boy Williamson, Professor Longhair, Pete Johnson, Big Joe Turner, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, Little Walter, and Clifton Chenier, among others, would by the late forties have created the lineup that would be a rock'n'roll band: electric guitar, drums, bass, harmonica and/or saxophone, and occasionally a piano. Those men made a wild, haunting music – the long snake moaning plain.

Theirs was the music, in those little sweaty juke joints, that Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins, among others, sneaked off to hear when they hit their teens in the late forties. These and the others who would first play what came to be known as

rock'n'roll were claimed by this music, this insistence by the dance itself that it survive. "Best music in the world," Lewis would say later. "Wilder than *my* music."

These young men were living more primitively than most people can imagine now. The main street of Lewis's hometown of Ferriday, Louisiana, wasn't paved till 1951; and he didn't live in a house with electricity and running water till he began to sell records in 1957. These young men attached themselves to this music against redneck strictures that we tend to brush aside now, but which took no small courage to transgress then. They had all been raised to think this was the Devil's music, and they pretty much believed that. They had all been raised to be deeply bigoted, and they believed in that too. Yet they sat at the feet of blacks whom they wouldn't sit beside at a lunch counter, because they couldn't get enough of black music. Most of them never reconciled these contradictions in their personal lives, yet that didn't stop them from transmitting the raw elements of the music to white people with a force, and on a scale, that any sane person would have thought unimaginable before Elvis had his first number one record in 1956.

Stating it with no holds barred: the moment this black music attracted these white musicians was one of the most important moments in modern history.

How typical that the best writers on these men – see Greil Marcus' crucial chapters on Elvis Presley in his superb *Mystery Train*, and Nick Tosches' great biography of Jerry Lee Lewis, *Hellfire* – virtually ignore the importance of how these men *moved*. Elvis' singing was so extraordinary because you could *hear* the moves, infer the moves, in his singing. No white man and few blacks had ever sung so completely with the whole body.

Elvis before the Army, before 1959, was something extraordinary: a white man who seemed, to the rest of us, to appear out of nowhere with moves that most white people had never imagined, let alone seen. His legs weren't solidly planted then, as they would be years later. They were always in motion. Often he'd rise on his toes, seem on the verge of some impossible groin-propelled leap, then twist, shimmy, dip, and shake in some direction you wouldn't have expected. You *never* expected it. Every inflection of voice was matched, accented, *harmonized*, by an inflection of muscle. As though the voice couldn't sing unless the body moved. It was so palpably a unit that it came across on his recordings. Presley's moves were body-shouts, and the way our ears heard his voice our bodies heard his body. Girls instantly understood it and went nuts screaming for more. Boys instantly understood it and started dancing by themselves in front of their mirrors in imitation of him.

Nobody had ever seen a white boy move like that. He was a flesh-and-blood rent in white reality. A gash in the nature of Western things. Through him, or through his image, a whole culture started to pass from its most strictured, fearful years to our unpredictably fermentive age – a jangled, discordant feeling, at once ultramodern and primitive, modes which have blended to become the mood of our time.

It is not too much to say that, for a short time, Elvis was our "Teacher" in the most profound, Eastern sense of that word. This is especially so when one recalls this Sufi maxim: "People think that a Teacher should show miracles and manifest illumination. The requirement of a Teacher is, however, only that he should possess all that his disciple needs at that moment in time."

Blacks pretty much ignored him – they knew precisely where he was coming from (he was coming from them) and they didn't need to be told what he was saying, it was all

around them and always had been. As for white mainstream culture – nobody knew what to do. An official culture that had become an official culture through the act of separating one thing from another (instead of unifying them), couldn't process Elvis or the rock'n'roll, black and white, that he was forcing on them. Yet Elvis was the first product of African metaphysics in America which the *official* culture could not ignore. The various American establishments – political, intellectual, media – had successfully ignored American music since Buddy Bolden (who was only mentioned in a newspaper once in his life, when he was arrested during what we might now call his first nervous breakdown). But they couldn't ignore Elvis. And they weren't going to be able to ignore American music ever again. They could co-opt Elvis, as they finally did, but they couldn't rationalize him. And they couldn't stop him. Within months of his first hit, black artists as wild as Little Richard, Fats Domino, and Chuck Berry would be heard on white radio-stations for the first time, due to the demand Elvis had created for their music.

It is important to recognize that when whites started playing rock'n'roll, the whole aesthetic of Western performance changed. Wrote Alfred Metraux of Haitian Voodoo dancing: "Spurred by the god within him, the devotee... throws himself into a series of brilliant improvisations and shows a suppleness, a grace and imagination which often did not seem possible. The audience is not taken in: it is to the *loa* and not the *loa's* servant that their admiration goes out."

In American culture we've mistaken the *loa's* servant for the *loa*, the horse for the rider, but only on the surface. We may have worshiped the horse, the singer-dancer, but we did so because we felt the presence of the rider, the spirit. John Sebastian of the Lovin' Spoonful said it succinctly in one of his lyrics:

*And we'll go dancin'  
And then you'll see  
That the magic's in the music  
And the music's in me*

The Voodoo rite of possession by the god *became the standard of American performance in rock'n'roll*. Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, James Brown, Janis Joplin, Tina Turner, Jim Morrison, Johnny Rotten, Prince – they let themselves be possessed not by any god they could name but by the spirit they felt in the music. Their behavior in this possession was something Western society had never before tolerated. And the way a possessed devotee in a Voodoo ceremony often will transmit his state of possession to someone else merely by touching the hand, they transmitted their possession through their voice and their dance to their audience, even through their records. We feel a charge of energy from within us, but it is felt as something infectious that we seek and catch and live. Anyone who has felt it knows it is a precious energy, and knows it has shaped them, changed them, given them moments they could not have had otherwise, moments of heightened clarity or frightening intensity or both; moments of love and bursts of release. And, perhaps most importantly, we could experience this in a medium that met the twentieth century on its own terms. So we didn't have to isolate ourselves from our century (as the "higher" art forms often demanded) in order to experience these epiphanies.

And for all this the body is the conduit. It is no coincidence that the first generation reared on rock'n'roll is the generation to initiate the country's widespread aerobics movement. As distorted by image consciousness as that movement is, it shows a new emphasis. We feel our bodies, have an awareness of our bodies, that is new to Western culture. In the light of the music we've saturated ourselves with, this should come as no surprise.

The steady stream of mixed black and white rock records played on the major radio outlets began with Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" in 1956. Within only two years, dancing in some neighborhoods was already going beyond the lindy, that patterned dance of our Western past. [Note, 2006: *Dancing the lindy, the male leads and controls the female's moves.*] "Let your backbone slip," is how many lyrics put it. Or, as Jerry Lee Lewis instructed in the spoken riff of his classic "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On":

*Easy now... shake... ah, shake it baby... yeah... you can shake it one time for me... I said come on over, whole lotta shakin' goin' on... now let's get real low one time... all you gotta do is kinda stand... stand in one spot... wriggle around, just a little bit... that's what you got... whole lotta shakin' goin' on...*

It's not only that he's described the dance that George W. Cable and others described in Congo Square; it's that, as Lewis says, "we ain't fakin'." The measure of how much we ain't fakin' is that you can see in Maya Deren's 1949 footage of Haitian Voodoo dancers exactly the same dancing that you've seen from 1959 to the present wherever Americans (and now Europeans) dance to rock'n'roll.

Which is not to say that rock'n'roll is Voodoo. Of course it's not. But it does preserve qualities of that African metaphysic intact so strongly that it unconsciously generates the same dances, acts as a major antidote to the mind-body split, and uses a derivative of Voodoo's techniques of possession as a source, for performers and audiences alike, of tremendous personal energy.

Texas singer and songwriter Butch Hancock comments on Presley's historic appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show": "Yeah, that was the dance that everybody forgot. *It was that the dance was so strong it took an entire civilization to forget it.* And ten seconds on 'The Ed Sullivan Show' to remember. That's why I've got this whole optimism about the self-correction possibility of civilization. Kings, and principalities, and churches, all their effort to make us forget the dances – and they can be blown away in an instant. We see it and say, 'Yeah – that's true.'"

Greil Marcus speaks of "the energy in popular music that usually can be substituted for vision." His book *Mystery Train* lives on that insight, and it is the single most important insight of any of this music's commentators. The tremendous energy of rock'n'roll has been so intense from its beginnings to this day that, while rarely articulating a vision for itself, it can't help but spark visions as it passes.

When Elvis Presley hit the charts in 1956 there was no such thing as a "youth market." By 1957, almost solely through the demand for his recordings, there was. It was a fundamental, structural change in American society. In a few years we would learn *how* fundamental, as that "market" revealed itself also to have qualities of a community, one

that had the power to initiate far-reaching social changes that seemed unimaginable in 1955. The anti-war movement, the second wave of the civil rights movement, feminism, ecology, and the higher consciousness movement – and there was little distinction between them all when they were beginning at roughly the same time – got their impetus from the excitement of people who felt strong because they were part of a national community of youth, a community that had been first defined, and then often inspired, by its affinity for this music. *That* was the public, historical result of those private epiphanies of personal energy we'd felt through this music's form of possession.

The thread that ran through all those movements of the sixties, and continues in their derivatives now, is a fundamental challenge to the old Western split between the mind and the body. More than any other single concern, this challenge defined the *mood*, if not always the issues, of the sixties. As William Irwin Thompson once put it, "The rock music of the sixties came close to being so powerful as if to uproot a whole generation from one culture and socialize it completely in the new [New Age] one." And all this was implied in the music's African roots from the beginning.

As Duke Ellington put it in his libretto to *A Drum Is A Woman* (a libretto in which he makes clear that he means "a drum is a goddess"):

*Rhythm came from Africa to America.  
Do you know what it does to you?  
Exactly what it's supposed to do.*

[*Note, 2006: That thought was refined in another way by songwriter JoCarol Pierce: "They give their bodies to the music 'cause the music knows what to do."*  
*However, two trends have since drained the generative, community-making power of the youth market: music became as firmly corporate-controlled as cinema; and it has fragmented into niches, both racially and stylistically. The result, especially among blacks and whites, is that there has been no significant youth-instigated social movement in many years.]*

I haven't meant to imply that either jazz or rock'n'roll is a greater or more socially significant music than the other. They are both faces of the same music. Within each is the holy drum. Rock takes the stand and recreates every night the terms of our survival, part ceremony, part cavalry charge. In all its genres it is Whitman's barbaric yawp amplified across the roofs of the world, making so much *possible* that had been so long lost. And it has to be done every night because, as one wise nineteen-year-old told me long ago, "There are things that have to be learned all over again every night."

Jazz also must take the stand every night, recreating and regenerating its forms, but contemporary jazz comes after what's lost has been discovered again. Jazz is the subtlety of feeling, the swiftness of thought, always implicit in the true freedom that we all say we seek. It's the suppleness of existence itself. It is change itself, flux itself, and the intelligence that seeks both to remain true to its source and its change. Even jazz at its wildest suggests a focused inner meditation that rock knows nothing about. Jazz mothered rock, and yet rock is earlier, more primitive. If rock is ceremony, jazz is knowledge. It is the initiate's knowledge that the ceremony exists both to celebrate and, in distilled form, to preserve. We must remember Coomaraswamy's thought, that "so

long as the material of folklore is transmitted, so long is the ground available on which the superstructure of full initiatory understanding can be built.”

Music can be understood by the body instantly – it carries so much history within it that we don’t need history to understand it. But a culture as a whole, a country as a whole, cannot be understood by the body alone – at least not anymore. The history of America is, as much as it is anything, the history of the American body as it sought to unite with its spirit, with its consciousness, to heal itself and to stand against the enormous forces that work to destroy a Westerner’s relationship to his, to her, own flesh. This music, largely unaware of itself; carried forward through the momentum of deeply rooted instinct; contradicting itself in many places; perverting its own purposes in many instances; sinking many times under the weight of its own intensity into a nether world of hate and confusion and bad trips; and trivializing its own meanings at many a crucial turn – this music yet rushed and rushes through every area of this country’s life in an aural “great awakening” all its own, to quicken the body and excite the spirit, and, quite literally, to waken the dead.

From the first the music has felt like an attack on the institutions – actual and conceptual – that it was, in fact, attacking. From the first it moaned and groaned furiously all the length of its great long snake, and his never been afraid of venting its own fury – often resulting in its own destruction. “If I told you what our music is really about we’d probably all get arrested,” Bob Dylan told an interviewer in 1965. Angry enough, often enough, the music has frightened its very dancers, so that many don’t want to be challenged in that way for very long and they let the music become merely a memory of their youth. But it is a music that won’t stop and that will not leave us alone. It speaks through the body and invokes the spirit. And some of us have felt, since the first day we heard it, that this is the aesthetic we have to live up to. No matter how the deal goes down.

It’s fitting to end with the superb New Orleans musician Sidney Bechet’s definition of the music he helped give us:

*It’s everybody’s who can feel it. You’re here... well, if there’s music, you feel it – then it’s yours too...*

*Oh, I can be mean – I know that. But not to the music. That’s the thing you gotta trust. You gotta mean it, and you gotta treat it gentle. The music, that’s the road. There’s good things alongside it, and there’s miseries. You stop by the way and you can’t ever be sure what you’re going to find waiting. But the music itself, the road itself – there’s no stopping that. It goes on all the time. It’s the thing that brings you to everything else. You have to trust that. There’s no one ever came back who can’t tell you that.*

*After emancipation... all those people who had been slaves, they needed the music more than ever now; it was like they were trying to find out in this music what they were supposed to do with this freedom: playing the music and listening to it – waiting for it to express what they needed to learn, once they had learned it wasn’t just white people the music had to reach to, nor even to their own people, but straight out to life and to what a man does with his life when it finally is his.*

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**This essay has been slightly revised for the website.**

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