

"The ultimate effectiveness (power) of any group of people is the degree to which they have as awareness of who they are and respect for themselves. The instruments that facilitate this development is education, cultural images and celebrations that build a shared aesthetic, role models and the projection of cultural heroes and heroines."

Na'im akbar, How To Make Black America Better

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasm's. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids-and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."

Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison

Intro Theme: The Black Composer as Invisible.

Dear reader; I am a Black American composer and I am invisible. I am perceived I think like a ghost passing in a memorable melody, heard rarely and never seen. I wanted to share a composer's take and journey on defining an aspect of a Black artistic tradition, its representation and identity in 21st century expression. If we examine the state of scholarship about African American culture in traditional music disciplines, we find that too often the academy consistently obscures the beauty, complexity and variety of Black life and artistic expression. By doing this the academy misses an opportunity to have an encompassing and relevant discourse related to the study of Black music, folk and life, in total. Basically there is sumptin' going on that allows us to ignore and thus dismiss the variety and diversity heard and taught within the whole of Black artistry. I like to think of this as the cultural politics of misrepresentation. I am as well concerned with a definition of Black musical value and our current generational divides on this issue. I want to erase the invisibility of Black composers, the men and women who are our "Black Beethovens".

In this age of P. Diddy, Jay-Z and Beyoncé, I want to introduce into the scholarly discourse, into the loop of representations, this identity and expression which has been central to Black American composers since William Grant Still wrote in 1930, the Afro-American Symphony based on, the Blues.

Mainstream American media has dismissed important creative, cultural/ social/spiritual aspects of Black artistic expressive culture and following that lead as well are the educational, cultural institutions that arm our society with relevant and lasting impressions of what is valued and what is preserved. This de-evaluation leads to not only the suffocation of major portions of Black culture, but as a counter productive ploy, investments are made into the commodification of negative cultural imagery and over blown pop teen "celebri-dom." The dark clouds of cultural chaos and the ever present potential of the invisibility of our own diversity in music, is underscored in the fact that for the most part in mainstream America, the only music that is now accepted as defining a Black modern cultural aesthetic, is hip hop. I listen and enjoy hip hop music. I love the form and the forum for engaging ideas. But in our current suffocation, our current drowning as Rome is definitely on fire, too much of popular culture in this way is doing more damage than good. Unfortunately because idea inspiring messages and strong healthy doses with images of Black productivity are missing, the possibilities of empowering values inherent in contemporary expression are muted.

"..Writing the book confirmed ideas that had been rolling around in my head for years... how to measure this world in which we find ourselves, where we are not at all happy, but clearly able to understand and hopefully, one day transform. How to measure my own learning and experience and to set out a system of evaluation, weights and meaning... This is the history..this is your history , my history and the history of the people...the Music, this is our history.

Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*, 1999

So the question now is, how are we measuring ourselves and are the cultural forms engaged in expressing, celebrating and critiquing culture in ways that continue to help navigate our survival as in the past and give us hope and joy in our living frames? If we are measuring our world only in terms of hip hop and Destiny's Children, we are in trouble. I have a friend who speaks of BET as a our televised Festival of Ignorance, a sexual minstrel show where Black males are being constructed as the commodity of anger and Black females in too many videos are diminished further as an image of a slut, sex driven, power access thirsty babe for leisure use for the crew.

No other voice or use. I'm convinced that Black people and scholars are as much of the problem as anyone else in this cultural phenomenon. Mostly because we don't speak out and educate. I respect Tricia Rose's, *Black Noise*, but after seeing her recently, I am convinced she is saddened by the diminished potential of what could have been a major cultural marker in our expressive evolution forward. For all of my big brother Michael Eric Dyson's powerful portrayal and advocacy for the use of hip hop as an aesthetic tool for young Black people, our popular music art forms need retooling. So, instead of complaining I wanted to offer a few alternative models, places and movements in our culture, heroes and heroines of Black music culture; Black American composers, their work and their worlds.

I am reminded of the seriousness we gave again to Black women writers after seeing the Oprah book club. As well hearing spoken word and free style poetry after, *SLAM* with Saul Williams, we got "literate again". Our reconsideration of our dance forms as a cultural expression of note with Savion Glover and George Wolfe's, *Bring on The Noise*, helped us to see dance as an expressive historical/cultural form and narrative. We will need of course launching forums supported by Black engaged scholarship to take a serious look at the work of Black composers and other forgotten and overlooked Black art forms as a part of the packaging of our cultural rituals, intellectual artistic canon(s), our literature in poetic and musical form.

This is my goal as a Black artist in the academy. Along with a camp of colleagues representing at least three generations of artists, we are creating the spaces and making the works of a Black music canon in modern serious Black Music. I don't like labeling music, but this a movement that includes Jazz, operas, contemporary instrumental music, ballet and symphonies.

We got some Black Beethoven's living up in here, and what's most sad is, y'all don't even know it!

Bridge: The politics of mis-representation

"The Negro is a natural musician. He will learn to play on an instrument more quickly than a White man. They may not know one note from the other, yet their ears catch the strains of any floating air, and they represent it by imitation. Inferior to the White race in reason and intellect, they have more imagination, more lively feelings and a more expressive manner. With their imagination they clothe in rude poetry the incidents of their lowly life and set them to simple melodies. Blessed power of music. It is a beautiful gift of God to this oppressed race to lighten their sorrows in the house of their bondage.

From *Songs of the Black*, Dwight's Journal of Music, Nov. 15, 1856

If it were left up to academic discourse as seen in the above, we would continually be reduced by a shallow and limited analysis offered as “the fact” of our creative work. Recently, I read a New York Times article complaining that hip hop singer Mary J. Blige needed to become angry again in order to reach her best as an artist. They don’t want us to be doing anything but . . . “clothing our rude poetry in the incidents of our lowly lives.”

As I see it one of the most valuable battles, movements to watch on the music/cultural front is in the field of new concert music composition. The players in this game are Black American composers and the performing/commissioning concert music venues (symphony, chamber, opera). For many Black composers our historical/cultural sensibilities are always clashing with mainstream schooling; that is, with what we want to write, how we are organizing contemporary musical materials, and the historical cultural narrative for libretto, scripts, are not rooted in the traditional formula. Black composers writing in the academy and concert performance industry is in itself the embodiment of cultural warfare. Because we use the Blues in complex forms, we use melodic,

rhythmically complex formulas, disjunctive 12 pitch tone rows, but we too express our romance and rage through 100 instrumental voices.

These works are heard in 100 concert halls a year across America, but y’all aint there. Black American composers have been synthesizing black expression and experience in these powerful representations for at least 100 years in American music literature.

There are numerous recording labels carrying this important work; Albany, Videmus/Visionary, Tel Arc, Columbia, Koch, Collins Classics, New World, CRI etc.

My role models are T.J. Anderson, my teacher, who served as one of the Atlanta symphonies first Black composers in residence. Also, my dear friends Patrice Rushen and David Baker and many others who place culture, experience and craft in a blender and serve up works that are some of the best examples of the successful contemporary multi-ethnic perspective in arts culture. The embodiment of the politics of culture(s) and representation are best exemplified in the music processes and products of contemporary Black American composers. These works are extremely rich, relevant and provide multiple sources for study in music, literature, cultural studies and Black music history, which reflect a rich past and project the potentiality of a strong future in Black musical artistry, in total.

Composers of African decent from Chevalier de St. Georges writing in pre-Beethovenian times to Francis Johnson in the early 19th century, to James Reece Europe at the top of the 20th and Tania Leon a contemporary a 21st century example, have been involved in one of bloodiest battles in western aesthetic construction and thought. They have done this by bringing the meaning of vernacular culture, ideas and identity to bear on the meaning of being an architect of western art form. Upon the waters of western expression, these ethnic boats that carry vernacular music, culture and identity hold crew, mission and captain in place and have succeeded in “crossing over”. In doing so Black composers have created one of the best examples of truly innovative Black music, rarely heard.

Two books recently published which document this work; Published in 2001, The International Encyclopedia of Black Composers, Fitzroy Press, produced by Center For Black Music Research, CBMR(Sam Floyd). As well, my own Landscapes in Color: Conversations with Black American Composers, Scarecrow, Roman Littlefield Press published Jan. 2003. This book explores the life and work of contemporary living Black American Composers working across the United States.

Landscapes in Color is a rare collection of insights by contemporary Black musical artists and one of the most diverse with a broad view of Black music making. The composers speak from such a wide variety of backgrounds on American music and culture. These days we usually just hear about Black music from rappers, producers and artists in R&B, gospel or Jazz. So much of who we are has come from musical artists and so their work is extremely important as well to gauge where we are headed. The book serves several purposes related to our central question and the idea of finding the core of 21st century expression and representations of Black American music culture. Sources like these:

Serve as an important and rich commentary on American music making and its development from the perspective of Black music makers.

Composers are talking about their musical making process and the development of their musical careers, narratives and inside stories.

Challenges, makes certain charges to the way we teach, look at and consume music in our culture.

Present very powerful alternative views, which are transformative to the way we have learned about American artistry. (Namely, that White artists were the only ones creating worthwhile important works.)

The writing as well contains discussion between myself and 40 of the leading Black American composers of our day. Many of these people our readers are very familiar with for example:

Composer Ysaye Barnwell(Legendary,Sweet Honey in The Rock) talking about the essential functional character of music making in the world. Bobby McFerrin talking about creative responsibility. Patrice Rushen, in many ways the model for a Janet Jackson,Alicia Keys, Norah Jones and one of the most influential women in the LA music scene, taking a stab at the lack of personal accountability that rappers have when they speak. Anthony Davis, composer of the opera Malcolm X, talking about Jazz redefining the direction of symphonies and operatic tradition in America. Great drummer Tony Williams, talking about life as a young musician working with Miles Davis or the old great Jester Hairston, composer of, Amen, talking about how the Spirituals changed American social sensibility, seeing this happen as early as the 1920's in his long professional life.

These perspectives are far reaching insights about music making, music education, the record and performing industry and the transformative role of art in our culture. The work of Tania Leon, Daniel Romain, (New York), Donal Fox (Boston), Julius P. Williams, Jonathon Holland (Berklee, school of Music, Boston),Alvin Singleton (Atlanta), Regina Harris Bioacchi (Chicago),Lettie Beckon Alston (Michigan),George Lewis, Anthony Davis (U of Southern California, San Diego), Stephen Newby (Seattle) along with Billy Childs, Patrice Rushen (Los Angeles), Jeffery Mumford (Oberlin college, Ohio), Gary Powell Nash (Fisk, Tuskegee), Roger Dickerson (New Orleans), Anthony Kelley (Duke University), William Banfield (University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN) are examples of contemporary Black composers of this generation creating in various places all around the country.

One of the main deterrents to present day successes for young people, is the lack of inspirational models of excellence, image, and identity. When there is less of that kind of talking, which is exactly what we face in popular music culture today, our society becomes bereft of places where young people especially get nurturing. Black artists of this caliber are a real shot in the arm and their examples and music are so powerful.

Development section: The Problem of a Clash in generational Values and Markets

"Every generation out of relative obscurity must discover their mission, fulfill it or betray it." Franz Fanon, *Wretched of The earth*

"If this generation does nothing, they are not our future, they are our fate". Maulana Kerenga

I recently participated in a conference on the state of Black scholarship and the arts. Black studies programs that began after the civil rights era in the early seventies are celebrating 25 and 30 year anniversaries. And they are asking just this question, where is Black America, the Black academy, arts institutions and communities in leadership? Just as important is the question how is Blackness represented and evolving in the global environment? This wider lens is the result of our recognition of the ways that, "African Diaspora experiences and traditions have functioned on a global scale and resonated within the spaces of a variety of international projects".

In most of these discussions the focus is on: the critical examination of the human, cultural, social, political, economic and historical factors that have created and shaped the African American and African Diaspora experiences post, 1970. The main point in agreement is the degree to which Black artists have taken up the torch to be instruments of change. It is clear that a more progressive and informed generation preceded us who were the models this kind of activism. So how do we encourage and not just attack due to possible generational, even class differences, a new generation with seemingly stark differences of cultural values?

The hip hop underground is the most socially and politically active generation since the long death and silence of the black community which feel asleep throughout the eighties. Grand Master Flash reminded us, "Its like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under". The relevancy of more contemporary underground Hip-Hop and Rap scores big in this discussion.

But to be honest though, this is a "teaching moment" where it is crucial that we all instill forward direction by both celebrating and critiquing contemporary culture.

I enjoyed recently exchanges I had at a similar conference in St. Louis aimed directly at the role of Black Theater in addressing a lack of diverse artistic hearings in our culture. Cultural critic-historian Gerald early well known as cultural commentator on recent PBS specials such as Ken Burns Jazz, *I'll Make Me A World* and others, commented on the fact that art always has engagement in the world. Art is politics in that anyone who does a work of art defends a certain set of values. Early reminded us of the history of Black audiences, that despite comodification and commercialism, we were an audience who could always see beyond bad politics and empty rhetoric and still be moved powerfully inwardly and externally. So, I guess there is still hope even in our current flood of suffocating popular images and music that on the current surface seem bleak with possibility.

All the playwrights and directors who attended the St. Louis gathering like the U Penn. event spoke of an eternally understood and practiced notion, that Black art has maintained many of its dynamic characteristics and still remaining in tact is the power of the rhythm in speech and its soul motion the Blues aesthetic. The players in this dialogue, playwrights, director and composer, began then to speak of collaboration and the processes of envisioning new black artistic movements that allows seeing ourselves trusting, sharing and working in a variety of capacities attempting to reveal, "truth".

Recap: Some History, Extensions of The Tradition and arguments for the music of Black Composers

Bohemian composer Anton Dvorak, while living here in the United States stated in 1893:

“I am satisfied that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro melodies. They are American. They are the folksongs of America and your composers must turn to them. ...I discover in them all that is needed for a great and noble school of music.” In 1912, James Reece Europe, composer, band leader and conductor of New York’s Clef Club Orchestra stated, “As composers, no matter what else you might think, we(Black Composers) have created an orchestral language that is unique and distinctive and lends itself to the peculiar compositions of our race.”

In the discipline of composition and concert music, Black American composers have in recent years provided many examples of what I have called, “extensions of the tradition”. These composers and their traditions are the result, the call and response if you will, to the prophetic words of Anton Dvorak.

Black American creative thinkers in the concert tradition are both vindicating past blocked voices and forging new musical practices. Contemporary Black Composers are gradually becoming a real presence on the American concert music scenes.

This is important I think because the music so wonderfully reflects much of what we already accept as our own musical culture. But we didn’t come to accept all this music as American, and worthy overnight. Black music innovators such as James Reece Europe(1881-1919) who experimented with the 100+ All Black Clef Club orchestra included five pianos, ten drum sets, mandolins, harp-guitar, banjo, Celli and brass. The band work of Francis Johnson, Scott Joplin’s Tremonisha, or Sister Rosetta Tarpe’s eclecticisms are early 20th century experiments which were pioneering. Fletcher Henderson’s orchestrations and path breaking arrangements which set the pattern for the American Big Band Jazz, or as mentioned earlier, William Grant Still’s evocative and innovative early fusing of rural Blues and the orchestra producing his Afro American symphony in 1930. These were all experiments as trail blazing as anything in American music by our white counter points such as by Ives, Cowell, Varese and Cage, though almost never recognized.

As tradition bearers, the generations who succeeded these innovators work back and forth between a great range of traditions: African American vernacular, West Africa and Western European Classical/Romantic and avant- grade traditions. And all this pluralistic, boundary crossing innovation occurs within the matrix of contemporary American music.

Coda: A Clash in Cultural Values in Music?

When you have a Black artist who attempts to make art, that art should be an expression of one’s culture, gifting, and be a product as well of the time, individual tastes and craft. But in order to be heard, many times a Black composer’s work is relegated to the Black History Month program when the work truly deserves to simply be, on a concert program on any month. Many people are unaware of the whole of the process and politics of being a Black composer, and I mean hearing about the problems, process and actually hearing the product.

I have been extremely blessed, fortunate and have a big enough mouth to have been given a great number of opportunities to grow and develop as an actual composer. I mean I really am commissioned to write symphonies, concertos operas, ballets and to write music for the opening of bridges, museums and libraries. I know this must be rare. After I completed my eighth symphony, many of my friends began to get worried, as several of the European composers died after their 8 or 9th symphonies. But for a Black composer writing in the academy and concert

performance industry is in itself, the embodiment of cultural warfare and certainly Black cultural representation and identity is one of the exchanges most salient points.

You may ask, what are some of the central issues that rise up in this exchange, this clash that provides us with some understanding of an embodiment of the politics of culture and representing Blackness? When a young person decides they want to be a composer, that choice is wrought with a whole battery of restrictions, strictures and terrain that must be navigated within traditional art venues and its especially tricky for a Black person. My musical hero was Jimi Hendrix. My mother and Father took me regularly to hear the Detroit Symphony. My mother told me, "One Day that Orchestra is going to play your music". So, I logically thought I would write music for Jimi Hendrix to play with the orchestra. As it turned out, some thirty years later the Detroit Symphony did play my music, but not before a long series of identity crisis-es which I am still repairing from. Here are 8 political "mine and mind fields":

§ Finding the opportunity to do one's art:(A jazz player can go play somewhere where the musician can see, and be seen among peers. Where does the Black composer go?)

§ Liberation of Voice: (In concert music you can't always have just your own voice like Ellington, or Macy Gray because it must be mediated through the thick aesthetic of conventions of traditional concert music instruments, methods. This can limit what you can say, and how you say it.)

§ Audience:(Who's listening..?)

§ Acceptance and Placement:(I used to say,"we are choking at the neck of a big white goose who we expect to falsely hatch golden brown eggs)

§ Documentation:(Who cares..? Record companies.. History books.. curriculum writers..?)

§ Work place, job:(How many Black composers did you have for your theory/composition teacher? The Olds boys network still exists. I was the first Black man to graduate with a doctorate in composition in 1992 from the University of Michigan. Why aren't more young Black scholars in the fields of composition, musicology, theory and conducting encouraged, and supported to pursue the academy?)

§ Language dilemma: Tone Row or Blues Scale(If you sound slightly Black, you might not be called back. Or if you don't "sound Black", you may be asked to flatten some of your thirds.

§ Disruption of the Western Cultural Formula:(A Black Composer? What and where is that? Here there is double-backlash from both sides, White and Black because of the behavioral/social/cultural codes entrenched deeply in the identity formation of both communities.

I should mention, that being a composer, an artist is tough, tough work for anybody green, blue or fuchsia. But the Black artists' challenges in a classical art world dwarfs our white contemporaries issues by legions.

Cadence

My suggestion is to ignore and fight the misrepresentation and past limited acknowledgement of Black artistry and seek out the music products of contemporary Black American composers. For educational, observation and study, you can see the richness in the whole dynamic from performance practices to the embodiment of our cultural heritages, and the best examples of the amalgamation of western European practice and vernacular culture. Its all there in the work, processes and product of Black American composers.

Here for cultural study and references are the politics of embodying culture and the tangles of representing and defining Black art in our contemporary culture. In all this perhaps we are trying to make the institution do something it was not meant to do? Again, I always say, " we are at the neck of a big white goose trying to make it lay a golden

brown egg". And implicit in this is the re evaluation of cultural and national values. There is much to gain from this view and engagement.

The task for us here will still be the challenge in addressing how to tap into the current generation's sensibilities that are forward, but critique that which is shackles and chains. We have to have enough love and courage to roll up the sleeves and commit to educating and art-ucating in a way that maintains those powerful and needed foundations in arts. This must be parallel to positive, productive black movement in the world socially, artistically and spiritually. We must be up to this task or we perish and go down, empty. Our cultural critiques, explorations and vision(s) keep us filled and overflowing thusly fulfilling our missions and ensuring our future.

The instruments that will facilitate a rich future will be by employing a knowledge to a full range of Black peoples' expressions, images, ideas. This is how we take care of the Souls of Black folk in the 21st century.