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Between the Angel of History and Revolution. Jazz on the Threshold

Abstract: This paper investigates the intersections between jazz and popular culture in the 1950s and 1960s. It explores the production of signs and the generation of effects that led to a transformation of the music, of society and of the understanding of history. We will look into how the deaths of several key jazz players in the 1950s and 1960s functioned as myths that allowed a melancholic relationship with what Walter Benjamin defined as the Angel of History. The transitional period from 1959 to 1965 (the “Coltrane Turn”) reveals the metamorphosis of melancholia into anger, as free jazz becomes openly political and an essential element in the social changes of the decade. We will investigate whether the similarities between jazz and democracy (in the language of Wynton Marsalis), and the connection between jazz creation and political insertion (Amiri Baraka and Jacques Rancière) are not, in fact, the reorientation from an understanding of history through the lens of myths to a production of history through radical invention.

Keywords: myth, invention, melancholia, on-the-threshold, jazz

Wind up the world the other way

The legend, attractive early on to the American (and predominantly white-controlled) media, has it that one of the greatest saxophone players in the history of jazz (and certainly the most revered at the time and in the decades that followed), Charlie Parker, was left in the morgue after his death for two days with the name tag “John Parker, age fifty-three.” During this interval, the Baroness Nica de Konigsberg, the protectoress *par excellence* of jazz (and specifically of bop) players, was trying to locate Parker’s wife, Chan. Charlie died in the

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baroness' apartment where he had retired a few days earlier, seriously ill. He was, at least in the eyes of his peers inside the world of music, a genius profoundly revered and constantly imitated—although never equaled—and this imitation expanded to his heroin addiction which seemed to hold the secret to his virtuosity, invention and energy. Of course, he died in fact at the age of thirty-five, but his body was a testament to the excesses of his life, which the media was quick to blame on his personal choices. He was not singular in such a lifestyle, nor in a corresponding portrayal by the media. Most of the jazz players of the bop generation—no longer eager to please, as the previous generation of the swing players had been—were figures of excess that the American media was quick to portray as a combination of native talent and moral errors that exposed a telling understanding of individuality. Just as artists like Jackson Pollock and the School of New York were defined and even exported around the world as models of American individualism, and their art a product of their free ego, far from the social and political dimensions of much of the European art in the first part of the 20th century (and of course the entire Soviet paradigm), the jazz players were seen—whenever it was the case of their trials and tribulations—as products of their own choices. There was however a contradiction at work in this portrayal, one that exposes the articulation of two logics: a logic of individuality (they were the exponents of the American Dream, even in their wrong moral choices—a kind of reversed freedom, the one to choose the wrong path) and a logic of hierarchy and discrimination (their wrong choices were also a surviving sign of their racial and economic backwardness). As such, the way the deaths of some of the key representatives of jazz during the '50s and '60s were presented and interpreted in the popular culture and media is significant to a tension that, in itself, contributed to an important turn. While the media focused on players as individualities, trying to reduce their relevance at the collective level, the response of jazz was inventive and radical: it took individuality to its breaking limit, where it dissolves in a solidarity that was necessary in order to return art to its political relevance. It thus attempted to break through the imposed autonomy on art, autonomy that, while it made myths out of players, it ideologically turned them into figures of submission.

The death of Charlie Parker on March 12, 1955 opens a period of plural mutations that lasted for more than a decade. We may call this period a *threshold*, a passage in which everything was questioned and open to change: the music, the status of Black America, the understanding of democracy and not in the least the relation between art, history and politics. Parker himself was only partly aware of what was to come. The last years of his life were full of turmoil that often led to forms of exploratory artistic creativity almost unbeknownst to popular music up to that point, but it also led to profound suffering. He and his wife, Chan, had been estranged (but not divorced) for a while and he had apparently married another woman in Mexico, who later was to claim his estate. He was a heavy alcoholic, and he had had problems with heroin for more than a decade. Two known suicide attempts

should be added to this, plus his self-internment at Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital, where he was subjected to electric shock treatment (a treatment that destroyed the talent of another bop great, the pianist Bud Powell, and would also affect Charles Mingus in 1959 to the extent that he would never trust the American system—medical, political, economical—ever again). When Chan was finally found after his death—as she confesses in her autobiography published in 1993, *My Life in E-flat*—, she was sure that his final fall (and the fall of their relationship) was connected to the death of their daughter, Pree, a year and a week before.

When the child died of a heart condition at the age of two, Charlie Parker was on the West Coast, in Los Angeles, fulfilling an engagement at Tiffany Club. During the night of March 4, 1954, he sent Chan four telegrams. Their reading is suggestive at this point. It reveals how at that time one of the key exponents of Black America was able to put into words his suffering and the way he related to death: as a phenomenon to be understood in terms of love, regrets and melancholy. The work of mourning they reveal is kept within the bounds of individual life and of the (close) circle around it. It is our hypothesis that popular culture and media's reaction to the deaths of popular figures and the ones close to them reflects a stage in which they are turned into myths. However, the melancholic aspect that such a metamorphosis implies leads to another stage, one of the becoming-collective of death in which a key connection between mourning and act is revealed and put into practice.

The death of Eric Dolphy in 1964 (and Charles Mingus's reaction to it) reveals a different attitude and a radical change in the figure of the jazz player: what he is (and what happened to him) is no longer a result of his choices, but a work (and many times a fight) of resistance against an entire system that, under the veil of individualism, turns figures of change into agents of conformity.

The words into which death is put are always suggestive and so are the sounds. Let us begin with words, by returning to Parker's telegrams from the night of his daughter's death. The first one was sent at 4:11 am: "my darling my daughter's death surprised me more than it did you don't fulfill funeral proceedings until i get there i shall be the first one to walk into our chapel forgive me for not being there with you while you are at the hospital yours most sincerely your husband charlie parker." Two minutes later, another one followed: "my darling for god's sake hold on to yourself chas parker." A deconstructive eye could surely find a lot to talk about in this injunction to hold to the self, coupled with the spelling error—Chas instead of Chan or Charlie—of the name. Is it her name? Is it his name? Is that a secret name, used between lovers, that resurfaces in the moment of grief? Or is it just the breaking of the name, of any name, it's (from now on) impossibility to name, if naming is to be understood as calling and connecting, and through all this, as a sign of life? And what does holding to yourself at such a point mean and why should it be desired? The work of mourning, at least as Sigmund Freud understood it, is precisely this act of holding to a self that finds itself under siege and thus a (slow, but assured) reconstruction, a healing. A coming-to-terms with

death or, in the later language of Jacques Lacan, the reappearance of a symbolic matrix over the a-signifying real. The Angel of History, in Walter Benjamin's reading of a drawing by Paul Klee, is turned towards the past: "where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at its feet." It is this vision that prevents this angel from facing the future. Its melancholy is expressed by an anguished desire to repair what has been broken: "the angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (Benjamin 62). A storm however blocks the attempts of the angel to heal and pushes it towards the future (towards which it has its back), towards new catastrophes, new wrongs and more and more wreckage. This storm and its blocking effect can also be read between the lines of Parker's telegrams—and even at the level of his life, or that of many of his peers—, although the history talked about here remains at the individual level. Two minutes after the second telegram, he sent the third: "chan, help charlie parker". Nothing but the names and, between them, the cry for help. A death has occurred. Those (still) living must now help or carry each other. In Paul Celan's lines—often revisited by Jacques Derrida in relation to mourning, testimony and responsibility—, "The world has ended / I have to carry you." For the moment, Charlie is asking Chan for help. No other specification is needed, which is a sign that the help is required at the level of the self. A few hours passed and then, finally, at 7:58 am, a fourth telegram: "my daughter is dead. i know it. i will be there as quick as i can. my name is bird. it is very nice to be out here. people have been very nice to me out here. i am coming in right away take it easy. let me be the first one to approach you. i am your husband. sincerely, charlie parker" (Laidman).

The wealth of this text deserves much more than we can offer here, where our interest constrains us to pass over it in a hurry. It should bring us back to the problem of the name and of the nickname, Bird, which originally, the legend goes, named Parker's appetite for chicken food, but now is invested with new and powerful connotations of flight, of quickness and of reduced weight. Its grammar is rich, especially in the chain of annunciations of and on the "I" as a subject, as a name, as a signature and as a husband. It should also require reflections on the sudden involvement of the others, of their being-nice, of their being *here*, as opposed to *there*. If we keep a while longer to the Benjaminian key of our reading, it is as if for a while the storm has passed and the angel is ready to do its job, although the grammar again is relevant. The text doesn't say: "I will be the first one to approach you," but instead it begs acceptance of this priority in the name of the husband and then sincerely in the proper name of the one who writes and signs. Parker was not known for his writing or, for that matter, for his reading. According to Chan, she saw him reading only once and that had been a yoga book. His telegrams to her must have been a surprise, even a shock, notwithstanding the context.

In her memoirs, *My Life in E Flat* (the title is a nod to the alto saxophone that her two husbands played, an E-flat instrument), she thought she was partly responsible for his death, but she also pointed out towards a collective responsibility:

...I wondered who was to blame for the death of Bird. Certainly Bird himself, and me. But I accused all the unfeeling doctors and all the cab drivers who wouldn't pick him up because he was black. I accused the club owners, the record executives and the agents, bookers and managers who had exploited him. I accused the critics who didn't understand his music and the public that rejected it. This was a genocide of the spirit. (Parker 57)

The diagnostic can partly be an answer to a question that easily arises: how come a music celebrating vitality and life (in its swing age) can turn to death, to its calling, to its inevitability, to its abyss so profoundly? "Drugs" is the usual answer, as if it could paper through all the other symptoms.¹ These *other* symptoms are however readable in the music, in the lives of artists like Parker and in their (albeit rare) texts.

There is another relevant text from 1954,² addressed by Parker to Chan. This time it was a hand-written letter: "Beautiful is the world, slow is one to take advantage. Wind up the world the other way. And at the start of the turning of the earth, lie my feelings for thou. To you. Shame on me. I love you" ("Wind up the world..."). In Benjamin's terms, the storm that keeps the angel from saving the world is called progress. It thus comes under the veil of a different, inverted (wound up) name.³ The only solution is a deconstruction of this ideology. For Parker, the beauty of the world is not on its surface: it refers to an attitude that needs to be worked upon, as if the most difficult thing to do is the attempt to live. We will return to this juncture to live. But first there are more deaths to deal with.

From Bop to Kaddish. Like a Poem in the Dark

Usually considered a break with the previous tradition of swing (in spite of the transition work of artists like Coleman Hawkins and Roy Eldridge), bop functioned in no less degree as a change in the image of the Black artist that was portrayed by the artists themselves and to a degree perceived by the audience and the media. In the reading by the (mostly white) media, it was of course essentially a substitution of stereotypes. For the previous decade the celebrated figure of the black jazzman had been Louis Armstrong. In many ways, he was seen as naive (a native talent without the erudition usually reserved for the European tradition of the artist), joyful (due to his talent as entertainer) and happy to be accepted. In short, no danger was attached to his image; he was the *right* kind of (black) artist and the white audiences loved him all the more for this reason. The figure of Charlie Parker—and, along with it, those of other bop greats, such as Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell or Thelonious Monk—played a different role: irrational, although brilliant, self-destructive and unpredictable. To a certain degree, bop affirmed two dimensions previously denied to the artists of color: the subjectivity of the artist—his soul, his emotions and his particular view upon the world—

and the creativity of the black musician—previously regarded mainly as a performer. To these, a fragile political dimension emerged for the first time.

Although Parker himself rarely spoke or expressed a political attitude, someone like Dizzy Gillespie—or, a bit later, Miles Davis—were not afraid to point out the injustice in the American Dream. The music itself radically changed. It was no longer something one could dance to. It required attention, experiment and it was not oriented by the expected taste of the audience. The simple fact that bop emerged without the usual pressure of commercial interests was in fact related to a strike, in the first years of the fifth decade, of the production houses. This offered the artists the chance to experiment and improvise without the pressure of what would sell and what would not (decisions taken exclusively by the white owners of the music industry), and thus to go where music led them. By the time they were able to record, the music had already matured and was ready to create, rather than find, an audience. It met however with fierce aggression from the critics. As Amiri Baraka observes, “BeBop was ‘Monkey Music’, ‘Chinese music’, ‘scandalous’, ‘madness’, ‘crazy’, a ‘con game’. One critic even called it ‘Stalinist’” (*Digging* 82). This last epithet is relevant of the ongoing ideological attack on any communist idea and of the danger perceived in music as a form that could demand, or even produce, figures of equality in a society bent on protecting the deepest inequality as a positive sign of meritocracy. In a way, the (white, because the very existence of a black critic at that time seemed the most absurd idea)⁴ critics’ aggression understood the political dimension of the music even deeper than the artists themselves.

This position has a long tradition in American culture. In the early years of the Black presence in America—and, for example, in the famous New Orleans gatherings of Blacks in the public squares on Sundays to play *their* music—these performances were perceived as highly dangerous, not just an expression of barbarity and backwardness. As such, it is suggestive that the drum was banned by the white masters. To Amiri Baraka, this was a clear sign that the drum had a “*political nature*” (*Digging* 73). When music, through its instruments or the aesthetic choices of the performers, can enact fissures in the accepted (cultural, social) order, it becomes political. This was the case of bop’s creativity. Based on virtuosity and speed, it resisted appropriation. Lesser players were unable to follow, and superficial audiences were politely distanced. To many of the artists, it seemed like a return to authenticity after the Swing Age that favored repetition, entertainment and exploitation of everything that could be sold for a profit.

The dominance of bop covers roughly the period between the beginning of the fifth decade and the end of the sixth. The epoch witness its emergence, its hegemony, but also the contrast with the *cool jazz*, a style which, although it has its origin in some famous recording sessions by Miles Davis from 1949 and 1950, later released as an album called *Birth of the Cool*, is usually associated with the West Coast and (mainly) white musicians of the likes of Chet Baker or Gerry Mulligan. There was also a radical offspring of bop, known as *hard*

bop, which saw the emergence of key figures for the period after 1959; among them John Coltrane, to which we will return. It was also the period of the close association, especially in the media and the popular culture, of jazz with drug addictions. Most of the key artists, including Miles Davis or Coltrane, succumbed at one point or another to this addiction and the media fed itself on such events. The cultural (and thus popular) image of the jazz player linked creativity (or mystery) with violence and drugs. The price paid for the presentation of the black artist as a *subjective* individual was its portrayal as a dangerous individual. Fascination and refusal mingled one with another. And, most often, the addiction to drugs was portrayed as a self-destructive tendency of the jazz player or even of the jazz itself.

The other side of the conquest of subjectivity—and thus the acceptance within the frames of the liberal ideology of individualism—was (and still is) the avoidance of or the protection against the blaming of the system. For the popular view, it was not racism or economic inequality that led to the (mostly black) artists' addictions and destruction. Everything was the result of their own choices as individuals in the free and democratic American system. That is why, in a political reading of the history of jazz music, *bop* can be seen as a period of transition.

On one side was the (almost) non-political substance of the Swing Age and, on the other, the clear and radical political revolution of Free Jazz. The transition names, in Amiri Baraka's terms, an introspective turn: "the pre-civil rights demeanor of a generation, not a quietism per se, but an introspective turn, an inside reflection that for some was enough in dealing with a hostile outside world. But the hostility can never be kept *outside*" (*Digging* 11). The point was already made by the artists themselves, revealing an (early) awareness of the situation. For example, Charles Mingus, in the liner notes of his epochal album *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, wrote in 1956:

People are getting fragmented, and part of that is that fewer and fewer people are making a real effort anymore to find out exactly who they are and to build on that knowledge. Most people are forced to do things they don't want to most of the time, and so they get to the point where they feel they no longer have any choice about anything important including who they are. We create our own slavery.

It was not just a case of the minority of Black Americans. The diagnostic extended to the (capitalist) system at large and it thus opened several years later the radical acts of the sixties. These acts made possible not only the emergence of a minority on the democratic scene, but also a solidarity between individuals oppressed in various ways, a solidarity that would lead to movements like the Black Panthers and the opposition to the Vietnam War.

It is not, we think, too risky here to point to another intersection,⁵ namely that between the development of *bop* and the Beat artists. It can be resumed by Allan Ginsberg's evolution between two famous poems, *Howl* (written in 1956 in San Francisco) and *Kaddish* (written two years later in New York). The first one starts with the well-known diagnostic of an entire

generation: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix” (Ginsberg 134). It will go on to list the various forms of self-destruction of the members of this generation, but also to create a solidarity of affect with the rejected and the oppressed. Ginsberg’s own words—in a reaction to an early (positive) appraisal of the poem by the critic Richard Eberhardt—are proof of this connection between the poem and a political act of solidarity: “You saw *Howl* as a negative howl of protest. The poem itself is an act of sympathy, not rejection. I am expressing my true feelings, of sympathy and identification with the rejected, mystical, individual even mad” (Morgan 218).

Kaddish, a poem occasioned by his mother’s death, written in a trance—partly made possible by a combination of morphine and methamphetamine—in November 1958, was a work of mourning, but at the same time a ‘vow to illuminate mankind’. Highly personal, introspective and a form of dealing both with the death of his mother and the hostility of the world, its rhythm and poetical innovation, its force of expression and the virtuosity of its style make it resemble the best parts of bop music or the trance-like phrases of Charlie Parker. A fascination with death and an understanding of creation through the lenses of madness described the age. In the Benjaminian key presented above, the best minds of this American generation were melancholic: like Paul Klee’s *Angel of History*, their eyes were turned towards the past (or the present as an already-becoming past, a pile-up of wreckage after wreckage), while the storm kept pushing them towards the new catastrophes of the future. It is at this point that a change was enacted, which turned melancholy into anger and mourning into radical politics.

Radical Performances

Charlie Parker died in 1956. Lester Young, another great exponent of the saxophone, renowned for his tender and fragile sound, died in March 1959. He was 50 years old, a drug-addict himself and often the target of racial aggression, not least during his period in the Army. A few months later, Billie Holiday, perhaps the greatest voice of the 20th century, died at the age of 44. Bud Powell survived until 1966, at the age of 42, but was never the same again after his hospitalization in 1948, when he was the victim of electroconvulsive therapy. He died of malnutrition and alcoholism. The two most promising trumpet players of the time, along with Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Chet Baker, died very young: Fats Navarro at 27, in 1950, due to a probable overdose, and Clifford Brown in 1956, at the age of 26, in a car accident. Eric Dolphy, one of the first proponents of free jazz, died in 1964, at the age of 36 in Berlin, where European doctors, convinced by the media that jazz players are always addicted to drugs, mistook a diabetic coma for an overdose and, instead of acting, thought that he was better left on a hospital bed for the drugs to run their course.

There are many other examples that could be invoked here. Like in Ginsberg's *Howl*, the best minds of jazz were destroyed at a young age in a few years. We will however restrict here to a single other example: John Coltrane, who died of cancer in 1967, at the age of 45. His evolution is symptomatic for the turn that we are trying to describe here. Himself addicted to drugs and alcoholism since 1948, he managed to extricate himself from their grasp in 1957. As he would later point out in the liner notes to his epochal album *A Love Supreme*, in 1965, at that moment he experienced a 'spiritual awakening'. The syntagm certainly befits the album which resembles a musical quest into the realms of the beyond. Organized in four parts (Acknowledgement, Resolution, Pursuance and Psalm), it was the result of a single recording session, but the tipping point of an evolution that accelerated starting in 1959⁶ with the album *Giant Steps*. Properly named, it created a different form of melodic phrasing that critics would call 'sheets of sound'. Through them, music became a research, or a quest comparable to the Indian ragas that attracted his interest during that period. In a way, it was a prolonging of the introspective turn observed by Amiri Baraka in the case of bop music, only that now it would search to connect the particularity of an individual to something universal. *A Love Supreme* perfects this intuition in a work that balances subjectivity with universalism, introspection with affirmation, spirituality with avant-garde. It can be read—and it has been read—as a hymn to a universal God, but also as a work of deconstruction, of subversion of traditional musical models.

It is suggestive that, shortly after *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane recorded *Ascension*. It opened a different path. While the previous album was the work of a quartet, *Ascension* was a form of collective improvisation. It is a performance without breaks, in which eleven musicians create a partly-structured event that starts with a musical motif from *A Love Supreme*. The difference between the two albums is not in fact radical: it simply points out that the music no longer revolves around one performer, one soloist or a certain musical grammar, but that it activates and makes possible a collective form of creativity. Everything Coltrane did afterwards, in the short time that was left to him, was to continue to enact and enlarge the breaks in the tradition and thus to move towards a field in which new definitions, new understandings and new forms of being could be conceived. In the terms we have used in this text, the melancholy directed towards the never-ending catastrophes of the past was replaced by the affirmation—albeit through catastrophe itself—not only of something new for the sake of the new, but of a different politics to come.

There was, of course, a subsequent tendency to understand Coltrane's life and contribution to music (and spirituality) inside the frames of a myth, just as it had been the case for the lives of Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday et al. But to a greater extent than it had happened to the others, the focus changed from biography, and an almost romantic celebration of the figure of the irrational artist, to the implications and effects of the music itself.

This seems to solve a paradox inherent to the liberal ideology: if what counts is the individual, then his continuous struggle against the pile-up of catastrophes that is history

can only appear as a melancholic failure. The difference brought by free jazz (and something that defines any authentic avant-garde) is the focus on the collective. Amiri Baraka reads this mutation in the terms of the (coming-to-)consciousness of a racial minority: “Jazz is the music of Americans who were not allowed to be Americans” (*Digging* 13). However, the key political element of such a music—and we use the term *political* here to name the moment when musical invention produces a redistribution of the sensible, or a re-understanding of the form of the *commons*—is, for the American writer, when the music overflows its racial boundaries and has to be taken seriously by the majority:

This development signified also that jazz would someday have to contend with the idea of its being an art (since that was the white man’s only way into it). The emergence of the white player meant that Afro-American culture had already become the expression of a particular kind of American experience, and what is most important, that this experience was available intellectually, that it could be learned. (*Blues People* 152)

To be precise, this happened slowly. It involved figures like Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman during the Swing Age, and Chet Baker, Bill Evans and many others afterwards. This history contains specific events of radical importance, like Billie Holiday’s 1939 performance in the New York’s Cafe Society, in front of a white audience, of the song called *Strange Fruit*. With lyrics written by Abel Meeropol, a Communist Jew, it dared to portray and accuse the killing (through lynching and hanging) of black people in the South. The carefully orchestrated event—all the lights in the cafe went off when Billie Holiday sung the last word of the song: “Here is a strange and bitter crop”—was courageous to say the least: Billie Holiday was facing uncertain reactions from a white audience, previously unchallenged by such strong and assertive criticism. After a few seconds of silence however, the audience burst into rapturous applause and we can undoubtedly read in this event a radical form of crossover solidarity, perhaps the authentic definition of what democracy should be.

Along this reading of jazz as a democratic form of dialogue and solidarity, Wynton Marsalis points out that this is (or should be) the aim of each performance: “to make something out of whatever happens—to make something together and *be* together.” The essence of jazz is, according to him, democratic: “Jazz reminds you that you can work things out with other people. It’s hard, but it can be done. When a group of people try to invent something together, there’s bound to be a lot of conflict. Jazz urges you to accept the decisions of others” (12).

The word to underline here is *invention*. The object or scope of a collective gathering, the aim of the music or of making a society work is not the negotiation or the producing of a contract among different particularities with their own identities kept (almost) intact. It is to be observed here that this is the aim of the current identity politics and of multiculturalism at large. Perhaps this is why jazz in our age is relegated (once again) to entertainment and to

a niche in the large and powerful music industry: its essence reminds us too radically what current democracy certainly is not. Namely, the ability to invent a new commons, a collective solidarity and identity.

The only solution out of the unavoidable conflict when different identities meet is to invent a form of solidarity that traverses and even internally destroys each particular identity. In Jacques Rancière's definition of the distribution of the sensible, it is not a matter of creating a harmonious social body, but first and foremost of challenging the legitimation of any existing one: "They do not produce collective bodies. Instead, they introduce lines of fracture and disincorporation into imaginary collective bodies" (29). The political collective is thus first of all an act of disincorporation, a challenge to the existing distribution of the sensible. The radical performances of the '60s were certainly such a challenge. For a while at least, they seemed to enact a metamorphosis from the (melancholic) introspective turn to a revolutionary invention of a new form of commons.

El Quinto Regimiento

In 1969, Charlie Haden, a bass player who rose to prominence as part of the revolutionary group of Ornette Coleman, that in many ways invented the language of free jazz, produced his first album as a leader. It was an unusual album, compared with the formulae used before: it was not a quartet or a trio, let alone a solo recording. And it was neither a big band, at least not in the traditional meaning of the term. The key was already in the title of the album: *Liberation Music Orchestra*. The term orchestra was not ironic, although the album was far from any traditional orchestral music and it included, among the performers, key figures of the free jazz movement: Don Cherry, Dewey Redman, Gato Barbieri, Paul Motian, Andrew Cyrille or Carla Bley.

The idea of the album has a political origin. As Haden explains in the liner notes to the album, an incident at the National Convention of the Democratic Party gave him the idea of a project that would link the form of an orchestra with the liberatory aspects of free jazz. It would also connect music and a political/ethical attitude. This incident exposed, for Haden, the real face of American democracy.

The supporters of a motion against the Vietnam War, defeated by vote of the majority, began to sing *We Shall Overcome*, an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement and originally a protest gospel song. Enraged by this act, the rostrum ordered the orchestra to start singing *You're a Grand Old Flag* (a patriotic tribute to the American flag) and *Happy Days Are Here Again* (the unofficial song of the Democratic Party), in the hope of silencing the dissenters. The (sad) irony of the incident was not lost on Charlie Haden. In order to pre-emptively block any emancipatory project, the solution was—and still is, undoubtedly, in the neoliberal

contemporary society—to pretend that everything is *already* alright, that we live in a happy age and that there is, after all, no other desirable alternative.⁷

The idea of the orchestra comes at least partly from this incident: while the Democratic Party Orchestra contributed to the stifling of any emancipation and liberation, Haden's project became and assumed the opposite position. As such, the tradition (and with it, the different writing of history) that the album refers to is entirely opposed to the legitimating narrative myth of the American Dream: Haden went back to the Republican songs from the Spanish Civil War; among them, the anthem of the Quinto Regimiento de Milicias Populares, a regiment made mostly of volunteers. It was not only a military unit—one of its aims was to promote education and to invent an art that would be suitable to the city streets and the front line. The regiment was known for its murals and posters, the mobile libraries it enacted all over Spain, or a form of theatre that came to be called “guerrillas teatrales.” Art, in this understanding, was far from an entertaining act or an object that would require contemplation: it was a weapon along the other traditional ones, meant to illuminate and emancipate. It would thus confront the official writing of history and would attempt to propose a different one.

For Charlie Haden, this was also the essential aspect of free jazz and of his own project. What was enacted through the Liberation Music Orchestra were

... ways of writing history, presenting situations and arranging statements, ways of constructing relations between cause and effect or between antecedent and consequent that confound the traditional landmarks, the means of presenting objects, inducing meanings and causal schemata that construct the standard intelligibility of history. (Rancière 65)

The album also contained the song *War Orphans*, one of Ornette Coleman's most openly political creations and Haden's own *Song for Che*. At this point Ernesto Che Guevara was already dead, murdered with the direct help of the CIA in Bolivia. The death of Guevara offered a kind of melancholic paradox for the emancipatory movements of the times: on the one hand it energized them through the anger at the injustice that his murder emphasized and, on the other hand, it signaled that the battle was far from being won. Revolution, in a sense, was dying at the end of the '60s, and not only on the front lines in Vietnam or in the mountains of Bolivia. It was also dying in music. The '70s would bring to the front rock music or disco, while the radical forms of jazz would become a niche with less and less popular appeal. A music that had been “engineered to expose the hypocrisy and absurdity of racism in our country” (Marsalis 88) left the center stage once again to the commercial interests of the industry and sometimes of the artists themselves⁸ (Miles Davis for example adapted very quickly to the demands of the market in order to keep his popularity and increase his revenues).

There is however another story that deserves to be added here, one that probably complements the example of Charlie Haden. For, if Haden would go on to make music,

including several more protest-political albums with his Liberation Music Orchestra, and would die in 2014 at the age of 76, another prime exponent of free jazz would suffer a different fate. In 1967, at John Coltrane's funeral, as a testament to his importance to the radical jazz scene of the time, the saxophone player Albert Ayler was chosen to perform a tribute. He was 31 at that time and had been the author of several experimental albums. His sound was radical and wild and his improvisations were comparable to the experiments of Coltrane himself after his *Ascension* album. At the funeral, his performance combined the ferocious playing of his instrument with cries of anguish (as a sign of mourning) and joy (as a sign of hope for Coltrane's ascension into heaven). This moment in his short career is usually perceived as the tipping point: after it, due to continuous pressures from his production company, that his music was too difficult to sell, the radicality of his sound subdued and was slowly replaced by a spirituality comparable to the one Coltrane offered in *A Love Supreme* or to contemporaries like Sun Ra or Pharoah Sanders. His final album, *Music is the Healing Force of the Universe*, appeared in 1969 and it was heavily influenced by rock music, although it still contained his signature wailing sound. In the review written for the AllMusic internet site, Al Campbell called it "a prophetic statement dealing with guilt, confusion, sorrow, and hopes of redemption" ("AllMusic Review"). The album was recorded in August 1969. What followed remains unclear and has been the subject of numerous speculations by the media and sometimes by the scholars who tried to bring light to his final year.

Ayler's body was found floating, on November 25, 1970, in New York's East River. At the time several conspiracies began to circulate: that his death was drug-related—either an overdose or a murder due to debts; that he was killed by the Mafia, tied to a jukebox and thrown into the river; that he was murdered by the FBI as part of a violent attempt to suppress the key figures of Black Culture, from the Black Panthers to artists like Dolphy, Coltrane or political leaders as Martin Luther King or Malcom X. The most accepted version of events nowadays comes from the perspective of Mary Parks, his girlfriend at the time and collaborator as a vocal singer on *Music is the Healing Force of the Universe*. She considers that Ayler committed suicide because of feelings of guilt and accusations from his mother that he was responsible for the miserable life of his brother, whom he had convinced to become a musician, by jumping off a ferry that was going to the Statue of Liberty. There are, however, no testimonies from anybody on that ferry that would confirm this version of events. The symptomatic aspect of his death on the road towards the Statue of Liberty did not escape the public.

There is one other aspect that deserves mentioning: Ayler died at the same age Charlie Parker did. Between them, 14 years of radical changes, sublime hopes and bitter defeats followed one another with an intensity rarely equaled in other periods of history. It was not, strictly speaking, a period of war, but it counted many victims. The ideology would want us believe that, as free individuals in a free country, they suffered the consequences of their own

choices. In any case, the phenomenon can hardly be reduced to such a simple explanation. That's why we will attempt a different one.

As the image of the graveyard⁹ in Chalers Baudelaire's poem *A Fantastical Engraving* from *Les fleurs du mal* ("a graveyard's empty plain / Where lie, with pallid sunshine overhead, / From old and modern times, the storied dead") makes clear, *les peuples de l'histoire* are left aside while the writing of history follows its own course. To Walter Benjamin, himself one of the key readers of Baudelaire, this abandonment of the people (for the sake of a triumphant ideological narrative) is caused by an equivalence between the catastrophes of history and what is called progress. The Angel of History is pushed, as we have seen, by a storm towards the future, with his back to it, "while the pile of debris before him grows towards the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm" (Benjamin 62). The Revolution free jazz tried to enact—or at least the one it desired to be a key part of—intended to be an interruption of this process. And, just as for Benjamin, the solution lied with a messianic force that would achieve through its radical act what the Angel of History is unable to do.

The stilling of the storm, the healing of the wounded and the opening of another possible (and hopefully just) world are the dimensions that can describe and define the singular connection between music and politics that jazz created between the death of Charlie Parker and that of Albert Ayler. The artist's role, in the view of Amiri Baraka, was (and is) to raise the consciousness of the people. Otherwise, there would be no reason for art. And, if for Benjamin the storm of history is so powerful that it makes us all melancholic victims, perhaps what the specific creativity of the music, the spiritual searches of John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, the protests of Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra or Charlie Parker's desire to wind the world the other way, what all these events tell us is that there might be a fragile, yet enduring solution well captured by another poet, this time Paul Valéry, in his own view of a graveyard, the poem *Le cimetière marin*¹⁰: "*Le vent se lève / Il faut tenter de vivre.*"

We live in an age that seems very far from the solutions imagined by and through free jazz. An epoch in which the very idea of radicality has been maligned and jazz itself seems just a niche in an environment that is entirely controlled by the market. Nevertheless, the past is often valuable not because it contains lessons for the present but because it can be viewed as an archive of possibilities that the present is no longer able to imagine. In such a reading, the stories visited above are not simple historical elements (well framed and contained in their context) to revisit with nostalgia, but possibilities that can be once again imagined and enacted.

End Notes

1. Even Chan Parker seems inclined to position the reasons for Parker's fall in his long *dance* with death: "Bird had a preoccupation with death, perhaps stemming from his father's murder. Death was a lover whom Bird wooed constantly. It was ever present in Pree. In a macabre way, he even tried to connect it to me when he told me I had the 'stench of death' about me. [...] Through all Bird's violence, his courtship of death turned inward upon himself. I could do nothing, except hold on, drag my feet, and pull him back towards life" (57).
2. It is unclear if this letter is prior or after his daughter's death.
3. It is worth mentioning here that Walter Benjamin did not include jazz among what he considered to be emancipatory movements. He was mainly concerned with (street) photography and (Soviet) cinema. And while this is probably due to the fact that he did not have access to a jazz that would be more than dance music, it is not true of, for example, other prominent members of the Frankfurt School like Theodor Adorno. However, as he put it in his 1936 essay *On Jazz* and reiterated it later in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and even later in his *Aesthetics*, Adorno remained convinced that jazz is an aspect of the culture industry in which its potential subversive dimensions are muted so that it can be mass-produced. Nevertheless, in many ways our perspective here remains indebted to Adorno and it just replaces jazz in its system of thought.
4. Given that even when black music was presented in positive terms these were due to the native qualities of black performers, not their rational choices and abilities to create. If talent was accepted for them, rationality was reserved for the inheritors of the European tradition.
5. It must however be pointed out that Allen Ginsberg didn't understand jazz. He considered it to be a form of facile music in which it is enough to blow into a horn and call what comes out music.
6. The year 1959 is usually considered as one of the most important in the history of jazz. It witnessed several key events that would change jazz music in a radical and definitive way: the *Kind of Blue* album of Miles Davis (to which John Coltrane was a part of) which exposed and, in a way, invented modal jazz; the first album by pianist Bill Evans (who was also part of *Kind of Blue*) with bassist Scott La Faro that would change the way the instruments, previously restricted to ensuring the rhythm, would perform; the two most important albums of Charles Mingus to that date (*Blues and Roots* which revisited the roots of Afro-American forms of expression, and *Mingus Ah Um* which contained forms of direct political jazz, as *Fables of Faubus*); Ornette Coleman's music that would define free jazz for an entire generation, captured in albums like *The Shape of Jazz to Come*; the avant-garde album of Sun Ra, called *Jazz in Silhouette*, but also albums by Dave Brubeck, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, or Abbey Lincoln.
7. One is tempted to point here the symptomatic change in the slogans of the Donald Trump election campaigns: in 2016 it was "Make America Great Again"; in 2020, it changed to "Keep America Great". Things are never new when politics is limited to the management of what is. They just change, as Marx knew so well, from tragedy to farce.
8. Stuart Nicholson in his *Jazz and Culture in the Global Age* makes the point that "the very culture that enabled jazz to grow and thrive in its Golden Years is pushing the music aside through the dictates of entertainment, leaving the music increasingly isolated". However the author fails

to imagine a different challenge for artists today rather than shaping their music “in a way that finds a function in people’s lives that is in tune with twenty-first-century consumerist lifestyles” (Nicholson 37).

9. According to Michael Löwy, this poem was one of the key sources for Walter Benjamin’s thesis on Paul Klee’s “Angel of History.”
10. Incidentally, the lines from this poem were used by Hayao Miyazaki in his 2013 animation film *Kaze Tachinu*, which also exposes the connection between death and radical invention. It must be observed here that the injunction that the lines offer (and the interpretation offered in Miyazaki’s movie and in our text) is far from suggesting a hedonistic answer to a world on the verge or in the middle of catastrophe. *Vivre* here is on the contrary the most ethical position, a resistance to the repetition of catastrophes, an act of defiance and an act of invention.

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