The Jazz Epic as American History:
John Carter and Wynton Marsalis

Daniel Widener

In spring of 2015, Michigan Congressman John Conyers introduced House Resolution 1682. This “National Jazz Preservation, Education, and Promulgation Act” offers a comprehensive plan for preserving, disseminating and otherwise supporting jazz music at the level of the American Federal Government, through programs administered by the Smithsonian Institution and through a variety of initiatives aimed at secondary schools. With a proposed funding level of $1,000,000 a year, Conyer’s bill followed a 2011 effort by the Congressman that, in addition to funding both preservation and jazz in schools, would have authorized the reintroduction of the Ambassadors of Jazz Program begun originally by the Department of State as part of the Cold War era cultural confrontation with the Soviet Union.¹

As the longest serving Democrat in the American Congress, Conyers has had ample opportunity over the years to demonstrate his support for a musical form he terms “a national American treasure.”² Conyers efforts are part of a larger trend aimed at ensuring the continued viability of jazz music by ensuring the genre’s status as “America’s classical” music. The core tenet of this trend holds jazz aloft as an indigenous American musical phenomenon of worldwide importance, akin to abstract expressionism, the iphone, and, perhaps, hamburgers, as world-historical examples of American influence and ingenuity. Antecedents of contemporary support for jazz as a “high” art deserving of museum recognition, public subsidy, and archival instillation

can be traced to before the Second World War. The march of jazz toward modernist respectability took decades. As a point of departure for thinking about the long history of the general trend, however, the years of the Second World War are crucial, seeing as they did the rise of bebop’s elevation of artistry over entertainment, Duke Ellington’s move into historically inflected symphonies such as *Black, Brown, and Beige*, which premiered at Carnegie Hall, and Norman Granz’s studiously integrated *Jazz at the Philharmonic* series.

This longer trajectory notwithstanding, it is principally since the 1980s that the notion of jazz as an “American” art has gained widespread official and philanthropic currency. This is a process that has been driven in no small measure through the conscious agency of a group of musicians and intellectuals committed to an identifiably “neo-classicist” approach to jazz. Alongside Conyer’s efforts to generate governmental appreciation and resources, the neo-classical trend is best exemplified by two interrelated events, the 1997 Pulitzer Prize awarded to Wynton Marsalis for his composition *Blood on the Fields*, and the 2000 Ken Burns television series *Jazz*. The second followed the first, as official recognition of jazz as worthy of the highest of American humanistic honors paved the way for the inclusion of jazz—alongside baseball and the American civil war—as a constituent element of the broad sweep of American history as envisioned by America’s preeminent documentarian.

Interestingly, the push for the inclusion of jazz as a recognized and distinctive American art comes amidst a parallel trend, a wide-ranging and bitter debate concerning the contours and desirability of a singular, and national, American history. Even before the 1990s, when Smithsonian Enola Gay exhibition became the site of an acrimonious series of skirmishes between museum leadership, professional consultants, military historians, and the broader public, a wide-ranging debate has taken place within and beyond the historical profession concerning how to conceive, narrate, and present the history of the United States. Although there is a risk in simplifying overmuch, the debate has tended to pit proponents of a singular and generally triumphalist national history against a motley band of revisionists who take
issue with nearly every article of faith that the former hold dear.

Much like the view of jazz as a “high” art, critical polemics regarding the parameters of American history have a long history, both within and outside of the historical profession.\(^3\) Ongoing iterations of this debate reflect the increasingly diverse makeup of both American society and the historical profession, a pattern Peter Novack described as “every group its own historian.”\(^4\) During the 1980s, challenges were generally framed via the inclusion of the race/class/gender triptych, augmented in turn by greater attention to questions of sexual orientation, citizenship status, disability, and other forms of social identity and positionality. Since the 1990s, the situation has grown even more complex, as interpreters of the past struggled to grapple with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the brief burst of uni-polar policies that followed, immigration and demographic transformation, globalization, sexual liberalization, and the halting, but real, inclusion of European theoretical frameworks that had previously proved more attractive to social scientists and literary scholars than historians.

These contexts have made politics difficult to detach from the contemporary writing of American history, despite, or perhaps because of, the historical profession’s traditional preference for “objective” neutrality at the expense of clearly articulated and theoretically elaborated points of view. At times, the revisions and counterrevisions of American history have acquired a left/right character, as in the case of Howard Zinn’s well-known *Peoples’ History of the United States* (recently expanded to a series of survey texts on a variety of topics) and its reactionary shade, Larry Schweikart’s *A Patriot’s History of the United States*. For more than a quarter century, Thomas Bender has sought a center that would hold, asking his colleagues to “conceive a plot that is adequate to our proliferating knowledge about

\(^3\) For one example, see Roy Rosenzweig, “What is the Matter with History?” *Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (June 1987): 117-22.

society.”

Questions about the viability of such a project can certainly be asked. Does an “integrationist” perspective of the sort envisioned by Bender have space for accounts that seek to transform, rather than stand alongside, extant accounts? Should scholars bother to try and produce a new consensus within a country whose politics, we are told, have become ever more partisan? Can one truly represent both the dominant and the dominated in a way that satisfies either? And can this be done before all the history departments are closed by administrators committed to the techno-vocationalism currently in vogue within higher education in the United States?

The language of globalization has made a singular narrative skein even more difficult to imagine. In the introduction to his recent volume *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, Bender notes the isolationist tendency of Americans to perceive America as “here” and the rest of the world as “over there.” This, it should be noted, is a pattern that affects both the historical profession and the public; witness the transformation of the field of diplomatic history into something strangely called “America and the World” as if the two constituent nouns were wholly independent of each other. Whether one takes Bender’s position that American history—structured by labor migration, slavery, technology transfer, imperialist expansion and war—has always been global, or prefers the defense of “national” history as a necessary glue for binding together the citizens of liberal democracies, as Johann Neem has argued, it is hard to see how the notion of America as an exceptional state can be retained. We are either connected to everyone else or akin to other states in a theoretical sense. This is a notion that disturbs many Americans, including seemingly the entirety of the political class, for whom the idea of America as transcendent and exceptional is a matter of public proclamation.

It is not hard to see how something like jazz—a multiethnic national art

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with worldwide impact—might find a place in debates regarding American history and America’s place in the world. Part of this, as Penny Von Eschen has explained, it because jazz has repeatedly been marshaled as exemplifying laudable national characteristics, as was the case in the aforementioned “jazz ambassadors” trips of the 1950s and 1960s. Beyond this singular example lie many faces of jazz music; as racially linked to African Americans and as a set of global and therefore multiethnic musical practices; as a form that connects modernist aesthetics and vernacular expressivity; as a permanent cultural critique or the most “American” of American cultural forms. Jazz has as many uses and it has users.

The essay that follows explores the “writing” of American history through jazz by contrasting two works, Wynton Marsalis’s 1997 Pulitzer Prize winning jazz oratorio, Blood on the Fields and John Carter’s 5-volume suite, written between 1982 and 1990, entitled Roots and Folklore. Each epic takes the African American experience as paradigmatic for comprehending the United States, and each tracks the periods of enslavement, emancipation, and after by moving through a variety of musical styles and affective gestures. Despite these commonalities, Marsalis and Carter were engaged in sharply divergent projects with clear ideological stakes and, I would argue, distinct views about the American past. Taken together, Blood on the Fields and Roots and Folklore allow us to think about how jazz “writes” history, what sorts of history jazz can write, and how debates about American history can unfold in aural, even instrumental, formats.

No working musician has been as closely identified with the recently successful attempt to position jazz as both a “high” art and as a crucial element of American cultural patrimony as Wynton Marsalis. The prominent scion of a venerable New Orleans jazz clan, an acclaimed performer of European art music and a youthful sideman of Art Blakey and Herbie Hancock, Marsalis rapidly earned commercial success and considerable acclaim as a straight-ahead “defender” of “traditional” be-bop-centric jazz. Since the 1980s,

Marsalis has advocated a traditionalist or “neo-classical” vision of jazz music both in print and on stage, and as a performer, as artistic director of the Jazz at Lincoln Center program, and as a vocal analyst of African American culture in general. In this, he has worked at length alongside Stanley Crouch and Albert Murray, two relatively public black intellectuals who have dedicated themselves to a forging an interpretation of race and American cultural life grounded in the views of novelist Ralph Ellison.  

As they themselves take pains to make clear, the ultimate figure with whom Marsalis, Murray and Crouch identify is the great composer and bandleader Duke Ellington. The Ellingtonian vision that Marsalis and Crouch have championed at Lincoln Center is a canonical one with clear musical and ideological positions. It views American culture as inherently polyglot; sees jazz as the definitive example of the promise of American culture, and champions African America as a kind of moral metronome for the rest of the republic. One aspect of this view, as noted earlier, is the insistence on taking jazz as a serious art that deserves state support and that is best showcased through the presentation of “classic” works by “heroic” masters like Ellington and Louis Armstrong. Educational programming is a logical corollary of this point of view, and the Jazz at Lincoln Center project offers extensive work toward fostering “jazz in the schools.” At the same time, Marsalis and Crouch are comfortable as cultural commissars, inveighing against black nationalists, experimental or avant-garde jazz musicians, and what they see as a deleterious black youth culture, exemplified above all by rap music.

As Eric Porter has detailed, dismissing black radical activism and excoriating the postwar jazz avant-garde are part of a broader Reaganite castigation of the 1960s. While the actual relationship between “free” jazz and black radicalism is a complex one, it is unsurprising that both critics and proponents would conflate the two. Each was visibly black and each was open about its contempt for the hypocrisy, violence, and general

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limitations of American society. Both pursued avenues of inquiry that took them well beyond the borders of the United States. Both Black Power and “the new music” were ultimately about community building, institutional transformation, and worker control.\(^\text{10}\)

In an era of racial strife and global revolt, free jazz offered a vision of “self-determination” even for those musicians whose connections to organized expressions of politics remained relatively tangential. This was the case with the avant-garde grouping that developed around composer and multi-instrumentalist John Carter and trumpeter Bob Bradford. In contrast to figures like Archie Shepp, Lester Bowie, and Horace Tapscott, each of whom developed ongoing links with elements of the black liberation struggle, Carter and Bradford were more akin to Anthony Braxton in promoting a vision of self-determination that referred primarily to their artistic goals. Carter and Bradford were dedicated experimentalists, eschewing the material of other composers. Indeed, all of the compositions on their first four albums were originals. Carter saw this as basic to the group’s creative process. No two performances were alike, and no attempt was made to recreate previously attained heights. Carter wrote most of the compositions played by the band, although Bradford penned a number of works, including “Songs for the Unsung,” which appeared on the album \textit{Secrets}. Nevertheless, the nature of the group’s creative process guaranteed widespread creative input. Carter described his compositions as “skeletal,” adding, “we try to play so that anybody can lead the way.” The result was a shared musical responsibility where “the only restriction on freedom of approach is that each player must listen...and...cooperate toward group expression within the mood.” Leading the way often took the form of capturing a particular mood set by Carter’s modal arrangements, which set the base for the group’s collective

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\(^{10}\) The bibliography on the relationship between Black Power and Free Jazz is large, and continues to grow. For three works that take distinct points of view, see Frank Kofsky, \textit{Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music} (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970); Iain Anderson, \textit{This is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); George Lewis, \textit{A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Creative Music} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
Collective improvisation constituted a critical element of the new music. This was less a sea change than a further elevation of a central component of jazz and, indeed, of African-derived music as a whole. Carter argued that the group’s “basic purpose is no different from that of any other jazz group. Our aim,” he continued, “is to explore any tune to the greatest extent possible at the moment we’re doing it.” Bradford argued that the difficulty implicit in constant, collective improvisation was necessary. Musical progress required that musicians constantly challenge themselves. Playing only original compositions, ditching more familiar patterns of sequential individual improvisation, and constantly seeking to transform his own understanding of his instrument involved acknowledged risks. “You can have good material and have a lousy group,” he noted. Defining playing as both a “picture and a problem,” Bradford added that, “all problems in my mind have a solution.” Sometimes, however, he conceded, “I don’t get all the little things.” Nevertheless, successfully combining complex elements into something new offered a victory wholly of the band’s own making. Here, the principle of aesthetic liberation became clear. Failure came not when a composition sounded awkward or proved unpopular, but when an the artist found himself or herself “playing something I didn’t want to play, didn’t like, and had no relationship to whatsoever.”

The pair met through Ornette Coleman. Coleman imagined that the Bradford might find Carter, with whom Coleman had attended high school in Texas, open to the musical ideas his former bandmate was interested in pursuing. Following this introduction, the duo began rehearsing together regularly. After forming the New Art Jazz Ensemble in 1965, the two men spent several years searching for like-minded musicians, eventually adding drummer Bruz Freeman and bassist Tom Williamson. After spending the

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better part of 1967 and 1968 woodshedding, the group sought to raise its public profile. Club dates remained elusive, however, and the group’s first public performance took place at a public theater, the Century City Playhouse. The Ensemble also began to record, releasing four albums between 1969 and 1973. The first, *Seeking*, was released by Revelation, which also recorded the band’s fourth album, *Searching*, in 1973. Two interim efforts, *Self-Determination Music and Flight for Four*, were produced by Flying Dutchman, an independent label that also released records by pianist Horace Tapscott and, ironically enough, given where things eventually went, Stanley Crouch. Although Carter and Bradford continued to play together regularly, the group issued no additional records until 1979, after which the duo continued to record until Carter’s death from cancer in 1991.  

Carter’s use of African American history as a reference point connected to similar efforts on the part of Anthony Braxton, Sun Ra, Shepp, Tapscott, and others. His five volume epic, *Roots and Folklore*, completed shortly before his death, sought to synthesize the whole of African American history into a musical corpus. Although the band’s first four albums referenced historical matter as well as African American musical traditions, Carter began a more serious attempt to utilize historical elements following his son’s return from a trip to Ghana and Nigeria in 1973. His incorporation of African instruments, rhythms, and historical themes, although by no means limited to the jazz avant-garde, nevertheless linked him to fellow experimentalists like Coltrane, Shepp, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Randy Weston and many others. Indeed, as Weinstein notes, many of the musical elements considered central to African music in general, including polyrhythm, improvisation, collective participation, and social and spiritual meaning, formed core components of

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avant-garde jazz, including the works of the New Art Jazz Ensemble.

Many of these musical elements are present in the initial two installments of the five-volume *Roots and Folklore* suite. It is worth taking up *Roots and Folklore* at greater length, as doing so allows a restatement of one argument proposed earlier, namely the need to see the intellectual and musicological interests of the jazz avant-garde as a fundamental part of the broader jazz corpus. Carter’s musical choices and narrative inclusions connected him to eighty years of parallel projects that aimed at translating African American experience into musical form. These include W.E.B. DuBois’ 1925 musical *Star of Ethiopia*, a conceptually ambitious but musically uneven effort that premiered at the Hollywood bowl and sought to recount the entire corpus of African-American history, from a mythologized Egyptian past to the rise of the New Negro generation, William Grant Still’s many locally penned examinations of “Negro” musical themes, of which the *Afro-American Symphony* is perhaps best known, and of course Ellington’s celebrated *Black, Brown and Beige*. But perhaps the most apt comparison is that between Carter’s opus and Wynton Marsalis’ Pulitzer Prize winning oratorio *Blood on the Fields*. Both projects offer epic treatments that trace the enslavement, transport, and transformation of Africans into African Americans as both a historical and musical phenomenon. Both take the blues as central to jazz, and indeed as central to African American identity. And both suggest that jazz represents the development of a uniquely “American” musical form.

Yet the differences between *Roots and Folklore* and *Blood on the Fields* clarify the political, intellectual, and musical contribution of the jazz avant-garde. While the term avant-garde is meant more as a conceptual and political signifier than a purely temporal marker, it is worth noting that the first segment of *Roots and Folklore* appeared in 1982, twenty years before

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Marsalis’ celebrated effort. Moreover, significant fissures are to be found between Carter’s experimental exploration of precolonial Africa, the middle passage, and the complicated process of African American subjectivity and the Marsalis’ equally complicated attempt to provide a musical documentation of his collaborator Stanley Crouch’s conviction that “our identity as Americans is the result of what slavery meant to our country.” Set within a larger project of codifying and extending a jazz canon, Marsalis, Murray and Crouch attempt to relate the twin concerns of “how much of our identity of Americans is the result of what slavery meant to our country” and the conviction that the African American experience offers “a metaphor for every question of unfairness and every question of servitude.”

Blood on the Fields offers an insightful and sober treatment of subject often elided in American public life. Both the compact discs and the liner note booklet feature American flag backdrops with African American figures, or blood, in the foreground. Blood and bodies are the primary signs in the painful, if relatively straightforward, story of capture and transformation Marsalis tells. America features prominently as well, as the suite ends with a freedom achieved in no small part through the embrace of an American identity. Marsalis traces the shift from Africa to America vocally and musically, incorporating what historian Eric Porter describes as “a pastiche of jazz history through Latin and funk rhythms, march passages, bebop harmonies and melodic lines, spirituals and New Orleans swing.” Despite this variation, and notwithstanding the talent and accomplishment of the nineteen musicians who sing and play on the records, Blood on the Fields might be said to suffer from the same limitations that a reviewer for Down Beat magazine noted in reference to an earlier Marsalis album, his 1982 Marsalis Standard Time, Vol. 1. In a review that appeared alongside a commentary on the first volume of Carter’s Roots and Folklore, Marsalis is described as “flawless, but narrow,” and as “having mastered jazz’s thousands

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16 Porter, What is this Thing Called Jazz, 332.
of improvisational clichés, and in avoiding them,” going on to invent his own. These musical clichés include “stiff solos” and “arranging gimmicks.”

One of the clichés present in Blood on the Fields is the conventional selection of a royal and a commoner as principle characters, a pairing whose eventual rapprochement creates a narrative that obliterates both a complicated African past and class distinctions among blacks—subjects that historians such as Michael Gomez have shown to be primary during precisely the moments Marsalis surveys—in the service of an American identity. The closed nature of the project is exacerbated by standard range of instrumentation, with only clarinet and tambourine complicating a line-up centered upon piano, trumpet, saxophone, trombone, and piano. Thus the ultimate project is one whose creative possibilities and political stances are circumscribed by the effort to translate Albert Murray’s notion of African Americans as “omni-Americans” into an epic musical form.

John Carter’s epic, by contrast, is both more particular in its evocation of African American life, and, in its refusal to accept an unconditional affiliation with America as a resolution of black problems, ultimately offers more successfully universal work. Incorporating a wider range of instruments and musical forms, Roots and Folklore is musically broader, more conceptually ambitious, and less bound by the narrative certainty that accompanies Blood on the Fields. As Bill Shoemaker noted, Carter offers “no unequivocal

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19 Murray’s influence on Marsalis, both in person and through the trumpeter’s closest intellectual mentor, Stanley Crouch, is a matter of record. See Wynton Marsalis, Pulitzer Prize Interview, Academy of Achievement, Washington, DC, January 8, 1991. Murray was an articulate advocate of a kind of African American mestizaje that posited African Americans as distinctly, fundamentally, and uniquely “American” subjects. In seeking to find a place distinct from either racist exclusion, unconditional assimilation, or black nationalism, like other voices concerned with explicating the border between the particular and universal as it relates to peoples of African descent, music figures centrally in Murray’s accounts. See Albert Murray, The Omni-Americans; New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1970).
statements, no coming full circle,” instead choosing to play “the urbanization of the African American experience as more a change of scenery than of circumstance.”

In part, Carter’s wide scope is possible because he gave himself more material to work with. One critical distinction between Carter and Marsalis can be found in the former man’s musical and social interest in Africa. His first instillation, *Dauwhe*, took up the subject of precolonial Africa, thus suggesting a connection to Africa wholly absent in Blood on the Fields, which begins with the middle passage. *Dauwhe* features an octet of veteran improvisers led by Carter, with Bobby Bradford (trumpet), Red Callender (tuba), James Newton (flute), reedist Charles Owens, UGMA bassist Roberto Miranda, drummer William Jeffrey and percussionist Luis Peralta. *Roots and Folklore* continues with Castles of Ghana, which traces contact, capture and the growth of the Atlantic slave trade. Centered upon the transformation of coastal trading posts into holding stations for detainees (the world’s first ‘factories’), *Castles of Ghana* aims to capture a region in flux through compositions that engage the complicity of Africans in the slave trade, the presence of Islamic culture in West Africa, and, above all, “the high emotions that must have gripped all the participants of this real life human drama.”

*Castles* is marked a series of musical additions, including vocalist Terry Jenoure, and former Frank Zappa sideman Don Preston, whose discordant playing helps add, in the words of one reviewer, “a suitably ungrounded element to this particular leg of the voyage.”

*Roots and Folklore* marks a serious, powerful, and yet understated entry into the polemic on the role of African in black North American culture. This

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20 Bill Shoemaker, *Down Beat* 55 (January 1988): 25. The idea of a negative historical continuity, meanwhile, seems to have taken hold in Marsalis’ subsequent work, as in the case of his 2007 recording From the Plantation to the Penitentiary.


22 Steve Smith review of Roots and Folklore series. http://nightafternight.blogs.com/night_after_night/2006/09/even_more_rec.html. It is fascinating to note, given the classicist elements at play in Jazz at Lincoln Center, that Castles of Ghana was originally commissioned as part of the New York Shakespeare Festival’s “New Jazz at the Public” series.
debate, which cuts across anthropology, history, religion, public policy and visual, plastic and musical art, is unlikely to ever fully abate. In regard to instrumental music, suffice it to say that for those concerned with positioning jazz as “America’s Classic Art!” serious attention to Africa can but be a distraction at best. Carter readily admitted that his work and social contacts with Ghanaian musicians convinced him of the vast distance that separates Africans and African Americans. Ultimately, this is part of the point. For both Africans and African Americans, jazz offered a vocabulary for articulating the dialectic of difference and similarity in ways that were often contentious, awkward, or incomplete. Yet as Robin Kelley has recently shown, musicians as vastly different as Guy Warren, Randy Weston, Ahmed Abdul Malik, and Sathima Bea Benjamin show, the nexus of jazz and Africa was simultaneously experimental and modern, anti-imperialist and aestheticized, and above all resistant to easy categorization.23

In the context of musicians from locales as different as Fort Worth, South Los Angeles and Bedford Stuyvesant trying to engage traditional Ashanti sounds, South African anticolonialism, or the Islamic music of the Sudan, the kind of shadow framework implied by historical narrative provides a crucial lodestone for ensuring consonance within difference. Some of this can be seen in the way that Dance of the Love Ghosts, Carter’s third installment, takes up the theme of the middle passage. Violence is an omnipresent backdrop, from the spiritual alienation conveyed by the percussive “the silent drum” to the vocalization of a shipboard rape by Jenoure. Although Dance of the Love Ghosts shifts the scene to the nether space between Africa and America, the album retains Africa as a living, knowable place. Carter took his compositional task as a research project, meeting repeatedly with an Africanist anthropology professor at UCLA and engaging a trio of Ghanaian

percussionists Carter had met through a drummer. In the course of recording the record, Carter came to appreciate the social distance between African and African American musicians, noting that while he thought the drummers understood his compositional ideas “academically,” the session made clear the “glaring” differences between the two groups.\(^{24}\)

Violence is similarly present in the projects fourth installation, *Fields*. As Joe Milazzo notes, the first side of *Fields* offers a litany of coercion:

The record begins with a sort of death chant -- “Ballad to Po’ Ben” -- in which the singer does not intercede for the departed’s soul as much as she bitterly mourns the lot of those Ben has left behind. “Bootyreba at the Big House” carries echoes of N’Awlins second line parade, but, as expressive as the individual instrumental voices are, they are too workaday woozy -- drunk, exhausted, beaten -- to be grotesque. Escape via heightened states of distraction is fruitless. “Juba’s Run”, the pace and tone of which is set by the desperate sprinter’s panting, finds literal flight from these circumstances equally impossible.\(^{25}\)

The flip side of this omnipresent violence is Carter’s multigenerational articulation of rural life. The album’s title track features a swinging, polyrhythmic work song in which the solos of Carter, Bradford, Andrew Cyrille, combine with a vocal sampling of an interview Carter did with his grandfather as well as a series of children’s rhyme’s sung by Carter’s grandchildren. This is a multi-generational, personalized (on one track Carter, a Texan, interviews his grandfather about rural conditions during the early 20\(^{th}\) century, while on another, Carter’s grandchildren sing nursery rhymes from Carter’s childhood), exploration of Carter’s conviction that “the field life that was witness to the labor, grief and pain that harnessed production unseen in the world before also cradled the beginnings of national


music that would grow to be respected and admired the world over.”

Carter’s quote shows that he, like Marsalis, was interested in questioning the relationship between African American cultural production and American identity. Maintaining the view that jazz was a quintessentially American “folk” music, Carter nevertheless opened a space for a music that would take American identity as an open question, rather than a fait accompli. In part, this came through sonic innovation, whether the counterpoising of five generations of family voices, the combination of acoustic and electronic instruments, the musical homage to varied African American forms, from field hollers to tap dance and bop. In part, this came from his serious interest in probing the importance and limitations of an African identity for African Americans, as well as his decision to engage compositional choices that made his final album, Shadows on a Wall, as open and searching as his exploration of precolonial Africa had been. In the end, Roots and Folklore provided an example not of integration or even progress, but of Baraka’s adage that “the song and the people is the same.”

America is also mostly “the same.” In 2007, Marsalis put out another well-received record entitled From the Plantation to the Penitentiary. Featuring seven original compositions that include the title track, a piece entitled “supercapitalism,” and a quasi-rap attack on rap music called “Where Y’all At,” this second work offers a logical extension of the themes raised in Blood on the Fields. The context surrounding this second foray into a socially themed work was, if anything, even more astringent than the years that surrounded Blood on the Fields. The early 2000s witnessed, after all, the 9-11 attacks; the subsequent (and continuing) abrogation of American civil liberties; the illegal invasion of Iraq; and the worst economic collapse in a half-century, brought about in no small measure by predatory lending practices aimed at black and brown homebuyers. Amidst all this was the massive expansion of mass incarceration as a fundamental element of American social

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The statistics are stark, and well known. Between the election of Ronald Reagan and the start of the first Obama administration, American prison rates rose from around 500,000 to over 2.3 million, with hundreds of thousands more in local jails, immigration detention facilities, or under court supervision. The United States, with less than 5% of the total world population, has more than 22% of the world’s prisoners. Equally well known are the racial disparities. One of every six black American men has served time, and one out of every 100 black women is imprisoned. The starkly racial elements of modern day mass incarceration have led powerful voices to note the continuities with earlier periods of slavery and segregation, as well as the increasing role prisons play in the political economy of the United States. This mass imprisonment of black men makes functional social life in black communities next to impossible, and it makes clear the problem with reducing African American experiences to a metaphor for a generalized American experience, for doing so negates the specificity needed for addressing and redressing specific forms of social inequality.

Against the backdrop of rising police violence, one might expect to see widening criticism of those African American intellectuals who have pushed a multi-generational argument regarding the waning importance of race as a fundamental form of inequality in American life. The murder of unarmed cigarette sellers, adolescent children, and women driving home from job interviews certainly calls into question black neoconservative jeremiads that

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29 Something of this can be seen in the acrimonious debate regarding the “Black Lives Matter” slogan. Many American communities with various degrees of aggrievement have advocated for the inclusion of other lives, or for the moniker “all lives matter,” an amendment that activists protesting the invisibility of police violence have found unhelpful at best.
posit the behavior of “thugs” as the core problem black Americans face. From this angle, Marsalis, Murray and Crouch have a problem.

John Paul Meyers has pointed out the ideological confusion at the heart of *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*. Meyers critiques Marsalis for decrying the excesses of capitalism while advertising luxury Movado watches (and, one might add, directing a musical project that includes a theater sponsored by and named after Coca-Cola). Meyer has also pointed out the verbal gymnastics required of Marsalis as he attacks rap while trying to use something very much like rap music in order to delimit what he sees as the flaws in working class black male behavior. Pressed on the latter point, Marsalis told an interviewer “it’s rapping, but it ain’t hip-hop. It’s the kind of rap we did in New Orleans back in the day. We called it juba juba, you, know ‘my grandma said to your grandma/Iko iko uh nay.” It is instructive that Marsalis would choose a song that features the lyrics “look at my king all dressed in red/bet you five dollars he’ll kill you dead,” in order to attack the violent imagery of contemporary black youth culture. Moreover, it says something about the link between liberalism and neo-conservative thinking that Marsalis ultimately feels compelled to understand the massive incarceration of black Americans principally through their own behavior. This is a lurching, shambling, wreck of a political position, animated by neoliberal falsehoods and unable to stand the cold light of day.

One suspects that John Carter, a former schoolteacher raised in a state infamous for its system of penal labor, would have had a different analysis of precisely how and why so many of us are in prison. It is likewise entirely possible that he would have remained open to at least some elements of hip-hop music, as did his fellow Los Angeles based experimentalist Horace Tapscott, who was a regular visitor and occasional participant at the legendary underground hip-hop space Project Blowed.30 At the very least, the instrumentation present on *Roots and Folklore*, extending as it does from precolonial percussion through 1980s-era electronica, suggests that Carter

would have been more attuned to the ways in which hip-hop mixes acoustic periods while reflecting both the ideological and technological context of today.

It is this openness, ultimately, that sets the avant-garde apart from the neo-classicist urge. It also brings back into focus the dialogue between history and jazz. For much of the 20th century, the cultural critique offered by jazz, blues, R&B, and, even hip-hop, was one tied to the political energies of black Americans. These were the interior musical styles of a population kept physically excluded from the mainstream of American life. This is not to say that culture and politics were identical, or even moved in concert. Nor is it to argue that black culture developed independently from the dominant culture it grew alongside. It is rather to say that musical forms corresponded to crucial shifts in the actual social lives of actually existing black Americans. *Mutatis Mutandis.* As arguably the foremost of these forms, jazz both crossed multiple epochs and persisted amidst the changes wrought by these shifts in the basic parameters of American life. For this reason, one can well understand how supporters of the music could both come to see it as emblematic of America and as worthy of recognition as such.

At the same time, the persistent abscesses in the American body politic—brought to light most recently by the seemingly unending spectacle of police murders of unarmed black people—suggest the need for an art that is less a mirror held up to society than a hammer used to reshape it. This was part of the historic contribution of both “the new music” of the jazz avant-garde and the “new social history” and its many variants. As such, it is unsurprising that their insurgent energies would generate the sort of responses that they have, and will doubtless continue to do, among defenders of the status quo. Generally, we tend to think of “history” and the “avant-garde” as operating in the contrasting temporalities of past and future. Yet in calling into question both the possibility

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and the utility of a singular narrative of American history, both free jazz and postnational historical scholarship offer a fissive vision of American social life as a point of departure for thinking about the early years of the 21st century.
ABSTRACT

The Jazz Epic as American History:
John Carter and Wynton Marsalis

Daniel Widener

This essay explores the “writing” of American history through jazz by contrasting two works, Wynton Marsalis’s 1997 Pulitzer Prize winning jazz oratorio, Blood on the Fields and John Carter’s 5-volume suite, written between 1982 and 1990, entitled Roots and Folklore. Each epic takes the African American experience as paradigmatic for comprehending the United States, and each tracks the periods of enslavement, emancipation, and after by moving through a variety of musical styles and affective gestures. Despite these commonalities, Marsalis and Carter were engaged in sharply divergent projects with clear ideological stakes and distinct views about the American past. Taken together, Blood on the Fields and Roots and Folklore allow us to think about how jazz “writes” history, what sorts of history jazz can write, and how debates about American history can unfold in aural, even instrumental, formats.

The recognition of jazz as a distinctive American art capable of “saying something” about American history as a whole comes amidst a parallel debate concerning the necessity and desirability of a singular narrative of American history. Although there is a risk in simplifying overmuch, the debate has tended to pit proponents of a singular and generally triumphalist national history against a motley band of revisionists who take issue with nearly every article of faith that the former hold dear. Ongoing iterations of this debate reflect the increasingly diverse makeup of American society and the historical profession, a pattern that heightens the utilility of thinking about the stakes implicit in discussing jazz as a format for the writing of history. In comparing the highly visible and celebrated vision of jazz and history offered by the prominent Lincoln Center enterprise with the lesser known contributions of
the jazz avant-grade, this essay argues that both free jazz and postnational historical scholarship offer a fissive vision of American social life as a point of departure for thinking about the early years of the 21st century.