

OLD GUARD IN THE SHADOW OF FREE JAZZ: AVANT-GARDE JAZZ  
AND THE POLITICS OF RACE FROM 1955 TO 1965

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## Introduction

America, as a hub of many distinct cultures, brought together European and African music traditions to create something utterly different in the process. Following the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, blues songs started to emerge from the Deep South. Blues was a cultural response to the newly-acquired freedom of African Americans. This music echoed the centuries of African American slavery and discrimination. Blues commonly referred to the topical events of the post-Reconstruction era. It frequently discussed the poor economic situation of the newly-emancipated minority, a lack of job opportunities, or their experiences with the problematic sharecropping system. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, blues songs often described a migration wave of African Americans traveling from south to north. As the Great Migration of the 1920s came to an end, the lyrical content began to focus on the African American hardships in the northern ghettos like urban violence, unbearable working conditions, segregation or longing for their previous southern home. In the 1920s, a group of newly-founded music corporations, like Columbia Records, recorded and distributed these African American folk songs. Bessie Smith was one of the first breakthrough blues singers to popularize the classic African folk standards, like “Downhearted Blues” in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to blues, jazz originated as a celebratory music first performed at the Congo Square in New Orleans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout this century, jazz music refrained from commenting on the African American experience in the way that blues did. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, except for Louis Armstrong’s “Black and Blue” which he composed in 1929,

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<sup>1</sup> See “From Down South to Up South: An Examination of Geography in the Blues” by Hiram Nall, and “From Emancipation to Segregation” in Giles Oakley’s *The Devil’s Music: A History of Blues* (24-29) for the origins of blues music. Furthermore, Hiram Nall’s article also explains how the migration experience shaped blues. Read “Bessie Smith” section in Oakley’s book for more about this pioneer blues singer.

jazz did not consciously talk about race. The 1930s brought a trend of integrated bands where white and black jazz musicians played together. Simply put, there were more racially integrated bands in this decade. Furthermore, in the 1930s, a number of Euro-centric classical elements increasingly infiltrated jazz. The original emphasis on improvisational soloing faded. The drum beat changed to an accessible 4/4 pattern, resulting in a swing reincarnation of jazz. Swing focused on big band music, primarily acting as dance accompaniment. Among the rising white mainstream, Bennie Goodman and Glenn Miller became the pivotal figures of swing. There were also plenty of opportunities for black jazzists, mainly those already established like Louis Armstrong. However, for political activism of jazz, it was not until 1939, when Billie Holiday, as the first well-known jazz singer, recorded a song about something so disturbing as the lynching of Southern African Americans in “Strange Fruit.” Still, the swing era continued until the mid-1940s. After the Second World War, an impulse to make jazz once again a black music manifested in bebop’s take on the genre. Bebop was a reaction on “the banality of popular swing music.”<sup>2</sup> As heard in the music of Charlie Parker, who was its icon, bebop countered swing’s popular danceable music with a take on jazz that demanded attention from the listener. Nonetheless, the standard jazz heavyweights, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, still remained the prominent figureheads of jazz.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning at the dawn of the 1950s, a culture war with the Soviet Union, during the Cold War, ushered in a decisive turn of events for American arts. The McCarthyism of the 1950s, or

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 55.

<sup>3</sup> Ted Gioia gives a good overview of the origins of jazz in *The History of Jazz*. For more about how jazz at the 18<sup>th</sup> century Congo Square represented a celebration and spiritual African music, and the syncretism of American and African music see the chapter “The Prehistory of Jazz,” 3-27. For an overview of the Swing era see Eric Porter’s *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, specifically “Swing that Music” section of “A Marvel of Paradox” chapter, 39-47. For a musical and social context of Bebop music and its relationship to post-WWII America see “Dizzy Atmosphere” in *What is Called Thing Jazz?*. The chapter also sheds light on the social activism of bebop players.

the Second Red Scare, morphed into an internal, domestic hysteria. Provoked by Senator Joseph McCarthy, this policy pushed the FBI and other governmental agencies to discredit and blacklist many artists who dared to criticize the so-called American way of life. The government tried, in some cases successfully, to discredit any left-leaning intellectual or artist “[f]rom Harvard to Hollywood.”<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, people working in the arts rather opted for a political silence. Still, some refused to follow suit and obey. Paul Robeson, a respected singer, actor, and sportsman, lost his freedom to travel abroad when the State Department took his passport after he criticized the U.S. for its unjust treatment of black minorities.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the Department of State regularly sent popular jazz musicians abroad to promote American culture and traditions in foreign countries. During their travels, black artists encountered little racial prejudice or discrimination when they toured in France and United Kingdom. Contrary to what the State Department expected, this widening of horizons continually prompted the artists to question the situation of blacks living in America. As Max Roach explained, “When you go over there, black musicians have a certain kind of sociological freedom, and a psychological one, too.”<sup>6</sup> The traveling black artists saw that compared to other, even less developed countries, the U.S. was behind in its treatment of the black minority.<sup>7</sup>

In the jazz of the 1950s, the so-called “cool jazz” of the West Coast, overwhelmingly

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<sup>4</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), xvi.

<sup>5</sup> See Laurel Sefton MacDowell’s article “Paul Robeson in Canada: A Border Story” for a detailed look into the FBI’s treatment of Robeson, and his apparent threat to American security. See p. 181 for the “passport incident.” To find out more about Robeson’s relationship with the Soviet Union see Lauren McConnell’s article “Understanding Paul Robeson’s Soviet Experiment.”

<sup>6</sup> Max Roach, interview by Marc Chenard, *Point of Departure*, December 8, 1978, accessed January 16, 2016, <http://www.pointofdeparture.org/PoD45/PoD45Roach.html>.

<sup>7</sup> To find out more about jazz as an American export article, see the chapter “The Resurgence of Jazz in the 1950s” in *This Is Our Music* by Iain Anderson.

played by white musicians, started to dominate. Cool jazz took a step back, and practically continued where swing left off, producing an answer to the previous popular genre. Dave Brubeck and Lennie Tristano became household names for jazz lovers. As a counterweight to cool jazz, some of the black jazz players put forward a relatively unsuccessful variation on bebop, “hard-bop,” a jazz style that emphasized the gospel and blues elements in jazz.

At the advent of the Civil Rights Movement in 1955, the shock from McCarthyism, the cool jazz takeover, hard-bop’s mixed results, and black artists’ experiences during their travels around the world, culminated in the formation of a group of radical black artists who were willing, more than ever, to experiment with their music. Charles Mingus, Max Roach, and Sonny Rollins formed the core of this group. While not as radical in their music as free jazz artists of the following decade, they did start to experiment with untypical musical elements such as atonality or collective improvisation years before free jazz became a thing. Having their heyday in the 1950s, these three artists were jazz’s avant-garde of that decade. The first chapter of this thesis will explain why. Furthermore, against the norm that “today’s avant-garde is tomorrow’s standard,” Mingus’, Roach’s, and Rollins’ music did not stop being cutting-edge after 1960. Therefore, in relation to free jazz, which was the avant-garde of the 1960s, they were the “Old Guard,” as they came before Coleman’s musical revolution. With the Old Guard, such artful interpretation of black music added to the growing sentiment of jazz as a relevant art form rather than merely a form of entertainment. “Jazz frequently appeared alongside established highbrow forms such as the visual arts (at the Jazz at the Museum of Modern Art series) and symphonic music (at the Boston Arts Festival).”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Old Guard was also radical in their political activism, actively involving themselves in the African American struggle for civil rights until the

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<sup>8</sup> Iain Anderson, *This is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 34.

1960s avant-garde, or free jazz took over.

The 1960s avant-garde was “the blackest” interpretation of jazz, as Whitney Balliet explained in Eric Hobsbawm's collection of essays titled *Uncommon People* (1998).<sup>9</sup> Jazz experts started to recognize free jazz as a musical genre after Ornette Coleman released *Free Jazz* in 1960. Nevertheless, Coleman experimented with a number of typical free improvisations at least a year before *Free Jazz* on his albums *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959) and *This is Our Music* (1960). By the time Atlantic Records released *Free Jazz*, Coleman already made free jazz an endorsed musical trend. John Coltrane and Albert Ayler followed Coleman’s lead. They became its figureheads in the following years.<sup>10</sup>

Free jazz or “The New Thing,” as jazzmen used to call it, pushed the musical experimentation of the Old Guard even further. Its use of polyphony, polyrhythm, and in some instances, almost structureless, free, collective improvisation usually resulted in complex and novel compositions. This collective improvisation often grew into in-synch “interaction among equals.”<sup>11</sup> The critics and scholars emphasized this radical quality of the musical aesthetics.<sup>12</sup> Although commercially unsuccessful, free jazz had notable cultural momentum that gathered a significant amount of attention from scholars and commentators in the following decades.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Whitney Balliet, *New York Notes: A Journal of Jazz in the Seventies* (New York, 1977), cited in Eric Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (London: Abacus, 1998), 383.

<sup>10</sup> See the liner notes to the albums *Tomorrow is the Question!*, *The Shape Jazz to Come*, *This is Our Music*, *Free Jazz*, by Ornette Coleman for an evaluation of his music from 1959 to 1960.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Hersch, “Let Freedom Ring!: Free Jazz and African-American Politics,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 32 (Winter, 1995-1996): 102.

<sup>12</sup> See the liner notes to *Free Jazz* by Martin Williams, recorded by Ornette Coleman.

<sup>13</sup> See the article by Charles Hersch and “Free Jazz and Black Nationalism: A Rhetoric of Musical Style” by Robert Francesconi for a complete understanding of the musical characteristics of free jazz. See the liner notes to *Free Jazz* for better understanding of free jazz’s musical aesthetics. For critics’ reaction, read early reviews of Coleman’s Five Spot Café gigs of 1959 by Martin Williams in *The Jazz Review*, and George Hoefer in *DownBeat*’s review.

Frank Kofsky and Amiri Baraka stand as the first leading scholars who contributed to the understanding of the genre, especially with their two major works, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (1971) and *Black Music* (1968), respectively. Kofsky was a great admirer of John Coltrane. In his influential book, he endorsed free jazz as a musical trend that was “fundamentally *political*.” He argued that the 1960s avant-garde was political as it expressed “the loss of faith of Negroes in a peaceful and gradualist American Dream.”<sup>14</sup> He connected this loss of faith with atonality and the abandonment of the 12-note chromatic scale, separating free jazz from Euro-centric music. Likewise, Amiri Baraka made a great effort to synthesize the radical politics of Black nationalism and Black Power with the uncompromising sonic tendencies of free jazz at the end of the sixties. Unfortunately, free jazz leader John Coltrane, who died in 1967, never had the opportunity to comment on this interpretation of his free jazz work.<sup>15</sup>

Although many scholars such as Frank Kofsky or Tommy Lee Lott, regard free jazz as a critical reflection on the racial politics of the 1950s and 1960s, this thesis will show that free jazz was involved in the politics of race to a similar extent as the Old Guard in spite of noteworthy changes from direct and confrontational to indirect and pragmatic ways in which they participated in these politics. A decline in the popularity of jazz at the start of the 1960s, the decolonization of Third World countries, and the changing hierarchy in jazz ensembles caused free jazz to turn to an indirect commentary through its musical aesthetics, not relying as much on explicit political statements such as those found in record titles or lyrics of the Mingus, Roach and Rollins compositions. The contrast between Coltrane’s seemingly pragmatic treatment of

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<sup>14</sup> Frank Kofsky, *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s* (New York: Pathfinder, 1998), 235.

<sup>15</sup> For a better understanding of the connection between free jazz and racial politics read “Part 3: Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music” in Kofsky’s *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s*, p. 217-253. For Amiri Baraka’s explanation of the link between free jazz’s avant-gardism and the politics of the freedom struggle see Ingrid Monson’s *Freedom Sounds*, specifically “The Debate Within: White Backlash, the New Thing, and Economics,” most importantly pages 259-262.



racial bias in the jazz industry, and the Old Guard's emotive and hands-on approach, including their open support of the Civil Rights Movement by appearing at fund-raisers and propagating its philosophies, was due to contrasting individual personalities within these artistic movements.

This thesis examines the involvement of free jazz and the Old Guard in the politics of race from 1955 to 1965, the period between the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the passage of the Voting Rights Act. These ten years were the pivotal decade in terms of racial activism. The southern black clergy and dissatisfied students established organizations like SCLC and SNCC, their efforts peaking with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Whereas most political studies of avant-garde jazz focus solely on the 1960s, and neglect the essential contributions of Mingus, Roach, and Rollins, this thesis establishes that in order to effectively judge the extent of free jazz involvement in the politics of race, it is crucial to see their racial activism in contrast to the 1950s jazz inventors, identified for the purpose of this thesis as the Old Guard, who represented political jazz in the 1950s, and consider free jazz's pro-black contributions in relation to the standard set by Mingus and others. Therefore, it is fitting to investigate the period between 1955 and 1965, as Old Guard had its heyday from 1955 until 1960, followed by the first wave of the free jazz improvisers, whose main contributions occurred until 1965. While 1960 was the central dividing line for the two artistic movements, they did not have a set year or month when they substituted one another, but were fluid in their continuity, both overlapping each other for some time and influencing one another. Coleman began to perform professionally at least two years before 1960. Likewise, Mingus and Roach did not completely stop with their political undertones in their music after 1960.

The thesis will not take into consideration the radical years after 1965, as free jazz became increasingly intertwined with the Black Arts Movement following 1965, making players like Sun Ra or Albert Ayler deliberately more militant, as a propaganda tool for Black Power.

John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman are the primary focus, as they are the ones who best represent the first wave of free jazz from 1960 to 1965. Coltrane and Coleman were not by any means the only ones to play free jazz. However, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra and Pharaoh Sanders were all part of the second wave that started to take over after 1965. Eric Dolphy was the only other first-wave improviser. However, more often than not, he acted as a sideman to Coltrane, so it would not be right to see him as an independent composer.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of methodology, this thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together works of musicologists, sociologists, historians, political scholars, and biographers. Each of these accounts has its own point of view on the relationship between jazz and racial politics, or politics in general, creating a fascinating contrast. Whereas musicological sources can, for example, discern racial commentary through the subtle tempo of a certain song, biographies add to the overall understanding by looking at the artist's childhood experiences and how they shaped him. Nonetheless, the most revealing scholarly works are those that specifically discuss political and social interpretations of jazz. For the Old Guard, Eric Porter's *What Is This Thing Called Jazz* (2002) treats the political history of Charles Mingus' work with care and a wealth of information, also adding fragments of information to Roach's political resume. Saul Scott's *Freedom Is Freedom Ain't* (2001) has revealing sections on the landmark Newport rebel festival and Mingus' other anti-establishment ventures. For Coltrane and Coleman, *This is Our Music* (2007) by Iain Anderson most comprehensively explains the social relevancy of free improvisation, the quintessential characteristic of free jazz. Lastly, Ingrid Monson's book *Freedom Sounds* (2010) thoroughly researches the relationship of the Old Guard and free jazz

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<sup>16</sup> For more about the relationship between the second wave of free improvisers and The Black Arts Movement see Iain Anderson's *This Is Our Music*, chapter "Free Jazz and Black Power," 94-95, 115-116. See "Art or Propaganda? Dewey and Adorno on the Relationship between Politics and Art" by William S. Lewis for an explanation of the relationship between jazz and political propaganda, especially pp. 52-53.

artists with the Civil Rights Movement. This quintet of publications provided a solid starting point for the thesis. Nonetheless, despite their very solid engagement with the relevant topics, they all give a somewhat subjective view. The thesis had to take this into account by closely examining what the primary sources had to say.

Later in the investigation, primary documents became the focal point, having an invaluable revelatory significance, as they came closest to the ideas of a specific artist. As one might assume, an interview with someone like Mingus can be very revealing. It is a good mode of expression, as usually the artist talks for a considerable amount of time, approaching many topics. However, the interview as an almost spontaneous conversation can also be misleading. There are instances when a certain artist completely contradicted himself and his beliefs. This happened during a interview with Sonny Rollins in 2010 when, asked how he rated his political activism in the 1960s, he answered with an observation that as a black man “everything you do is political,”<sup>17</sup> basically downplaying his civic engagement. Still, interviews, in general, are without a doubt an insightful source.

Liner notes are probably the most valuable material that scholars can use. An artist can discuss the music on a specific record in depth. It was common practice to have a critic write liner notes to a jazz record. The artist, who created the album, commissioned the critic to produce this piece of writing, describing the meaning of the music on the record. Nat Hentoff, A. B. Spellman or Ralph Gleason were the popular choices at the time. Normally, the author of the text came very close to what the musician tried to express with his musical creativity. However, the liner notes written by the artists themselves are the most worthwhile, as they come closest to

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<sup>17</sup> Martin Gayford, “Shining On: Interview with Sonny Rollins,” *Daily Telegraph*, November 12, 2010, accessed January 16, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandjazzmusic/8125961/Shining-on-interview-with-Sonny-Rollins.html>.

the personal viewpoint of the composer. Jazz journalists did not only have their hands in the printed liner notes on the record sleeves, but also expressed their opinions in jazz publications. Jazz journalists ordinarily commented first on a particular development in jazz. They also mirrored the initial reaction of a broader audience. Jazz magazines did not serve only as a place for short reviews of the new records but provided space for columns and essays from the critics and the artists reacting to recent musical trends.

## Chapter 1

### The Old Guard

When Ornette Coleman came to New York City in 1959, his performances left many people in awe. Even the veterans of experimental jazz, Charles Mingus and Max Roach, did not know what to think of the dissonant sounds coming out of Coleman's saxophone, as their reaction “oscillated between lukewarm support and outright hostility.”<sup>1</sup> This confusion even led to embarrassing violence, when Roach punched Coleman after one of his gigs in late 1959.<sup>2</sup> However, there might have been more to Roach's aggressive behavior than mere confusion. Such an emotional response to Coleman's music might well have had a deeper cause. Most likely, Mingus and Roach, who spearheaded the more sophisticated and experimental jazz of the 1950s, were having a difficult time accepting people's acknowledgment of Coleman as the avant-garde jazz maestro when what they heard was only a slight extension of what they were already doing. Moreover, for them, it brought only minimal endorsement by the jazz community.<sup>3</sup> In essence, they saw their music as equally deserving of the avant-garde label as Coleman's music. This view was understandable. Indeed, Mingus', Roach's and Rollins' non-conforming lifestyles and their adventurous musical nature indicate that they were not only the avant-garde of the 1950s, but also the Old Guard of the 1960s avant-garde because of their influence on free jazz and their sonic experimentation, which continued well into the 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*, 137.

<sup>2</sup> John Litweiler, *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life* (New York: Morrow, 1992), 82-83.

<sup>3</sup> See Gene Santoro, *Myself When I am Real*, 160, for an explanation why Mingus resented Coleman.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Gebhardt, *Going for Jazz*, 127-29, and Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, examine the hostile reaction of the Old Guard to Coleman's music.

From a musical standpoint, avant-garde jazz utilized sonic and compositional pieces that were not common in mainstream music. Mingus did not shy away from such elements. Mingus almost never followed what was conventional in the jazz genre of the 1950s. Despite being influenced by hard bop, he was “more experimental than most hard boppers.”<sup>5</sup> As a talented bassist, he remained at the forefront of rhythm innovation since the late 1940s, incorporating musical ideas that were utterly original, or rarely used by other musicians. Even his bass successors did not catch up on his novelties. As musicologist Ekkerhard Jost asserts, “[o]nly to a slight extent did Mingus’s immediate contemporaries take over his technical innovations or join the move to free the bass from its servant role.”<sup>6</sup> Mingus, on his album *Tijuana Moods*, ambitiously blended bebop with distinct Latin music’s rhythms.<sup>7</sup> Compositionally, his innovations even went on to inspire some free jazz musicians. As David Ake found out, Ornette Coleman later further explored Mingus’ trademark “barline-blurring implied pulse” in his extended “free-floating drone”<sup>8</sup> in some *Shape of Jazz to Come*’s compositions.<sup>9</sup>

Max Roach, a pioneering drummer of the 1950s, also pushed jazz forward sonically. Besides developing innovative drumming techniques, Roach had radical sonic ideas in other areas as well. Such a moment appeared on his seminal album *We Insist: Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite*; more specifically during a song called “Protest,” when Abbey Lincoln’s atonal

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<sup>5</sup> David H. Rosenthal, *Hard Bop: Jazz & Black Music 1955-1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 137.

<sup>6</sup> Ekkerhard Jost, *Free Jazz* (Vienna: Da Capo Press, 1994), 37.

<sup>7</sup> For an example, listen to “Flamingo” on *Tijuana Moods*.

<sup>8</sup> David Ake, *Jazz Cultures* (California: University of California Press, 2002), 70.

<sup>9</sup> For more about Mingus’ bass innovations see the chapter “Charles Mingus,” 35-43, in *Free Jazz* by Ekkerhard Jost. For discussion on meaning of avant-garde in jazz see *Mingus Speak*’s chapter “Avant-Garde and Tradition” written by John F. Goodman, 23-47, and Amiri Baraka’s chapter “The Jazz Avant-Garde” in *Black Music*, 74-79.

singing resembled screaming. The atonality, which was later on so typical of free jazz, is “the most avant-garde moment in the work.”<sup>10</sup> Of course, the scream exemplified only a brief moment of avant-garde experimentation, especially compared to “the extended laments, wails, and shrieks” played by Albert Ayler or John Coltrane.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, it still had its avant-garde quality. Mingus and Roach had always strived to avoid being pigeon-holed.

Likewise, Sonny Rollins, a fellow saxophone player, on “Freedom Suite” anticipated “the avant-garde elasticity of the sixties.”<sup>12</sup> On another occasion, his dueling with Coleman Hawkins in “All the Things You Are” resulted in an extended “free-jazz overblowing and chordless soloing,”<sup>13</sup> bringing to mind the avant-garde experiments of the 1960s. All three artists flirted with untraditional sonic ideas throughout their discographies, fulfilling the criteria of being avant-garde.

While the direct influence of Mingus and Roach on the sound of jazz is undeniable, what also made them avant-garde were their particular ideals and attitudes that they followed. The members of the vanguard often had an unusual approach to their businesses or lifestyles. This set of ideals almost always confronted the established cultural status quo which was in the eyes of the members of the vanguard stagnant and uninventive. Thus, they became “oppositional – either in a political way or in response to attempts to co-opt it by mass culture.”<sup>14</sup> The vanguard jazz musicians in the 1950s were no exception in this regard. Mingus and Roach’s opposition towards

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<sup>10</sup> Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 178.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Stanley Crouch, “The Colossus,” *New Yorker* 81, no. 12 (2005): 67.

<sup>13</sup> Gene Santoro, “The Edgy Optimist: At 76, Saxist Sonny Rollins is Still On Top of His Game,” *American Scholar* 76, no. 1 (2007): 128.

<sup>14</sup> John Goodman, *Mingus Speaks* (California: University of California Press, 2013), 38.

the established state of affairs was clear from their actions during the 1950s. In 1952 Mingus realized that to fight the exploitative economics of the music industry, he had to found his own record label. As a response, “Mingus established the Debut label”<sup>15</sup> with his close friend Roach. In this instance, seeing no satisfying adjustment in the unfair treatment of black artists, Mingus rebelled against the discriminatory economic politics of the music industry. The problem resided in the fact that recording companies kept most of the profits, leaving only a miniscule part of the revenue to the black artists. The record label continued until the late 1950s when it provided “a home for a less sensational jazz,”<sup>16</sup> a platform that provided an opportunity for the experimental, forward-looking type of jazz.<sup>17</sup>

Mingus’ connection to free jazz suggests that he was avant-garde. The improvisational ideas opened for Mingus a musical landscape associated with, and later further explored, by free jazz. According to historian and jazz aficionado Eric Hobsbawm, free jazz represented a form of “the 1960s jazz avant-garde.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, if free jazz represented the avant-garde of the sixties, then Mingus as the prime influence on free jazz persisted also as a part of the cutting-edge vanguard throughout his career. In one of the interviews inside *Mingus Speaks*, the author concluded: “Although Mingus often disparaged the avant-garde movement, many avant-garde musicians continue to cite Mingus as a prime influence.”<sup>19</sup> Eric Porter, an expert on Mingus, went even deeper in the search for the direct connection between Mingus and free jazz. He saw Mingus’

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<sup>15</sup> Scott Saul, *Freedom Is Freedom Ain't* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 154.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> For more about the uniform ideals and lifestyles of avant-garde, and more about avant-garde theory see *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* by Renato Poggioli.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (London: Abacus, 1998), 383.

<sup>19</sup> John Goodman, *Mingus Speaks*, 40.



occasional “experimental approach to jazz”<sup>20</sup> as an early taste of what would come in 1960. He came up with “a number of free form characteristics including extended solos, [and] collective group improvisation.”<sup>21</sup> Mingus’ approach to jazz even managed to capture the main ingredient of 1960s avant-garde jazz, his version of free-spirited playing. As one of his old friends and colleagues emphasized during Mingus’ Jazz Workshop sessions, “[h]e was serious about being free.”<sup>22</sup> Although not as loose as the free jazz innovators of the 1960s, his liberating approach to composition-building remained not far away from what free jazz strived to do. Finally, Mingus did not only influence Coleman, but also the other way around. When Mingus heard Coleman’s music it motivated him to try new things, musically, in the early 1960s.

Despite the theoretical avant-garde classification being a relatively loose concept, it provides a satisfactory cohesive identity to the three jazz artists. Mingus, Roach, and Rollins were the Old Guard, who made their name as the avant-garde of the 1950s. They represented the most musically bold, and most non-conformist, jazz artists of the 1950s. As the forerunners of the 1960s avant-garde jazz, they were a uniform group with a shared musical agenda. Furthermore, the Old Guard’s palpable influence on free jazz, and continual experimentation well into 1960s indicates that this group indeed was the Old Guard in relation to the free jazz.

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<sup>20</sup> Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*, 137.

<sup>21</sup> Iain Anderson, *This is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture*, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Gene Santoro, *Myself When I am Real* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124.

## Chapter 2

### “We Insist!”: The Old Guard and Free Jazz Address the Politics of Race

Spending their childhood in a racially divisive society, black jazz musicians suffered or witnessed racial discrimination, especially if they lived in the states of the Deep South. Under the circumstances of constant racial oppression, the more ambitious relocated to New York, Chicago, or Detroit. However, the bitterness that they had felt since their early days remained in most of them despite the change of environment. Furthermore, the African American experience during the Second World War ingrained a greater political radicalism inside the black population.<sup>1</sup> A popular form of jazz, Bebop, reflected this development in the late 1940s. Bebop gave the jazz artists a means to vent this inner frustration. The Old Guard continued this tradition. Coming to prominence during the first five years of the Civil Rights Movement, during the time of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Old Guard artists became increasingly engrossed by the black civil rights struggle.

Then in November 1959, just two months before the Greensboro sit-ins, seemingly out of the blue, Ornette Coleman made jazz history. During his breakthrough debut performance at the Five Spot Café in New York, “[s]ome walked in and out before they could finish a drink, some sat mesmerized by the sound, others talked constantly to their neighbors at the table or argued with drinks in their hand at the bar.”<sup>2</sup> A. B. Spellman, a respected New York-based jazz aficionado, described Coleman as “a walking myth, the image of a small bearded man striding out of the woods of Texas and into New York’s usually closed jazz scene.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, as one

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond King, “The World’s Against Me As a Black Man!: Charles Mingus and Segregated America,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 13, no. 1 (2000): 57.

<sup>2</sup> George Hoefer, “Caught in the Act: Ornette Coleman Quartet,” *DownBeat*, January 1960, accessed January 15, 2016, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1a3C1\\_MlvW7RG9IV3hxeG9FcFk/edit](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1a3C1_MlvW7RG9IV3hxeG9FcFk/edit).

<sup>3</sup> A. B. Spellman, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1966), 79.

of the attendees who worked for *Time* commented, “[n]o jazzman has created such a stir since Charlie Parker started packing them at the Three Deuces on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street 12 years ago.”<sup>4</sup> With such a sensational opening, it did not take long before the whole jazz world started to pay close attention. It was the beginning of the free jazz movement. Unleashed by Coleman, an ensemble of young, up-and-coming experimental jazz artists recreated jazz music into something that was utterly original.<sup>5</sup>

The sixties’ avant-garde did not only experiment with new stylistic features but also introduced a distinct *modus operandi* when addressing the politics of race, completely rethinking their involvement in this sphere of life. The extent to which the Old Guard immersed themselves with racial activism was close to that of the free jazz movement as both commented on African American struggles in their music, each countered the racially biased jazz industry, and the two also had noteworthy links to the Civil Rights Movement. However, the Old Guard’s involvement was more open and direct in comparison to that of Coltrane and Coleman. Mingus, Roach and Rollins referred to African American politics in their music more directly, some even having a strong political sentiment, while free jazz mostly only utilized its musical aesthetics to communicate a political attitude. Furthermore, the Old Guard had pro-active attitude to racial discrimination in jazz industry when dealing with *DownBeat*, a well-established and leading jazz publication, compared to free jazz’s pragmatic or even reserved behavior when solving the same issue, leaving the label to resolve the dispute with the magazine, and finally, the Old Guard’s open embrace of the Civil Rights Movement contrasted with calculated endorsement of the movement by free jazz.

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<sup>4</sup> “Beyond the Cool,” *Time Magazine*, no. 26 (1960): 56, <http://time.com/vault/issue/1960-06-27/page/58/>.

<sup>5</sup> Amiri Baraka’s *Black Music*, originally published in 1968, provides an authentic reaction to the newly emerging 1960s avant-garde. For detailed description of the musical characteristics of the avant-garde jazz of the 1960s and the explanation of its significance for jazz, see the chapter “The Jazz Avant-Garde,” 69-81.

For avant-garde jazz, music became one of the primary means to make a contribution into the racial debate. The avant-garde jazz's music commented on the politics of race specifically through its record titles, liner notes, or musical compositions. For Charles Mingus, the member of the Old Guard, the impetus for racially motivated expression came during his childhood days as "race was painfully complex for him."<sup>6</sup> Following an unfair, racially biased treatment at an audition for a cellist in the Los Angeles' Symphony orchestra due to "racism,"<sup>7</sup> Mingus had often fiercely attacked the chronic epidemic of racial discrimination in American society. From the mid-1950s, he occasionally included a composition with a racial message or meaning. In 1955, he published a live concert LP, *Mingus at the Bohemia*, with a musical piece titled "Work Song." In the same year, only a few months later, he again played at the Bohemia Café, where he performed "Haitian Fight Song." Both song titles carried African American sentiment. Mingus intentionally referred to Haiti, as Haiti was the first black republic founded in 1804 after a bloody revolution. He wrote it as a tribute to Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution, seeing his rebellion as a motivating story for the American blacks. However, even Nat Hentoff admitted in the liner notes to *The Clown* that it could have just been "called *Afro-American Fight Song*,"<sup>8</sup> suggesting that the adjective "Haitian" was not of fundamental importance. Either way, both title variations alluded to the black struggle.

Without any lyrics to expand the context, the compositions relied heavily on the subjective interpretation of the music. Mal Waldron rightly suggested in the liner notes that "Work Song" was "a jazz tone poem depicting old slave gangs,"<sup>9</sup> as the disciplined brisk tempo

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<sup>6</sup> Gene Santoro, *Myself When I am Real: The Life and Music of Charles*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Desmond King, "'The World's Against Me As a Black Man!': Charles Mingus and Segregated America," 64.

<sup>8</sup> Nat Hentoff, liner notes to *The Clown*, Atlantic 90142-1, LP, 1984.

<sup>9</sup> Mal Waldron, liner notes to *Mingus at the Bohemia*, Original Jazz Classics OJCCD-045-2, CD, 1990.

on cymbals reminded listeners of this group of enslaved black men.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand “the lynching of a 14 year old black boy in Mississippi,”<sup>11</sup> Emmett Till, inspired Mingus to write a song that eventually became “Haitian Fight Song.” However, such influence was not noticeable in the music.

These interpretations in the liner notes indicate that the titles “Work Song” and “Haitian Fight Song” themselves were rather ambiguous. Although the song titles had noticeable African American sentiment, it was the additional explanation by Hentoff and Waldron that gave the compositions a more focused racial interpretation. Without the additional liner notes explanation, the compositions did not give much away. Indeed, the liner notes enabled the interpretation of these compositions as a reaction to formative events in black history, and the contemporary racial situation. Most likely, the creative process behind these two musical pieces caused the ambiguity of these songs, as Mingus first wrote the tune, and only afterwards added a provocative title to it.

From 1956, Mingus began to refer to racial topics with well-thought out ideas. At the same time as Martin Luther King was leading people to boycott segregated buses in Montgomery, Mingus recorded his 1956 debut on Atlantic Records, *Pithecanthropus Erectus*. With the title song, Mingus tipped his hat to the participants in the boycott and wider protest forces that took a stand against racial oppression and discrimination. In liner notes written by Mingus himself, he painted a vivid portrait of a white man as a creature that is “pounding his chest and preaching his superiority over the animals still in a prone position.”<sup>12</sup> Certainly, the metaphorical story of a tyrannical “Upright Ape-man,” whose “greed is attempting to stand on

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<sup>10</sup> Hear “Work Song” on *Mingus at the Bohemia* for more musical characteristics.

<sup>11</sup> Desmond King, “The World's Against Me As a Black Man': Charles Mingus and Segregated America,” 67.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Mingus, liner notes to *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, Atlantic 1237, LP, 1966.

false security,”<sup>13</sup> was “a clear allusion to the Civil Rights and liberation movements.”<sup>14</sup> With its cinematic feel, Mingus for example employed dramatic aggressive saxophone solo at the end of the title song which served as a metaphor for the last breaths of the “Upright Ape-man.” With this song, he established a framework for subsequent political pieces that carried even more definite political statement.<sup>15</sup>

A spiritual sequel came in September 1959. Mingus put out his Columbia Records' debut *Mingus Ah Um*. On this album, he included “Fables of Faubus.” This musical piece had characteristics unlike any other of Mingus' creations. Rather than the political concept being just an extension of the song's meaning, as remained the case with the previous songs with similar social messages, in this instance the political idea drove the music. “Fables of Faubus was different.”<sup>16</sup> As Mingus saw the National Guard in front of the Little Rock Central High School, preventing nine African Americans from entering, he was inspired by the actions of Governor Orval E. Faubus of Arkansas to write a piece that became jazz's greatest political statement. In contrast to the tradition of including detailed descriptions of musical compositions, Mingus did not include any explanations of the accompanying songs on the sleeve of *Mingus Ah Um* LP. Diane Dorr-Dorynek, *Mingus Ah Um*'s sleeve author, provided only a brief biography of the Jazz Workshop, Mingus, and other contributing musicians. Thus, unfortunately for scholars, Mingus never gave his view on “Fables of Faubus.” There were only opinions by critics and scholars in later years who provided their take on why “Fables of Faubus” became a great piece of political

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Saul, *Outrageous Freedom: Charles Mingus and the Invention of the Jazz Workshop*,” *American Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (2001): 412.

<sup>15</sup> Hear the song “Pithecanthropus Erectus,” on the album of the same name. For more about the song see Eric Porter's *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 124-130.

<sup>16</sup> Desmond King, “The World's Against Me as a Black Man!: Charles Mingus and Segregated America,” 57.

jazz. As Gene Santoro, Mingus' biographer, argues, in this satirical song, Mingus ridiculed Faubus as a "mock-villain whom no one really takes seriously."<sup>17</sup> Essentially a theme song for Senator Faubus, the cynical tempo is what made this track so effective. As Scott Saul comments, with "Fables of Faubus" Mingus added new ammunition to the arsenal of anti-racist protest tactics "that took his musicians' antagonism and deployed it like a bomb against his political enemies."<sup>18</sup>

The satirical lyrics of the song were so bruising that Columbia Records only allowed Mingus to publish a lyric-free version of the song. Mingus had to wait a year to release the "Original Faubus Fables" version on an independent label, Candid Records. This might have caused Mingus to restrain from any further comments. Nonetheless, even on *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*, he only chronicled the struggle with Columbia, not adding much more to describe the song. Most likely, the reasoning behind the omission of any relevant sleeve notes to the new version was that he already included very revealing lyrics. For Mingus, this served as the definitive version of what he wanted it to be. In the lyric version, he revealed that Faubus's ridiculousness expanded beyond him, as Mingus also included President Eisenhower and the Rockefeller family into this category. This time, there was no holding back. Mingus now directly and unapologetically pointed a finger at Faubus, Eisenhower, and Rockefeller, who were, in Mingus' eyes, the prime reason for the African American agony. In the opening verse, he sings: "[N]ame me someone who's ridiculous, Dannie/Governor Faubus!/Why is he so sick and ridiculous?/He won't permit integrated schools."<sup>19</sup> In the later verses, he also added Eisenhower and Rockefeller. Compared with "Work Song" or "Haitian Fight Song," the title and words

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<sup>17</sup> Gene Santoro, *Myself When I am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus*, 198.

<sup>18</sup> Scott Saul, *Freedom Is Freedom Ain't*, 182.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Mingus, *Presents Charles Mingus*, CJM 8005, LP, 1960.

inside “Original Faubus Fables” spoke for themselves. Despite the lack of deeper examination of the song in the liner notes, “Fables of Faubus” or “Original Faubus Fables” were more potent and focused versions of “Work Song” or Mingus’ other political arrangements. Even without any relevant notes, the biting lyrics, cynical musical aspects and revealing song title made “Original Faubus Fables” an explicit political statement on race, in which Mingus clearly expressed his views.<sup>20</sup>

Since meeting Mingus, Max Roach and Sonny Rollins had always talked to each other about racial politics. Max Roach, another politically conscious member of the Old Guard, also addressed the black struggle for freedom and civil rights in his music. In the early months of 1960, he released *We Insist: Freedom Now Suite*, his most political and well-known work. Even Frank Kofsky, who preferred free jazz’s political radicalism to that of the Old Guard, acknowledged in 1982 its profound significance. In his opinion, *We Insist* represented “a turning point in the historical evolution of political Black nationalism in jazz.”<sup>21</sup> The planned album was meant to accompany the centennial anniversary of the Emancipation Declaration in 1963.<sup>22</sup> However, seeing its outstanding potential during the initial recording sessions, and being struck by the Civil Rights Movement’s momentum, Roach decided to release the album at the end of 1960. Being a concept album, it reminded listeners of “Original Faubus Fables” but on a much greater scale. *We Insist* consisted of five provocative songs that “explored three themes that were prominent in politically oriented jazz circa 1960: the African American experience with slavery, the contemporary freedom struggle, and an affinity with Africa.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For a complete history, description, and interpretation of “Fables of Faubus” see Scott Saul, *Freedom is, Freedom Ain’t*, 201-205.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Kofsky, “Black Nationalism in Jazz: The Forerunners Resist Establishment Repression,” *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 10, no. 2 (1982): 15.

<sup>22</sup> Scott Saul, *Freedom Is Freedom Ain’t*, 93.

<sup>23</sup> Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and*



A few months later, Impulse! Records issued Roach's *Percussion Bitter Sweet*. This time, Roach divided the recorded material into two parts, political and personal. Both *We Insist* and *Percussion Bitter Sweet* specifically addressed the role of the civil rights activists at the turn of the 1960s. *We Insist* directly referred to the people who took part in the 1960's Greensboro sit-ins, with the iconic photograph of the four protesters sitting at the Woolworth lunch-counter serving as the album's front cover art. "Tender Warriors," on *Percussion Bitter Sweet*, Roach "wrote for our youth who partake in our struggles for independence and equality."<sup>24</sup> Margo Guryan, who wrote the liner notes for the album, identified them as the "freedom riders, sit-in demonstrators, and all others who actively participated in the fight for civil rights."<sup>25</sup>

Roach did not focus solely on the role of activists in the American South. He also looked into the past, referencing two influential men in the history of the racial struggle. The Greensboro cover photograph supplemented a classic A. Philip Randolph quotation: "A revolution is unfurling – America's unfinished revolution. It is unfurling lunch counters buses, liberties and schools – whenever the dignity and potential of men are denied. Youth and idealism are unfurling. Masses of Negroes are marching onto the stage of history and demanding their freedom now!"<sup>26</sup> It emphasized the contribution of this crucial thinker. Likewise, Roach decided to include "Garvey's Ghost" as an introduction track on *Percussion Bitter Sweet*. As Guryan noted, Roach presented it as "a composition written for Marcus Garvey, a leader in the organizing of hundreds of thousands of black people all around the world."<sup>27</sup> On *We Insist*, at

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*Activists*. 167.

<sup>24</sup> Margo Guryan, liner notes to *Percussion Bitter Sweet*, Impulse! A-8, LP, 1961.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Max Roach. *We Insist: Freedom Now Suite!*. Candid CJM 8002. LP. 1960.

<sup>27</sup> Margo Guryan, liner notes to *Percussion Bitter Sweet*.

least two compositions, “All Africa” and “Tears for Johannesburg,” pointed out the racial problems in South Africa. As a consequence, the South African government banned the album sale in 1962.<sup>28</sup> The race commentary effectively summed up “the contemporary hopes and demands of African Americans at the crossroads of an intensified civil rights struggle.”<sup>29</sup> With *We Insist*, he assembled a 35-minute long, concise political work packed with many African American cultural references, and a strong, straightforward message.

Like Mingus, Sonny Rollins grew up in a political environment. His grandmother was “a black activist. She was involved with Marcus Garvey.”<sup>30</sup> Additionally, during his childhood, Rollins had many liberal and communist neighbors and acquaintances with whom he came into contact every day in Harlem. As he explained, “[c]oming from that neighborhood, there was also a Communist person who was a big hero in our house, congressman Vito Marcantonio. He was a Communist, and he came from that part of Harlem, Italian Harlem.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, as Rollins himself admitted, he “was a politically active person. [He] was always interested in how to make the society a better place.”<sup>32</sup> These early influences culminated in Sonny Rollins’ interest in the advancement of cultural black nationalism. Rollins released *Freedom Suite* in 1958. The album title referenced the main theme of the 1960s civil rights struggle, freedom. On the album, he asserted that “America is deeply rooted in Negro culture.”<sup>33</sup> However, Rollins claimed, in liner notes, that the song “Freedom Suite” was “not a piece *about* Emmett Till, or Little Rock, or

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<sup>28</sup> Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 175.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>30</sup> Sonny Rollins, interview by *Academy of Achievement, A Museum of Living History*, June 2, 2006, accessed January 4, 2016, <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/printmember/rol0int-1>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Sonny Rollins, liner notes to *Freedom Suite*, Riverside Records RLP 12-258, LP, 1958.

Harlem, or the peculiar local election laws of Georgia or Louisiana, no more than it is about the artistic freedom of jazz.”<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, the advancement and acknowledgment of black culture by white mainstream society persisted as Rollins’ priority. Probably, as an act of provocation, to underline its relevance, he placed the song “Freedom Suite” on the A side with four other American classics covered on side B, as if Rollins wanted to suggest that these four songs are indebted to the composition on the first side. Rollins’ repertoire addressed important cultural and political issues, as it promoted pride in African American culture, and referenced contemporary political events.<sup>35</sup>

Free jazz also commented on political themes with its music, involving itself in the racial strife. John Coltrane, after being tutored by Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, eventually organized his own quintet in 1957. Until the end of the 1950s, he almost single-handedly carried modal jazz. He achieved modal jazz’s creative peak on *My Favorite Things* in 1961. Before 1961, in 1957, he had suddenly broken a serious drug habit, which was a formative experience. Afterwards, he credited this turn of events to his decision to seek spiritual guidance and study the cultures of Third World countries. This marked “a milestone in Coltrane’s career in that it was the first time that he so explicitly displayed his growing sense of music as spiritual expression.”<sup>36</sup> As J.C. Thomas points out, Coltrane “was particularly fond of books about religion and philosophy.”<sup>37</sup> Although not a member of any church or sect, he spent most of his spare time studying Greek philosophy, Islam, Hinduism, and traditional African religions. However, it took

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> To better understand the “Freedom Suite” song placement, see the track list to Rollins’ album *Freedom Suite*.

<sup>36</sup> Joe Goldberg, “A Love Supreme (1965),” in *The John Coltrane Companion: Five Decades of Commentary*, ed. Carl Woideck (London: Omnibus Press, 1998), 233.

<sup>37</sup> J. C. Thomas. *Chasin’ the Trane* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 118.

him nearly four years to incorporate this part of his life into the music he was creating.<sup>38</sup>

After the success of the *My Favorite Things* sessions, he signed a contract with Impulse! Records, marking the start of his African and spiritually-oriented music. Eventually, between 1961 and 1967, Coltrane “made eighteen recordings with titles related to Africa or the East.”<sup>39</sup> By adding the African/Asian and spiritual influences to his music, cultural commentators began to interpret his music as racial and social commentary. Scholars such as Tommy Lee Lott claimed that Coltrane’s argument, when addressing the race problem in society, was that only through universal spirituality, reaching into oneself, could black Americans achieve “autonomy.”<sup>40</sup> They came to this conclusion by looking at what Coltrane wrote in his liner notes and spoke in his interviews. In *A Love Supreme*, for example, he wrote that in 1957, he “experienced by grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead [him] to a richer, fuller, more productive life.”<sup>41</sup> Artists like Albert Ayler also acknowledged the depth of Coltrane’s philosophy. Ayler described it as a recipe for “another peace level.”<sup>42</sup> Normally, spirituality was apolitical. However, a link between the political process of Third World decolonization and spiritual teachings coming out of these countries embraced by Coltrane suggests that inspiration for his art came from a political place, essentially politicizing spirituality. Song and album titles reflected this idea. Nonetheless, this parallel was very indirect. And, Coltrane never reacted to

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<sup>38</sup> For more about Coltrane’s early career and his music see Ekkehard Jost, “John Coltrane and Modal Playing,” *Free Jazz*, 17-35.

<sup>39</sup> Gerald Early, “Ode to John Coltrane: A Jazz Musician's Influence on African American Culture,” 377.

<sup>40</sup> Tommy Lee Lott, “The 1960s Avant-Garde Movement in Jazz,” *Social Identities* 7, no. 2 (2001): 167.

<sup>41</sup> John Coltrane, liner notes to *A Love Supreme*, Impulse! A-77, LP, 1965.

<sup>42</sup> Nat Hentoff, “Albert Ayler – Truth is Marching In,” *DownBeat*, November 17, 1966, accessed December 15, 2015, [http://www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=stories&subsect=story\\_detail&sid=1013](http://www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=stories&subsect=story_detail&sid=1013).

any specific event with his music, except once.

As Coltrane was touring Europe, at one of his last stops in Norway, he heard terrible news. In Birmingham, Alabama, a bomb at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, planted by the Ku Klux Klan killed four black girls. Shocked and saddened by this barbaric act, as Brown describes in Art Davis' words, Coltrane could not believe that such thing happened "in a House of God, and people were there worshipping God."<sup>43</sup> He addressed the shameful act that left him sleepless at night on 8<sup>th</sup> October in 1963. At Birdland, in New York City, he played "Alabama," a 5-minute touching tribute to the four innocent girls. This time, everyone knew what was the meaning behind the song. Coltrane based his horn maestro moves "on the cadences of a Martin Luther King speech."<sup>44</sup> "Alabama" does provide a rare instance of free jazz directly addressing a particular political event.

Ornette Coleman, as the de facto the inventor of free jazz, mostly commented on the freedom aspect of the racial debate. His music also hinted towards the racial situation in the U.S. Although album titles such as *Change of the Century*, *Tomorrow is the Question*, or *Shape of Jazz to Come* did not explicitly use the word freedom, they anticipated more freedom in the racial hierarchy as much as in jazz. Freedom as an idea appeared frequently on his first four albums, as he showed others "how to be free in their ways,"<sup>45</sup> transcending the musical realm, and communicating this musical ideology to other spheres of life, influencing even ordinary people. For Coleman, freedom became synonymous with the struggle for black equality. On *Free Jazz*, he fully opened himself to new ways of playing jazz, making "continuous free

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<sup>43</sup> Rowland, Steve. *Tell Me How Long Trane's Been Gone* (ArtistOwned.com, 2000), cited in Leonard L. Brown, "In His Own Words: Coltrane's Responses to Critics," in *John Coltrane & Black America's Quest for Freedom: Spirituality and Music*, edited by Leonard L. Brown, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 25.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Herch, "Let Freedom Ring!": Free Jazz and African-American Politics," 100.

<sup>45</sup> Nat Hentoff, liner notes to *Tomorrow Is the Question!*, Atlantic LAC 12228, LP, 1959.

improvisation with only a few, brief pre-set sections”<sup>46</sup> a cornerstone of this theory. As scholars established, Coleman’s pursuit of freedom in his music mirrored the larger struggle for freedom by African Americans. As Franya Berkman, the expert on Coltrane, argued, this implied emphasis on musical freedom in Coleman’s music “had extensive political ramifications during the 1960s as a display of personal liberation and black cultural expression.”<sup>47</sup> Coleman managed to seize the principal ingredient of the race struggle: freedom. Nonetheless, his treatment of this topic was obscure, relying heavily on explanation in liner notes from critics.

Paradoxically, free jazz commented most on African American political and social struggles using its non-verbal aspect: its musical aesthetics. Even though the Old Guard had avant-garde characteristics, it did not use a set of cohesive sounds like free jazz did. With the inception of free jazz in the 1960s, pro-black commentators and activists praised jazz for exposing a wider audience to the sounds of an authentic black experience in America. The standard chromatic scales, tonalities, and harmonies did not sufficiently represent the often harsh conditions in the black ghettos. Thus, they moved away from the features of standard jazz, creating “cadences and rhythms that [were] unique to the lives of black people in the urban environment.”<sup>48</sup> Free jazz “adopted this stance in musical terms by associating the unfamiliar stylistic elements of their music with non-European musical practices.”<sup>49</sup> After studying Indian music around 1960, Coltrane started to look at a musical theory “in which particular sounds and scales are intended to produce specific emotional meanings.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Martin Williams, liner notes to *Free Jazz*, Atlantic SD 1364, LP, 1961.

<sup>47</sup> Franya J. Berkman, “Appropriating Universality: The Coltranes and 1960s Spirituality,” *Journal of American Studies* 48, no. 1 (2007): 55.

<sup>48</sup> Frank Kofsky, *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s*, 230.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Francesconi, “Free Jazz and Black Nationalism: A Rhetoric of Musical Style,” 40.

<sup>50</sup> Nat Hentoff, liner notes to *Live at Village Vanguard*, Impulse! A-10, LP, 1962.

Furthermore, a dominant feature of free jazz was spontaneous collective improvisation. By improvising in union, “free jazz broke conventions to increase individual expression, mirroring the efforts of civil rights leaders to lift rules and conventions constricting the lives of blacks.”<sup>51</sup> To come close to the idea of total collective improvisation Coltrane increased “freedom from metric constraints.”<sup>52</sup> However, as Coltrane described it, this development occurred quite naturally. As he wrote, “in these approaches there’s something I can draw on and use in the way I like to play.”<sup>53</sup> This effort culminated in 1965, with Coltrane’s *Ascension*, another groundbreaking take on free jazz. Nat Hentoff connected the musical characteristics of the 40-minute piece to the politics of “the human rights struggle, and nuclear weapons.”<sup>54</sup>

There was a noticeable willingness to explore the theme of freedom in jazz’s musical aesthetics, as a possible reaction to what activists were doing at the lunch counter in Woolworth or riding a bus during the Freedom Rides. As Hersch puts it, free jazz “did give aesthetic form to the ideas of the civil rights movement.”<sup>55</sup> For example, in *This is Our Music*, Coleman’s preference for loose chord structures and unorthodox rhythmic patterns gave “more freedom to the player.”<sup>56</sup> Coleman succeed in identifying with oppressed minorities “through music.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, what Coltrane’s said applies to Coleman’s: “[m]usic, being expression of the human heart

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>52</sup> Franya J. Berkman, “Appropriating Universality: The Coltranes and 1960s Spirituality,” 45.

<sup>53</sup> John Coltrane, “Coltrane on Coltrane,” *DownBeat*, September 29, 1960, accessed December 14, 2015, [http://www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=stories&subsect=story\\_detail&sid=1035](http://www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=stories&subsect=story_detail&sid=1035).

<sup>54</sup> A. B. Spellman, liner notes to *Ascension*, Impulse! A-95, LP, 1965. Hear *Ascension* (1966), *Meditations* (1966) by John Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz* (1960) for examples of total collective improvisation.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Hersch, “Let Freedom Ring!': Free Jazz and African-American Politics,” 117.

<sup>56</sup> Ornette Coleman, liner notes to *This is Our Music*, Atlantic SAH-K 6181, LP, 1961.

<sup>57</sup> Ornette Coleman, interview by Jacques Derrida, June 23, 1997, accessed December 21, 2015, [http://www.samnewsomemusic.com/files/Ornette\\_Coleman\\_Interview.pdf](http://www.samnewsomemusic.com/files/Ornette_Coleman_Interview.pdf), 323.

or the human being itself, does express just what is happening.”<sup>58</sup> At the time, around 1960, the freedom struggle was the main social issue.

In theory, Nicholas Gebhardt paraphrased Fredric Jameson's idea that there is a connection between the social condition and the invention of a new aesthetic suggests that indeed free jazz commented on the situation of blacks in America. Gebhardt saw free jazz's abrasive, spontaneous, improvisational characteristics as “an ideological act in its own right.”<sup>59</sup> However, even free jazz operated using “a ‘framework’ as a basis for improvising,”<sup>60</sup> raising questions about its commitment to absolute improvisational freedom. Furthermore, even Ayler, the successor of Coltrane, who pushed free jazz even further with the other members of the second wave of free improvisers, admitted that, in essence, free jazz players were simply trying to “rejuvenate that old New Orleans feeling that music can be played collectively and with free form.”<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, Coltrane and Coleman found a complex and compelling method of associating certain cutting-edge jazz aesthetics with the fight for freedom in the South, and the plight of the black ghetto situation in the North. Coltrane and Coleman forged parallels between their unique musical landscapes and racial freedom, self-determination, and advancement, commenting in a way that their involvement in the politics of race was felt.

To summarize the extent to which free jazz and the Old Guard commented on racial themes in their music, the Old Guard usually referred to some specific event or person in the struggle for equal rights. For the Old Guard, by 1960, the song titles and descriptions became

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<sup>58</sup> “John Coltrane on Giant Steps – Blank on Blank – PBS Digital Studios,” YouTube video, 4:57, posted by “Blank on Blank,” May 12, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZF0EvYd\\_Bgw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZF0EvYd_Bgw).

<sup>59</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1981), 79, cited in Nicholas Gebhardt, *Going for Jazz: Musical Practices and American Ideology* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2001), 125.

<sup>60</sup> Ornette Coleman, interview by Jacque Derrida, June 23, 1997, 322.

<sup>61</sup> Nat Hentoff, “Albert Ayler – Truth is Marching In.”



more telling. “Original Faubus Fables” or *We Insist* conveyed much more concrete political sentiment than “Work Song.” In contrast, free jazz supplemented its edgy musical aesthetics with spirituality or the notion of musical freedom, propagated in the liner notes or in song titles, to make allegorical, open-to-interpretation links to the paramount social questions of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Critics usually reinforced these links. It was only after the movement ended that commentators and scholars began to give more concrete political meanings to the specific compositions of Coltrane and Coleman.

Besides their music, the racially prejudiced jazz industry also created an opportunity for black jazz artists to make their mark in race politics. Like any other major entertainment business in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the recording industry was run exclusively by whites. Only a handful of African Americans partially operated record labels or music clubs like the well-known Motown Records run by Berry Gordy, or Vee-Jay Records operated by Vivian Carter and James Bracken. The white majority’s tight grip on the whole musical enterprise inevitably brought racial friction inside the industry. Black artists like Miles Davis or Ornette Coleman accused the white-controlled industry of privileging white artists in their promotion efforts.<sup>62</sup> They criticized the white owners for not supporting black musicians. During Mingus and Rollins’ private conversations, “[t]hey talked how their music wasn't being appreciated.”<sup>63</sup> Reports of much lower wages being paid to African Americans compared to white musicians were common at the time. The white artists also got more lucrative gigs. These unfair economic conditions were “part of the same dominant social structure.”<sup>64</sup> Mingus “was keenly aware of how racism and

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<sup>62</sup> See A.B. Spellman’s *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, page 134, for a recollection of how Brubeck earned more for than Coleman for similar sized audience.

<sup>63</sup> Gene Santoro, *Myself When I am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus*, 197.

<sup>64</sup> Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*, 199.

economic exploitation operated in the music industry.”<sup>65</sup> The African American jazzmen, who were frustrated by the racial double standard and their lack of decision-making power inside in the music industry, protested against this treatment.

As Anderson points out, *DownBeat* functioned as one of the enforcers of the established racial arrangement. It was a publication that, by default, maintained a skeptical stance towards jazz’s more radical innovations. By the early 1950s *DownBeat* was home to many renowned jazz critics, including Ira Gitler, Don DeMichael, and John Tynan. Together, these critics wielded extraordinary influence. In 1961, they effectively established a monopoly in jazz criticism when *DownBeat*’s two rivals, *Metronome* and *Jazz Review*, folded.<sup>66</sup> *DownBeat* often criticized vocal pro-black musicians who resisted racially unfair treatment like Abbey Lincoln.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the attitude of the free jazz movement and the Old Guard towards *DownBeat* Magazine illustrated how each faction involved themselves in the aspiration to better their working conditions, or at least to challenge *DownBeat*’s biased press.<sup>68</sup>

The relationship between Mingus and *DownBeat* began on a positive note. In 1951, *DownBeat*’s editor-in-chief, Ralph J. Gleason, named Mingus “one of the most impressive thinkers about music that jazz has produced,” as a reaction to Mingus’ pragmatic attitude towards the economics of jazz, as Mingus argued that “[e]very musician must seek his own

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>66</sup> Iain Anderson, *This is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture*, 78.

<sup>67</sup> See Kofsky’s chapter “Critiquing the Critics” in *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s*, p.160-162, for the instance of *DownBeat*’s attitude towards Bill Dixon. Also, see Ingrid Monson, “The Debate Within” in her *Freedom Sounds*, 238-252, for an explanation of the running series of discussions that *DownBeat* organized in the early 1960s, where they criticized Abbey Lincoln for her pro-black views.

<sup>68</sup> See Frank Kofsky’s article “Black Nationalism in Jazz: The Forerunners Resist Establishment Repression,” for examples of *DownBeat*’s treatment of Charles Mingus, Abbey Lincoln, Rollins, and others.

individual solution to the problem of making a living.”<sup>69</sup> For the next four years, Mingus continued to argue that it is in the interest of an individual artist to make art that could sell. He remained blind towards unfair, racially-motivated distribution of income among black and white jazz musicians. After Miles Davis criticized Dave Brubeck for his appearance on the cover of *Time Magazine* on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1954, which named him “the most exciting new jazz artist working today,”<sup>70</sup> Mingus defended Brubeck. Mingus, in a 1955 open letter to Miles, praised Brubeck as a worthy jazz icon of the white-dominated industry.<sup>71</sup> Davis harshly criticized Brubeck for the unfair economic arrangement. However, Mingus stood behind Brubeck, praising his musical integrity and genuineness. As he wrote in 1955 “he feels a certain pulse and plays a certain pulse which gives him pleasure and a sense of exaltation because he’s sincerely doing something the way he, Dave Brubeck, feels like doing it.”<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, this episode prompted Mingus to change his opinion on then-current economic system governing jazz industry. Eventually, Mingus started to talk more openly about the situation of his struggling, fellow musicians.

Increasingly from 1955, the relationship between Mingus and the music industry deteriorated, eventually reaching its nadir in 1960. As Max Roach remembered, while on tour in Chicago in 1960, Mingus called him and said, “the Newport people, they never hire any of the

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<sup>69</sup> Ralph J. Gleason, “Charles Mingus: A Thinking Musician,” *DownBeat*, January 6, 1951, accessed December 11, 2015.

[http://www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=stories&subsect=story\\_detail&sid=959](http://www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=stories&subsect=story_detail&sid=959).

<sup>70</sup> “The Man on Cloud no. 7,” *Time Magazine*, no. 19 (1954): 67, <http://time.com/vault/issue/1954-11-08/page/69/>.

<sup>71</sup> To see the full open letter to Miles Davis written by Charles Mingus where he apologizes to Davis for his failed attempt in *DownBeat*’s Blindfold Test and defends Brubeck’s perception of jazz, see <http://mingusmingusmingus.com/mingus/an-open-letter-to-miles-davis>.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Mingus, “An Open Letter to Miles Davis: By Charles Mingus, November 30, 1955, *DownBeat*,” *MingusMingusMingus*, accessed December 12, 2015, <http://mingusmingusmingus.com/mingus/an-open-letter-to-miles-davis>.

younger musicians.”<sup>73</sup> He meant free jazz players who were all black. Afterwards, they came up with the idea to counter the exploitative double-standard of the Newport festival in 1960 by inviting other sympathetic performers at their rebel, rival festival organized at the Cliff Walk Manor Hotel. Mingus and Roach went on with this plan. A considerable number of jazz players happily contributed with a performance, “including swing legends Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, and Jo Jones.”<sup>74</sup> As Sonny Rollins remembered, they were “trying to address some of these social ills through the promoters.”<sup>75</sup> However, Mingus and Roach did not escape the attention of *DownBeat* for this scandalous act. Despite the positive endorsement of their actions by a reporter in *Time Magazine*, who praised the counter festival having a civil rights spirit, *DownBeat's* had a far less encouraging response. The *DownBeat* staff attacked Mingus and his company for “Crow Jim” behavior.<sup>76</sup> Jazz journalists used “Crow Jim” as a description for reversed racism. The magazine made fun of Mingus, suggesting that he failed to understand the theory of “supply and demand.”<sup>77</sup> Gene Lees, a *DownBeat* editor, “implied that the bassist was afflicted with delusions.”<sup>78</sup> He accused Mingus of destroying jazz “with his wild charges.”<sup>79</sup> When Mingus explained “that jazz festivals underpaid African American artists and were no longer committed to presenting 'quality' music,”<sup>80</sup> *DownBeat* completely disregarded his point.

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<sup>73</sup> “Max Roach talks Tristano with Ed Scarvalone, Jan. 1979,” *WKCR*, accessed December 18, 2015, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-P1sXw3uymXWHpFWWU1d2dUWUk/view>.

<sup>74</sup> Iain Anderson, *This is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American*, 51.

<sup>75</sup> Gene Santoro, *Myself When I am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus*, 198.

<sup>76</sup> For more instances of *DownBeat* accusing artists of “Crow Jim” racism see Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 241-246.

<sup>77</sup> Gene Lees, “Newport: The Trouble,” *DownBeat* 28 (August 18, 1960): 21.

<sup>78</sup> Frank Kofsky, “Black Nationalism in Jazz: The Forerunners Resist Establishment Repression,” 8.

<sup>79</sup> Gene Lees, “Newport: The Trouble,” 44.

<sup>80</sup> Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and*

These kinds of provocative actions, especially towards the music's white establishment, led the guardian of the established jazz order, *DownBeat*, to criticize these insurgent musicians at every opportunity.

The Newport Counter-festival vividly demonstrated the white bias in jazz. “Mingus, the Black artist, was completely in the wrong and probably deranged to boot; Newport, the White-owned, White-operated jazz festival, was innocent of all accusations.”<sup>81</sup> This action resulted in a very strained relationship between the Old Guard and *DownBeat*. After the criticism accumulated, Mingus even “threatened to leave jazz for good, stating his intent to live on the island of Majorca and to compose a symphony.”<sup>82</sup> The incident showed the great extent to which Mingus and Roach were determined to oppose racial discrimination in their cherished industry.

Coltrane also had an up-and-down relationship with *DownBeat*. Early press reviews by *The Jazz Review* blasted Coltrane in 1960 for “the relentlessness of the stream of scales, all those notes with so little variety,”<sup>83</sup> but *DownBeat* magazine’s reviews started to be even more negative shortly after. *DownBeat* did not like Coltrane's embrace of the free jazz stylings, and were the harshest in their critique of this adjustment. In the aftermath of *Africa/Brass* and *Live at the Village Vanguard*, in 1962, *DownBeat* blamed Eric Dolphy, who was one of the leading free jazz multi-instrumentalists, for this development of Coltrane’s music. After one of their concerts in 1962, both Coltrane and Dolphy “came under the withering fire of *DownBeat* associate editor John Tynan.”<sup>84</sup> Writing for the Take Five section of *DownBeat*, Tynan concluded that Coltrane’s

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*Activists*, 134.

<sup>81</sup> Frank Kofsky, “Black Nationalism in Jazz: The Forerunners Resist Establishment Repression,” 9.

<sup>82</sup> Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*, 133.

<sup>83</sup> Mait Edey, “John Coltrane: ‘Giant Steps,’” *The Jazz Review*, May 1960, 22.

<sup>84</sup> “John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Jazz Critics.” *DownBeat*, April 12, 1962. accessed January 17, 2016. [http://www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=stories&subsect=story\\_detail&sid=354](http://www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=stories&subsect=story_detail&sid=354).

group was “bent on pursuing an anarchistic course in their music that can but be termed anti-jazz.”<sup>85</sup> Tynan saw in Coltrane’s Village material “no apparent attempt to play what is recognized in most places as 'jazz' as most fans know and love.”<sup>86</sup> He blamed the artist for devaluating jazz, labeling Coltrane’s artistic output with the derogatory term “anti-jazz.”

While the critics were already used to the free jazz innovations coming from newcomers like Coleman, they had a hard time coming to terms with the inevitable adoption of these musical elements by some well-established musicians. “None proved as controversial as John Coltrane, whose professional credentials and growing reputation made it much more difficult for critics to marginalize his music.”<sup>87</sup> A conservative magazine by nature, *DownBeat* always leaned towards praising records with standard harmonies, rhythms or melodies, such as cool jazz or modal jazz. Free jazz stood in stark contrast, stylistically. Even more threatening was the fact that these advances came exclusively from a group of black musicians. Thus, the anti-jazz label defined *DownBeat's* coercive tactic to discredit the genre as much as possible. Coined by *DownBeat* writer Leonard Feather, the anti-jazz term was applied by the magazine “to the music of the 1960s avant-garde movement as a means of social control.”<sup>88</sup> While it is difficult to accuse Leonard Feather of racial bias, there were noticeable signs of a white critic/black artist tension. It illustrated the antagonism that the white critics felt towards the African elements in free jazz, such as polyrhythm, dismissing the knowledge of African music that people like Coltrane had as “many avant-garde musicians were well versed in the African-American tradition.”<sup>89</sup> Coltrane responded to the negative view of *DownBeat* with a calm and constructive offer. Feeling that the

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<sup>85</sup> John Tynan, “Take Five,” *DownBeat* 28 (November 23, 1961): 40.

<sup>86</sup> Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 264.

<sup>87</sup> Iain Anderson, *This is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture*, 69.

<sup>88</sup> Tommy Lee Lott, “The 1960s Avant-Garde Movement in Jazz,” 171.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

critics did not understand what he set out to achieve with his Village Vanguard material, he offered to explain the reasoning behind his new style. He wanted to debate the issue as he argued that “[i]f something new has happened, something nobody knows what the musician is doing, he should ask the musician about it.”<sup>90</sup> *DownBeat* had no motivation to have this kind of conversation.<sup>91</sup>

It seems that *DownBeat* put considerable pressure on Coltrane. According to one of the executives working for Coltrane, a *DownBeat* critic came along and said, “John Coltrane's records are windy, flat and need editing.”<sup>92</sup> Coltrane responded to these criticisms with a string of three underwhelming, uninventive “standard tunes,”<sup>93</sup> *Duke Ellington & John Coltrane, Ballads*, and *John Coltrane & Johnny Hartman*, all released in 1963. Luckily, soon after, Coltrane’s record label came up with a solution to *DownBeat*’s pressures. They decided to found a new jazz publication that would protect the artistic integrity of bold pioneers like Coltrane. Bob Thiele, who ran Impulse! Records, “secretly financed a new jazz publication to compete with *DownBeat*.”<sup>94</sup> “Launched in the fall of 1962, *Jazz* took the name of a magazine Thiele first published in the 1940s and drew its advertising base and art direction from Impulse!”<sup>95</sup> Coltrane’s decision to sign on to Impulse! was a great step, as despite Coltrane’s pragmatic stance on the issue, his reputation did not suffer. As *Jazz Magazine* started to grow, *DownBeat*’s

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<sup>90</sup> Don DeMichael, “John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Jazz Critics,” 21.

<sup>91</sup> Don Demichael’s 1962 essay “John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Jazz Critics” in Carl Woideck’s *The John Coltrane’s Companion* (109-116) discusses the “anti-jazz” term and Coltrane’s other struggles with his critics.

<sup>92</sup> Frank Kofsky, “Black Nationalism in Jazz: The Forerunners Resist Establishment Repression,” 3.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Iain Anderson, *This is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture*, 85.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

position became less influential.<sup>96</sup> However, this uncomfortable situation showed that free jazz artists were more pragmatic towards their involvement in the racial struggle at their home industry, and opposed the racial bias of the jazz powers that be, in this case *DownBeat*, in a more peaceful, sophisticated way.

The avant-garde also had a direct connection to the principal pro-black liberation movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement was a pivotal era in racial activism. From the mid-1950s, swept by the energetic campaigning of countless African American activist groups, ranging from the moderate Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Martin Luther King to the more militant Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, successful African Americans, jazz musicians and other entertainers supported the moral fight of these freedom activists. African Americans from all kinds of public spheres, in any way possible, contributed to the effort. As part of the people who “made it,” musicians were expected to be the artistic vanguard of the movement. As Nat Hentoff explained in *We Insist*, “jazz musicians, normally apolitical and relatively unmindful of specific social movements, were also unprecedentedly stimulated.”<sup>97</sup> The Old Guard and free jazz were no exceptions. Their link to the Civil Right Movement helped to categorize their involvement in the politics of race, as the interest of free jazz and the Old Guard in this movement varied.

The civil rights groups often struggled for money, as they required considerable amounts for their campaigning and other activities. Jazz performers, whatever their particular style, were valuable, attention-grabbing entertainers. Thus, they formed an integral part of the fund-raising efforts. The guests of these events often contributed with generous donations. John Coltrane only appeared at civil rights fund-raisers twice, once in 1964, and then the next year, both times in aid

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<sup>96</sup> See pages 128-130 of Kofsky’s *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s* for summary of *DownBeat*’s history after 1963.

<sup>97</sup> Nat Hentoff, liner notes to *We Insist: Freedom Now Suite*.



of *Freedomways*,<sup>98</sup> a relatively unknown literary and political periodical. The number of appearances reflected Coltrane's relatively distant attitude towards civil rights organizations. Publicly, Coltrane refrained from talking about the Civil Rights Movement. He only wanted to discuss these matters in private. During an interview, when he talked with Frank Kofsky, he openly admitted his admiration for Malcolm X, when he went to one of his sermons, as he thought: "I had to see the man." In all, he was "quite impressed"<sup>99</sup> by what he heard and witnessed. However, these positive acknowledgments only surfaced after the movement came to an end. Most likely, Coltrane and his management thought they would lose their musical integrity if they had more openly supported such a scrutinized cause.<sup>100</sup>

Max Roach, by contrast, sought to participate in as many fundraising events as he could. During the Civil Right Movement's peak, Roach participated in more than ten benefit concerts, occasions ranging from the NAACP annual convention to a African Asian unity bazaar.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, he used his *We Insist* album to promote The Congress of Racial Equality's agenda. As Ingrid Monson explains, CORE "sponsored a benefit performance of *We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite* at New York's Village Gate."<sup>102</sup> After the release of *We Insist: Freedom Now Suite*, Roach toured every major city in the North with his band, with every benefit being disguised as an event promoting the album. CORE billed the *Freedom Now Suite* concert as the

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<sup>98</sup> Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa*, 213.

<sup>99</sup> "John Coltrane on Giant Steps – Blank on Blank – PBS Digital Studios."

<sup>100</sup> For one of Coltrane's more personal interviews in which he discusses the political importance of jazz, the Vietnam war, free jazz, and Malcom X, see Frank Kofsky's interview in *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s*, 432-454.

<sup>101</sup> Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa*, 191-215.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

trademark musical event of the organization. It became an effective instrument to promote CORE's ideas. Roach was also interested in the black street rallies on his album *Speak, Brother, Speak!* The inside of the album alluded to these specific progressive events organized by the Movement. At these meetings "the people of all walks of life [had] an opportunity to express themselves vocally, on their impressions of the state of the nation as related to themselves, culturally, socially, economically and politically."<sup>103</sup>

In the case of Charles Mingus, his involvement was obvious. Mingus' father, Charles Mingus Sr., was an active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).<sup>104</sup> Young Mingus, thus, participated in a number of NAACP-sponsored gatherings. Because he was immersed in this culture, his involvement in civil rights groups in his adult years was, therefore, a logical step. However, when it came to participating in the civil rights fund-raisers, he copied Coltrane's uninterested attitude. Eventually, Mingus' contributions ended up being more verbal and musical.

In spite of his fund-raising inactivity, Mingus' connection to the movement was apparent from his philosophy. He sought to implement civil rights doctrines in his musical and business endeavors. At the Jazz Workshop, "Mingus' modus operandi was close to the Civil Rights Movement's strategy of provocation through non-violence."<sup>105</sup> Essentially, he always started the Jazz Workshop session with "his own musical vision while providing other members of the ensemble sufficient improvisational freedom to participate in the spontaneous creation of each performance."<sup>106</sup> As Mingus argued, "In this way, I find it possible to keep my own

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<sup>103</sup> Max Roach, liner notes to *Speak, Brother, Speak*, Original Jazz Classics OJC 646, LP, 1991.

<sup>104</sup> Gene Santoro, *Myself When I am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus*, 24.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>106</sup> Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*, 126.

compositional flavor in the pieces and yet to allow the musicians more individual freedom in the creation of their group lines and solos.”<sup>107</sup>

Both the Old Guard and the free jazz movement reflected the American political situation in their music. However, despite free jazz political reputation, it did not insert itself into the struggle for black equality to a greater extent than Mingus, Roach, or Rollins did. Free jazz required a deeper look into the music to find the subtleties. The Old Guard explicitly supported the Civil Rights Movement, while free jazz relied on radical music to make indirect references. Likewise, free jazz’s handling of its relationship with the jazz industry and the civil rights movement was also more low-key to that of the Old Guard.

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<sup>107</sup> Charles Mingus, liner notes to *Pithecanthropus Erectus*.

## Chapter 3

### The Causes of Change in Free Jazz's Involvement in the Politics of Race

Previously, this thesis established the different degrees of involvement of free jazz and the Old Guard in race politics. These alternative approaches towards African American politics must have had a distinct set of causes that enabled free jazz artists to make this adjustment. In the midst of the unfolding activities of SCLC and SNCC in Birmingham and Albany, and the March on Washington, there were new cultural, sociological and jazz developments that came along with a new generation of jazz artists that contributed to a large extent to the direction jazz was heading. The changing hierarchy of jazz ensembles, the decolonization of Third World countries, the Old Guard's inability to get across its political message in its music, and a decline in the popularity of jazz at the turn of the new decade forced free jazz to adjust the extent to which and how it became involved in the politics of race through music, while individual personalities set the course for how free jazz's players and the Old Guard dealt with racial discrimination in music industry.

At the start of the 1960s, the diminishing popularity of jazz in general influenced free jazz's ability to address the problems of African Americans as explicitly as the Old Guard did. By the mid-1950s, an increasing number of people started to perceive jazz as high art. With cool jazz and modal jazz at the spearhead, Dave Brubeck's *Time Out* and Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* mirrored the growing popularity in commercial terms. Both records being released in 1959, it did not take long for them to sell 100,000 albums. By 1962, each sold over 200,000 copies, an enormous number for the genre. Whereas the 1920s and 1950s were the heights of the New Orleans-inspired music, the 1960s ushered in a decade of jazz disintegration.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more about jazz's popularity in the 1950s, see Jack Maher's "The Many Types of Jazz" in *Billboard Music Week Magazine* April 28, 1962.

By 1960, a youthful variation of blues started to take over the music charts, forcing jazz further away from the popular mainstream. A decline in album sales for jazz reflected this development. The famous jazz clubs in New York and Los Angeles also struggled. As Hobsbawm remembered, “[to] revisit New York in 1963 was a depressing experience for the jazz lover who had last experienced it in 1960.”<sup>2</sup> Many long-established jazz clubs had to close, including Café Bohemia and Birdland. Free jazz artists knew that without cultural, popular, and financial backing, it would be counterproductive to make any strong, explicit political proclamations, as it would not have sufficient weight behind it. Thus, there was no continuation of clear-cut political commentary found in songs like “Original Faubus Fables” or “Tears for Johannesburg.”

To be effectively involved in racial politics, avant-garde jazz musicians had to get their point across adequately in their music. Even though free jazz chose an original way to achieve its goal, it seems that both free jazz and the Old Guard failed in this condition. Mingus once allegedly smashed his bass during one of his concerts at the Five Spot Café as a reaction to a bored, non-stop talking couple sitting in the front row.<sup>3</sup> The presence of political content made their musical pieces even more divisive. The form of representation of this sensitive topic proved to be a decisive factor in much of their recorded material. Being explicitly political in a number of their musical releases and shows, they often failed to connect with the people who bought their record or listened to them live.

After *We Insist!* came out in 1960, Roach decided to go on the road with his musical ensemble, to stage a grand black cultural event combining music and poetry with other performing arts, such as dance. However, the live performance of songs like “Tears for

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz*, 377.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Bogdanov, *All Music Guide to Jazz* (New York: Backbeat Books, 2002), 717.

Johannesburg” that addressed the “bloody cruelty against Africans, as in the Sharpeville massacres of South Africa,”<sup>4</sup> and words to songs depicting “a room where the light won't find you/Holding hands while the walls come tumbling down,”<sup>5</sup> created what *Variety* called a ‘bitter mood.’<sup>6</sup> This kind of response suggested that the political atmosphere of Roach’s gigs caused the audience to react against controversial, explicit messages of the compositions. The Old Guard had a tough time expressing their ideology, as the audience often had a problem bonding with the Old Guard’s music.

In contrast, free jazz relied on collective improvisation and its uncompromising, authentic musical cadences when enlightening audiences on race issues. In addition to different harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic innovations that free jazz undoubtedly brought, the genre strived to rely totally on collective improvisation. As Rollins argued, “[j]azz improvisation is supposed to be the highest form of communication.”<sup>7</sup> As the milestones in collective improvisation, Coleman’s *Free Jazz* and Coltrane’s *Ascension*, showed, the first wave of free jazz improvisers came very close to the idea of total collective improvisation, where each member of ensemble tried to improvise as much as possible. Reviewers of *Free Jazz* were amazed when they heard how much a double quartet could improvise. As Martin Williams, the author of the liner notes to the album, proclaimed, “[n]ot only is the improvisation almost total, it is frequently collective, involving all eight inventing all at once.”<sup>8</sup> In a second *DownBeat* review, John Tynan praised the album for

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<sup>4</sup> Nat Hentoff, liner notes to *We Insist: Freedom Now Suite!*.

<sup>5</sup> Max Roach, *We Insist: Freedom Now Suite!*, Candid CJM 8002, LP, 1960.

<sup>6</sup> Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*, 173.

<sup>7</sup> “Sonny Rollins: ‘You Can’t Think and Play at the Same Time,’” NPR, May 3, 2014, accessed December 16, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2014/05/03/309047616/sonny-rollins-you-cant-think-and-play-at-the-same-time>.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Williams, liner notes to *Free Jazz*.

getting rid of the rules, as he wrote “Rules? Forget ‘em.”<sup>9</sup> By rejecting the rules, the album paved the way for freedom, as freedom was the shared musical and socio-political concept that the record alluded to,<sup>10</sup> suggesting that the reviewers got the political sentiment of the album.

Scholars like Kofsky or Baraka, in their early assessments of the music, argued that there was no need to address racial problems explicitly, as collective improvisation being part of “this music [was] an expression of higher ideals.”<sup>11</sup> Baraka thought that this piece of aesthetically radical music could have more effectively mobilized specific individuals inside the black, or even white, community than “a concrete political program.”<sup>12</sup> But, for the most part, his views were very optimistic, as ordinary people hearing this music must have had a tough time understanding this artful musical rhetoric, even though it was supposed to be the purest possible musical language. Thus, judging by the lack of popularity of free jazz, the artists of the genre were no better in communicating their political sentiments in such complex arrangements than the first part of the mid-century avant-garde. The idea “that the African-American quest for social equality could be advanced only by works of art that are neither too commercial nor too politically guided,”<sup>13</sup> probably only applied to the people who were already well versed in this type of music.

The momentous cultural rediscovery of Third World countries also pushed free jazz to change the extent to which they expressed a race rhetoric. At the same time as African Americans were marching in the South, the old colonial powers started to lose influence on the

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<sup>9</sup> John Tynan, “Double View of a Double Quartet,” *DownBeat* 29 (January 18, 1962): 28.

<sup>10</sup> *Free Jazz’s* gatefold liner notes by Martin William, together with picture of Jackson Pollock painting explain why the struggle for freedom was an important for the context of the album.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Kofsky, *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s*, 436.

<sup>12</sup> Scott Saul, *Freedom Is Freedom Ain’t*, 247.

<sup>13</sup> Tommy Lee Lott, “The 1960s Avant-Garde Movement in Jazz,” 166.

African continent. Starting with Ghana, the decolonization of British colonies in Africa lasted from 1956 until 1968, with its peak taking place between 1960 and 1962, when Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Cameroon finally won their independence. The African independence movements of the 1960s gave great impulse for rediscovery of the continent to its former descendants, as many African Americans had a West African or Gold Coast heritage. Likewise, there was a resurgence of interest in Asian cultures and religions in America. As Franya J. Berkman explained, “Americans explored Eastern spiritual traditions with new vigor, facilitated, in part, by the Asian Immigration Act of 1965.”<sup>14</sup> Americans and Europeans were more likely than ever to visit India or the nations of the Middle East. As Anderson points out, “[t]he decline of European empires helped inspire a new appreciation for varieties of world music rooted in alternative cultural values.”<sup>15</sup> Free jazzists were no exception, being very invested in these distant cultures. As Berkman points out, the “decolonization and third world revolution are crucial to understanding the musical and spiritual pursuits of the black jazz community.”<sup>16</sup>

Subsequently, by the early 1960s, jazz had become a truly “global phenomenon, having the ability to appeal and touch listeners of all cultures and races, transcending difference of language, economic status, gender, skin color, economic status, and age.”<sup>17</sup> It became more prominent in Asia and South America. This made free jazz artists more appreciative of foreign cultures. Eventually, since they did not have much “but their talent,”<sup>18</sup> several of them took the

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<sup>14</sup> Franya J. Berkman, “Appropriating Universality: The Coltranes and 1960s Spirituality,” 47.

<sup>15</sup> Iain Anderson, *This is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture*, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Franya J. Berkman, “Appropriating Universality: The Coltranes and 1960s Spirituality,” 54.

<sup>17</sup> Leonard L. Brown, “You Have to be Invited: Reflections on Music Making and Musician Creation in Black American Culture,” in *John Coltrane & Black America's Quest for Freedom: Spirituality and Music*, ed. Leonard L. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21.

<sup>18</sup> John D. Baskerville, “Free Jazz: A Reflection of Black Power Ideology,” *Journal of Black Studies* 24, no. 4 (1994): 488.



chance to see other parts of the world, making jazz artists more attuned to foreign cultures. Thus, free jazz and Third World countries were interesting to each other. As a result, Coltrane put out *Ole Coltrane* in 1961, a Latino inspired album, as well as the Ravi Shankar influenced *Africa/Brass*.

Eventually, fueled by this natural curiosity, free-jazzists did not only admired these distant civilizations, but also made an effort to make contact with the people who represented these cultures. Coltrane was “a friend of African drummer Olatunji,”<sup>19</sup> who came from Nigeria. Likewise, Coltrane’s relationship with Shankar was so close “that one of Coltrane’s sons bears the same first name as the Indian sitar master.”<sup>20</sup> Turning to Asia and Africa encouraged free jazz to adopt new modes of music, including unconventional harmonies and tonalities.<sup>21</sup> Knowingly or not, the inclusion of the African and Asian traditions, after Third World decolonization, into his artistic output led Coltrane into “an age of unprecedented discovery,”<sup>22</sup> and influenced free jazz music to make indirect links with racial politics through musical aesthetics.

In contrast, the Old Guard did not make an effort to come into contact with the Third World nations to the same extent that free jazz did. Mingus showed little interest in Africa. For him, Africa remained distant in a literal, as much as in a figurative sense. Living in Los Angeles and New York during the height of his career, he “thrived in interracial settings like San Francisco’s Beat scene and Greenwich Village’s café circuit.”<sup>23</sup> As Mingus himself admitted in

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Francesconi, “Free Jazz and Black Nationalism: A Rhetoric of Musical Style,” 42.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Kofsky, “John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s,” 233.

<sup>21</sup> For an explanation of musical rhetoric in relation to Third World influences on free jazz, see article by Robert Francesconi, “Free Jazz and Black Nationalism: A Rhetoric of Musical Style.”

<sup>22</sup> Leonard Feather, “Hierarchy On the Jazz Anarchy,” *Esquire* (September 1965): 123.

<sup>23</sup> Scott, Saul, *Freedom Is Freedom Ain’t*, 265.

1972, he never had “any African friends,” and he had “never been to Africa.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, at most, he was only inspired by American fusions or alternations of African cultures.

His ambivalence towards people outside of America was a result of his anxiety due to his racial ambiguousness. As he admitted in a 1962 interview, “[m]y identity is still to be accepted by my own people.” He explained that the people that he met made him feel that he “was not good enough to be black.”<sup>25</sup> His mixed skin color represented a source of the negative attitudes of people towards him. Being of white, black and Latino descent caused him a lot of anxiety. Whereas Mingus’s ignorance of what was happening in Africa resulted only in political content that focused solely on America, Roach’s limited investment in the foreign cultures prompted him to at least lyrically adhere to the themes of Third World struggles. However, as far as the music goes, he remained detached. Thus, compared to free jazz, the Old Guard’s musical distinctiveness did not stand out as much, as despite instances of experimentation with distant styles, the music still remained very much European influenced.

Another reason for the different extent of political expression in avant-garde music was the hierarchy within jazz ensembles. The band leaders of the 1950s’ avant-garde, hard-bop or cool jazz quintets and quartets had commanding power over their musical cohorts. In most cases, they told their sidemen when to play, what to play, and how to play. These ensembles worked on a basis of tight hierarchy. Ever since establishing the Jazz Workshop, his roster-rotating band, Mingus exercised nearly authoritative power over his ensemble. As in his private life, he had a difficult time resisting his hunger for power. As “Trumpeter Ted Curson remarked, ‘Mingus was

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<sup>24</sup> John F. Goodman, *Mingus Speaks*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> “Charles Mingus Interview, 1962,” YouTube video, 24:32, posted by “Jamie Breiwick,” October 12, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0uv9Gshveo>.

the boss. He gave the orders.”<sup>26</sup> He “ruled by the force of excessive power”<sup>27</sup> through his autocratic instructions. Even when he tried to “crystallize the long-standing connection between black music and collective freedom,”<sup>28</sup> the effort failed, as the other players’ choice of musical expression had to come from him first, in essence limiting the freedom of improvisation during live or recording sessions. Even when it came to a genuine advancement of musical freedom in the Old Guard’s rhythms, the veteran band leaders restricted others to “amazingly static and smooth”<sup>29</sup> attempts, reminiscent of the fifties hard-bop ideas of swing.

As the fifties came to an end, jazz musicians started to redefine the hierarchy of jazz orchestras. The free jazz collectives were more democratic. Although Coltrane and Coleman still served as the leaders in the collective, their drummers, bassists, or pianists had a greater role in the creation of compositions.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, the hierarchy became less rigid and restrictive. Coleman’s collective reflected this shift in his 1961 album *This is Our Music*, released a few months before the seminal *Free Jazz*. As Peter J. Welding, the reviewer of *This is Our Music*, pointed out, the music had “no order.”<sup>31</sup> The loosening of the band’s hierarchy brought an opportunity for them to utilize a free, democratic, collective improvisation, which in turn scholars associated with pro-black politics. Since Coleman was familiar with Mingus, it is plausible that Coleman analyzed the disadvantages of a hierarchical ensemble, made a change,

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<sup>26</sup> Scott, Saul, *Freedom Is Freedom Ain’t*, 158.

<sup>27</sup> Scott Saul, "Outrageous Freedom: Charles Mingus and the Invention of the Jazz Workshop," 395.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>29</sup> Leroi Jones, *Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2010), 76.

<sup>30</sup> See Ornette Coleman’s segment in *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* by A.B. Spellman for more about Coleman’s private and professional relationship with his band. For Coltrane, the latter half of *Chasin’ the Trane* by J.C. Thomas includes stories presenting behavior between Coltrane and Elvin Jones, McCoy Tyner, and other members of his band.

<sup>31</sup> Peter J. Welding, “Review: This is Our Music,” *Hifi/Stereo Review* 7 (1961): 78.

and put an emphasis on the democratic nature of the jazz groups, which consequently put them on the path of the complete group improvisation, creating the radical musical aesthetics associated with pro-black doctrines.<sup>32</sup> In addition to making the rhythm section more loose and complex, and employing elements of polyphony more thoroughly, the improvisational breakthrough became the trademark of playing in free jazz style, enabling the critics and scholars to make parallels between musical freedom and the call for social and political rights in the wider society.<sup>33</sup> In essence, free jazz favored “the destruction of the individual ego in the creation of collective strength.”<sup>34</sup>

As people, the personalities of the members of the Old Guard contrasted significantly with the gentle, easy-going temperaments of Coltrane and Coleman. Very expressive and direct from an early age, Mingus continued to be well-known for his violent on-stage temper. In private, his co-workers accused him of being abusive and bullying. Mingus once punched his friend Jimmy Knepper, who was a jazz and classical composer resulting in “charges of third-degree assault.”<sup>35</sup> Roach was heavily involved in the Nation of Islam. As a result, he lived an unorthodox life, as this sect pursued an alternative lifestyle. However, unlike Mingus, Coltrane, Joe Goldberg described him as “[a] quiet, pleasant, shyly friendly man who [dressed] simply and [spoke] softly,” and was “likely to be between sets seated on his horn case, reading and eating an apple.”<sup>36</sup> A former *DownBeat* editor, Don Demicheal, added that he “never hurried me or made

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<sup>32</sup> The chapter “Avant-Garde and Tradition” in *Mingus Speaks* by John F. Goodman addresses the relationship between Mingus and 1960s avant-garde jazz.

<sup>33</sup> For more about the musical technicalities of Ornette Coleman’s free jazz see “Chapter 3: Ornette Coleman” in *Free Jazz* by Ekkehard Jost.

<sup>34</sup> Scott Saul, *Freedom Is Freedom Ain’t* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 255.

<sup>35</sup> Gene Santoro, *Myself When I am Real*, 212.

<sup>36</sup> Joe Goldberg, “John Coltrane (1965),” in *The John Coltrane Companion: Five Decades of Commentary*, ed. Carl Woideck (London: Omnibus Press, 1998), 38.

me feel uncomfortable,”<sup>37</sup> during their interviews. Apparently, he “had acquired his quiet and private persona early.”<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, Coleman, a goofy youngster with long hair in his early twenties, had a gift for getting along with people. The well-known critic Alfred Spellman, who knew Coleman well for a long time, concluded that “[e]veryone who talked to Ornette during this time attested to his modesty, if not his outright humility.”<sup>39</sup> Both being introverted, it was not in Coltrane’s or Coleman’s nature to be hostile to other human beings because of clashing opinions. Furthermore, seeing the world through more pragmatic and modest eyes, the free jazzists were reluctant to comment explicitly on the racial politics of America. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Mingus expressed outspoken views on many subjects. Thus, inevitably, he often challenged people, and despised them for their contrasting opinions. Therefore, he was more likely to attack people in his lyrics, or come into open conflict with journalists, as was the case with DownBeat. This personality trait of Mingus’ explains his more direct political stance compared to Coltrane.

Ultimately, an irreversible set of causes put free jazz on the path of a reformed perspective and approach towards racial politics. While the Old Guard achieved notoriety for their pro-black views and racial inclusiveness, the emerging impulse from the emancipated African and Asian nations, and the declining popularity of jazz, contrasting personalities of the five artists, and assumed ineffectiveness of Old Guard’s music in getting across their political message pushed free jazz to limit their involvement in the politics of race.

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<sup>37</sup> Don Demicheal, “Conversation with Coltrane (1962),” in *The John Coltrane Companion: Five Decades of Commentary*, ed. Carl Woideck (London: Omnibus Press, 1998), 104.

<sup>38</sup> J. C. Thomas, *Chasin’ the Trane* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 7.

<sup>39</sup> A. B. Spellman, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, 124.

## Conclusion

Black musicians had a particular role in the liberalization of race relations in the 1950s and 1960s. Having a cultural relevancy and popularity, especially among youngsters and the middle-aged, these artists knew that their activist voices would resonate differently compared to the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, bringing a different kind of attention. The popular civil rights politics of the mid-century spawned a fruitful period for activist songs. Protest hymns of popular music icons such as Sam Cooke's heartfelt ballad "A Change is Gonna Come" had the power to sway people to the artist's side. However, the tension between art and politics caused the politically minded artists to be careful with any associations with the political struggle for freedom and race equality, knowing that the audiences might discredit such efforts on the part of artists. The artists had to take into the account the power of their persona and the political climate in the mid-20th century. Mingus' "Original Faubus Fables" and *We Insist* were all on the margins of the jazz industry, reaching a very limited number of people. This aspect improved with free jazz when albums like *A Love Supreme* were commercially successful. Furthermore, free jazz was like a magnet for the white middle-class liberals, whose influence in American society was beneficial to the cause of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>1</sup>

Compared to the wider musical world, the Old Guard produced many of the early freedom songs throughout the 1950s. Along with anti-nuclear and anti-McCarthyism songs, freedom songs were a palpable presence in the politically motivated music of the time. In the 1960s, the freshly emerging folk and rock scenes in New York and Los Angeles continued in the Old Guard's steps. The protest songs of the American folk scene were similar to Mingus'

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<sup>1</sup> *When the Spirit Says Sing!* by Kerran L. Sanger further examines the significance of the Freedom songs in context of the Civil Rights Movement.

“Original Faubus Fables” or Roach’s “Driva Man.” While musically dissimilar, both cultivated a comparable, ideological approach when articulating social topics in their songs. Bob Dylan’s “With God on Our Side” or “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” were strong, opinionated additions to the civil rights’ musical cannon. Nonetheless, Dylan, a white folk hero living in Greenwich Village, was in a different situation than the Old Guard, which received only minuscule attention compared to Dylan or any other popular, socially conscious singer.

By recognizing the Old Guard, this thesis was able to judge the involvement of free jazz in the politics of race in a new way, against standards set by the political avant-garde of the 1950s. Despite significant differences in the manner in which they participated in these politics, both were comparable in their extent. Thus, the decolonization of Africa, and the shift in jazz ensembles’ collective hierarchy, made the participation of free jazz in race politics through musical commentary more indirect. Free jazz shifted to a more modernist course, subtly commenting on racial themes in albums like *Free Jazz* and *Ascension*, through the power of musical aesthetics, as opposed to the Old Guard’s explicit political commentary in “Original Faubus Fables” or *We Insist*. Coltrane’s more pragmatic and sophisticated solution to black jazz musicians’ disagreements with *DownBeat*, contrasted with the outspokenness of Mingus and Roach, whose hostile words about *DownBeat* led nowhere. When it came to the avant-garde’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, whereas the Old Guard openly endorsed its efforts, Coltrane and Coleman were helpful to the cause, but only so far as not to hinder their artistry. Not as assertive as the Old Guard in promoting the interests of the Movement, free jazz did not openly associate itself with the black freedom movement. Free jazz musicians’ approach meant that they did not give away too much in their music, did not make any enemies in the industry, and did not compromise their artistry by making obvious associations with political movements, while the Old Guard was more uncompromising.

Regarding their lives after the 1960s, Rollins mostly stayed out of politics in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, remaining skeptical towards the effectiveness of art with a political message. He especially questioned the political interpretations of his records composed during 1950s and 1960s, as he said that he did not want to be political. Coleman and Roach remained active in the advancement of their communities in the following decades. Roach accepted an offer to teach at the University of Massachusetts, where he supported the local black community. Coleman continued with his music career, going global, spreading the idea of black unity around the world, in Europe and in countries such as Morocco.<sup>2</sup>

After 1960, Mingus was finished with hard bop, and progressed to the free jazz genre, incorporating musical ideas typical for the “New Thing.” He also made several detours to less prevalent genres of jazz, such as soul-jazz or vocal jazz. Although to a lesser extent than in the 1950s he still maintained the race rhetoric in some of the recorded material post-1960. With *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, in 1963, he moved towards more abstract assessment of race relations in America, addressing the familiar theme of freedom. Mingus commissioned well-known psychotherapist Edmund Pollock to write an evaluation of Mingus’ personality and his music. Mingus eventually included this text inside the album booklet. Inside, besides several personal remarks, Pollock also wrote that “the black man is not alone but all mankind must unite in revolution against any society that restricts freedom and human rights.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the shifting approach, he still retained his confrontational rhetoric as he warned the “white man to be

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on Sonny Rollins’s evaluation of 1950s and 1960s political jazz see a 2005 interview with him in *Jazz Times* (<http://jazztimes.com/articles/15731-sonny-rollins-interviewed-by-joshua-redman-newk-s-time>) and a 2010 interview with *The Telegraph* (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandjazzmusic/8125961/Shining-on-interview-with-Sonny-Rollins.html>). A 2007 *New York Times* report provides a summary of Roach’s ventures after 1960s: ([http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/16/arts/music/16cnd-roach.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/16/arts/music/16cnd-roach.html?_r=0)).

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Pollock, liner notes to *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, Impulse! AS-35, LP, 1963.



aware.”<sup>4</sup> Eventually, as the decade came to an end, the exciting new trend swallowed even Mingus, as he modeled his sound more on free jazz’s edgy aesthetics, not being as politically direct as he had been before. Unfortunately, Mingus’ bad health at the end of the 1960s caused a halt to any large musical or political projects. He eventually died in 1979. Even more shocking was Coltrane’s sudden death in 1967. Coltrane’s premature end made him a martyr figure, signaling “to cultural nationalists, Marxists, and those interested in spirituality, an inspiration, if not soundtrack, for black freedom.”<sup>5</sup> Sadly, due to his premature death, Coltrane never had the chance to comment on any of the political interpretations of his music.<sup>6</sup>

Even though the Old Guard was more direct and noticeable in their involvement in the racial politics, free jazz paradoxically gathered more attention from scholars and critics because these intellectuals were probably more drawn towards the open-to-interpretation quality of free jazz. While the scholars and critics were, in general, more attracted to free jazz’s more nuanced and sophisticated race activism, this thesis has shown that Mingus, Roach, and Rollins were equally deserving of the attention paid to free jazz and that their involvement and accomplishments in the politics of race have been previously undervalued.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Gray, “John Coltrane and Practice of Freedom,” in *John Coltrane & Black America's Quest for Freedom: Spirituality and Music*, ed. Leonard L. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 51.

<sup>6</sup> In a 1962 interview with Nesuhi Ertegun (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0uv9Gshveo>), Mingus describes his departure to vocal jazz on his album *Mingus Oh Yeah!* For more information on Mingus’ take on soul-jazz listen to and see the liner notes of *The Black Saint and The Sinner Lady*.

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