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Connections in an Ann Arbor African Diasporic Music Style to African Traditions:  
a Cultural Investigation

In my third semester at music school, I took a class entitled “Music History from Antiquity to 1750.” The class touched on the history of “music” from ancient Mesopotamia to the Baroque period; they conveniently left out that it was only the history of Western European music. I learned that Western European tradition studied in music schools in the West can- and most certainly does- trace its roots back 1,000 years to Gregorian chant, and often even further than that. White culture has the ability to trace its lineage back thousands of years; however, I noted that, as a black man, I did not even know who my great-grandparents were. While bringing Africans across the Ocean for the purpose of enslaving them, white supremacists erased as much African culture as they could- yet even still, Black Americans have built nearly the entire industry of American music using their own heritage and the things they came into contact with in this country. With this in mind, in this paper I will investigate the history of Black American and African Diasporic music styles in Ann Arbor and their connections to Africa. Specifically, I will ask: what gives Black American music its ability to create an energetic atmosphere? How is Black American music acquired by musicians? How do these connect to the heritage that Black Americans have in Africa? I will argue that Black American music’s rhythmic and regularity-focused faculties give it its atmospheric effect, it is acquired through experiential, improvisational learning, and these are descended from traditions that enslaved people brought with them from Africa.

It was around seven o'clock when I got out of my cognitive psychology discussion section. It was dark and cold out, but I heard music coming from the Diag. It was here that I ran into the subject of my research: Joe and the Ruckus. Joe and the Ruckus describe themselves as a band with many influences, notably including jazz and funk. They were doing a performance for a school organization, situated just underneath the graduate library and surrounded by a half-circle of people. The band includes a vocalist, a drummer, a keyboardist, a bassist, a guitarist, a saxophonist, a trombonist, and a trumpet player. I approached the band after the performance to ask about interviewing them for my research, and they were kind enough to oblige.

What was fascinating about Joe and the Ruckus' performance was their ability to capture an audience. Somehow, on a dark, cold night in Ann Arbor, Joe and the Ruckus managed to get an audience singing, moving, and at least attempting to dance. At one point, the crowd turned into a mosh pit (Joe and the Ruckus 2021). In the words of Jeff Pressing, Black American music "is effective in underpinning solidarity in social gatherings like ceremonies"- or perhaps, the University of Michigan Diag (Pressing 2002, 286). It may be said that Black American music's rhythmic capacities are essential to its potent ability to create what Friedling Riedel calls an atmosphere- a "feeling, mood, or *stimmung* that fundamentally exceeds an individual body and pertains primarily to the overall situation in which bodies are entrenched." (Riedel et al. 2019, 85). Pressing may give us insight into the question of what it is about Black American music that gives it the ability to create this atmosphere; his answer is two approaches to time found in Black American music- groove and speech. Pressing draws a line of connection between Yoruba Dundun music and Black American traditions, stating,

“[In Dundun music,] the rhythmic patterns relate to a central groove, visible in the dance steps, but the same parts actually also express spoken proverbs or other sayings, by systematically mimicking their Yoruba speech patterns and tonal contours (Euba, 1990)... in the hands of jazz singers such as Billie Holiday... speech rhythms can float above the regularity of the underlying rhythm section, giving aligning reference to it only at certain points.”

Regularity is also important in Pressing’s conception of the abilities of Black American groove.

Pressing goes on to state,

“the regularity and arousal qualities of the groove also allow heightened attention to, and perceptibility of, performance microstructure... in addition, the regularity and bodily entrainment have the capacity to reduce anxiety... effectiveness of a groove from the standpoint of reception is assessed by its ability to engage human movement and attention.” (Pressing 2002, 287, 290)

Clearly, Joe and the Ruckus is effective at creating a groove. In this conception of music, the ability to generate human movement is the central measure of what makes music effective. From Joe and the Ruckus’ instagram, we can see their rendition of Curtis Mayfield’s “Move on up.” It features a horn section on melody, a drummer, bass, and keys. The drum rhythm is complex, but it can be boiled down to an elaboration on a beat of the kick drum on 1 and 3 and an eighth note, eighth note, sixteenth rhythm starting on the and of one and 3; the constant notes of elaboration from the snare and the cymbals create a feeling of movement. The bass and keys play a dotted eighth note rhythm that floats above drums, and the horn section plays the melody. Notably, the rhythms of the drums and the bass and keys line up on beat 1, and the cymbal lines up with the bass and keys on the and of two; Figure 1, located in the appendix, is a reduction that shows the

moving alignments of the melody and harmony. We might say that this aids in the effectiveness of the groove. This is the African Diasporic homophony that Pressing describes; each part of the rhythmic pattern relating to a central groove, encouraging a kinesthetic response in the listeners. If we follow Pressing's conclusion, it was this homophony that created the space to allow for a crowd of cold and tired college students to begin a mosh pit on a Thursday night, and it is this homophony, central to its corporeal abilities, that is the ancestral birthright of the Black American tradition.

The manner in which music is acquired has great cultural significance. In my experience, most musicians in a conservatory environment learn music through lessons or school programs, which may lead to performance groups, which may lead to summer programs, which may lead to conservatory. The cost of these programs lead to an interesting class divide in the types of people that can acquire Western European art music. However, Black American music has not evolved in the same way that Western European music has, and is acquired in different ways. My interview with Joe and the Ruckus shed some light on this, most notably that their drummer, Adam Wooten, is the son of legendary bassist Victor Wooten. Adam explained to me that his father learned music by playing in a family band from the time he was two years old; he heard and was inspired by artists like James Brown and Earth, Wind, and Fire. Adam grew up hearing this music and, in his words, it "became a way of life" for him. From this, I argue that experiential, improvisational learning is a distinct, important characteristic of Black American music. It is to be noted that this paper in no way means to assert that experiential learning is the only way that Black American music is acquired; multiple band members stated that they learned music by participating in school programs, and some are jazz students at the University of Michigan. However, this paper does mean to assert that learning music through hands-on,

communal, improvisational experience is a distinct tenet of the Black American music world that has an important connection to its heritage in Africa. In another example from the African diaspora, Kendrick Lamar immortalizes his experience with experiential, improvisational learning in his song “Money Trees,” where he tells the story of how part of the way he learned to rap was by doing it in the car with his friends, saying, “Parked the car then we start rhyming, ya bish (ya bish, ya bish)/The only thing we had to free our mind (free our mind, free our mind)/Then freeze that verse when we see dollar signs (dollar signs, dollar signs)” (Lamar 2012)

One may perhaps compare this to Chomsky’s idea that language is generated by infants as they learn to speak; in the same way, Black American music may in part be generated by performers as they play together and create music (indeed, there is conversation surrounding a Chomskyan approach to music in the literature, per C. Roads and Paul Reineke’s research (Roads and Wieneke, 1979). My conversation with the band expanded to their music-making process, and we touched on this. Their approach is to gather all the voices of the band to make a unified sound; it is important to Joe and the Ruckus that everybody gets to express themselves. They often play along to records together to develop this sound or have jam sessions at each others’ houses. Their guitarist, Alec, learned guitar so that he would be able to hang out- to experience community, if you will- with other people. In my interview with him, Dr. Ed Sarath, professor of jazz at the University of Michigan, noted that there was a “miracle” of enslaved people transported across the Atlantic retaining the traditions of the places they came from, and spoke of two dimensions of Black American music descended from Africa in my interview with him- the improvisatory creative and the rhythmic. Indeed, the band later compared African drum circles to a jam session. In his book, *Black Music Matters: Jazz and the Transformation of Music Studies*,

Sarath expands on the notion of the improvisatory creative and its effects on musicianship, writing,

“The significance of the improvisatory/compositional episode for the individual lies not only in its expressive qualities, but also in its transformative and noetic properties... improvising and composing... penetrate to a stratum of creation in which basic musical elements are experienced in abstract, fluid, malleable, and undifferentiated form. Musical ideas originate as deeply intuitive and abstract facets of a creative flow, fathomed not through conventional terminology and analysis, but through subtle dimensions of feeling, intuition...” (Sarath 2016, 15)

Mr. Conner VanderBeek, in his lecture on creativity for Musicology 139 at the University of Michigan, speaks of a similar framework that the band spoke of for the creation of their songs as a larger framework for the creation of American popular music, writing, “the later half of the 20th Century was characterized by creativity within the pop music arena (jazz, rock, soul, as well as rhythm and blues). Songs were not written down or created by solitary artists, but rather, by all band members working collectively” (VanderBeek 2021). Experiential learning is a feature used by artists in multiple African diasporic music styles that is specific and important to the landscape of African diasporic music

Black American music is at the heart of American culture. Its rhythmic tendencies in large part contribute to its ability to create an energetic atmosphere and incite movement in audiences, and its experiential and improvisational acquisition feature gives it the ability to penetrate to a deeply human level of art. This paper is written in hopes that it will contribute to a larger academic valuing of Black American music, and in due time, to black liberation.

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Appendix

Move On Up



Figure 1: reduction of keyboard/bass and horn section part in Joe and the Ruckus' performance of "Move On Up"