In Pursuit of Freedom: Jazz and the American Religion
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There have been a variety of attempts to express the essence of American ideology. And though it is almost universally acknowledged that part of the genius of the American way is the manner in which the founding documents create a scenario wherein debate is perpetuated, a paradox exists that demands attention. America is founded on a set of ideals – of theoretical absolutes that enable the ambiguity of constant compromise.

This paper suggests that a comparison of the philosophy of two American cultural phenomena would give us insight into an essence of American ideology. Please feel free to react as I present to you the two subjects to be compared in this paper. You will almost certainly agree that there could not possibly be any two things more culturally opposed than these two indigenous American creations (as evidenced by the many raised eyebrows and grins accompanying the futile wait for a punch line after presenting this concept to others). And while it may seem incongruous at first, comparing the philosophical roots of Jazz and Mormonism will reveal some of those fundamental axioms of thought that are an essence of American ideology, and, hence, are not merely American, but resonant with the whole of humanity.

At its onset, the comparative study of these two American conceptions seems to border on the absurd. But the commonalities between them become apparent on many

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1 The author recognizes the danger of using the term "American" due to the varied definitions that accompany it, ranging from the right-wing politically charged to the possibility of giving offense to other Americans living on either American continent. It is not intended to possess any such meaning, but is intended to refer to the United States of America. The issue of whether or not use of this term would be correct is one that the author debated greatly. Decision to do so is founded on the precept of establishing a consistency between the author's prose and the rhetoric of other sources quoted throughout the text.
levels. As has already been stated, they are each indigenous to American soil.\(^1\) & \(^2\) Being organic evolutions of the democratic ideal, they offer an intimate connection to its fundamental nature. Also, both Jazz\(^3\) and Mormonism\(^4\) have a worldwide influence that shows remarkable adaptability to specific cultures. This global presence gives credence to studying their roots in an attempt to understand what portion of the American Democratic ideal is "resonant with the whole of humanity." Both share a belief and hope in the aforementioned ideal. Such optimism, which both Jazz\(^5\) and Mormonism\(^6\) profess to be realistic, fuels an attempt by many of their preeminent philosophers to define what is, as opposed to what is not, when it comes to the ideals of this country. Perhaps most intriguing is the fact that African-Americans and Mormons are two groups of people denied the rights of citizenry by the citizenry in this country.\(^7\) Thus, the experiential connection to overcoming prejudice and hate, while struggling with it among their own, provides a sobering bridge between these seemingly dichotomous worlds.

Harold Bloom, Professor of Literature at New York University, observes that due to the "peculiarity that the Mormons believe in continuous revelation," "Mormon theology . . . has been left incomplete, which encourages Mormons . . . to invent for themselves."\(^8\) While there are specific fundamentals in which Mormons believe,\(^9\) there is

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3 Nat Hentoff, "The Third World Cat in the Black Hat," in *Jazz Is* (New York: Random House, 1976), 241
5 Horace A. Porter, *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America* (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 20
8 Bloom, 113
9 LDS Church, *Pearl of Great Price*, 60-61
considerable room for interpretation on many facets of Mormon theology which branch out beyond those fundamentals. Mormons are taught to "treasure up in [their] minds continually the words of life,"\(^1\) so that, depending on the situation in which they find themselves, they may engage in organizing and re-organizing those words to create solutions. Similarly, the creation process in jazz improvisation is viewed as an organizing and reorganizing of rhetoric diligently "treasured up," anchored to the fundamentals of blues and swing.\(^2\)

The concept of organizing information to create situation-specific solutions had its doctrinal birth in the early days of the Mormon Church. In the words of Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism to historians, and restorer of the ancient Church of Jesus Christ to believers:

> [In the Bible], the word "create"... does not mean to create out of nothing; it means to organize... God had materials to organize the world out of chaos... which is element... The pure principles of element... may be organized and re-organized, but not destroyed."\(^3\)

In his work entitled "Supreme Being," Duke Ellington makes a similar declaration. "Out of... chaos... the Supreme Being organized and created, created and organized Heaven and Earth. For darkness was on the deep, and the earth was without form."\(^4\) This biblical reference presents a peculiarity about Ellington's perception of the Creation account. To the knowledge of the author, there is no existing version of the Holy Bible which directly refers to organization in the context of the creation story. Yet,

\(^{1}\) LDS Church, *Doctrine and Covenants*, 159

\(^{2}\) For an in depth discussion of organization in improvisation, see Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*.

\(^{3}\) Smith, *Teachings*, 350

\(^{4}\) Ellington, "Supreme Being," *Sacred Concert*, 1979
Ellington repeats the terms "creation" and "organization" in alternating order, demonstrating that, to him, one is not more significant than the other in the creation process. They are, in fact, interchangeable.

The intent of presenting these quotes is not to prove theological ideas, but to demonstrate the placing of the concept of organization in a profoundly important--even sacred--context by both Jazz and Mormonism. To further quote Harold Bloom, "Nowhere is [Joseph] Smith's genius so American as when he declares that God organized us and our world. . . ." Why? Because this new view of organization is directly connected to the way America perceives adversity. Significantly, each of the statements about Deity creating or organizing the world addressed a material that was necessary to enable organization -- chaos.

Chaos is the antithesis of organization. Without it, creation cannot exist. And the need for opposition, an idea shared by both Jazz and Mormonism, gives birth to the blues as a frame of mind. In the words of Ralph Ellison,

The blues voice . . . mocks the despair stated explicitly in the lyric, and it expresses the great human joke directed against the universe, that joke which is the secret of all folklore and myth: that though we be dismembered daily we shall always rise up again. Thus, the blues give us a "rock-bottom sense of reality, coupled with our sense of the possibility of rising above it."

The Mormons' understanding of the adversity through which they pass, as observed by historian Ralph Laurence Moore, gives us even further insight into the role of opposition in American thought, and the purpose inherent in confronting adversity with the attitude of the blues. "Mormons taught the American religion, or at least a vital

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1 Bloom, 101
3 Ibid., xxiv
aspect of it. . . . One way of becoming American was to invent oneself out of a sense of opposition.\(^1\)

Inventing self out of a sense of opposition is an adequate definition for improvisation, and reveals the purpose thereof. Quoting Ellison, "After the jazzman has learned the fundamentals . . . he must then 'find himself,' must be reborn. . . . He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity."\(^2\)

Only when the jazz musician insists on the reality of what Kathleen Higgins calls "diversity in unity,"\(^3\) and the resulting "inherent intricacy of irresolution"\(^4\) does self-discovery become reality. As Higgins notes,

> This achievement, in either social relations or Jazz, is not possible without tension. . . . The suggestion of the solo [in jazz] is that diversity in unity is not only coherent, but also a dazzling human achievement. . . . [It] reveals the possibility of a liberated individual presence subtly cooperating with a distinct ensemble.\(^5\)

To what end, then, do the principles of the blues, improvisation, and the necessity of adversity exist? The answers are as delightfully ambiguous in their embrace of paradox as life itself. The purpose of confronting the chaos of living by improvising is to achieve, or become, Freedom.

Mormonism identifies two types of freedom. The first is the freedom to choose, or free agency. The second is used synonymously in Mormon thought with salvation, life, liberty, and happiness. "Wherefore men are free . . . to choose liberty and eternal life

\(^{2}\) Ellison, xix
\(^{4}\) Ibid., 181
\(^{5}\) Ibid., 181
through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the
power of the devil. . . ."

The Freedom achieved in the LDS concept of salvation is deeply connected to all
that has been discussed thus far of improvising in the midst of opposition in pursuit of
self-discovery, or self-awareness. In the words of Hugh B. Brown,

Again I emphasize, there is no final goal. . . . One may not attain salvation by
merely acknowledging allegiance . . . That it is an eternal quest must be obvious
to all. . . . It is in large measure a problem of awareness. . . . In other words, it is
not merely a conforming to rituals. . . . The depth and height and quality of life
depend upon awareness, and awareness is a process. . . .

We return also to the words of Duke Ellington.

My fantasy gradually changes its character to introduce the negro as he is--part of
America, with hopes and dreams and love of freedom that have made America for
all of us. But what has this to do with the development of jazz? . . . To make jazz.
requires . . . awareness."

The importance of awareness in the development of Jazz is significant to Duke
Ellington's concept of the pursuit of freedom. In the same article in which he wrote this
statement concerning awareness, he also wrote a plain and simple definition of jazz. "Jazz
is Freedom." Thus, developing jazz, or developing Freedom, is a matter of awareness,
just as to the Mormon, developing salvation, or developing Freedom, is a matter of
awareness.

It is the emphasis on awareness and its deep connection to Freedom that allows
Jazz and Mormonism to identify what they view to be the two ominous dangers
threatening Freedom. In the words of Wynton Marsalis,

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1 LDS Church, *Book of Mormon*, 59
2 Brown
3 Ellington, *Reader*, 257
4 Ibid., 253
That great lie is . . . that there are people who by birth are objectively inferior to other people and who deserve to be mistreated. . . . But this music, jazz music, comes to say "God chooses." No group or hairstyle decides who delivers the message.¹

Refuting the great lie identified by Marsalis is, according to historian Nathan Hatch, one of the most fundamental messages of the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ -- the text referred to by Joseph Smith as the keystone of the Mormon religion.

The Book of Mormon is a document of profound social protest, an impassioned manifest . . . against the smug complacency of those in power and the reality of social distinctions based on wealth, class, and education. . . . This book is a stern and sober depiction of reality. . . . Divine judgment upon proud oppressors, blindness to those wise in their own eyes, mercy for the humble, and spiritual authority to the unlearned.²

Never in the history of music has someone played with more spiritual authority than the great Louis Armstrong, the son of a poverty stricken woman, abandoned by her husband, and forced into prostitution to give sustenance to her children. At age five Louis Armstrong was working all day delivering coal to help his mother, which left him with little time for educational matters. He was certainly unlearned. Yet from his horn flowed a wisdom that will speak for the duration of time.³

Hence, to both Jazz and Mormonism, the "great lie" that fights against Freedom is that one person is better than another because of wealth, education, class, race, tribe, gender, etc. And the great truth is, literally, that the "first shall be last, and the last shall

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¹Wynton Marsalis and Selwyn Seyfu Hinds, To a Young Jazz Musician: Letters from the Road (New York: Random House, 2004), 72-73.  
be first."\(^1\) Whoever we as society push down will, by virtue of the adversity we inflict upon them, rise to greater heights than the oppressor could ever aspire. For, surely, such an oppressed person will learn to improvise, organizing and reorganizing what little they've been given to improve their conditions, transcending adversity by going through it, and coming out of the refiner's fire with a new self-determination and self-awareness.

The other equally aggressive attack on Freedom, according to these two American phenomena, is indifference, precisely because of the extreme importance they place on awareness.

Darwin Skinner, close friend to Jazz Trumpeter Rex Stewart, tells a story that illustrates the tragedy of indifference. It speaks of a time near the end of Rex's life, when he had moved to white farm country in upstate New York in a type of self-imposed exile.

We were in a town there with a grill called the Crystal Lounge, where there were occasional sessions. On the street I found Rex looking into the Crystal Lounge with his nose almost pressed against the window. He turned and asked me almost as a favor to accompany him into the grill. He didn't want to walk in alone because he was black. . . . At another place where Rex went on to play, I'd come often, and I could hear his horn grow more bitter with each passing night. The notes did not cry for help but shouted in anger at the way the world was treating Rex Stewart.\(^2\)

Nat Hentoff then makes a poignant commentary on this story. "But the world, of course, didn't know it was being addressed by Rex."\(^3\)

The other philosophical root of this antagonism toward indifference is the supreme importance that Jazz\(^4\) and Mormonism\(^5\) place on the individual, and the capacity within each human being to nurture a genuine individuality. To them, indifference stops

\(^1\) LDS Church, *Bible*, 1221  
\(^2\) Hentoff, 15  
\(^3\) Ibid., 15  
\(^4\) Ibid., 14  
\(^5\) Bloom, 101
the individual from having the courage to be individual. Indifference lulls one into choosing to become instead, what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls an "easy secondary." To quote this author, mid a lament concerning the lack of willingness to endure the solitude of such individuality:

Ah me! no man goeth alone. All men go in flocks to this saint or that poet, avoiding the God who seeth in secret. They cannot see in secret; they love to be blind in public. They think society wiser than their soul, and know not that one soul, . . . their soul, is wiser than the whole world. . . . None assayeth the stern ambition to be the Self . . . but each would be an easy secondary . . . . Once leave your own knowledge of God, your own sentiment, and take secondary knowledge . . . and you get wide from God with every year this secondary form lasts, and if, as now, for centuries,--the chasm yawns to that breadth that men can scarcely be convinced there is in them anything divine . . . The imitator bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man's.¹

To Jazz and Mormonism, as the individual pursues Freedom, or self-awareness, they will come to understand yet another fierce paradox concerning the very Freedom he/she pursues. Freedom is achieved only within form. As has been demonstrated, chaos is not synonymous with freedom to either of these two American creations.

Duke Ellington asks, "What's the future of swing? It has been said that it has no future because it's too narrow in its form. I don't think that's right. Swing at its best is 'free' within the form itself."² Speaking of the Jazz musician engaged in improvisation, Ellison states, "when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was with a fluid style that reduced the chaos of living to form."³ Thus we return to our point of departure, and the importance of organization as creation in American thought.

The pursuit of Freedom is not only the essence of American Democracy, but the deepest yearning of humankind. American Democracy insists that Freedom is not chaos.

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance and Other Essays: Unabridged, Edited by Stanley Applebaum (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1993), 114
² Ellington, Reader, 243
³ Ellison, 6
One does not find freedom by casting aside standard, law, or fundamental principle. Freedom exists in form and structure, and is deeply connected to the profound longing for originality within each of us. One can only experience freedom in a prophetic solitude, having the courage to go alone, achieving greater awareness of self because of intimate interactions with others rather than imitative interactions. Self is only discovered by working through tensions via improvisation -- focusing not merely on doing, but on becoming. And, according to these Jazz and Mormonism, American Democracy maintains that becoming Freedom is possible, giving reason for the blues as a frame of mind, for no matter how many times we are dismembered, we will always rise again.

The ideals of these two original American creations give us hope of rising to Freedom, having given us an initial glimpse of what may be -- a world of people who embody what Duke Ellington refers to as the most important and moral of freedoms:

1. Freedom from hate, unconditionally.
2. Freedom from self-pity (even throughout all the pain and bad news).
3. Freedom from fear of possibly doing something that might help another more than it might myself.
4. Freedom from the kind of pride that could make a man feel that he was better than his brother or neighbor.¹

¹ Ellington, Music, 159-161