

Harmony in Harlem: An Interaction of Jazz and Culture

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Much like the chicken and the egg, jazz and culture share a tricky relationship. Is jazz simply a small part of culture, which is made up of thousands of other customs and institutions? Or does jazz create its own culture? Naturally, the answer is a complicated one. Jazz was born out of culture, namely African American traditions, and was therefore created by civilization. However, jazz also shapes that civilization, as it inspires its listeners and spreads different ideas. Duke Ellington, one of the most influential jazz composers of the 20th century, serves as the perfect example of this give and take between music and society. Ellington's compositions paint an accurate yet passionate picture of life, specifically life as an African American. From African roots to complex orchestration, Ellington infuses countless elements into his songs, celebrating black culture and in turn, inspiring his listeners. First recorded in 1937, Ellington's "Harmony in Harlem" provides an inside look into Harlem life. Sandwiched between the end of the Harlem Renaissance and the beginning of the Swing Era, the piece reflects both the larger cultural movement at the time as well as Ellington's personal ideologies about race and music. In 1967, during the civil rights movement, "Harmony in Harlem" was recorded again. Separated by three decades, one can make clear distinctions between the different recordings due to the shifts in both culture and jazz; however, its message of freedom remains prevalent throughout.

Beginning in the 1910s, the Harlem Renaissance would shape the city for many years to come. After World War I, thousands of black Americans flocked to the cities due to the growing appeal of urban life. Harlem heavily gained from this as "great numbers of blacks seemed to mean new power",¹ and due to this influx of people, the city boasted immense economic, political, and intellectual opportunities. Naturally, as more prominent black figures moved to Harlem, the more attractive it seemed to others, which only further improved the city. In just a few years, Harlem had

¹ Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, Cary: Oxford University Press, 2007, ProQuest Ebook Central, 14, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/towson/reader.action?docID=679397>.

become the “center of black intellectual, political, and cultural life and a magnet for aspiring young black men and women”,² including Duke Ellington who moved to Harlem in 1923. Ideologically, the Harlem Renaissance promoted the New Negro movement, which advocated for the reinvention of the black image. On the individual level, the “New Negro” was “militant and self-assertive”,³ with a “renewed sense of self-respect”.⁴ On a broader scale, the movement encouraged the black community to advocate for “a conception of African American as a nation”,⁵ “a doubting a skeptical world had to be shown evidence of Negro ability” in order to prove the legitimacy of African American civilization.⁶ Leaders of the Harlem Renaissance hoped to create concrete, permanent improvements for the entire African American population.

Many historians only focus on the political and literary efforts to promote these New Negro ideologies. After all, Harlem was the birthplace of many civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League.⁷ Also, literature in the form of editorials, poems, and essays spread at this time.⁸ However, the value of music should not be ignored. Due to its accessibility, music reached a larger portion of the black community, and due to its relatability, it was just as inclusive and inspiring.⁹ Unfortunately, during this period, jazz did not earn the title of “an ingredient of high civilization” for it was only seen as “infectious entertainment”.¹⁰ Therefore, if jazz was to be taken seriously, it was up to the black musicians themselves to make that happen. Ellington understood this dilemma

² John Hasse, *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington*, NY: Da Capo Press, 1993, 62.

³ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 54.

⁴ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 57.

⁵ Vaughn Booker, “An Authentic Record of My Race: Exploring the Popular Narratives of African American Religion in the Music of Duke Ellington”, *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Winter 2015): 7, JTSOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rac.2015.25.1.1>

⁶ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 27.

⁷ Hasse, *Beyond Category*, 63.

⁸ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 17.

⁹ Hasse, *Beyond Category*, 64.

¹⁰ Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 64.

for as he “took pride in Harlem as a space to symbolize the African American attempt at civilization”,¹¹ he wished to expand the definition of civilization to include that infectious entertainment to which he dedicated his life. Therefore, as he grew in popularity in the music world, he preserved African American culture within his compositions.

By the mid-1930s, the Harlem Renaissance was coming to an end, but in the jazz world, a different kind of revolution was just beginning: the Swing Era. Swing music was chiefly characterized by the establishment of a big-band format, and the transformation of rhythm.¹² The beat became looser and the momentum was more forward moving, hence the name “swing”.¹³ Swing heavily emphasized improvisation along with individual soloists. Another key component was that it was dance music. Because of the Great Depression that spanned across the decade, swing was advertised as an escape from reality; people could dance their worries away. Finally, as Ellington once said, “swing is business”.¹⁴ Swing offered economic opportunities that had not been seen before, and in response, big bands flooded the industry.¹⁵ Swing gave black musicians a bigger platform, and Ellington made use of it.

Ellington wrote “Harmony in Harlem” in 1937, collaborating with his alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges. Following the standard AABA format,¹⁶ “Harmony in Harlem” consists of a repeating 32 bars. The 1937 recording has an easy tempo of approximately 86 bpm 2/2, which lends itself to dancing. To start, the orchestra plays through the main 32 bars twice, giving the melody first to the saxophones, then the trumpets, and briefly the trombones. The middle of the

¹¹ Booker, “Authentic Record”, 9.

¹² Hasse, *Beyond Category*, 197.

¹³ Hasse, *Beyond Category*, 198.

¹⁴ Hasse, *Beyond Category*, 203.

¹⁵ Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 118, 130, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/towson/reader.action?docID=3038163>

¹⁶ Berendt, Joachim-Ernst. *Jazz Book: From Ragtime to the 21st Century*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009, 198, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/towson/reader.action?docID=1316229>.

piece contains a series of solos, switching between soprano saxophone and trumpet. Throughout the piece, Ellington incorporates several unique textures. At 1:43, as the trumpet improvises, the saxophone accompaniment sounds like oinking pigs. Also, different techniques contrast the mellow woodwinds from the harsher brass tones, including staccato trombones, muted trumpets, and fast runs or flourishes of the clarinets and saxophones. These contrasting elements culminate at 2:27, as the brass and woodwinds play complementary countermelodies for the last 32 bars. In a triumphant finale, the last bar is heavily textured, with celebratory trills. Every instrument is its own character, each one adding to the rich, three-dimensional world that Ellington has built.¹⁷

Simply by listening to the piece, one can feel the joyful spirit that is representative of the Harlem Renaissance. With Ellington's firsthand knowledge about Harlem nightlife, he paints a clear picture of a night on the town. Upon further analysis, Ellington's personal beliefs and compositional style shine through. In all of his songs, he masters the balance between the solo and the accompaniment, adding just enough texture without it overwhelming the ear. He follows the rules of swing when he needs to but breaks them when they limit his creativity,¹⁸ as seen in his unusual instrumentation or sounds. Throughout the piece, seemingly conflicting elements blend together beautifully. Here, his personal connection to Harlem comes to light once again. Ellington, writing about New York, said that the "miracle of this city is that this concoction, with its multitudes of dissimilar ingredients, can sometimes come to a boil".¹⁹ He later writes that New York "embraces all humanity within its structure...and joins each new heartbeat with her own throbbing pulse".²⁰ This same sentiment can presumably be applied to Harlem as well as

¹⁷ Ellington, Duke and Hodges, Johnny. "Harmony in Harlem". The Duke Ellington Orchestra, 1937. Storyville Records 1038415, compact disc. Storyville Records, <https://www.storyvillerecords.com/products/duke-ellington-at-the-cotton-club-1038415>.

¹⁸ Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *Jazz Book*, 99.

¹⁹ Duke Ellington, "New York City", *Music is My Mistress*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1973, 84, <http://www.aspresolver.com.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/aspresolver.asp?AAMR;505921>.

²⁰ Duke Ellington, "New York City", 85.

Ellington's music. Every dissimilar ingredient and every unique heartbeat that he adds to his compositions come together to create one meal, one throbbing pulse. "Harmony in Harlem" demonstrates that there is beauty in the individual but power in synergy.

The next thirty years produced significant changes within the political and musical realms of society, especially when it came to race. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, discourse about race became more prominent in jazz, and immense pressure was put on black musicians to contribute to the movement politically.²¹ Within the music business, the 1940s gave rise to pro-integration discussion, and by the 1950s, "the jazz world clearly felt that it was imperative for jazz musicians on both sides of the color line to oppose segregation in jazz".²² Emerging in the 1950s, the "Black Power" ideology emphasized economic autonomy and political empowerment among African Americans,²³ echoing and even strengthening the New Negro ideas from thirty years ago. While many jazz musicians "claimed symbolic power of jazz",²⁴ the general population did not think that it was enough. Because of this, Ellington's relationship with the civil rights movement was complicated at best. He was heavily criticized for playing for segregated audiences, although he would later cancel on venues with segregated seating.²⁵ In 1956, he received the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP, but many thought he had not been active enough in civil rights to deserve this award;²⁶ after all, he was just a musician. Ellington disagreed. He always advocated for black Americans, however subtly. He battled stereotypes through his sophisticated image and "cosmopolitan display of knowledge"²⁷. In his 1941 film, *Jump For Joy*,

²¹ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007, 14, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/towson/reader.action?docID=415316>

²² Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 31, 37.

²³ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 226.

²⁴ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 237.

²⁵ John Hasse, *Beyond Category*, 340.

²⁶ Marissa Baum and Luke Harbur, "Duke Ellington's Relationship with the NAACP: Celebrated and Criticized", American Jazz Museum. Accessed November 20, 2020, <https://americanjazzmuseum.org/content/duke-ellingtons-relationship-naACP-celebrated-and-criticized>.

²⁷ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 87.

he banned the use of blackface, protesting racism through the movie's positive image of African Americans.²⁸ When he accepted his Spingarn award, he urged the black community to support the NAACP financially and to rise up against oppression.²⁹ Furthermore, while some critics accused Ellington of abandoning African American tradition in his music,³⁰ his pieces gave "musical shape to the African American experience".³¹ Finally, Ellington believed that "jazz is freedom".³² He writes in his essay, "We, Too, Sing 'America'", that black people "recreated in America the desire for true democracy, freedom for all".³³ To Ellington, jazz, freedom, and black empowerment are all inextricably woven together.

When analyzing "Harmony in Harlem" in this context, one can see that its theme has not changed; it has always been about freedom. The piece still represents the joyful and diverse black community within Harlem and the hope for a brighter future. The civil rights movement does not alter this message; rather, it strengthens it. Stylistically, however, the 1967 recording is notably different from that of 1937 due to new jazz trends. In the 1940s, as a response to racial inequities, bebop was "an attempt to reconstitute jazz...to give its black creators the greatest professional autonomy within the marketplace".³⁴ In the 1950s and the 1960s, cool jazz, hard bop, and free jazz emerged,³⁵ but "Harmony in Harlem" seems to have been most influenced by bebop. Note that "Harmony in Harlem" is still a swing piece. However, certain bebop elements can be highlighted.

²⁸ John Hasse, *Beyond Category*, 248.

²⁹ "Duke Ellington Say NAACP Not Supported." *New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961)*, Jul 4, 1959, City edition.
<https://www-proquest-com.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/docview/225488829/5DCC5730746448DCPQ/100?accountid=14378>.

³⁰ Gunther Schuller, "Jazz and Composition: The Many Sides of Duke Ellington, the Music's Greatest Composer", *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Oct. 1992): 47, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3824163>.

³¹ David Schiff, *The Ellington Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 168, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/towson/reader.action?docID=816155>.

³² Marissa Baum and Luke Harbur, "Duke Ellington's Relationship with the NAACP".

³³ Ellington Duke. "We, Too, Sing 'America'". *California Eagle*, February 13, 1941.

³⁴ Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 27.

³⁵ Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *Jazz Book*, 18, 20.

First, the tempo is significantly faster than before at about 136 bpm 2/2 (or 272 bpm 4/4). Second, the arrangement is more stripped down. During the solo section, the only background instruments are piano, string bass, and drums. The ending is also less dramatic, as it trails off into silence instead of ending with a big finale. Thirdly, the solo, which takes up most of the piece is flashier, more complex, and seems more improvised.³⁶ These changes could be attributed to the fact that this was a live recording and that Ellington's orchestra never played the same arrangement twice.³⁷ However, they line up perfectly with the bebop style, which was full of "racing, nervous phrases",³⁸ stripped down small-group arrangements, and flashy cutting competitions. This was no longer big-band dance music, it was listening music. Bebop represented the "growing acceptability of jazz as an 'indigenous American art'",³⁹ something that opened doors for blacks everywhere; it was what Ellington had been striving for.

"Harmony in Harlem" was never one of Ellington's most popular or intellectual works, and it is therefore able to fly under the radar, masquerading itself as just another swing piece. Digging deeper, however, it is part of Ellington's long-lasting legacy of preserving African American culture, protesting racial stereotypes, and advocating for the importance of jazz in society. It was born from the Harlem Renaissance and the Swing Era, later influenced by bebop and recontextualized during the civil rights movement. Shaped by two cultural revolutions and two musical revolutions, both variants of "Harmony in Harlem" spread the same message of freedom and unity.

³⁶ Duke Ellington and Johnny Hodges, "Harmony in Harlem", The Duke Ellington Orchestra, 1967, Fantasy PACD-5304-2, compact disc, <https://towson-nml3-naxosmusiclibrary-com.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/jazz/catalogue/PACD-5304-2>.

³⁷ Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *Jazz Book*, 100.

³⁸ Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *Jazz Book*, 15.

³⁹ Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 238.

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