



Music Making History: Langston Hughes's Ask Your Mama (1961)

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Ask Your Mama (1961) de Langston Hughes : une contribution de la musique à l'écriture de l'histoire

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(Caen, France)*

Résumé

Peut-on dire qu'ASK YOUR MAMA: 12 MOODS FOR JAZZ a inspiré le mouvement des Droits Civiques des années soixante autant qu'il l'a incarné ? L'étude des différents mouvements de ce poème nous permettra d'examiner comment la musique met en évidence le caractère historique et culturel du texte. Nous verrons ensuite en quoi les poèmes teintés de jazz de la génération Beat diffèrent de la poésie jazz de Langston Hughes, pour montrer que l'œuvre du poète africain-américain constitue un cri de ralliement, doublé d'un véritable appel à l'action.

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Music Making History: Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama* (1961)

For John Pappas

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(Caen, France)

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Music makes history and keeps it. Langston Hughes was clearly not the first to understand this—almost any poet would say as much. Hughes's understanding of music and history was influenced by Paul Laurence Dunbar and Carl Sandburg, the former for preserving the voice of the uneducated and exploited, and the latter for singing of the people in folksong as well as in poetry. A glance through Sim Copans's *Chansons de Revendication* (1966) will remind anyone who is interested to what extent American music is a vector of ideas and of history. James Baldwin's comment in 1951 that Black America could only tell its story with music (Copans 298) suggests the extent to which African-America has always depended on music as life-line. Life-line it was also in Hughes's poetry where its appeal was in part as touch-stone to the common people, as described by Hughes in 1926 in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain":

These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardization. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself.

Indeed, it can be argued that from the Harlem Renaissance poems onward, Hughes's use of music was also linked to notions of revolt. As he wrote in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain":

Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz...

[J]azz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against the weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.

This is hardly the primitivist tom-tom mentioned in T.S. Eliot's lecture given at Harvard in 1933 (though Eliot may have caught a beat from Hughes): "Poetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating a drum in a jungle, and it retains that essential of percussion and rhythm..." (155). But for Hughes, the beat was linked to commitment, and so it was that in 1964, François Dodat rightly saw *ASK YOUR MAMA: 12 MOODS FOR JAZZ*¹ as the synthesis and apotheosis of Hughes's work (Dodat 65). Hughes had accomplished to the letter the program he had set for himself in "The Negro Artist": he had incorporated into a coherent whole the "great field of unused material ready for his art" and captured the "overtones and undertones" of relations between black and white in America. His use of music in *ASK YOUR MAMA* allowed him to stand squarely within his non-white identity.²

Perhaps there is no greater long poem of the Civil Rights period than *ASK YOUR MAMA*. In fact, it may have inspired the Civil Rights Movement as much as it embodies it. It can be seen as a poem of non-violent revolution. For R. Baxter Miller it is where Hughes's "political imagination achieves its most brilliant expression" (Miller 85). At the very least, it is an inscription in poetry of a moment in history, "a kind of free verse newsreel" (see Dace 635). Its perspective on African-American identity places sufferings squarely within the confines of the colonialist tradition while celebrating the culture (the music!) that arose from that suffering. *ASK YOUR MAMA* "transform[s] folk culture into a complex, lasting vision" (Sundquist 58). But despite the text's musical inscription of history, *ASK YOUR MAMA* has hardly received the critical attention it merits, even though it has recently been performed as part of the series of celebrations for the centennial of the poet's birth.³ Was Hughes not given credit for his originality because the Beat poets were using jazz at the same time? Or was it because Hughes's reputation suffered from rumors of poetic stagnation? Can the overwhelmingly negative critical reception the poem received in the 1960s be explained solely by the sometimes overt racism or critical conformity of the newspaper reviewers? Not all of these questions can be answered here, but most of them will be explored within the confines of

¹ New York: Alfred A. Knopf, published in Fall, 1961.

² "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) had already adequately responded to George Schuyler's essay, "The Negro-Art Hokum" (1926) in which Schuyler downplayed the originality of African-American works of art. Hughes's poetic works also demonstrate the contrary.

³ Different performances of the poem were held, among others: in Chicago, at the DuSable Museum of African-American History, on March 19-20, 2002, scored by Hale Smith, performed by Maggie Brown and Sterling Plump and a jazz ensemble, and at Oberlin College by Wendell Logan, Ronald McCurdy and John S. Wright <<http://www.ronmccurdy.com/12moods.htm>>. The same group performed the poem in several different locations, including the Lied Center of the University of Kansas (Feb 16, 2002) and Kalamazoo Valley Community College's Lake Auditorium (Feb 27, 2002).

an assessment of the use of jazz in the poem, the critical reception of the work within its literary context, and the type of revolution the poem appears to vindicate.

Memory's Montage from History, Text, and Music

There is enough referentiality in *ASK YOUR MAMA* for an Ezra Pound *Canto*. That Hughes had been influenced by Pound is a given. In his first letter to Pound, from April 1932, Hughes wrote: "I have known your work for more than 10 years..." (Gill 81). Hokanson has convincingly argued that incorporating jazz dynamics into poetry extended Pound's modernist challenge to "make it new":

...it is jazz and the signifying voices of the African-American tradition that provide Hughes with the kind of broad and deep collective foundation that T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound aimed for in their references to classical mythology and the monuments of Western culture. (70)

Pound was impressed with Hughes's use of music, as this letter (posted December 20, 1950 following their September meeting at St. Elizabeth's Hospital) indicates:

*Langston's lamenting
Loud an' long
hope he gits cash
fer his new Year song.*

*(definitely not jazz, but unrealist outbreak)
EZ (quoted by Roessel 231)*

Hughes had been working up to *ASK YOUR MAMA*, and his different experiments with form were leading him to write the poem. His use of marginal indicators began in *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations* (1931) where poems were given instructions for mood. In music and form, *ASK YOUR MAMA* follows in the wake of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (written mostly in 1948, published in 1951).⁴ *Montage* integrated newer forms of jazz. It presented itself as a High Modernist long poem (Gill 86). Hughes specifically linked the volume to "Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed—jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and bebop" (*Montage* in *Collected Poems* 387). Between his two long jazz poems, Hughes wrote an introduction for young people called the *First Book of Jazz* (1955).

But the catalyst for Hughes's 1961 poem has to be linked to a specific moment in jazz history: the irony of seeing about 3,000 Whites riot on July 2, 1960 when they were unable to get tickets to the evening concerts of the 7th Newport Jazz Festival. Tear gas and water hoses were used by police and by

⁴ See Jemie Onwuchekwa's suggestion that the technique of cinematic montage in *Montage* shifts to the free association of ideas in *Ask Your Mama* in *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* (1976).

midnight the National Guard had been called in. The remainder of the festival was cancelled and it was left to Langston Hughes to preside over the last concert on July 3rd. For the occasion, Hughes scribbled out the “Goodbye Newport Blues”, set to music by Otis Spann on piano and sung by Muddy Waters (Rampersad 315). Perhaps this is precisely when work on *ASK YOUR MAMA* began. After all, one of the recurrent phrases from the poem is about getting “show fare”—allegedly for an impoverished African-American child to go see the film version of “Porgy and Bess,” but the “strip tickets” of *ASK YOUR MAMA*’s final section “SHOW FARE PLEASE” may well recall those sold at Newport.

Hughes gave his poem solid roots in Civil Rights history, and in the events as they were happening. He wrote to Arna Bontemps that his first reading of *ASK YOUR MAMA* was accompanied by Buddy Collette’s Band at a Poetry-Jazz program for the NAACP in Santa Monica, California, on February 18, 1961 (Nichols 405). It is not surprising that he wanted the poem read at an NAACP event—commitment was always of the essence for Hughes. When he received his sample copy of *ASK YOUR MAMA* from Knopf in September, he wrote enthusiastically to Bontemps: “*Mama* is stunning, in fact, should win a Graphic Arts prize for format and unique design” (Nichols 425). The reviewers also took note of the colors: “Printed on pumpkin-colored paper,” wrote Rudd Fleming in the *Washington Post* (31 December 1961 in Dace 640). Ulysses Lee saw the colors as linked to the content:

The typography of the book provides yet a fourth dimension, for the poems are printed in blue and brown inks on a laid paper the color of faded roses while the binding and dust jacket use a jazzy abstract design in blues, greens, reds, and black. The contrast of desiccated pink and the crisp blue and brown ink comments on the method of the poems: the juxtaposition of the unlikely to produce a syncopated view of the paradoxes of our racial times. (Dace 645)

In the light of such reactions, it can only be regretted that no one thought of re-issuing the volume as an added homage to Hughes during his centennial year. The capital letters of the original, and the bright colors, gave the poem added impact that the impression in the *Collected Poems* does not carry.

If the colors were a call to civil action, then that was even more true of the content. The protest so often inherent in African-American musical forms (from Negro spirituals to blues to jazz) was all too clearly revealed in the poem. And ironic and non-ironic musical parallels are part of the message. Consider the blending of the “Hesitation Blues” with the French Revolutionary song, “Ça ira” which is indented and set off in italics, while the margin notes call for rhythms of “When the Saints Go Marching In” played on maracas:

TELL ME HOW LONG —
MUST I WAIT?
CAN I GET IT NOW?

**ÇA IRA! ÇA IRA!
OR MUST I HESITATE?
IRA! BOY, IRA!**

(Hughes, *Collected* 483)

At a time when the August 28, 1963 March on Washington was still far off, here was Hughes proclaiming “CULTURAL EXCHANGE,” and dreaming of a new government for Georgia:

**MARTIN LUTHER KING IS GOVERNOR OF GEORGIA,
DR. RUFUS CLEMENT HIS CHIEF ADVISOR**

Black children are served by white mammies in the state of Georgia turned on its head:

**MAMMY FAUBUS
MAMMY EASTLAND
MAMMY PATTERSON
DEAR, DEAR DARLING OLD WHITE MAMMIES —
SOMETIMES EVEN BURIED WITH OUR FAMILY!
(Hughes, *Collected* 480)**

The first section of *ASK YOUR MAMA* ends in music: the marginal notes indicate two full rounds of the dixieland classic “When the Saints Go Marching In.” But the saints in this section of the poem are not white, and the implications may have caused a shock for the average white reader. The white mammies’ husbands, also known as “Dixiecrats,” were important players in the game of racism. Orval Faubus was the Democratic governor of Arkansas opposed to integration of Central High School in Little Rock. His summoning of the Arkansas National Guard prompted Eisenhower to send in the troops. James O. Eastland was a segregationist Democratic senator from Mississippi, and John M. Patterson was Democratic governor of Alabama from 1959 to 1963.⁵

Apart from “When the Saints Go Marching In”, what else in the message was likely to cause offense or be seen as revolutionary? The poem’s twelve sections or “moods” (“CULTURAL EXCHANGE,” “RIDE, RED, RIDE,” “SHADES of PIGMEAT,” “ODE TO DINAH,” “BLUES IN STEREO,” “HORN OF PLENTY,” “GOSPEL CHA-CHA,” “IS IT TRUE?” “ASK YOUR MAMA,” “BIRD IN ORBIT,” “JAZZTET MUTED,” “SHOW FARE, PLEASE,” and the

⁵ See Rampersand’s notes in Hughes, *Collected* 682. Perhaps Hughes’s naming of Democrats in office (even though they were reactionaries from the Deep South) was considered offensive? The critical shunting aside of *ASK YOUR MAMA* did not prevent Hughes from reprinting a section of “CULTURAL EXCHANGE” in *The Panther & the Lash* (1967) where Mammy Patterson was changed to Mammy Wallace (Hughes, *The Panther* 83). By 1967 Alabama’s Governor George Wallace had a long list of racist actions behind him, including preventing black students from enrolling at the University of Alabama, trying to keep black students from entering white high schools a mere 5 days before the Birmingham church bombing (September 15, 1963), entering the May 1963 Democratic presidential primaries as a segregationist and winning 34% of the vote in Wisconsin, 31% in Indiana and 43% in Maryland. After attempting presidential elections again in 1967, he was to become an independent presidential candidate in 1970.

prose “LINER NOTES For the Poetically Unhep”) address different issues related to African-American and Pan-African history, as well as that history’s link to jazz and other musical forms. I would like to briefly discuss the major issues using the sequence and attempting to trace the pattern used by Hughes himself.

The connection between “CULTURAL EXCHANGE” and “RIDE, RED, RIDE” is made by allusions to heavenly judgment and recompense. After “When the Saints Go Marching In” at the end of the first poem, the second poem opens with a lyric drawn from a hymnal:

*I WANT TO SEE MY MOTHER MOTHER
WHEN THE ROLL IS CALLED UP YONDER
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES*

(Hughes, *Collected* 483)

“RIDE, RED, RIDE” is the title of a jazz song from the 1930s by Henry Red Allen. The poem evokes Lumumba’s death on February 13, 1961, Castro’s revolution, and the volcanic eruption in Martinique, May 8, 1902, which killed about 30,000, leaving only two survivors for the city of Saint-Pierre. These incidents are reminders of the low value given to the natives’ lives by the colonizers. This is highlighted by the question, in Spanish, “Where is your grandmother?”

*IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
TU ABUELA, ¿DÓNDE ESTÁ?
BLOWN SKY HIGH BY MONT PELÉE?
¿DÓNDE ESTÁ ¿DÓNDE ESTÁ?
WAS SHE FLEEING WITH LUMUMBA?*

(Hughes, *Collected* 483)

The text reflects the French, Spanish and English languages of colonizers. The anachronisms highlight the inter-relatedness of the oppressions of slavery and colonization around the globe, giving a Pan-African perspective of the diaspora. This section ends once again squarely in an American City, “IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES,” where a Santa Claus, perhaps symbolizing a rich white man, is chauffeured in a Jaguar by Adam Powell, Harlem’s representative to Congress.

The following section “SHADES OF PIGMEAT” might be a reflection on that Santa Claus. Pigmeat is pink, white, un-kosher to Jews, forbidden to Muslims. It is a meat that WASPS eat—and also that they might taste like, if eaten. Is there a word-play intended with “pigment”? Whites focused on pigment when colonizing: the reference to “BELGIUM SHADOW LEOPOLD” evokes the Belgian Congo’s sad history, and South African apartheid is contained in the mention of Malan, its creator. The marginal notes indicate the humming of “All God’s Chillun Got Shoes” beside the text where the singing repetition sounds just a bit too affirmative, a sarcasm calling into question the white stereotype of those in the quarter:

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES

**WHERE NEGROES SING SO WELL
 NEGROES SING SO WELL
 SING SO WELL
 SO WELL.
 WELL?** (Hughes, *Collected* 486)

They may sing well, but do they have shoes?⁶

The fourth “mood” of the poem is “ODE TO DINAH” which commemorates Dinah Washington, names Ray Charles in the margin notes, mentions Pearl Bailey, Mahalia Jackson, and Blind Lemon Jefferson within the context of the centennial celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation and evokes memories of the Underground Railroad with a passing allusion to the genocide of Native Americans (Pocahontas is mentioned in the final stanza). The poem engages with the fact that African-American music has become commercialized, turned into a profit industry benefitting Whites, it is “SUCKED IN BY FAT JUKEBOXES” where:

**[...] EACH QUARTER CLINKS
 INTO A MILLION POOLS OF QUARTERS
 TO BE CARTED OFF BY BRINK’S** (Hughes, *Collected* 491)

“BLUES IN STEREO” seems to be about white and black blues as a reaction to racism, and the longing for poet-musicians to be unified.

**YOUR NUMBER’S COMING OUT!
 BOUQUETS I’LL SEND YOU
 AND DREAMS I’LL SEND YOU
 AND HORSES SHOD WITH GOLD
 ON WHICH TO RIDE IF MOTORCARS
 WOULD BE TOO TAME —
 TRIUMPHAL ENTRY SEND YOU —
 SHOUTS FROM THE EARTH ITSELF
 BARE FEET TO BEAT THE GREAT DRUMBEAT
 OF GLORY TO YOUR NAME AND MINE
 ONE AND THE SAME:
 YOU BAREFOOT, TOO,
 IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
 WHERE AN ANCIENT RIVER FLOWS...** (Hughes, *Collected* 495)

The allusions here seem autobiographical. The opening lines evoke Carl Van Vechten in their resemblance to letters sent by Hughes to him, signed with phrases like “Pine needles and snow to you,” “Magnolias to you,”

⁶ Shoes come up again later in “BIRD IN ORBIT” in these lines that occur twice:

**THAT GENTLEMAN IN EXPENSIVE SHOES
 MADE FROM THE HIDES OF BLACKS** (Hughes, *Collected* 518-519)

The identity of the man is unknown. The chilling notion of music linked to torture, and the use of human skin to create objects of human consumption recalls other racisms and other perverted uses of music. It was also a reminder that African-Americans were still waiting for the “Double V for Victory,” the war slogan evoking racism at home as well as nazi fascism (see Gonzalez 89).

“Dandelions and cherry blossoms,” “Apples and pears to you” (see Bernard 33, 44, 50, 66, etc.) Van Vechten responded in kind, and their long-lasting correspondence (1925-1965) is testimony to their friendship. Hughes seems to be poking gentle fun here at Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926), all the while granting Van Vechten the position of honorary Negro and paying him tribute for his help in getting his first book of poems published (*The Weary Blues*, 1926).

“HORN OF PLENTY” recreates the harvest of money that famous Black artists acquire (punctuated by the dollar symbols \$\$\$) in contrast to the material lack of the ghetto children who want show fare (punctuated by symbols of cents). Mentioned in this section are Odetta Gordon, Katherine Dunham, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Eric Dolphy, Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, Nina Simone, Billy Strayhorn, Luther Allison, Louis Armstrong, Gospel singers, with subtle allusions to Charlie Parker (the “Bird”, “in orbit” several lines later), along with the sports stars:

GLOBAL TROTTERS BASEBALL BATTERS \$\$\$
JACKIE WILLIE CAMPANELLA \$\$\$\$ \$\$\$\$
FOOTBALL PLAYERS LEATHER PUNCHERS \$\$\$
UNFORGOTTEN JOES AND SUGAR RAYS \$\$\$\$ (Hughes, *Collected* 498)

From the mood of material triumph the poem swings into “GOSPEL CHA-CHA”, a portion of which was published as “Haiti” in *The New Republic* (September 1961). Not only does this section evoke Haitian history, the 1791 slave revolt led by Toussaint L’Ouverture and Haitian religious traditions, it may also carry something of the spirit of the founder of the Haitian communist party, Jacques Roumain, whose *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* (1944) Hughes translated into English as *Masters of the Dew* (1947). Also relevant is Hughes’s libretto to *Troubled Island* by William Grant Still. The first opera composed by African-Americans performed in the USA, it premiered on March 31, 1949 in New York City, and contained the story of the Haitian revolt and Dessaline’s defeat along with island melodies and voodoo dances. The music of “GOSPEL CHA-CHA,” as the title suggests, has shifted to island sounds: cha-cha, maracas, bongo drums, mambo, and bahia. The portrayal of the black diaspora in this section is also reflected in the religious dimension: one of those crucified on Calvary “WAS BLACK AS ME.”

“IS IT TRUE” addresses the notion of primitivism around the question (according to the “Liner notes” at the end of the poem) of whether or not the Negro—presumably because a savage—has more fun. The allusions here are to the musically committed: Moses Asch, the founder of Folkways Records and Alan Lomax, a musicologist and collector of African folklore. There is also regret at the loss of roots, lost languages, lost customs.

The ninth section, “ASK YOUR MAMA” lists the ghetto districts, the “Black Belts” of American cities, and mourns the African leaders who are not able to fully create an independent Africa. The frustration of white domination builds into the following section’s mood, with its commemorative title for

Charlie Parker, "BIRD IN ORBIT." Here Civil Rights protests are mentioned, the sit ins, W.E.B. DuBois, The Niagara Movement, the NAACP... the bullets. In a follow-up to "CULTURAL EXCHANGE," American politics take center stage once more:

**THEY ASKED ME AT THANKSGIVING
DID I VOTE FOR NIXON?
I SAID, VOTED FOR YOUR MAMA.** (Hughes, *Collected* 516)

The reply is intended to be off-putting, as in the dirty dozens, the adolescent game of escalating insults, which uses the recrimination of "your mama" consistently. Here the line may also be interpreted as a suggestion of hope for increased Civil Rights stemming from Kennedy's election in 1960. The poem approaches prophecy in a rather eerie way concerning Martin Luther King:

**THE REVEREND MARTIN LUTHER
KING MOUNTS HIS UNICORN
OBLIVIOUS TO BLOOD
AND MOONLIGHT ON ITS HORN
WHILE MOLLIE MOON STREWS SEQUINS
AS LEDA STREW HER CORN
AND CHARLIE YARDBIRD PARKER
IS IN ORBIT.** (Hughes, *Collected* 517)

Ornette Coleman's free jazz is imaged as a lit fire in "JAZZTET MUTED," which may be seen as anticipating the violent turn the Civil Rights Movement would take. The margin notes ask for bop in the final two sections of **ASK YOUR MAMA**. The poem ends with another demand: "SHOW FARE, PLEASE". The poem's leitmotif of a child asking for money to go see *Porgy and Bess* is again thwarted.⁷ But, fifty cents is just not available, and the child's voice ends the poem, plaintively:

**THE TV'S STILL NOT WORKING
SHOW FARE, MAMA, PLEASE.
SHOW FARE, MAMA. . . .
SHOW FARE!** (Hughes, *Collected* 525)

The final exclamation point sounds like rage aimed at the Mama which represents the nation, as the poem signals in "HORN OF PLENTY":

**AND ONE SHOULD LOVE ONE'S COUNTRY
FOR ONE'S COUNTRY IS YOUR MAMA.** (Hughes, *Collected* 500)

The horn heats up, so to speak, as the improvisations of jazz empower the poem to blow down the walls of the racist Jericho.

⁷ Composed by the Gershwin brothers, premiering in 1935, it was the first opera to be performed by black singers (see "SHADES OF PIGMEAT").

“Bop! Bop!...Be-bop!...Mop!...Bop!”

Hughes was among the first to use jazz as an inspiration for his poetry in the 20s. Influenced by his encounters with jazz in Chicago, New York, and Paris, the early poem “Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret” (first published in *Crisis*, December 1925) presages some of what is to come in *ASK YOUR MAMA* in the collaging of styles and languages (see Hughes, *Collected* 60). It reflects Hughes’s dishwashing evenings at the nightclub Le Grand Duc in the spring of 1924, of which he wrote in *The Big Sea*, citing the rue Pigalle as the center of Blues and Jazz in Paris.⁸ So, why are Kerouac and Ginsberg always the first names people think of when jazz is associated with poetry? One could postulate that this question can be linked to their respective appreciations of be-bop. Fauchereau suggests that names such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonius Monk come up in African-American writing, while the Beats more often name musicians of cool jazz: Miles Davis—with the 1959 album *Kind of Blue*—followed by Gerry Mulligan, Lee Konitz, Stan Getz, Al Cohn and Zoot Sims (Fauchereau 177).

The first jazz poems of the Beats date from 1949 with Ginsberg’s “Fie My Fum” and “Bop Lyrics” (Ginsberg 23, 42-43). Both of these poems suggest a playful, narcissistic introspection. His allusions to jazz in the apocalyptic “Howl” (1955-56) present it as a possible survivor of the dark times:

*...the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here
what might be left to say in time come after death,
and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow
of the band and blew the suffering of America’s naked mind for love
into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered
the cities down to the last radio* (Ginsberg 131)

Ginsberg registers the suffering that jazz represents, but perhaps the specificity of the suffering of African-Americans is lost amid the numerous torments represented in “Howl”. Like Hughes, the Beats read their poetry to jazz.⁹ Ginsberg read *Howl* to music, and Ferlinghetti’s *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958) was created for jazz accompaniment. Kerouac, in the jazz chapters (see especially Book 3) of *On The Road* (1957) described the tenor sax player who possesses the mystical IT of existence.¹⁰ Of Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues* (1959), Ginsberg said:

Mexico City Blues is a great classic. I think, I mean it taught me poetics... and is one of the great presentations of Buddhism in American terms. It has many virtues, it’s a completely original book, with a self-invented poetics in it, it has a marvelous ear and marvelous rhythms. (Ginsberg in Allen, 64)

⁸ Bryan Carter and Tim Portlock, creators of the “Virtual Harlem Project” began work on a virtual Montmartre in 2003.

⁹ In San Francisco, the haunts were The Cellar, The Place, The Coexistence Bagel Shop (Davidson 60).

¹⁰ Later he recorded *Blues and Haikus* with the tenor saxophones of Al Cohn and Zoot Sims in 1959.

Kerouac's final choruses give homage to Charlie Parker:

*Charley Parker Looked like Buddha
Charley Parker, who recently died
Laughing at a juggler on the TV
after weeks of strain and sickness,
was called the Perfect Musician.* (Kerouac 496)

The Beats' interaction with jazz was continuous, but clearly different from Hughes's. Called "Beatniks" with the "nik" suffix negatively registering Sputnik, they were reacting to the heights of the Cold War. Davidson suggests that "...all of the Beats idealized various forms of mindlessness, whether enhanced by drugs and booze or by mantric chant and jazz" (Davidson 99-100). Non-conformity coming from white American poets of the 1950s may be considered laudable, but Langston Hughes was keeping a different agenda. While Kerouac linked jazz to mysticism, Hughes understood jazz to be an instrument of testimony. Maybe that is why, in "JAZZTET MUTED", in reaction to the dilution of jazz forms resulting from materialism, Charlie Parker is invoked by Hughes: "**HELP ME, YARDBIRD! / HELP ME!**" (Hughes, *Collected* 522).

Ralph Ellison ("RALPH ELLISON AS VESPUCIUS" in "CULTURAL EXCHANGE") who was educated as a musician, had an important influence on Hughes's understanding of be-bop (see Lowrey 365). So did Dizzy Gillespie, mentioned in "Bop," a "Simple" episode first published in the *Chicago Defender* (reprinted in *The Best of Simple* in 1961, published just prior to *ASK YOUR MAMA*). There, Simple defines the genre in very concrete terms as the sound made when "a cop hits a Negro with his billy club":

That is where Bop comes from—out of them dark days we have seen. That is why Be-bop is so mad, wild, frantic, crazy. And not to be dug unless you have seen dark days, too. That's why folks who ain't suffered much cannot play Bop, and do not understand it. They think it's nonsense—like you. They think it's just crazy crazy. They do not know it is also MAD crazy, SAD crazy, FRANTIC WILD CRAZY—beat right out of some bloody black head! That's what Bop is. (Hughes, *The Best of Simple* 118-119)

Simple's words and *ASK YOUR MAMA* are in line with the description of bop by Ross Russell, head of Dial Records, and biographer of Charlie Parker:

Be-bop is music of revolt: revolt against big bands, arrangers, vertical harmonies, soggy rhythms, non-playing orchestra leaders, Tin-Pan Alley—against commercialized music in general. It reasserts the individuality of the jazz musician as a creative artist, playing spontaneous and melodic music within the framework of jazz, but with new tools, sounds, and concepts (Hokanson 64).

Nevertheless, it should be remembered that Hughes's emphasis of bop, as described in his introductory note to *Montage* is that of a transitory state, as of African-America seeking fulfillment of emancipation:

be-bop...[is] marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in transition. (Hughes, Collected 387)

Hughes leaves room for musical progression, for the “individual assertion within and against the group” that fit Ellison’s description of true jazz (see Gonzalez 93).¹¹ To blend the diverse musical elements into a cry for equal rights, the techniques of jazz were put to work. “IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES” is a recurrent refrain, structuring the whole poem. The “mama” phrases, taken from the dirty dozens game, operate like riffs: those witty comments of jazz, played as a solo, or given in song. Consider the responses to white racism in “HORN OF PLENTY”:

**YET THEY ASKED ME OUT ON MY PATIO
WHERE DID I GET MY MONEY!**

I SAID, FROM YOUR MAMA! (Hughes, *Collected* 499-500)

**THEY RUNG MY BELL TO ASK ME
COULD I RECOMMEND A MAID.
I SAID, YES, YOUR MAMA.** (Hughes, *Collected* 501)

One could add that the replications beginning “AND I NEVER HAD” in “SHADES OF PIGMEAT” function in much the same way:

**HIP BOOTS
DEEP IN THE BLUES
(AND I NEVER HAD A HIP BOOT ON)
HAIR
BLOWING BACK IN THE WIND
(AND I NEVER HAD THAT MUCH HAIR
DIAMONDS IN PAWN
(AND I NEVER HAD A DIAMOND
IN MY NATURAL LIFE)...** (Hughes, *Collected* 487)

Hughes’s poetry and liner notes in *ASK YOUR MAMA* place him solidly in his own tradition—that of incorporating African-American art forms into his poetry. As LeRoi Jones said in *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963): “...if the Negro represents, or is symbolic of, something in and about the nature of American culture, this certainly should be revealed by his characteristic music” (Jones ix). The Beats were seeking alternative identities to those proposed by the American establishment, and they used jazz as a tool,

¹¹ Compare the previous descriptions of bop to the opening page of *ASK YOUR MAMA*, which prints the musical scores of “Hesitation Blues” and “Shave and a Haircut” into the text with this commentary: *The traditional folk melody of the “Hesitation Blues” is the leitmotif for this poem. In and around it, along with the other recognizable melodies employed, there is room for spontaneous jazz improvisation, particularly between verses, where the voice pauses. The musical figurine indicated after each “Ask your mama” line may incorporate the impudent little melody of the old break, “Shave and a haircut, fifteen cents.”*

but Hughes used jazz to affirm his African-American identity, and to demand equality.

Telegram for a Revolution

ASK YOUR MAMA seems to link the use of capital letters with the notion of revolution. Before the age of fax and the Internet, of course, telegrams used to arrive in capital letters which gave added emphasis to the urgent and cryptic messages. Like a telegram, the message of **ASK YOUR MAMA** was urgent. Hughes's use of capital letters may date back to a letter he received from Ezra Pound on orange paper in 1935.¹² As in Pound's other writings, capitalized letters stand out as a way of emphasizing words. In this letter, red ink was used as an alternate emphasis. The letter dated May 13, 1935 was a response to Hughes's call for support for Jacques Roumain, who, due to his leadership of the first Haitian communist party in 1934, was sentenced to three years of prison in 1935. The theme of the letter is revolution. Pound states he wrote a letter to support Roumain, and then postulated for the remainder of the letter about revolution.

Anybody who wants a REAL one, has got to want it IN TIME and SPACE, i.e.; a particular place at a given date. [...]

Considerin' I spend about 95% of my energy at this typewriter trying to CREATE a REAL revolution, I get a bit fed up with the palookas who merely go on talking about a stuffed replica of a revolution that ONCE happened. (Roessel 228-229)

Like Pound, Langston Hughes seems to be situating **ASK YOUR MAMA** as a call for revolution in time and space. The time is now, as expressed in the lyrics of the theme song, "Hesitation Blues": "How long must I wait? Can I get it now—or must I hesitate?" (The question is given in the margin notes of the first section of **ASK YOUR MAMA**). The time is now, when kids still can't get money to go to the movies, and wealthy Blacks are busy imitating wealthy Whites. Revolution is possible not through imitation, but through integration, as the reaction Hughes portrays to racial mixing suggests:

**AIN'T YOU GOT NO INFORMATION
ON DR. ROBERT WEAVER?**¹³

¹² The paper Pound used must have been about the same color as the paper of the first edition of **ASK YOUR MAMA**.

¹³ In an article published in *The New Republic* in 1941, Roi Ottley mentioned the appointment of "Dr. Robert C. Weaver, to the Advisory Commission to the Council of National Defense," a gesture *The Crisis* interpreted as indicative of "a growing realization that colored Americans must be given the serious consideration they demand" (Ottley 7-8). Born in 1907, Weaver graduated from Harvard, with a doctorate in Economics in 1934. After the war, he worked in Chicago on the Mayor's Committee on Race Relations and wrote *Negro Labor, a National Problem* (1946) and *The Negro Ghetto* (1948). Active in Civil Rights and the NAACP, Weaver was appointed by President Kennedy to head the Housing and Home Finance Agency, which was later elevated to Cabinet level in January 1966 by President Johnson, making Weaver the first African-American Cabinet member. (In July 2000, in homage, the HUD headquarters building in Washington, D.C. was renamed The Robert C. Weaver Federal Building).

**INVESTIGATE THAT SANTA CLAUS
WHOSE DOLLS ARE INTERRACIAL!**

(Hughes, *Collected* 519)

The crass materialism some upper class Blacks aspire to, an imitation of the “successful” white lifestyle, is denounced in “HORN OF PLENTY”, while the following section, “GOSPEL CHA-CHA” suggests a different, less bourgeois, more revolutionary way of being... It ends on an image of a black Christ figure. Linking Haiti to a call for revolution is opportune: knowing where you come from is a prerequisite to progress. Hughes’s call for change is linked to Roumain’s communism as well as to the Haitian Revolt. One of Roumain’s poems, “Nouveau Sermon Nègre” can be compared to Hughes’s “Goodbye Christ” (1932) with regard to its theme of replacing Christianity with Marxism. In “Goodbye Christ” the Christ figure is white and rejected by the revolutionaries, whereas in Roumain’s poem, Christ is black and inspires the revolution.

*Ils ont craché à Sa Face leur mépris glacé
Comme un drapeau noir flotte au vent battu par la neige
Pour faire de lui le pauvre nègre le dieu des puissants
De ses haillons des ornements d'autel
De son doux chant de misère
De sa plainte tremblante de banjo
Le tumulte orgueilleux de l'orgue
De ses bras qui halaient les lourds chalands
Sur le fleuve Jourdain
L'arme de ceux qui frappent par l'épée
De son corps épuisé comme le nôtre
dans les plantations de coton
Tel un charbon ardent
Tel un charbon ardent dans un buisson de roses blanches
Le bouclier d'or de leur fortune*

....

*Nous ne chanterons plus les tristes spirituals désespérés
Un autre chant jaillit de nos gorges
Nous déployons nos rouges drapeaux
Tachés du sang de nos justes
Sous ce signe nous marcherons
Sous ce signe nous marcherons
Debout les damnés de la terre
Debout les forçats de la faim.*

(quoted by Conturie 23)

Other Hughes poems besides **ASK YOUR MAMA** are infused with the image of a Black Christ. For the Scottsboro case, Hughes had written “Christ in Alabama” in 1931:

*Christ is a nigger,
Beaten and black
Oh, bare your back!*

The poem was reissued in *The Panther & The Lash* (1967) along with “Bible Belt” (first published in 1953), dealing with a similar motif.

*It would be too bad if Jesus
Were to come back black
There are so many churches
Where he could not pray
In the U.S.A. (Hughes, The Panther 38)*

Léopold Sédar Senghor’s remark during a conference in 1950, may be pertinent here. He claimed that Negro Spirituals were more an identification of the suffering of the race with the suffering of Christ than spiritual, strictly speaking: “[Les spirituels] sont nègres avant que chrétiens. Jésus symbolise la souffrance nègre” (Senghor 105).¹⁴ But, in contrast to Countee Cullen, Hughes refrained from making Judas white. The Black Christ of *ASK YOUR MAMA* is crucified next to Whites:

*WHEN I GOT TO CALVARY
UP THERE ON THAT HILL
ALREADY THERE WAS THREE —
AND ONE, YES, ONE
WAS BLACK AS ME. (Hughes, Collected 505)*

This vision leaves a hope of redemption for the white race, based on integration (Christ did, after all, pardon the repentant robber). The Revolution of Langston Hughes is one of integration, contrasting to the call for militant separation between races made by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X before his pilgrimage to Mecca.¹⁵ As Elijah Cummings, chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, recently suggested while commenting on the 1963 March on Washington:

We are engaged in a continuing, peaceful social revolution called democracy—and, as Dr. King often counseled us: “The most revolutionary action that our people can undertake is to assert the full measure of our citizenship.” (Cummings 169)

Asserting African-American identity and citizenship is still at issue in 2003, while as early as the 1940s, Hughes’s “Simple” stories humorously demonstrated that fear of the other (the most primary racist fear) could be assuaged by getting to know the other. The musical culture that Hughes advances in *ASK YOUR MAMA* is shared: “BLUES IN STEREO” suggests that both Whites and Blacks suffer from racism. *ASK YOUR MAMA* is a call for militancy of the passive resistance sort, such as Gandhi’s, which inspired Martin Luther King. The sit-ins are evoked in “BIRD IN ORBIT” and King is

¹⁴ For a comprehensive treatment of the Black Christ figure, see Souffrant.

¹⁵ It is worth remembering that Malcolm X’s 1964 pilgrimage caused him to modify his discourse about race relations. Finding people of all races participating together in worship of Allah, he asserted that true Islam destroys racism (see Malcolm X 97).

mentioned, along with the *négritude* promoted by Alioune Diop, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Charlie Parker is the one hovering over this ensemble, with margin notes indicating “Happy blues,” “Cool bop,” and a “flute solo...cry... call” (Hughes, *Collected* 516-19). The overall effect of this section, and of the poem as a whole, is to remind the reader that music itself can be a form of such resistance.

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