

Isbah Mehar
Professor Guenther
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Music and Race

The Great Migration was a large and powerful movement which changed the social, political and economic landscape of modern America. Isabel Wilkerson wrote in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, “[The Great Migration] had such an effect on almost every aspect of our lives — from the *music that we listen* to the politics of our country to the ways the cities even look and feel, even today”¹. Many of the cultural changes part of this era, such as the widespread and popularity of jazz and blues music, is a direct reflection of the experiences and journeys of many African Americans. I explored the development of jazz and blues music and how it illustrated the progression and struggles of the Great Migration. I expressed this idea in the form a musical compilation, edited a collection of significant and influential songs by African American artists, from the 1920s to the 1960s, which portrayed key moments and beliefs during The Great Migration. I intend to show how oftentimes music crossed social and cultural barriers that blacks were not able to pass alone.

The first song I chose was “A Song From A Cotton Field”² by Bessie Brown, recorded in 1928. This specific song is a direct portrayal of the working conditions and life of many African Americans living in the south during the 1920s. She sings of the struggle and helplessness felt as a sharecropper, “all my life, I’ve been makin’ [cotton] it / all my life white folks takin’ it / this old heart, they’s just breakin’ it”. The song reminded me of the grueling experiences Ida Mae faced as a cotton picker, with its long and painful hours. “ain’t no use kickin’ / cause I’ll be

¹ Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*, New York: Random House, 2010. Print, pg.43

² Bessie Brown, “Song From A Cotton Field”, unknown, Pathe, 1928, Vinyl.

pickin' / till all my children is grown". These type of conditions and injustices depicted in this song, described a significant cause of the migration out of the south, many hoping, like Ida Mae, for a more fulfilling and independent life.

"Time is Getting Harder"³ by Luscious Curtis, 1930, further depicted the troubles and poverty many wanted to escape by moving out. Curtis emphasizes the economic disparity and injustices surrounding the south, reflecting the troubles faced by a collective, he sings:

"I'm bound to leave this place.
White folks sittin' in the parlor,
Eatin' that cake and cream,
Nigger's way down to the kitchen,
Squabblin' over turnip greens."

The stark contrast where whites are "sittin' in the parlor" with cake and cream in comparison to African Americans "squabblin' over turnip greens" highlights the extreme inequality amongst two races creating a deep need for change, which took its form through the Great Migration. Luscious's resentment mirrors George Starling's when he felt cheated of a decent pay as a fruit picker in Florida compared to his factory work in the North, Chicago.

Lead Belly's "The Bourgeois Blues"⁴ is one of the artist's most powerful and controversial pieces created, remembered as his, "heartfelt protest song"⁵. It was written in June 1937 in response to the discrimination and segregation that Lead Belly faced during a visit to Washington, where Lead Belly and his wife were denied the right to rent a hotel room for the night and also other forms of segregation. It is a symbol of resistance against racism, the Jim Crow Laws and calling for African American civil rights. He sang:

³ Luscious Curtis, "Times is Gettin' Hard," in *Mississippi River Blues*, Vol. 1, Flyright-Matchbox Library of Congress Series, 1930.

⁴ Lead Belly, "The Bourgeois Blues.", unknown, Alan Lomax, 1938.

⁵ Wolfe, Charles; Lornell, Kip (1992). *The Life and Legend of Ledbelly*. New York: HarperCollins, pg.29.

“Gonna spread the news all around
Well, me and my wife we were standing upstairs
We heard the white man say "I don't want no niggers up there"

This disheartening situation was also faced by many others, such as Robert Pershing, and created a need for justice and change. The song influenced many to protest, specifically in the left wing political groups, who used it as a platform to demand equality in America.

While jazz and blues oftentimes did take on a voice for political and racial beliefs, they were drastically contrasted by other artists during the Great Migration. “Crazy Blues”⁶ by Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds was considered a landmark in 1920 to be considered the first blues record ever issued. Within the first month of its release it had sold 75,000 copies and had taken on an immense popularity in the North, between both black and whites⁷. The song portrayed how with the Great Migration, music and culture also crossed borders, it sparked a new interest and audience, along with a little more integrated society. Duke Ellington’s “Old Man Blues”⁸ further presented the *lighter side* of jazz and its recognition in white society, however, it symbolized an unsettling and blurred segregation. This song was featured in the 1930 film “Check and Double Check”, where the scene opens up with a luxurious dancing hall, filled with well-dressed whites who turn to listen to Duke Ellington and his *Cotton Club* Band. It was interesting to see that at this era; many were large supporters of segregation but wouldn’t hesitate to have an all African American band playing in a film. Presenting how while with these influence of jazz and blues were growing, the racial and cultural divide was dwindling.

Although Ray Charles’s “Hide Nor Hair”⁹ had less commercial successes than other songs in 1965, however, it marked the accomplishments and triumph of one migrant during this

⁶ Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds, “Crazy Blues”, record, Okeh Records, 1920

⁷ Schuller, Gunther (1986). *Early jazz: its roots and musical development*. Oxford University Press, USA. p. 226.

⁸ Duke Ellington & his Cotton Club Band, “Old Man Blues”, Verve Records, 1930

⁹ Ray Charles, “Hide Nor Hair”, Live In Concert, AM Par Record Corp., 1965, Vinyl

time, Robert Pershing Foster. It reflected how Robert was able to move to California with no support or help and be able to reach a level professional success and respect, to such a point, where Ray Charles was moved by him. He presents the American Dream that many hoped to achieve during the Great Migration, how as an African American he was able to achieve prosperity and status out of the south.

In some cases, jazz and blues contrasted the actual social situations of the time, where the music would be seen as a mask or escape from reality. This can be seen in Nat King Cole's "Nature Boy"¹⁰. The song creates a feeling of peace and love, where he sings, "The greatest thing you'll ever learn / Is just to love and be loved in return." However, when Nat King Cole released this song in 1948, it was the same year he moved in to an all-white neighborhood in Hollywood, Hancock Park, where he suffered a campaign of racist abuse and discrimination. The singer and his family were subject to months of protests, they were forced to move out when his lawn was defaced and dog poisoned¹¹. Nat's music which was loved by many and his extremely abusive experience depicted a stark difference between culture and society which was yet to be bridged during this time.

Louis Armstrong's rendition of "Black and Blue"¹² is a powerful piece which shed lights on racism on a personal level, describing the emotional pain he feels because of his skin color. "I'm white inside, but that don't help my case / 'Cause I can't hide what is in my face / My only sin is in my skin, what did I do to be so black and blue?". In this way, Jazz represented a form of self-expression and individual views, and showed how this deep rooted racism inhibited many from being themselves, marked from the beginning as an outsider just by their skin color.

¹⁰ Nat King Cole, "Nature Boy", Capitol Records, 1949

¹¹ Cole, Maria, with Robinson, Louie (1971). Nat King Cole: An Intimate Biography. William Morrow, pg.14

¹² Louis Armstrong, "Black and Blue", in Louis Armstrong and all the Stars, Decca Records, 1955

Nina Simone's chilling yet powerful live performance of the song "Why (The King Of Love is Dead)" is one of the most memorable pieces from this musical compilation. Nina wrote the song after the murder of Martin Luther King in 1968, in one of her concerts shaken and raw, she pauses before singing the song and speaks to the audience. "We can't afford any more losses...They're killing us one by one." The haunting audio piece moves and rattles the listener, her extreme loss and despair is evident and, through her music, Nina creates a meaningful dialogue about the civil rights and equality. In this instance, we can see that when blacks were suppressed many found freedom and identity through music. As artists' took on a larger stage and audience, so their voices and pains grew louder. The last piece of the musical compilation is Nina Simone's "Young, Gifted and Black"¹³. The song hopes for a brighter future for African Americans and provides pride and power to its audience:

"There are times when I look back
And I am haunted by my youth
Oh but my joy of today
Is that we can all be proud to say
To be young, gifted and black"

With the 1970's, The Great Migration neared an end and with it many were hopeful they would leave the past and their discrimination behind. The song provides a chance for a brighter future and along with the end of the struggles an injustice faced before. Looking forward to a generation where the *young, gifted and black* will be recognized and appreciated.

In these ways, the songs and artists selected portray the long and arduous path of The Great Migration and civil rights. The journey, both physically and emotionally, was challenging and lead the way for a more integrated and equal America.

¹³ Nina Simone, "Young, Gifted and Black", In *Little Girl Blue*, RCA Records, 1969.

Citations

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