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An Exploration of Extra-Musical Issues in the Music of Don Byron

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AN EXPLORATION OF EXTRA-MUSICAL ISSUES
IN THE MUSIC OF DON BYRON

By

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ABSTRACT

In 1992 Byron released his first solo recording, *Tuskegee Experiments*, and received *Down Beat* magazine’s “Jazz Artist of the Year” award. Since then, he has produced nine more solo recordings that highlight his wide range of skills and interests, including classical, salsa, hip-hop, funk, klezmer, and every era of jazz styles from swing and bebop to avant-garde. His latest CD, *Ivey-Divey*, received a Grammy nomination for best instrumental solo and was voted “Album of the Year 2004” in *Jazz Times* magazine. Equally interesting, though, are the ensuing discussions of controversial issues that grow out of his musical choices and sociopolitical statements.

Byron first garnered attention for his work as a klezmer clarinetist with the Klezmer Conservatory Band and later for his performances and subsequent recording of the music of klezmer humorist and bandleader, Mickey Katz. Klezmer music, the celebration music of Yiddish communities, was performed from the early 1900s until the 1950s by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who came to the United States. Byron, who is African American and not Jewish, was integral to the klezmer revival of the late 1970s and 1980s. Some of the revivalists have questioned the musical authenticity of Katz, and by extension, Byron, due to their pop parodies. Additionally, some view Byron as an outsider as they assert a Jewish ownership of klezmer music. By studying the music of Mickey Katz and the work of scholars and participants active in the klezmer revival, Chapter 1 explores the issues of authenticity and ownership.

Chapter 2 addresses the complexities and controversial nature of musical categorization. By showcasing the swing era music of Raymond Scott, John Kirby, and
the young Duke Ellington in the 1996 recording *Bug Music*, Byron highlights his affinity for their unique compositional styles, styles that jazz critics and historians often claimed were not jazz. The chapter considers the critics and historians’ responses, as well as their possible motivations.

Finally, since he began his solo recording career, Byron has infused his work with sociopolitical commentary. One of the topics he frequently addresses is racism. Using Byron’s song titles and his statements in liner notes and information gleaned from interviews, Chapter 3 explores how he expresses his views and what he says about the contemporary manifestation of this highly charged social practice.
INTRODUCTION

The clarinet was an integral member of jazz ensembles from the early stages of the development of jazz music until the 1940s when stylistic changes began to favor the saxophone. The clarinetist’s role in early jazz was to add rapid obbligato passages to the melodic line. Later, in the swing era of the 1930s and 40s, the ensemble role of the clarinet was diminished to “occasionally [floating] angelically over the band in the closing chorus,”¹ which led to it becoming primarily a solo instrument. This solo period was the golden era for the clarinet in jazz, when Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw became household names. In the mid-1940s the saxophone supplanted the clarinet as the principal solo reed instrument in the jazz ensemble. Around the same period, the more harmonically and technically challenging style of bebop arrived.

One of the few clarinetists to successfully make the transition from swing to bebop was Buddy DeFranco. When comparing the relative difficulty of playing clarinet or saxophone in bebop, he explains that to play the same scale throughout the practical range of the clarinet requires three different sets of fingerings, one for each octave, but on saxophone the same finger patterns can be used in the two primary octaves. Also, changing notes on the clarinet requires more precise finger control in order to cover tone holes with the fingerprint of the finger, while on saxophone, fingers only need to press keys. Finally, the clarinet does not play as loudly as a saxophone, and in bebop,

one needs to be heard over a loud rhythm section. In *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*, Mark Gridley observes that despite DeFranco’s efforts: “The clarinet has not been an important instrument in modern jazz. One of the most popular instruments during the swing era, it became one of the least popular during the bop era. Clarinet has almost disappeared as a jazz instrument.”

In the 1980s, however, the clarinet began to reappear in jazz settings. Articles with headlines such as “Jazz Clarinets Making Comeback at the Public [Theater],” “Jazz Virtuosos Usher in a Second Golden Age of the Clarinet,” and “Jazz: Rebirth of the Clarinet?” praise the performances and recordings by the “Clarinet Summit” (a quartet made up of Jimmy Hamilton, John Carter, Alvin Batiste, and David Murray), Eddie Daniels, and classical artist Richard Stoltzman in his first crossover effort. Another young clarinetist’s name began appearing on the New York scene as well: Don Byron.

Byron was born in 1958 and raised in the Bronx. In addition to attending the High School of Music and Art, he pursued a diverse musical education, studying classical clarinet, playing and arranging salsa music with neighborhood musicians, listening to his father’s jazz records (who also played bass in a calypso band) and taking trips to the symphony and ballet. After high school Byron spent one year at the

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2 Ibid., 291-292.
Manhattan School of Music before transferring to the New England Conservatory to study in their Third Stream program (now called “Contemporary Improvisation”), a program begun in 1973 by Gunther Schuller for students “to explore the ‘third stream’ that is formed when the streams of classical music and jazz are creatively combined.”

Soon he was invited to join N.E.C.’s new klezmer group, the Klezmer Conservatory Band, with which he performed for seven years.

In 1992 Byron released his first solo recording, *Tuskegee Experiments*, and received *Down Beat* magazine’s “Jazz Artist of the Year” award. Since then, he has recorded nine more solo recordings that highlight his wide range of skills and interests, including classical, salsa, hip-hop, funk, klezmer, and every era of jazz styles from swing to avant-garde. His latest CD, *Ivey-Divey*, received a Grammy nomination for best instrumental solo and was voted “Album of the Year 2004” in *Jazz Times* magazine. In addition to composing much of the music for his recordings, his composition credits include: *There Goes the Neighborhood*, a piece commissioned and performed by the Kronos Quartet; *Dark Room* for the Bang On A Can All Stars; theme music for the *Tom and Jerry* animated series on the Cartoon Network; original scores for the silent film *Scar of Shame*, and a 1961 television episode by comedy pioneer Ernie Kovacs; the score for Joel Katz’s film *Strange Fruit*, a documentary about the 1930s protest song made famous by Billie Holiday; *Spin*, a duet for violin and piano premiered at the Library of Congress; and *Red*, a big band suite premiered at the Monterey Jazz Festival in 2002.

From 1996-1999 Byron served as Artistic Director of Jazz at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and from 2000-2005 he was Artist-in-Residence at New York’s Symphony Space, where he established the *Contrasting Brilliance* concert series. The series showcased his artistic interpretations of the unexpected pairings of Henry Mancini and Sly Stone, Igor Stravinsky and Raymond Scott, Herb Alpert and Earth,

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Wind and Fire, and explored the music of the seminal hip-hop label Sugar Hill Records. Additionally, Byron has written and performed music for the dance companies of Donald Byrd, Bebe Miller, Mark Dendy, and Ellen Sinopoli, and was featured on-screen as a jazz performer in Robert Altman’s movie *Kansas City* and the Paul Auster film *Lulu on the Bridge*.

Without exaggeration, Byron’s website biography states that he “has been a singular voice in a dizzying range of musical contexts, exploring widely divergent traditions while continually striving for what he calls ‘a sound above genre.’”9 Equally interesting, though, are the ensuing discussions of controversial issues that grow out of his musical choices and sociopolitical statements.

Byron first garnered attention for his work as a klezmer clarinetist with the Klezmer Conservatory Band and later for his performances and subsequent recording of the music of klezmer humorist and bandleader, Mickey Katz. Klezmer music, the celebration music of Yiddish communities, was performed from the early 1900s until the 1950s by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who came to the United States. Byron, who is African American and not Jewish, was integral to the klezmer revival of the late 1970s and 1980s. Because of his pop parodies, some revivalists have questioned the musical authenticity of Mickey Katz; by extension they have questioned Byron’s authenticity as well. Additionally, some view Byron as an outsider as they assert a Jewish ownership of klezmer music. By studying the music of Mickey Katz and the work of scholars and participants active in the klezmer revival, Chapter 1 will explore the issues of authenticity and ownership.

As Byron’s “dizzying range of musical contexts” and exploration of “widely divergent traditions” demonstrate, he is not a musician who is easy to categorize. Chapter 2 addresses the complexities and controversial nature of musical

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categorization. By showcasing the swing era music of Raymond Scott, John Kirby, and the young Duke Ellington in the 1996 recording *Bug Music*, Byron highlights his affinity for their unique compositional styles, styles that jazz critics and historians often claimed were not jazz. The chapter will consider the critics and historians’ responses, as well as their possible motivations.

Finally, since he began his solo recording career, Byron has infused his work with sociopolitical commentary. One of the topics he frequently addresses is racism. By using Byron’s song titles and his statements in liner notes and interviews as a starting point, Chapter 3 will explore how he expresses his views and what he says about the contemporary manifestations of this difficult topic.
CHAPTER 1

KLEZMER AND THE MUSIC OF MICKEY KATZ

As a student at the New England Conservatory of Music in the early 1980’s, Don Byron began performing klezmer music. By the 1970s and early 1980s the models for klezmer revivialist’s style and repertoire came from 78 rpm records that had been made in the first part of the 20th century. Byron played with the Klezmer Conservatory Band from 1980-1986 and made five records with the group. After moving from Boston to New York City, he left the KCB and formed his own klezmer group. Alongside jazz gigs and playing weddings with his klezmer band, he began to study the music of Mickey Katz. This led to his 1993 solo recording Don Byron Plays the Music of Mickey Katz.

After a brief stint performing with well-known musical satirist Spike Jones, Katz became a top selling artist in the 1950s. His popularity was grounded in his musical parodies, the first of which was Haim Afen Range (Home on the Range) in 1947. Josh Kun describes the eclectic mix of Katz’s music as “dissonant and aggressively unassimilated interlingual pop parodies that spiked English storylines with Yiddish phrases and punchlines and inserted skilled Eastern European klezmer explosions into

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10 A majority of these records were made between 1913 and 1930 by large record companies such as Columbia and Victor; bandleaders included Abe Schwartz, Harry Kandel, Abe Ellenkriag, Al Glaser, Israel J. Hochman, Abe Katzman, Max Leibowitz, Alexander Olshanetsky, Art Shryer, Simkha Young, and Abe Weissman. Henry Sapoznik, The Compleat Klezmer, with Transcriptions and Technical Introduction by Pete Sokolow (Cedarhurst, N.Y.: Tara Publications, 1987), 11.
a postwar crazy quilt of swing, calypso, polka, mambo, opera, and rock and roll.”

Kun also states that despite the commercial success of Katz’s first two records, his live performances often drew fire: “His ‘in-group’ musical humor may have worked within the safe confines of the private sphere, but in public many found it distasteful, insulting, and offensive—the musical realization of the worst of age-old Jewish stereotypes.”

Two important issues are raised by Byron’s involvement with klezmer music, and further, by performing the music of Mickey Katz. The first is the question of authenticity. Since Katz combined 1950’s popular culture with klezmer music, his authenticity as a klezmer performer is questioned by klezmer musician and historian, Henry Sapoznik. Sapoznik also challenges Byron’s authenticity of klezmer performance: he says that Byron has “chosen a novelty door into klezmer” since “Katz was a novelty performer who enjoyed a very tenuous relationship to the Jewish world.” The second is the question of ownership. Because Byron chose to perform the music of Mickey Katz, Sapoznik claims that Byron, who is not Jewish, is an outsider who has co-opted controversial music from Jewish culture: “Don’s playing on a very strong sense of cultural ownership. [He is] saying ‘Hey, look what your community has thrown away, and look what I’m doing. I, an outsider, am championing a spokesman from your community.’” This chapter will ultimately explore the issues of authenticity and ownership by addressing the following questions: What is “authentic” klezmer music? Do the performances of Katz and Byron meet the criteria of authenticity? Why did Katz have a tenuous relationship to the Jewish world? Is the fact that Byron is a non-Jew the only reason he is considered an outsider?

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12 Ibid., xxiv.
14 Ibid.
Byron Discovers Klezmer and Katz

While Byron was a student at the New England Conservatory of Music (1980-1984), he was recruited to perform klezmer music in a faculty concert of twentieth-century Jewish music. Enrolled in NEC’s “Third Stream” program, he was a diverse musician who could improvise and was a natural choice to be the group’s clarinetist. In a 1990 interview with Francis Davis, Byron recalled: “Hankus Netsky recruited me for this band he put together to play three klezmer tunes for [an] NEC faculty concert called ‘Contemporary Dimensions of Twentieth-Century Jewish Music,’ or something like that—the other faculty members played stuff by Leonard Bernstein and George Rochberg, but Hankus wanted to do something different. That was the beginning of the Klezmer Conservatory Band.” The successful debut of the KCB resulted in offers to perform at concerts, parties, and weddings, necessitating a more detailed study of klezmer style and repertoire.

Learning the style and nuances of klezmer was not difficult for Byron since the curriculum of the Third Stream program was designed to teach students to aurally assimilate diverse styles of music. Even though African Americans had no tradition as

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15 “As a student in New England Conservatory’s Contemporary Improvisation Department, you will have the opportunity to forge a unique, personal style of improvisation through rigorous aural training combined with an individually tailored course of study. Gunther Schuller founded this innovative program in 1973 to explore the ‘third stream’ that is formed when the streams of classical music and jazz are creatively combined...Our program is one of the few places in the world where one can absorb and synthesize the music of other cultures in a personal and creative way.” New England Conservatory of Music, “Majors: Contemporary Improvisation”; available from http://www.newenglandconservatory.edu/majors/mjrCI.html; Internet; accessed 21 March 2004
17 “Your studies begin with a rigorous aural training program designed to build basic aural skills. You will be initially assigned a set of recorded melodies, from many different musical traditions, to be sung from memory. This memorization is done solely by ear, allowing you to assimilate the details of each different style and absorb not only the superficial characteristics but also the deeper emotional and spiritual aspects of each piece.” New England Conservatory of Music, “Majors: Contemporary Improvisation.”
klezmer performers, Byron felt a connection to the music nonetheless. He saw a correlation between the underlying feeling of klezmer music and his African-American heritage: “When a klezmer piece bursts with joy, there’s also a bittersweet undertone, and when it wails with pain, there’s still a hint of joy. It’s the music of people living where happiness and suffering are never far apart. I had no trouble relating to that.”

In the course of studying old klezmer recordings Byron encountered a performance by Mickey Katz: “The first time I heard him, it was Mickey’s Dreidel, one of the records from [Hankus Netsky’s] collection, and I thought, ‘What is this? This stuff is bad. And whoever is on that clarinet sounds a little like me.’ Because his playing had that athleticism I like.” Additionally, he was impressed with the overall musical elements he heard: “I immediately responded to [the recording]—it had really great musicians on it . . . And there’s all this beautiful voice-leading, four-part harmonies, melodies that go down to sixteenth notes, four-part fugues, really fancy writing.” Byron’s fascination with Katz’s musical arrangements inevitably led to further study, performances of the music, and the 1993 recording Don Byron Plays the Music of Mickey Katz.

Mickey Katz

Born on June 15, 1909 in Cleveland, Ohio, Meyer Myron (Mickey) Katz began playing clarinet at the age of 11 and by his early teens was a regular in amateur talent shows. He went on to perform in various groups and settings including “Doc Whipple’s big band,” “Mickey Katz, King of Clarinetists, and his Goodtime Kittens,”

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19 Byron quoted in Davis, Bebop and Nothingness, 179.
and “Phil Spitalny’s All-Girl Orchestra.” During World War II he fronted a six-man
“comedy band,” called “Mickey Katz and his Krazy Kittens,” for the U.S.O.

After returning home to Cleveland in 1946, he joined “Spike Jones and his City Slickers.” Like other members of the group, Katz fulfilled several functions: in addition to playing clarinet, he had to both sing and perform the gurgling and swallowing sound effects. While performing a Yiddish parody of *Home on the Range* for fellow band members at a City Slickers recording session, he caught the attention of an RCA executive. Eighteen months later, Katz left the group due to a salary dispute and signed his own RCA recording contract. The 1947 release of “Mickey Katz and His Kosher Jammers” *Haim Ofen Range/Yiddish Square Dance* sold close to 35,000 copies in the first few weeks.

Beginning in 1948, Katz toured with his musical variety show, the *Borscht Capades*, eventually performing on Broadway. In 1950 he moved from RCA to Capitol Records and went on to make fifteen recordings. While most of these were pop parodies, in 1951 Katz recorded a “straight” album, *Mickey Katz Plays Music for Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and Brisses*. Many great Los Angeles jazz musicians played on Katz’s records, including trumpeters Ziggy Ellman and Mannie Klein, trombonist Si Zentner, drummer Sam Weiss, and violinist Benny Gill.

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23 Friedwald, liner notes for *Mickey Katz: Simcha Time*.


In addition to his performing career, Katz also had a stint hosting a southern California radio show. From 1951-1956 he programmed “everything from Al Jolson’s The Anniversary Waltz and Yiddish recordings by operatic cantors to symphonic arrangements of Jewish folk music, songs about the Holocaust, and Israeli recordings.” Mickey Katz succumbed to kidney failure on April 30, 1985.

Katz and Authenticity

As noted earlier, Henry Sapoznik has accused Mickey Katz of being little more than a “novelty performer who enjoyed a very tenuous relationship to the Jewish world.” Further, he believes that when “listened to today [the] traditional and original compositions [on Mickey Katz Plays Music for Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and Brisses], written in ‘klezmer’ style, demonstrate tremendous technical virtuosity, but the only whiff of authentic Yiddish styling comes from the trumpet playing of Ziggy Elman and Manny Klein.” Sapoznik’s claims invite an investigation of the music on Mickey Katz Plays Music for Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and Brisses followed by a look at Katz’s relationship to the Jewish world through his musical parodies.

In the “straight” album, Mickey Katz Plays Music for Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and Brisses, one finds a number of characteristic klezmer elements involving inflections of the pitch. Yiddish-speaking Jews call them: krekhts (Yiddish for “groan”), a wailing sound; tshok, laughing; and kneytsh, a sobbing sound. These speech-like inflections can all be heard in the playing of Katz and the other instrumentalists.

28 Sapoznik, Klezmer!, 174.
Klezmer music tends to fit one of six typical dance forms. Katz utilizes four of these. Eight of the twelve tunes on *Mickey Katz Plays Music for Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and Brisses* are freylekhs (or possess a freylekh section). The freylekh (also called a bulgar) is a moderate- to bright-tempo dance with the basic beat:

Example 1.1 Basic freylekh beat.\(^{30}\)

Three of the twelve tunes are either khosidl or sher, which are both slower duple dance forms. One tune features Katz in a doina. The doina is an improvised rhapsodic, unmetered showpiece, accompanied by sustained chords from the ensemble.

Finally, all twelve of the tunes contain the standard ending found in all klezmer music: tonic, dominant, tonic. The first tonic note is preceded by either a chromatic run or a glissando, and rests separate each of the three pitches:

The following transcriptions also show Katz’s use of a characteristic cantorial mode. A cantorial mode is one of the five scale modes used for the majority of traditional klezmer tunes: major, minor, and three cantorial modes that are “specifically characteristic of Ashkenazic and other Eastern European music. . .[named] according to the first words of the prayers in which they appear . . .”

The first excerpt from Grandma’s Draidel follows a four-measure introduction, played in unison by bass and trombone, that establishes the tonic as “G.” After the introduction, a solo trumpet states the melody:

Example 1.3 Grandma’s Draidel, solo Trumpet.33
In another scale pattern later in the tune, the clarinet plays a descending stepwise scale beginning on the seventh degree, and is joined by the trumpet and violin in an ascending scale that uses a raised sixth degree as a pivot note:

Example 1.4 Grandma’s Draidel, Clarinet, joined by Trumpet and Violin.34

The recurring sequence of G-A flat-B natural fits the Ahava Raba cantorial mode. This is similar to the Phrygian mode, with a half steps between the first and second notes and the fifth and sixth notes; it differs in that the interval between the first and third notes is a major third, creating a characteristic augmented second interval between the second and third scale degrees. The seventh degree can be major or minor depending upon the melody. For cadences, the chord of the minor seventh is usually used instead of the dominant. Pieces in the Ahava Raba mode use the key signature of the subdominant minor (iv) since most of the notes fit that key signature.35

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reflect the spellings used in the source material. In the first ending, an interval of a tritone (B natural-F) is present because it is common in the Ahava Raba mode to cadence on the seventh degree.

34 Mickey Katz and Nat Farber, “Grandma’s Draidel.”

Katz did not restrict himself to one specific style of music. Like other second-generation American Jewish musicians, such as his collaborators trumpeter Ziggy Elman and trombonist Si Zentner, Katz was comfortable with jazz as well. Many of Nat Farber’s musical arrangements in *Mickey Katz Plays Music for Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and Brisses* do show what Will Friedwald, an authority on jazz singing and frequent contributor to the *Village Voice*, calls a “quasi-big band approach in terms of sectional voicings.” In particular, he refers to *Frailach Jamboree*, which “opens with brass and reeds playing off each other in the best Fletcher Henderson manner.”

One of the essential elements of jazz is improvisation. While there is also improvisation in klezmer, it is traditionally treated differently than in jazz. Pete Sokolow explains in *The Compleat Klezmer*:

> It has lately become fashionable to associate *klezmer* music with jazz. Writers talk of flights of fancy, soaring emotional/creative heights, etc. Let it be stated here that we are operating in a highly proscribed, somewhat narrow musical

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36 Ibid. This example is transposed up an interval of a fourth to match the key of *Grandma’s Draidel*.

37 Friedwald, liner notes for *Mickey Katz: Simcha Time*. The different spellings “Frailach” and “Freylekh” are used interchangeably; the spellings used in this chapter reflect the spellings used in the source material. Pianist/bandleader/arranger Fletcher Henderson (1897-1952) was instrumental in the development of the big band style of arranging. Along with Don Redman, he integrated the interplay of brass and reed sections by using call-and-response and one section playing supportive riffs behind the other. Henderson led his own bands in the 1920s and 30s. After Benny Goodman rapidly gained popularity using some of Henderson’s arrangements, Goodman employed Henderson as his staff arranger from 1939-1941. James Lincoln Collier, “Henderson, Fletcher (Hamilton, Jr.),” in The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz, 1988.
milieu with a set vocabulary and phraseology. I would compare klezmer music only with the very earliest post-ragtime New Orleans/Dixieland of the King Oliver/Original Dixieland Jazz Band stripe—an ensemble based style in which “soloing” goes on while everybody is playing, or an occasional, very short “break.” The sort of chord-based improvisation endemic to later jazz is non-existent here. The klezmer is expected to embellish the melody in a tasteful, artistic manner; even in the case of the doina, the player must adhere to stringent idiomatic strictures. While it is true that a given piece may originally have been improvised, once the piece is “set,” improvising is out.38

Friedwald acknowledges that the improvisation on the Katz recording may be more influenced by jazz when he says: “Katz and Farber rely a great deal more on improvisation than is encouraged in conventional klez.”39

Christina Baade summarizes the klezmer/jazz conflict that informs the discussion about Katz’s authenticity: “In klezmer, jazz influences mark some music [as] more assimilationist, more American, less Jewish, and even more African-American. I think this is why Katz was held in disdain by early klezmer revivalists. He internalized jazz idioms and played with klezmer as “merely one of many elements in his musical makeup kit” as Will Friedwald wrote, comparing Katz’s treatment of klezmer with Duke Ellington’s use of the blues.”40 As with many who have a personal investment in ethnic musics, klezmer purists believe that the music is less authentic if there is any obvious influence of another culture’s music. In the case of Mickey Katz, his familiarity with jazz imbues his klezmer with African-American culture. When studying Mickey Katz Plays Music for Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and Brisses, one can find both characteristic klezmer and jazz elements. Notions of authenticity then depend upon whether one’s definition of klezmer is inclusive or exclusive.

39 Friedwald, liner notes for Mickey Katz: Simcha Time.
Katz and Assimilation

Baade also raises the issue of Jewish assimilation. The desire on the part of many Jewish immigrants to appear less Jewish and more American played a central role in the disappearance of klezmer music in the 1950s. It also conflicted with what Mickey Katz had to say about assimilation in his pop music parodies.

Like all immigrant groups in America, the Jews faced many hardships in their new country that strengthened the desire to assimilate into American society. One of their early twentieth century obstacles was the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act (IRA), in which a partnership of legislators and racist eugenicists who believed in the superiority of the Nordic or Anglo-Saxon people of northern and western Europe effectively reduced immigration from southern and eastern Europe.\(^{41}\)

This act and others grew out of increasingly virulent anti-Semitism. One of its many forms was the debasement of Jewish composers’ music by prominent critics such as the essayist/teacher/composer Daniel Gregory Mason and the automobile magnate Henry Ford. In his 1931 book *Tune In America: A Study of Our Coming Musical Independence*, Mason asserted that Jewish musicians posed a stylistic threat to American music: “Our whole contemporary aesthetic attitude toward instrumental music . . . is dominated by Jewish tastes and standards, with their Oriental extravagance, their sensuous brilliancy and intellectual facility and superficiality, their general tendency to exaggeration and disproportion.”\(^{42}\) Even more blatantly anti-Semitic, Henry Ford published *The International Jew – The World’s Foremost Problem* in the Dearborn

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Independent, a periodical published by his own Ford Motor Company. In one of the eighty essays, “Jewish Jazz Becomes Our National Music,” Ford accused Jews of being compositional scavengers who unjustly reap the financial rewards of their work: “In this business of making the people’s songs, the Jews have shown, as usual, no originality but very much adaptability – which is a charitable term used to cover plagiarism, which in turn politely covers the crime of mental pocket-picking. The Jews do not create; they take what others have done, give it a clever twist, and exploit it.”

With this climate of open hostility towards Jews, the solution for most was to assimilate into American culture, and further, into American “whiteness.” The process of achieving whiteness, however, had a price. In The Price of the Ticket, James Baldwin wrote that “white people are not white: part of the price of the white ticket is to delude themselves into believing they are.” Kun describes how the Jews purchased their white ticket:

In order to believe that you are white, you must also believe that you are no longer what you once were. Names get shortened. Identities are hidden. Americans are born. For Jews in the fifties, the urge to trade in Old World identities and purchase this ticket into American whiteness was so great— in 1952, 160,000 American Jews either shortened or replaced their last names, a number twice as big as pre-World War II numbers—that it became a nearly compulsory act, the dominant narrative of post-World War II Jewish American life.

Changing one’s name is relatively easy, but changing one’s language and dialect is more difficult. Mickey Katz never considered either of these. In fact, the most provocative aspect of his parodies was how he played with English and Yiddish—

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“Yinglish”: “It’s not just that Katz sang in Yiddish, it’s that he sang in Yinglish and that he sang Yinglish in a certain way: through his nose, butchering the English words. He sang in a style that directly recalled the spoken performances of so-called ‘dialect comedians,’ which likewise angered, threatened and embarrassed many Jews trying to work quietly, ethnically “under cover” and free of obvious differences.”47 Dialect comedy was associated with immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe and was considered an obstacle to the Jewish goal of assimilation.48 Further, Katz’s “Yinglish” was reminiscent of the “potato Yiddish” of a later stage of Yiddish Theater, the shund (or trash). It was “both an insult to the ‘real’ Yiddish of ‘real’ Yiddish theater and an embarrassment to upwardly mobile Jews who wanted to discard the ‘trash’ of their ethnic pasts for a future in English.”49

Because of Katz’s seeming disregard for the upwardly mobile Jews’ goals, one can see how Sapoznik would say that Katz “enjoyed a very tenuous relationship to the Jewish world.”50 Byron, though, does not agree with this assessment. He is able to look past all of the problems that Jews find in Katz’s parodies:

In music, it’s unusual for parodies to have anywhere near the depth of the original compositions. But Mickey consistently pulled it off. Perhaps the key to his parodies’ effectiveness is that they manage to say something significant in musical forms that are by design lightweight and disposable. Forgettable lyrics were transformed into tales of food, sex and family; rumbas mutated into frailachs. There’s a shock at hearing anything real in such musical triviality. And Mickey’s musicianship pushed these tunes beyond their silliness.51

It is within the music that Byron discovers and champions a message that rejects the erasure of ethnic and racial past.52 He points out that post World War II popular music

47 Ibid., xli.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., xlvi.
featured many “pseudo-ethnic” hits, such as the Weavers’ *Tzena, Tzena, Tzena* and *Que Sera Sera* by Doris Day, but clarifies that they were “sanitized versions, diluted of their cultural punch.”\(^{53}\) Further, Byron says: “It was as if the goal of these pseudo-ethnic hits was to make all of us immune to whatever was not white and ‘American.’ These songs were for many the most intimate contact with people unlike themselves. Subsequently, [songs like these] could become the source of a stereotype in our ethnically segregated society.”\(^{54}\) According to Byron, “Katz seemed to sense the ridiculousness of it all” and “[dove] headlong into the chasm between America’s immigrant population and a social order that held—and still holds—WASP-iness as its highest value.”\(^{55}\) Kun echoes this sentiment: “Mickey Katz resisted this urge to purchase the dream of whiteness like few others in the fifties entertainment industry. Katz’s dream of becoming American didn’t entail becoming white. He continually became a Jew.”\(^{56}\) Unlike Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, George Burns, and Jack Benny, all prominent Jewish television personalities in the fifties, Katz did not erase overt Jewishness from his stage persona.\(^{57}\) Despite “revel[ing] in in-betweenness, in the sound of cultural dualism,”\(^{58}\) Katz was not resisting the pull of assimilation: Katz’s son, actor Joel Grey, says that “when my father came out on stage, wearing a big cowboy hat and a shirt lettered ‘Bar Mitzvah Ranch’ to sing *Home on the Range* in Yiddish, it was his way of saying: ‘I want to be an American.’”\(^{59}\) Byron agrees, and adds that Katz’s parody was a way of making assimilation conditional: “To be admitted to the American mainstream, yes. But, also, the privilege of bringing his own people’s culture with him.”\(^{60}\) His strategy had mixed

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\(^{54}\) Byron, liner notes for *Don Byron Plays the Music of Mickey Katz*.  

\(^{55}\) Ibid.  


\(^{57}\) Ibid., xxxix.  

\(^{58}\) Ibid., xxxvi.  


\(^{60}\) Byron quoted in Grossman, “Klezmer music finds a soul man,” 5:2.
results. According to Kun, Katz’s contemporaries found his parodies “embarrassing or hilarious, either a proud celebration or a threatening, self-directed insult.”

**Byron and Authenticity**

The klezmer revival began in the late 1970s when a new generation of Jewish musicians became interested in their cultural heritage:

> Imbued with the aesthetic of 1960′s self-expression, playing in the raw musical styles of blues, bluegrass, old-time swing, jazz, folk, and soul, and impressed by the African American roots movement, young Jewish musicians began asking questions about their musical ancestry.

When Don Byron began playing with the Klezmer Conservatory Band in 1980, he was at the forefront of the klezmer revival. While often a critic, Sapoznik acknowledges Byron as “the first popular non-Jewish interpreter of klezmer music and, because of the success of the KCB, one of the most influential stylists of this modern period.” Despite his status as a non-Jew, one only needs to listen to his performances with the KCB on Der Nayer Doyne/Sam Shpilt or Freylekhs to hear that Byron plays in a historically authentic style: he has “mastered the klezmer language—the vocalized intonation, ardent wailing, and tortuous glissandi . . .” The krekhts, tshok, and kneytsh are all present and his improvisation consists of appropriate embellishments and ornaments.

Byron’s approach to the music, though, differed from some of his klezmer revivalist counterparts. His goal was not to learn how to play a tune exactly as it

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63 Sapoznik, *Klezmer!,* 211.
sounded on an old 78 record; rather, he would learn the tune and use the spirit of the
recorded performance as a point of departure.

At first, my attitude was, OK, you put a piece of music in front of me and I can
deal with it. But I responded immediately to the mischief in that music: the place
on each of the old records where the clarinetist would play the most out thing he
could think of. It’s not like in jazz, where a guy gets hot and takes another
chorus. There might be just one exciting trill, but that’s where the creativity was.
Most of the young cats playing klezmer are just trying to sound like the old 78s.
But those guys on the records were taking risks. That’s what I think I brought to
klezmer that excited the rest of the [Klezmer Conservatory] band. Maybe some
of the stuff I played was inappropriate, especially in the beginning. But at least I
was doing something new. And as time went by, I developed my own voice in
that language.66

In addition to developing his own klezmer voice, his updated wedding tune
book reflected his personality:

“Nobody had a book like us.” . . . He leafed past the klezmer transcriptions and
the Israeli material to the Motown tunes. “I had twenty, maybe twenty-five
Motown transcriptions, with those bad James Jamerson bass lines that bring the
sound right out to the people on the dance floor. Plus things like Downtown,
Judy’s Turn to Cry, Cold Sweat, Part 2 . . .”67

The inclusion of contemporary dance music is not as unusual as it might appear.
Historically, klezmer repertoire was a varied mixture of both dance and non-dance
music performed for Jewish and non-Jewish audiences.68 Mark Slobin asserts that “to
be a klezmer traditionally meant, and still tends to mean, playing whatever the paying
customers want to listen and dance to.”69

66 Byron quoted in Davis, Bebop and Nothingness, 177-178.
67 Ibid., 175.
in American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots, ed. Mark Slobin (Berkeley: University of California Press,
2002), 96; Henry Sapoznik, “From Eastern Europe to East Broadway: Yiddish Music in Old World and
69 Mark Slobin, Fiddler on the Move: Exploring the Klezmer World (New York: Oxford University Press,
2000), 40.
What complicates matters in a discussion about Byron’s klezmer authenticity is the fact that his only solo klezmer recording is *Don Byron Plays the Music of Mickey Katz*, in which his group performs a mixture of Katz’s parodies and some of the “straight” tunes from *Mickey Katz Plays Music for Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and Brisses*. Stephen Sherrill says that “for better or worse, Byron has linked his klezmer fate to Katz’s; he is forcing the issue of both Katz’s authenticity and his own.”\(^{70}\) Byron responds to the charge: “None of those klezmer cats are doing what they’re doing any more authentically than I am. Some of the same type of cats said this stuff about Mickey, too: ‘No, this isn’t really klezmer.’ As if klezmer is just one thing. Well, this is really Mickey Katz, and if they want to make a value judgment about that, that’s their business. But to say it’s not real – it’s really what it is.”\(^{71}\) Byron’s former colleague and founding member of the KCB, Frank London, raises an important point about people making a value judgment about the authenticity of someone’s music:

> There will always be those who claim that certain klezmorim play the music more “traditionally,” more “authentically” than others, but these terms are open to a wide degree of interpretation. “Traditional” and “authentic” are important terms, and they’re also politicized terms. They’re also power terms. I hear a lot of people trying to sell their product, the one they like, because it’s more “authentic.” I can’t get certain grants because I’m not “traditional” or “authentic” enough. For me, to be traditional is to be “in the tradition.” To sound like a 1925 Jewish band in New York is to be traditional, but for me, it means to be informed by the past and to be part of it, but to be moving into the future, to be both part of the music, but also part of the grander scheme in which the music functions. Everything else is just someone trying to sell you something. “Tradition” does not always equal “good.”\(^{72}\)

While listeners or scholars might be able to identify what is musically authentic in the klezmer performances of both Mickey Katz and Don Byron, London makes the

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\(^{70}\) Sherrill, “Don Byron,” 20.

\(^{71}\) Byron quoted in Sherrill, “Don Byron,” 20.

point that the discussion resonates outside of the musical arena as well. This discussion is often related to a sense of klezmer ownership.

**Klezmer Ownership**

According to Byron, there is a greater underlying issue than whether or not his performance is considered authentic: he has been viewed as an outsider participating in a musical style that is not associated with his race or ethnicity. He feels that because of this, he was not always accepted in the klezmer setting: “The first year or two [of playing with the Klezmer Conservatory Band] was terrifying. [The Jewish] community [is] not used to having deep cultural stuff examined by outsiders, and most of our performances were in temples. The clarinet is the main instrument; I was one of the two people who fronted the band, and the reception I got wasn’t always pleasant.”

Despite the problems he has faced as an African American playing klezmer music, he feels justified in his participation and is willing to ignore the expectations of many:

I’ve played klezmer since 1980. But it hasn’t been easy to feel entitled to play it. A white man plays world music, and no one questions the ethnic connection. But not too many brothers are playing music from Bulgaria. I spent hundreds of hours transcribing Katz’s records; I feel entitled to the knowledge, entitled to participate. But what amazes people is that I’m a black guy doing the music of people who are supposed to be white.

Since he does not look the part and plays klezmer in such a convincing manner, it forces listeners to “disconnect what they’re hearing from any preconceived notions of what someone playing such music looks like.” Baade points out that the audience and other

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75 Sherrill, “Don Byron,” 20.
participants may not be able to ignore their preconceived notions due to their personal investment in the music:

As a virtuosic revival genre, klezmer also attracted non-Jewish performers. . . . The notion of authenticity tied to the klezmer revival acts more as a flag for emotional and ideological investment than as an assurance of musical truth or truthfulness. Scholars like Richard Taruskin have questioned our very modern motivations when we speak of authenticity—what do we hope to convey and whom or what do we seek to exclude? Those who play and write about klezmer create its history in their own image and assert new modes of musicianly and Jewish identity.76

What do participants have invested in the klezmer revival and how does it shape their views on who may participate?

In studies of the klezmer revival, several scholars have described klezmer as “heritage music.” Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett uses the term “to distinguish between music that is part and parcel of a way of life and music that has been singled out for preservation, protection, enshrinement, and revival . . .”77 The use of the words “preservation,” “protection,” and “enshrinement” indicate a deep emotional and ideological investment of someone who has chosen to take possession of klezmer music as a way to assert their Jewish identity. One indicator of this is that since the revival, it has become common once again for Jews to use klezmer music at important rites of passage such as weddings and bar mitzvahs.78

Why did the klezmer revival occur? Alicia Svigals, violinist of the Klezmatics and one of the early revivalists, explains that younger American Jews had “reject[ed] the assimilationist model of the previous generation,” were not comfortable with the “Israel-centered alternative,” and were looking for ways to assert their Jewish

76 Baade, “Can This White Lutheran Play Klezmer?”
78 Slobin, Fiddler on the Move, 22.
For this identity, they looked to Ashkenazic Yiddish culture, discarded the religious observance, and absorbed the language, literature, and music. Many of the klezmer revivalists came to the music from bluegrass and other American traditional music genres, so it was not surprising that they “jumped at the chance to have their very own folk music . . . .”

Not everyone involved with the revival, though, shared the same motives. London discussed his own motivations:

I believe that for myself, and many of my peers whom I’ve spoken to, the focus was on trying to play the music, trying to play it well, trying to get better on the nuances. Others were saying, “Oh, that’s not why you were trying to do it; you’re carrying on your ancestors’ legacy, you’re reigniting this torch that went out”—they were getting very heavy about this. But no; we were trying to play some music, make some money, and have some fun. Many of the musicians who were doing klezmer music weren’t Jewish, so they weren’t discovering their roots. A lot of them were in it for technical reasons, particularly the clarinetists, as in the case of Don Byron. Here was a music that was technically challenging, fun to play, and had a market.

So, London, Byron, and others did not approach klezmer with the same personal investments as other revivalists; rather, they had artistic, technical, and financial investments. These philosophical differences help illuminate why Henry Sapoznik, a central proponent of the klezmer revival, has been one of the most prominent critical voices when it comes to the music of Katz and Byron.

Since he directed the Jewish music research project at the Martin Steinberg Center for Jewish Arts of the American Jewish Congress from 1977 to 1979, Sapoznik has been an instrumental figure in the klezmer revival. His additional credentials include: co-producer of the Peabody Award-winning “Yiddish Radio Project” for

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80 Ibid., 212.
81 Ibid., 213.
National Public Radio; founder of the Archives of Recorded Sound at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in 1982 and its director until 1994; founder and member of early klezmer revival group Kapelye; in 1985 founded “KlezKamp: The Yiddish Folk Arts Program”; author of the 2000 ASCAP Deems Taylor Excellence in Music Scholarship award-winning Klezmer! Jewish Music from Old World to Our World; and producer of 13 reissues of historic recordings of Jewish music, including a four-volume CD set of Yiddish 78s from 1912-1950 for Sony Legacy. This list of accomplishments shows his involvement in every aspect of klezmer music, including performance, research, and education. In the following narrative about how he conceived KlezKamp, Sapoznik provides a picture of his ideological investment in klezmer:

The prototype [for KlezKamp] was the fact that I had taught at camps that were teaching Appalachian music, I had gone to Balkan camp, and saw those. . . . The thing that was a little disconcerting is that [the Balkan camp] was run by people who were not members of the community. It was mostly Jews who ran it, and they were reductions of the culture, so they treated that culture as a sort of smorgasbord. Okay, we’re going to take out the music and the songs and the dance, and that’s pretty much it, and the rest of the culture doesn’t interest us. Which I felt was sort of disingenuous, because the stuff isn’t out of context. You can’t do the songs without the language, the literature, reduce all these poetic images and stuff, just teach people to mouth the words. I was concerned that people get on stage and even if they can play a tune they end up offering this weird context for their audiences. People come away less enlightened than they think they are.

Both his credentials and his ideals show that Sapoznik has a strong ideological investment in the dissemination of klezmer music, but he thinks that a klezmer performer should be knowledgeable about other parts of the culture in addition to the music and feels justified in holding others to this standard. Recall Baade’s statement: “Those who play and write about klezmer create its history in their own image and

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84 Sapoznik quoted in Slobin, Fiddler on the Move, 77.
assert new modes of musicianly and Jewish identity." Sapoznik feels that klezmer is his music, is part of his identity, and should be studied and performed in a specific way. It troubles him that Byron, whom he begrudgingly refers to as “one of the most influential stylists of this modern period,” can be viewed as a spokesperson for klezmer music, since he is an outsider playing klezmer for what he considers are the wrong reasons. After interviewing both Byron and Sapoznik for a 1994 article, Stephen Sherrill surmises: “In Sapoznik’s view, Byron has never really wanted to be a part of the klezmer world and has deliberately—defiantly—maintained his outsider status.” Sapoznik is very specific in his criticisms: “[Byron’s] making a personal statement merely by playing the music. I don’t think Don would say he’s a klezmer stylist. He’s saying, ‘I’m going to make your expectations about what form klezmer should take and I’m going to turn it on its ear—I’m going to turn it on your ear.’ The problem is, we have to live with the consequences—and clean up when he’s gone.” This last sentence is an especially strong declaration of ownership; Sapoznik seems to be saying that Byron is intentionally intruding upon his territory, imposing his own uninformed musical and cultural opinions, and undermining Sapoznik’s authority, leaving the true klezmer revivalists to properly educate the public.

When it comes to Don Byron, issues of identity are additionally compounded by issues of race. Sapoznik has said that “[Byron’s] superior technical acuity aside, he has attracted more than his share of attention because he is also one of the few African-Americans playing the music.” In the same breath, he praises Byron’s musical abilities and then points to Byron’s race, making a novelty of his role in the klezmer revival. Baade addresses the complicated role that ethnicity and race play in klezmer when she

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85 Baade, “Can This White Lutheran Play Klezmer?”
86 Sapoznik, Klezmer!, 211.
87 Sherrill, “Don Byron,” 20.
89 Sapoznik, Klezmer!, 211.
comments that the title of her article, “Can This White Lutheran Play Klezmer? Reflections on Race, Ethnicity, and Revival,” is not as arresting as David Borgo’s, “Can Blacks Play Klezmer? Authenticity in American Ethnic Musical Expression.”

She continues:

I suspect, though, that it is more surprising that a non-Jewish black clarinetist plays Klezmer than a non-Jewish white clarinetist. Indeed, I have seen no more than passing reference to the fact that Matt Dariau, the current clarinetist of the Klezmatics, is not Jewish. Further, Andy Statman, a balei teshuvah or “returnee” (one who chooses to practice Hassidic Judaism later in life) balances his musical career between the bluegrass mandolin and the klezmer clarinet. Statman has not been interrogated for playing music associated with rural, goyish Southern Whites. The key to this lack of reflexivity – and part of the key to David’s provocative title – is ethnicity complicated by race.

It is less obvious to an audience that a white person playing clarinet is actually Lutheran, but more obvious to an audience that an African-American person is most likely not Jewish. There is definitely a historic double standard where it has been considered more acceptable for whites to appropriate musical styles that have been developed by another race or ethnicity, but not as acceptable for African Americans.

The attention he receives as an outsider is typical for Byron, who “regularly faces audiences who think of klezmer as theirs, not his”:

We were doing Mickey Katz’s “Trombenik.” The title is Yiddish for a no-goodnik, and you pronounce it “Trum-BENIK.” I know that. But as a joke, I announced it as “Trum-BONE-nik,” because it features the trombonist. Do you know, about a dozen Jewish cats yelled out “Trum-BENIK! trum-BENIK!”

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90 The ironic title of Baade’s article underscores the fact that “white” is often overlooked as a race since it is the dominant one.
91 Baade, “Can This White Lutheran Play Klezmer?”
92 To the credit of some early KCB audience members, though, they enjoyed the music so much that they were convinced that everyone in the band must be Jewish. They decided that Byron must be an Ethiopian Jew, called a Falasha. Former KCB member Ingrid Monson recalls with amusement: “Once...a woman came up [at a performance] and said, ‘That boy on the clarinet, is he a falafel?’” Sherrill, “Don Byron,” 21.
93 Byron quoted in Davis, _Bebop and Nothingness_, 172-173.
Another instance came in 1982 when the KCB appeared on the popular Boston public radio show *Morning Pro Musica*:

In what might have been an attempt to lighten up the interview portion of his show—or perhaps to demonstrate how ‘hip’ he was—pompous host Robert J. Lurtsema asked Byron: “So Don . . . How did a goyisher shvartzer like you come to play klezmer music?” Aghast but gracious, Byron sidestepped the insensitivity of the question and talked instead about his desire to play great music.\(^\text{94}\)

The use of this racist term further underscores the complicated issue of black and Jewish relations in twentieth-century America.

The portrayal of Byron as a klezmer outsider fits the historic pattern of immigrant groups portraying blacks as more alien than themselves in order to achieve whiteness and fully assimilate into American culture. In *How Jews Became White Folks* Karen Brodkin has pointed out that in order to do this, a group of Jewish intellectuals systematically set out to construct “Jewishness as a model minority” which required a “depend[ence] upon an invented and contrasting blackness as its evil (and sometimes enviable) twin.”\(^\text{95}\) This process was not unique to the Jews, though. Toni Morrison has said: “In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African American.”\(^\text{96}\)

Between the 1940s and first half of the 1960s, a group of intellectuals from New York working-class backgrounds were the visible face of Jewishness. In a number of published articles and studies, the City College-educated Nathan Glazer, Daniel Bell,

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\(^\text{94}\) Sapoznik, *Klezmer!*, 211.
and Irving Kristol promoted the strengths of Jewish culture while contrasting it with a “culturally deficient” African-American community.\textsuperscript{97}

In \textit{Beyond the Melting Pot}, a study of New York City’s major ethnic cultures, Glazer observes the Jewish “passion for education and their strong ethnic community bonds in business, intermarriage, and social life in general as the bases of their strength.”\textsuperscript{98} These accolades provide a contrast to a discussion under the heading “The Family and Other Problems” about the breakdown of the African-American nuclear family where “a quarter are headed by women” and the implications of such for children’s academic performance.\textsuperscript{99} Later, it is pointed out that “even with much less prejudice directed against them, Jews have formed dense and concentrated suburban settlements,” which is a positive result of voluntary self-segregation, not discrimination.\textsuperscript{100}

Along the lines of Glazer’s study, Bell and Kristol made similar comparisons about how Jews had been more successful at overcoming discriminatory odds through their emphasis on a strong community. In a 1964 New York Times article, Bell observed: “A cursory acquaintance with Jewish community life in New York City, for example, reveals the dense network of community organizations and services set up by the Jewish community itself . . . . And the reason [the African-American community lacks

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\textsuperscript{97} Brodkin, \textit{How Jews Became White Folks}, 144. Glazer, Bell, and Kristol were all prominent members of a group called The New York Intellectuals. “[They] are the first influential critics to rise from America’s working classes. During the 1930s, these sons . . . of turn-of-the-century East European Jewish immigrants formed an obscure intellectual circle where radical politics and the cultural avant-garde collided. By the late ’40s they were rising to prominence as left-wing political and cultural critics in post-war America through magazines and journals like \textit{Partisan Review} and \textit{Commentary}. Embroiled in the controversies of the Cold War, and challenged by the rise of the New Left in the 60s, the group’s politics began to diverge and its members now occupy places across the political spectrum.” \textit{Arguing the World}, “About the Film”; available from http://www.pbs.org/arguing/about.html; Internet; accessed 19 June 2004.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 146.


\textsuperscript{100} Glazer and Moynihan, \textit{Beyond the Melting Pot}, 59.
this structure] . . . is that these tasks have been shirked or ignored by the Negro middle
class.” 101 While discussing African-American identity and the paradox of the civil-
rights “militancy,” Kristol explains:

The civil rights movement seems to regard the American Negro as nothing but a
negative sociological phenomenon, as merely the creature of white prejudice and
discrimination . . . One is reminded . . . of a parallel with the situation of the
Jews. Many thinkers . . . have seen the “essence” of Jewishness as something that
can be fully explained in terms of the existence of anti-Semitism. The motives
behind this point of view are laudable enough: they aim at the extinction of anti-
Semitism. But this perspective has never commended itself to most Jews, who
prefer to think of themselves as something more than the sum of their
disabilities, and who insist that “being Jewish” . . . is also something positive and
meritorious and gratifying. 102

It is unlikely that the sole purpose of these articles was to assist in the Jewish attainment
of mainstream American status. The New York Intellectuals wrote what they felt to be
accurate assessments of the state of the African-American community at that time, and
instead of only restricting their commentary to its problems, they provided insight into
possible solutions that they had seen succeed in their own Jewish community. One of
the results, though, is the elevation of the Jews to model minority status—thereby
achieving whiteness—by their comparisons to African-American culture. Because Don
Byron is an African-American who plays klezmer—neither white nor Jewish—the
juxtaposition of a black man as a visible face of the klezmer revival becomes too
provocative and reinforces a deeply ingrained, though perhaps unconscious, belief
established through years of comparisons that a black man is an outsider who should
not, and perhaps cannot, play the music of the Jewish people.

Conclusion

Klezmer came to America with eastern European Jewish immigrants during the late 1800s and early 1900s. This music, performed by klezmorim for celebrations such as weddings and bar mitzvahs, dates back to the 1600s. The accepted characteristic style conventions and repertoire of American klezmer were established and preserved on 78 rpm recordings made during the first decades of the 20th century. After a period of inactivity, a klezmer revival began in the late 1970s by Jewish musicians who studied the old records and apprenticed with the older surviving practitioners of the music.

Over the past 25 years, the original revivalists have become known as the accepted experts of klezmer scholarship and performance. Because of their prominence, they have been in a position to offer opinions on the issues of authenticity and ownership in klezmer. Most notably, Henry Sapoznik has questioned the authenticity of Mickey Katz, and by extension, Don Byron.

The debate over Katz is two-fold. First, the bulk of his recorded output consists of musical parodies, which are tangentially related to klezmer. This is only a surface-level debate, though. The real problem is that Katz refused to whitewash his Jewish identity in public performance, and as a result, upset many Jews in their quest for assimilation into American culture. The second part of the debate surrounding Katz follows more musical concerns. Despite his adherence to dance forms, modes, tonal inflections, and cadences in his straight compositions and improvisations, his detractors point to the audible influence of jazz. Katz, however, was not the only klezmer musician to use jazz. Even Dave Tarras, universally understood to be one of the main proponents of American klezmer music, was involved with jazz styles. Sapoznik writes about Tarras’s recordings sessions for Savoy Records:

The two sessions, in 1946 and 1947 produced ten sides. [Sammy] Musiker [(saxophonist with the Gene Krupa band)] effectively constructed arrangements
around Tarras’ strengths—and avoided his weaknesses. Knowing Tarras’ jazz playing to be virtually non-existent, he had him play in the ensemble (or sit out) until the arrangement blossomed forth in the “Jewish” section—where he soloed brilliantly. This ternary sectional form—jazz, Jewish, jazz—is based on the arrangement used by Ziggy Elman on his “…Angels Sing” record.\textsuperscript{103}

There is an irony to the different criticisms Katz received from his Jewish contemporaries and more recently by the klezmer revivalists. The critical view depends upon which style of his performance is studied, either the parodies or the straight repertoire: his contemporaries criticized him for what they perceived to be an anti-assimilationist message in his parodies, and the revivalists criticized him for being too assimilated regarding the jazz influence in his straight klezmer. Both then and now, these views resulted in questions regarding Katz’s authenticity as a klezmer performer.

There is not much debate about the authenticity of Byron’s klezmer performance related to his work with the Klezmer Conservatory Band. Although he might play with some individuality of style, he is stylistically accurate. Additionally, when he was working in New York with his own band, his repertoire was historically consistent with its wide variety and inclusion of music that people wanted to hear. Any questions into Byron’s musical authenticity are extensions of questions about the authenticity of Katz’s music or a referendum on the ownership of the music.

Claims of ownership are not surprising given that many of the revivalists have made klezmer their own folk music in order to create a contemporary Jewish sense of communal identity. Not unique to klezmer revivalists, claims of ownership are relatively common. By studying a wide range of both Western and non-Western folk music, Philip Bohlman has concluded:

\begin{center}
\textit{Common to most societies, ethnic groups, or communities are ways of designating folk music that is their own. A sense of ownership often reflects a sense of boundaries and the musical territory that they enclose, if not also that...}\end{center}

which they concomitantly exclude . . . This sense of musical ownership, furthermore, reflects group identity, that is, those patterns by which a community distinguishes its own culture and seeks to express that culture.\textsuperscript{104}

Fairly or unfairly, klezmer revivalists like Henry Sapoznik have established boundaries in order to distinguish their contemporary Jewish cultural identity; this requires them to label Byron as an outsider. Further intensifying the feelings of ownership is the case of an obvious outsider: Don Byron, an African-American, belongs to a group who other immigrants have historically used as a stepping-stone in their quest for an assimilated, model-minority status in America.

Byron chafes against both stylistic labels—jazz and klezmer—and subjective concepts—authenticity and ownership. He feels that they are irrelevant and that the validity of the music is all that matters. Byron finds both musical and extra-musical values in Katz’s music, and by posthumously returning him to the spotlight, Byron demonstrates that Katz’s message is still relevant today. Josh Kun understands this:

I suddenly understood how Katz’s comic klezmer rejected the compulsory presentness of an American identity that requires the erasure, or at the very least, the indexing or forgetting, of the ethnic and racial past in the name of a newly anointed national identity, how its pro-ethnicity sonic assault on the ears of ethnic erasure made it not quaint or corny, but nearly radical or subversive, dangerous or marginal, precisely because of what its quaintness and corniness signified: Jewish difference from the norm of American cultural homogeneity.

In that way, Byron made Katz’s music contemporary for me. He showed me that the performance of Jewishness spoke directly to debates over multiculturalism, diversity, and ethnic and racial difference that had been figuring so centrally in the shifting national discourse on the politics of identity.\textsuperscript{105}

Byron has helped to remind the public that there are many ways that Americans from a multitude of diverse backgrounds can express themselves artistically.


CHAPTER 2

BUG MUSIC

Don Byron’s 1996 recording Bug Music features music from the 1920s and 30s that was originally performed by three different bandleaders: Raymond Scott, John Kirby, and Duke Ellington. The three are linked in two important ways. Compositonally, Byron finds similarities in “their love of hemiola, unusual chord progressions, minutely detailed arrangements, and their ability to fashion pieces that explore the talents of individual bandmembers.”\textsuperscript{106} Critically, at different points in their careers they were all subject to the similar charge that they were not playing jazz.

While Scott and Kirby were both relatively popular with audiences in their day, some jazz critics and historians have relegated them to a lesser status. Byron surmises that this is due to their blending of jazz and classical music, which was unique at the time: “The reasons for this rejection have much to do with these bands’ overt interest in classical music, and the rigorous nature of their compositions. This music lives in a zone somewhere between jazz and classical music. These groups accomplished this in a time when such a mix of influences was considered even more unusual than it is today.”\textsuperscript{107} Surprisingly, even Ellington was not immune to negative criticism early in his career. Mark Tucker points out that Ellington struggled to overcome the constraints

\textsuperscript{106} Don Byron, liner notes for Bug Music, Nonesuch 79438, 1996.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
of categorization when classical music critics claimed that he was not equal to his European counterparts and jazz critics accused him of abandoning his musical roots and deviating from the dance band format.\textsuperscript{108}

Byron draws together the circumstances of the three bandleaders by naming \textit{Bug Music} after a 1960s episode of the cartoon series \textit{The Flintstones} that parodies the Beatles craze. In America, many adults disliked the new and immensely popular rock group.\textsuperscript{109} Interestingly though, Byron feels that the criticism was not directed at the Beatles’ music: “They couldn’t figure out the music, couldn’t figure out the haircuts. Nothing anybody wrote about the Beatles at that period was at all compositional.”\textsuperscript{110} He believes that critics’ opinions are often directed by personal agendas and that the music of early Ellington, Scott and Kirby is more important than many critics and historians realize: “Bug Music has lived on for me as a fable of the public’s subjectivity. The wind can blow one way or another with the public, yet another with critics. Both public and critical opinion may change over time, and never can they necessarily indicate the actual strength of a composition.”\textsuperscript{111} Additionally, it is the composition itself, regardless of musical category, that is important: “It matters very little to God whether or not a piece of music is Jazz, only that it is a compositional act. This is the only universal truth in music, and the entirety of musical art.”\textsuperscript{112} By studying critical response to the music of Duke Ellington, Raymond Scott, and John Kirby, this chapter addresses the complexities and controversial nature of musical categorization and how Don Byron is involved in the debate. Additionally, motivations for the negative criticism leveled by John Hammond, Gunther Schuller, and Stanley Crouch are investigated.

\textsuperscript{109} The Flintstone’s version of the Beatles was called “Bug Music with them four insects.” Byron, liner notes for \textit{Bug Music}.
\textsuperscript{111} Byron, liner notes for \textit{Bug Music}.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
Duke Ellington

Byron has long admired Ellington’s music, declaring: “The music he made in [his] early period is some of my favorite music in the world.”\textsuperscript{113} The three Ellington compositions included in Bug Music are Blue Bubbles (first recorded in 1927), The Dicty Glide, and Cotton Club Stomp (both recorded in 1929).\textsuperscript{114} As another early Ellington tribute, Byron performed The Mooche (first recorded in 1928) and The Duke Steps Out (first recorded in 1929)\textsuperscript{115} at the Wolf Trap Jazz and Blues Festival in 2000. For this performance Byron led a group he called “Jungle Music for Post-Moderns,”\textsuperscript{116} a reference to the “jungle style” for which Ellington became known early in his career. He developed this style, with its characteristic use of muted-brass effects, as an elaborate accompaniment to the theater’s acts with an “African setting” during his five-year engagement at Harlem’s well-known Cotton Club.\textsuperscript{117}

Beginning with the jungle style of the late 1920s, Ellington developed a reputation for innovative compositional skills. Jazz historian Gunther Schuller postulates that Ellington’s compositional development was precisely due to the demands of his Cotton Club employment. Unlike other writers who were involved exclusively with arranging music for dance bands, Ellington was required to compose new background music for the constantly changing Cotton Club acts, leading to his experimentation with “descriptive or abstract, non-functional music.”\textsuperscript{118} This in turn

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 6, 10.
\textsuperscript{117} Edward Kennedy Ellington, Music is My Mistress (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1973), 419-420.
affected his compositional style beyond his works for the Cotton Club. When compared
to typical jazz compositions of the period, some of Ellington’s more innovative pieces
include: *East St. Louis Toodle-Oo*, which quietly ends with a short reprise of the theme
instead of a full-ensemble ending;\(^{119}\) *Birmingham Breakdown*, in which the main theme is
a 20-bar phrase, not the usual 32-bar song form or 12-bar blues;\(^{120}\) *Tishomingo Blues*,
where Ellington exploits the individual tone quality of his baritone saxophone player,
Harry Carney, by giving him a B flat below the root in a C9 chord instead of the
expected root;\(^{121}\) *Mood Indigo*, with a unique trio voicing of muted trumpet on top,
muted trombone in the middle, and clarinet on the bottom quietly blending together to
play the theme;\(^{122}\) and *Rocky Mountain Blues*, with bitonality in a blues progression.\(^{123}\)

Although Ellington is viewed as one of the most important composers in the
history of jazz, some critics did not accept artistic explorations that they felt deviated
from jazz or were influenced by classical music. In a 1935 article, the respected talent
scout and producer John Hammond criticized as “pretentious” the twelve-minute
length of Ellington’s new *Reminiscing in Tempo*, a piece that far exceeded a jazz tune’s
usual three-minute length (one side of a ten-inch, 78 rpm record could only
accommodate that much), and said that “his newer stuff bears superficial resemblance
to Debussy and Delius without any of the peculiar vitality that used to pervade his
work.”\(^{124}\) Later, after Ellington’s 1943 Carnegie Hall debut performance, Hammond
began a review by praising Ellington as the “leader of the finest dance unit ever
produced.” But, Hammond continues, since the early 1930s Ellington “has been adding
men to his once compact group, has introduced complex harmonies solely for effect and

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 329.
\(^{120}\) Ibid., 334.
\(^{121}\) Ibid., 336-337.
\(^{123}\) Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 344.
\(^{124}\) John Hammond, “The Tragedy of Duke Ellington, the ‘Black Prince of Jazz,” *Downbeat* (November
1993), 118-120. Quotes from pp. 119, 120.
has experimented with material farther and farther away from dance music . . . ”

Bob Thiele echoed Hammond’s opinion that Ellington was not writing in a jazz style since he had moved away from the dance roots of jazz and was instead composing classically influenced music. He felt that Ellington had developed “a love of exaggerated coloring, tending toward a sort of varied, over-rich layer cake of ideas and tones” that were “in direct opposition to the fundamentals of jazz.” Thiele outlines these fundamentals: “Jazz music springs from folk music and still contains many of its qualities. It is spontaneous, full of improvisation. It is music that springs from the soul of musicians. It represents America: Negro spirituals, marches, Tin Pan Alley. It is living American music. It is hard music, beat out for hard dancing. . . . I feel that jazz must always contain many, if not all, of these fundamentals or it is not real jazz.”

Additional criticism that Hammond leveled at Ellington underscored an inherent problem in the relationship between jazz critics and the musicians. According to David Stowe in Swing Changes, many of the critics were young white men from privileged backgrounds who used their influence to attach a political meaning to the music, one that intersected with the Popular Front ideology common among intellectuals of the 1930s. To these men, jazz represented all-American values and progressive leftist ideals, challenged racial segregation by acknowledging the artistic creativity of African

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Americans, rebuked fascism by challenging the Nazi theorists who regarded swing as a lowly music conceived by Jews and blacks, and “was above all a democratic music, a product of ‘the people,’ accessible to all classes and cultural types, marked both by a spirit of collective cooperation and by spontaneous individuality.”

These beliefs could influence a critic to focus on extra-musical concerns, and Hammond was no exception. In the same article that he criticized Ellington’s *Reminiscing in Tempo*, Hammond focuses not on the music, but instead opines that Ellington is being financially exploited and charging: “The real trouble with Duke’s music is the fact that he has purposely kept himself from any contact with the troubles of his people or mankind in general,” citing examples of “southern sharecroppers, the Scottsboro boys, [and] intolerable working and relief conditions in the North and South.”

In addition to his focus on extra-musical concerns, Hammond promoted what he felt were the authentic roots of jazz. On December 23, 1938 in Carnegie Hall, he staged the first of two *From Spirituals to Swing* concerts, which included blues, gospel, boogie-woogie piano, early New Orleans jazz, and swing. With the exception of the swing representative (the Count Basie Orchestra, a group that he had discovered and promoted), Hammond recruited “genuine authentic performers” who lacked formal training and had not previously performed for a white audience. Between his politics

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129 Hammond, “The Tragedy of Duke Ellington, the ‘Black Prince of Jazz,’” in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, 119-120. The Scottsboro boys were nine young black men accused of raping two young white women in 1931 on a train traveling through Alabama. The guilty verdict by an all-white jury resulted in demonstrations in Harlem, Dresden, Leipzig, and Berlin. The International Labor Defense, the legal arm of the U.S. Communist party, quickly stepped in to defend the nine. Appeals and retrials lasted for years despite the fact that one of the alleged victims admitted that she had fabricated the story. Charges were eventually dropped against five of the nine; the remaining four were convicted. Three were later paroled and the fourth escaped from prison. Olive Vassell, ed., “The Scottsboro Boys,” *Afro-Americ@’s Black History Museum*; available from http://www.afro.com/history/scott/scotts.html; Internet; accessed 10 June 2005; *Court TV.com*, “The Greatest Trials of All Time: The Scottsboro Boys”; available from http://www.courttv.com/archive/greatesttrials/scottsboro/trials.html; Internet; accessed 10 June 2005.
130 Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 52.
131 Ibid., 61.
and his dedication to what he believed to be authentic jazz, Hammond was a jazz critic who clearly revealed a bias. While he may have been well-meaning regarding social concerns, his writing demonstrates how peripheral issues can be used to challenge a musician’s credentials.

Raymond Scott

Raymond Scott’s Quintet was active from 1937 to 1942 playing through-composed jazz music strongly influenced by classical music. The group served as the house band for the popular television show *Your Hit Parade*; in addition Scott’s music was used in movies and cartoons. Many of the tunes featured witty titles, such as *Reckless Night on Board an Ocean Liner, Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals, Careful Conversation at a Diplomatic Function* and *In an Eighteenth Century Drawing Room*.

While growing up, Raymond Scott was passionate about both music and science. Because of Scott’s musical talent, his older brother, a professional violinist and conductor, dissuaded him from studying engineering in college. After graduating from the Institute of Musical Art (later the Juilliard School) in 1931, Scott was hired as staff pianist for the CBS radio house band that was conducted by his brother.132

Bored by the CBS standard repertoire, Scott began composing his own music. By 1936 he resigned his staff position, formed his own group, and debuted on CBS’s *Saturday Night Swing Sessions*, the first radio program to feature jazz music. A recording contract with Master Records soon followed.

In the late 1930’s Scott’s music was heard in many venues: The Raymond Scott Quintet made recordings from 1937-1939; they spent one year in Hollywood providing tunes for (and also appearing in) movies for 20th Century Fox, including the Shirley

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Temple film Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm; they were regular performers on Your Hit Parade; and many different ensembles performed Scott’s music, including the Paul Whiteman band. In 1938 Scott became music director for CBS.

His music was immortalized in Warner Brother’s cartoons: in 1943, Warner Brothers bought Scott’s publications and on May 15 of that year a Carl Stalling adaptation of Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals appeared in the Friz Freleng-directed cartoon Greetings Bait. Powerhouse was included in at least 40 scores by Stalling and his successor, Milt Franklyn, and Scott themes have been quoted in about 120 Warner productions, including The Penguin, Twilight in Turkey, Huckleberry Duck, The Toy Trumpet, Siberian Sleighride, Reckless Night on Board an Ocean Liner, Singing Down the Road. Since then, other cartoon series, including Ren and Stimpy, The Simpsons, Animaniacs, and Duckman have used Scott’s music.133

Scott’s displeasure with the evolution of jazz shaped his unique compositional style. In a 1937 article titled “Swing is ‘Stagnant’ Syncopation,” he voiced the concern that jazz, including improvisational innovation, had slipped from being a new and interesting music into a “stagnant and stereotyped formula of raucous repetitions of everything that has been played in syncopated tempos during the last two decades.” He thought that the solution was to place more emphasis on orchestration and harmonic development. Later, in 1943, Scott wrote that although George Gershwin had successfully pioneered the use of jazz rhythms, harmonies, and spirit in classical music, Scott’s experience leading a jazz ensemble put him into greater contact with idiomatic styles of wind instrument performance—an essential addition to serious jazz composition. He cites as examples: wind playing modeled on the “Negro spiritual . . .

rich with shouting, with effects of crude and ungovernable force”; instrumental effects like the “growl”; and pitch deviation that can create new harmonies.\textsuperscript{134}

Using an unusual method of composition, Scott did not write anything down on paper, instead he taught the music to his group during rehearsals. Feeling that a written score was inhibiting, he stated: “There’s a tremendous difference in performance if you skip the eyes.”\textsuperscript{135} Additionally, Scott recorded these rehearsals so that he could later study them in order to “cut and paste” his favorite passages. Scott’s biographer Irwin Chusid hypothesizes that this method explains “why many of [Scott’s] compositions contain juxtaposed non-sequiturs . . . of unrelated melodies and unanticipated rhythmic shifts, in A-B-A sequence.”\textsuperscript{136}

In order to achieve some of the different sounds that he wanted, Scott experimented with auxiliary instruments, such as a New Year’s noisemaker and finger cymbals in \textit{Twilight In Turkey}. He was also fascinated with how the microphone could be involved in achieving a desired sound, from the group set-up for radio broadcasts to the capturing of a very soft tone. Scott explained:

“The simplest . . . example is the sub-clarinet tone that can never be heard actually because it’s so soft. It’s the same tone that a singer uses, singing up close to the mike . . . Without a P.A. system, the sound isn’t audible three feet away. But on the microphone, you can step up the volume so that you can hear the tone without losing any of the beautiful quality. Before radio you might have dreamed about using a tone just that low, sweet quality, but you could never have reproduced it.”\textsuperscript{137}

These different approaches to music making elicited a host of superficial criticism from critics and historians that focused on Scott’s use of auxiliary instruments,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{135} Scott quoted in Chusid, “Raymond Scott: Biography.”
  \item \textsuperscript{136} Chusid, “Raymond Scott: Biography.”
\end{itemize}
the comic song titles, or the music’s character. In his book *The Big Bands*, George Simon quipped: “The group displayed a naïve charm, which was probably appreciated more by grade school music teachers than by jazz fans and musicians.”138 Harold Taylor focused on the auxiliary instruments in a 1939 article: “I don’t think that those Scott compositions are sincerely jazz vehicles. Only occasionally do they swing, the rest of the time they are trying to get smart effects. . . .You get the old tom-tom out and bang it a bit, and then play those oriental figures over it, and there you have what Scott calls an experiment in modern jazz.”139 Taylor also failed to hear any descriptive content that the titles implied: “I’m afraid I find it difficult to distinguish between such tunes as Twilight in Turkey and War Dance for Wooden Indians. It all sounds the same to me.”140 Schuller agreed, stating that titles in jazz music usually do not share a relationship to the music: “Even though [Scott’s] titles were witty, appealing to a broad popular and generally naïve mentality, they in most cases told you nothing about the music.”141 In Scott’s defense, though, others did hear the descriptive elements. Neil Strauss commented on “the seasick saxophone of Reckless Night On Board An Ocean Liner, the clickety-clacking drumsticks of The Girl At The Typewriter, and the breathless, fast-talking trumpet of The Tobacco Auctioneer;”142 Annmarie Ewing pointed to “the whirr of the machines [and] the steady boom of the hammers” in Powerhouse, “the rushing of the sea and the wind, the hilarity of the festive passengers” in Reckless Night on an Ocean

140 Ibid.
Liner, and “the beat of the drums, and the savage mutterings of the diners” in Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals.¹⁴³

A more substantial criticism took aim at Scott’s approach to improvisation. Scott focused upon the creation of an orchestrated framework that would elicit more refined solos: “Orchestrated swing music does not necessarily mean the complete disregard for free improvisation, but by providing unusual instrumental backgrounds to guide soloists a finer degree of improvised music must be achieved.”¹⁴⁴ While Scott did allow improvisation in his music, once he heard something he liked in rehearsal, alterations were prohibited. The Quintet’s clarinetist, Pete Pumiglio, said that when soloing, the group learned “to know what to do so [Scott would] like it.”¹⁴⁵ Drummer Johnny Williams disliked this lack of improvisational spontaneity: “We really didn’t want to do any of it. We were doing what [Scott] called ‘descriptive jazz,’ and which we thought was descriptive all right, but not jazz. Jazz is right now, not memorized note for note.”¹⁴⁶ Scott’s insistence on greater control of soloists was highly unusual in the jazz community, which in the late 1930s saw many jazz musicians seeking greater freedom for improvised solos along with increased spontaneous interaction among the group. Such attitudes led to the growth of the bebop style. Inevitably, Scott’s unorthodox views on jazz composition and improvisation did not concern many musicians or critics, instead most of the mixed reaction focused on superficial issues such as the song titles.

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¹⁴³ Ewing, “Engineer-Musician Electrifies Swing World With Ideas.”
¹⁴⁵ Strauss, “Scottdology.”
¹⁴⁶ Chusid, “Raymond Scott: Biography.”
John Kirby

Active during the same period as Raymond Scott’s group, John Kirby’s Sextet also worked in a similar vein, playing classically influenced jazz tunes. They performed society engagements and were one of the earliest African-American bands to have their own radio show. While Kirby was the bandleader, most of the music was composed and arranged by others, most notably Charlie Shavers, the group’s trumpet player. Songs with titles that were similar to Scott’s filled their repertoire: *Rehearsin’ for a Nervous Breakdown, Zooming at the Zombie, Beethoven Riffs On, Afternoon in Africa, and In a Twentieth Century Closet.*

Originally from Baltimore, John Kirby broke into the New York jazz scene playing tuba and bass with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra in 1932. Prior to starting his own group in 1937 he also played with Chick Webb and Lucky Millinder’s groups. Schuller observes that the Kirby Sextet was unusual for its time since “combo jazz” was an exception to the Swing era rule of the large big band. The Kirby Sextet’s success at the famous Café Society led to performances in establishments that had not previously featured swing music, including Chicago’s Pump Room and New York’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. By 1940 the sextet became the first African-American group to have its own radio show, *Flow Gently, Sweet Rhythm* on CBS.

In a 1967 *Downbeat* article, jazz trumpeter Rex Stewart addressed John Kirby’s legacy: “Although musicians in general and the public adored the Kirby group, the jazz critics did not care for his excellent and tasteful brand of music. The know-it-alls of the late thirties and early forties felt that Kirby’s approach was too stylized and overarranged, and this probably accounts for the regrettable lack of available

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147 Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 806.
commentary on his group.” The most extensive commentary comes from Schuller’s *The Swing Era*, in which he criticizes the group’s musical arrangements, their improvisational abilities, and their “commercial impulses.” Schuller begins by musing about the Kirby Sextet’s popularity:

Undoubtedly much of their repertory was created to wow the tourist customers who flocked to 52nd Street on their one visit to New York, to hear “some o’ that crazy new jazz.” Little did they know that the Kirby version was hardly jazz at all. . . . What is surprising is that, for a while anyway, sophisticated jazz fans and even some musicians took this music seriously. One must assume that a great part of the fascination lay in the well-rehearsed, disciplined playing of the group, especially Shavers’s (for the time) rather spectacular technical wizardry on the trumpet.

Despite complimenting Shavers’ salient performance, Schuller is critical of Shavers’ arrangements. He finds everything about these arrangements lacking in creativity, including the typical homophonic block-chordal, close-harmony ensemble, as well as the common form of an opening melody, solos, and a repeat of the melody at the end. What concerned him most, however, was that the Kirby Sextet’s solo work was “limited, both in quantity and quality.” He singles out clarinetist Buster Bailey and saxophonist Russell Procope for criticism:

Bailey was never an imaginative jazz artist, at best a fluent, technically well-equipped functional player. His work always smacked of being worked-out, slightly mechanical, and devoid of the spontaneity one associates with major jazz figures. His solos with Kirby, mostly stiff and rigid in execution, could have been played as well by any gifted and slightly flexible classical player. Procope, too, was never a major soloist, although I find his work with the Kirby Sextet often below his own par, ill at ease or perhaps even stifled by the limited opportunities for extended improvisation. In self-defense Procope often resorted

149 Ibid., 157.
151 Ibid., 813.
152 Ibid., 816.
153 Ibid., 815.
to merely “running the changes,” as musicians call it, mostly in arpeggios and other melodic clichés.\textsuperscript{154}

Schuller is less critical of Shavers’ improvisational quality, but does compare him to his trumpet-playing peer, Dizzy Gillespie, stating that despite Shavers’ greater technique, Gillespie was more creative, as well as one of the innovators of bebop.\textsuperscript{155} Schuller concludes: “A jazz group’s worth cannot stand on its ensemble virtues alone, no matter how impeccable.”\textsuperscript{156}

Finally, Schuller levels the charge of commercialism against the Kirby Sextet when he surmises that their uneducated audience was unaware that Kirby’s music was only pop music.\textsuperscript{157} He explains that the difference between true jazz and a commercially popular music was not very clear to the general populace in the 1930s. The most commercially successful swing bands were white dance bands, some of them mediocre, who created a more accessible imitation of the leading black jazz groups. If black musicians, the real innovators, were able to compromise by taking the “rough edges” off their music, they would achieve more commercial success.\textsuperscript{158} So, when Schuller mentions the Kirby Sextet’s tourist customers on 52nd Street (i.e., an uneducated audience), and that the music was conceived as “eminently polite music that would not offend genteel tastes and ears,”\textsuperscript{159} he is essentially accusing the Sextet of playing smoother, more commercial music that is no better than that of the white imitators. This is a serious charge for any artist, for it calls into question both the artist’s abilities and integrity, and the authenticity of their craft.

As a respected conductor, composer, former principal French horn with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, former president of the New England Conservatory, and

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 814.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 815.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 816.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 199-200.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 816.
the author of two well-regarded volumes of jazz history that exhaustively study jazz from its beginnings through the swing era, Schuller’s opinion cannot be easily dismissed. By looking carefully into his scholarship, however, one can find possible motivations for his harsh assessment of both Kirby’s and Scott’s music.

In the preface to *Early Jazz*, Schuller explains that his goal is to assess individual artists by evaluating them in relation to their contemporaries and to focus upon those who “represent innovational landmarks in the development of jazz.” He also expresses a desire “to combine the objective research of the historian-musicologist with the subjectivism of an engaged listener and performer-composer.” Schuller’s subjectivity as a performer-composer developed in the 1950s when he began writing about his compositional theories regarding a jazz and classical fusion. So, not only is he comparing Kirby and Scott with their contemporaries, but he is also comparing them to his own concept of jazz/classical fusion when he states: “The idea of performing [this type of music] was, I am sure, born of the noblest of impulses and a desire to break down the barriers between jazz and classical music. But even its nicely played performance was bound to fall between the jazz and classical stools, for it was neither classical music of much import or originality nor identifiable in the slightest way with jazz.”

In 1957 Schuller coined the term “Third Stream” to describe a genre of music that was a seamless blend of jazz and classical. He believed the fusion was natural to the evolution of jazz, since as jazz was performed more frequently in a concert setting, it would naturally become more complex and expressive. The resultant harmonies and

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160 Schuller, *Early Jazz*, ix.
161 Ibid.
techniques would require “more complex musical forms to support the increased load of this superstructure.”¹⁶³ There was a caveat, however, as Schuller explained:

> It would be dangerous . . . if the jazz musician were to be satisfied with complacently reaching over into the classical field and there borrowing forms upon which to graft his music. The well-known classical forms—such as sonata or fugue, for instance—arose out of and were directly related to specific existing conditions, musical as well as social; and their effectiveness in most cases has been greatly diminished to the extent that these conditions have changed.¹⁶⁴

Schuller believed that Kirby and Scott had fallen into this trap, and he classified their music as “novelty pieces with allusions to classical forms.”¹⁶⁵ More specifically, he concluded that they had not appropriately blended jazz and classical styles to his specifications.

By 1961 Schuller wrote an article that further illuminated the complexities of genre categorization. This follow-up article regarding Third Stream attempted to clarify the genre since jazz critics were appraising the music using only jazz criteria. He felt that this was an inaccurate method of assessment since the music’s “quality cannot be determined solely by categorization.” When articulating his vision of a Third Stream, Schuller explained that he attempted to avoid possible conflicts between jazz and classical music because of their historically separate traditions that many would wish to maintain:

> I felt that by designating this music as a separate, third stream, the two other mainstreams could go their way unaffected by attempts at fusion. I had hoped that in this way the old prejudices, old worries about the purity of the two main streams that have greeted attempts to bring jazz and “classical” music together could, for once, be avoided. This, however, has not been the case. Musicians and critics in both fields have considered this Third Stream a frontal attack on their

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 561-562.
¹⁶⁵ Schuller, The Swing Era, 297, n33.
own traditions. My attempts to make important and precise distinctions have only created greater confusion.

He continued by emphasizing that Third Stream “must be born out of respect for and full dedication to both the musics it attempts to fuse,” and wishing that “critics . . . could appraise the music on its terms, not theirs.” The constraints of the classical and jazz categories made it difficult for some to accept a fusion of the two. It is possible that Schuller’s experience defending Third Stream music led to his harsh assessment of Scott’s and Kirby’s music.

**Byron and Categorization**

Byron has defiantly rejected categorization for most of his performing career. That he shares a type of critical response similar to the composers he includes on *Bug Music* strengthens his affinity for their music. Prior to recording *Bug Music* he was already eschewing categories by performing in a wide variety of ensembles, including a standard jazz combo, a modern classical quintet, an Afro-Cuban ensemble, and his own klezmer group. Stanley Crouch, an artistic consultant to *Jazz at Lincoln Center* and columnist with the *New York Daily News* and *Jazz Times* magazine, was quoted in a 1994 article questioning Byron’s jazz credentials despite Byron winning the 1993 *Downbeat* magazine reader’s and critic’s “Favorite Clarinet Player” polls: “I don’t really consider Byron a jazz musician. I consider him a person who has command of certain instruments. He is one of the few people associated with so-called avant-garde jazz who is actually a virtuoso, but when I hear him I don’t hear the elements that make jazz sound like it sounds.” This comment is reminiscent of those directed towards Ellington, Scott, and Kirby. Crouch’s expectations of jazz carry weight since his view is

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promoted in the educational outreach of Jazz at Lincoln Center, which under the artistic direction of Wynton Marsalis, is considered by many to be the premier jazz institution in the United States. Together Crouch and Marsalis wield enormous power.

In What is This Thing Called Jazz?, Eric Porter shows that through the 1980s Marsalis became a spokesman for the music, articulating a historical narrative of jazz. In stressing the existence of a legitimate jazz canon, Marsalis intended for this narrative to elevate the status of jazz and its practitioners. Porter explains that Marsalis’ ideas were extensions of those of his ideological models, Albert Murray and Stanley Crouch. Most notably, “Murray’s ‘omni-American’ perspective on African American life and culture” is the most significant contribution to this vision: an affirmation of “the humanity of black people, [placing] them at the center of American experience, and [rejecting] aspects of both Eurocentrism and black cultural nationalism.”

Exclusion also aids in the definition of a narrative, and Marsalis and Crouch target the avant-garde for exclusion because of its departure from form and structure, lack of dance rhythms, inadequate tonal vocabulary, poor playing, and a sound that is “very European despite the proclamations about its blackness.” Marsalis also elevates jazz by excluding fusion from the category since the commercially-oriented music combines funk and rock elements with jazz, which Marsalis believes misleads the public into believing that fusion is jazz.

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When Crouch proclaims that Byron is not a jazz musician and is associated with the avant-garde, he is claiming sole possession of the jazz narrative and thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of *Jazz at Lincoln Center*. Byron disagrees with the *Jazz at Lincoln Center* vision: “They should be presenting the freshest, baddest stuff. I don’t even exist in jazz as these people perceive it to be.”\(^{171}\) In a radio interview he comments further upon what he views as an inaccurately exclusive definition of jazz: “We’re kind of almost in a Nazi-esque period of – not so much ethnic purity but jazz purity. At least the way the newfound academy has chosen to characterize jazz – that jazz is this incredibly pure thing, and anyone who actually reads about the history of jazz, much less listens to anything, can tell that that’s not really the way that things went.”\(^{172}\) Other musicians share Byron’s views. Saxophonist Greg Osby comments on the vitality of jazz, how it “feeds on contemporary trends, steps across fences, borrows from alien sources and brings them back in a new way.” Osby believes that many jazz musicians are not given the opportunity to perform at Lincoln Center since Marsalis and Crouch “seem to think jazz stopped in 1967.”\(^{173}\)

As Byron sees it, however, the greater problem is the confining nature of categorization in general. When he was a student at the New England Conservatory of Music in the early 1980s, he knew many of the up-and-coming jazz players collectively referred to as the “Young Lions.” Being labeled as jazz musicians, they did not participate in other music that also interested them:

> I think that in jazz, especially since the Wynton [Marsalis] era, there’s been this kind of set life pose. I know a lot of these young lion guys, especially the first group of them. We were all going to Berklee [College of Music] and New

\(^{171}\) Byron quoted in Sherrill, “Don Byron,” 21.


England together. . . .And I know that they had other interests. . . . [T]hey like some rock and some funk as much as the next guy, but they know that they can’t play it. They know that because they’re on this jazz beat they’re in this thing where they can’t do everything that they’re interested in, or maybe from their perspective, they’re getting paid doing what they’re “supposed to be doing,” so they just don’t do anything else.174

Byron understands these constraints and can be affected by them as well. He explains that even though he has won numerous jazz polls, there is still debate about whether he is an outstanding jazz clarinetist, which influences his performance: “So, a lot of times, when I’m playing in [a jazz venue], I might be internally trying to come off like I know a lot of stuff about playing chords. Whereas I might play just as many chords if I wasn’t feeling that, but I also might play some other stuff.”175

Since he is not concerned that his music respects categories, Byron continues to be frustrated by critics who are focused on categorization. He relates the problem to a deeper underlying issue that he calls “jazzism.”176 This term refers to the contradiction that African Americans face by excelling as jazz musicians while their success in that genre symbolizes the social and artistic restrictions that they face in American society. Since the 1920s African-American intellectuals and musicians such as James Weldon Johnson, Dave Peyton, Alain Locke, and Max Roach have written about this issue. They uniformly make similar statements that black musicians are consistently categorized by the music industry, critics, and the white audience.177 By the time Byron was in high

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175 Ibid.
school he became acutely aware of this stereotype: “Nobody wanted to believe I was capable of doing the classical stuff. I’d show up and they’d say, ‘You want to play jazz.’ In the classical pedagogy, I had teachers telling me my lips were too big.”

Echoing Johnson, Peyton, Locke, and Roach, and relating the theme to American society, Byron explains:

People really look at African-Americans both in the street and musically in very habitual ways. Like, if you’re a teenager you’re probably going to mug me. If you play music and you look young, you probably play rap or you play some kind of thing that we expect. And, we really live in an environment pretty consistently where once we’ve found a certain pocket of Black creativity that we accept, then everything is kind of judged against that.

The musicians that Byron admires most are the ones who, like him, defy categories and are not afraid to play or compose whatever style of music they wish. One such musician is Igor Stravinsky. The individuality of Stravinsky’s compositional voice regardless of style is what draws Byron’s attention:

Even [Stravinsky’s] last period is so fascinating, where he’s really writing serially, but it doesn’t sound anything like Schoenberg – nothing. . . . When you develop your voice at that level it doesn’t matter what you do. And that’s what I’ve tried to do the whole time, is just say, well, my voice is this. My compositional angle on this Afro-Caribbean stuff is this. My compositional angle on this funk is this. . . . It’s not like I want to make you smile and play some funk. I want you to listen to my angle. And that’s the voice. The voice that he has is so strong it doesn’t matter what he plays.

For Byron, it comes down to artistic choice. As composers and performers, John Kirby (and Charlie Shavers), and more notably Duke Ellington, made choices to step
beyond their accepted musical category. But, as African-American musicians, Byron stresses that they, and he, are not traditionally afforded this choice:

It’s because black people still aren’t really respected as composers. People want you to be your music. . . . It’s like when you want to make some choices that are obviously choices, like me playing klezmer music. It’s a choice, but it’s an informed choice. . . . It’s a choice because I didn’t come up with that. In most cases, people expect black people to do the black thing. Because we’re supposed to live in our little neighbourhood and nowhere else. To pretend that jazz is a single discipline, that Duke Ellington wasn’t listening to Debussy and Debussy wasn’t listening to him back . . . well, it’s not true for one, and two, it doesn’t let people see that we’re making choices.  

Byron is not alone among contemporary African-American musicians who have made artistic choices that are not easily categorized by the music industry. He and Duke Ellington (posthumously) are participants in a movement of like-minded artists whose goal is to overcome this problem. It is the hope of The Black Rock Coalition that they can “[achieve] creative emancipation, economic parity, administrative access and historical correction for Black artists . . . irrespective of genre.”

Conclusion

With Bug Music Don Byron has drawn together music that he admires from three bandleaders who endured similar types of critical reception. Ellington, Scott, Kirby, and Byron have all been faulted for not playing jazz because their individual voices incorporate musical influences from outside an exclusively defined jazz framework. Additionally, the issue of “jazzism” affects Ellington, Kirby, and Byron. Byron argues that African Americans are not given the choice to participate in music outside of a

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“certain pocket of Black creativity.” And finally, questions of categorization are informed by a critic’s individual agenda: Hammond and politics; Schuller and primacy of style; and Crouch/Marsalis with the legitimacy of their jazz narrative.

It should be no surprise that Byron tends to perform with other musicians who also defy categorization. His first record label was Nonesuch, known for its eclectic and innovative roster of musicians. One such musician, Bill Frisell, frequently collaborates with Byron. When asked if he plays jazz, Frisell expressed a discomfort with musical categories: “Jazz is still the best way of describing . . . the mechanics of what I do.” He continued:

If I have a pedal steel guitar in my group, someone can say, “Oh, then it must be country music.” But that’s just on the surface. The examples I learned from—Sonny Rollins and Thelonious Monk and people like that . . . a lot of it is, for me, not copying them, or anything like that . . . but trying to imagine what they would be thinking in the same situation. Then again, I guess I don’t even know what jazz is supposed to be anymore.

Francis Davis, a jazz critic and contributing editor for The Atlantic, states that no one truly knows what jazz is. He writes that prior to the 1960s, discourse about jazz used to rely upon a definition that consisted of a “checklist of attributes that supposedly identified a musical performance as jazz,” including syncopation, “blue” notes, and improvisation. Despite the general acceptance of this list, there are notable exceptions in the music of Duke Ellington, “a jazz musician by any worthwhile definition,” who occasionally did not use any improvisation at all. Understanding the subjectivity of categorizing a musical performance, Davis writes: “The only safe bet [in the past] seemed to be that you would know jazz when you heard it.” Due to developments since the 60s, such as Schuller’s Third Stream, Coltrane improvising on Indian scales.

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185 Ibid.
and African rhythms, and Miles Davis incorporating rock and funk, Francis Davis favors a more inclusive definition of jazz:

So many other kinds of music have rubbed off on jazz in the decades since that a definition based on the assumption that jazz is somehow autonomous no longer seems realistic, let alone wise. It’s jazz if the musicians playing it say it is and can find an audience to agree. About the only constant is that whenever something wholly original—a synthesis for which there is no ready-made niche—comes along, its legitimacy as jazz will be challenged by those for whom bebop remains the sole true path.\textsuperscript{186}

Just as Ellington, Scott, and Kirby were questioned in the past, Byron and others are questioned by Crouch and Marsalis.

Davis is one of the “jazz critical establishment” with whom Crouch disagrees. As recently as April 2003 their conflict was highlighted in the press. In his \textit{JazzTimes} column, Crouch accused white critics of promoting white musicians over black musicians. Shortly thereafter, the editors of \textit{JazzTimes} terminated his contract, contending that Crouch missed deadlines and failed to be objective.\textsuperscript{187} Crouch claims that the real reason for his dismissal is that he disagreed with the prevailing viewpoint of the “jazz critical establishment,” which asserts that “everything is relative and jazz is whatever [one] choose[s] to call it.”\textsuperscript{188} This is another example of the struggle over the possession of jazz history, one that does not appear to be ending any time soon.

Throughout the history of jazz there have been, and will continue to be, disagreements among critics, historians, and musicians concerning the confining and controversial nature of musical categorization. Byron refuses to be permanently restricted to a particular category. When asked if he considers himself a jazz musician,

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\textsuperscript{186} Davis, “Unironic,” 162.
\end{flushright}
he replies: “I consider myself a jazz musician when I’m playing jazz.” It seems that he would prefer the term “musician” without any qualifiers.

Throughout its history jazz has often included an element of sociopolitical commentary. Some artists, like Duke Ellington, made occasional statements through pieces like *Black, Brown, and Beige* in 1943, where he thematically explored African American history. By the 1960s many jazz musicians became active participants in the civil rights movement, including strong statements of political parody and themes of protest in their music. With the victories of civil rights legislation, the urgency of civil protest has declined to the point that sociopolitical activism among jazz musicians is less explicit.

Beginning in the late 1980s Don Byron realized that what he felt was missing from the “Young Lions” generation of jazz musicians was the political subtext of the 1960s. He explains:

Today our enemies are kinder, gentler, but just as deadly. . . . Back [in the 1960s], your enemy was more of a definable entity: cops with hoses, national guardsmen with tear gas, George Wallace. Now we have the militias. Back in the day people hated more openly, dismissed people of color more openly. Today the moral esthetic forbids that sort of thing but inordinate fear of blacks and Latinos works just as well to create a similar discriminatory atmosphere, but one without

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the morally troubling aftertow. And there are some people of color enlisted by the enemy (. . . the “you see, that nice darkie agrees with me!” types) to make it more confusing. Back in the day, people that didn’t like Negroes just said what they actually thought; now we have to decipher the barely coded messages . . . Back then we had Orval Faubus, now we have the racism-denying, reverse-racism-claiming, angry white majority.\textsuperscript{192}

As an African American who still feels the effects of discrimination, he uses his position as a prominent musician to speak out about relevant issues and respond to the ideas of “people of color enlisted by the enemy”:

These people need to be called on their bullshit, and that’s what my musical politics is about, because these are the issues that I deal with every day. I don’t know what I actually achieve politically on a day-to-day basis, but it makes me feel better about being an artist of my time.\textsuperscript{193}

Since he began his solo recording career in 1992, Byron has provided sociopolitical commentary on different topics. Most prominently, he has addressed the topic of historical and contemporary racism as well as countered the opinions of public intellectuals who report differing accounts of the prevalence of contemporary racism. By focusing on selected subjects from his song titles and his statements in liner notes and interviews, this chapter will explore Byron’s views on racism.

**Historical Precedent**

Byron’s models for sociopolitical activism include some of the well-known musicians of civil rights-era jazz. He points to these artists and the integration of their music and politics:

\textsuperscript{192} Don Byron, “What inspires you to compose/perform music that has political overtones?” \textit{New Music Box}, available from http://www.newmusicbox.org/article.nmbx?id=1147; Internet; accessed 5 June 2005.

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid.
My music refers all the time to intellectual concerns. Why do that? Why not just play? My answer is, I think a lot about Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln and Mingus, and you can’t strip the politics away from that music. The music holds up without it—if it didn’t, it wouldn’t be worth discussing—but it’s the motivation. If you read what they were saying and thinking then, it makes even more sense. People can learn the notes Coltrane played, but unless they’re willing to embrace some of the politics that produced them, there’s a whole piece of him they’re skirting.\textsuperscript{194}

Among these artists’ compositions related to the civil rights movement are Max Roach’s album \textit{We Insist! The Freedom Now Suite}, Charles Mingus’ \textit{Fables of Faubus}, and John Coltrane’s \textit{Alabama}.

\textbf{Max Roach \& Abbey Lincoln}

\textit{We Insist! The Freedom Now Suite}, written by Max Roach and Oscar Brown Jr. and featuring vocalist Abbey Lincoln, is perhaps one of the most explicitly political jazz records ever made. Composed in 1960, \textit{The Freedom Now Suite} follows a historical progression through African American history. The five-movement work begins with \textit{Driva’ Man}, a work song about the white overseer of the plantation. Second is \textit{Freedom Day}, which simultaneously celebrates the Emancipation Proclamation but also acknowledges that real freedom has not been attained. The third movement is \textit{Triptych}, made up of three parts: \textit{Prayer}, \textit{Protest}, and \textit{Peace}. The entire movement is a duet between Roach on drums and Lincoln providing wordless vocals. Most strikingly, \textit{Protest} features one minute and twenty seconds of screaming accompanied by continuously rolling drum figures, described in the liner notes as “a final, uncontrollable unleashing of rage and anger that have been compressed in fear for so long that the only catharsis can be the extremely painful tearing out of all the

accumulated fury and hurt and blinding bitterness."\textsuperscript{195} All Africa celebrates African American’s heritage with Lincoln chanting the names of dozens of African ethnic groups. The final movement, \textit{Tears for Johannesburg}, simultaneously commemorates the losses in South Africa’s Sharpeville massacre and makes the statement that “there will be no stopping the grasp for freedom everywhere.”\textsuperscript{196}

\textbf{Charles Mingus}

Charles Mingus recorded \textit{Haitian Fight Song} in 1955, one of the earliest examples of a jazz musician using a song title to make a political statement about “civil rights and anticolonialist struggles.”\textsuperscript{197} Attesting to the inextricable linkage of inspiration and performance, Mingus explained: “My solo in it is a deeply concentrated one. I can’t play it right unless I’m thinking about prejudice and hate and persecution, and how unfair it is. There’s a sadness and cries in it, but also determination.”\textsuperscript{198} One of his better-known pieces of political parody is \textit{Fables of Faubus}. Originally untitled, he named the tune at a 1957 performance when his group realized that the silly buffoonery of the music lent itself particularly well to a musical characterization of Arkansas’ notorious governor, Orval Faubus, who had unsuccessfully tried to prevent the court-ordered desegregation of the Little Rock public schools.\textsuperscript{199}

\textbf{John Coltrane}

Saxophonist John Coltrane recorded \textit{Alabama} in November 1963. It is thought to have been attributed to the September 1963 bombing of a Birmingham Baptist church

\textsuperscript{195} Nat Hentoff, liner notes for \textit{Max Roach: We Insist! Freedom Now Suite}, Candid CCD 79002, 1960; reissue 1990.


\textsuperscript{197} Porter, \textit{What Is This Thing Called Jazz?}, 128.

\textsuperscript{198} Mingus quoted in Porter, \textit{What Is This Thing Called Jazz?}, 128.

\textsuperscript{199} Porter, \textit{What Is This Thing Called Jazz?}, 129.
that killed four young black girls. While the connection to the bombing is extremely likely, Coltrane never explicitly stated this association as fact. Francis Davis writes that two of the sidemen on the recording session reported that Coltrane never talked about the bombing with them, and that they did not even remember the piece possessing a title when they were first handed the sheet music. The only person who claims to have heard Coltrane speak about the bombing is the pianist’s brother, whom Davis dismisses as a life-long Communist possibly promoting his own agenda. In the recording’s liner notes, LeRoi Jones cryptically may attribute Alabama to the bombing:

[The producer] asked Trane if the title “had any significance to today’s problems.” I suppose he meant literally. Coltrane answered, “It represents, musically, something that I saw down there translated into music from inside me.” . . . And what we’re given is a slow delicate introspective sadness, almost hopelessness . . . The whole is a frightening emotional portrait of some place, in these musicians’ feelings. If that “real” Alabama was the catalyst, more power to it, and may it be this beautiful, even in its destruction.

While Coltrane may not have named the piece as a response to the bombing, the chronology, Jones’ liner notes, and Coltrane’s willingness to use the title provide a credible link between Alabama and the bombing.

**Tuskegee Experiments**

“Long before I finished [my first] recording,” Byron states, “I knew I would call it Tuskegee Experiments. The word ‘Tuskegee’ itself represents many different aspects of

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the African-American experience.” He is specifically referring to two historical instances of racism: the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the plight of the Tuskegee Airmen.

The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, first reported by the news media in 1972, had been running steadily for forty years. The United States Public Health Service began the study in 1932 to chart the effects of untreated syphilis by using 600 rural, mostly uneducated black men in Macon County, Alabama. Of them, 399 were in the later stage of the disease and the remaining 201 were used as a control. With cooperation from the Alabama State Board of Health, the Macon County Board of Health, and two all-black institutions, the Tuskegee Institute and the U.S. Veterans Administration Hospital, the study was purely observational. There was no testing of new drugs, and PHS officials later argued that treatment in the 1930s (consisting of mercury and two arsenic compounds) was highly toxic and often fatal. When penicillin became available in the 1940s it too was withheld from the men using the rationale that it was a new and largely untested drug. The administrators not only failed to obtain informed consent from the men but offered the participants meager incentives (free physical examinations, hot lunches, and burial stipends) in return.

The Tuskegee Airmen were African Americans who flew for the Air Force in World War II. The Airmen were among the first group of men who trained at the newly established 66th Air Force Flying School at the Tuskegee Institute. Deployed to North Africa in May 1943, the 99th Squadron was assigned to support services hundreds of miles from the battlefronts. Despite this, the commanding officer criticized their lack of victories in comparison to the more successful white squadrons, unjustified criticism that was even reported in a *Time Magazine* article. Further, the 99th was routinely excluded from mission briefing sessions, placing them in potentially life-threatening

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situations. In October 1943 they were paired with the all-white 79th Fighter Group and participated in the bombing of key German targets. Aware that their every move was sharply scrutinized, the men of the 99th Squadron set high standards for themselves to flawlessly complete every assigned mission.205

The title track of Tuskegee Experiments is a poem about the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, written and performed by Sadiq Bey and accompanied by Byron’s music. Sadiq’s text condemns three white doctors prominently involved in the study: Dr. Taliaferro Clark, whose idea it was to build upon an earlier study and undertake the nontherapeutic experiment;206 Dr. Oliver Wenger, who aided Dr. Clark in both procuring the support of the Tuskegee Institute and developing the study’s protocol, and advised him about the best way to secure the subjects for autopsy;207 and Dr. Raymond Vonderlehr, who was in charge of the field work and conceived the idea of extending the study’s length indefinitely.208 Sadiq also chastises three of the study’s African-American collaborators: Nurse Eunice Rivers, who served as a liaison between the researchers and the subjects and was responsible for securing the families’ permission for an autopsy when a subject died;209 Dr. Jerome J. Peters, a physician at the Veterans Hospital who interpreted X-rays, performed spinal taps, and assisted with autopsies;210 and Dr. Eugene H. Dibble, the medical director at the Tuskegee Institute and head of the hospital. Dibble also supervised Nurse Rivers, performed spinal taps and autopsies, and accepted an honorary appointment in the Public Health Service as

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206 Jones, Bad Blood, 91-95.
207 Ibid., 100-101, 103-106, 134-135.
208 Ibid., 108, 112, 125-126.
209 Ibid., 6, 151-170.
210 Ibid., 121, 135, 148-149.
“Acting Assistant Surgeon” for which he received $1 per year.\textsuperscript{211} The first three stanzas of the poem follow:

1. while Sydney Bechet was pullin’ pistols in Paris,   
   Nurse Rivers, who even   
   had a car to shuffle her  syphilitic children across   
   Macon County, her “bad blood” cotton pickers,   
   the “joy” of her life,   
   was clearly chosen.   
   an appointment befitting this darkest century.

2. a Dr. Clark conviction   
   a Dr. Wenger coversion   
   a Dr. Vonderlehr conception   
   a Dr. Peters spinal puncture   
   A Dr. Dibble hanging from   
   his ankles in the town square,   
   the Surgeon General’s schwartzgeist rising,   
   while Tuskegee falls asleep.

3. bring them to autopsy   
   with ulcerated limbs,   
   with howling wives,   
   bring them in, one coon corpse at a time.   
   (says Dr. Dibble,)   
   “a dollar a year for forty years   
   to watch these shadows rot.”   
   “they didn’t receive treatment for syphilis,   
   but they got so much else.   
   medicine is as much art as it is science.” \textsuperscript{212}

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 100, 129, 133, 148-149.

After the scandalous study was finally exposed, it took twenty-five years for the U.S. government to offer a formal apology for the unethical experiment.²¹³ By this time, though, the damage had been done in the African American community. To them, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study has come to symbolize racism in the medical field, misconduct in human research, and the arrogance with which physicians and the government abuse black people. Further, the chair of the presidential committee on the Tuskegee legacy asserts that the syphilis study is a major reason that African Americans will not participate in clinical trials, organ donation, or government-sponsored vaccination (as was evidenced by the reluctance of many black postal workers to be vaccinated during the recent anthrax scare in Washington D.C.).²¹⁴

In the liner notes for *Tuskegee Experiments* Byron discusses the implication of the two experiments. Along with the obvious racism of the syphilis study, he also finds Rivers’, Peters’, and Dibble’s complicity in the study particularly troublesome: “To me, these two experiments are metaphors for African-American life. In one, we see once again that black life is cheap, and that a person of color can be enlisted to work against the best interests of his group, for nothing more than a brief ‘vacation’ from the pain of invisibility or the pressure of being seen as part of an ‘inferior’ group.”²¹⁵ And, as the racist treatment of the 99th Squadron shows: “The aviation experiment reflects the struggle black people constantly face: having to be smarter, better, more qualified simply to justify being given any opportunity.”²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Byron, liner notes for *Tuskegee Experiments*.
²¹⁶ Ibid.
Bernard Goetz

Addressing a more recent occurrence of racism, Byron recorded Bernard Goetz, James Ramseur and Me on his 1999 CD Romance With the Unseen. Goetz achieved notoriety as the “Subway Vigilante” when he shot four black teenagers for attempting to rob him in the New York City subway. On December 22, 1984 Goetz entered a subway car already holding close to twenty passengers and sat directly across from Barry Allen, Troy Canty, James Ramseur, and Darrell Cabey. The four soon rose, and after surrounding Goetz, Canty first asked him for five dollars, then said “Give me your money.” Goetz pulled out a gun and shot each of them. As Cabey lay bleeding, Goetz said “You don’t look too bad, here’s another,” firing one more shot that severed Cabey’s spinal cord, resulting in paralysis. Goetz escaped the subway car and surrendered nine days later in New Hampshire. He was eventually acquitted of attempted murder and assault, receiving only a conviction for illegal gun possession.217

None of the characters involved are particularly sympathetic. The four teenagers reportedly possessed sharpened screwdrivers during the incident and Cabey later admitted that they intended to rob Goetz. Further, the other three were eventually imprisoned for other crimes, with Ramseur sentenced in 1986 for first-degree rape, sodomy and robbery.218 In addition to Goetz’s “You don’t look too bad” comment, many statements attributed to him show racist attitudes: at a community meeting he is quoted as saying that crime in his neighborhood would only improve when “the

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niggers and the spics” were gone; he also felt that the shootings were a public service, that the victim’s mothers should have had abortions, and that society would benefit if certain people were killed, jailed, or used in forced labor. Cabey’s lawyer used these statements in a 1996 civil trial to win a $43 million settlement against Goetz.

Byron’s title reflects upon his earlier mention of an “inordinate fear of Blacks” that stereotypes African American men as criminals: “What I was thinking when I wrote [Bernard Goetz, James Ramseur and Me] was that if I had been sitting around in the car—in the subway car when that happened, I would have been shot, too, just because I was black in the car.” While Byron’s conclusion may or may not be accurate, these stereotypes do exist. Dr. Kenneth Clark, emeritus professor of psychology at the City University of New York, thinks that Goetz would not have shot four white youths in the same situation. According to Marvin Wolfgang, a University of Pennsylvania criminologist, statistics can support a perception of who may have criminal intent. He concludes that since the rates of crime for homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault are ten times higher for blacks than for whites, it is realistic to expect that four young black males are more likely to cause harm than four young white males. He adds: “I can understand the black position that this is a racist attitude, but it’s not unrealistic.”

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223 Wolfgang quoted in Berger, “Analysis; Goetz Case.”
Public Intellectuals

In *Music for Six Musicians* and *Nu Blaxploitation*, Byron refers to three public intellectuals who have written books about contemporary racism: Dinesh D’Souza, Andrew Hacker, and Shelby Steele. In the liner notes of his 1998 CD *Nu Blaxploitation*, Byron derisively compares D’Souza’s books to Hacker’s *Two Nations*, a book that he feels is a more focused discussion of racial issues. Steele is the subject of two different tracks in Byron’s 1995 *Music for Six Musicians*. Because of Steele’s criticism of affirmative action, Byron has referred to Steele as one of the “people of color enlisted by the enemy.”

**Dinesh D’Souza**

D’Souza is currently a Hoover Institute fellow and previously served as an American Enterprise Institute fellow, senior policy analyst in the Reagan administration, and managing editor of *Policy Review*. With his 1995 book *The End of Racism*, D’Souza “undertakes the first comprehensive inquiry into the history, nature, and ultimate meaning of racism” by addressing the following questions: “Is racism a Western idea?” “Was slavery a racist institution?” “Why did white liberals and black activists abandon color blindness as a basis for law and policy?” “Why have charges of racism multiplied while clear evidence of racism has declined?” “Why is the black underclass worse off while the black middle class is better off?” “Can blacks be racist?” “Does contemporary liberalism have a future?” “Is racism the main problem facing

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225 Byron, “What inspires you to compose/perform music that has political overtones?”
blacks today?” Additionally, he contends that while the traditional forms of
discrimination have declined, there is a new form of discrimination that he calls
“rational discrimination” due to “black cultural pathology”: “High crime rates of young
black males, for example, make taxi drivers more reluctant to pick them up,
storekeepers more likely to follow them in stores, and employers less willing to hire
them. Rational discrimination is based on accurate group generalizations that may
nevertheless be unfair to particular members of a group.” D’Souza differentiates
racism from rational discrimination since the latter is based on group conduct, not a
belief of biological inferiority. After studying the practices of cab drivers, racial
stereotypes, the media, hiring practices, mortgage lending, and criminal justice
statistics, D’Souza concludes that rational discrimination may not necessarily be moral
but places the blame for its existence on the destructive conduct of young black men
that provides a “basis for statistically valid group distinctions.”

D’Souza’s inflammatory rhetorical style elicits many negative responses. John
Hood, President and Chairman of the John Locke Foundation, believes that D’Souza
lacks prudence with his use of language, making comments that “provoke rather than
persuade.” Examples of this include the chapter title “Uncle Tom’s Dilemma:
Pathologies of Black Culture”; and in a section discussing high illegitimacy rates among
black children, D’Souza writes: “With some discomfort, we see that there is some truth
to the historical stereotype of the black male stud . . . .” Michael Bérubé, the Paterno
Family Professor in Literature at Penn State University, agrees with Hood’s assertion of
insensitivity and lists several of D’Souza’s offenses, including: “The American slave was

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22-24.
229 Ibid., 24.
230 Ibid., 245-287. Quote from p. 287.
D’Souza quote from The End of Racism, 517.
treated like property, which is to say, pretty well;” and, when discussing blacks being recruited into federal jobs programs or the private sector: “Yet it seems unrealistic, bordering on the surreal, to imagine underclass blacks with their gold chains, limping walk, obscene language, and arsenal of weapons doing nine-to-five jobs at Procter and Gamble or the State Department.” With these examples it is not difficult to see why Bérubé titles his review “Extreme Prejudice: The Coarsening of American Conservatism” and why Byron would find D’Souza’s books offensive.

Andrew Hacker

Social and political scientist Andrew Hacker takes a different position when he states: “From slavery through the present, the nation has never opened its doors sufficiently to give black Americans a chance to become full citizens.” In Two Nations, he draws upon his background to try to understand the contemporary role and significance of race in the United States. He begins by presenting his observations of racial definition and division, what it is like to be black in America, and why white Americans react to African Americans in the way that they do. Next, he focuses on the role of race in education, family life, the economy, politics, and crime. He posits that few whites are willing to think about how their majority provides them with power and privilege, and that black Americans “face boundaries and constrictions set by the white majority.”

Reviews of Two Nations are mixed. Don Wycliff, public editor of the Chicago Tribune, believes that while some indict Hacker for his emphasis on white racism, it is

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233 Ibid. D’Souza quote from The End of Racism, 504.


235 Ibid., 4.
welcome as a counter charge to those who have recently declared that whites are not at all responsible for racism. However, by placing responsibility elsewhere, Wycliff concludes that Hacker “unfortunately . . . [captures] . . . the sense of victimization and insult that can never be absent from an African-American’s consciousness.”

James Traub, a regular contributor to The New York Times Magazine, Harper’s, and The Atlantic Monthly, appreciates how Hacker avoids superficial interpretation of statistical data, thereby effectively refuting deceptively optimistic claims. He points to one example where Hacker notes that the proportion of black households earning $50,000 annually has risen 46 percent between 1970 and 1990. Although this sounds promising, Hacker’s interpretation goes one step further when he reminds us that the $50,000 figure accounts for household, not individual, income: “So while there is now a much larger black middle class, more typically, the husband is likely to be a bus driver earning $32,000, while his wife brings home $28,000 as a teacher or a nurse. A white middle-class family is three to four times more likely to contain a husband earning $75,000 in a managerial position, which allows him to support a nonworking wife.”

Hacker also contends that many white Americans believe that conditions for black Americans are not bad and because of affirmative action it is sometimes a disadvantage to be white. He uses a parable to force his white sociology students to think about the value of their whiteness: An official representing a wealthy organization informs them that they were mistakenly born white. At midnight they will become black. They can be monetarily compensated for this mistake and are expected to live for fifty more years. What do they request? He finds that most ask, on average, for $1 million per year. Hacker believes that this high figure conveys the value that the

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students place on their whiteness. Further, the large compensation would be used to “buy protections from the discriminations and dangers white people know they would face once they were perceived to be black.”

Byron refers to Hacker’s parable in *Domino Theories II* on *Nu Blaxploitation*. It is not a musical selection, but instead takes the form of a conversation between Byron and members of his band during a game of dominoes. He talks about this conversation in an interview:

Byron: Everybody knows that they don’t want to be Black because it’s a hassle, but when Black people start talking about it, everybody pretends that racism is over.

Interviewer: [The comedian] Chris Rock touched on that when he said that no white man in America would trade places with him and he’s rich.

Byron: . . . . That’s what one of the stories that we were talking about, which was actually drawn from this sociologist, who every year speaks to his class and he says, “How much would it be worth to you if you were all of [a] sudden Black today?” People that he had been trying to convince that there was racism at all, all of [a] sudden had a price. It would [be] worth two million dollars a year or four million dollars a year, the kind of money that [athletes] make.

While the results of Hacker’s parable certainly do not constitute a scientific study, they do support both his and Byron’s claims that few whites have thought about their intrinsic power and privilege and that racism still warrants thoughtful discussion.

**Shelby Steele**

Like D’Souza, Shelby Steele is a fellow at the Hoover Institution, where he specializes in race relations, multiculturalism, and affirmative action. He received the

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In his book, Steele states that psychological barriers to black progress are as much to blame as social or economic barriers. These psychological barriers are self-defeating by preventing a retrieval of one’s full humanity. Blacks also suffer from an inferiority anxiety resulting from the fear that societal notions of inferiority may be true, making the risk of seizing opportunity too great. It therefore becomes easier to maintain a victim-focused identity that claims there is less actual opportunity available. Steele hypothesizes that in the past, this victimization has been black’s source of power.

Juan Williams, a senior correspondent for National Public Radio, acknowledges that black politics does focus on victimization, but believes Steele’s strong emphasis on black psychology lacks a necessary historical perspective by glossing over the fact that the fears of inferiority are a direct consequence of the past. Historically, blacks have endured centuries of vilification and denials of educational and economic opportunity. Williams warns that by ignoring history, Steele opens himself to charges that he is a pawn of those who claim that whites no longer bear any responsibility for the problems of black America. Additionally, he concludes that this lack of historical perspective makes Steele’s argument just as weak as those he criticizes: he evades history while others focus solely upon history. Finally, Williams points out: “Steele’s own evasion blinds him to the plausible grounds for affirmative action; without a knowledge of the past, there is no rationale for companies to seek out qualified minorities for jobs, because there is no history of whites excluding qualified people on the basis of gender and race.”

242 Ibid., 170.
Steele’s main criticism of affirmative action is that despite its intentions, the program has resulted in racial preferences and that whites will view the recipients of these preferences as inferior, further stigmatizing blacks.\textsuperscript{244} Further, he thinks that affirmative action programs encourage blacks to invest in a victim-based identity.\textsuperscript{245} Steele would instead prefer economic and educational development of all disadvantaged people, and a strictly monitored eradication of all kinds of racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination from our society, resulting in equal opportunity for all.\textsuperscript{246}

Michael Eric Dyson, Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities at the University of Pennsylvania, argues against this logic by relating an incident as a college undergraduate where, after he was honored at an awards banquet for winning a fellowship to Princeton, a white man he had never met made it clear that he believed Dyson’s admission to Princeton wouldn’t have occurred without affirmative action. Dyson says that the claims of writers like Steele are bolstered by such incidents, proving that whites will always believe that blacks will only advance in life with the artificial means of affirmative action. Refuting this claim, Dyson feels that at present, affirmative action is the best way to guarantee blacks access to jobs, schools and resources that should be available to them regardless of whether whites still view them as inferior. He is willing to accept this possibility: “If black folk are stigmatized in the process, better to be stigmatized and treated justly than stigmatized without justice or power.”\textsuperscript{247}

In Byron’s 1995 \textit{Music for Six Musicians}, Steele is a subject of two different tracks. The first, \textit{Uh-Oh, Chango/White History Month}, features music by Byron and words written and performed by Sadiq Bey. The text addresses those who feel a Black History Month reasonably justifies a White History Month. It also serves to remind Steele of the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{244} Steele, \textit{The Content of Our Character}, 116-118.
\item\textsuperscript{245} Ibid., 118.
\item\textsuperscript{246} Ibid., 123-124.
\item\textsuperscript{247} Michael Eric Dyson, \textit{Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 79-80. Quote from p. 80.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
historical sacrifices his predecessors made which led to his success, and to stress the continued need for affirmative action:

Aficionado of the dis
Sometimes soon you’re gonna miss
What brought you to recognition
While your strategy suggests perdition.
Without our champions you’d be carting out the trash
When the guests are gone,
Without our heroes, Shelby Steele would be mowing the master’s grass,
A lawn jockey waiting for the mailman.²⁴⁸

Byron also alters the penultimate line into the title Shelby Steele would be mowing your lawn for a purely instrumental track. He clearly disagrees with Steele’s message and worries about the ramifications of the mainstream publicity that Steele and other writers who agree with him receive:

The whole phenomenon of black conservatism and forms that it takes, . . . Shelby is slick. And he knows he can say something incredibly true, and say something so killingly false, within a whisper. He’s a very clever man, and very dangerous. And then, a lot of people that have no contact with black people at all read him. And that’s their opinion on how shit would go, it’s based on him, and not, hmm... Why don’t you hang out with some black folks and then you can decide what your conservative politics on the subject should be. But people read him instead of experiencing black folks.²⁴⁹

Musical Reflection of the Title

Tuskegee Experiments, Domino Theories II, and Uh-Oh, Chango/White History Month all have text that help a listener gain greater insight into Byron’s meanings. The instrumental pieces, Shelby Steele would be mowing your lawn and Bernard Goetz, James

Ramseur and Me, provide a glimpse of information in the title but require program notes or comments in interviews for the listener to achieve a more complete level of understanding. Any compositional methods Byron uses to convey a meaning may or may not be obvious. In one interview he talks about the use of a musical quotation in Shelby Steele would be mowing your lawn: “I remember the only really obvious thing I did, I quoted Bells in England in the bridge of it, just to say that what was happening with Shelby Steele was [a] little bit of colonialism. You know, just internalized colonialism.” In another interview he mentions a different technique entirely:

Every tune on [the] Six Musicians record has techniques that dealt with the subject matter differently. Take Shelby Steele. It states the melody, then states it upside down in the clave, then states it two beats off in the clave; so it talks about how if you state something out of context it changes meaning. My point is that you can talk politically in any context, even repertory. Any lump of clay you pick up, you can use to say anything you need.

This second technique would be especially obscure to most listeners, leading one to conclude that Byron’s musical manifestations of his subjects are more personal and intuitive. In an interview he joked about the abstract nature of instrumental music as opposed to a leitmotif representation: “Well, when you’re dealing with instrumental music, unless you want to get really Wagnerian, like this little line is this gnome . . .” If he wanted his audience to understand every nuance, he would write more detailed liner notes or provide detailed analyses on his website. With the instrumental pieces he seems to be more interested in providing a feeling or impression, not an exact map of his thought process. When writing about John Coltrane’s Alabama, Davis makes statements that can also be used to explain the relationship of Byron’s music and their titles:

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250 Ibid.
252 Byron, “Interview with Don Byron: Hip-Hop and Racial Politics.”
Music is a “pure” art; a note or chord or rhythmic pattern has no literal meaning in the way that a poem, a passage of prose, a song lyric, a representational or even an abstract painting can. Yet what we hear in music—what we think we hear, influenced by the composer’s title or some other piece of information we accept as a clue to his intentions—gradually assumes its own reality.  

Conclusion

By using song titles, accompanying texts, liner notes, and information gleaned from interviews, listeners are able to understand Byron’s views on race and racism. Through his music citing the two Tuskegee Experiments he reminds us of historical situations that can metaphorically be repeated today. Bernard Goetz serves as an example of the extreme consequences of stereotyping that some will clinically excuse as rational discrimination. Byron differs with the public intellectuals D’Souza and Steele who promote the view that white racism is no longer a significant factor, and further, that African Americans are hindering their own progress due to their “cultural pathology” and “psychological barriers.” These views align well with the more politically conservative philosophy of self-reliance. As a result, conservative media and politicians promote them as justification for the cancellation of social programs like affirmative action. Finally, while African Americans may no longer routinely experience the overt historical forms of unapologetic racism, Byron insists that they continue to suffer discriminatory treatment and it needs to be discussed:

I think we’re at a point in history where people don’t want to think about those things because it profits them to think, or at least to let you think, that all of this stuff is over and we don’t need to be talking about biases of race and gender. And it’s never over, either you want to talk about it or you don’t . . .

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253 Davis, “Coltrane at 75: the Man and the Myths.”
CONCLUSION

Don Byron’s music provides an artistic forum in which to study complex issues of authenticity, ownership, and categorization. The musical authenticity of Mickey Katz has been questioned both during his time and by klezmer revivalists. His contemporaries found fault with a perceived anti-assimilationist message in his parodies while the revivalists have called Katz’s jazz-influenced klezmer tunes too assimilated. When Katz’s authenticity is questioned, so too is Byron’s; issues of authenticity morph into a referendum on the ownership of musical style. Sapoznik and other like-minded participants of the klezmer revival have used the music as a means of creating a contemporary sense of Jewish communal identity; they exclude Byron in the process. Further complicating matters is the fact that while he may not look the part, he is said to play klezmer in a convincing manner. As Stephen Sherrill has observed, this forces listeners to “disconnect what they’re hearing from any preconceived notions of what someone playing such music looks like.”

When Byron combined the music of Raymond Scott, John Kirby, and young Duke Ellington in Bug Music, he not only presented transcriptions of unique swing-era music that defied strict categorization, but also drew together three bandleaders with whom he has shared a similar critical reception. Because of their mix of influences and their lack of conformity to the critic’s exclusive definition of what constituted jazz, all

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four have fielded charges that they were not playing jazz. Byron also asserts that these critics are often influenced by “jazzism,” a failure to accept African American musicians who venture outside of jazz. Additionally, exclusion appears to be a common motivation for Byron’s jazz and klezmer detractors: Crouch and Marsalis exclude Byron in order to legitimize their version of a jazz narrative promoted by Jazz at Lincoln Center, and Sapoznik and klezmer revivalists exclude Byron to claim the narrative of their contemporary Jewish identity.

In addition to confronting the topics of authenticity, ownership, and categorization, Byron also uses his music as a vehicle to address sociopolitical issues. Specifically, over the course of four different CDs, he provides commentary on the topic of contemporary racism. Most importantly, he alerts his listeners that biases still exist and warns them that an “evasion of civil, focused discussions of racial issues is, in itself, a form of racism.” His worldview is as much a part of him as his music, and it is important for him as an artist to integrate the two: “People that know me know that if we’re gonna talk for an hour, we’ll spend 20 minutes talking about stuff that I have in my pieces.”

Two large themes emerge in the music and issues examined in this treatise: categorization that goes beyond music, and access. While categorization is the central issue of Bug Music, it also intersects with the issue of authenticity in the debate over Katz’s jazz-influenced klezmer. For some revivalists, Katz does not fit cleanly into the klezmer category, so therefore he is not performing authentic klezmer. Another variation of categorization is stereotyping. This can lead to potentially dangerous behavior, as demonstrated by the actions of Bernard Goetz, or lead to controversial views, as demonstrated by the theory of rational discrimination and the ideas expressed by Dinesh D’Souza and Shelby Steele.

256 Byron, liner notes for Nu Blaxploitation.
The second theme concerns African American’s access to opportunity. Byron addressed how he has been made to feel like an outsider when playing klezmer. This exposes a double standard in which black musicians are not as likely as white musicians to be allowed access to music that traditionally has not been part of their culture:

It’s been the role of African-Americans to be the source, but not to play the game, not to be in the Paul Simon position of looking at another culture and participating in it directly. We’re just supposed to be this source of cop-able material that’s elevated by the masters of the game. Somehow, when Paul Simon plays with these cats, he’s elevated their thing. This is one of the rare times where the shit’s been reversed, where I as an African-American feel entitled to [klezmer], and not without effort. Certainly, all the people that usually play that music don’t love the fact that I do it at the level that I do it.258

“Jazzism” also works against access; it discourages African Americans from partaking in other kinds of music, especially classical. Byron related how some of his music teachers assumed that he was going to play jazz, and points to other African American woodwind players who pursued jazz because of the institutional lack of access to classical music:

A lot of cats were classical clarinet players when they went to school . . . But, among the black reed players in New York, it was a question of how much direct participation in post-academic classical activity could they have gotten into when they got out of school. . . All of the cats in the Ellington reed section could have played in symphony orchestras if they had been white. But they dealt with it by being scholarly brothers. When I hear Otto Hardwick, I immediately hear legit. When you hear [Eric] Dolphy, you hear not just legit, but a whole Heinz Hollinger contemporary music headspace. They just never got the chance to pursue it.259

Finally, African American’s access to opportunities in the workplace, education, and a variety of resources is the entire purpose of affirmative action policies. When Byron

259 Ibid.
points out that there are still biases of gender and race, he is addressing the theme of access.

The theme of access is extremely important in Byron’s life, exemplified by his interest in the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. Byron pays homage to the Brooklyn-born artist of Haitian and Puerto Rican parentage with two different versions of his composition *Basquiat*. The artist enjoyed a successful yet brief career in the 1980s before dying at age 27 of a drug overdose. His art integrated many influences, including pop culture, politics, jazz music, sports, books, and references to other artists. In addition to Basquiat’s broad worldview, Byron feels an affinity for how the artist participated in cultural practices to which he might not otherwise have had access:

Basquiat’s work really speaks to a kind of cultural way of looking at things. He was of color and made access for himself. Access to art, access to music, access to whatever he wanted to put in his world. And I think black people in this country are really encouraged to be kind of provincial folks who don’t stray outside of a certain kind of cultural framework. They’re not supposed to know about high art and heavy films. And like lots of great black artists, he accessed what he needed to access.

Byron’s eclecticism as a musician is not cultivated for publicity, but is an honest representation of who he is:

I’m not aiming at a market, I’m trying to define a space. It’s a space that me and, I think, a lot of other funky black intellectuals are into. It’s Afrocentric with a world view; a different headspace than that of the rappers, who’ve never been

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out of the ‘hood, who don’t read science fiction or other literature, or care about Hitchcock movies, for instance. When you make music, you try to define your space, I think, and if you’re successful, over time the circle of people who identify with that space grows.²⁶⁴

He follows his curiosity and accesses any part of American culture that interests him, perhaps running into categorical constraints but always sharing his observations along the way. In the process of defining his space, Byron presents himself as a musician and an intellectual.


_______. “Silent is golden with Byron’s new film score.” Chicago Tribune. 26 January 1998. 5:2.


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DISCOGRAPHY


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BIographiesKETCH

Steve Becraft earned his Bachelor of Music degree in 1992 from the University of Nevada, Reno, and his Master of Music degree in 1994 from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He has studied clarinet with Frank Kowalsky, Rosario Mazzeo, David Ehrke, and Deborah Pittman, and saxophone with Patrick Meighan and Mark Tulga.

Mr. Becraft is currently Assistant Professor of Clarinet and Saxophone at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, and has also served on the music faculties of Troy State University in Alabama, the University of Nevada, Reno, and the San Francisco Community Music Center. He frequently performs on clarinet and bass clarinet with the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra and spent the summers of 2001-2003 as a member of the Utah Festival Opera Orchestra. Previous orchestral appointments include the Tallahassee Symphony, Reno Philharmonic, Fresno Philharmonic, and the Northern Nevada Concert Orchestra. Additionally, he has performed at the 2003 International Clarinet Association ClarinetFest in Salt Lake City and the 2004 National Association of Teachers of Singing national convention in New Orleans.

In March 2001 Mr. Becraft’s article Don Byron and From Spirituals to Swing: Breaking New Ground was published in The Clarinet, the quarterly journal of the International Clarinet Association.