

Kamau Brathwaite

Jazz and the West Indian Novel, I, II and III

The Blues is a special kind of music... It is... the artistic expression of a particular kind of Negro – the Negro slave and his descendants under the geographical and social conditions of the American South...

Jazz, on the other hand, is not 'slave' music at all. It is the emancipated Negro's music: hence its brash brass colouring, the bravado, its parade of syncopation, its emphasis on improvisation, its *swing*. It is the music of the freed man who having left the countryside of his shamed and bitter origins, has moved into the complex, high-life town...

Jazz... was, and in many ways continues to be, the perfect expression for the rootless, 'cultureless', truly ex-patriate Negro...

Jazz has been from the beginning a cry from the heart of the hurt man, the lonely one. We hear this in the saxophone and trumpet. But its significance comes not from this alone, but from its collective blare of protest and its affirmation of the life and rhythm of the group...

We should expect that other great creolized and Negro societies of the Americas – the Caribbean – also to have its jazz.

But there is no West Indian jazz. The urban, emancipated Negro musical forms in the West Indies, where they appear at all – the calypso in Trinidad, the ska in Jamaica, and the similar, related forms in some of the Spanish and French islands – are concerned with protest only incidentally. They are essentially collective forms, ridiculing individualism, singing the praises of eccentricity, certainly, more often celebrating their own peculiar notions of conformity. The West Indian musical form, where it has any general area of application at all, is basically a music for dancing: a communal, almost tribal form. There is no suggestion of alienation, no note of chaos in calypso...

This isn't to say that there was (or is) no protest tradition in the West Indies... But West Indian post-emancipation protest, being not concerned like the American with 'civil rights', the place and status of a black minority in a white world, but rather with subtleties of caste and colour, of West Indian against West Indian, has achieved

little or no liberating, self-creative expression. There has been, it is true, with the increasing urbanization of Kingston and Port-of-Spain, a growing element of protest (and comfort) in the calypso and the ska. But it is still too early to see this as a positive contribution... here it has been mainly literary...

And yet it is here, in the new literary elements in the calypso and ska, and of course in the more sophisticated and elaborate structures of West Indian poetry and novels, [that] we can find a connection, (or rather a correspondence) between jazz (the American Negro expression based on Africa), and a West Indian Negro expression based on Africa... We will, in other words, be looking for some mode of New World Negro cultural expression, based on an African inheritance... [but] built... on a superstructure of Euro-American language, attitudes and techniques. Jazz, for instance, is played in an Africanized manner on European instruments...

My concern... is... with the (British) West Indian contribution to the general movement of New World creative protest of which I regard jazz as the archetype. I am asking here whether we can, and if it is worthwhile attempting to, sketch out some kind of aesthetic whereby we may be helped to see West Indian literature in its (or seems to me) proper context of an expression both European and African at the same time... The West Indian writer is just beginning to enter his own cultural New Orleans. He is expressing in his work of words that joy, that protest, that paradox [of] community and aloneness, that controlled mixture of chaos and order, hope and disillusionment, based on his New World experience, which is at the heart of jazz. It is in the first place mainly a Negro experience; but it is also a folk experience; and it has... a relevance to the 'modern' predicament as we understand it today...

Words, then, are the notes of this new New Orleans music. The 'personal urge for words', the West Indian writer's trumpet. But the 'jazz' sound of these novels is not expressed in words alone...

Word, image and rhythm are only the basic elements of what, within the terms of my definition, would go to make up a jazz aesthetic in the Caribbean novel. What determines the shape and direction of a jazz performance... is the nature of its improvisation...

It should be clear by now that what I am attempting in this study is the delineation of a possible alternative to the European cultural tradition which has been imposed upon us and which we have more

or less accepted and absorbed, for obvious historical reasons, as the only way of going about our business. Or to put it more accurately: I'm trying to outline an alternative to the English Romantic/Victorian cultural tradition which still operates among and on us, despite the 'colonial' breakthrough already achieved by Eliot, Pound and Joyce; and despite the presence among us of a folk tradition which in itself, it seems to me, is the basis of an alternative. Our folk tradition, however, and the urbanized products of this tradition – jazz in the United States, calypso and ska in the islands – has been (with the partial exception of jazz) largely ignored; and where it has been examined, the examination has been usually cursory, uncritical, sometimes patronizing. The assumption has been that these are debased forms; hybrid forms; formless peripheral forms . . .

The resistance to the calypso and related West Indian indigenous forms by West Indians is and continues to be, it seems to me, a very real and pervasive thing. But it is the nature of the objection which is most pertinent to our discussion: the fear of attack on the *moral standards* of the middle class; the objection of *belly-centred* bawdy. As Odium said, quoting from Derek Walcott: 'we must teach our philosophy to reach above the navel'. And yet it is around this very navel that the battle rages. The alternative tradition is belly-centred: in the beat, the drum, the apparent bawdy. This region, as opposed to the middle-class Romantic/Victorian virtues of the 'head', is the centre of Sparrow's art; is the source of Louise Bennett's vitality; is the blood-beat of the ska and jazz . . . And behind this whole revolt, this assertion of an alternative, there lies the deep rhythmical and formal influence of Africa . . .

But . . . this tradition has remained fixed, isolated, a relic, a ruin; a memory that has ceased to move and therefore hardly moves us. Even our novelists, more aware than most others that there is something *there*, have not on the whole made any real concerted attempt to explore or rehabilitate this tradition. After an instinctive, initial (usually autobiographical) attempt to associate with this tradition, they have (most of them), left the islands either physically or spiritually or both, before they have come to grips with these 'alternative' possibilities . . . we still await serious and more than occasional ethno-cultural and *creative* sociological studies on this subject.

It is because of this lack of information, of articulation, that in the search for a possible West Indian aesthetic I have chosen, for the

time being, to explore the potentials of jazz as a working model. Jazz is a New World negro form of expression that *has* received study, recognition and a certain measure of acceptance. And it is an urban folk form that has wider and more modern connections and correspondences with the increasingly cosmopolitan world in which we live, than the purely West Indian folk forms . . . Most importantly, jazz, in several quarters, is already *seen* to be, or to represent, an alternative to the 'European' tradition . . .

It is of course difficult . . . to make wholly convincing correspondences from music into literature; and easier to demonstrate relations between jazz improvisation and the folk/oral tradition than it is to do the same with jazz and the more conscious products of the 'written' tradition . . . What can be said with some certainty, however, is that . . . many folk forms, and those passages on West Indian . . . literary works that grapple most closely with folk forms and folk experience, contain elements of improvisation . . .

[There] is a folk form improvisation tacked on . . . at the end of Neville Dawes' *The Last Enchantment* (1960) . . . an almost perfect example of improvisation, in the jazz sense, where tone, rhythm and image come together to create a certain kind of effect . . . this same story could be told by different people with infinite degrees of variation . . . But this is not jazz improvisation (the novel's concerns are too 'sophisticated' for this) . . . no West Indian novelist has, as far as I know, attempted yet to incorporate the Anancy story structure in the form of his work; and this is because, as I have already suggested, most of our novelists, after their initial 'creole' expression, have passed on out of the West Indian orbit, moving to London, New York or Montreal before they can really come to grips with the problem of formally expressing the deep-rooted experiences of the folk aspect of their tradition. Where is the second and third novel written by a West Indian *in* the West Indies about the West Indies? . . .

To find 'written' examples of improvisation similar to the Anancy story, we have to turn to those few poets who have remained working in the West Indies . . . and who have had . . . to come to grips with the oral tradition of the region (e.g. Louise Bennett [in] *PeDESTRIAN* *Grass*).

The 'improvisation' here is not only in the variations of tone, made possible by the assumption of dramatic method (as in the calypso),

and in the changes of rhythm within the verse structure, but in the 'melody' itself – the variations based on the word 'cross' ...

Improvisatory effects can also be achieved through repetition of a 'theme' – the jazz 'riff' – a kind of collective response which marks the end of one improvisation and the beginning of the next. This is a form found in many folk literatures ...

In his train scene in *The Emigrants* (1954) George Lamming uses a similar kind of device, contracted to a single repeated line ... 'WILL PASSENGERS KEEP THEIR HEADS WITHIN THE TRAIN?' ...

The 'theme' here is the train journey. The improvisation is in the rhythm, the shifts of tone and rhythm, the repetitions, the apparently spontaneous variations of thought, point of view and comments that make the journey 'happen' ...

Here at the end of the 'performance' (the journey) the ensemble re-asserts itself ('Remember we keep together'), though still expressing the individual/group dilemma ('But if a man see one single good break goin' ...') which jazz, on the whole, has so successfully resolved ...

There are, of course, even more subtle, more 'literary' kinds of improvisation, where the variation takes place not in the word and/or rhythm only, but in the image and metaphor of the theme; so that a kind of transformation of meaning takes place ... (e.g. Lamming: *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), p. 121 or Wilson Harris' *The Waiting Room* (1967b) ...)

Harris' book, taken as a whole, is not a jazz novel. As with Lamming, his concerns remain individual rather than social ... They move beyond 'mere' regional socio-cultural preoccupations, into the infra-national and cosmopolitan; though their modes of expression and the structures of their work, based as they are on New World experience, remain outside the 'European' tradition ...

Our concern in this study is with the novel as an expression of West Indian 'creole' experience: a structure taking its form from the pressures of West Indian social reality. My thesis is that faithfulness to this concern discovers a form similar to that evolved by the American negro in jazz; I hope to be able to trace ... this in ... Roger Mais' *Brother Man* ...

Brother Man, significantly, opens with a 'Chorus of People' – musical and social elements ...

This is the basic rhythm of the book. But playing against it, leaking

ension into it (compare the method with say, Vic Reid's *New Day*), there is a staccato counterpoint:

– Cordy's man get tek-up for' ganga ...
– Bra Man show de gospel way ...
– Me-gal still wi' hold wid Bra' Ambo ...

(p. 8)

But after this 'downbeat', this introductory statement of theme, the rhythm changes, as it shifts and changes in jazz, and we hear the entry of the first solo instrument – or rather solo instruments, because two people, a woman and a man (Girлие and Papactia) are involved ...

Gradually, as from within a New Orleans ensemble or a Duke Ellington structure, these two solo instruments begin an interchange; the male voice and action (trumper) alone first, staccato, challenging the female (clarinet) ...

In the next scene (pp. 12-15) another 'duet' is started, this time between a small boy, Joe, and Jennings, a policeman; both as Mais reveals later, having significant connection with Papactia and Girлие of the first theme. The third theme, also in duet form, introduces two sisters, Cordy and Jesmina (pp. 15-17). And before the introduction of ... Brother Man himself, Mais links Girлие – Papactia and Cordy – Jesmina (p. 16); and brings about the expected resolution of 'conflict' between Girлие and Papactia started in the first theme. This resolution is expressed not only as 'plot', as a literal union of voices; the two individual soloists begin to interchange with each other in a kind of collective improvisation. That is, the solo voices (pronoun notes), instead of being continued to separate paragraphs, now begin to appear together in the same lines ... (pp. 21-2) ...

The introduction of the 'sexual' here ... underlines the social theme of the novel with its emphasis on collectiveness, cohesion and making ... But perhaps most importantly, this scene serves as an introduction and counterpoint to the other and main theme of the book: Brother Man with his sense of spiritual love; and the conflict, within him, as within all men, of this with the physical ...

Mais now moves from clumsy *word* to dramatic *symbol*. And herein lies his integrity as a 'folk' artist. He is able, always, to reinforce what is often quite banal verbalisation with meaningful *image* ... [e.g.] (pp. 25-6).

This trapped flutered bird is Minette, is Brother Man, is all the people who live within this novel. It is also the life of Brother Man's spirit, it is the life of 'making the room new' and it is also the life and love within Minette... (p. 32)... The whole novel, in fact, is structured around this image as a jazz improvisation is based on the few notes of a theme...

Brother Man, then, reveals certain rhythmic, thematic and structural features which justify, I think, my comparing it to music. Its specific relationship to New Orleans jazz comes with its peculiar sense of union and unity, its contrasting 'duets', its 'improvisation' and correspondences and above all, its pervading *sense of community* (its *collective* improvisation). The 'Chorus of People' who introduce each section of the book is only the most obvious instance of this sense of community – and a rather external instance at that. Mais' sense of community goes deeper than a mere device. It informs the very structure of the book...

In *Brother Man* the violence is a kind of communal purgation. It involves the entire community of the novel, finally moving beyond the apparent chaos it brings, to that revelation of wholeness that one is aware of at the end of a successful jazz improvisation...

Using therefore the idea of jazz as an aesthetic model (a way of seeing; a critical tool), we can perhaps now begin to generalise... about the kind of West Indian novel... I have called the 'jazz novel': the most successful, though far from perfect, example of which, so far, has been Roger Mais' *Brother Man*. (The reason why there have not been more of these novels – only Salkey's *A Quality of Violence* could be said to be another; and why Mais' itself is so very flawed... is mainly a question of orientation; attitude to 'West Indian' material; the amount of attention given to what we really have; the kinds of models which we have absorbed as paradigms.)

The 'jazz novel'... deals with a specific, clearly-defined, folk-type community, [and] will try to express the essence of this community through its form. It will absorb its rhythms from the people of this community; and its concern will be with the community as a whole... The conflicts which give this kind of novel meaning will not be Faustian conflicts of self-seeking knowledge or the Existentialist stoicism of alienation... We are not here trying to say what anybody should or should not write. We are striving towards a way of seeing what they write and relating it to our indigenous

experience. There is an argument, of course, that holds that 'our experience' is in fact the world's; by which, I think, is meant West Europe's, certainly Britain[s] and North America's. I do not dispute this; though I would seriously qualify it. But I would also add that those people who delight to see our experience as 'international', as 'cosmopolitan', tend to see it *only* as these things... It is my contention that *before it is too late*, we must try to find the high ground from which we ourselves will see the world, and towards which the world will look to find us. An 'international' tradition by all means for those that wish it. *But a creole culture as well*. And a creole way of seeing first. It is from this that we must begin...

(1967-9)