

Chapter 9: Enter the Middle Class

. . . the race does not advance, it is only better preserved

(Charles Olson)

At the rent parties, barbecues, "hot bed" apartments (places where several families crowded in together to live), and after-hours places, there must have been some Negroes absent -as there had been in the South when religious members of the slave community absented themselves from the "sinful" activities of the more secularly inclined. However, just as the "Jordan" had changed in the minds of a great many Negroes to something immediate and material, so these rent parties were no longer "sinful," but "vulgar," or at least "wasteful." (I can see my grandfather now making such a pronouncement.)

Instead of the fabled existential, happy, carefree Negroes, there were now some black people who were interested in what was around them and how to get to it. (The people who wanted the white man's God had made these same separations in the old society -"I am bound for the Promised Land" -but they had long been losing ground, in

the new cities.) Negroes appeared whose Promised Land was where they were now, if only they could "save a little money, send the kids to school, get a decent place to live. . . ." The further "movement" *into* America. And this movement, this growing feeling that developed among Negroes, was led and fattened by a growing black middle class.

The migration north was, of course, the main reason for the rise of a black middle class in America, since there was in the North that space that the increasing subtlety of the paternalistic society allowed. There was greater room for *progress*.

But even in the slave society there had been the beginnings of a "privileged" class of Negroes. The house servants were extended privileges that were never enjoyed by the majority of "field niggers." The "house nigger" not only assimilated "massa's" ideas and attitudes at a more rapid rate, but his children were sometimes allowed to learn trades and become artisans and craftsmen. These artisans and craftsmen made up the bulk of the 500,000 black freedmen at the beginning of the Civil War.

These house servants, as I have mentioned, were the first to accept the master's religion, and were the first black ministers and proselytizers for the new God. The Christian Church in slave times represented not only a limited way into America, but as it came to be the center of most of the slaves' limited social activities, it also produced a new ruling class among the slaves: the officials of the church.

The church officials, the house servants, and the freedmen were the beginnings of the black middle class, which represented (and represents) not only an economic condition, but, as is true with any stratum of any society, a definite way of looking at the society in which it exists. The black middle class, from its inception (possibly ten seconds after the first Africans were herded off the boat) has formed almost exclusively around the proposition that it is better not to be black in a country where being black is

a liability. All the main roads into America have always been fashioned by the members of the black middle class (not as products of a separate culture, but as vague, featureless Americans). I pointed out earlier why Negroes in North America were able to adopt the customs and habits of the masters so much more quickly than their brothers throughout the rest of the Americas. But still another factor was that from the very

beginning of Afro-American culture in North America, there have always been Negroes who thought that the best way for the black man to survive was to cease being black. First, it was the stench of Africa these aspirant *Americans* wanted to erase; then, the early history of the Negro in America.

The African gods were thrown into disrepute first, and that was easy since they were banned by the whites anyway. As always, the masses of black men adapted, rather than completely assimilated; appropriated, rather than traded, one god or one culture for another. (The Freedman's Bureau published none of the secular songs of the Negro, but only the "religious" songs -and then those that were quite readily recognizable as pickups from pale white Protestant hymns.)

It was the growing black middle class who believed that the best way to survive in America would be to *disappear* completely, leaving no trace at all that there had ever been an Africa, or a slavery, or even, finally, a black man. This was the only way, they thought, to be *citizens*. For the Creoles and mulattoes of the South, this was easier -there *was* a quickly discernible difference between themselves and their darker brother since it was the closeness of their fathers (and mothers) to the masters that had produced them in the first place. Many of the freedmen were mulattoes, and many of the mulatto freedmen and *gens de couleur* even had black slaves themselves. But the darker members of the fledgling bourgeoisie had to work out their salvations under much more difficult circumstances. The real *black*

bourgeoisie was always lashed irrevocably to the burden of color. Hence, the hopelessness and futility of "erasing" all connections to the black society when it was always impossible to erase the most significant connection of all.

Many freedmen had moved north even during slavery: they made up the majority of the Northern black middle class even after the Emancipation. The movement north brought not only the "impoverished masses" but also many members of the middle class: some because they thought to make an even deeper entry into America, some, like the church people, because they had to follow their flocks or they would be out of luck.

Whole churches moved north, and the first thing many of the poor Negroes did when they reached that Promised Land was to pool their meager resources and set up their church again, and get their preacher a good place to live. The storefront church was a Northern phenomenon simply because in the cities these country people found it was impossible to just buy some wood and build a church, as they had done in the South. And many churches, such as the one my parents went to, progressed, as their members moved up the economic ladder in the industrial North, from storefront or apartment to huge, albeit quixotic, structures.

The middle-class churches were always pushing for the complete assimilation of the Negro into white America. Middle-class Baptist and Methodist churches strove with all their might to do away with any of the black appropriations of Christianity that rural Southern Negroes had affected. A white Christianity was, after all, the reason for existence of these churches, and their directors always kept this in their minds. Many churches "split" once they moved north because of conflicts that arose among the members as to whether they wanted the church "black" or "white." Many of the new emigrants had to set up churches of their own because they were not welcome in the black middle-class

churches of the North. In the 1920's, in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, where my grandfather and his flock moved from Alabama, they had to build their own (the Tabernacle Baptist Church) when they found that they were unwelcome in the established black Baptist church because they were *Southerners*. The black residents of Beaver Falls wanted nothing to do with the South and its terrible memories of slavery. They would cut off their own people to have a go at America.

The "morality" of the black middle class was not completely the result of a "spontaneous" reaction to white America, it was also carefully nurtured and cultivated by certain elements of white America. Behind a great many manifestations of the temperament of the black middle class sits the carefully washed "wisdom" of the early Protestant missionaries, who not only *founded* the black Christian churches but also quite consciously instilled the post-Renaissance religious dogmas into their new black congregations. The educational philanthropies were also attended and shaped in their beginnings by these same missionary elements, who sought to show the savage heathens how through "thrift, prayer, and work" they might somehow enter into the kingdom of heaven (even though it might be through the back door). The paradox, and perhaps the cruelest psychological and cultural imposition of all, was the inculcation of this Puritan ethos on a people whose most elegant traditions were the complete antithesis of it. Of course, the poor and the unlettered were the last to respond to this gift, but the strivers after America, the neophytes of the black middle class, responded as quickly as they could. In effect, the way to Puritan Protestant heaven only existed for the black man who could pretend he was also a Protestant and a Puritan.

When the supernatural goal of the society (black and white) yielded to the more practical, positivistic ideals of industrialized twentieth-century America, salvation belonged

to those who realized that the worth of man was his ability to make money. The black middle class responded to this call, as it would to any call that would insure it respectability and prestige and their concomitant privilege. But religious or positivist, the adjustment necessary for the black man to enter completely into a "white" American society was a complete disavowal that he or *his part of the culture* had ever been anything else but American. (The cruel penalty for this kind of situation is the socio-cultural temperament of America today, where the very things that have served to erect a distinctive culture on this continent are most feared and misunderstood by the majority of Americans!) But the fact was that by the time of the move north (and precipitated in part because of it), the oppression the Negro knew America capable of -his indestructible bond with this country -and the space and light he saw it capable of producing sat dictating the narrow path most Negroes could travel on their way toward *citizenship*. For Negroes, the oppression was an historical imperative informing each response they could make to whatever situation the society proposed; but their ever-widening knowledge of the country and its most profound emotional characteristics made any withdrawal impossible. Even the poorer Negro had moved to the point where he thought perhaps he might one day live in this country as a person of certain economic capability, with almost complete disregard of the color of his skin. (This is a brilliant, yet desperately conceived hypothesis, but its validity has yet to be demonstrated.) However, the moral-religious tradition of the black middle class is a weird mixture of cultural opportunism and fear. It is a tradition that is capable of reducing any human conceit or natural dignity to the barest form of social outrage.

It is uncomfortably symbolic that there were some Negroes "absent" from the rent and barbecue parties, just as it is analogous of the social microcosm that at twelve o'clock in

the old Tin Type Hall in New Orleans, around the turn of the century, "when the ball was getting right, the more respectable Negroes who did attend went home. Then Bolden played a number called *Don't Go Away Nobody*, and the dancing got rough. When the orchestra settled down to the slow blues, the music was mean and dirty, as Tin Type roared full blast." ⁴² It was not only the Creoles' purely political (made social) response to a Negro music but the feeling of the black people themselves that there were things much more important than the natural expression of a vital culture.

In the North, before the migration that hurled all the deepest blacks of Southern Negro culture into America

at large, the Northern Negroes had to a great extent secured themselves a leaky boat of security from these reminders of the slave culture. "Most of the Negro population in New York then [around 1921] had either been born there or had been in the city so long, they were fully acclimated. They were trying to forget the traditions of the South; they were trying to emulate the whites. You couldn't deliver a package to a Negro's front door. You had to go down to the cellar door. And Negroes dressed to go to work. They changed into work clothes when they got there. You usually weren't allowed to play blues and boogie woogie in the average Negro middle-class home. That music supposedly suggested a low element. And the big bands with the violins, flutes, piccolos, didn't play them either." [43](#)

One of the funniest and most cruelly absurd situations to develop because of the growth and influence of a definable black middle class in America is the case of Black Swan Records. Black Swan was founded and run by a Negro, Harry Pace, during the early twenties. It was the first Negro-owned record company in the country, and it quickly

grew into a money-maker, its success based to a large extent on the popularity of its star performer, a young girl named Ethel Waters. Black Swan also recorded numerous other blues performers, and advertised its products as: "The Only Genuine Colored Record. Others Are Only Passing for Colored." (A wild turnabout!) But many Negroes, especially those in business, brought pressure on Pace to change his position, since they thought that the job of a Negro recording company would be to show how dignified Negroes really were . . . and, of course, blues were not dignified. Pace tried to use all kinds of other material that was not strictly blues (for this reason Ethel Waters with her torchy, "pop" style was a godsend), but the popularity of the company waned because the audience to which the records were largely aimed did not care as much about the *dignity* of its musical tastes as the Negro business community. Finally, Black Swan was sold to Paramount, a white company, which had no qualms about recording the rougher, less dignified, blues performers.

The *space* the city provided grew quickly vertical. The idea of *society*, or at least divisions within a social milieu, grew more common among Negroes. The earlier "mulatto-freedmen-house servant-field servant" division that became so fixed within the slave society was, of course, broken down, but the new strata forming within the "free" black societies proved to be equally as rigid. The new society based its divisions almost completely upon *acquisition*, reflecting and reacting to the changed psyche of twentieth-century America. In the black society, the change was effected almost exclusively by the mass movement north and the "openness" of the new industrial culture. The older, stricter divisions of black society, based on certain mythological characteristics of color-caste and the importance of less menial positions within the slave culture, were broken down because many "field niggers" and "monkey men" (dark-skinned African-looking Negroes) could go into

Mr. Ford's factories and "make \$5 a day just like a white man." The white society's need for Negro laborers and the resulting scramble into the great Northern cities "smeared" the caste lines of an older black society and began to form a sprawling bourgeoisie based on the pay check -an almost exact duplication of the way in which the earlier caste system of white America was "debased." But the white society still had some semblance of caste -its "first" families, intact (although frequently as heads or "captains" of industry). Negroes could not become "captains" of industry and could never have belonged to any first families (except, perhaps, as family retainers), so it was the professional men -doctors, lawyers, ministers -who were the heads of the new black society. And these people wanted more than anything in life to become *citizens*. They were not ever satisfied with being freedmen, or former slaves. They wanted no connection with that "stain on America's past"; and what is more, they wanted the right (which they thought they could earn by moving sufficiently away from the blacker culture) to look on that "stain" as objectively as possible, when they had

to, and to refer to it from the safety of the bastions of the white middle class. They did not even want to be "accepted" as *themselves*, they wanted any self which the mainstream dictated, and the mainstream *always* dictated. And this black middle class, in turn, tried always to dictate that self, or this image of a whiter Negro, to the poorer, blacker Negroes.

The effects of these attempts by the black middle class to whiten the black culture of this country are central to my further discussions on the sociological significance of the changes in Negro music, but I think it might be useful here to consider also the effects this "whitening" had in other cultural areas. I think it is not fantastic to say that only in music has there been any significant Negro contribution to a *formal* American culture. For the most part, most of the other

contributions made by black Americans in the areas of painting, drama, and literature have been essentially undistinguished. The reasons for this tragic void are easy to understand if one realizes one important idea about the existence of any black culture in this country. The only Negroes who found themselves in a *position* to pursue some art, especially the art of literature, have been members of the Negro middle class. Only Negro music, because, perhaps, it drew its strength and beauty out of the depths of the black man's soul, and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the "lowest classes" of Negroes, has been able to survive the constant and willful dilutions of the black middle class and the persistent calls to oblivion made by the mainstream of the society. Of course, that mainstream wrought very definite and very constant changes upon the *form* of the American Negro's music, but the emotional significance and vitality at its core remain, to this day, unaltered. It was the one vector out of African culture impossible to eradicate. It signified the existence of an Afro-American, and the existence of an Afro-American culture. And in the evolution of form in Negro music it is possible to see not only the evolution of the Negro as a cultural and social element of American culture but also the evolution of that culture itself.

The "coon shout" proposed one version of the American Negro and of America; Bessie Smith proposed another. (Swing and bebop, as I shall attempt to point out, propose still another.) But the point is that both these versions are accurate and informed with a legitimacy of emotional concern nowhere available in, say, what is called "Negro literature." The reason is as terrifying as it is simple. The middle-class black man, whether he wanted to be a writer, or a painter, or a doctor, developed an emotional allegiance to the middle-class (middle-brow) culture of America that obscured, or actually made hideous, any influences or psychological awareness that seemed to come from outside

what was generally acceptable to a middle-class white man, especially if those influences were identifiable as coming from the most despised group in the country. The black middle class wanted no subculture, nothing that could connect them with the poor black man or the slave.

Literature, for most Negro writers, for instance, was always an example of "culture," in the narrow sense of "cultivation" or "sophistication" in an individual within their own group. The Negro artist, because of his middle-class background, carried an artificial social burden as the "best and most intelligent" of Negroes, and usually entered into the "serious" arts to exhibit his social graces -as a method, or means, of displaying his participation in the serious aspects of Western culture. To be a writer was to be "cultivated," in the stunted bourgeois sense of the word. It was also to be a "quality" black man, not merely an "ordinary nigger."

Early Negro novelists such as Charles Chesnutt, Otis Shackleford, Sutton Griggs (even though he was more militant), Pauline Hopkins, produced works that were potboilers for the growing Negro middle class. The books were also full of the same prejudices and conceits that could be found in the novels of their models, the white middle class. The contempt for the "lower-classed Negroes" found in these novels by black novelists is

amazing and quite blatant. And, as Robert A. Bone points out: "It must be understood at once that the early [Negro] novelists believed substantially in the myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority. Pauline Hopkins writes: 'Surely the Negro race must be productive of some valuable specimens, if only from the infusion which amalgamation with a superior race must eventually bring.'" Chesnutt's and Grigg's "heroes" were usually "refined Afro-Americans"; as Bone shows further: "In several of the early novels there is a stock situation in which a 'refined Afro-American' is forced to share a Jim Crow car with dirty, boisterous, and drunken Negroes."

The idea of the "separation," the strata, had developed within the group. The thin division of field hand from house servant had widened, and the legacy of the house servant was given voice constantly in the work of the early Negro writers. As Bone says, "When all the sound and fury of these novels has evaporated, what remains is an appeal for an alliance between 'the better class of colored people' and the 'quality white folks.'" [44](#) And an "amen" could be heard to that sentiment throughout the rising black churches of the North. Of course, the Negro novelist ceased to be so blatantly patronizing and disparaging of "most Negroes" when the social climate in the country itself became more "liberal." No longer would a member of the Negro middle class be idiotic enough to write, as Shackleford once did in his novel *Lillian Simmons*: "She could understand why Jim Crow cars and all other forms of segregation in the South were necessary, but she could not feel that it was fair to treat all colored people alike, because all were not alike." [45](#)

By the twenties, spurred again by the movement of Negroes to the North and the change that had made of a basically agricultural country an industrial giant, thereby transforming the core of the Negro population from farm workers into a kind of urban proletariat, a great change also took place among Negro artists and intellectuals. Even though they were still fundamentally the products of the Negro middle class and still maintained rather firmly many emotional and intellectual ties with it, the Negro novelists of the twenties at least began to realize that the earlier attitudes of the black middle class were the most agonizing remnants of the "slave mentality." It was now that the middle class demanded, through its spokesmen the novelists and the more intrepid educators, "at least equality." It was the beginning of what was called the "Negro Renaissance," and the emergence of what Alain Locke called the "New Negro."

But if now the more cultivated members of the black middle class began to realize that the old stance of "whiter Negroes" could not effect an entrance into the mainstream of American society (these writers, in fact, rebelled against the entire concept of a slavish disparagement of the Negro by Negroes as a prerequisite for such privilege), this "rebellion" still took form within the confines of the American middle-class mind, even if those confines had been somewhat broadened by the internationalism imposed upon the country by World War I. Even the term *New Negro*, for all its optimistic and rebellious sound, still assumes that it is a different kind of Negro who is asking for equality -not old Rastus the slave. There is still, for all the "race pride" and "race consciousness" that these spokesmen for the Negro Renaissance claimed, the smell of the dry rot of the middle-class Negro mind: the idea that, somehow, Negroes must *deserve* equality.

The spirit of this "Renaissance" was divided as an emotional entity into three separate and easily identifiable reactions, corresponding to the cultural stratum of the particular Negroes who had to interpret it. The rising middle class-spawned intelligentsia invented the term *New Negro* and the idea of the Negro Renaissance to convey *to the white world* that there had been a change of tactics as to how to climb onto the bandwagon of mainstream American life. The point here is that this *was* to be conveyed to white America; it was another conscious reaction to that white America and another adaptation of the middle-class Negro's self-conscious performance for his ever appreciative white audience. There was a loud, sudden, but understandably strained, appreciation for things black by this intelligentsia. The "Harlem School" of writers attempted to glorify the

lives of the black masses, but only succeeded in making their lives seem *exotic* as literary themes. It produced a generation and a tradition of Lafcadio Hearn. The reproduction of a black America as real as the white America these writers

seemed to sense as "the norm" was never realized. A white man, Carl Van Vechten, mechanized and finally strait-jacketed a good part of the Negro Renaissance when he wrote the novel *Nigger Heaven*, which many Negro writers have never ceased to imitate.

For poorer Negroes, as I have mentioned before, Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa Movement" represented the renewed sense of "race pride" the concept of the New Negro represented for the middle-class intelligentsia. Garvey thought, and persuaded a great body of the Negro masses, that equality could never be achieved in the United States, and the Negro should seek to embrace his older, "truer," African traditions and eventually set up an independent black state in Africa. Although Garvey ultimately failed, his call to "Mother Africa" inspired thousands of Negroes, though, of course, the middle class would have nothing to do with him. Not only because it did not want to be associated with a movement that involved the poorer Negro but also because any mention of Africa only conjured up frightening visions of undigested Tarzan movies.

The middle class reacted to the growing "nationalism" among poorer Negroes and the intelligentsia by adopting a milder kind of nationalism themselves. And even though most were startled at first by the kind of radicalism that the Niagara Movement, which led to the eventual establishment of the NAACP, and people like W. E. B. DuBois represented, they did begin to protest in earnest about "Jim Crow," and "the brotherhood of man." They eventually took over such organizations as the NAACP, aided by the dependence of such organizations on the philanthropies of white liberals, and molded them to their own purposes. But from the beginning, when the black middle class began to *realign* itself toward an America from which they could ask "equality" instead of privilege, they had oriented themselves as would-be *citizens*, rather than freedmen, or ex-slaves. And this is the fundamental difference, perhaps even the single

line of demarcation, separating the black middle class from the rest of the Negroes living in the United States. The middle class accepts the space, the openness and/or "liberalism" of twentieth-century America as the essential factor of its existence in this country as citizens. But when the recognized barriers to such "citizenship" are reached, when all their claims to equality with the rest of America, on the one hand, and superiority, on the other, to their own black brothers seem a useless and not wholly idealistic delusion because in the end they are still regarded by this society as "only Negroes," they are content with the name "second-class citizens." This at least shows them with a foot in the door, if somehow still having to battle to get the rest of themselves in; always in, behind the calm façade of white middle-class America. For the black intelligentsia, the term *second-class citizen* was a meaningless hoax, and the poorer Negro never even considered the idea of citizenship as something that could be extended in this country to a person with a black skin. The poor Negro always remembered himself as an ex-slave and used this as the basis of any dealing with the mainstream of American society. The middle-class black man bases his whole existence on the hopeless hypothesis that no one is supposed to remember that for almost three centuries there was slavery in America, that the white man was the master and the black man the slave. This knowledge, however, is at the root of the legitimate black culture of this country. It is this knowledge, with its attendant muses of self-division, self-hatred, stoicism, and finally quixotic optimism, that informs the most meaningful of Afro-American music.

My burden's so heavy, I can't hardly see,
Seems like everybody is down on me,
An' that's all right, I don't worry, oh, there will be a better day.

The most expressive Negro music of any given period will be an exact reflection of what the Negro himself is. It will be a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time. Who he thinks he is, what he thinks America or the world to be, given the circumstances, prejudices, and delights of that particular America. Negro music and Negro life in America were always the result of a reaction to, and an adaptation of, whatever America Negroes were given or could secure for themselves. The idea of ever becoming "Americans" in the complete social sense of that word would never have been understood by Negro slaves. Even after the Emancipation, such a concept would have seemed like an unamusing fantasy to most Negroes since many times the very term *America* must have meant for them "a place they don't want you." America, for Negroes, was always divided into black and white, master and slave, and as such, could not simply be called "America." And so there have been, since slavery, two Americas: A white America and a black America, both responsible to and for the other. One oppressed, the other the oppressor. But an even more profound difference between these two Americas has been their awareness of each other, or the degree to which the one America is aware of the other. The white America has never had more than a cursory knowledge of black America (even during the days of the Negro Renaissance, as I have pointed out, the knowledge of black America obtained by white America, for all the talk to the contrary, was never more than superficial). But the black American has always *had to* know what was on the white man's mind, even if as a slave, he had no full knowledge of what America really was. The Negro's adaptation to American life has been based since the Emancipation on his growing knowledge of America and his increasing acquaintance with the workings of the white man's mind. The Negro American had always sought to *adapt* himself to the other America and to exist

as a casual product of this adaptation; but this central concept of Afro-American culture was discarded by the middle class. After the move north and the sophistication that that provided, it was *assimilation* the middle class desired: not only to *disappear* within the confines of a completely white America but to erase forever any aspect of a black America that had ever existed.

The separation I spoke of between the freedman and the citizen is basic to any understanding of the evolution of black America. From a relatively homogenous social, cultural, and geographical unit, existing strictly apart from white America, Negroes became a group of diverse "Americans" forming a psychological chain that begins with a complete awareness of and dependence on what is now called a "folk culture" and moves to a completely antithetical extreme -to those Negroes who are completely dependent upon the culture of mainstream America. It is a psychological chain much like a spectrum that begins at deepest black and moves easily into American gray. There was a period of transition, however, when for the majority of Negroes, the chain did not stretch completely into gray America. But the separation, the cleavage, within black America was beginning to be quite apparent.

The beginning of this cleavage within black America was demonstrated in microcosm in New Orleans, even before the mass exodus of Negroes northward. New Orleans, with its co-existing complex of social, cultural, and racial influences, predated the modern, post-World-War-I, Northern city in many ways. French, Spanish, English, African, and Caribbean cultures existed simultaneously within New Orleans and all were thriving. Within what could be called the black society there was already the extreme cleavage I have mentioned, based for the most part on socio-ethnic considerations, most easily verified by color.

The Creoles, *gens de couleur*, and mulattoes existed both

socially and economically as the more generalized black middle class was to do in later years. They encouraged the separation between themselves and their darker, usually poorer half-brothers. And they emphasized this separation as formally as they could by trying to emulate as much as possible the white

French culture of New Orleans.

The Downtown people acquired most of the European instrumental techniques and disparaged the vocal blues style that raged Uptown in the black belt. But the repressive segregation laws passed at the turn of the century forced the "light people" into closer social and economic relationships with the blacker culture. And it was the connections engendered by this forced merger that produced a primitive jazz. The black rhythmic and vocal tradition was translated into an instrumental music which utilized some of the formal techniques of European dance and march music.

Later the merging of the Southern blues tradition with the musical traditions of the Northern Negro produced an instrumental music similar in intent to the early jazz of New Orleans. And when the instrumental innovators themselves began to be heard in the North, the music, jazz, had already developed further, aided by the architectonic and technical ideas of ragtime, into a more completely autonomous music. The important idea here, though, is that the first jazzmen were from both sides of the fence -from the darker blues tradition and a certain fixed socio-cultural, and most of the time economic, stratum, and also from the "white" Creole tradition and its worship of what were certainly the ideals of a Franco-American middle class. Also, the Negroes who hired the blues men into their dance and society bands in the North were oftentimes by-products of the desire of Negroes to set up a black middle class. So were many of the musicians who were influenced by the "dirty" way of playing. This meant that as jazz developed after the early twenties in this country, it could only be a music that would reflect the socio-cultural continuum that had developed

within Negro America from blackest black to whitest white. The jazz player could come from any part of that socio-cultural spectrum, but if he were to play a really moving kind of jazz, he had to reflect almost all of the musical spectrum, or at least combine sufficiently the older autonomous blues tradition with the musical traditions of the Creoles or the ragtime orchestras of the North. And thus, jazz could not help but reflect the entire black society. (Such a thing as a *middle-class blues singer* is almost unheard of. It is, it seems to me, even a contradiction of terms.)

Jazz, as it emerged and as it developed, was based on this new widening of Afro-American culture. In the best of jazz, the *freedman-citizen* conflict is most nearly resolved, because it makes use of that middle ground, the space that exists as the result of any cleavage, where both emotional penchants can exist as *ideas* of perhaps undetermined validity, and not necessarily as "ways of life."

First there was, after the Emancipation, an America. Then there was a North. And after World War I, even places and sets of ideas that were not American. That was, in one sense, as far as the blues would go as a completely *autonomous* music. The blues as a fully integrated American experience was what was called "classic" blues. Publicly, as American performers, the great lady blues singers of the twenties brought blues to a social and cultural significance that it never has had before or since. The jazz people took over from there.

Blues in its most significant form again returned underground, into the house parties and black cabarets that existed in the new black communities of the North, with all the wild "un-American" abandon which was supposed to typify the pre-middle-class Negro society. Without the jazz players, blues would have existed as an American music, *i. e.*, considered as such by the mainstream, only during the

time of the classic singers. Before their time and after it, autonomous blues was the product of a subculture.

Given the necessary social involvement with American culture, Negroes themselves would have drifted away

from blues since it no longer was an exact reflection of their lives in America. For the developing black middle class, it was simply the mark of Cain, and just another facet of Negroness which they wished to be rid of. But jazz, even with its weight of blues, could make itself available as an emotional expression to the changing psyche of the "modern" Negro, just as in less expressive ways, it made itself available to the modern American white man.

During the twenties, when jazz was first beginning to be heard in the North and in whatever diverse presentations, throughout America, it was still in a period of transition. The older blues people were still coming into the Northern cities, the classic singers were at their peaks; and the newer city blues was also developing (as the expression of a *new* subculture) as well as the spontaneous piano music, boogie woogie (or the Eastern "stride" piano style), that was concomitant with it. But the jazz players were also coming into these towns, and a whole new generation of Negroes was born into this transitional culture -the first generation with a preponderance of *citizens* rather than ex-slaves. These were the people who had to decide what was to be done with blues and what weight it would have in their lives. At the same time there were still a great many Negroes who had known slavery personally, or knew it as the emotional idea on which any experience of America had to be based. All these Negroes existed as black America; the extremes were the rent-party people at the one end of black society and the various levels of parvenu middle class at the other. Jazz represented, perhaps, the link connecting the two, if they were to be connected. The verticality of the city began to create two separate *secularities*, and the blues had to be divided among them if it was going to survive at all.

42 F. Ramsey and C. Smith, eds., *Jazzmen* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1939), pp. 12-13.

43 Garvin Bushell, "Garvin Bushell and New York Jazz in the 1920's," *Jazz Review* (January, 1959), p. 12.

44 *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 18.