Sonic Stereotypes: Jazz and Racial Signification in American Film and Television Soundtracks

Kyle Jackson
Western University

Recommended Citation

Jackson, Kyle (2015) "Sonic Stereotypes: Jazz and Racial Signification in American Film and Television Soundtracks," *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Sonic Stereotypes: Jazz and Racial Signification in American Film and Television Soundtracks

Abstract

This paper examines the use of jazz in contemporary American film and television soundtracks. Through processes of cultural signification, jazz music frequently maps racialized meaning onto the narrative. Often, a “black” jazz aesthetic signifies social and sexual deviance, while a “white” jazz aesthetic signifies elegance and high-culture. Such associations reinforce racial boundaries and essentialist stereotypes by perpetuating a dichotomy in which “blackness” figures as culturally dangerous (e.g. sexually deviant, unrestrained, threatening, and low-class) and “whiteness” as elite and culturally superior (e.g. civilized, educated, and high-class). To demonstrate this, the soundtracks of Anthony Minghella’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999); Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk’s *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013); and, Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa’s *Homeland* (2011) are examined. These examples are then compared to Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989), a film featuring sympathetic representations of African American identity. In Lee’s film, jazz challenges—rather than reinforces—racial discourse; a characteristic likely linked to Lee’s background as an African American with parents involved in the arts, black literature, and jazz composition. By comparing Lee’s alternative use of jazz to the preceding examples, it is argued that the use of the genre in film and television soundtracks as a stereotyping device reflects racial biases prominent in contemporary culture.

Keywords

Jazz, Race, Signification, Film, Soundtracks

Sonic Stereotypes: Jazz and Racial Signification in American Film and Television Soundtracks

Kyle Jackson
Year IV – Western University

In contemporary American film and television soundtracks, jazz music frequently produces racialized meaning. Often, a “black” jazz aesthetic signifies social and sexual deviance, while a “white” jazz aesthetic signifies elegance and high-culture. Such uses reinforce racial boundaries and essentialist stereotypes by perpetuating a dichotomy in which “blackness” figures as culturally dangerous (e.g. sexually deviant, unrestrained, threatening, and low-class) and “whiteness” as elite and culturally superior (e.g. civilized, educated, and high-class). This occurs in the soundtracks of Anthony Minghella’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999); Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk’s *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013); and, Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa’s *Homeland* (2011).

Not all film scores with jazz perpetuate such stereotypes, however. For instance, Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) uses jazz to signify kinship among racialized members of an inner-city community and this community’s

struggle for autonomy in the face of conflict and oppression. By using jazz in this way, the film posits a construction of the music that, though linked to racial discourse, challenges—rather than reinforces—it. In drawing this comparison, and by recognizing that Lee’s subversive use of the genre likely stems from his African-American background and parental upbringing, I argue that the use of jazz as a stereotyping device reflects racial biases pervasive in contemporary culture.

In *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*, Anahid Kassabian describes music in film as a stable “communicative system that can be ‘read’ by listeners,” functioning “subliminally or subconsciously [to evoke] meanings and moods.”¹ Music adds emotional depth and nuance to a scene, which cannot be conveyed by imagery and dialogue alone. Moreover, certain musical styles, through their capacity to associate visuals with external cultural themes, can add an additional layer of meaning to characters, places, and events in the narrative. Although both functions of soundtrack music impact the final televisual product, this essay focuses primarily on the latter; namely, that soundtrack music supplements a televisual text’s production of meaning through processes of cultural signification.

In *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*, Ingrid Monson describes how certain jazz aesthetics became racially coded after World War II. She writes, “hard bop and soul jazz, with their prioritization of heavier timbres,

1. Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 17–18.

blues inflection, and hard, driving rhythmic feels...[are] generally...cast as ‘blacker’”; at the other end of the spectrum, “cooler” sounding jazz (e.g. Miles Davis’ *Birth of the Cool*) is constructed as “whiter” in its preference for “thinner timbres, relaxed time feels, and lyrical melodies.”² (Notably, the purported racial characteristic of Davis’ album contradicts his ethnic background.) Accordingly, Monson describes the mapping on of Dionysian and Apollonian characterizations to these “black” and “white” musical aesthetics respectively.³ Dionysian relates to “the sensual, spontaneous, and emotional aspects of human nature,”⁴ while Apollonian relates to “the rational, ordered, and self-disciplined aspects of human nature.”⁵ In other words, these two distinctive jazz styles became discursively associated with, and distinguished by their connection to, American racial stereotypes. As the following analysis shows, contemporary American film and television soundtracks commonly draw upon these “white” and “black” jazz aesthetics to produce narrative meaning. In the process, they reinforce numerous problematic cultural assumptions about race.

The Talented Mr. Ripley, an American film set during the 1950s, uses a “black” jazz aesthetic—as described by Monson—to signify the social and sexual deviance of multiple

2. Ingrid Monson. *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*. (Oxford University Press. 2007), 72.

3. Monson. *Freedom Sounds*. 84.

4. “Dionysian,” *Oxford Dictionaries*. Accessed May 4, 2015, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/Dionysian.

5. “Apollonian,” *Oxford Dictionaries*. Accessed May 4, 2015 http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/Apollonian.

central characters. Although the association of “black” music with these characters is a historically accurate portrayal of white hipsters’ adoption of black cultural styles at the time, the film nonetheless reinforces negative racial stereotypes.

First, a “black” jazz aesthetic accompanies American Dickie Greenleaf, a hip character who consciously transgresses normative formations of “white” identity. In opposition to his wealthy, conservative father’s wishes, Dickie’s lifestyle consists of partying; sleeping with his girlfriend and mistress; and, relaxing in his coastal home in a small Mediterranean town. In addition to these hedonistic pursuits, Dickie, while naked in a bathtub, displays homosexual desire when he flirtatiously engages gay protagonist Tom Ripley. Due to these transgressions of normative cultural values, Dickie embodies American social and sexual “deviance”: he is lazy, unconventional, and sexually unrestrained. To aid in this portrayal, he is accompanied in the soundtrack by a jazz aesthetic signifying “blackness,” which associates him with culturally undesirable characteristics embedded in racist discourse. In particular, this includes the recurring motif of sporadic, shrill saxophone runs and terse, syncopated, snare-heavy percussion. Moreover, on several occasions, in his house and on stage, Dickie himself produces “boppish” jazz saxophone solos, further solidifying the film’s explicit connection between Dickie and “blackness.”⁶ Although this link is consciously created by the filmmakers—perhaps even

6. Krin Gabbard, “White Face, Black Noise: Miles Davis and the Soundtrack,” *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California, 2007), 268.

exaggerated—the result is, nonetheless, a recirculation of racist notions about the imagined cultural dangers of “blackness.”

A “black” jazz aesthetic also signifies deviance during the film’s introduction of Dickie’s friend and fellow American jazz enthusiast, Freddie Miles. The scene begins with Dickie and Tom sitting at an outdoor cafe on a sunny afternoon in Rome, accompanied by a blend of subdued accordion music and calming city sounds. At this point, Tom’s civilized persona briefly dominates the frame, representing his attempt to tame Dickie’s hipness.⁷ He is interrupted, however, by Freddie, who arrives in a convertible as a boppish jazz saxophone sounds from his car radio.⁸ This disruptive sonic intrusion signifies Freddie’s hipness and the end of Tom’s brief assertion of “civility” over Dickie. Freddie exits the car, calls out, and approaches Tom and Dickie at the table. Wearing a loose-fitting and unkempt suit, he appears brazen and disheveled—much like the suave and sexually threatening (according to contemporaneous popular imagination) black hipsters of New York City. Combined with the appropriated image of jazz-age “blackness,” the soundtrack signifies Freddie’s threatening and disruptive persona in contrast to Tom’s embodiment of “whiteness” and civility. In drawing this juxtaposition, the film supports the dichotomous construction of normative “white” and “black” identities prominent in racial discourse.

A raced jazz aesthetic also perpetuates racial stereotypes in the *Homeland* episode entitled “Beirut is Back,” in which cool “white” jazz conveys the elegance of an upper-

7. Unbeknownst to Dickie, Tom is in Europe, on behalf of Dickie’s father, to convince Dickie to return to America.

8. Gabbard, “White Face, Black Noise,” 270.

class cocktail event. The scene begins with brief shots panning through the glamorous venue, before focusing on a conversation between the protagonist, Nicholas Brody, and the United States Vice President. Throughout the scene, “Gloria’s Step (Take 2)” by the Bill Evans Trio plays diegetically. Consisting of soft, pedaled, arpeggiated, and closed position piano chords; sparse, airy percussion; and, a smooth, ruminating bass line, this passage epitomizes a cool jazz sound and embodies the “white,” Apollonian aesthetic described by Monson. The innate cultural meaning of this musical style sonically attributes the traits of elegance and sophistication to the characters and their environment. In doing so, it reinforces hegemonic notions of the government, upper class, and, more broadly, discursive constructions of whiteness.

The technique of communicating deviance through a “black” jazz aesthetic also arises in the sonic construction of “the fallen woman,” from the fallen woman-virtuous wife dichotomy of Hollywood cinema.⁹ As described by Kassabian, the fallen woman is often sonically represented by “dotted rhythms, increased chromaticism, and [saxophones], often in jazz or blues style,” while “the virtuous wife is accompanied by violins and flutes, [sweeping] upward melodically in even rhythms and lush but simple harmonic language.”¹⁰ These two sonic identities are analogous to the purportedly “black” and “white” aesthetics in jazz discourse. Thus, like in the examples described previously, they imbue Dionysian and Apollonian qualities on the “fallen woman” and “virtuous wife”

9. Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 18.

10. Ibid.

respectively. The “fallen woman,” characterized by her social and sexual depravity, is constructed as such through a sonic signification of “blackness,” while the purity and innocence of the “virtuous wife” is preserved by sonically invoking “whiteness.”

In the *American Horror Story: Coven* episode entitled “The Dead,” a “black” jazz aesthetic accompanies the sexual affair between the antagonist, Fiona, a terminally ill witch, and the spirit of New Orleans’ serial killer, The Axeman. Along with The Axeman’s interest in the music, this accompaniment signifies Fiona’s Dionysian qualities. Their relationship begins earlier in the series when they meet at a bar, where Fiona is searching for one last romantic partner before her impending death. In “The Dead,” the two connect over their mutual sexual lust; indulgent substance abuse habits; and, shared murderous tendencies. Emotional fulfillment and intimacy is absent in their relationship, however, and Fiona realizes that her involvement with The Axeman is an unsuccessful attempt to mask the pain of her imminent death. Fiona is portrayed as a sexually promiscuous “fallen woman,” whose hollow encounter with The Axeman is motivated by a misguided desire for pleasure.

Music plays an important role in portraying Fiona as such. During the scene where the two flirtatiously joust in a bedroom whose original occupant lies dead in the bathtub, they are diegetically accompanied by a big-band/bop fusion piece, which contains the unstable hammering of a honky-tonk blues piano; erratically splashing symbols; and, rich, swung saxophones. As a result, the tropes of “blackness” signified by this musical style map onto Fiona and The Axeman’s

exchange, reinforcing the racist association of “blackness” with culturally “illegitimate” behaviours.

In contrast to the use of jazz in the three preceding examples, Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* uses jazz to signify the struggles of a predominantly Black and impoverished community, while encouraging audiences to empathize with this group. Considering Lee’s background as an African American from Brooklyn, whose parents were involved in the arts, black literature, and jazz composition, I suggest that this film provides an authentic, humanist representation of black communities in America, and that his use of jazz in the soundtrack reflects this. In Lee’s film, jazz serves, not as shorthand for establishing stereotypical identity characterizations, but as an intimate accompaniment to characters’ vulnerabilities and as a mediating, sympathizing voice. More broadly, it reveals the hardships underpinning racially divided American social life in the late twentieth century, as experienced by characters in the narrative.

The soundtrack features the solemn croon of a lone saxophone as a recurring, non-diegetic motif. For example, during a scene in which three older black men lament the success of a Korean grocer in contrast to their own economic hardships, the music expresses the men’s shared sense of social and economic marginalization. In this way, jazz is presented as it was historically imagined: as a medium for expressing African American experience. When compared to the reductionist role jazz plays in many film and television soundtracks, Lee’s use of the genre is subversive. Here, it showcases the suffering of discursively oppressed groups while evoking audiences’ empathy. By encouraging emotional

identification with these men, the film highlights the underlying humanity of characters frequently subjected to stereotypical representations. In doing so, it discourages one-dimensional, essentialist views of race.

In *Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation*, Vijay Iyer writes, “Historically, African American cultural practice has been seen by mainstream Western culture as the realm of the physical, the sensual, and the intuitive, in diametric opposition to the intellectual, the formal, and the logical.”¹¹ As demonstrated in this analysis, such racial discourse is commonly deployed in American film and television soundtracks, in the form of post-World War II jazz aesthetics, to produce narrative meaning. As a result, these soundtracks perpetuate ideologies underlying racial divides. Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*, however, presents an alternative means of using jazz in a soundtrack. Rather than playing into racial stereotypes, jazz communicates the shared struggle of a systemically marginalized African American community. In this way, Lee puts forth a construction of jazz congruent with the music’s imagined expression of African American spirit. In my view, this construction of jazz is much more contemporarily viable and productive, as it transcends racist, reductionist interpretations of the music. Indeed, the commonplace appropriation of jazz in media as a caricature-producing device, which reflects and informs normative cultural assumptions permeating American society, mutes the

11. Vijay Iyer, “Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation,” *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 402.

Nota Bene

genre's subversive potential. In place of this potential, ideologies from America's racially violent past are perpetuated.

Bibliography

- Do the Right Thing*. Directed by Spike Lee. 1989. New York: Criterion, 2001. DVD.
- Falchuk, Brad. "The Dead." *American Horror Story: Coven*, season 3, episode 7. Directed by Bradley Buecker. Aired November 20, 2013. Beverly Hills, California: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment. 2014. DVD.
- Gabbard, Krin. "White Face, Black Noise: Miles Davis and the Soundtrack." In *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, edited by Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert, 260–74. Berkeley: University of California, 2007.
- Iyer, Vijay. "Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation." In *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, edited by Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, 393–403. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Johannessen, Chip. "Beirut Is Back." *Homeland*, season 2, episode 2. Aired October 7, 2012. Beverly Hills, California: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment. 2013. DVD.
- Kassabian, Anahid. *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Monson, Ingrid. *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- "Spike Lee Biography (1956?–)." *Film Reference*.
<http://www.filmreference.com/film/19/Spike-Lee.html>.
- The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Directed by Anthony Minghella. 1999. Hollywood, California: Paramount Home Video, 2002. DVD.