

The Duke's Man: Ellington, Shakespeare, and Jazz Adaptation

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Abstract

Professor Hawkes provides an introduction to the cluster of essays on Duke Ellington and Shakespeare.

For people of my generation, it's been evident for some time that, in terms of sheer outrageous performative energy, the music of New Orleans has long proved to be more than a match for the urgent literary and theatrical ebullience of Shakespeare's London. Strolling from Southwark to Eastcheap four hundred years ago, or from Jackson Square to Bourbon Street more recently, few observers of the dynamics of cultural formation would deny that just as the teeming Bankside once generated a popular theatre of quintessential early modern Britishness, so the boisterous Crescent City has functioned as the womb for an equally spirited art whose nature remains distinctively of our own time and uniquely American. As its most eloquent chronicler characteristically put it, New Orleans is "the place where the birth of jazz originated from" (Lomax 1950, 40). And there's a subtle sense in which, though we're scarcely comparing like with like, his list of the qualities necessary for success in the one creative sphere might also be said to apply, with intriguing force, to the other: "sweet, soft, plenty rhythm."

So, when the Shakespeare Association of America decided to hold its annual meeting in New Orleans in 2004, a particular encounter proved irresistible. A session which would set out to explore what happens when one mode of vital public entertainment engages with another became not only desirable, but necessary. The papers presented there under the title "The Duke's Man: Ellington, Shakespeare and Jazz Adaptation," and now revised for inclusion in the inaugural issue of *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, are the result.

The crucial notion is of course "adaptation," with its conceptual link to the more complex question of appropriation. The case that American jazz music and British public drama can meet as equals is not of course incontestable, and the idea that one form might "adapt" itself to another

certainly raises the issue of subservience which appropriation entails. The matter of mode is also a factor. However intricately involved in aural and visual communication, European drama, and particularly the plays of Shakespeare, is overwhelmingly discursive in character. Music, on the other hand, remains stubbornly non-discursive.

Stephen Buhler's paper confronts this issue boldly, locating it in a revealing social and historical context. It's appropriate to do so, for adaptation and appropriation have deep roots in the American psyche. They were, after all, the African American's historical lot. Forcibly abstracted from one culture, violently appropriated by another, the question of how to adapt must always have been crucial to an experience whose institutional centre lay in New Orleans. Since, at its heart, it involved a major subjugation in respect of language itself (African languages being forbidden by slave-owners), it could have proved — and did so for many — to be ultimately overwhelming. In the event, an important mitigation turned out to be available in the potential, fully embraced by slaves, for the sly appropriation — and manipulation — of the master's tongue. Burrowing into some of its established meanings to the extent that "bad" or "wicked" might even come to mean "good," or "admirable," and — no less subversively — foregrounding the acoustic and rhythmic features of utterance (in "signifying" or, latterly, rap), they finally forced the discursive to give the non-discursive its due (see Gates 1992, 131-51). It's at least arguable that a good deal of African American art — and particularly jazz music — stands as a monument to this process.

What could be termed a larger American experience is also at work. An adapting, re-fashioning commitment to "newness," embodied, not only in the city's name, but in the very fibre of its way of life, works its way decisively into the music for which New Orleans is best known. Its two most famous native-born composers, Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869) and Jelly Roll Morton (1890-1941), both deliberately engaged with "high" as well as "low" culture and sought to foster an "adaptive" relationship between the two.¹ Gottschalk made a point of drawing on African and Latin American rhythms and harmonies in a number of his compositions (e.g., "Bamboula"), whilst Morton, asserting a pivotal "American" status for jazz music, reinforced his notorious claim to be its originator by ensuring that his personal version of its history was recorded — also in person — in the central archive of "official" United States culture, the Library of Congress.

The contribution of both these New Orleans citizens, latterly endorsed by the recent appearance of each one's likeness on a U.S. postage stamp, exemplifies a kind of all-American, racy, liberating, republican irreverence, whose mode can be said to be broadly adaptive. It's no accident that the serried ranks of British nobility are devastatingly undermined as well as gently mocked in the jazz musician's employment of sobriquets such as "King," "Count," "Earl," and of course, "Duke."

And in the case of Ellington's Shakespearean *Such Sweet Thunder*, we find not just a whimsical "adapting" to or appropriation of the Bard, and not simply a spirited attempt to render the discursive in terms of the non-discursive, but a tough and determined quasi-political commitment which pulls even the name Henry across the Atlantic, so that it turns gratifyingly into "Hank." Even more American is its adaptation of something so fundamental as numbering, whereby *Henry V* becomes "Hank Cinq." To fight free of Englishness by recourse to things French has, after all, been a major transatlantic ploy since the eighteenth century. That Ellington's "Sonnet to Hank Cinq" achieves all this, whilst overtly presenting itself as simply submitting to the rigours of assonance, reinforces a sense of unremitting subversion.

Douglas Lanier's paper goes some way towards confirming this view. The confrontation of Shakespeare and jazz, he argues, is shaped in twentieth-century America by an association between the Bard and minstrelsy which forms part of a massive and highly complex political interpenetration of "high" and "low" cultures. Race is undoubtedly a major factor here, with white literary and intellectual "highbrow culture" set in opposition to a black musical and more visceral "popular culture." But, needless to say, the creole inheritance of New Orleans complicates and sophisticates such dispositions. Far from being the intuitive, native "folk" artists of legend and stereotype, many of the early jazz musicians proved expert enough in complex European musical modes to find employment in the orchestra of its much-admired French opera house. Jelly Roll Morton was not slow to emphasise his own European ancestry: as he put it, "My folks was all Frenchmans" (Lomax 1950, 3).

Fran Teague's account of *Play On!*, a musical show that combined aspects of the plot of *Twelfth Night* with biographical material from Duke Ellington and his compositions, shifts the focus to New York. That, of course, is entirely appropriate. The migration of jazz from New Orleans, consequent upon the closing down of the "red-light" district of Storyville in 1917, was an event of not only national cultural importance. The spreading of the music's influence first to Chicago, then to New York, and particularly to the centre of the vital and expanding African American culture in Harlem, ensured its world-wide recognition. Professor Teague's consideration of *Swingin' the Dream*, a short-lived 1930s jazz adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, thus makes sense of the fact that the character of Bottom was carefully, if oddly, assigned to one of jazz's major international "stars": Louis Armstrong.

But, perhaps more than any other musician of his generation, it is still Duke Ellington who remains a symbol of the transformation in the status of jazz that followed its expansion beyond the limits of New Orleans. In his music, it ceases to be an art of subsequence, dependent on some "primary" work which it aims to "swing" as earnest of its subservience. Instead, it has become, like

the America which gave it birth here in Louisiana, its own unique and self-present entity, capable not just of adaptation, but of appropriation on its own terms. By now, in this city, it can surely claim to encounter the work of Shakespeare on an equal footing.

Notes

1. Curiously, the composers found common ground in the "Miserere" from *Il Trovatore*. Gottschalk produced a piano transcription of the piece which embroidered and embellished it (*Miserere du Trovatore, paraphrase de concert*, opus 52) whilst Morton cites the "Miserere" as an example of the sort of music heard in the New Orleans French opera, and then plays Lomax a jazz version of it on the piano. The Library of Congress recording hints at the sort of promiscuously casual, "adaptive" context of the city's musical life:

Lomax: Did you ever hear of a composer named Gottschalk?

Morton: Yes.

Lomax: Did they use to play his stuff around there?

Morton: No doubt they did, but I was kind of young at that time. This is "Miserere" from *Il Trovatore*. (cf. Lomax 1950, ix-xv)

References

- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. 1992. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lomax, Alan. 1950. *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and "Inventor of Jazz."* New York: Grove Press.