

Minstrelsy, Jazz, Rap: Shakespeare, African American Music, and Cultural Legitimation

Douglas Lanier, University of New Hampshire

Abstract

Even though, it must be conceded at the start, Shakespeare has made no more than marginal appearances in blues, jazz, R&B, and hip-hop, the potential for their conjunction has had a particular symbolic resonance. Sketching out the history of that conjunction — my purpose here — offers us one way of understanding African American music's pursuit of artistic status and cultural respectability, and in particular a means for reevaluating the hybridizing of Shakespeare and jazz. My argument here will be that mid-century jazz adaptations of Shakespeare serve as an ambivalent middle-term between Shakespearean minstrelsy of the nineteenth century, where the relationship between Shakespeare and African American music was first codified, and contemporary hip-hop, where musicians have reclaimed Shakespeare as a minor yet symbolically significant point of reference for African American music.

Shakespeare Sings the Blues

At the end of the first chapter of *Stomping the Blues*, Albert Murray's pioneering study of African American music, the discussion turns to that most canonical exemplar of the blues, Shakespeare's melancholy Dane. Murray observes that Hamlet's florid self-debates, his struggles to fend off anguish and hopelessness, his engagement with "the most fundamental of all existential imperatives: affirmation, that is to say, reaffirmation and continuity in the face of adversity" — all these are also at the heart of the blues and thus at the heart of African American musical traditions (Murray 2000, 6).¹ Without doubt, Murray's parallel draws upon the cultural capital of the Western canon — he also includes *Oedipus Rex* and *The Waste Land* in his list of examples of the blues — in order to make a case for the aesthetic authenticity, emotional depth, and broad appeal of a distinctively African American musical form. And yet at the same time, Murray's allusion to *Hamlet* subtly suggests a reading of the play particularly keyed to the African American experience of racism when he describes the source of Hamlet's despondency: "the young prince is charged by the ghost of his late father to rid the kingdom of Denmark of the evil forces that dominate it" (Murray 2000, 6).

The sense of obligation to a prior generation, the responsibility to purge society of a system of oppression, the blues that spring from the twin burdens of subjugation and moral duty — these emphases recast *Hamlet* as an allegory of the African American struggle for social justice in the second half of the twentieth century. Murray's strategic allusion to Shakespeare in the context of the blues is, of course, a well-worn critical ploy, a means for lending a novel object of academic study cultural legitimacy by association. But it is more than that. It is a reminder that in such exchanges Shakespeare is often as much the object as agent of legitimation, particularly from the perspective of popular culture, within which Shakespeare so often serves as its ambivalent high-cultural Other. And perhaps more important, Murray's conjunction of Shakespeare and the blues points to the potential of a reciprocal exchange of meaning and cultural power between Shakespeare and African American music. Even though, it must be conceded at the start, Shakespeare has made no more than marginal appearances in blues, jazz, R&B, and hip-hop, the potential for their conjunction has had a particular symbolic resonance — witness, to take a familiar example, Langston Hughes's jazz-inflected *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942) — one that has taken on different connotations at different moments in the history of African American music. Sketching out the history of that conjunction — my purpose here — offers us one way of understanding African American music's pursuit of artistic status and cultural respectability, and in particular a means for reevaluating the hybridizing of Shakespeare and jazz.²

What gives the conjunction of Shakespeare and African American music its special frisson is that throughout much of the last century the two have been emblematic of what have been perceived as distinct cultural realms. Shakespeare exemplifies highbrow art, fundamentally intellectual in its appeal and demanding specialist knowledge for its full appreciation, British in origin and tied to European cultural traditions, the very icon of the mainstream Anglo canon. African American music, by contrast, has been widely regarded as profoundly emotional, bodily, sexual, rhythmic, and exotic in its appeal; improvisational and performative and thus in a sense anti-literary; somewhat disreputable in its venues, styles, and uses and thus surrounded with an aura of popular transgression; and symbolic — in the case of jazz — of a distinctively American experience of urban modernity. The relationship between the two has been treated as emblematic, in short, of the relationship between highbrow and popular American cultures. These distinctions, we might note in passing, do not bear up long under critical scrutiny, but nevertheless that does not render them any less culturally dominant or powerful. To rest upon this emblematic contrast between highbrow and lowbrow, white canon and black pop, however, is to miss, I think, the historical dynamics of the relationship between Shakespeare and African American music, the interplay of

different forms and ratios of cultural legitimation shaped by racial politics and cultural nationalism, the rise of youth culture, and ever-changing hierarchies of musical genres. My argument here will be that mid-century jazz adaptations of Shakespeare serve as an ambivalent middle-term between Shakespearean minstrelsy of the nineteenth century, where the relationship between Shakespeare and African American music was first codified, and contemporary hip-hop, where musicians have reclaimed Shakespeare as a minor yet symbolically significant point of reference for African American music.

Shakespearean Minstrelsy

African American music entered the wider cultural consciousness through the minstrel show. First performed in New York's Bowery Amphitheatre in January 16, 1843, the minstrel show thrived throughout the mid-nineteenth century until vaudeville began to displace it in popular taste at century's end. An amalgamation of Irish folksong, African American instrumentation and musical styles, and theatrical extravaganza, the typical minstrel show offered dances, comic, lyrical and sentimental songs, and instrumental numbers performed in blackface, punctuated by banter between the end-men (named Tambo and Bones, for the instruments they played) and Mr. Interlocutor, the comically stuffy master of ceremonies. At least early in the form's history, minstrel music was presented as offering access to actual African American musical practice and thus to an indigenous, authentically American culture. An essay published in *The Knickerbocker Magazine* in 1845, a mere two years after the minstrel show first appeared and in the midst of its initial craze, makes the point with tongue-not-quite-firmly-in-cheek. It characterizes "our negro slaves" as artists of natural genius unsullied by education or cosmopolitanism, in contrast to America's Euro-centric Brahmins: "That is the class in which we must expect to find our original poets, and there we do find them. From that class come the Jim Crows, the Zip Coons, and Dandy Jims, who have electrified the world. From them proceed our ONLY TRULY NATIONAL POETS" (Kennard 1996, 52). Later in the same essay, Shakespeare becomes an ambivalent standard against which the popularity and artistic achievement of minstrelsy should be measured. "Let Webster tell of the tap of Britain's drum, that encircles the world!" we are told. "Compared with the time occupied by Great Britain in bringing this to pass, 'Jim Crow' has put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes" (Kennard 1996, 55). Elsewhere in the essay, Shakespeare is presented as part of the hide-bound dominion of the British literary canon, the counterpart to the British Empire alluded to here, against which American minstrelsy is juxtaposed. And yet the phenomenal popularity of minstrelsy is lent additional (and ironic) force through the allusion to the speedy global circumnavigation by Shakespeare's Puck (interestingly enough, also a slave and poetizer). The critical attitude toward African American

music in the minstrel show was to remain divided: celebrated as an exotic, distinctively American form of popular entertainment, yet never quite raised to the level of a conscious or legitimate "art" except under the veil of irony.

The content of minstrel songs combined racist, ethnic and gender stereotyping, nostalgia for an edenic image of southern plantation life, and various forms of class-oriented parody. This last element grew considerably with expansion of the roles of the end-men, who served both as buffoons and unruly tricksters, and with development of the olio, the second section of the minstrel show. The olio featured short theatrical pieces burlesquing various forms of dominant cultural and political authority: the stump speech, the lecture, the social soirée, the opera, and legitimate theater. These burlesques turned on the contrast between their "high" content and low "Ethiopian" style, that is, the same plantation dialect and racist personae in which the music was performed. The result for African American culture was twofold and deeply contradictory. On the one hand, these burlesques obviously worked to reinforce the image of blacks and black culture as irredeemably "low." The concert and theatrical sections of the minstrel show functioned as an ideological circuit: while the music demonstrated the potential legitimacy and undeniable popular appeal of what was presented as indigenous African American art, the burlesques demonstrated that blacks were incapable of performing properly the mainstream discourses of social and cultural authority. The minstrel show established, in other words, that African American music was a form of entertainment denied the legitimacy of "culture": art without power or, worse, in Ralph Ellison's phrase, a form of symbolic self-maiming (Ellison 1995, 103). On the other hand, the blackface persona provided minstrel performers with a ready means for lampooning and subverting figures and rituals of authority both political and cultural, no small part of the minstrel show's core appeal. That is, the minstrel Negro became a vehicle for symbolic counter-violence against the injuries of class, a voice of popular transgression, albeit one rendered only temporary and comically inert.

Because Shakespeare was one of the most ubiquitous icons of nineteenth-century cultural authority and a focus for questions about America's relationship to European culture, the fact that Shakespeare would become a favorite target of the minstrel show is hardly surprising. Though passing citations of Shakespeare, both mangled and straight, appear throughout minstrel songs (as they do in much popular music of the day), it is in the olio where the relationship between Shakespeare and African American culture was first codified in a mass-market artform (Browne 1957; Browne 1960; Mahar 1991; Haywood 1966). "Ethiopian" burlesques of Shakespeare — in the form of short plays and vignettes within "parade" plays — wedded knockabout farce and American racist humor with elements of the British Shakespeare burlesque (they often adopt its doggerel couplets, for example); the subgenre was popular enough to support stand-alone

"Ethiopian" burlesques, independent of the minstrel show. The Shakespearean content of these parodies was often reduced to no more than a few key scenes or speeches, and it typically served as a mere armature on which to hang topical satire — *Julius the Snoozer* (White and Ryman 1875), for example, lampoons Boss Tweed's political corruption — or, far more often, to recycle commonplaces of racist stereotyping — as in the comic operetta *Hamlet the Dainty* (Griffin 1880), where the appearance of old Hamlet's ghost sends Horatio, Marcellus, and Hamlet into paroxysms of bug-eyed fright, and jokes about liquor abound.³

Two qualities of these burlesques are of special notice. First, *Othello* is a favorite object of parody. Indeed, it is almost as if the rise of blackface parodies of *Othello* appears concurrently with the rise of minstrelsy — "Daddy" Rice himself, the original "Jim Crow," had produced a short burlesque of the play as early as 1833.⁴ As William Mahar argues, "the authors of the *Othello* burlesques recognized that the audience's fear about racial mixing had greater potential for comedy than the more complex dramatic problems inherent in portraying Othello's jealousy and Iago's obsession with vengeance" (Mahar 1991, 253; see also Edelstein 1982, 179-97). But in these plays fear about miscegenation also involves fear about new possibilities for African American political clout, social mobility, and cultural legitimacy. "Ethiopian" burlesques of *Othello* thus typically remake Shakespeare's tragedy into travesties of mobility, portraying Othello as a black buffoon with social or cultural pretenses — tellingly, the illustrations for Alexander DoMar's *Othello: An Interesting Drama, Rather!* (1850) picture Othello in the garb of Zip Coon, the foolish urban dandy who was a stock character of minstrelsy.⁵ Second, a number of burlesques concern themselves with the desire of blacks, motivated by easy money or pretensions, to become Shakespearean actors, with the invariable result that they mangle and misapply the text, misunderstand the plot and characters, and in the case of *Dar's De Mony* (ca. 1880), reduce the final scene of *Othello* to a comic brawl. Henry Llewellyn Williams's *The Black Forrest* (1882) turns on the preposterous substitution of aspiring actor Jerry Mander for the "eminent American tragedian" Edwin Forrest who, scheduled to play "Shakespeare's tragedy of Aborigine life, entitled *Metamora*, or the *Genuine Live Injun and the Yankee Captain*," turns up missing. The play even offers a subtle reminder of *Othello*: when at play's end Mander is exposed as a charlatan, the theater manager roars that he is "the rogue who sparked round my daughter" Lucy, and she, like Desdemona, springs to her man's defense (Williams 1882, 10). In her incisive discussion of Maurice Dowling's *Othello Travestie* (1834), Joyce Green MacDonald observes that nineteenth-century burlesques of *Othello* worked to delegitimize black performance of Shakespeare — and, more generally, black self-representation of blackness onstage — at the very cultural moment when black Shakespearians such as Ira

Aldridge had begun to take the stage (MacDonald 1994; see also Collins 1996). This point might be extended: "Ethiopian" burlesques of Shakespeare work more generally to undermine African American aspirations to cultural legitimacy on two fronts at once: first through their treatment of Othello as a signal example of black overreaching, comically absurd rather than tragically noble, and second, through their lampooning of black efforts to stage Shakespeare and thus to lay claim to one form of cultural prestige. In the minstrel show, Shakespeare becomes a symbolically powerful means for denying African Americans the mantle of cultural authority, paradoxically even as their music — a quintessentially American artform — was putatively being introduced to the world.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the height of the swing craze, the relationship between Shakespeare and African American music became once again an active issue in American culture. It should be seen in the context of a larger drive throughout the 30s to adapt classics to American mass cultural genres — the early Shakespeare talkies; *The Boys From Syracuse*, a musical adaptation of the *Comedy of Errors*; and *The Hot Mikado*, a swing version of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, to name a few (Rodgers and Hart 1938; Bell et al 1939). By virtue of its wide cross-racial and cross-class appeal during this period, swing came to be regarded as having the potential to be a genuinely universal African American musical form, capable of democratizing and popularizing whatever content it touched.⁶ That potential is articulated clearly in an 1936 comedy short, *Shake, Mr. Shakespeare*, produced in response to the mid-decade Shakespeare film boom (Mack 1936).⁷ In an extended dream sequence, various Shakespearean characters celebrate their "goin' Hollywood" by dancing and singing to swing music. Film and jazz, the short suggests, are media interchangeably emblematic of American modernity, capable of getting the stuffy, outmoded Bard to join in the group dance craze, which he obligingly does at film's end. The utopian dimensions of hybridizing Shakespeare and African American music can be seen in *Paradise in Harlem*, a 1939 "race" film directed by Joseph Seidler (Seidler 1939). As its somewhat ironic title suggests, its subject is the gap between African American aspirations for cultural legitimacy, symbolized by Harlem, and the sordid reality and precarious nature of black life in America. As the film opens, we are introduced to Lem Anderson, a black actor who is struggling to make a living as a blackface comedian at a white-owned nightclub catering to blacks. Backstage, Lem tells the black girlfriend of the clubowner about his dream to leave behind minstrelsy and play Othello. That dream is soon deferred when he accidentally and innocently becomes implicated in a gangland hit and becomes relentlessly pursued by a white gangster's black thugs. Their harassment forces Lem to move South, where he tries to pursue his Shakespearean aspirations while working menial jobs, but the thugs soon find him and he returns to New York, only to be entrapped by the white clubowner's black girlfriend, who is

accidentally shot protecting him. At film's end, under police custody, Lem is allowed to play his Othello.

At first, despite the nobility of Lem's performance, the black audience mocks him. "Yeah, put out the light," one man shouts, "so we can all go home." But as Desdemona pleads for her life, the performance, in dreamlike fashion, changes from Shakespearean oratory to a slow blues built on the half-sympathetic, half-taunting refrain, "I don' wanna die." Soon the blues transforms into a moving choral spiritual, with the audience, former hecklers included, joining in. After Lem's Othello murders Desdemona, the music shifts yet again, this time from minor to major key and becoming an up-tempo hot swing number to which the audience jitterbugs in frenetic delight. We are never shown Othello's mistaken jealousy, his confrontation with Iago, or his final speeches and suicide. Instead, the murder is treated as an unproblematic act of black power in which Lem channels anger at white oppression into the quasi-religious sacrifice of a symbolic white betrayer. In obvious parallel, Seidler intercuts this sequence with the shooting backstage of the white clubowner and revelation of Lem's innocence. The performance of Othello becomes for Lem a complex act of cultural and self-redemption: his performance definitively purges his degrading blackface past and crafts a way to unite Shakespeare and African American music without resorting to minstrel travesty. Lem reclaims Shakespeare for black agency, both simply by performing Othello as a black man and by boldly breaking with the tragic trajectory of Shakespeare's version of the role through a survey of black musical forms. And this, the film imagines, is the prelude to wider cultural legitimacy, for, as Lem reveals in the final reel, he's been offered the chance to play Othello on Broadway, "the Great White Way," "with a jazz band and a choir".

And yet minstrelsy continued to cast a very long shadow when the most ambitious early example of jazzed-up Shakespeare, the musical *Swingin' the Dream*, premiered on Broadway in 1939 (the same year as *Paradise in Harlem*). *Swingin' the Dream* is the apotheosis of the 1930s drive to musicalize and modernize Shakespeare (Charell and Seldes 1939). The lavish production boasted an astounding assemblage of talent: Gilbert Seldes and Erik Charell wrote the book, and songwriter Jimmy Van Heusen composed the music, basing his swing adaptation largely on Mendelssohn's score; Agnes De Mille choreographed such notable dancers as Bill Bailey and the Rhymettes; two bands were used, the Bud Freeman band and Benny Goodman's sextet, both directed by Don Voorhees; and the African American cast featured "Moms" Mabley, Maxine Sullivan, Butterfly McQueen, the Dandridge sisters, and, most famously, Louis Armstrong as Bottom. Significantly, the play's action was shifted from Athens, seat of canonical Western culture, to 1890s New Orleans, the mythic birthplace of jazz, as if to underline the cultural *translatio imperii* at work in this Americanization of a classic. And yet the show was quickly dubbed a

grandiose failure, closing after only thirteen performances. Part of the reason can be traced to Seldes and Charell's decision to remain overly faithful to Shakespeare's plot and, more importantly, his language. Converting Shakespeare to contemporary musical form was, after all, a means to transcend the problem of archaic Renaissance diction on the modern stage. Instead, one reviewer observed, "at one moment you hear genuine pentameters in the style and sometimes the original wording of the bard, at another you hear anti-climactic lines like 'go fly a kite'" (quoted by Bergreen 1997, 395-6), a juxtaposition that only widened the gap between classical art and hip modernity that the show sought to traverse. So, too, perhaps the use of Mendelssohn as the basis for Van Heusen's swing score.

But clearly the specter of minstrelsy also figured in the reception of *Swingin' the Dream*. The supposed inability of African American actors to speak Shakespeare properly surfaced in several notices, as did the expectation that the adaptation would be, in the words of the *New York Times* reviewer, "a Negro carnival" (Atkinson 1939, 24). The transposition of the action to the Old South ended up unwittingly evoking the plantation setting of the minstrel walkaround. Accordingly, what was singled out for praise was the instrumental music, the "dark-skinned steppers who take to rhythm as though it were created for them" (Atkinson 1939, 24), and the passing moments of travesty provided by Butterfly McQueen's squeaky-voiced Puck. Consider the telling comment on the show by John Mason Brown in the *New York Post*, 10 November 1939: "It is at its best and a delightful best that is, when Shakespeare is being pushed offstage by its dancers and musicians. It is at its happiest when he is being irreverently dealt with" (quoted by Hill 1984, 115-6). Because *Swingin' the Dream* used African American music, actors, and milieu to update rather than to lampoon Shakespeare, the show was regarded as overly serious, inappropriately grandiose, even incoherent. Instead of codifying swing's cultural prestige — this was, after all, the first major Broadway production to use luminaries from black jazz circles — *Swingin' the Dream* seemed to confirm the fundamental incompatibility of African American music with Shakespeare.

Of course, that incompatibility could also potentially be a valuable resource. A favorite film plotline of this period involved a stuffy, old-fashioned (and often just old) authority figure whose cultural tastes are challenged or transformed through contact with the jazzed-up world of swing (and, just as often, with unrepressed sexuality in the form of a working-class chorus girl). Unsurprisingly, in these films Shakespeare serves as one of several icons of highbrow taste and is the typically ironic object of jazzing-up. For examples of this motif, one might look to Leslie Goodwins's *Casanova in Burlesque* (1944), involving a Shakespeare professor who secretly works summers as a vaudeville comic; John Farrow's *Red, Hot and Blue* (1949), which features Betty Hutton doing a four-minute jazz version of *Hamlet*; and H. Bruce Humberstone's *She's*

Working Her Way Through College (1952), which offers a swing production number referencing *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Tempest*, and Ronald Reagan as a college professor. A British variant can be found in Walter Forde's *Time Flies* (1944), a zany time-travel comedy in which the historical Shakespeare himself ends up participating in an American chorus girl's impromptu — and immediately lucrative — swing number on the Globe stage. Each of these features toys with the possibility of hybridizing Shakespeare with swing, but each presents that possibility as a means of confirming rather than challenging the high-low cultural divide, with an eye toward establishing the film's "popular," gently subversive orientation by reaffirming Shakespeare as its high cultural Other.

One of the first films in this vein, David Butler's *Playmates* (1941), demonstrates this dynamic at work. In this case, the cultural odd couple was popular (white) bandleader Kay Kyser and John Barrymore, the American Shakespearean who had triumphed in the 1920s but who was by this point declining into alcoholism and personal scandal. The film's plot turns on Shakespeare's uncommerciality. Otherwise unemployable, Barrymore (playing himself) agrees to appear in a Shakespearean show for a radio executive's blueblood wife. For publicity reasons, the revue includes the homespun Kyser, and Barrymore is enlisted to teach him how to perform Shakespeare, a prospect he resolves to sabotage. Throughout, the film pits the elitist Barrymore and his beloved Bard against the corny, but sincere Kyser and his swing music. Over and over again, Kyser demonstrates that he is, simply, incapable of mastering "authentic" Shakespearean performance, even though a romantic subplot illustrates the (supposed) utility of high cultural savoir-faire in the seduction of Ginny Simms, singer for Kyser's band. With fascinating ambivalence, the film's finale addresses the crucial question of transposing Shakespeare into the popular idiom of swing. After silencing Barrymore with alum in his throat spray bottle, Kyser and his band present their own musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. It opens with Ish Kabibble, the band's resident idiot, reciting the prologue and homing in on the difficulty of Shakespearean language. "It sounds like English," he observes, "but I know it ain't." As if in answer, Kyser, dressed as Shakespeare himself, bursts through the giant pages Kabibble has been reading and offers to do Shakespeare "in the modern way." What we get is the tale of swing musician Romeo Smith and opera singer Juliet Jones, with Juliet's father, a devotee of classical music, as the obstacle to their romance. Juliet's father soon changes his tune when he learns that Romeo has a lucrative contract as a bandleader. With the prospect of a rich son, a Romeo who brings the benefits of a Paris, he blesses the match and even vows to join the band, as Shakespearean characters dance to the swinging reprise:

Cheek to cheek
Bless you, I say,

30 grand a week
That ain't hay. (Butler 1941)

Popular appeal and commercial success avert the tragic trajectory of Shakespeare's version of events, and in the process magically resolve the conflict between cultural classes. Once emptied of the problem of language and fidelity and filtered through swing, Tin Pan Alley rhymes, and the conventions of musical comedy, Shakespeare becomes wildly successful. The crowd roars its approval, and the executive, convinced that the adaptation is Barrymore's, rushes to sign him for radio endorsements. Two things are striking about this "utopian" evocation of jazzed-up Shakespeare. First, despite the triumphant performance, ambivalence persists about this mode of popularizing Shakespeare. When, still dressed as Shakespeare, Kyser comes to take his bow, he accidentally takes a drink of alum and, like Barrymore, chokes up on stage. The final tableau depicts both the proper Shakespearean and his swing-era counterpart reduced to silence. Second, conspicuously absent is any acknowledgement of the relationship between swing and African American culture; both Kyser's band and the audiences he plays for are exclusively white, and the only hint of non-Anglo ethnicity is a Latin American chanteuse who plays the bad girl role of Kyser's would-be seducer. It is possible to connect these points: is jazzed-up Shakespeare denied full cultural legitimacy in the film because of swing's association with black culture?

To Be-Bop or Not to Be-Bop

The promise of a jazz Shakespeare faded with the precipitous fall of swing after World War II. With only a few exceptions, bop utterly ignored Shakespeare — except in the occasional song title, such as Horace Silver's "To Beat or Not to Beat?" (1956, on *Silver's Blue*).⁸ The rejection of Shakespeare was in line with the new racial politics of bop. No longer were black musicians willing to produce dance music for white audiences easily appropriated by white bands; instead, they defined themselves as artists intent upon expressing African American pain, aspirations for freedom, and defiance of bourgeois musical taste. Bop's Afrocentric bent, evident in many song titles, sorted poorly with Shakespeare, that old lion of the mainstream canon. Indeed, with the important exception of Duke Ellington's *Such Sweet Thunder* (Ellington 1957), jazzed-up Shakespeare after 1950 tended to drift in two main directions — first, toward adaptation to cabaret format, the most successful of which were John Dankworth's settings of Shakespeare's lyrics for singer Cleo Laine's albums *Shakespeare — And All That Jazz* (1964) and *Wordsongs* (1978); and second, toward the use of jazz as a musical signifier in stagings of the plays. The most famous example of the latter is *West Side Story*, in which Leonard Bernstein's jazz-via-Stravinsky is meant

to lend musical street credibility to this American underclass adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (Bernstein and Sondheim 1957).⁹ Once again, as in *Playmates*, though African American music is used throughout the score, African Americans themselves are conspicuously absent, replaced by Puerto Ricans.

There are two major exceptions to these two groups, both large-scale musical statements by important jazz composers: Duke Ellington's *Such Sweet Thunder*, which was premiered and recorded in 1957, and George Russell's *Othello Ballet Suite*, first recorded in 1967 (Russell 1981). Ellington's *Such Sweet Thunder* represents a crucial milestone in the relationship between Shakespeare and jazz and, it should be noted, in his own career. The fall of swing and rise of bop, changes in personnel in his orchestra, and a certain conservatism of repertoire made Ellington seem, by the 1950s, like a relic of the musical past. Jazz historians agree that the second chapter of Ellington's career began with his band's electrifying performance of "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue" at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival, after which the popular press quickly established Ellington as an elder statesman for jazz (Hasse 1993; Vail 2002, 103-13). *Such Sweet Thunder* was composed and recorded in the next year, on the heels of Ellington's concerts for the Stratford Ontario Shakespeare Festival, and it seemed to affirm Ellington's stature as "classic," not has-been. Stratford's inclusion of jazz musicians of an older generation as part of its festival reinforced the idea that pre-bop concert jazz styles constituted a "classical" artform, on a par with Shakespeare and in line with the discerning tastes of Stratford's target audiences. In essence, Ellington's suite acknowledges this act of legitimation and returns the favor with a jazz suite, in what would become something of a standard practice for the composer's later years. Stratford's inclusion of Ellington also acknowledges that as a "classical" artform with a limited elite audience, Ellington's brand of jazz, like Shakespeare's plays, requires special state subsidy. It is to the hint of elitism in this exchange of prestige that Ellington reacts in his program notes for the suite's first performance. The shared problem faced by performers of Shakespeare or jazz is, Ellington asserts, the perception that these sophisticated artforms require special expertise to be appreciated properly — in other words, that these artforms do not have the immediacy and broad appeal of popular culture. If in the 1930s and 1940s swing had been seen as a means to popularize Shakespeare, in 1957 linking Shakespeare with jazz ran the risk of classicizing the music in a way that made it the property of (largely white) cognoscenti. In his program notes, Ellington tries to negotiate the problem:

I have a great sympathy with Shakespeare because it seems to me that strong similarities can be established between a jazz performance and the production of a Shakespeare play

. Basically, both groups face comparable problems in the reluctance of some participants to expose themselves and join the audience. Their hesitance is due, in both cases, to a misconception that the major supporters of both these artistic manifestations — Shakespeare and jazz — are the people who have invested time and money in becoming experts.

There is an increasing interrelationship between the adherents to art forms in various fields. . . it is becoming increasingly difficult to decide where jazz starts or where it stops, where Tin Pan Alley begins and jazz ends, or even where the borderline lies between classical music and jazz. I feel there is no boundary line, and I see no place for one if my own feelings tell me a performance is good.

Any musician will agree that the final judgment of a musical performance lies in its immediate impact on the human ear, rather than in previous knowledge or academic study.

In the final analysis, whether it be Shakespeare or jazz, the only thing that counts is the emotional effect on the listener. Somehow, I suspect that if Shakespeare were alive today, he might be a jazz fan himself — he'd appreciate the combination of team spirit and informality, of academic knowledge and humor, of all the elements that go into a great jazz performance. And I am sure that he would agree with the simple and axiomatic statement that is so important to all of us — when it sounds good, it is good. (quoted in Ellington 1973, 192-3)

On the one hand, Ellington insists upon the intellectual and emotional depth of the two artforms, the way in which they reward repeated viewings or listenings, a quality which divides them from pop ephemera. On the other hand, he emphasizes that the impact of both "top-grade" jazz and Shakespeare is "immediate" upon the listener's ear, as a means of arguing for their fundamentally democratic appeal. Ellington's delicate recasting of the nature of Shakespeare's art in his program notes reveals the twin and not always compatible ambitions of Ellington's later career — to create a music with the cultural legitimacy of other "classical" arts and with the inclusive immediacy of popular culture.

Ellington's suite consists of eleven numbers, each linked to Shakespearean characters:

Such Sweet Thunder

Sonnet for Caesar

Sonnet to Hank Cinq

Lady Mac

Sonnet in Search of a Moor

The Telecasters ["The Three Witches and Iago"]

Up and Down, Up and Down, I Will Lead Them ("Up and Down")

Sonnet for Sister Kate

The Star-Crossed Lovers (aka "Pretty Girl")

Madness in Great Ones ("Hamlet")

Half the Fun (aka "Lately") ["Cleopatra"]

A final number, "Circle of Fourths," which was added later, is a musical tribute to Shakespeare himself. The suite engages the problem of wedding Shakespeare with African American music in several different ways. First, and perhaps most obviously, the music is entirely instrumental, bypassing the issue of setting Shakespearean language in an African American idiom. Even so, many of Ellington and Strayhorn's arrangements seem designed to convert Shakespeare's voices to musical form, each distinctive in timbre, style, and emotional tone. In a few cases, the sections have something of a narrative quality. The opening number, "Such Sweet Thunder," for instance, musically depicts the seductive stories that Othello tells Desdemona, specifically "the sweet and swinging, very convincing story Othello told Desdemona." The song was originally assigned to Cleopatra and parenthetically subtitled "Cleo" (Ellington 1957). Second, and related to the first, is Ellington's conception of Shakespeare's artistry in terms of characters with highly individualized personalities. Indeed, Ellington conceives of the suite as a series of musical portraits of Shakespearean characters, ending, coda-like, with a portrait of Shakespeare himself — it is a suite of solos, if you will. This conception of Shakespeare's artistry is akin to Ellington's own compositional methods; famously, he took the distinctive sound and style of individual band members as a starting point and inspiration for composition. Last, and most important, Ellington stresses Shakespeare's affirmation of black characters. The suite of Shakespearean characters begins and ends with blacks — Othello in Such Sweet Thunder "" and Cleopatra in "Half the Fun" (as the liner notes wryly observe, Antony seems to be on hiatus). A third portrait, "Sonnet in Search of A Moor," closes the embedded "Sonnet" sequence, and it too concerns Othello, this time depicting his tenderness and pathos rather than his wit. Significantly, all three portraits actively celebrate black erotic power — as the pun on "a moor/amour" suggests — and defy stereotypes of black sexuality by stressing these characters' sophistication and sly charm. Since Shakespeare is popularly known as a poet of love, this emphasis on black sensuality also provides a rationale for resituating Othello and Cleopatra at the center of his artistic achievements. By framing the

suite with black characters and stressing the affirmational qualities of Shakespeare's depictions (excluded are Othello and Cleopatra's tragic ends, and Aaron in his entirety), Ellington argues for the fundamental compatibility between African American music, even elements of Ellington's early so-called "jungle style," and Shakespeare. The final number, "Circle of Fourths," a work that traverses all the musical keys in less than two minutes, even slyly hints at an analogy between Shakespeare and Ellington himself — if Shakespeare was renowned for his universal poetic facility, his ability to mime any verbal idiom, so too Ellington demonstrates his ability to think in any musical key and to move freely, deftly among them.¹⁰

Ellington's emphasis upon intelligence, wit, craft, and sophistication in the arrangements thoroughly rejects the notion that transposing Shakespeare into an African American idiom can lead only to travesty. Indeed, the title "Such Sweet Thunder," taken from Theseus's description of his dogs baying in the wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both acknowledges the sullied historical reputation of African American music — perhaps Ellington was thinking in particular of his own "jungle music" — and asserts its extraordinary "sweetness" and potentially universal cultural reach:¹¹

never did I hear
Such gallant chiding: for, besides the groves,
The skies, the fountains, every region near
Seem'd all one mutual cry: I never heard
So musical a discord, such sweet thunder. (4.1.118)

More generally, the suite serves to illustrate the capacity of Ellington's brand of jazz to assimilate other artistic forms and traditions while keeping faith with its fundamental African American roots. Ellington's approach here and after was to search out and emphasize points of contact; his approach to jazz adaptation was mutually affirmational rather than confrontational or revisionary. Indeed, *Such Sweet Thunder* seems to announce Ellington's late-career ambition to establish jazz as a global language, an international modernism rooted in African American culture, into which other cultures might be translated. Such was the hallmark of later Ellington, as a sampling of titles suggests — *The Far East Suite*, *The Latin American Suite*, *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*, his adaptations of Tchaikovsky and Grieg, and his *Sacred Concerts*.

In the summer of 1963, Ellington was to return to Shakespeare one more time with incidental music for Michael Langham's staging of *Timon of Athens* for the Stratford Festival. Unfortunately, the original score exists only in a fragmentary state in the Stratford archives, though it was skillfully reconstructed and augmented by Stanley Silverman for Stratford's revival

of *Timon* in 1991. As Silverman acknowledges, one purpose of the score was simply to jazz up one of Shakespeare's least known and less-regarded plays using Ellington's wide popular appeal, strengthened by his many jazz performances at the Stratford Festival in the 1950s and 1960s, to build interest in a potential box-office loss-leader. But given the year of its creation and Ellington's concerns at the time, this score also bears in interesting, if oblique, ways on the relationship between Shakespeare and debates about the civil rights struggle in the United States. At first glance, *Timon*, conspicuously unconcerned with questions of racial identity, seems far removed from the themes of Ellington's other major work of 1963, *My People*, for the Chicago Century of Negro Progress Exposition, a musical cavalcade that surveyed American black history and music, emphasizing African Americans' dignity and essential contributions to American culture. But Ellington's interest in *Timon* hints at subtle parallels between Shakespeare's acerbic tragedy about money, the "good life," and social approval and Ellington's focus on black aesthetic sophistication and on economic and social exclusion in America. The jaunty "banquet theme" of Ellington's *Timon* score, a repeated leitmotif, suggests affinities between Timon's generosity and desire for friendship and Ellington's own role as entertainer and bon vivant. Read in this fashion, Timon's bitter impulses, to embrace misogyny and to support violence against a society that fails to appreciate his generosity, might be seen to exemplify embittered and militant responses to American racism, potential responses very much in evidence in the civil rights movement and ones that Ellington consistently rejected. Thus the musical theme that Ellington assigns to revolutionary Alcibiades and his men, instruments of that violence: a pompous march in which momentary appearances of a major key quickly lead back to a minor tonic.

This is not to claim that Langham's 1961 production or 1991 revival actively pursued this reading of the play — they did not. Stanley Silverman's reconstruction offers a somewhat different impression of the relationship between Ellington's music and Shakespeare's tragedy. By fleshing out the surviving fragmentary score (primarily in the banquet scenes) with several of Ellington's best-known "Cotton Club" pieces — "Black and Tan Fantasy," "The Mooche," "Creole Love Call," "Ring Dem Bells" — Silverman potentially solidifies our surmise that Timon might be identified with Ellington in his celebratory vein. (It is also chronologically appropriate to director Langham's resituation of the play's action to Mediterranean Europe between the two world wars.) But Silverman also fashions a new song-motif, "Timon's Theme," from a 10-measure fragment by Ellington that was not included in his original score, a motif that Silverman links to Timon and that is woven in various guises throughout his reconstruction. This bittersweet, highly chromatic theme introduces a persistent element of wistfulness and regret to the play, the nostalgic sense of an earlier, more generous and innocent era lost, an era that Timon tragically comes to exemplify. I argue that

Ellington's incidental music for *Timon* has as one of its subtexts his assimilationist response to the issue of racial oppression. That subtext operates on two levels: first, by suggesting subtly that the tragedy of *Timon* is the tragedy of an unappreciated man who falls prey to the impulses of bitterness and revenge and too late repents that response, a tragedy that speaks obliquely to debates within the civil rights movement; and second, simply by demonstrating a potential congruency between the concerns of that white classic, Shakespeare, and Ellington's own black classical music.

Though it too seeks to make the case that jazz is an appropriate vehicle for Shakespearean content, George Russell's *Othello Ballet Suite*, written and recorded 10 years after Ellington's *Such Sweet Thunder*, adopts a quite different strategy of appropriation. Part of Gil Evans's coterie and composer of early bop standards, George Russell is best known as the codifier of the modal system that underlay the hard bop pioneered by Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Russell has described his mature jazz style as "panmodal" and "panrhythmic," an effort to embrace a variety of musical styles rather than a single identifiable sound, and his later work often layers those styles upon one other synchronically, according to Russell's concepts of "vertical structure" (Russell 1981).¹² His *Othello Ballet Suite* offers a rather challenging example of Russell's post-bop idiom: a dark dirge of sliding low wind and brass notes over nervous polyrhythmic figures in the rhythm section forms the suite's theme, one that constantly threatens to fall into rhythmic chaos. It soon transforms into Ellingtonian big band swing, then moves freely and with minimal transition between various styles, including bop, so-called "third stream" experimentalism, free jazz (several moments recall Ornette Coleman), and even twelve-tone classical modernism. Interestingly, the subjects for Russell's music, particularly in this ex-patriate period (he lived in Scandinavia from 1964 to 1969), oscillated between broad universalist themes (particularly nature and spirituality, as in his *Electronic Sonata for Souls Loved by Nature*, 1966) and Afrocentrism, themes that would come together in his magnum opus, *The African Game* (1983).

His treatment of *Othello* in the *Ballet Suite* is his first attempt to synthesize these two concerns. Other than to retain *Othello*'s tragic dramatic curve, Russell makes little discernible attempt to present the particularities of Shakespeare's narrative. Instead, he speaks of creating "mood objects" for the dancers, treating the play as a sequence of emotional states that are abstract and universal rather than particular to the racial sociopolitics of Shakespeare's play (Russell 1981). At the same time, Russell identifies *Othello* as the work's conceptual armature, as if he were reclaiming Shakespeare's play for performance in a predominantly Afrocentric idiom. Though the suite is not program music, the musical "narrative" (such as it is) returns again and again to a tenor sax soloist, clearly the protagonist Othello, who struggles to accommodate his languorous blues

voice — sometimes successfully, sometimes not — to the barrages of complexly-layered, often rhythmically-agitated musical styles that confront him one after another. (Iago's voice seems to be taken up by the tuba, Desdemona's by the flute.) At the suite's end the return of the opening dirge-like theme lends a certain tragic fatedness to the sequence of "mood objects" that we have just heard; after this theme disintegrates and fades, Russell daringly concludes with a harmonically ambiguous, ominous organ chord, held unchanging for almost a minute — the musical version of a theatrical tableau. Earlier in the suite's second part, this very same chord was used as the sole accompaniment for an affecting slow blues by the sax soloist, perhaps a musical presentation of Othello's sorrowful, tragic succumbing to jealousy. Russell treats *Othello* not as a master ideological narrative about race, but as an abstract psychological study of human nature in crisis, and he uses the play to demonstrate how various jazz idioms might translate that powerful portrait into music. In short, in the *Othello Ballet Suite* the "blackness" of Othello is supplied not by Shakespeare — who provides only a portrait of universalized human nature — but by the African American musical styles Russell supplies and orchestrates. It provides an apt example of mutual legitimation: Russell's jazz forms provide Shakespeare's *Othello* with a measure of black authenticity, while Shakespeare provides his music with a weighty, universal content appropriate to genuine "art."

We should also acknowledge that the aesthetic politics of Russell's piece are complicated by his situation at the time as a jazz ex-patriate. Finding it difficult to support himself in the United States, Russell emigrated to Scandinavia in 1964 and benefitted from the patronage of Radio Sweden, and in particular of its director Bosse Broberg, who commissioned and recorded Russell's work during this five-year period. The idea of an *Othello* ballet suite originated not with Russell, but with choreographer Walter Nicks; its production and subsequent recording were underwritten by Broberg and Radio Sweden and featured an all-European jazz orchestra (with future stars Jan Garbarek and Terje Rypdal). Indeed, jazz's status in Europe — and Russell's European reputation in particular as a "serious" jazz composer and theorist — perhaps make moot the question of African American cultural legitimacy that had long haunted jazz and its relationship to Shakespeare. Certainly Russell's suite avoided the issue of using jazz to provide Shakespeare with popular and commercial appeal, for his compositions were clearly directed to a jazz cognoscenti capable of appreciating thorny complexity rather than to a general listening audience. Indeed, Russell's suite simply assumes that jazz is high art, consonant with Shakespearean content. By 1967, the date of *Othello Ballet Suite's* composition, many of the questions earlier associated with jazz and Shakespeare had migrated elsewhere, particularly in an American context, to the relationship between Shakespeare and rock-and-roll.

One last example also considers the conjunction between Shakespeare and jazz from a distinctly European perspective, using *Othello* as its key reference point and, interestingly enough, even referencing Ellington. Basil Dearden's film *All Night Long*, produced in 1960 at London's Shepperton Studios, offers a modernization of *Othello* set in the world of post-swing jazz (Dearden 1961). On the night of his first wedding anniversary party, Aurelius Rex, a black big band leader, is coaxed by Johnny Cousin, his ambitious drummer, into believing that his white wife Delia Lane is involved with the band's saxophonist and manager Cass. The party features an extraordinary group of jazz luminaries, jamming in an ever-changing line-up — Charles Mingus, Dave Brubeck, and a host of British jazz all-stars such as Tubby Hayes, John Dankworth, and Johnny Scott, all playing themselves. The gathering is hosted by millionaire jazz-fan Rod Hamilton, who uses his South London warehouse pad as a private after-hours jam club and who, like his namesake Roderigo, still secretly carries a torch for Delia. Striking is the extent to which the film mutes the source play's concern with racism. The anniversary party is depicted as a miniature racial and jazz utopia: on and off the bandstand, blacks and whites mingle easily as they enjoy the music, and the interracial nature of the relationships between Rex and Delia and between Cass and his black girlfriend Benny hardly occasion notice or comment. Interestingly, the film both alludes to and elides the real-life interracial marriage between white sax player John Dankworth and his black wife, vocalist Cleo Laine. When Dankworth arrives at the party alone, Rod points up Laine's absence: "I'm so sorry Cleo couldn't make it." Even so, Laine does make an uncredited appearance in the film, but in voice only: she provides the vocals for "All Night Long," the plaintive tune about unfulfilled desire that we see Delia singing in the film, and for "I Never Knew," Delia's duet with Cass.

With his debonair manner, trimmed moustache, aristocratic name, and laidback piano style, Rex unmistakably evokes the image of Duke Ellington — he even leads the group in two Ellington standards, "In a Sentimental Mood" and "Mood Indigo." The image thus brings to the film an oblique reminder of Ellington's ideal of jazz, particularly swing, as a force for racial harmony, and at first Rex and Delia's interracial marriage seems to confirm that ideal. In this adaptation it is not racial prejudice that occupies centerstage, but the vexed business of jazz. Frantic to create his own band, Johnny Cousin needs not only Rod's financial backing, but also commercial credibility with promoter Lou Berger, and Delia, a once famous and still popular chanteuse, becomes the key to both. Delia retired, however, when she married Rex, in part so that she could devote herself entirely to him, in part, as Rod comments in passing, so that Rex could keep her out of the public eye. Though she still longs to perform (and even secretly rehearses a song with Cass for the anniversary celebration), Delia rejects Johnny's business offer and clumsy romantic overture, and so he resolves to destroy her marriage by exploiting for innuendo her close friendship with Cass. The location of

the jazz party at the margins of London and under Rod's sponsorship, the comment of the musicians as they arrive that because the music is noisy "you can't have an all-night session in Mayfair," Berger's complaint that he has more bands than he knows what to do with, the sense that Rex's elegant repertoire of popular standards is somewhat outdated in the context of modal bop and cool jazz: all point to the fact that at the time of the film's production jazz was on its way to becoming a coterie rather than a widely popular musical style. That awareness fuels Cousin's increasingly desperate desire to create a big band of his own before opportunity passes him by. Interestingly, Delia acknowledges the change in tastes. After singing "All Night Long," her signature ballad in the style of an old-fashioned torch song, she offers a sample of her "new style," a bopped-up version of the standard "I Never Knew" that she performs as a duet with Cass. Rex erupts in fury, not only out of jealousy over the imagined affair between Delia and Cass, but also out of anger that she has taken up performing again and in a musical style pointedly not his own. As Rod introduces her performance with Cass, he unwittingly underlines this conjunction: "Aurelius Rex, a year ago tonight you married a woman you thought you knew. There was, however, something you did not know, an aspect of her personality which you never suspected. Mister Rex, ladies and gentlemen, I give you the new, the true, Delia Lane".¹³ Even though race is pointedly and surprisingly not central to this jazz adaptation of *Othello*, nevertheless the issue perhaps inescapably surfaces as a subtext. Rex's impulse to control Delia — he pressured her to give up her singing career — springs from his fears of her abandoning him, and the only indication of the source of those fears comes in this exchange between the two early in the film:

REX: Will you ever be sorry that you married me?

DELIA: Never.

REX: You don't feel in an alien world?

DELIA: Don't say that.

REX smiles, reassured.

It is not clear whether the "alien world" to which Rex alludes is the domestic realm to which Delia referred moments earlier — unconvincingly, she proclaims herself to be newly devoted to homemaking — or marriage to a black man. That Rex may feel uneasy about his interracial relationship with Delia is also hinted at by Johnny Cousin, who observes to Rod that "maybe he doesn't want their marriage in the limelight," a comment that echoes Rod's own surmise. These moments never rise above the level of ambiguity, and they seem to fly in the face of the racial harmony portrayed at the party, so that we are allowed to postulate that while Rex and Delia's

relationship may be accepted by enlightened boho jazz-lovers, the reaction of the general public — a public that, we are told elsewhere, lionizes Rex — may be another matter altogether.

In any case, it is Johnny Cousin who most explicitly voices a consciousness of racial politics. When he suggests that Cass use Delia to get reinstated into Rex's good graces, he adds that "Rex wouldn't refuse Delia tonight even if she asked him to move to Johannesburg," a comment with which Benny agrees before she catches herself. In an equally crass quip, Cousin declares to Lou Berger that he belongs to "that new minority group, white American jazz musicians; we're going to hold a mass meeting in a phone booth." It is only Rex's chuckle that prompts Lou and his insufferable assistant to join comfortably in the laughter. The quip about white jazzmen underlines Cousin's insecure place in the emergent jazz world of the 1960s and reveals that he, unlike everyone else at Rod's party, does not or cannot share the ideal of a jazz-race utopia. Indeed, in his final conversation with Emily he brutally rejects the idea of mutual love:

COUSIN: I love. You love. She loves. Everybody loves everybody. Well, I don't — see? I love nobody. I don't even love Johnny.

This climactic speech makes Johnny's earlier race-oriented comments into symptoms of his own personal psychology, twisted by ambition and self-loathing, rather than indicators of a more pervasive racial politics operating in this fictional jazz world and beyond. That is, Cousin's final tirade tends to mute our perception that this version of *Othello* turns on wider issues of race.

Unlike *Such Sweet Thunder*, which evinces Ellington's active effort to make a case for the cultural legitimacy of jazz, in the process redeeming the relationship between Shakespeare and African American music, *All Night Long* harmonizes Shakespeare and jazz by largely eliding the problem of race not merely in its treatment of Shakespeare's play, but also in its treatment of jazz. Though as a black musician Rex is portrayed with respect, by and large the film does not depict jazz as specifically "black" or inclusively "popular" music. Rather, jazz is treated as a coterie art underwritten by a rich (and white) aficionado, addressed to a hip elite with the specialized, educated taste to appreciate it properly (such is the burden of Cass's harangue at the vulgar promoter Berger). Particularly telling is how the film uses its two major jazz stars, Dave Brubeck and Charles Mingus. Both are given significant cameos and, considered in retrospect, both point to very different directions for the future of jazz.¹⁴ Brubeck pioneered so-called "cool jazz" — harmonically and rhythmically clever, emotionally restrained, sweet and smooth in timbre, but, as many critics complained, with immediate radio-friendly appeal and lacking in expressive force — bop domesticated for mainstream white audiences. *All Night Long* features Brubeck prominently in a full-length performance of his "It's a Raggy Waltz," capitalizing on the song's premiere as

part of Brubeck's 1960 British tour. Though Mingus saw himself as an heir to Ellington, his music exemplified a thornier, more aggressive, even iconoclastic style that was explicitly linked to African American experience, particularly the rage and aspirations born of racism and economic injustice. (Indeed, in the year of the film's making, Mingus formed the Jazz Arts Guild with the intention of offering jazz musicians more control over their work.)

It is striking, then, how in comparison with Brubeck's prominence, Mingus's cameo is shunted to the margins. Though he is the first jazz celebrity we see — when Rod arrives at the warehouse, Mingus is playing a free version of "All Night Long" on the solo bass — and he boasts "I'll be the last to leave," Mingus in fact serves only as an occasional sideman in the jazz sequences, and even then, is pictured very briefly. His duet with Brubeck, "Non-Sectarian Blues" (one of two numbers Mingus contributes to the film's jazz score), occupies less than 30 seconds of screen time and constitutes his longest appearance in the film. Another lengthy celebrity instrumental, Johnny Dankworth's "Fall Guy," also suggests the racial politics governing the film's portrayal of jazz, for in this sequence Dankworth is featured as soloist with an all-black back-up band. This is perhaps intended as yet another example of the "jazz/race utopia" at Rod's after-hours party, but since only Dankworth is accorded closeups, the sequence tends to place his sidemen in the role of lending a measure of black authenticity to Dankworth's white British bebop. Indeed, this sequence suggests that the muting of blackness in this jazz *Othello* might be understood as a reflex of the film's British provenance; in 1960s Britain, jazz was not so closely linked to a specifically African American struggle for cultural recognition and social justice, and so its "blackness" might be pushed to the margins. My point in examining these cameos is not to malign the musicians or their performances (these sequences are extraordinary snapshots of jazz history), but rather to highlight how the ideal of jazz Shakespeare — a Shakespeare at once broadly popular and harmonized with black culture — was, only three years after Ellington's *Such Sweet Thunder* premiered, becoming increasingly vexed by the post-swing politics of African American music. If, as I have suggested, Rex is meant to evoke Ellington and his racial and cultural ideals, in *All Night Long* we are given a disturbing image of the persistent racial anxieties and tensions that lurk just below the surface of his jazz utopia. The image of Rex, under Cousin's poisonous influence, brutally choking Delia, seems to confirm the barbaric rather than the noble impulses of Shakespeare's black protagonist.

Conclusion

With *Such Sweet Thunder* and *Othello Ballet Suite*, Ellington and Russell mark out paths of Shakespearean adaptation largely not taken. There are many reasons for this: the fragmentation of styles in the 1960s made impossible the notion of jazz as a musical Esperanto;

the increasing Afrocentrism of black music, particularly jazz, and, more generally, the counter-culturalism and youth-market nature of pop music made Shakespeare seem largely inhospitable territory (with the important exceptions of *Romeo and Juliet* and Shakespearean rock musicals); the assimilative and affirmational quality of Ellington's suites were increasingly out of step with the more confrontational politics of social justice in the 1960s and after (indeed, Ellington was accused of "being above" the civil rights movement, a comment that gave him great pain); and perhaps most important, popular culture itself increasingly became the cultural dominant, with both Shakespeare and jazz, with their largely coterie audiences, far more the objects rather than instruments of cultural legitimation. Even so, one sign that the conjunction between African American music and Shakespeare has persisted on the cultural radar is the minor and unlikely phenomenon of Shakespeare rap in the 1990s.¹⁵ Its appearance might be chalked up merely to coincidental timing: hip-hop rose to cultural prominence in the same decade as Shakespeare film moved from the art house to the mall cineplex, and Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* and the teen adaptations that followed marked out Shakespeare as canonical fodder for pop culture sampling. It should be noticed, however, that many examples of Shakespeare rap predate Luhrmann's film by several years — the cause-effect relationships, that is, are not that simple. It is perhaps more accurate to characterize Shakespeare rap as one of several concurrent attempts to bring Shakespeare in line with the protocols of American pop and corporate culture, at the very moment when the culture of the African American underclass gained a broad cultural cachet among youth of all races. After all, it is now Shakespeare, not rap, that benefits from this exchange of legitimation, if "exchange" is even the proper term.

And yet even here, the specter of minstrelsy continues to haunt the relationship between Shakespeare and African American music. The year 2000 saw the off-Broadway premiere of *The Bomb-itty of Errors*, a full-length hip-hop version of *The Comedy of Errors* (Allen-Dutton et al 2000). The show was written and performed by five white rappers in full "in the 'hood" personae, who punctuated their adaptation with crude ethnic and gender caricatures, off-color humor, comic dancing, and a general atmosphere of travesty. The rappers were in fact New York University classmates who first conceived the project to satisfy a course assignment. Though not performed in blackface, *Bomb-itty* has the unmistakable flavor of an updated minstrel show, once again suggesting under the banner of admiration for African American music that recasting Shakespeare into a black idiom leads only to burlesque. The show went on to be a surprise, if minor, hit. Extraordinarily enough, very few reviewers remarked on its problematic racial politics, perhaps because the five performers insisted so strongly (and disingenuously) in the publicity materials

upon their own street credentials.¹⁶ In the very next year, Rennie Harris and his Pure Movement Dance Company produced *Rome and Jewels*, a hip-hop Romeo and Juliet filtered through two canonical "street" adaptations, *West Side Story* and Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (Harris 2001; Bernstein and Sondheim 1957; Luhrmann 1996). Harris shifts the focus from the love story to the savage world of inner-city violence that Rome struggles to transcend. At the heart of the show is rivalry between two gangs, the Monster Qs and the Caps, depicted in terms of competition between two dance styles, b-boy and hip-hop. In the piece, dance depicts the unremitting, claustrophobic brutality of male violence, but the show also seeks to co-opt that violence's energies and transmute them into something creative and beautiful, into art. *Romeo and Juliet* here becomes the occasion for examining the urban culture that gave birth to hip-hop, to suggest its unrealized possibilities while interrogating the destruction and degrading styles of manhood it purveys.

I conclude with these two examples for several reasons. They testify yet again to the persistent and ambivalent desire to link Shakespeare with African American music, an idiom regarded as authentically indigenous, of the people, and not quite culturally legitimate. The history of Shakespeare and black music reveals that the interplay between different forms of legitimation, shaped by cultural stratification and racial politics, has long been central to their relationship. But equally important, these two quite different examples suggest that both the degradation and utopian promise of Shakespeare in a black idiom remain historical potentials very much alive in American culture. They suggest, that is, that the final chapters of the history of Shakespeare and African American music remain yet to be written.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Professor Les Fisher for drawing my attention to this reference.
2. The assertion that jazz is a distinctively African American music remains a point of some heated controversy within jazz criticism. Though jazz indisputably originates from a mix of African and American musical forms, whether the music exclusively expresses African American experience and whether it can be played authentically by white musicians continues to generate debate. For the perspective of jazz as distinctively African American music, see Jones (Baraka) 1963, and the final three chapters of Kofsky 1998, 83-142; for the opposing view, see Gerard 1998 and Nisenson 2000a. The controversy is certainly relevant to the question of whether Shakespeare, an icon of mainstream white culture, can be the subject of jazz adaptation without violating its fundamental nature.
3. For a detailed reading of the play, see Katz 1993, as well as Mahar 1991, 261-62.

4. See the recently published text of this work in Lhamon, Jr. 2003, 343-83, as well as Lhamon's incisive discussion of minstrelsy and Shakespeare's *Othello* in his introduction, 11-14 and 70-90.
5. A related illustration, of Othello as a minstrel with banjo wooing Desdemona, graces the cover of *Ye Comic Shakespeare*, a series of twelve British Shakespearean burlesques written by Charles Ross and illustrated by William Gray (1864).
6. For a full consideration of the utopian potential and racial realities of the swing craze, see the thorough discussion in Erenberg 1998.
7. In the case of films without video releases, I worked from off-air recordings or from viewings in film archives.
8. Note also Shearing, *To Be or Not to Bop*, written and first recorded in 1949, which is also the title of Dizzy Gillespie's memoirs (1987). For reasons that may relate to analogies between soloing and soliloquies, *Hamlet* has been a persistent source for titles for jazz instrumentals. For a sampling of examples, see Pepper, "Ophelia," 1975; Brecker, "Slings and Arrows," 1996; Coster, "To Be or Not to Be," 1993; Erskine, "To Be or Not to Be," 1991; Jackson, "Hamlet's Favorite Son," 1996; and Marciano, "Hamlet," 2003. *Othello* has supplied far fewer jazz titles, though "Othello" is the title of instrumentals by Lyle 1990 and Morris 1990. Irvin Mayfield, a protege of Wynton Marsalis, has two Shakespeare titled instrumentals — "Othello and Desdemona" and "Romeo and Juliet," 2001. Titles from *The Tempest* often indicate a Latin- or New Age-tinged pedigree: see, for example, Braga, "Ariel," 1992; James, "Prospero," 1985; and Toney, "Ariel's Dream," 1995. References to *Romeo and Juliet* are far more frequent in jazz or swing songs with lyrics than in instrumentals. Most of these titles date from the 1990s, an indication that Shakespeare's relationship to popular culture and jazz has changed significantly since the 1950s.
9. Though not strictly jazz, other examples of cabaret Shakespeare include Mulcahy and Jones 1981; Young and Leslee 1995; and Luscombe and McKee 1995.
10. For a detailed musical analysis of Ellington's adaptational strategies, see Stephen Buhler's essay in this issue.
11. Quotations from the works of Shakespeare come from the *Riverside Shakespeare* (Shakespeare 1997).
12. For a succinct survey of Russell's life and musical concepts, see Nisenson 2000b, 50-73 and 177-81. See also Monson 1999, 963-72.
13. All citations from *All Night Long* are transcribed from the region 2 Carlton DVD release.

14. Brubeck and Mingus appear in the film simply because they were touring in Britain at the time of its filming.
15. For a fuller discussion of Shakespeare and rap, see Lanier 2002, 73-80, and Burt 2002.
16. I am reminded by Fran Teague that the London production of *Bomb-itty* included a black cast member, a fact that complicates but does not invalidate the point I am here making (Allen-Dutton et al 2000).

Online Resources

Additional Images from *All Night Long*. <http://atropos.english.uga.edu/cocoon/borrowers/request?id=118292>.

Internet Broadway Database Information for *The Boys From Syracuse*. <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=12397>

Internet Movie Database Information for *Casanova in Burlesque*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036700/>

Internet Broadway Database Information for *The Hot Mikado*. <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=12440>

Internet Movie Database Information for *Playmates*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0034033/>

Internet Movie Database Information for *Red, Hot and Blue*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041795/>

Internet Broadway Database Information for *Shakespeare's Cabaret*. <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=4091>

Internet Movie Database Information for *She's Working Her Way Through College*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045144/>

Internet Broadway Database Information for *Swingin' The Dream*. <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=13212>

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