

The Art of Protest: African American Resistance through Community and Music from 1920-Present

By Richard Sajche



Graffiti on wall: N.W.A. logo

At the turn of the 19th century the segregated South unjustly treated African Americans with Jim Crow laws that discriminated against them from any mobility whether it was social, political, or economic. This hostile environment made African Americans migrate out of the South and into the friendlier places such as Chicago, New York, and the West Coast. By specifically looking at Los Angeles and the impact African Americans had on the region this paper shows how African American music was a reaction to the racial inequalities that followed them from the South.

Before African Americans could start to build a community in Los Angeles they needed a big population. In Joe William Trotter Jr.'s historical magazine "The Great Migration" he argues that between 1910 and 1920 several pull factors were forcing African Americans out of the Deep South.[1] These pull factors ranged from economic opportunities such as working in defense plants while white men were off at war, to more secretarial work for black women during World War 1.[2] Since the war required several able-bodied white men and the support of white women, African Americans were able to advance in the North with the majority of the white population at war.

Although Trotter suggest the majority of African Americans ended up in cities like Chicago and New York he sets up the parameters for the African American migration as a whole. His article does a great job creating the foundation for what will be known as the biggest population shift in American history since manifest destiny. However Trotter's article completely ignored Los Angeles and the impact African Americans had on that region during the same time period. Trotter's inadequate analysis of Los Angeles gave way for other scholars to study the West Coast using the same parameters he established for Chicago and New York.

For Los Angeles the pull factors were the same, yet because it was so far west not many were courageous enough to migrate the longer and less traveled path. However, the ones that did make the journey mirrored the economic opportunities Trotter identifies for Chicago and New York. The parallels existed, yet Trotter was not compelled to include Los Angeles. According to Clara Bryant's book "Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles" the West promise of jobs, land, and business opportunities were some of the pull factors that were being promoted through published black newspapers.[3] Once African Americans arrived to Los Angeles they were confined to neighborhoods in and around Central Avenue and 1st street due to housing restrictions on African Americans.[4]

Moreover, Bryant's book does a great job taking the boundaries Trotter established and applied them to Los Angeles, specifically Central Avenue. Additionally Bryant stressed how important Central Avenue was in the 1920's for African American social life with bars such as Mrs. Dawson's, and The Waldof.[5] However, Bryant's book fails to take the parameters established by Trotter and apply them to Los Angeles as a whole. Bryant's narrow focus on Central Avenue ignores other factors of African American life that were happening in Los Angeles leaving his analysis fragmented for other scholars to pick up.

Although Central Avenue was a huge epicenter for African Americans to live near they were also established in other parts of the city. According to Douglass Flaming's book "Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America" he argues that blacks were unlike any other minority in Los Angeles during the 19 teens because they actively built organizations and institutions even under racial laws that were similar to the Jim Crow South.[6] One way in which the black community prospered was through race papers (black newspapers) such as the Liberator and The Eagle that ultimately promoted black businesses.[7] It was through the increasing promotion of black entrepreneurship down Central Avenue done by race papers that ultimately gave way for African Americans to prosper.

Furthermore, Flaming's book does a great job expanding the scope of Bryant's scholarship that focused on Central Avenue and applied it to the greater Los Angeles Area. Flaming also takes the parameters Trotter established for the African American migration out of the South and applies them to Los Angeles. Although Trotter briefly mentions Jim Crow Laws being alive in the South and never mentioning them again, Flaming's book recognizes that Los Angeles was under similar laws the South was under such as segregated schools and racial housing covenants.[8] However Flaming's book failed to elaborate why black entrepreneurship was so important during the 1920's.

Besides a friendlier place to live and better job opportunities economic independence was one of the most important reasons why African Americans left the unwelcoming South. It was through economic independence that African Americans were able to establish communities like Los Angeles and make way for the biggest culture impact the West Coast had ever seen. The works of Trotter, Bryant, and Flaming all do a great job establishing why African Americans left the South, and put into perspective communities they arrived to. However they all fail to mention the impact community establishment had on culture, specifically music.

Prior to 1920 African Americans in Los Angeles were small in population yet impactful along the corridor they were confined to. The first few thousand African Americans that came from the South ranged from unskilled workers to former domestics, yet in 1917 that demographic changed. According to Richard Wang's article in the Black Music Research journal entitled "Researching the New Orleans-Chicago Jazz Connection: Tools and Methods" he argues that once New Orleans famous jazz venue "Storyville" closed in 1917 due to anti-progressive ideals, several musicians were out of work and looked for economic opportunities anywhere in the United States.[9]

Wang continues by stating that several musicians left New Orleans to places like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. His article emphasizes how Los Angeles's African American community was just as established as communities in Harlem and Chicago.[10] Wang essentially instituted how community establishment was needed for Music to rise in the region. However the most pivotal thing Wang's article created was the foundation for the spread of African American music throughout the United States.

Initially jazz music was seen as provocative because it was played in the red light district in New Orleans during a period in American history when abstinence was promoted. However according to Monroe Berger's article "Jazz: Resistance to the Diffusion of a Culture-pattern" jazz music wasn't only provocative but also seen as protest music because musicians were self-taught, and didn't follow traditional scales.[11] Since jazz musicians didn't have formal musical education music critics considered them unprofessional yet rebellious.[12] Unprofessional because the music they were producing wasn't up to standard to the music they were being compared to such as sheet music.

Additionally jazz was seen as rebellious because the amount of improvisation that was needed to compose a song was spectacular. A good example of an improvised jazz song that was heard in Los Angeles during the 1920's was Kid Ory's "Ory's Creole Trombone" where several musical instruments independently combine melodies to the same tempo.[13] It was songs like Ory's that Berger argued were protest music since they didn't follow traditional sheets like other musicians. This idea for the musical world was revolutionary hence Berger deemed it protest music.

However, Berger's main argument of jazz being a form of protest because it didn't follow any musical rules only suggests it was protest by sound. Although his argument seems plausible there are other reasons why jazz could be seen as protest music. In addition to it protesting sound, jazz also challenged race based realities in Los Angeles. As Flamming pointed out Los Angeles also had its fair share of discrimination toward African Americans such as racial covenants that prohibited non-whites from purchasing homes in certain areas, and segregated facilities. Yet according to Marshall Royal's testimony in "Central Avenue Sounds" during the 1920's jazz venues in Los Angeles such as the Lincoln theatre and the Somerset Hotel were places where race based laws were broken.[14]

It was in those venues where people of different ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds all came together to listen to jazz. Since jazz was so phenomenal during the 1920's white, black, Hispanic, and Asian Angelinos all

came together. The racial barriers jazz ruined was the significant reason why jazz was a form of protest. Although Berger's is still accredited for considering jazz as a protesting form of expression his ideas only triggered something more complicated than protest by sound. Moreover the overall theory of jazz being a form of protest because it went against race based laws was only possible because of an established African American community.

Without a prosperous African American community along Central Avenue in Los Angeles jazz wouldn't have flourished the way it did. Since African Americans came to the region with the hope of bettering their social, and economic situation they were able to prosper during the 1920's. According to Josh Sides' book "LA City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the present" the prosperity African Americans had continued during the end of the 1920's; however once the Great Depression dawned that soon changed.[15] Sides' states that although African Americans in Los Angeles had a better opportunity to triumph compared to Chicago and New York, they weren't exempt to the Great depression and its detrimental economic effect.[16]

Similar to the rest of the nation's population, African Americans were affected by the Great Depression. The Black community in Los Angeles took a huge economic blow losing the few jobs they held in agriculture, domestic work, and food industries because of the Depression.[17] Since the economic slowdown drastically affected the affluent white community they cut down on luxuries such as maids, traveling on public transportation, and eating out. The economic downfall affluent white Angelinos went through in the 1930's made it harder for African Americans to maintain jobs.

Although jobs as domestics, and in food industries were drastically decreasing, the federal government was providing jobs for Angelinos. Under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal program several African Americans were able to survive the economic downfall because of programs such as the "Civilian Conservation Corps" that employed African Americans.[18] Although the CCC provided job opportunities for African Americans building roads and cleaning parks they were discriminated against. Within the program African Americans were segregated and were often employed doing the worst jobs available.

Moreover, Sides then alludes to Flamming establishing that segregation in Los Angeles was apparent during the time period yet narrows Flamming's scope, and applies it to job opportunities African Americans had during the Great Depression. Additionally as the Great Depression was coming toward an end

the economic downfall the African American community experienced was managed, and their communities remained established. On the eve of World War 2, Los Angeles's African American community survived the Great Depression and was struggling to prosper; whereas the white community was getting ready to join the Second World War.[19]

Once the war initiated after the bombing of Pearl Harbor thousands of white men were enlisted into the armed forces and made their way toward the European battlefield. Moreover since so many white men were enlisted into the war, Los Angeles was left with thousands of jobs that needed to be filled. It was those voided jobs that prompted the second great migration of African Americans leaving the South since the early 1900's. Sides argued that the same parameters Trotter established for the first great migration to Chicago and New York from the South were the same reasons why the second great migration occurred.[20] It seemed 40 years after the second great migration; the economic opportunities that were originally looked for were still relevant and Sides' applied them to Los Angeles.

While the country was geared toward war, a shortage of workers in defense plants prompted employers to reconsider segregated laws and pressured them to include African Americans in their companies.[21] Under those circumstances the African American community saw the biggest economic rise in their community since the early 1920's. Through defense based jobs such as working Naval Ports to the building of fighter jets, African Americans were able to strengthen their community enough to give rise to the second biggest musical innovation since jazz.

During the 1930's while the African American community was experiencing financial ups-and-downs, music continued to thrive. Although the venues jazz musicians would perform in took a significant blow, that didn't stop them from innovating. According to Ralph Eastman's article "Central Avenue Blues: The Making of Los Angeles Rhythm and Blues, 1942-1947" he argues that jazz musically gave rise to a new form of African American music during the 1940's know as Rhythm and Blues.[22] Although Rhythm and Blues (R&B) was considered a new category of music, the similarities between jazz and R&B were clear.

One direct characteristic R&B took from jazz was the amount of improvisation musicians incorporated into their songs. However, one new thing about Los Angeles R&B that was distinctly different than jazz was the amount of lyrics that were incorporated within songs.[23] A prime example of an R&B song that was similar to jazz during the 1940's yet still different was Joe Liggin's

“The Honeydrinker.”[24]Liggins song combined the 1920’s jazz style known as musical improvisation and added a bebop rhythm with lyrics to epitomize a new category of African American music during the 1940’s. At first R&B wasn’t as popular as jazz but once more and more people heard the “new jazz” they grew to love it and R&B slowly became a worldwide sensation.[25]

For the African American community in the 1940’s they saw R&B as an extension of jazz, therefore both genres were played in the same venues. It was the slight similarities within African American music that compelled Dr. Gaye Johnson to argue in her presentation “*Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement*” that regardless what music was being played by African Americans the end result was always a congregation of different races.[26] Similar to jazz, Dr. Gaye argues that although African Americans were the dominant audience in most venues, they weren’t the only Angelinos enjoying the music.[27]Black, white, Asian, and Latino Angelinos all attended R&B venues at the same time to hear the new music.

Since they all congregated together in the same place that went against the race based laws that were established in Los Angeles, Clyde Wood’s photograph “Club Alabam” is a great example of how R&B continued the same rebellious legacy jazz started of bringing people together regardless of color.[28] R&B venues like Club Alabam in the 1940’s holds Dr. Gaye’s argument of African American music unifying people of different culture to be true. However, although the unification amongst races was apparent in African American social life when it came to the enjoyment of music, life outside those venues was far from unified.

Dr. Gaye’s claim of R&B continuing the same initial protest jazz started when it came to breaking cultural barriers is undeniable. However the discrimination that African Americans endured in Los Angeles that Flamming established with racial covenants and private facilities were the socioeconomic realities for African Americans outside of music venues. That reality ultimately kept African Americans marginalized, and kept them confined to the restricted communities they were allowed to live in. Moreover in Paula Laura’s photograph “1863 East Seventeenth St. 1949” she captures how African Americans and White Angelinos weren’t as unified a Dr. Gaye claimed.[29]

Although the Supreme Court decision Shelley vs. Kraemer outlawed racial covenants in Los Angeles in 1948, Laura’s 1949 picture captures how that decision didn’t apply to some parts of the city. The image shows an African American family trying to purchase a home in Leimert Park, which was

outside of Central Avenue where they were historically confined. Although legislation allowed the African American family to purchase the home an angry white mob refused to let that happen.

Moreover the resentment the white mob showed toward the new legislation in Los Angeles was the beginning of several problems the African American community was going to endure toward the end of the 1940's. Sides argued that after World War 2 the African American community experienced a detrimental economic decline with the closing of several factories along the Alameda corridor. [30] The closing of defense plants after the war impacted thousands of African Americans who worked there to provide for their families. Some African Americans were lucky and found work doing cheap labor such as handyman's and domestics, however as white veterans were returning from the war, job opportunities became more and more limited.

Although after 1948 African Americans were able to move to other parts of the city besides Central Avenue, the loss of jobs barred them from any mobility. According to Josh Sides testimony on "Crips and Blood: Made in America" Sides argues that at a time when the United States was getting ready to pass civil rights legislation, African Americans in Los Angeles were experiencing the biggest economic downfall since the great depression.[31] Not only did the loss of jobs bring an economic downfall to Central Avenue but it also gave rise to masses of unemployed black youth who found alternative jobs in lucrative businesses such as stealing or drug dealing. [32]

While the African American community in Los Angeles was experiencing economic hardships during the civil rights movement, on the other side of the United States the black community was musically innovating. In an interview conducted by Tukufu Zuberi entitled "Birthplace of hip-hop" Zuberi interviewed Elvin Reyes (Dj Kool Herc) who argued that he was the founding father of hip-hop.[33] According to Dj Herc hip-hop started in 1973 at his sister's birthday party in the Bronx, NY when he was on the turntables mixing and scratching jazz and R&B cd's when suddenly someone started rhyming over the beat.[34] It was that summer day DJ Herc claims that hip-hop was born.

Whether or not Dj Herc was single-handedly responsible for the creation of hip -hop is debatable however the impact R&B had on the genre isn't. According to Dr. Johnson Hip-Hop was a direct successor of 1950's R&B that combined the improvisational techniques of jazz and the call and response of R&B through sampling.[35] Sampling was a technique used by hip-hop artist such as Dj Herc who took traditional jazz or R&B songs, added lyrics to them,

and created a whole new song out of the combination. The format Dj Herc established was used by up and coming 1970's hip-hop artist such as Public Enemy, Krs One and several others on the East Coast.

While the innovation of hip-hop was an East Coast phenomenon Los Angeles contributed to the music world with their own version of the new genre. Although the East Coast shaped the parameters for hip-hop with beats and rhymes being the two main factors, Los Angeles' version of hip-hop added a different component into the music, which was struggle. According to Michael Quinn's article "Never Shoulda Been Let out the Penitentiary: Gangsta Rap and the Struggle over Racial Identity" gangsta rap was the west coast representation of hip-hop.[36] Quinn argued that the biggest difference between hip-hop and gangsta rap was the amount of protest gangsta rap had in it.[37]

Unlike Dr. Johnson who argued that all African American music was protest music because it culturally unified people of different races; Quinn argued that gangsta rap's protest was in the racial discrimination African Americans had to deal with regularly. [38] In Los Angeles during the same time gangsta rap was becoming popular, the black community was experiencing a huge drug, and gang epidemic. The problems African American communities had to deal with when it came to drugs and violence was combined with the inability to become financially stable after World War 2.[39] With crime thriving in their communities, police officers routinely patrolled their neighborhoods looking for any suspicious activity.

Due to police officers constantly looking for anyone suspicious in black neighborhoods the tension between African American communities and police officers grew. After the continuous harassment police officers had on the African American community people were compelled to fight back. Sides states that several gangs in the 1980's were formed because black communities felt that police officers weren't there to serve their communities but to profit off them by sending people to prison.[40] In Los Angeles gangs were a direct response to police harassment and kids around the neighborhood saw the formation of gangs as a way to rebel.

Musically the African American community rebelled in a different way. One was to lyrically resist the police harassment that was plaguing their neighborhoods by creating songs protesting the cruel reality. One of the most famous songs protesting the harassment of police in black communities was N.W.A.'s "Fuck the Police" where Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, Eazy-E, Mc Ren, and Dj Yella (N.W.A.) lyrically portrayed a courtroom where they all described the

different ways in which police officers harassed them.[41] In their song N.W.A. accused the Los Angeles Police department of planting evidence, stereotyping, and physically abusing them numerous times for no reason other than the color of their skin.[42]

Although the accusations made by N.W.A. in “Fuck the Police” were a reality for African Americans in Los Angeles, people from outside communities saw it as offensive toward police officers. According to Quinn, White Angelinos saw the song as a direct offense to what police officers represented in terms of safety. Since white Angelinos were less prone to experience any harassment from police they failed to recognize that N.W.A.’s song was a reality in some parts of Los Angeles. The disbelief white Angelinos held about the way N.W.A. said police officers treated them was how many outsiders viewed their objective lyrics but after 1992, that viewed changed.

In 1992 for the African American community the beating of Rodney King by police officers in South Central Los Angeles captured on video vividly demonstrated how police officers treated black people throughout Los Angeles. After the police officers were arraigned in court and found not guilty by a jury of their peers, African Americans throughout South Central Los Angeles rioted because they felt the justice system failed them once again. In an interview conducted by Terry Gross “Covering the Los Angeles Riots” Ice T states that the riots caused by the Rodney King decision were foreshadowed in gangsta rap lyrics years before the incident.[43] Ice T argued that songs like N.W.A.’s “Fuck the Police” didn’t encourage rebellion against police officers, on the contrary he states that the record protested police brutality.[44]

Moreover, Ice T’s testimony suggest not only was gangsta rap a form of protest, but also a reflection of the objection African Americans in Los Angeles had toward racist institutions such as the police department. Similar to jazz in the 1920’s, which protested against racial laws that prohibited against integration, and R&B that continued the same legacy jazz started, gangsta rap continues the legacy of African American music being protest music. Although different forms of protest they all qualify under a general theme of objection to racist institutions.

Similar to jazz and R&B people of different cultures throughout Los Angeles have learned to love gangsta rap in contemporary times. Although racism still exist, and African Americans are discriminated against because of the color of their skin, Los Angeles has grown since early 20th century race laws that prohibited minorities from living in certain neighborhoods. Although times

and musical genres change the struggle within the African-American community remains the same.

While African American communities throughout Los Angeles still feel under protected and preyed upon by the police department, contemporary gangsta rap mirrors this resentment. Kendrick Lamar's song, "Alright," argues that police brutality and racism still exist in Los Angeles during the 21st century.[45] With lyrics such as "and we hate popo [police], want to kill us dead on the street fosho . . . but we going to be alright," Lamar vividly depicts the relationship the African American community has with police officers in the 21st century.[46] Lamar reflects change in genre that shows gangsta rap transitioning into a more positive perspective yet, the struggle with police brutality remains.

From Trotter's analysis of the Great Migration to Sides' inclusion of economic hardships, the shape of Los Angeles for African Americans is clearly attributed. Although all their contributions provide a clear understanding of the African American experiences in Los Angeles, they fail to include how music played a role in defining the African American experience beyond the confines of the local community. From jazz in the early 1920's to gangsta rap in contemporary times music has underscored the struggle of the African American in the twentieth century. Although the protest captured by African American music in Los Angeles has been emphasized through Jazz, R&B and Rap, the sentiments expressed are not exclusive to the region and can be seen in African American communities thought out the United States.

Can you tell me why

Every time I step outside I see my niggas die

I'm lettin' you know

That there ain't no gun they make that can kill my soul

Oh no[47]

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Photograph

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