Kinds of Blue

Grandt, Jurgen E.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Grandt, Jurgen E.
Kinds of Blue: The Jazz Aesthetic in African American Narrative.
The Ohio State University Press, 2005.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28300.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28300

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1178238
In Nathaniel Mackey’s epistolary novel *Atet, A.D.*, multi-reedist N. is astonished by the dramatic improvement in the playing of his bandmate Penguin after the latter’s prolonged stint of, in jazz parlance, ‘woodshedding’: that is, practicing in isolation. “It was,” writes N., “as if the ‘place’ he’d gone off to prepare was not so much a place as a certain rapport, a ‘place’ neither wholly here nor wholly there. It was a ‘place’ which was more than one place at once, a utopic ubiquity which, though always there, was never all there” (15). It is precisely this kind of metaphorical space of at least temporary freedom toward which Sidney Bechet’s poetics of place strives in forging an aesthetic of literary jazz. In enacting this literary jazz aesthetic, *Treat It Gentle* creates an unstable text that, jazz-like, asks to be continuously reinterpreted anew. It stands to reason, though, that the (oral) autobiography of a jazz musician is, of course, likely to avail itself of the same or similar aesthetic principles as the music itself. Thus, the question of what we stand to gain by reading African American narrative to the tune of jazz must necessarily be extended to prose fiction. Ralph Ellison’s seminal novel *Invisible Man* has elicited a plethora of critical responses seeking to integrate jazz and literary-critical practice, primarily because the novel’s prologue features Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue” quite prominently, and because of Ellison’s own copious critical writings on jazz. At the same time, Ellison’s artistic biography practically demands such an
approach, as Ellison was, of course, a trumpeter before he turned to writing, and even his own method of writing emulated the practice habits of the jazz musician (O’Meally, “Introduction” xxx). Thus, the validation of a jazz aesthetic in prose fiction demands that we turn to an author without any direct ties to the jazz community. It also suggests that we not only look at literary texts that are ‘about’ jazz, but that we apply such a critical reading to narratives in which jazz does not figure so conspicuously, or not at all.

Ann Petry’s short story “Solo On the Drums” certainly is a literary text that both is jazz and is about jazz. In her novel The Street, on the other hand, jazz does not appear to be salient. Nor does Petry herself seem the kind of author whose work lends itself readily to a critical engagement with jazz: born into an upper middle-class black family—at the time, one of only two in the town of Old Sadybrook, Connecticut—she pursued a career in pharmacy initially, carrying on the family tradition. After her marriage and subsequent move to New York City, Petry switched to journalism, working for the Amsterdam News and the People’s Voice, Harlem’s biggest weeklies. Having published a number of short stories in the early forties, it was her experiences as a reporter for the People’s Voice which furnished the inspiration for her first novel, The Street, published in 1946. Although an admitted “jazz buff” and hobby pianist, Petry did not have a direct connection to the jazz world (Petry, “Just” 102; Sanders Mobley 347–50; Ivy 200). It is perhaps for this reason that—with the notable exceptions of Gayl Jones’s and Johanna Garvey’s analyses—Petry’s fiction has generated very little criticism focusing on the role of music in general and jazz in particular. While the short story “Solo on the Drums” is saturated with the same jazz aesthetic that informs Treat It Gentle, The Street does not appear to be. Lutie Johnson, a single mother desperately trying to find the means to escape the poverty and despair of 116th Street in 1944 Harlem, is certainly no musician’s musician, and her discovery as a singer is quite incidental. Even so, the novel’s central event is Lutie’s performance as a jazz singer. Her impressive rendition of the sentimental torch song “Darlin’” is located precisely in the middle of the book, in the ninth of a total of eighteen chapters. This strategic placement of an ostensibly minor scene, then, invites a reading of the text as a jazz text. “Narrative,” as Ulfried Reichardt reminds us, is after all “the specifically human form of configuring time,” and the compelling central positioning of Lutie as a jazz artist suggests that jazz plays a pivotal role as a structural device in The Street (474). While “Solo on the Drums” accedes to the same aesthetic principles as Sidney Bechet’s autobiography, The Street extends the literary jazz aesthetic by swinging to a different time signature.
The 1947 short story “Solo on the Drums” features Kid Jones, star drummer in a swing orchestra, playing the solo of his career. During the performance his mind wanders back to the morning of the same day, when his wife told him that she would leave him for the band’s pianist. In the ensuing musical battle between drums and piano, Jones vanquishes his rival, the Marquis of Brund: “When he hit the drums again it was with the thought that he was fighting with the piano player. He was choking the Marquis of Brund. He was putting a knife in clean between his ribs. He was slitting his throat with a long straight blade. Take my woman. Take your life” (239). Just as Omar did playing his drum on Congo Square, Jones in his solo transcends reality by creating a figurative place for himself:

The drums leaped with the fury that was in him. The men in the band turned their heads towards him—a faint astonishment showed in their faces. He ignored them. The drums took him away from them, took him back, and back, and back, in time and in space. He built up an illusion. He was sending out the news. Grandma died. The foreigner in the litter has an old disease and will not recover. The man from across the big water is sleeping with the chief’s daughter. Kill. Kill. Kill. The war goes well with the men with the bad smell and the loud laugh. It goes badly with the chiefs with the round heads and the peacock’s walk. (239)

As Gayl Jones points out in her comprehensive analysis, the drum solo “functioned as a kind of catharsis, a purgatorial ritual. Through his music, Kid Jones . . . has ‘killed’ the Marquis effectively in a musical ritual, so he won’t have to do it in the world; the central confrontations have been transfigured” (97). Just like Bechet’s story of Omar, Kid Jones’s solo, too, creates a figurative space out of lost love, deadly violence (at least the impulse for it), and Africanist memory. As with Omar and Bechet, transcending the pain and suffering of history is only temporary, lasts only for the duration of the song, for as Jones muses while bowing to the audience, “Yeah, he thought, you were hot all right. The jitterbugs ate you up and you haven’t any place to go. Since this morning you haven’t had any place to go. ‘I’m leaving it’s the guy who plays the piano I’m in love with the Marquis of Brund he plays such sweet piano I’m leaving leaving leaving—’” (241–42). Literally without “any place to go,” the only place left is his music. It is that very same place to which Bechet’s and Omar’s stories strive. Even though Jones’s figurative place, like Penguin’s and Bechet’s, is one of “utopic ubiquity,” to use N.’s
phrase again, at least his art—what psychologist Ferdinand Jones has called jazz’s “challenge attitude” that is “crucial to the psychological survival of black Americans”—furnishes space for catharsis and, eventually perhaps, spiritual healing (127, 133). Thus, “Solo on the Drums” falls squarely within the jazz aesthetic as scored by Treat It Gentle. The Street, however, poses certain challenges to a jazz reading, not only because it is a text that is clearly not ‘about’ the music, but also because the “utopic ubiquity” of the metaphorical space that affords Bechet, Omar, and Kid Jones the opportunity of at least temporary transcendence only serves to accelerate the tragic downfall of The Street’s Lutie Johnson.

I. She’s Got a Right to Sing the Blues: Jazz and Gender in The Street

Lutie Johnson, a single working mother in 1944 New York City, has one burning ambition: she is determined to find a way out of Harlem’s dreary, depressing 116th Street for herself and her eight-year-old son Bub. Although she has never had any formal musical training, Lutie is a gifted singer. Boots Smith, the former sleeping car porter turned bandleader, overhears her one evening singing along with the jukebox in the Junto Bar and Grill and is struck not only by her exceptional beauty, but also by her innate musical talent. When Lutie accepts his offer to sing at the Casino with his orchestra, she thinks of the audition primarily as her best chance to escape 116th Street. Her rendition of the sentimental torch song “Darlin’” the following night occurs exactly in middle of the novel:

The music swelled in the back of her and she began to sing, faintly at first and then her voice grew stronger, clearer, for she gradually forgot the men in the orchestra, forgot even that she was there in the Casino and why she was there. Though she sang the words of the song, it was of something entirely different that she was thinking and putting into the music: she was leaving the street with its dark hallways, its mean, shabby rooms; she was taking Bub away with her to a place where there were no Mrs. Hedges, no resigned and disillusioned little girls, no half-human creatures like the Super. She and Bub were getting out and away, and they would never be back. The last low strains of the melody died away and she stood holding onto the mike, not moving. There was complete silence behind her, and she turned toward the band, filled with sudden doubt and wishing that she had kept her mind on what
she was doing, on the words of the song, instead of floating off into a day-dream. (222)

Lutie’s apprehensions are unfounded, though, as her arresting performance not only commands the respect of the musicians, but also lands her the job. In Petry’s description of this jazz performance, we find remarkable parallels to Kid Jones’s drum solo: the juxtaposition of individual soloist and the band collective, the individual’s ability to transcend in music the pain and suffering of history, the straining towards a metaphorical place of freedom. Even though Lutie’s motivation is primarily economic rather than artistic, her performance is nonetheless the result of what Ferdinand Jones calls “the mental improvisational mode”: “Black instrumentalists and jazz singers through the ages, like African American storytellers, exercise resistance and self-definition. . . . The parallel of jazz improvisation to the everyday mental processes of African American individuals is the stance that given reality is not a constant but is to be interpreted” (130, 133). And it is precisely this mental improvisational mode which resists and reinterprets a debilitating reality that we find in Sidney Bechet, Omar, Kid Jones, and also Lutie.

Her talent in harnessing this improvisational “challenge attitude” is also accentuated in the novel’s very first chapter (F. Jones 127). Walking down 116th Street on a windy November day, Lutie espies a sign in front of a building advertising a vacancy:

She read it rapidly. Three rooms, steam heat, parquet floors, respectable tenants. Reasonable. She looked at the outside of the building. Parquet floors here meant that the wood was so old and so discolored no amount of varnish or shellac would conceal the scars and the old scraped places, the years of dragging furniture across the floors, the hammer blows of time and children and drunks and dirty, slovenly women. Steam heat meant a rattling, clanging noise in radiators early in the morning and then a hissing that went on all day. (3)

One by one, Lutie accurately deciphers the meaning in or behind the words on the sign. This, however, still only constitutes interpretation, not improvisational re-interpretation. Nonetheless, when she enters the building, the names on the mailboxes and the narrow hallway, combined with her previous observations, inspire her to a jazz-like improvisation, to a reinterpretation of reality, on the spot:
She stood there thinking that it was really a pity they couldn’t somehow manage to rent the halls, too. Single beds. No. Old army cots would do. It would bring in so much more money. If she were a landlord, she’d rent out the hallways. It would make it so much more entertaining for the tenants. Mr. Jones and wife could have cots number one and two; Jackson and girl friend could occupy number three. And Rinaldi, who drove a cab nights, could sublet the one occupied by Jackson and his girl friend. (7)

The little story Lutie spontaneously composes out of the drab materials at hand is representative of Ferdinand Jones’s mental improvisational mode in that it, too, “affirms the interpreter’s subjective autonomy and therefore spares the individual from psychological dominance even when he or she cannot control the physical circumstances” (133). It is this very same talent for reinterpretation and improvisation that will later inform her performance as a jazz singer.

Even so, while this subjective autonomy of self, however temporary, at which Sidney Bechet, Omar, and Kid Jones arrive in and through music is a liberating one, Lutie’s jazz performances only accelerate her fall. For at the very moment Lutie creates a liberating place of metaphorical freedom for herself and Bub in her reinterpretation of “Darlin’,” she is observed by Old Man Junto, Boots’s white employer, owner of the Casino, and all-powerful if inconspicuous slum lord. Junto “had never been known to look twice at any” of the girls employed in his many venues, but now, after Lutie’s audition, he “wanted her for the same reason that he [Boots] had—because she was young and extraordinarily good-looking and any man with a spark of life left in him would go for her” (276). Ironically, it is Lutie’s success as a jazz singer which allows Junto to order that Boots withhold her salary, which in turn sets in motion the events that lead to Boots’s brutal murder and Lutie’s flight.

Ferdinand Jones’s positivistic analysis of jazz omits the fact that, at least in the literary jazz aesthetic, the mental improvisational mode entails not only opportunity but also a significant risk in its struggle to transcend reality: Lutie’s “day-dream” is destructive rather than redemptive precisely because it is an illusion. As Lutie herself comes to realize eventually, “She had built up a fantastic structure made from the soft, nebulous, cloudy stuff of dreams. There hadn’t been a solid, practical brick in it, not even a foundation. She had built it up of air and vapor and moved right in. So of course it had collapsed. It had never existed anywhere but in her own mind” (308). The collapse of her “fantastic structure” is
caused by Boots’s and Junto’s male gaze of sexual desire that imprisons Lutie at the very moment she sings of liberation. Significantly it is jazz—Lutie’s singing of “Darlin’”—which enhances her good looks. At the same time, jazz also enhances the danger confronting her because it invites the objectifying male gaze of desire in two key scenes, first when she sings along with the jukebox record at the Junto Bar and Grill, then at the audition in the Casino. Being ‘too handsome’ certainly never was a problem for the womanizing Sidney Bechet nor the fictional Omar, not even for the duped Kid Jones—but for Lutie Johnson, physical beauty is a curse rather than a blessing. Hence, Petry’s take on the literary jazz aesthetic appears to emphasize its inherent dangers rather than its potential for self-definition and liberation.

These dangers, as many critics have pointed out, arise in a landscape shaped and regulated by the forces of white male capitalism personified in Junto (Garvey 135–37; Pryse 117–18; Wurst 18–20). The novel frames Lutie’s performance at the Casino in these same symbolic terms as well: at the onset of her audition, Lutie “walked over to the microphone and stood there waiting for the melody to repeat itself. She touched the mike and then held onto it with both hands, for the silvery metal was cold and her hands were suddenly hot. As she held the mike, she felt as though her voice was draining away down through the slender metal rod, and the idea frightened her” (221). The phallic microphone—positioned by bandleader Boots and paid for by clubowner Junto—separates her body, the object of male sexual desire, from her voice, the instrument of individual human self-expression. Even though Lutie wins the respect of the musicians on the bandstand and hears “violent applause” from the crowd every time she sings later that night, the microphone transforms her individualistic art into that precious commodity of consumer capitalism, mass entertainment: “And she thought, It doesn’t make much difference who sings or whether they sing badly or well, because nobody really listens. They’re making love or quarreling or drinking or dancing” (224). Moreover, after her first appearance with Boots Smith’s orchestra has come to a close, a successful performance that has made her feel “so strong so confident,” Lutie overhears one of the bouncers informing Boots that his employer wants to see him (226–27). After Boots has dropped his new singer off at her building on 116th Street, he learns that Junto wants to have Lutie for himself. But Lutie is also in more immediate danger: her successful first stint with Boots’s band causes her to return home in the middle of the night, which leads directly to the sexual assault by Jones, the “cellar crazy” superintendent of her building (302). The attempted rape is foreshadowed earlier in the novel, for it is at
the exact same time that Lutie sings “Darlin’” to the jukebox that Jones prowls through her apartment fondling her clothes.

Thus, for Lutie, the figurative territory of jazz is as dangerous as the literal territory of the unforgiving street, if not more so. The novel provides an interesting contrast between Lutie’s musical endeavors and those of two unnamed male band members. One night soon after her debut, the pianist and a trumpeter remain on the bandstand during intermission:

The trumpeter was experimenting with a tune that had been playing in his head for days. The pianist turned sideways on the piano bench listening to him. . . . The pianist groped for appropriate chords as the man with the trumpet played the tune over softly. Together they produced a faint melody, barely a shred, a tatter of music that drifted through the big ballroom. Conversation and the clink of glasses and roars of laughter almost drowned it out, but it persisted—a slight, ghostly sound running through the room. (302–3)

Unencumbered by the commercial demands of the venue and the artistic restrictions of pre-arranged scores, the two musicians play improvised jazz at its purest, spontaneously composing a new song, a new story, in the moment. While the musicians are engaged in the imaginative creation of art, Lutie asks Boots about her salary: “She waited for his answer, leaning toward him, straining to hear it and hearing the faint, drifting sound of music. It disturbed her because at first she thought it wasn’t real, that she was imagining the sound. She turned towards the bandstand and saw that two of the boys were practicing” (304). For the two male musicians, jazz provides the opportunity for artistic self-actualization. For Lutie, “the thin, ghostly, haunting music” becomes in fact a prelude to tragedy and death: when she arrives at Boots’s apartment towards the end of the novel in order to borrow money to secure a lawyer for Bub, she finds that Junto is present as well. Boots takes her aside to inform her that she can get all the money she needs if she agrees to “be nice” to Junto, to which she reacts with the barely controllable desire to kill the slumlord right then and there (421). Significantly, her homicidal impulses are accompanied by the memory of that faint tune she heard at the Casino: “She could still hear that floating, drifting tune. It was inside her head and she couldn’t get it out. . . . If she hummed that fragment of melody aloud, she would get rid of it. It was the only way to make it disappear; otherwise it would keep going around and around in
her head. And she thought, I must be losing my mind, wanting to hum a tune and at the same time thinking about killing that white man who is sitting, waiting, outside” (422). When her urge to kill finally erupts, she does kill the white man, but only by proxy, for it is the black man who has just attempted to rape her who receives repeated blows from the iron candlestick in her hand. At last, with Boots’s body lifeless on the sofa, the thin, ghostly, persisting melody in her head disappears, and “[t]he room was perfectly still. There was no sound in it except her own hoarse breathing” (11). Just as the “slender metal rod” of the microphone drained Lutie’s voice earlier, so does the candlestick now drain the room of even just the memory of music, haunting as it is. Surely then, the meaning the ghostly melody has acquired for Lutie diverges brutally from whatever meaning the two male musicians find in it. For them, jazz provides the freedom to explore artistically, to roam creatively—for Lutie, jazz in the end becomes the soundtrack for murder.

In her analysis of the subject, Sherrie Tucker avers that “in Black women’s fiction, jazz pulls the individual back to the community,” echoing the positivistic take of Ferdinand Jones and others (“‘Where’” 38). Clearly, though, for Lutie jazz is the catalyst that propels her out of the (albeit dysfunctional) community, severing even the relationship to her son. In fact, the potentially liberating powers of jazz are rendered mute by the overwhelming male forces arrayed against her. It also underscores the fact that jazz “remains an enclave of machismo,” as Francis Davis observed only recently (19). Historically, the only roles readily open to women have been those of vocalist and, less frequently, pianist. Tucker’s own historical study on women jazz musicians in the swing era in fact contradicts her findings in fiction: “In the gender division of jazz and swing labor, the normal configuration is for men to skillfully operate instruments and for women to perform privatized popular versions of femininity with their voices and bodies” (S. Tucker, Swing 6). The fate of The Street’s protagonist dramatizes that the jazz aesthetic can be as pernicious as it is liberating, for women more so than for men, even though—or, perhaps precisely because—Lutie inadvertently adheres to the gendered labor codes of jazz.

II. Swinging Time: The Mills Brothers’ “Swing It, Sister,” Lucky Millinder’s “Darlin’” and Narrative Structure in The Street

Even though, or because, jazz hastens and accompanies Lutie’s demise,
the music also serves as a structural narrative device in the novel. Jazz or jazz-like improvisation appears in the beginning, the middle, and the end of the book. Both jazz and storytelling occur within time, after all, and the strategic placement of Lutie as a jazz artist hence suggests that ‘jazz time’ plays a significant role in structuring the narrative of *The Street* (474). The literary jazz aesthetic’s striving towards a figurative space of freedom also entails the element of time, that is, narrative sequencing: in improvised jazz music, “there is no intent towards time as a period of development,” observes multi-instrumentalist Leo Smith; “rather, time is employed as an element of space” (qtd. in Wilson 570; emphasis added).

This dynamic interaction of time and space, then, points to one of jazz’s unique characteristics—one that sets it apart, to a degree at least, from other African American musics—namely its complex, multilayered manipulation of time, that elusive, mysterious quality called *swing*. Jazz musicians themselves often will define swing simply as that aspect of the music which is “making people’s feet pat” (qtd. in A. Murray 174). Critics and musicologists, on the other hand, have made countless attempts over the years to define empirically this evasive phenomenon (Berendt 198–207; Berliner 244–47; Monson, *Saying* 26–29, 62–63). In his tome *The Swing Era*, Gunther Schuller even goes so far as to enlist computer-generated spectral graphs in his analysis, only to conclude that swing is a jazz element “which, I dare say, we do not yet fully understand” (225, 855–57). Nonetheless, what the various analytical investigations all share is the notion that swing results from a rhythmic manipulation of time combining seemingly opposite elements. Schuller designates these elements as “horizontal” and “vertical” relationships that merge in “the simultaneous integrated flow of performance energies” (225). For Schuller’s colleague Wilfried Raussert, swing is derived from “a complex African sense of time in which recurrent and progressive elements intersect,” and even though swing “postulates a regularity of temporal progression . . . it continuously disrupts and even negates such a regular movement” (521). And Samuel Floyd avers that swing is “a quality that manifests itself when sound events signify on the time line against the flow of its pulse, making the pulse freely lilt” (*Power* 115). It is precisely this combination of disparate time lines which informs both Lutie’s jazz performances as well as the novel’s narrative structure as a whole.

Lutie’s vocal talent is first showcased when, treating herself to a glass of beer at Junto’s Bar and Grill one night, she is inspired by a song blaring from the jukebox: “[T]he juke-box in the far corner of the room started
playing ‘Swing It, Sister.’ She hummed as she listened to it, not really aware that she was humming or why, knowing only that she felt free here where there was so much space” (146). “Swing It, Sister” was a hit for the tremendously popular singing group and scat pioneers the Mills Brothers back in the 1930s (Friedwald, booklet 4–5).8 The tune follows the Mills Brothers’ standard recipe: accompanied only by guitar, Donald, Herbert, Harry and John Mills sing a bouncy, mid-tempo song imitating the voices of instruments—in this case, muted trumpet, trombone, saxophones, and tuba. Only the third chorus contains actual vocals, where Donald’s lead implores the addressee to give in to that “crazy beat” and to “Swing it, sister, / Give it everything you’ve got.” The rest of the performance, four choruses total, consists of the brothers’ signature ‘instrumentalized’ scat-stylings. The song is not only significant in that it functions as a prelude to Lutie’s rendition of “Darlin’,” which she will sing next and, swinging it in jazz time, give it indeed everything she’s got; Lutie hums along with the scat vocals while Junto himself, sitting at his usual table near the back, observes her reflection in the large mirror behind the bar. Thus, Lutie is not the only one who sees herself “look[ing] young, very young, and happy in the mirror” (145). Of course, Junto is too far away to hear Lutie’s humming over the din of the customers, but then again Junto, like Boots, is interested in her body, not her voice. The music that he does hear is “Swing It, Sister,” and so the Mills Brothers’ song accompanies Junto’s male gaze of sexual desire. As critic David Wills has observed, scatting is a peculiar variation of singing in that scat is not “a form of prediscursivity similar to the gesture and the cry, but rather the opening of utterance to a supplemental structure—of celebration, of invention, of complaint—whose site of production is nevertheless within the borders of the body. More articulate than a groan or a cry, less than a verbal utterance, the singing of a melody is something like a commentary upon the body issuing from within it” (138). Thus, Lutie’s humming and the Mills Brothers’ scatting both comment on her body not only as young and happy, but also as very desirable. Scatting, Wills continues, functions “as the vocal interface across which the language of the lyric departs and the sonic purity of the music returns to cement its relationship to the body” (139). Junto is enthralled not by the “purity” of Lutie’s artistry, but by the “purity” of her physical beauty. Lutie’s wordless, and to Junto inaudible, humming arouses his sexual desire, solidifying in his mind that Lutie is indeed one “swingin’ sister,” as Donald Mills’s vocals and his brothers’ scatting inadvertently confirm.9

But Lutie’s artistic talent is not fully showcased until the jukebox plays the next tune. The song is “Darlin’,” a sentimental ballad com-
posed by Lucky Millinder and Frances Kraft Reckling. Recorded on May 26, 1944, six months prior to Lutie’s arrival on 116th Street, “Darlin’” was Millinder’s latest stab at the charts. Alabama-born and Chicago-raised Lucius Venable “Lucky” Millinder was an alumnus of the Mills Blue Rhythm Band of the 1930s before he organized a big band under his own name in 1940. A favorite at the famous Savoy Ballroom and other Harlem venues, Millinder’s high-octane showmanship—he never played an instrument with the band, but sang occasionally—was designed to compete with the likes of Cab Calloway or Louis Jordan, and accordingly the band book contained many novelty numbers like “Who Threw the Whiskey in the Well” or “Big Fat Mama.” The band’s roster of the early forties nevertheless included musicians with exceptional jazz credentials—trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie and Joe Wilder, saxists Tab Smith and Lucky Thompson, bassist George Duvivier, or drummer Panama Francis, to name just a few.\textsuperscript{10} The outfit’s main attraction, however, remained Millinder’s humorous antics and musical gimmicks as well as a string of singers. The first of the band’s featured singers was Sister Rosetta Tharpe, whose highly expressive mezzo-soprano voice gave the new Lucky Millinder Orchestra several hits. Unfortunately, Tharpe left the band in 1944—quite possibly motivated in part also by the famously ribald antics of the other singing star, Wynonie “Mr. Blues” Harris, and of the bandleader himself—to return to her religious singing. Millinder replaced Tharpe with Judy Carol, a vocalist of stunning beauty but rather mediocre talent (Schuller, \textit{Swing} 385–92; Schenker 4). While Harris, and occasionally Millinder, took on the driving jump-blues numbers that began to dominate the Orchestra’s repertoire, Carol was primarily used as a balladeer or “canary,” in the jargon of the swing era. Despite her musical limitations, her rendition of “Darlin’” became a hit when it was released in 1944.\textsuperscript{11}

Typical of the countless sentimental torch songs popular in wartime America, “Darlin’” bemoans the absence of a dear lover. Basically a standard in AABA form, neither the composition itself nor the arrangement contains anything extraordinary—the first two A sections of the middle chorus were cut to accommodate the limitations of the 78 rpm discs—and the lyrics merely recycle a string of well-worn clichés. The first stanza alone summarizes the gist of the song nicely:

Darlin’, where are you?
Darlin’, how are you?
Darlin’, my darlin’,
I’ll wait for you.
The recording begins with Ellis Larkins’s arpeggiated piano leading into (probably) Freddie Webster’s trumpet introduction. Webster simply states the theme in a ‘sweet’ Harry James style before handing off to Carol. Other than some intonation problems, a few very slight melodic variations in the outgoing chorus (which might, however, be part of the arrangement as well), and a phrasing that occasionally lags behind the beat a bit—obviously, Carol has listened to Billie Holiday—Carol’s singing adheres to the score. Taken at a leisurely pace of seventy-four beats per minute, Carol croons her way through the two A sections in D-flat, then arrives at the beginning of the bridge in ominous F minor that soon dissolves through a sunny A-flat major back into D-flat major. After the outgoing repeated A part, the arrangement has the five-man reed section play the melody of the bridge again, augmented by the seven brass for the second half, and driven throughout by an intensified backbeat in the rhythm section. Carol’s repetition of the theme brings the performance back to the original languid groove, and things wrap up with a final trumpet flourish. Save for Larkins’s occasional piano fills in the background, there is no improvisation, as the entire performance is carefully arranged and written out.

This, then, is the recording that prompts Lutie to sing along at the Junto Bar and Grill. Lutie begins singing “when the voice on the record stopped,” that is, she superimposes her vocals on the instrumental bridge (147). Of course, we do not know what notes she sings, but we do know that she signifies on the original lyrics. On the bridge in the first chorus, Carol moans

There’ll be no play
Until the day
You’re in my arms.
This heart of mine is only
Lonely for the one, the one I’ll always love, ah—

Over the instrumental bridge in the second chorus, however, Lutie croons “There’s no sun, Darlin’. [/] There’s no fun, Darlin’” (147). Rhythmically, this contrasts with the score’s original “There’ll be no play / Until the day.” Because her lines are one syllable longer, Lutie must insert at least one additional note into each line, compared to the reed section’s four notes per line. Regardless of what rhythmic value Lutie assigns to each of these notes, the meter of her extemporaneous lines must necessarily contrast with that of the original, and therefore with the rhythmic value of the notes played on the record by the saxophone sec-
tion. Thus, Lutie does indeed ‘swing’ the song rather than simply sing along; her innate sense of jazz time recasts the original meaning of the lyrics and signifies, to borrow Samuel Floyd’s terminology again, on the timeline against the rhythmic pulse of the recorded “Darlin’”:

The men and women crowded at the bar stopped drinking to look at her. Her voice had a thin thread of sadness running through it that made the song important, that made it tell a story that wasn’t in the words—a story of despair, of loneliness, of frustration. It was a story that all of them knew by heart and had always known because they had learned it soon after they were born and would go on adding to it until the day they died. Just before the record ended, her voice stopped on a note so low and so long sustained that it was impossible to tell where it left off. (148)

Significantly, it is not the meaning of the lyrics, but the way Lutie recasts them, that makes her performance so exceptional. In other words, the quality of her performance stems not so much from her verbal signifying as from her rhythmical signifying, which “wasn’t in the words,” and which lends an entirely new emotional shade to the song. In short, it is how Lutie sings the song, rather than what she sings. This compelling shift from what to how, a shift predicated in and by rhythm, makes Lutie’s version a true jazz performance—for, as pianist Bill Evans once put it succinctly, “Jazz is not a ‘what,’ it’s a ‘how,’ and if you do things according to the ‘how’ of jazz, it’s jazz” (qtd. in Kirchner 3).

Just as Lutie’s sense of musical swing time transforms “Darlin’” from a saccharine ditty into a work of art, so does the novel as a whole avail itself of a similar complex layering of literary swing time. Gunther Schuller’s attempt at an analysis of swing is again useful here. For Schuller, “the simultaneous integrated flow of performance energies” that generates swing consists of various elements: one of these is

directed towards maintaining the horizontal flow from note to note. Another element of these energies . . . is involved with the vertical aspects of the music and feeding these up towards the horizontal line. A third part . . . is involved with the opposite: constantly reverting the horizontal line down towards the vertical. This complicated duct system must be maintained at an even flow and perfect balanced control over whatever period of time the performance is to cover. (Swing 224)
Thus, swing combines an inexorable forward motion with a loping circular motion. *The Street*, too, moves irresistibly towards the final catastrophe, but this horizontal movement constantly reverts back on itself in parallel plot lines in synchronous or vertical time.

On the one hand, the novel’s action is clearly linear, teleological. Its naturalistic determinism is symbolized by the title subject itself: “No one could live on a street like this and stay decent. It would get them sooner or later, for it sucked the humanity out of people—slowly, surely, inevitably,” as the protagonist eventually comes to realize (229). Even at the very beginning Lutie must acknowledge that she has “a choice a yard wide and ten miles long” when she muses whether or not to rent the tiny, drab apartment on 116th Street (19). And finally, when Lutie asks for a one-way train ticket to Chicago at Pennsylvania Station after she has killed Boots, she grimly thinks to herself, “Yes, a one-way ticket . . . I’ve had one since the day I was born” (434). Accordingly, Lutie’s linear journey continues at the end of the novel “as the train roared into the darkness” (436). Thus, the text enacts that inevitable forward motion, and Ann Petry herself has said that she “tried to write a story that moves swiftly” (qtd. in Ivy 199).

Lutie’s story is ironically accompanied by another teleological, linear narrative, that of the American Dream. Several critics have pointed to the significance of the figure of Benjamin Franklin and his archetypal American rags-to-riches story. Other than a white skin, Lutie, “the All-American black girl” according to one critic, has all the assets needed to realize her own American Dream: talent, creativity, looks, determination, and an unwavering work ethic (Clark 496). Before she moved to 116th Street, she used to work as a maid for the Chandlers, a family of wealthy industrialists, and “[a]fter a year of listening to their talk, she absorbed some of the same spirit. The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough” (43). And yet, all of these experiences and attributes converge only to produce tragedy for Lutie: her talent and creativity drive her into the insidious designs of Boots and Junto; her looks cause the sociopath Jones to attempt to rape her; and her determination and work ethic cause Bub to fall prey to Jones’s ploy and be detained in a children’s shelter. Lutie’s linear journey toward disaster traces, in reverse, Ben Franklin’s journey toward success: “All those years, going to grammar school, going to high school, getting married, having a baby, going to work for the Chandlers, leaving Jim because he got himself another woman—all those years she’d been heading straight as an arrow for that street or some other street just like it. Step by step she’d come, growing up, working,
saving, and finally getting an apartment on a street that nobody could have beaten” (426). Lutie’s identification with the myth of Ben Franklin, her firm belief “that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and could prosper, then so could she,” and the tragedy this belief brings about only highlights that the myth of the American Dream, encoded and disseminated by white males, is designed to exclude her (64).14 America’s foundational myths of national identity governing its social, political, and economic evolvement—from the Puritan errand into the wilderness, to the western frontier, to manifest destiny, and so on—are all teleological myths (Bercovitch 7–8). They allow Ben Franklin, Junto, the Chandlers, and even the Italian immigrant family of the Pizzinis to pursue their American Dream; but for Lutie Johnson, black and female, they lead to an American Nightmare.

Precisely because the linear, horizontal trajectory of Lutie’s life is accelerated by her jazz performances, leading not to the city upon the hill but to Chicago’s South Side, the narrative flow constantly reverts back on itself. The novel’s linear kinesis, analogous to the horizontal elements in Schuller’s definition of swing, is continuously subverted by a narrative sequencing that appears momentarily to arrest the progress toward the story’s inevitable destination—bringing to mind saxophonist Anthony Braxton’s somewhat cryptic definition of swing as “gravitational intrigue” (qtd. in Lock 153). Therefore, just as in swing, the novel’s horizontal elements are complemented by vertical elements, too, namely the parallel plot lines which time and again disrupt the linear teleology of the narrative.

Throughout the novel, the narrative point of view shifts between different characters, and almost all of their stories feature recurrent flashbacks. Moreover, especially in the first half of the book, the narrative structure repeatedly circles back to the same events, retelling them from a different character’s perspective, or to different if related events that occur simultaneously. For instance, the first three chapters are narrated from Lutie’s point of view, beginning with her deciphering of the wind-tossed sign and ending with her walking up to the Junto Bar and Grill. While chapter four focuses on Jones and begins with him watching Lutie leave the building, the entire chapter seems to arrest time: it narrates in flashbacks how Jones ended up on the street, but it also renarrates in unsettling detail the scene from the very first chapter in which Lutie inspects the apartment and senses the superintendent’s sociopathic desire. After Jones has groped through Lutie’s closet while Bub is out getting a bottle of beer for him, the chapter ends with Jones back in his own apartment, puzzled by the absence of Min, his submissive live-in
girlfriend. Thus, in real time, chapter four advances the action for only a few hours at most. Chapter five once again circles back in chronological time, beginning with Min making supper earlier that evening. While Lutie is at the bar and Jones in her apartment, Min pays a visit to David the Prophet, a root doctor who provides her with the means to keep Jones at bay, and the chapter ends with Min’s first successful rebuking of Jones. Chapters six through eight cover the time between Lutie’s arrival at the bar and her preparation the next morning for the audition with Boots’s band. Here, the narrative development is chronological, save for several long flashbacks, but much of it covers the same time span as did chapters four and five. In fact, the actual time covered by the narrative from the end of chapter three—Lutie leaving for the bar—through the beginning of chapter twelve—Jones returning to his apartment after the attempted rape of Lutie—amounts to little more than twenty-four hours. In the intervening almost two hundred pages, the narrative constantly rewinds the plot, developing the action in stops and starts, moving forward for at most a few hours at a time. And significantly, this time frame is demarcated by Lutie’s two renditions of “Darlin’” in swing time: the first in the Junto Bar and Grill that leads to her introduction to Boots, the second one the following night at the Casino that gives rise to Junto’s nefarious design and that leads to Jones’s attempt to rape her later.

The sequencing of these parallel plot lines on the one hand creates the effect of arrested development (that is, vertical movement), suggesting that Lutie’s efforts to escape the street and its pernicious influences are all in vain. On the other hand, each of the parallel plot lines pushes Lutie ever closer to disaster (that is, horizontal movement) by enhancing the inevitability of her eventual downfall. While the action in the last few chapters does pick up speed considerably, the novel’s ending once again emphasizes the simultaneity of linear, horizontal, and circular, vertical, movement: the penultimate scene shows Lutie on the train to Chicago, a linear journey for the protagonist, but in the subsequent, last scene the novel closes with another snapshot image of the street that opened the book, a circular journey for the narrative. Moreover, Lutie’s linear train journey into an unknown, foreboding future is accompanied by the motif of the circle:

As the train started to move, she began to trace a design on the window. It was a series of circles that flowed into each other. . . . Her finger moved over the glass, around and around. The circles showed up plainly on the dusty surface. . . . The train crept out of the tunnel, gathered speed as it left the city behind. Snow whis-
pered against the windows. And as the train roared into the darkness, Lutie tried to figure out by what twists and turns of fate she had landed on this train. Her mind balked at the task. It was that street. It was that god-damned street. (435–36)

The circular “twists and turns” of the narrative itself are accompanied by the deterministic teleology of the street’s pernicious forces. Significantly, Lutie’s drawing of a series of circles at a time when the narrative propels her furthest into the future is occasioned by the flashback that reaches furthest into her past: the circles are occasioned by her memory of a writing exercise she and her peers were taught in grammar school so as “to get the proper slant to their writing” (435). Yet again, the novel’s exploration of swing time effects a kinesis that is at once linear and circular.

Thus, the novel’s narrative sequencing is indeed Schuller’s “complicated duct system” in jazz time, that complex interaction of the linear and circular elements of swing. Lutie’s figurative one-way ticket to disaster is accentuated by a narrative sequencing that constantly circles back on itself, ensnaring her in ever-tightening circles of male desire. Musicologist Wilfried Raussert observes that swing time “subverts the idea of time as a linear, teleological process. Although it postulates a regularity of temporal progression—the influence of European marches becomes audible here—it continuously disrupts and even negates such a regular movement. A polyrhythmic effect—African sources manifest themselves—results from a flexible change of beat sequences” (521). Just as the action of The Street marches inexorably toward tragedy, so its own flexible change of narrative sequencing continuously disrupts the regular chronology of the events at whose very center is Lutie’s performance of “Darlin’.” Combining linear and circular, or horizontal and vertical elements, The Street is indeed a book narrated in swing time.

III. “Ornamenting the Passage of Time”: Billie Holiday’s “All of Me” and The Street as Jazz Text

“Time,” notes Ishmael Reed in Mumbo Jumbo, “is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around” (218). And if jazz is “a way of ornamenting the passage of time,” as Dick Hebdige once put it euphemistically, then so is narration, and The Street’s way of temporal ornamentation does indeed make it a jazz novel, even though it is not ‘about’ jazz per se (336). The reader experiences the same “slightly
different sense of time” as Ellison’s invisible man listening to Louis Armstrong: “you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes you’re behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around” (*Invisible* 8).

In terms of jazz music itself, the narrative sequencing of events in Petry’s novel echoes, for instance, the dynamic layering of rhythmic time in Billie Holiday’s famous 1941 recording of “All of Me” with the Eddie Heywood Orchestra. Even though Holiday does not change Seymour Simons’s lyrics at all, her melodic alterations (the vertical movement of harmony) and rhythmic modulations (the horizontal movement of rhythm) achieve a maximum of emotional expressivity. Heywood’s arrangement takes the Gerald Marks score at a bouncy 110 beats per minute without reharmonizing the standard. Holiday, on the other hand, takes remarkable melodic and rhythmic liberties. Her vertical, harmonic alterations to the melody are characterized by a consistent lowering of intervals and by a downward bending of the pitch on central words like “goodbye” in her second chorus. The linear, rhythmic variations emphasize and enhance her characteristic behind-the-beat phrasing even more; for instance, in the second chorus Holiday both subtly delays and markedly elongates the “on” in the lines “How can I / Go on, dear, without you,” contrasting noticeably with the underlying steady forward pulse provided by the band. Thus, the upbeat drive of Heywood’s arrangement, akin to the linear teleology of *The Street*, is accompanied by Holiday’s singing that consistently lags behind; her persona is literally left back refusing to be swept up by the orchestra’s forward rhythm, persisting instead in its melancholy plea to “take all of me,” analogous to *The Street*’s narrative that constantly reverts back on itself. Clearly then, both “All of Me” and *The Street* derive their peculiar artistic power from the dynamic interaction between their respective horizontal and vertical elements.

To be sure, Petry’s book is obviously a pre-arranged composition, as it were, and one that is most carefully executed; it does not contain an equivalent to Lester Young’s tenor saxophone solo on “All of Me.” Nor is it an unstable text like *Treat It Gentle*, or an improvisational story like Bechet’s narrative of Omar. The lack of literary improvisation and textual instability, however, does not disqualify the novel as a jazz text. First of all, it is often forgotten that in the history of the music, improvisation did not become a *sine qua non* until the bebop revolution of the mid- to late 1940s. It was a common practice in earlier styles of jazz, especially
big band swing, to have pre-composed solos, written out solos; Sidney Bechet, as I have pointed out, practiced set phrases in advance that later only sounded as if they were being invented spontaneously when he played them on stage. Quite frequently, too, star soloists in big bands would repeat a famous solo note for note, and sometimes it would not even be their own solo originally (Schuller, *Swing* 307–8; Berendt 161–64). Such solos, or entire performances even, may *seem* completely spontaneous, but they rely—albeit much more so than later styles of improvisation—on what Albert Murray has called “a very specific technology of stylization” (99).19 Even in the second half of the twentieth century one can find numerous examples of jazz with little or no improvisation, for instance many of Duke Ellington’s suites or Miles Davis’s collaborations with arranger Gil Evans. Lucky Millinder’s “Darlin’” also contains virtually no improvisation, yet it is still unmistakably a jazz performance. In general, the popular notion that the improvising jazz musician is a mere vessel of sheer talent or is struck by some bolt of quasi-divine inspiration at the outset of each solo is patently false. As the exhaustive studies of Ingrid Monson and Paul Berliner demonstrate—not to mention the countless interviews and memoirs of musician themselves—the art of jazz improvisation demands years, decades even, of constant learning and practice (much of it in isolation) of scales, chords, rhythms, licks, phrases, of studying harmony, of transcribing and memorizing recorded solos. Just as an everyday conversation consists largely of words, phrases, and entire sentences that we have ‘practiced’ or used before and hence of very little truly spontaneous extemporization, so does jazz improvisation consist also of elements of licks, solos, phrases, and melodies that the musicians have incorporated into their musical vocabulary before they go on stage each evening. “It is important to note,” Gayl Jones stresses correctly, “that in jazz the concepts of ‘improvisational’ and ‘extemporaneity’ are only a manner of speaking: jazz is a mastery of technique, and a superb jazz text is as exacting a form as its musical counterpart. This technique is not like ‘automatic writing,’ because the jazz musician (and writer) . . . improvises upon traditional materials” (201).

Accordingly, for Petry—as for Ellington and Davis, for that matter—“a good story” and “good music” both retain a sense of spontaneity (“A Visit” 84). At the same time, both writing and music are also demanding crafts that exact much disciplined work from their respective practitioners: “It comes to you as you write,” she simply said of the creative process, but also emphasized that she does not “freewheel” on the typewriter and revises constantly (“From” 72; “Visit” 82). Thus, the process
of writing Petry describes also occurs, like jazz, within a dynamic field of
tension framed by spontaneity and planning, inspiration and revision.
As fellow writer Robert Creeley notes, improvisation is actually “the
experience of possibility within the limits of his [the improviser’s] mate-
rial (sound and duration) and their environment” (qtd. in Mackey, Dis-
crepant 9). Seconds Berndt Ostendorf: “Improvisation is not free in the
sense of being arbitrary. It follows the difficult discipline of searching out
the inherent curve of language as collective consciousness in finding the
inherent rhythms and rituals of the vernacular” (115). And so, given its
musical reference points and its literary translation of swing time, The
Street does indeed constitute a jazz text, and Ann Petry is the consum-
mate artist who makes it swing.