The very first short story Ann Petry published in the fall of 1939—under the nom de plume Arnold Petri—did not exactly intimate the trenchant interrogation of capitalism, race, and gender that was to inform *The Street*. “Marie of the Cabin Club” appeared in the pages of the Baltimore-based *Afro-American* and is an improbable mixture of romance and mystery. The title character works as a cigarette girl at the Cabin Club, a jazz venue. Trumpet virtuoso Georgie Barr gigs there on a regular basis, and “[t]he high, thin, sweet sound that came out [of his instrument] made her skin prickle and set her pulse to beating faster and faster” (14). Marie has not been able to approach Georgie, however, as he spends intermissions at the table of “an artificial-looking white woman” (14). When Marie manages to save the trumpeter’s life in a knife-fight, the two become friends. Soon she discovers that their every move, especially Georgie’s, is monitored carefully by an Englishman (with requisite monocle). One night, Marie is kidnapped and taken to the stately mansion of the English mystery man, who threatens and beats her. He coerces Marie into telephoning Georgie, who arrives presently. It turns out that Marie’s captor intends to exchange her for Rosa Marin, the white woman from the Cabin Club. Georgie refuses, and instead produces a squad of armed policemen storming the premises. The kidnapper is taken into custody, and Marie learns that Rosa Marin is actually a spy. Marin had recruited Georgie in France during his last
European tour, and after his return stateside she followed him, apparently to collect intelligence on the domestic espionage activities of the Axis powers. They agreed on the club as the least conspicuous place to exchange information, but the Englishman, spying for the Japanese, somehow got wind of it and intended to neutralize Marin. With all the mysteries resolved and the danger averted, Marie and Georgie pledge each other eternal love and “forgot all about Rosa Marin” until the day of the wedding, when they receive “by special messenger” a silver tea service courtesy of Marin and the French government (14).

Unlike *The Street* or “Solo on the Drums,” “Marie of the Cabin Club” is not really a jazz text. The “unearthly” and “miraculous music” tumbling from the bell of Georgie Barr’s trumpet has no function other than to inject an aura of (sexual) excitement into the goings-on and to allude to other popular stereotypes of jazz as an ‘underground’ music always on the edge (14). Of course, the figure of a trumpet virtuoso is more alluring than that of, say, a bartender or doorman, and the ancillary references to Georgie’s music are designed simply to enhance his desirability for Marie as well as our suspense. Nonetheless, the short story is indicative of a rather curious theme in African American jazz narrative, namely the linkage between jazz, (political) power, and violence. The struggle between Omar and Marie’s master in *Treat It Gentle* as well as Bechet’s own violent outbursts, Kid Jones’s fantasy of dismembering his rival in “Solo on the Drums,” Lutie’s surreal nightmare of the Super and her brutal killing of Boots in *The Street*, and, as we shall see, several bizarre acts of violence in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*—all of this suggests that there is more than a casual connection between jazz and violence. The suggestion deepens when we remember Langston Hughes’s description of drowning out the sound of exploding artillery shells in besieged Madrid by playing his Ellington, Goodman, or Lunceford records at full volume (*I Wonder* 340–41); of Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, who plays Armstrong’s recording of “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue” as a prelude to the battle royal (*Invisible* 7–8); or of Amiri Baraka’s Clay, who is fatally stabbed after he exclaims that Charlie Parker would have roamed the streets of New York City murdering white people had he not had a saxophone (*Dutchman* 97–98).

To be sure, physical violence has been a presence in the lives of many jazz musicians: one is reminded, for instance, of Sidney Bechet’s famous shootout, Wild West-style, in the streets of Paris; of Charles Mingus’s attraction to fire axes; or of Stan Getz’s predilection for spousal abuse. Nonetheless, jazz is not (or is no longer) a musical genre readily associated with violent behavior. The excesses of rock ‘n’ roll and, later, hip-
hop have long since eclipsed the association of jazz with vice and gangsterdom popular in the early days of the music (Ogren, Jazz 56–65). And yet, pianist and jazz historian Ben Sidran insists that ‘Black music is a kind of ‘ritualization’ . . . which can channel black aggression toward constructive and creative ends. It does not drain away that aggression but redirects it, in a more highly articulated form’ (139). Thus, jazz as a form of ritual violence is also a political tool. To Jacques Attali, music—all music—intrinsically contains violence and is a primary tool for the negotiation of political power: “Noise is a weapon and music, primordially, is the formation, domestication, and ritualization of that weapon as a simulacrum of ritual murder” (24). As a way of regulating and structuring noise, music “creates political order because it is a minor form of sacrifice. In the space of noise, it symbolically signifies the channeling of violence and the imaginary, the ritualization of a murder substituted for the general violence, the affirmation that a society is possible if the imaginary of individuals is sublimated” (25–26). If Attali is correct, it should come as no surprise that this connection between music and violence is particularly salient in the United States. Sacvan Bercovitch sees in American history a perennial “simultaneity of violence and cultural formation” (9). And Ralph Ellison, for whom the black experience in the New World remained central to the project of the American democracy—and who, after all, lived this simultaneity of violent oppression and cultural production—observed in Going to the Territory:

Indeed, a battle-royal conflict of interests appears to be basic to our conception of freedom, and the drama of democracy proceeds through a warfare of words and symbolic actions by which we seek to advance our private interests while resolving our political differences. Since the Civil War this form of symbolic action has served as a moral substitute for armed warfare, and we have managed to restrain ourselves to a debate which we carry on in the not always justified faith that the outcome will serve the larger interests of democracy. (595)

Ellison also stressed time and again that this symbolic action is, to invert Carl von Clausewitz’s famous dictum, more than just the continuation of war by other means: “Any people who could endure all of that brutalization and keep together, who could undergo such dismemberment, resuscitate itself, and endure until it could take the initiative in achieving its own freedom is obviously more than the sum of its brutalization” (Ellison, Going 737; von Clausewitz 210). To Ellison, jazz musicians were
“that most representative group of Negro Americans”—and hence, he might have added, representative of all Americans—in their everlasting quest not just to perfect their art, but to reinvent it (Going 749). The question now becomes how the jazz aesthetic negotiates violence: how does it critique, subvert, or lay claim to power within a political system that, historically, has disenfranchised African Americans? It is precisely this nexus between power, violence, and jazz that Langston Hughes’s short story “Bop,” Ralph Ellison’s “Cadillac Flambé,” and Amiri Baraka’s “Answers in Progress” explore.

I. “MOP! MOP! . . . BE-BOP!”: Sense and Nonsense in Langston Hughes’s “Bop”

There can be no doubt that what Louis Armstrong was to jazz music, Langston Hughes was to jazz literature. Almost single-handedly, Armstrong created the basis for a jazz tradition—Hughes did the same for jazz literature. Curiously, African American writers produced virtually no jazz literature during the 1920s. In part, this was due to the fact that Armstrong, Bechet, Ellington, and others were at the time still creating what would become the foundation of the jazz tradition. In the age dubbed the Jazz Age, most Americans paradoxically did not recognize yet in jazz a distinct art form with its own antecedents and origins, nor did they necessarily recognize it when they heard it. After all, The Jazz Singer, like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short story collection, was about anything but jazz. In the 1920s, the word jazz was readily tagged on to just about any commercial and popular form of music (Evans 105–7; Ogren, Jazz 139–46; Sudhalter, “Hot” 149–51).

Another reason for the relative dearth of jazz narratives was that some of the most powerful Harlem Renaissance leaders were suspicious of this rowdy, hybrid, new art form. Men like Du Bois, Locke, or Johnson, always concerned with the ‘respectability’ of black American cultural production, saw in jazz (and blues) at best the source material for some higher, more refined art (Anderson 118–19; Brooker, “Modernism” 231–40; Floyd, Power 106–9; Ogren, “Controversial” 162–68). Consequently, they favored the symphonic concert music of a William Grant Still over the pioneering jazz of an Edward Kennedy Ellington. As Nathan Huggins concluded,

Harlem intellectuals promoted Negro art, but one thing is very curious, except for Langston Hughes, none of them took jazz—the
new music—seriously. Of course, they all mentioned it as background, as descriptive of Harlem life. All said it was important in the definition of the New Negro. But none thought enough about it to try and figure out what was happening. They tended to view it as a folk art—like the spirituals and the dance—the unrefined source for the new art. . . . [T]he promoters of the Harlem Renaissance were so fixed on a vision of high culture that they did not look very hard or well at jazz. (9–10)

Representative of this treatment of jazz as descriptive background in Harlem Renaissance fiction is Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*. The references to jazz are numerous, but their primary purpose is to infuse the exotic-erotic soundtrack with a “primitive, voluptuous rhythm” (337) accompanying the protagonist’s sexual conquests in a teeming, urban setting where

the atmosphere was fairly bacchic and jazz music was snake-wriggling in and out and around everything and forcing everybody into amatory states and attitudes. . . . The women, carried away by the sheer rhythm of delight, had risen above their commercial instincts (a common trait of Negroes in emotional states) and abandoned themselves to pure voluptuous jazzing. They were gorgeous animals swaying there through the dance, punctuating it with marks of warm physical excitement. The atmosphere was charged with intensity and over-charged with currents of personal reaction. (107–8)

Similarly to Petry’s “Marie of the Cabin Club,” jazz in *Home to Harlem* simply charges the plot’s backdrop with some added titillation but does not constitute an aesthetic that informs the text in its entirety. 3

Hughes himself initially explored the literary potential of black music—not just jazz, but the blues, spirituals, and folk songs—in poetry. 4 Not until his first novel, the 1930 *Not without Laughter*, did Hughes begin to tap black music in a sustained fashion in prose. Even then, jazz was only one ingredient in a mélange of sounds reverberating through the narrative. Jazz in the Jazz Age was indeed still “waiting to be the music,” in Sidney Bechet’s words, and so Hughes’s novel reflected a music that was only just beginning to gel from the collision of myriad styles, genres, and regional influences (Bechet 4): “Those mean old weary blues coming from a little orchestra of four men who needed no written music because they couldn’t have read it. Four men and a leader—Rattle Benbow from
Galveston; Benbow’s buddy, the drummer, from Houston; his banjoist from Birmingham; his cornetist from Atlanta; and the pianist, long-fingered, sissyfied, a coal-black lad from New Orleans who had brought with him an exaggerated rag-time which he called jazz” (Hughes, Not 78).5

By 1942, when Langston Hughes began writing his regular column “Here to Yonder” for the Chicago Defender, not only had jazz found itself, it had developed into America’s pop music. But the country had just entered World War II, and the changing times seemed to call for a change in jazz as well. In that same year, 1942, Dizzy Gillespie left Lucky Millinder’s band and joined Earl “Fatha” Hines, where he met a young saxophonist named Charlie Parker (Gillespie 162–63, 173–74). The bebop revolution was incubated. Bebop was everything the music of the grandiose swing orchestras of the previous decade was not: bebop was often politically conscious and self-assuredly black; it was frenetic, screaming, high-octane jazz at sometimes mind-boggling speeds.

“Damn right!” exclaims Gillespie about the early days of bop, “We refused to accept racism, poverty, or economic exploitation, nor would we live out uncreative humdrum lives merely for the sake of survival. . . .

If America wouldn’t honor its Constitution and respect us as men, we couldn’t give a shit about the American way. And they made it damn near un-American to appreciate our music” (287). Or, as Charlie Parker’s alto saxophone famously declared, “Now’s the Time” for a new music with a new attitude. It seemed indeed a music born out of the chaos of wartime. No wonder, then, that there was another voice that accompanied the bebop revolution, namely that of Jessie B. Simple. A year after Parker and Gillespie had joined forces, he made his first appearance in Hughes’s “From Here to Yonder” column in 1943. At first identified only as “my Simple Minded Friend,” Hughes had originally conceived Jessie B. Semple, eventually renamed Simple, as a propaganda tool to drum up black support for the war effort, but Simple soon proved this to be too simple of a role for him and took on a life of his own (Rampersad, Life II 61–64; Harper 23–44). Quick-witted, assertive, impatient, proud of his race, with a hipster lexicon all his own, Simple seemed in many ways the perfect literary foil to the beboppers at Minton’s and Monroe’s, just a few blocks away from Paddy’s Bar, Simple’s favorite hangout. Not surprisingly, Simple dug bop, too.

On November 19, 1949, Hughes published “Simple Declares Be-Bop Music Comes from Bop! Bop! Bop! Mop!” as one of his last Defender columns (Harper 242). As he did with his other Simple columns, Hughes revised it for inclusion in the 1953 collection Simple Takes a Wife, the sec-
ond in the Simple series, and selected it for the 1961 The Best of Simple as well.6 “Bop” is a vignette which follows the well-established call and response formula of pitting the somewhat obtuse narrator against the wily Jessie B. Simple. As the narrator walks past Simple’s house on a Sunday, he finds him on the stoop scatting along Dizzy Gillespie’s “Oolya-koo” emanating from the record player in an upstairs apartment7:

“All that nonsense singing reminds me of Cab Calloway back in the old scat days,” I said, “around 1930 when he was chanting, ‘Hi-de-hie-de-ho! Hee-de-hee-de-hee.’”

“Not at all,” said Simple, “absolutely not at all.”

“Re-Bop certainly sounds like scat to me,” I insisted.

“No,” said Simple, “Daddy-o, you are wrong. Besides, it was not Re-Bop. It is Be-Bop.”

“What’s the difference,” I asked, “between Re and Be?”

“A lot,” said Simple. “Re-bop was an imitation like most of the white boys play. Be-Bop is the real thing like the colored boys play.”

“You bring race into everything,” I said, “even music.”

“It is in everything,” said Simple.

“Anyway, Be-Bop is passé, gone, finished.”

“It may be gone, but its riffs remain behind,” said Simple. (Early 227)8

Despite Simple’s subsequent edification of the narrator, the latter still maintains his opinion that bebop’s scat vocals—the instrumentalization of the human voice—are devoid of meaning:

“It all sounds like pure nonsense syllables to me.”

“Nonsense, nothing!” cried Simple. “Bop makes plenty of sense.”

“What kind of sense?”

“You must not know where Bop comes from,” said Simple, astonished at my ignorance.

“I do not know,” I said. “Where?”

“From the police,” said Simple.

“What do you mean, from the police?”

“From the police beating Negroes’ heads,” said Simple.

“Every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club says, ‘BOP! BOP! . . . BE-BOP! . . . MOP! . . . BOP!’

“That Negro hollers, ‘Oool-ya-koo! Ou-o-o!’
“Old Cop just keeps on, ‘MOP! MOP! . . . BE-BOP! . . . MOP!’
That’s where Be-Bop came from, beaten right out of some Negro’s
head into them horns and saxophones and piano keys that plays
it. Do you call that nonsense?”
“If it’s true, I do not,” I said. (227–28)

And, of course, it is not true. While the precise etymologies of the
early, and soon largely obsolete term rebop, its synonym bebop, and the
commonly used abbreviation bop, are unverifiable—as is so much else in
the music’s history—, jazz scholars agree that the terms derive from two
of the most frequently used vocables in scat singing, that is, rebop and
bebop. Recorded examples of the recurrent use of these vocables date
back as early as Louis Armstrong’s 1927 rendition of “Hotter Than
That,” for example (Baraka, Black 74–75; “Bop” 137–38; DeVaux,
“Advent” 292; “Rebop” 403). Hughes himself was very much aware of
the actual etymology of the words bebop and rebop (First 59). At the same
time, jazz lore is replete with stories of white musicians invading the
uptown nightspots in the early 1940s to scribble down furtively on their
shirt cuffs the brand new licks the black jazz artists on stage were invent-
ing—part of what Amiri Baraka has accurately identified as “the Great
Music Robbery”—or with the occasional assertion that the complexity of
bebop harmonies was designed specifically to keep white players out of
jam sessions (DeVeaux, Birth 351–52; “Advent” 295–302; Baraka and
Baraka 331). Accounts of the participants in the birth of bebop vary. Pre-
dictably, white musicians tend not to recall any race-based discrimina-
tion and emphasize that the litmus test was always musical ability, while
black artists—especially if they sense that their interlocutor is sympa-
thetic—will sometimes intimate that the increasing chordal complexity
was indeed a deliberate attempt to contain white imitators (Gerard
23–26). In jazz historiography, the issue of race is closely linked with the
ongoing debate over the evolution of bebop: some students of the music,
like Gunther Schuller for instance, see bop primarily as an aesthetic
response to the worn-out clichés of the big band era, while others, like
Amiri Baraka, insist that bebop grew out of a more explicitly militant
political stance of its black creators (Gennari 475–98). Arguably, Scott
DeVaux’s analysis is the most nuanced:

Entrenched patterns of segregation, both in the music industry
and in society at large, automatically gave white musicians a
nearly insuperable advantage in the mainstream market, blunting
black ambition and forcing it into new channels. Bebop was a
response to this impasse, an attempt to reconstitute jazz—or more precisely, the specialized idiom of the improvising virtuoso—in such a way as to give its black creators the greatest professional autonomy within the marketplace. Bop was the twin child of optimism and frustration, of ingenuity and despair. (Birth 27)

In any event, Simple’s racial distinction between rebop and bebop is pure fabrication: no bebopper or jazz historian relates an ethnic distinction between bebop and rebop. In fact, Gillespie himself was commonly introduced as “Professor Rebop” in the 1940s before the term eventually fell into general disuse. Simple’s account of the origins of bebop in the sonic potential of billy clubs is therefore simply apocryphal.

But, as usual, nothing is that simple with Simple. His explanation that police brutality gave the music its name moves along very similar lines as Sidney Bechet’s fictional story of Omar and the origins of jazz. Just as Bechet adduces the exigencies of American history, the historical context of chattel slavery in America, in order to explain jazz, so does Simple place bebop within a specific socio-historical context, the institutionalized violence inflicted upon African Americans by a political apparatus dominated by whites. And just as the telling of Omar and Marie’s story of enslavement and murder allows Bechet to strive for a figurative space of at least temporary freedom, so does Simple’s account of police brutality and black cultural production aim to assert African American identity and humanity, and to find in that imaginative assertion the freedom of artistic creation.

Jessie B. Simple’s insistence on the politicization of bebop scatting recalls Lutie Johnson’s humming to the Mills Brothers’ “Swing It, Sister” in The Street. It also recalls David Wills’s definition of scat as “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” (138). Simple’s appraisal—and practice—of bebop scatting is precisely that: not just a complaint, but simultaneously a celebration and an invention. Significantly, according to Simple, this at once plaintive and celebratory invention issues forth from within violated black bodies. Enhancing the blackness of black bodies, the “nonsense” vocables of scat are therefore a direct channelization of state-sanctioned violence. Attali’s discussion of noise is once again useful at this point: to Attali, music is the result of an effort to impose order and structure on the disorder and chaos of noise. Thus, if music is meaning, noise is the absence of meaning, that is, nonsense (3–9, 122–24). At the same time though, precisely because noise is devoid of meaning, because it is nonsense, it
contains the potential to create new meanings, to make sense: “the very absence of meaning in pure noise or in the meaningless repetition of a message, by unchanneling the auditory sensations, frees the listener’s imagination” (33). The imaginative powers that are unleashed in and through noise can in turn create a new and different order (or, for that matter, find new ways to consolidate the existing one): “Listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political” (6).¹¹

Though historically inaccurate, Simple’s explanation of the difference between rebop and bebop constitutes such a political act of reinscribing history through the free improvisation of the human imagination. First, there is indeed a lot of difference between “Re” and “Be,” as Simple elaborates: “Be-Bop music was certainly colored folks’ music—which is why white folks found it so hard to imitate. But there are some few white boys that latched onto it right well. And no wonder, because they sat and listened to Dizzy, Thelonius, Tad [sic] Dameron, Charlie Parker, also Mary Lou, all night long, every time they got a chance, and bought their records by the dozens to copy their riffs” (Early Simple 228).¹² The difference between rebop and bebop, then, is that between replication and becoming. For the white jazz musician, Simple suggests, bebop is matter purely of technique, a matter of craft: its riffs, licks, and chords can be learned from recordings—what Attali refers to as stockpiled use-time—and, once ‘mastered,’ are replicated in his or her own playing, thus becoming re-bop (Attali 124–27). For the black jazz musician, bebop is not just an abstract, technical art form: be-bop is also living use-time, an ontological process of negotiating and mediating the terrors of American history in striving towards a human identity of blackness.¹³

Secondly, Simple’s be-bop is a political act of empowerment turning the hierarchical order of sense (music) and nonsense (noise) on its head. By labeling bebop scatting sheer nonsense—in other words, noise—the narrator echoes the cultural mainstream. Simple, on the other hand, by making sense of nonsense, music out of noise, exposes the ostensibly rational power structure as utterly nonsensical. “Bop comes out of them dark days,” Simple affirms: “That’s why real Bop is mad, wild, frantic, crazy—and not to be dug unless you’ve seen dark days, too” (Early Simple 228). In other words, to those unfamiliar with the black experience in America—“them dark days”—bop sounds indeed like noise. As Simple continues: “They think Bop is nonsense—like you. They think it’s just crazy crazy. They do not know Bop is also MAD CRAZY, SAD CRAZY, FRANTIC WILD CRAZY—beat out of somebody’s head! That’s what Bop is. Them young colored kids who started it, they know what Bop is”
In the concluding exchange between Simple and the narrator, the binary pair of sense/nonsense has become completely inverted: “‘Your explanation depresses me,’ I said. ‘Your nonsense depresses me,’ said Simple” (228). Simple has made sense out of nonsense (his “explanation”) and thus revealed the narrator’s initial charge of nonsensical noise as nonsense itself. Tapping into the potential of meaningless noise—the sound of the words *bebop* and *rebop*—Simple forges a life-affirming meaning that challenges and subverts the politics of the cultural mainstream. The political leadership of American society insists on the rationality of *de facto* or even legalized racial subjugation. This claim to reason is enforced and maintained through violence, symbolized here in the billy clubs of white police officers. Policing a political structure that claims to make sense legitimizes, even necessitates, the use of physical violence. The violence visited upon those who resist this claim to reason is channeled by and in the ostensibly unreasonable and nonsensical noise of bebop scatting. However, Simple’s imaginative and improvisational channelization of violence unmasks the power structure’s politics of implementing and maintaining what purports to be sensible order for what it is: utterly unreasonable, brutally irrational. Or, as R. Baxter Miller puts it, in the “blues fantasy” of Simple, “the wild leaps of contradiction and inconsistency pose no incongruity at all, at least none more ridiculous than those that take place in a society based on reason and morality yet still allowing racial segregation in the 1950s” (*Art* 112, 110).

The violent irrationality of racism is exposed in a seemingly nonsensical tale of how noise becomes music: in Simple’s story, the state becomes the purveyor of nonsensical noise, and the storyteller the purveyor of human sense, that is, music. “Part of the genius of black music,” Nathaniel Mackey points out astutely, “is the room it allows for a telling ‘inarticulacy,’ a feature consistent with its critique of a predatory coherence, a cannibalistic ‘plan of living,’ and the articulacy that upholds it” (*Discrepant* 252–53). Hence, where the narrator of “Bop” hears jarring noise, Jessie B. Simple hears, and tells of, a sound will to live. Attali writes,

The only possible challenge to repetitive power takes the route of a breach in social repetition and the control of noisemaking. In more day-to-day political terms, it takes the route of the permanent affirmation of the right to be different. . . . [I]t is the conquest of the right to make noise, in other words, to create one’s own code and work, without advertising its goal in advance; it is the conquest of the right to make the free and revocable choice to
interlink in another’s code—that is, the right to compose one’s life. (132)

And this, of course, is precisely what Simple practices, sitting on his stoop and scatting along with Dizzy Gillespie’s “Ool-yah-koo.” These “disc-tortions,” as Hughes called them in the prefatory note to his bop-inflected Montage of a Dream Deferred, are therefore not only aesthetic claims to compose art, but also political claims to compose life (Collected 387).14

It is therefore certainly no coincidence that both the literary figure of Simple with his witty yet trenchant “disc-tortions” and the music of bebop with, as Eric Lott termed it, its “ritual dismemberment” of the pop music of the swinging thirties originated in an era ravaged by global violence on a heretofore unknown scale (601). The inspiration for Simple, as Langston Hughes tells us, was a man he met in a Harlem bar in the early 1940s who worked in a war plant making “cranks” (Best vii). America’s involvement in World War II also had a decisive influence on the music of bebop, in a way. As Dexter Gordon, one of the original boppers, put it:

I think all the cats were aware of the fact that what we were doing, what we were playing was new, was revolutionary . . . and it was accepted to a degree and then again, there was always somebody putting it down. I really think it was the start of the revolution, the civil-rights movement, in that sense, because that’s what the music is talking about. This is all the young generation, a new generation at the time. And they’re not satisfied with the shit that’s going down. Because they know there should be changes being made. And actually it was a time of change because it was wartime and people were moving back and forth all over the United States and constantly traveling—armies, war jobs, defense jobs. It was a time of great flux. And it was a time of change, and the music was reflecting this. And we were putting our voice into what we thought was about to be the thing. (qtd. in Gitler, Swing to Bop 311)

No wonder, then, that these same violent times also gave birth to Jessie B. Simple, whose voice in the 1950s and ’60s would come to speak out about the civil rights struggle just as eloquently.15 And no wonder, then, that one former candidate for the US presidency—Dizzy Gillespie himself—copped a lick from Jessie B. Simple, as it were, and entitled his memoirs To BE . . . or Not to BOP.16
II. Jazz as Violent Performance Art: Ralph Ellison’s “Cadillac Flambé”

In 1961, Langston Hughes published his collection *The Best of Simple*, which fittingly concludes with the short story “Jazz, Jive, and Jam.” In it, Simple recalls how Joyce, his wife, recently dragged him to a lecture by a prominent black historian. The “Negro hysterian,” as Simple renames him, “said we was misbred, misread, and misled, also losing our time good-timing. Instead of time-taking and money-making, we are jazz-shaking” (239). Offended and bored, Simple took the opportunity to rant about the ineffectiveness of all those civic improvement committees and conferences Joyce attends: “in my opinion, jazz, jive, and jam would be better for race relations than all this high-flown gab, gaff, and gas the orators put out. All this talking that white folks do at meetings, and big Negroes, too, about how to get along together—just a little jam session would have everybody getting along fine without having to listen to so many speeches” (242–43). To Joyce’s indignant reply that meetings like these were not musicals, but serious efforts to further integration, Simple offered this counter:

I said, “With a jazz band, they could work out integration in ten minutes. Everybody would have been dancing together like they all did at the Savoy—colored and white—or down on the East Side at them Casinos on a Friday night where jam holds forth—and we would have been integrated.”

Joyce said, “This was a serious seminar, aiming at facts, not fun.”

“Baby,” I said, “What’s more facts than acts? Jazz makes people get into action, move! Didn’t nobody move in that hall where you were—except to jerk their head up when they went to sleep, to keep anybody from seeing that they was nodding.” (243)

Simple proposes that future meetings include a band like Count Basie’s or Lionel Hampton’s so that the proceedings “open with jazz and close with a jam—and do the talking in between” (244). This way, he concludes, “Even I would stick around, and not be outside sneaking a smoke, or trying to figure out how I can get to the bar before the resolutions are voted on. *Resolved*: that we solve the race problem! Strike up the band! Hit it, men! Aw, play that thing! ‘How High the Moon!’ How high! Wheee-ee-e!” (244–45).

Ralph Ellison would certainly have agreed with Simple’s equation of
Because he saw what he often liked to call the drama of American democracy as fundamentally, intrinsically “jazz-shaped,” jazz to Ellison was really a synecdoche for the American nation as a whole (Going 582, 595–96). Ellison, of course, had had formal musical training and aimed to make a career in music before he turned to writing. In his fiction, essays, and commentary, music, especially jazz and other African American musics, remained a constant source of inspiration, as it did for the long, monumental manuscript of his second novel. Even though this novel was only published posthumously as Juneteenth—a heavily edited version compiled by the executor of his literary estate, John F. Callahan—Ellison over the years had placed self-contained excerpts from the mushrooming manuscript in various literary journals. One of those excerpts was published as “Cadillac Flambé” in the February 1973 issue of the American Review.

The story is set in Washington, D.C., during the 1950s and is told from the point of view of a nameless narrator, a white newspaper reporter. The narrator is on his way home from a pleasant spring Sunday of bird-watching and is walking past the sprawling estate of Senator Sunraider, a powerful New England politician notorious for his virulent race-baiting. Suddenly he notices a white Cadillac convertible driven by a black man in a white suit coming to a stop beneath Sunraider’s mansion. The driver, a jazz bassist named Lee Willie Minifees, proceeds to set his car on fire in an elaborate ceremony. As a stunned white crowd, including the senator, looks on and the car bursts into flames, Minifees launches into a lengthy mock-sermon. He recalls that driving home to Harlem from a lucrative engagement in Tennessee, he had turned on the radio and happened to hear the rebuttal to one of Sunraider’s liberal colleagues, who had criticized Detroit’s automobile industry for a lack of innovation. Sunraider retorted during this live broadcast that, on the contrary, American cars were the best-designed in the world. The only blemish on the reputation of the Detroit-made cars, Sunraider added derisively, was that Cadillacs had become rabidly popular among Harlemites: “We have reached a sad state of affairs, gentlemen, wherein this fine product of American skill and initiative has become so common in Harlem that much of its initial value has been sorely compromised. Indeed, I am led to suggest, and quite seriously, that legislation be drawn up to rename it the ‘Coon Cage Eight’” (229). Therefore, Sunraider concluded, the recurrent complaints of African Americans about economic disenfranchisement were quite spurious: “Give your attention to who it is that is creating the scarcity and removing these superb machines from the reach of those for whom they were intended! With so
many of these good things, what, pray, do these people desire—is it a jet plane on every Harlem rooftop?” (232). Listening to this speech, Minifees decided that he was obliged to return his luxury vehicle to one “of those for whom they were intended” and simply stopped by the Senator’s house to make him a “present” (222). Topping Sunraider’s infamous rhetorical hyperbole, Minifees ends his powerful mock-sermon, accompanied all the while by the crackling flames shooting forth from the car, by expressing his gratitude to the Senator:

In fact, now I don’t want anything you think is too good for me and my people. Because . . . if a man in your position is against our having them, then there must be something WRONG in our wanting them. So to keep you happy, I, me, Lee Willie Minifees, am prepared to WALK. I’m ordering me some club-footed, pigeon-toed SPACE SHOES. I’d rather save my money and wait until the A-RABS make a car. The Zulus even. Even the ESKIMOS! Oh, I’ll walk and wait. I’ll grab me a GREYHOUND or a FREIGHT! So you can have my coon cage, fare thee well! Take the TAIL FINS and the WHITE WALLS. Help yourself to the poor raped RADIO. ENJOY the automatic dimmer and the power brakes. ROLL, Mister Senator, with that fluid DRIVE. Breathe that air-conditioned AIR. There’s never been a Caddy like this one and I want you to HAVE IT. Take my scientific dreamboat and enjoy that good ole GRA-CIOUS LIVING! The key’s in the ignition and the REGISTRATION’S in the GLOVE compartment! And thank you KINDLY for freeing me from the Coon Cage. Because before I’d be in a CAGE, I’ll be buried in my GRAVE—Oh! Oh! (228)

Just as Minifees rips into “God Bless America” for the fiery, dissonant finale, he is interrupted by police and fire engine sirens. Law enforcement eventually haul Minifees away in a straightjacket, leaving behind a thoroughly puzzled narrator and an incensed yet also frightened crowd of onlookers.19 Minifees’s “duet with the expiring Cadillac” comprises the heart of the short story (229).20 Significantly, the narrator implicitly likens the bassist’s act of arson to a jazz performance: “a certain tension, as during the start of a concert, was building. And I had just thought, And now he’ll bring out the fiddle,” but, of course, the crowd of onlookers is in for another kind of performance altogether, a performance which, the narrator recognizes, is largely “improvised” (218, 219). Minifees’s ‘concert’ concludes when, “most outrageous of all, he threw back his head and
actually sang a few bars before the noise of the short-circuited horn set
the flaming car to wailing like some great prehistoric animal heard in the
throes of its dying” (229). To the narrator, the sounds of Minifees’s per-
formance, including the mock-sermon, are sheer primeval noise that dis-
rupts the harmonious setting of a late Sunday afternoon in the spring.
Significantly, though, Minifees performs his concerto in the key of noise
near Senator Sunraider’s mansion in Washington, D.C., the hub of polit-
ical power. The narrator is aware that he must have just witnessed “a
crude and most portentous political gesture,” but is incapable of seeing
in the bassist’s “noisy action” anything other than “a case of overreact-
ing expressed in true Negro abandon, an extreme gesture springing from
the frustration of having no adequate means of replying, or making him-
self heard above the majestic roar of a senator” (229, 232).21

What the narrator is missing—and he himself is prone, despite his
professed liberal convictions, to regurgitate freely racialist stereotypes
about blacks—is the fact that Minifees’s improvised production of seem-
ingly nonsensical noise within earshot of Sunraider is profoundly sub-
versive: “Subversion in musical production,” avers Attali, “opposes a
new syntax to the existing syntax, from the point of view of which it is
noise. . . . What is noise to the old order is harmony to the new” (34–35).
Clearly, for the white onlookers, the bassist’s actions are anything but
harmonious: they disrupt Sunraider’s barbeque, tarnish the narrator’s
bird-watching expedition, and generally unhinge the peaceful Sunday
routine of the park-goers. Minifees’s improvisation of noise directly
opposes and challenges the existing syntax of harmony orchestrated by a
political system condoning the continued subjugation of Americans of
African descent, a system of which Senator Sunraider is the most vocal
and visible representative. Just like Simple, Minifees, too, lays claim to
the right to make ostensibly meaningless noise and, in doing so,
unmasks the laws of harmony according to which society is arranged as
truly meaningless themselves.

However, where violence remains figurative and contained within
Simple’s narrative in “Bop,” violence here is enacted in the protagonist’s
torching of the white Caddy. The narrator recurrently likens the events
he is observing to a sacrificial ritual, an “outlandish rite” of which
Minifees is “the chief celebrant” (221): “I could hear the swoosh-pop-
crackle-and-hiss of the fire,” reports the narrator, and

We watched with that sense of awe similar to that with which
medieval crowds must have observed the burning of a great
cathedral. We were stunned by the sacrificial act and, indeed, it
was as though we had become the unwilling participants in a primitive ceremony requiring the sacrifice of a beautiful object in appeasement of some terrifying and long-dormant spirit, which the black man in the white suit was summoning from a long, black sleep. And as we watched, our faces strained as though in anticipation of the spirit’s materialization from the fiery metamorphosis of the white machine, a spirit that I was afraid, whatever form in which it appeared, would be powerfully good or powerfully evil, and absolutely out of place here in Washington. (220)

The “terrifying and long-dormant spirit” which the narrator fears and which, he believes, shall issue forth from the destruction of the “gleaming white” automobile is the centuries-old yearning for self-determination and freedom for blacks in America; it is a spirit that has never been dormant really, just inaudible to the narrator until Lee Willie Minifees sets his Cadillac ablaze (215). Setting free this spirit of liberty and self-determination must indeed seem “absolutely out of place” at the center of a political system dedicated to curb, control, or render mute this very same spirit. But this pernicious, dehumanizing system is also so paranoid that it is convinced, as is the narrator subconsciously, that it may very well meet the same fate as Minifees’s vehicle if it allows this spirit to find a voice.

The narrator’s recurrent analogies to ritual and sacrifice point again to Attali’s theory of music. Music, says Attali, is the channelization of noise, and every political system seeks to monopolize the codification of music because noise—chaos, death, violence—threatens the legitimacy and existence of this political system. Thus, the musician engages in a sacrificial ritual that either consolidates or subverts the existing social structure:

The musician, like music, is ambiguous. He plays a double game. He is simultaneously musicus and cantor, reproducer and prophet. If an outcast, he sees society in a political light. If accepted, he is its historian, the reflection of its deepest values. He speaks of society and he speaks against it. . . . Shaman, doctor, musician. He is one of society’s first gazes upon itself; he is one of the first catalysts of violence and myth. . . . [T]he musician is an integral part of the sacrifice process, a channeler of violence, and . . . the primal identity magic-music-sacrifice-rite expresses the musician’s position in the majority of civilizations: simultaneously excluded (relegated to a place near the bottom of the social hierarchy) and superhuman
(the genius, the adored and deified star). Simultaneously a separator and an integrator. (12)

Clearly, Minifees in Ellison’s story is Attali’s excluded musician-outcast whose performance of improvised noise issuing forth from the fiery sacrifice of the white Cadillac aims at unmasking, through a channelization of violence, the inhumanity of a political system that oppresses him. Sunraider’s speech underscores Minifees’s dual social status: the bassist has just returned from a financially successful engagement, but the politics of Sunraider and his ilk want to deny him the enjoyment of the fruits of his labor. And yet, Minifees’s subversive action amounts to a characteristically Ellisonian “tableau vivant” that is thoroughly American: the “gleaming white” of the luxury vehicle mingles with “the leaping red and blue flames” ignited by the bassist’s ingenious incendiary device, which he waves about like “a Fourth of July sparkler” (Ellison, “Cadillac” 219, 215, 220, 219). To Ellison, jazz musicians were “that most representative group of Negro Americans,” and so the patriotic color imagery orchestrated by a jazz bassist again configures jazz as a metaphor for the ongoing drama of America and American democracy (Ellison, Going 749; H. Porter 95). And hence, most ironic of all, the white spectators of Minifees’s ritualistic murder-sacrifice of the vehicle are indeed also catching a glimpse of themselves.

However, while Minifees’s act of arson is analogous in many ways to a jazz performance, it is not jazz itself. Just as much as the narrative thrives on the violence of noise, so it also separates it from the harmony of music: significantly, it is the Cadillac that is being sacrificed to noise, not jazz music itself. In fact, the narrator observes how Minifees removes his bass from the backseat of the automobile, carrying it “up the hill some thirty feet above the car, and placed it lovingly on the grass” before he proceeds to torch the car (218). To be sure, improvised jazz music informs Minifees’s ritual sacrifice, but it remains at the same time safely removed from the conflagration that occurs. Symbolically, Minifees’s unharmed instrument suggests the enduring relevance and power of jazz.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that the short story’s protagonist is a bassist. The bass, says bebop legend Ray Brown, furnishes “rhythm with a good sound that can never be replaced by anything else. It’s like a heartbeat,” and Phil Bowler seconds, “[w]e’re the foundation on which everything is built” (qtd. in Berendt 328; qtd. in Monson, Saying 29). To the lay listener, the bass may seem unobtrusive and at times even inaudible, but its function is absolutely crucial. As musicologist Joachim Ernst
Berendt summarizes, “[t]he task of the bassist is to provide the musicians of a jazz ensemble with a harmonic basis that they can traverse. He is the backbone of the group. Simultaneously, the bass has a rhythmic assignment. Since bebop, the bassist’s four regular beats to the bar constitute often the only factor demarcating unwaveringly the fundamental rhythm” (320). Furthermore, the upright bass, or “bull fiddle,” is the most physically demanding of all jazz instruments, even more so than the drum set (Crow 672–79; Berliner 130–31, 315–16). Because the development of the musical role and instrumental technique has been more sweeping and radical for the bass than for any other instrument, jazz historiography has sometimes referred to its “emancipation” from a strictly functional support instrument—often inaudible to the audience and, because of the limitations of early recording technology, often replaced by the tuba in studio sessions or left out altogether—to a fully-fledged solo voice on equal footing with horns, piano, and drums (Berendt 321–26; Crow 675–80). In “Cadillac Flambé,” Lee Willie carefully removes his instrument from the immediate danger zone; he uses only the bow as part of the ritual sacrifice, and the bow is rarely used by jazz bassists. Thus, Minifees, the jazz bassist and representative American of African descent, embodies the black experience in the New World and, by extension, the project and promise of an American democracy that lives up to its own ideals. His bass, untouched by the flames and smoke, symbolizes the continuing vital importance of blacks as the actual “backbone” of the country as a whole. As Ellison concludes in “What America Would Be Like without Blacks,” African Americans “are an American people who are geared to what is, and who yet are driven to a sense of what is possible for human life to be in this society. The nation could not survive being deprived of their presence because, by the irony implicit in the dynamics of American democracy, they symbolize both its most stringent testing and the possibility of its greatest human freedom” (Going 584). Minifees’s sacrificial act certainly constitutes such a stringent testing; his bass, conversely, symbolically holds out the possibility for greater human freedom.

At the end of the short story, however, Lee Willie Minifees is overwhelmed by the police, forced into a straitjacket, and hauled off to jail. His impending incarceration appears to indicate a loss of freedom. Even so, the unharmed instrument as well as one of the milestones in the history of the “emancipation” of the bass reveal not only an echo of Invisible Man, but also offer a reading in which “Cadillac Flambé” retains the enduring possibility of greater freedom. In the fall of 1939, Duke Ellington hired a new and spectacular bass player for his big band: Jimmy
Blanton. Shortly after Blanton joined, Ellington made another addition in tenor saxophonist Ben Webster, and what has come to be known as the Blanton-Webster band is still considered by many to be the finest of all Ellington outfits. In the short time he spent with Ellington, Blanton—who died of pneumonia at the age of twenty-four—revolutionized the function of the bass in jazz. His agile technique and full, robust sound elevated the bass to a solo instrument (Lawrence 286–90; Polillo 368–70). Accordingly, Ellington decided to feature his new bass player and had his musical alter ego, arranger and composer Billy Strayhorn, rework an old tune, “Take It Away,” for Blanton. The showpiece, retitled “Jack the Bear” and recorded for RCA Victor in early 1940, is a bluesy, exuberantly swinging tune and begins with an introductory bass solo of eight measures that positively shocked the jazz world and changed the role of the instrument forever, paving the way for the later innovations in bebop and beyond by the likes of Oscar Pettiford, Ray Brown, or Charles Mingus (Lawrence 292; Schuller, Swing 114–16).

Echoing the Ellington-Strayhorn composition, the invisible man in the novel’s prologue asks, “[c]all me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation,” because “a bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring: then he comes strolling out like the Easter chick breaking from its shell” (6). He defines hibernation as “a covert preparation for a more overt action” and concludes, “[b]ut I am an orator, a rabble rouser—Am? I was, and perhaps shall be again. Who knows?” (13, 14). Thus, it is as if Lee Willie Minifees is Jack-the-Bear returning from his invisible hibernation. Not only is the overt action of his ritual sacrifice set beneath “a clear blue springtime sky,” he is most certainly also an orator and, at least in the eyes of the white onlookers, a rabble-rouser (220). The covert preparation for his fiery sacrificial ritual has taken place on stage and in the practice room as a jazz bassist, invisible and inaudible to Sunraider. Moreover, Minifees’s incarceration is most likely going to be only temporary and thus constitutes but another hibernation from which he will eventually emerge. Because of his musical skills and name recognition at least within the jazz community—the narrator notices that the bassist wears “expensive black alligator shoes” as part of what Albert Murray calls the “special ceremonial costumes” of the jazz professional, who even off-duty “tends to remain in character much as does the Minister of the Gospel”—Minifees will without a doubt be in high demand upon his release and will continue to play his highly subversive yet simultaneously thoroughly American music (Ellison, “Cadillac” 230; A. Murray 230). As one of the “emancipators” of the bass extending Blanton’s legacy in the 1940s, Oscar Pettiford identified four
main criteria of meaningful bass-playing: “Humanity, expression, emotionality, and telling stories” (qtd. in Berendt 327). It is precisely these qualities which pervade portentously both Minifees’s music and sacrifice, qualities to which he shall resort again after his state-imposed hibernation.

The connections to Ellison’s novel do not cease here, for the white narrator of “Cadillac Flambé” himself is in many ways the invisible man’s foil. *Invisible Man* ends with the famous sentence, “Who know but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581). Lee Willie, as we have seen, transmits his message on those selfsame frequencies. But where the invisible man is attuned to those frequencies, the narrator in “Cadillac Flambé” is not. Even though he professes to empathize with the bassist, he is as taken aback, as are the rest of the onlookers, because “burning an expensive car seemed so extreme a reply as to be almost metaphysical” (232). Nonetheless, the arson reverberates in his mind, and the story concludes echoing the final note of *Invisible Man*:

What would be his fate? I wondered; and where had they taken him? I would have to find him and question him, for his action had begun to sound in my mind with disturbing overtones which had hardly been meaningful. Rather they had been like the brief interruption one sometimes hears while listening to an F.M. broadcast of the musical *Oklahoma!*, say, with original cast, when the signal fades and a program of quite different mood from a different wavelength breaks through. It had happened but then a blast of laughter had restored us automatically to our chosen frequency. (233)

Whereas the invisible man deliberately sounds frequencies which the cultural mainstream seeks to suppress, the narrator here hopes to be returned from Minifees’s violent if brief interruption of a Sunday spent catching birdsongs on tape “to our *chosen* frequency,” a frequency, in other words, where white America is not inconvenienced by inadvertently having to face itself in black America. *Oklahoma!* the musical is set in the Indian territory at the dawn of the twentieth century and was a smashing success both with the critics as well as the public in its skillful fusion of romance, adventure, and folk materials, but it does not resemble the Oklahoma of Ralph Ellison’s youth at all (Bunnett et al. 276–77; Wilk 257–62). Although the musical’s *dramatis personae* includes, curiously, the Persian peddler Ali Hakim, it otherwise renders invisible the multicultural Oklahoma of Ralph Ellison’s childhood celebrated in essays
like “Remembering Jimmy” and in numerous interviews. No wonder,
then, that the narrator of “Cadillac Flambé” prefers the fantasy world of
Oklahoma! in which the Other in the person of Ali Hakim is conveniently
married off to one of the minor characters without further complicating
any of the amorous developments of the plot.

To the narrator’s chagrin, the disruption of his “chosen frequency”
hence consists of the translation into ritualistic violence of what
Nathaniel Mackey calls “black music’s infiltration of the dominant soci-
yety” (Discrepant 6). The bassist’s noisy sacrificial act—much like the
invisible man’s intended goal of his covert preparation—is an act of
what Mackey terms “discrepant engagement”: “Discrepant engagement,
rather than suppressing resonance, dissonance, noise, seeks to remain
open to them. Its admission of resonances contends with resolution. It
worries resolute identity and demarcation, resolute boundary lines, res-
olute definition, obeying a vibrational rather than a corpuscular sense of
being” (Discrepant 20). The narrator, on the other hand, clearly proud of
his liberal stance yet unaware of his racial othering of Minifees, is inad-
vertently engaged in what could be termed conformist engagement.

This juxtaposition of discrepant and conformist forms of engagement
also illuminates another salient feature of “Cadillac Flambé,” connecting
it to Ellison’s non-fiction on jazz, namely the recurrent bird imagery. In
the story, we are told that the narrator’s “bird-watching expedition” has
yielded a very satisfactory “tally of birds” enhanced by several glasses of
a drink invented by the host called the “chicken-shot.” He is also carry-
ing a tape machine “to record bird-songs” (214). Later, he likens the ris-
ing top of Lee Willie’s convertible to “the wing of some great, slow,
grateful bird” and the burning automobile to “a huge fowl being flam-
béed in choice cognac” (217, 220). Minifees himself confesses that before
he heard Sunraider’s speech on the radio, he believed he was “as free as
a bird—even though a black bird” steering his luxury automobile down
the highway (224).

This conspicuous profusion of birds in the text strongly suggests one
of Ellison’s sly digs at the most important bebop revolutionary, Charlie
Parker, nicknamed “Yardbird” or simply “Bird.” For all his extolling jazz
as a metaphor for America, Ellison, unlike Langston Hughes and Jessie
B. Simple, never really reconciled himself with bebop and the more mod-
ern styles of jazz. In his eyes and ears, the boppers, these “disgruntled
conspirators meeting fatefuly to assemble the random parts of a bomb”
as he described them in Shadow and Act, were not worthy to join Duke
Ellington and Louis Armstrong in the pantheon of jazz (242). Ellison,
who once blithely quipped that “style is more important than political
ideologies,” was deeply suspicious of the militancy of the beboppers and deplored what he perceived as bebop’s move away from “the true jazz moment” always connected inextricably with blues and dancing (Going 743; Shadow 267). Although his public criticism of the music was muted, in private he could be scathing. Writing to his friend Albert Murray in the fall of 1958 with a summary of the Newport Jazz Festival—of whose board, like Hughes, he was a member—he describes the late Charlie “Bird” Parker’s sound as “miserable, beat and lost” and deplores his pervasive influence on jazz musicians: “but hell, they believe in the witchdoctor’s warning: If Bird shits on you, wear it” (Letter 244). He also ridicules “that poor, evil, lost little Miles Davis” along with John Coltrane, clearly expressing a lack of understanding, masked as disdain, for the experiments in modal jazz the Miles Davis Quintet was involved in at the time and would bring to perfection on Kind of Blue (245; O’Meally ed. 234–35).

The very opening of “Cadillac Flambé” that has the narrator return from a bird-watching expedition also hearkens back to Ellison’s essay “On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz.” In this review of Robert Reisner’s Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker, Ellison points to “the pathetic comedy” of Parker’s life and bemoans “the crabbed and constricted character of his style” as well as his “sound of amateurish ineffectuality” (Shadow 256, 264). The tragedy of Parker’s life, as Ellison sees it, was that in rejecting the role of the entertainer so vehemently—a role which Armstrong, a hero to Ellison but a “moldy fig” to many boppers, embraced wholeheartedly—the alto saxophonist inadvertently conformed to the very image he was trying so desperately to escape, the image of a clown, “a sacrificial figure whose struggles against personal chaos, onstage and off, served as entertainment for a ravenous, sensation-starved, culturally disoriented public which had only the slightest notion of its real significance. . . . In the end he had no private life and his most tragic moments were drained of human significance” (261). Just as Parker’s musical innovations and political militancy are just smoke and mirrors to Ellison, so is the freedom Lee Willie experiences driving his Caddy illusory. Consequently, the chirpy bird-chatter on the tape the reporter-narrator turns on instinctively is superseded by the bassist’s profoundly political statements. Having moved his instrument away from immediate danger, Minifees speaks first and foremost as an American citizen rather than a jazz musician. Bird was “like a man dismembering himself with a dull razor on a spotlighted stage,” but Lee Willie’s immolation of the white car, that “huge fowl,” is a raucous and much more effective sacrificial form of social protest (Shadow 261; “Cadillac” 217).
Thus, “Cadillac Flambé” explores the nexus between jazz, violence, and the right of African Americans to self-determination and freedom in their struggle to make their human voices heard. As Ellison himself wrote of his beginnings as a struggling artist, “[i]n those days it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live” (Shadow 227). For the established artist and consummate manipulator of sounds Lee Willie Minifees, on the other hand, the choice between music and noise is not an absolute one: in the ritual murder of his Cadillac to the tune of jazz, he decides rather desperately to live with the “noise” of his own music.

III. Black to the Future: Revolutionary Jazz in Amiri Baraka’s “Answers in Progress”

In “A Coupla Scalped Indians,” yet another short story lifted from his novel in progress, Ellison tells the coming-of-age story of two teenage boys. In the course of their adventures, they suddenly hear the sounds of a jazz band emanating from a nearby fairground. The narrator’s companion, Buster, translates one by one how the soloists are “playing the dozens with the whole wide world” (186). Queried about the meaning of the trumpet player’s solo, Buster explains:

“He? That fool’s a soldier, he’s really signifying. Saying,

So ya’ll don’t play ‘em, hey?
So ya’ll won’t play ‘em, hey?
Well pat your feet and clap your hands,
‘Cause I’m going to play ‘em to the promised land. . . .

“Man, the white folks know what that fool is signifying on that horn they’d run him clear on out the world. Trumpet’s got a real nasty mouth.”

“Why you call him a soldier, man?” I said.

“‘Cause he’s slipping ‘em in the twelves and choosing ‘em, all at the same time. Talking ‘bout they mamas and offering to fight ‘em. Now he ain’t like that ol’ clarinet; clarinet so sweet-talking he just eases you into the dozens.” (186–87)

The trumpet’s martial assertion here to blow the audience into “the promised land” echoes Jessie B. Simple’s utopian recipe for social justice
and reform by replacing the talk of politicians with the swing of Count Basie. Furthermore, where the violence in “Bop” remains contained within Simple’s narrative and is situated, figuratively, in the past, where Minifees's concrete sacrificial violence is enacted by an individual and has no far-reaching consequences apart from the bassist’s impending imprisonment, this passage from “A Coupla Scalped Indians” points to the revolutionary potential resulting from the interface between jazz and violence. As Ellison himself elaborated in Going to the Territory on the dramatic tug-of-war that is American democracy, “this contest (our improvised moral equivalent for armed warfare) proceeds as a war of words, a clash of styles, or as rites of symbolic sacrifice in which cabalistic code words are used to designate victims consumed with an Aztec voracidity for scapegoats. Indeed, so frequently does this conflict erupt into physical violence that one sometimes wonders if there is any other viable possibility for co-existing in so abstract and futuristic a nation as this” (501; emphasis added). After all, America was born from revolution, and jazz, being a distinctly American art form, must therefore logically reflect the potential of revolution in the nation’s continuing struggle to realize the ideals of American democracy. Thus, the jazz aesthetic’s revision of the past—Sidney Bechet’s invention of Omar, Jessie B. Simple’s story of the origins of bebop—is accompanied not only by the possibility of violence and revolution. It also contains a utopian impulse in its struggle towards that metaphorical place of freedom, this “utopic ubiquity,” to quote Nathaniel Mackey’s N once more, an impulse that evinces itself in Bechet’s description of slave songs as well as in Lutie Johnson’s rendition of “Darlin’” (Mackey, Atet 15).24

More than Langston Hughes or Ralph Ellison, Jessie B. Simple or Lee Willie Minifees, Amiri Baraka has championed jazz music as a herald of revolution. Throughout Baraka’s many transformations—from Bohemian Beatnik to Black Nationalist to crude Marxist-Leninist—“one constant for me from the time of any consciousness in helping to define the world has been music,” as he wrote in his Autobiography (65). Today, Blues People and Black Music remain indispensable texts for the jazz scholar. Baraka discovered bebop in his youth, and his association with Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg early in his career in New York City fanned his desire to find a literary voice issuing from black music. In the early 1960s, he began to write numerous reviews, interviews, and articles for several jazz journals and was for a time a regular contributor to Metronome and Down Beat magazine, penning his short-lived column “Apple Cores” for the latter.25 His anything but amicable departure from Down Beat was largely occasioned by the magazine’s hostility towards
the increasingly outspoken black nationalism of many musicians of the emerging free jazz movement (Kofsky 123–30). Baraka, however, was—and continues to be—free jazz’s staunchest supporter. It is certainly no coincidence that his transformation from Greenwich Village Bohemian Beat to Newark Black Nationalist ran parallel with the rise of free jazz. The “New Black Music,” as he preferred to call it, signaled to Baraka a revolutionary call to arms, a rejection of and frontal attack on white America, and a return of jazz to its unadulterated sources in blues and bebop. The larger-than-life leader of the new “poets of the Black Nation,” of the soldiers instigating this revolution, was John Coltrane (Black 176). As Baraka saw it, “Trane is a mature swan whose wingspan was a whole new world. But he also showed us how to murder the popular song. How to do away with weak Western forms. He is a beautiful philosopher” (Black 174). The music of the “hatchet men” and “private assassins” around Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor was the harbinger of a cultural and, eventually, social uprising of Americans of African descent as it spoke “of a world more beautiful than the white man knows” (Black 178, 175; Blues 228).

Baraka is arguably also the African American writer who exerted the most influence on jazz music. His frequent artistic collaborations, either as interviewer, concert organizer, or reviewer, in the 1960s with exponents of the “new music,” especially with his downstairs neighbor Archie Shepp (an early Coltrane disciple), were manifestations of the increasing politicization of jazz (Baraka, Autobiography 256–57; Kofsky 243–44; Such 26–27). Looking back on that wild decade a bit ruefully, free jazz veteran Billy Bang for instance commented that “[m]usicians had no choice in the 1960s but to get into the political thing. A lot of the musicians did not have to get into the theoretical side of musicianship. . . . But they could pick up an instrument and it was like they were picking up an AK47. . . . They just started honking and screaming and the statements sounded like machine gun fire. This happened to me too” (qtd. in Such 71). For Baraka, there was no difference between jazz as aesthetic expression and jazz as revolutionary ideology. To him, jazz, real jazz, real black jazz, was supposed to sound like machine gun fire. His politics of aesthetics—or, for that matter, aesthetics of politics—as well as his staunch preference for the new free jazz therefore made his writings not all that palatable to Hughes or Ellison.

The apocalyptic vision of Charlie Parker running down Fifth Avenue killing scores of white people that Baraka had conjured up in Dutchman seemed about to come true only a few years after the play’s premiere. The year 1967 not only saw the publication of Baraka’s collection of short
stories, Tales, but also a series of bloody race riots that engulfed the nation. No wonder, then, that many of the stories in Tales, although written mostly in the first half of the 1960s, reflected the violence of the times, especially also since the young generation of black free jazzers saw in the jazz musician, in the words of Baraka’s friend Archie Shepp, “a reporter, an aesthetic journalist of America” (qtd. in Baraka, Black 153; Watts 234). The collection’s narrators, all to varying degrees autobiographical projections of the author himself, negotiate personal conflicts and alienation from the community. The last selection in Tales is not only different in that it bears the date of composition. Written after Baraka’s transformation from the Beat Bohemian Leroi Jones to the Black Nationalist Amiri Baraka, the narrative voice of this story is clearly one that has been reborn into an unequivocally black identity. Consistent with the recurrent themes of transformation and revolt, Tales ends with the quasi-futuristic plot of “Answers in Progress,” extending the premise of the earlier story “The Screamers,” in which tenor saxophonist Lynn Hope spearheads a surreal black urban uprising that eventually fails nonetheless. In this last tale, however, space aliens in search of records by jazz drummer Art Blakey, “long, blue wiggly cats, with soft liquid sounds out of their throats for voices,” land amidst the violent, bloody chaos of a black upheaval in Newark:

Space men wanted to know what happened after Blakey. They’d watched but couldn’t get close enough to dig exactly what was happening. Albert Ayler they dug immediately from Russell’s mouth imitation. . . . Red spam cans in their throats with voices, and one of them started to scat. It wigged me. Bamberger’s burning down, dead blancos all over and a cat from Sigma Veda, and his brothers, hopping up and down asking us what was happening. (128)

The narrator, local organizer of the apparently nationwide black uprising now in its fifth day, discusses with “the blue leader” the revolution taking place, the paintings of Ben Caldwell, the poetry of Claude McKay, and together they debate “the changing reference, of our new world. As it stood already in the old ruins. And we all felt like Bird. The old altosaxophonist . . . but the limits opened out into the pure lyric tone of powerful beings” (131). After another exhausting day, the revolutionaries agree on a new flag brandishing “[b]lack heads, black hearts, and a blue fiery space in the background” before the narrator goes home to his wife and children (132).
“Answers in Progress” departs deliberately from the conventions of storytelling—just as free jazz deliberately departed from the conventions of diatonic music. In the earlier, more conventionally modernist stories of Tales, “[t]he yearning for a functional and pragmatic theory of government and prose remains unfulfilled,” as Werner Sollors has demonstrated, and consequently the depiction of a brutal, violent revolt against the political system in “Answers in Progress” comes in a style that revolts against conventional prose, too (156). More like a snapshot—or sound clip—of the prolonged uprising, the story mixes prose, shaped poetry, and song, lacks any exposition or closure, and is generally allusive rather than descriptive. Stylistically, the short story is one of Baraka’s “creative destructions,” as William Harris has labeled them (18). It also draws on several different genres and artistic movements; most notably, of course, it parodies the science fiction genre. Significantly, Baraka’s aliens are not depicted as representatives of a technologically superior civilization: other than catching up on the latest jazz, the aliens seem to be interested only in “gettin’ cooled out” on a space narcotic that tastes like carrots. “It was a cool that took you,” the narrator comments approvingly. “You thought something was mildly amusing and everything seemed interesting” (131). Hence, “these blue dudes” visit earth not to conquer and colonize it with far advanced technology, but to expand their minds (131). But Baraka’s use of the science fiction genre is not simply parodic. Musicologist Graham Lock points out that even in early slave songs, “[e]xtraterrestriality . . . encodes a heavenly site of order and justice that represents a vision of greater sanity than the terrestrial world of slavery, apprehended by the slaves as cruel, arbitrary, and irrational” (58). “Answers in Progress” clearly follows this tradition in that the full emancipation and empowerment of black people in America is possible only at a future (futuristic) time when blue space aliens land in Newark, New Jersey. Furthermore, the story encompasses the events of day five of the revolution: “That’s the way the fifth day ended,” concludes the narrator (132). The allusion to the book of Genesis suggests that on the next, the sixth day of the violent uprising, a new race, a new black race, will emerge, analogous to God’s creation of the race of man, who shall have “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (Genesis 1.26). This parody of Genesis also limns another recurring motif in Baraka’s prose and poetry, namely the idea of a black, or blacker, rebirth through music (Sollors 204).
It is not surprising, then, that these space aliens have heard first intimations of the emergence of a new black race in hard-bop jazz: “Art Blakey records was what they were looking for. . . . They wanted to know what happened to The Jazz Messengers. . . . ‘You know where Art Blakey, Buhaina, is working?’ We just about fell out” (127, 129). Drummer Art Blakey had been among the beboppers of the first hour. In the late 1940s, like many other progressive jazz musicians, he converted to Islam taking the name Abdullah Ibn Buhaina and traveled to Africa to study drumming and Islamic culture. He also formed the first of his various groups bearing the name the Jazz Messengers. Joining forces with pianist Horace Silver in the early 1950s, the Messengers quickly evolved into the archetypal hard-bop group (Gerard 63–64, 73–77). Hard-bop discarded the jagged lines, dizzying tempos, and complex harmonies of bebop in favor of a more pronounced reliance on the blues as well as on the spirituals of the black church. Hard-bop’s redirection towards the more traditional rhythms and melodies of the (rural) black South, towards an emphasis of black “soul,” evinced itself also in song titles like the Messengers’ own “Moanin’” and other compositions like “Sunday Mornin’,” “Back at the Chicken Shack,” “Soul Station,” “Greasin’ Easy,” and so on. Blakey was known as a loud, hard-hitting drummer famous for his intense press rolls, and his playing certainly expresses what literary critic William Harris has called “the jazz aggressive impulse” (16).

Surely, Blakey’s religious conversion, the name of his band, his choice of instrument, and his incorporation of African drumming techniques appealed to Baraka. At the same time, though, Baraka has always been very critical of hard-bop. In Blues People, for instance, he complained that hard-bop had become too formulaic, too commercial, and had degenerated into “the final meaninglessness of the popular” as “a mood music for Negro colleges” (220, 235). Even so,

The direction, the initial response, which led to hard bop is more profound than its excesses. It is as much of a “move” within the black psyche as was the move north in the beginning of the century. The idea of the Negro’s having “roots” and that they are a valuable possession, rather than the source of ineradicable shame, is perhaps the profoundest change within the Negro consciousness since the early part of the century. . . . The step from cool [jazz] to soul [jazz, i.e. hard-bop] is a form of social aggression. It is an attempt to place upon a “meaningless” social order,
an order which would give value to terms of existence that were
once considered not only valueless but shameful. Cool meant non-
participation; soul means a “new” establishment. It is an attempt
to reverse the social roles within the society by redefining the
canons of value. (218–19)

In Baraka’s opinion, however—perhaps not quite coincidentally,
Herbie Hancock’s gospel-tinged “Watermelon Man” had been a huge
crossover hit in 1962, one year prior to the publication of Blues People—
this valorization of black roots had unfortunately succumbed to com-
mercial excess and artistic stultification. The redemption of black music
was effected by the “new thing” of free jazz.

Accordingly, the blue aliens of “Answers in Progress” are keen to
find out “what happened after Blakey. They’d watched but couldn’t get
close enough to dig exactly what was happening” (128; emphasis
added). They are particularly impressed by the futuristic jazz of Sun Ra:
“But when the Sun-Ra tape came on this blue dude really opened up. He
dug the hell out of it. Perfect harmony these cats had too. Booooooo-iii-
iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii . . . daaaahhhhhhh aaaaahhhhhhh . . . booooo
OOOOOOOOOOOOOO ooooooooooooooaaaaaaa” (131). Born in
1914, Sun Ra was easily the most colorful and controversial bandleader
in jazz history. He initially made a living as a Chicago-based pianist first
in the swing, then the bebop idiom, but at some point in the 1950s, Her-
man “Sonny” Blount transformed himself first briefly into Le Son’y Ra,
then into Sun Ra. Claiming that he and his band, variously called the
Myth-Science Arkestra, the Astro Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra, or simi-
lar such titles, had come to Earth from the planet Saturn, Sun Ra’s ideol-
ogy and multi-media performances combined this futuristic space narra-
tive with Afrocentric Egyptian mythology, and standard jazz tunes with
percussive, radically free collective improvisations that were quite often
aleatoric and featured unusual instruments such as the synthesizer, vio-
lin, or piccolo, as well as the Arkestra’s trademark “space chants” (Lock
13–74). “Space is the place” where, the Arkestra’s “Space Ethnic Voices”
intoned hypnotically, “Your bond / Is free / And your life is / Worth-
while.”

The goal of the black uprising in “Answers in Progress” is a similarly
utopian or futuristic one: the poem that disrupts the short story halfway
through admonishes the revolutionaries to

walk on out through sunlight life, and know
we’re on the go
for love
  to open
our lives
  to walk
tasting the sunshine
of life. (129–30)

“[W]e have / each other,” the poem continues, and its utopian vision is virtually identical with the one Sidney Bechet described so eloquently in Treat It Gentle:

My people, all they want is a place where they can be people, a place where they can stand up and be a part of that place, just being natural to the place without worrying how someone may be coming along to take that place away from them. There’s a pride in it, too. The man singing it, the man playing it, he makes a place. For as long as the song is being played, that’s the place he’s been looking for. (203)

For Baraka, too, black music allows its practitioner as well as its audience to “visit another place. A place where Black People live. But dig, not only is this a place where Black People live, it is a place, in the spiritual precincts of its emotional telling, where Black People move in almost absolute openness and strength” (Black 168–69; emphasis added). As unlikely as it may initially appear, Bechet’s and Baraka’s jazz-poetics of place have the exact same destination.

Before reaching this Promised Land, however—the “Answers” of the title—the revolution “in Progress” must necessarily incur the detention or brutal killing of whites and the incineration of Newark. As Baraka wrote elsewhere, the “creation of a new reality” is only possible “after the destruction of the old” (Daggers 200). And that, too, is exactly what the free jazzers were doing: with “an almost alien power,” Coltrane massacred the popular American song, and “to hear a man destroy all of it, completely, like Sodom, with just the first few notes from his horn, your ‘critical’ sense can be erased completely, and that experience can place you somewhere a long way off from anything ugly” (Black 57, 65). Clearly, then, the inherent hybridity of the jazz aesthetic, both in its literary and musical manifestation, is also a potential source of conflict that can erupt into brutal violence at any moment. Partly, that source lies in what Walter Göbel sees as “the tension between the deterministic form of blues and the utopian form of jazz” (72). In “Answers in Progress,” the
revolution’s teleological determinism necessitates the shedding of blood, but the poem in the middle of the story as well as its soundtrack, courtesy of the Astro Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra, describe the peaceful utopia the current, gory violence strives to effect. And so Baraka was perhaps not merely facetious in declaring, “[i]t is science-fact that Sun-Ra is interested in, not science-fiction” (Black 199).

But even the “science-fact” that Baraka hears in Sun Ra’s music, and to which he himself lays claim in “Answers in Progress,” is after all still utopian. The story gives its date of composition as March of 1967. After the dissolution of the short-lived but influential Black Arts Repertory/Theater School (BART) in Harlem, Baraka had returned to his hometown of Newark, where he established the School’s successor, the Spirit House. He also became directly involved in local politics, founding the Black Community Development and Defense Organization intended to further the interests of the city’s African American community. “Answers in Progress” is eerily prophetic—Attali’s remark that music “has always been in its essence a herald of times to come” rings ominously here—because only four months after its composition, the country’s worst race riot since Watts engulfed Newark (Attali 4). For almost a full week, from July 12 to 17, a broad and extremely violent racial uprising turned the city literally into a war zone. The National Guard was mobilized to quell the revolution; over 1,500 people were injured, and police reported 1,300 arrests, not to mention the excessive property damage (Watts 348–56; Woodard 78–84). This massive riot solidified Baraka’s resolution to topple the political establishment of Newark. While its mayor, Hugh Addonizio, had been elected partly due to support from African American voters, he proved to be rather impervious to the black community—in “Answers in Progress,” “[t]he dead mayor and other wops [are] carried by in black trucks” (128). The forays of Baraka and his fellow black nationalists in the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN) into power politics were initially unsuccessful, but in 1970, Kenneth Gibson, whose candidacy was endorsed by the CFUN and whose campaign was engineered in part by Baraka himself, defeated Addonizio in a runoff election (Watts 356–63; Woodard 143–55). Bursting with confidence, the black nationalist-poet-activist declared, even before the runoff, that the Gibson mayoralty would turn Newark into “New Ark . . . an example upon which one aspect of the entire Black nation can be built” (qtd. in Watts 363). But Baraka’s romantic vision of a unified black nation grooving to the space chants of Sun Ra’s Arkestra was not to be. Gibson turned out to be a hard-nosed pragmatist and technocrat, and before long the mayor’s office and Baraka’s black nation-
alists were bitter political enemies. Of course, Baraka and the CFUN could not openly oppose Gibson’s reelection, and Baraka in the course of the following years became so disillusioned with black electoral politics that he discarded the utopia of New Ark altogether and transformed himself once more, this time into a primitive Marxist-Leninist (Watts 364–67, 420–21).

Just as Baraka the would-be politician romanticized the public sphere of New Ark, so does “Answers in Progress” romanticize the private life of the narrator. The end of the short story releases the narrator into domestic bliss: “I knew after tomorrow’s duty, I had a day off, and I knew somebody waitin’ for me at my house, and some kids, and some fried fish, and some carrots, and wow” (132). In reality, Baraka’s private life was in a state of turmoil in the spring of 1967. After his failed marriage to Hettie Cohen (white and Jewish), he had been in a series of less than committed relationships with black women. Shortly before his departure to Newark, he had impregnated eighteen-year-old Bumi, member of an African dance troupe affiliated with BART. Bumi, intent on seeing Baraka fulfill his responsibilities as father of their child, followed him to Newark, which did not, however, prevent the poet-activist from entering into a relationship with actress and dancer Sylvia Robinson. He even attempted to persuade the two women of the righteousness of a polygamous marriage, justified, so he claimed, by the tenets of Maulana Karenga’s Kawaida ersatz-religion that he had espoused. Conveniently for Baraka, already the disinterested father of three children, Bumi fell suddenly ill and died in the hospital. Even though this freed him to marry Robinson, who adopted the name Amina, later that same year, their relationship, too, would prove to be rather calamitous at times, mostly due to Baraka’s virulent sexism (Baraka, Autobiography 320–35; Watts 291–95, 345–47).

Thus, both Baraka’s private life and public career in the late 1960s and early 1970s resembled a dystopia much more closely than the family idyll to which the narrator of “Answers in Progress” retreats, or the New Ark the black revolutionaries and their blue alien allies seek to build. The fact that Tales features thinly veiled autobiographical first-person narrators and ends with a romantically idealized fiction of the private self, but with an unresolved revolution organized by the public self, not only raises certain ethical questions. It also highlights that, ultimately, “Answers in Progress” is not discrepant engagement in Mackey’s sense of the term, but rather discrepant escapism—unlike Langston Hughes’s “Bop” or Ralph Ellison’s “Cadillac Flambé”; or Sun Ra’s “Space is the Place,” for that matter. Where Sidney Bechet’s fictional autobiography
serves to illuminate the jazz aesthetic, Amiri Baraka’s autobiographical fiction, in the end, only serves to aggrandize the author’s fictional alter ego.

Published in 1967, the same year as Tales, Baraka’s collection of music criticism, simply titled Black Music, also ended on a utopian note regarding the future of jazz: “But there is a theory stated just before. That what will come will be a Unity Music. The Black Music which is jazz and blues, religious and secular. Which is the New Thing and Rhythm and Blues. The consciousness of social reevaluation and rise, a social spiritualism. A mystical walk up the street to a new neighborhood where all the risen live. Indian-African anti-Western-Western (as geography) Nigger-sharp Black and strong” (210–11). These predictions have not come to pass, either: the demise of free jazz, accelerated by the premature death of John Coltrane in 1967, was succeeded by the crass commercialism of much of fusion and, later, smooth jazz in the 1970s and 1980s, while the last decade of the century saw the consolidation of the museological zeal of the neo-conservatives around Wynton Marsalis. If there exists a black “unity music” today at all, it is arguably hip-hop. Even so, the recurrent materialism and hedonism of hip-hop is obviously not the kind of “social spiritualism” Baraka had in mind.36 Baraka, certainly in his Black Nationalist phase, had to dismiss and suppress the hybridity inherent in both literary and musical jazz; he therefore could not and would not acknowledge the jazz aesthetic’s recognition that complete transcendence is, ultimately, impossible—hence the escapism of “Answers in Progress” and the illusive prophecy at the end of Black Music.

Nonetheless, the “unearthly” and “miraculous music” of Ann Petry’s Georgie Barr does indeed echo through Amiri Baraka’s short story, if on another frequency to be sure (Petry, “Marie” 14). “Answers in Progress” clearly sounds many of the same blue notes as Langston Hughes’s “Bop” and Ralph Ellison’s “Cadillac Flambé.” Nathaniel Mackey points out that black music avails itself of “a liminality that situates it somewhere between the reality from which it recoils and the ideal to which it aspires (and thereby makes it suggestive of both),” and the often grotesque violence in these stories is the result of the eruption of the perpetual tension between the ideal and the real (Discrepant 46). Free jazz tenor saxophonist Albert Ayler, on the other hand, insisted that “One day, everything will be as it should be” because jazz was “the healing force of the universe” (qtd. in Lock 212, 59). Until then, though, the exigencies of American history and reality suggest that Dizzy Gillespie’s admonishment, to be or not to bop, may express a more viable stance.