EMBRACING CHAOS IN NARRATIVE FORM:
THE BEBOP AESTHETIC IN RALPH ELLISON’S INVISIBLE MAN

by A. Timothy Spaulding

When Ralph Ellison began writing what would eventually become his landmark novel *Invisible Man* in late 1945, bebop had only just begun to permeate the streets and airwaves of New York City. In fact, Ellison’s own life as he worked on the manuscript paralleled that of many of the jazz musicians who recorded the first bebop “sides” and played their music in public venues. At the time, Ellison would make the commute from his one-room apartment in Harlem to an empty eighth-floor suite in an office building at 608 Fifth Avenue. This space, provided to him by a fellow writer, allowed Ellison to craft his work within the hustle and bustle of mid-town Manhattan. At night, however, Ellison would return to his cramped Harlem apartment where, as he admits in his introduction to the 1981 edition of *Invisible Man*, “most of the novel still managed to get itself written” (xi). Around the same time, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, two of the primary innovators of the emergent music, ventured into the middle of the city in 1945 to record bebop classics such as “Salt Peanuts” and “Koko” and to perform in the nightclubs that lined 52nd Street. But it was in the late-night jam sessions at Harlem nightclubs like Minton’s Playhouse and Monroe’s Uptown House that Parker, Gillespie, and other jazz musicians established the “modernist” musical innovations of bebop. More than a parallel in subway lines and taxi-cab rides, Ellison’s and bebop musicians’ trajectory from these two public spaces within two miles of one another represents the complex cultural terrain at work in both *Invisible Man* and bebop music as African-American aesthetic forms. These contemporaneous works and the contexts of their production reflect the tense interaction between seemingly opposing worlds: between the black community located in Harlem and the (largely white) mainstream world of mid-town Manhattan; the creative innovations of art and the commercialism of public performance; and an aesthetic rooted in black folk culture and an aesthetic influenced by white mainstream culture. *Invisible Man* and bebop, as products of this interaction, illustrate the intersections as well as the divisions between these two worlds and the role each had on African-American cultural production at this time.

My task in this essay is to examine Ellison’s *Invisible Man* through the cultural and aesthetic framework of bebop, the form of jazz that achieved the height of its popularity between the years 1945–1950, the time during which Ellison wrote the novel. Although many critics have characterized the novel as a “jazz novel” and have explored, in general terms, the elements of a jazz aesthetic in the novel, critics have ignored the specific connections between Ellison’s work and the form of jazz that was
emerging contemporaneously. As products of post-World War II sensibilities, both bebop and *Invisible Man* reflect Ellison’s interest in the figure of the bebop virtuoso who struggles to achieve an individual identity through the creation of a unique improvisational voice. This figure serves as both a model and a corollary for the protagonist of the novel. As embodied by the prototypical bebopper Charlie Parker, the bebop virtuoso exists at the confluence of tradition and innovation, past and present, individual and communal identity. In essence, Ellison constructs the unnamed narrator as a literary bebop improviser who draws on the voices and reflections of other characters, redefines and comments on their statements, in order to emerge with his own improvisational voice by the end of the text. As he narrates his story from his underground dwelling in the Prologue of the novel, the protagonist achieves his sense of identity by improvising on elements of his past through key figures that represent both musical and cultural traditions within their narrative voices. By working his own narrative through the free-indirect speech of characters like the sharecropper Trueblood, the signifying street-talker Peter Wheatstraw, and even the figure of Louis Armstrong, who plays a significant role in the novel, the protagonist places traditional elements that form the foundation of jazz within the context of his own story. These characters and the cultural traditions they represent function as guides for the narrator and allow him to combine the aesthetic forms that lie at the roots of black expressive culture with his own narrative performance.

An aspiring musician in his youth and a self-proclaimed audiophile who consumed jazz recordings voraciously, Ellison was more than aware of the musical innovations that surrounded him: he immersed himself in the music of the time. Jazz music permeated all aspects of his life, from his life-long love of Louis Armstrong to his study of music and the trumpet at Tuskegee and into his literary career as one of the first African-American writers to examine and analyze extensively jazz music as both a cultural and an aesthetic phenomenon. Even before the first bebop recordings were released in the winter of 1945, Ellison witnessed the burgeoning art form by attending the public jam sessions at Minton’s Playhouse. In one of his most famous and frequently anthologized essays, “The Golden Age, Time Past,” Ellison nostalgically (the article was written in 1955) recounts the developing sounds that Parker and Gillespie, along with other musicians like pianists Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell, and drummers Max Roach and Kenny Clarke, displayed on stage in the late-night hours at Minton’s:

It was itself a texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous, not fully formed; its melodic lines underground, secret and taunting; its riffs jeering—“Salt Peanuts! Salt Peanuts!”—its timbres flat or shrill, with a minimum of thrilling vibrato. Its rhythms were out of stride and seemingly arbitrary, its drummers frozen-faced introverts dedicated to chaos. And in it the steady flow of memory, desire and defined experience summed up by traditional jazz beat and blues mood seemed swept like a great river from its old, deep bed. We know better now, and recognize the old moods in the new sounds, but what we know now is that which was then becoming. For most of those who gathered here, the enduring meaning of the great moment at Minton’s took
place off to the side, beyond the range of attention, like a death blow glimpsed from the corner of the eye, the revolutionary rumpus sounding like a series of flubbed notes blasting the talk with discord. . . . By the time it was over and the dust settled the best of it [was] absorbed like drops of fully distilled technique, mood, and emotions, into the great stream of jazz. (240–41)

The unabashed experimentation that occurred “beyond the range of attention” and in the margins of the city at these late night jam sessions energized Ellison, an active and critical listener of the emergent music. Although audiences initially responded to the “underground” melodic lines with confusion, Ellison, writing with the benefit of retrospection, recognizes both the revolutionary qualities of the new music and its connection to earlier, more familiar forms. As chaotic and disjointed from the past as these musicians and their music sounded, Ellison realizes that they ultimately reflected the continuous evolution of the jazz tradition. By 1955, when jazz had continued to evolve into styles that either expanded on or refined the innovations of bebop, Ellison could appreciate his presence at the nightclub that was, in his words, “to modern jazz what the Café Voltaire in Zurich is to the Dadaist phase of modern literature and painting” (243).

In its merger of the relentless exploration characteristic of modern jazz improvisation with an adherence to the irrepressible elements of swing and the blues, Ellison found a model in bebop. With Invisible Man, Ellison sought to expand the parameters of the Protest Novel (the prevailing form of the time established by his literary mentor Richard Wright) while retaining the traditions rooted in black oral and folk culture. Faced with the daunting task of unifying “the rich culture of the folk tale” with the largely European tradition of the novel, Ellison felt that, as a beginning writer, he “would have to improvise upon [these] materials in the manner of a jazz musician putting a musical theme through a wild star-burst of metamorphosis” (introduction xxiii). Ellison’s goal as a novelist was to create a new aesthetic work that not only drew from, but also expanded beyond, the foundations of black expressive culture and the modernist innovations of literary writers of the time.

In turning to the concept of improvisation, the province of the jazz artist, as both an inspiration and a literary technique, Ellison grounds his aesthetic production in a distinctly African-American art form whose history lies in the synthesis of European, African and African-American musical and cultural sources. Even as Ellison frequently cited such European and American authors as Eliot, Hemingway, and Joyce as his literary ancestors, black jazz musicians, specifically those who spent considerable time playing in Oklahoma City like guitarist Charlie Christian, saxophonist Lester Young, and singer Jimmy Rushing, were among his earliest and most foundational influences. These musicians, as much as his literary ancestors, shaped Ellison’s view of the relationship between the artist and his art:

Now I had learned from the jazz musicians I had known as a boy in Oklahoma City something of the discipline and devotion to his art required of the artist. . . . These jazzmen, many of them now world-famous, lived for and with music intensely. Their driving
motivation was neither money nor fame, but the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of idea-emotions through the technical mastery of their instruments (which, incidentally, some of them wore as a priest wears the cross) and the give and take, the subtle rhythmical shaping and blending of idea, tone and imagination demanded of group improvisation. The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during those early jam sessions was a marvel of social organization. I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition, and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision. Life could be harsh, loud and wrong if it wished, but they lived it fully, and when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was with the fluid style that reduced the chaos of living to form.

(228-9)

From these early jazz musicians Ellison developed a view of the improvising jazz artist that expands on the classical conception of the virtuoso: the musician of such exceptional technical skill who can produce a perfect performance of a notated score. For jazz musicians, virtuosity comes as the result not only of the technical command of their instrument but also through an ability to develop and assert a strong musical identity without sacrificing a commitment to group performance. Ellison’s conception of virtuosity also moves beyond an aesthetic formulation of the world and suggests a cultural dimension that addresses the relationship between the jazz musician and the world around him. Virtuosity in the jazz context and in the context of being black in America also involves the musicians’ ability to transform the complexities of his or her social condition (which could often be chaotic) into “an affirmative way of life.” As Horace Porter points out, Ellison regarded jazz improvisation as a simultaneously “transformative and transcendent... act of rebirth” (25). Jazz virtuosity, then, reinforces a connection to and an engagement with the cultural forces out of which the artists work even as it sets itself apart from those forces. The jazz musician’s commitment to virtuosity through the combination of technical mastery, an understanding of tradition and a dedication to individual innovation, and the transformation of the chaos of life into art inspired Ellison’s own approach to the craft of writing. Like the developing jazz musician, Ellison viewed his own development as a writer in terms of his ability to determine his relationship to the American and European writers he most admired by finding his own voice and by adding “necessary modifications” to their “composite pictures of reality” (56). Ellison’s own literary virtuosity in Invisible Man lies in his similar ability to balance the contrasting cultural influences and forces that inform his text and to create a novel that both reflects and expands on those influences. Ellison’s novel stands as both an explicit critique of the racist ideology ingrained in post-WWI American culture and a work of art that transcends the artistic limitations and didacticism of such a critique.

Beyond the inspiration jazz musicians provided Ellison as a writer, the figure of the bebop virtuoso also provided Ellison with a contemporaneous cultural context for the
“chaotic” forces that ultimately constrain the protagonist of his novel. Like the narrator of *Invisible Man* who must situate himself in a conflicted dominant culture that alternately seeks to include and constrain him and his art (exemplified particularly by The Brotherhood), jazz musicians during World War II and the years immediately following its cessation, found themselves negotiating a cultural terrain that both valued and exploited their aesthetic production. The complex cultural conditions surrounding the development of bebop, dilemmas such as limited employment opportunities, instances of racial discrimination and physical violence, and the less apparent though equally devastating psychological results of racism, provide illuminating corollaries to the nameless narrator’s own situation and subsequent attempts to survive this cultural terrain. In “Things to Come: Swing Bands, Bebop, and the Rise of a Postwar Jazz Scene,” Lewis Erenberg characterizes bebop as springing out of black musicians’ discontent, politically and musically, with the dominance of swing bands during the war years. With the exception of Duke Ellington and his orchestra, the most prominent bands of the era, like those led by Glen Miller, Woody Herman, and Benny Goodman, either exclusively or predominantly hired only white musicians. In addition, swing music, which emphasized big band dance arrangements, included only a limited amount of space for improvisation and thus limited the amount of individual expression in performance (236). With its emphasis on small bands (most commonly quintets or sextets) and extended opportunities for improvisation, bebop shifted the focus from large ensemble arrangements to the individual improviser. This shift allowed black jazz musicians to express not only their identities as individual performers but as bandleaders and businessmen as well. Scott DeVeaux in *The Birth of Bebop* argues that bebop was “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” (27). As such, bebop’s emergence and eventual dominance as a style of jazz reflects a particular quest for individual identity that involves aesthetic concerns, racial and cultural politics, and a desire for economic gain.

In light of the complex issues and circumstances surrounding bebop’s development, a basic question comes to mind: Is the process of finding and expressing identity through jazz improvisation an aesthetic or a political act? Like most artistic movements, it would be difficult, and ultimately reductive, to trace bebop back to one moment of inception, one individual’s artistic invention, or one cultural influence. Such an impulse either leads to a purely aesthetic conception of bebop or makes claims for a direct and unproblematic relationship between the socio-cultural politics of the time and the emergence of the music as an expression of African-American political consciousness. Regarding bebop as an art form isolated from its cultural context divorces African-American musicians from their social circumstances and posits them as necessarily a-political beings unaffected (or, at least unaffected in any way that shapes their artistic practices) by the racial inequities of the era. However, locating bebop’s emergence in the specific frustrations that gave rise to events like the Harlem riot of 1943 ignores the fact that many black musicians’ relationship to politics, as Scott DeVeaux argues, “were oblique at best” (26). Although many members of the black community consumed the works of bebop musicians, the
majority of the music’s fan base was white. In addition, DeVeaux notes that jazz artists’ status as popular entertainers, often playing to white audiences, placed them in a cultural and socio-economic category different from that of most African Americans (26). Although jazz musicians were most certainly subjected to the same racial discrimination and oppression as other African Americans, their stature as entertainers allowed them to achieve a greater degree of cultural status and economic success. But as Eric Porter points out, bebop musicians’ success served only to qualify the instances and effects of white racism and ultimately gave rise to a cultural perspective that combined a “rising black awareness and militancy” with a “cosmopolitan approach to life and art” (61). As such, the development in the forties reflects the emergence of an oppositional political perspective even as the musicians themselves sought to create an “art” music unrestricted by the limitations of any one cultural or musical tradition.  

Ellison’s own views regarding the aesthetic and political dimensions of bebop reflect the difficulty in prioritizing either one of these aspects in the music. In response to Amiri Baraka’s (writing as LeRoi Jones) assertion that bebop was revolutionary and separatist in form and content, Ellison prefigures DeVeaux’s view and argues that bebop musicians were “the least political of men” who sought to create not a self-consciously black form of revolutionary art but “a fresh form of entertainment which would allow them their fair share of the entertainment market which had been dominated by whites in the swing era” (283). Although such a statement seems dismissive of bebop, put alongside Ellison’s high regard for jazz as an art form, his acknowledgement of bebop’s connection to the entertainment industry does not limit its stature as art, but rather, limits its achievements to the province of aesthetics as opposed to the political realm. But the very fact that Ellison asserts that these musicians sought their “fair share” in a commercial market that either exploited or ignored their talents acknowledges an implicit political implication in their creation of a new and innovative art. Out of these seemingly contradictory views—one which characterizes bebop musicians as a-political and the other which emphasizes the socio-economic factors that inspired their music—Ellison’s own description of bebop suggests that the music is both a product and a reflection of the cultural circumstances which contributed to its development. As such, bebop musicians derive a degree of aesthetic and political agency by virtue of the fact that they successfully created a forum for individual expression within a marketplace that sought to limit that expression.

The assertion of an individual identity amidst conflicted cultural forces ultimately is the thematic element that most unites bebop and Invisible Man as artistic texts. For Ellison, the search for individual identity is not only a fundamental theme in American literature but also lies at the heart of jazz performance and represents a paradox within the art form:

True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition
of his identity as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it. ("The Charlie Christian Story," 267)

As much as the racist economic oppression of the dominant culture posed a challenge to the bebop musician’s expression of his identity, the jazz tradition itself loomed as a paradoxical force that promoted both the loss and the assertion of identity. Even as the “true” jazz moment represents a forum for individualized expression, it also represents, for Ellison, the simultaneous subordination of the individual to the canon of established tradition. Much as T. S. Eliot theorized the relationship between the modern(ist) poet and his literary ancestors in his influential essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Ellison emphasized the jazz musician’s submission of self to a jazz tradition that included the work of figures Ellison revered like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. Within the “endless improvisation” on the “traditional materials of the past” (the folk traditions of black expressive culture like spirituals and the blues), the jazz musician must forge an individual voice that reflects that tradition but builds upon it.

Ellison’s conception of jazz as an ever-present legacy posed a particular dilemma for bebop musicians, many of whom sought to elevate jazz from its status as a primitive and folkloric music (as many regarded Dixieland and New Orleans styles) and as dance-hall entertainment into “art music” worthy of study and serious contemplation. As Eric Lott argues, bebop musicians’ relationship to past jazz styles was one of “calculated hostility” in their attempt to form a “modernist” and iconoclastic music (462). Although he appreciated the musical contributions of bebop musicians, Ellison, who preferred the earlier jazz styles of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Christian and other “swing” musicians, he saw bebop’s chaotic and frenzied quality as a sign of this ambivalence. For Ellison, the music itself reflected this “crisis” of identity. In their desire for recognition as individuals and as serious artists, Ellison saw a fundamentally conflicted relationship between bebop musicians and a musical tradition that had yet to achieve its due as an art form. According to Ellison, figures like Louis Armstrong, whose stage persona often consisted of clowning for and catering to white audiences, represented a complex dimension of the jazz tradition that bebop musicians struggled to resolve. Although Armstrong’s virtuosity and innovative improvisations (particularly in his landmark recordings with the “Hot Fives” and “Hot Sevens” in the mid-1920s) first established a prominent role for the individual soloist and paved the way for future jazz musicians, bebop musicians considered his stage personae a manifestation of “Uncle Tom-ism” and a retention of “those non-musical features which came into jazz from the minstrel tradition” (Ellison 271). In their own musical aspirations, bebop musicians sought to distance themselves from an aspect of the jazz tradition they thought Armstrong represented. In Ellison’s view, however, many bebop musicians “confused artistic quality with questions of personal conduct” and limited their understanding of the musical
vitality of earlier jazz innovators like Louis Armstrong. As a result, even in the face of asserting their individual identities within the jazz tradition, many bebop musicians continued to struggle with ambivalence regarding their place in that tradition.

Of all the musicians who achieved prominence in the bebop era, perhaps no one embodied the conflicted position of the bebop virtuoso or serves as a corollary to the nameless narrator of Ellison’s novel more than Charlie Parker. As Ellison points out in his essay “On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz,” “no other jazz musician struggled harder to escape the entertainer’s role” that Armstrong had so readily embraced (268). On one hand, Parker, as one of the founders of bebop, cultivated and achieved the image of the jazz virtuoso as consummate artist. His expansion of the vocabulary of the jazz soloist and the amazing speed with which he could incorporate phrases and melodies from other musical traditions into his own coherent improvised statements compelled listeners to shift their focus from the “swinging” arrangements of earlier jazz styles to the spontaneous compositions of the individual jazz musician. Not since Armstrong himself had a jazz musician established his own individual and innovative style as Parker. However, Parker’s popularity largely resulted not only from creative talents but also from his infamous lifestyle of excess and drug addiction—a lifestyle that ultimately led to his death at thirty-four in 1955. Like many entertainers who die young, Parker achieved a cult-status and popularity in death that far exceeded his fame during his lifetime. As much as he symbolized the jazz musician as creative artist, in Parker Ellison saw a figure who ultimately succumbed to the entertainer’s role he sought to reject. For Ellison, Parker became “a sacrificial figure whose struggles against personal chaos, onstage and off, served as entertainment for a ravenous, sensation-starved, culturally disoriented public” (261). Although Parker largely avoided the racist stereotypes associated with the minstrel tradition, his own personal struggles often threatened to overshadow his creative achievements and undermined his ability to distance himself from the role of the entertainer.10

The perpetual negotiation between the expressions of one’s personal (and artistic) identity and the potential constraints of a tradition with ties to a history of racism and racial stereotyping plays itself out clearly in Invisible Man much as it does for the bebop improviser. From the moment the narrator first confronts the reality of his paradoxical invisibility at the Battle Royal to the moment he retreats to his underground dwelling beneath Harlem, the narrator undergoes the systematic process of expressing his identity only to have that identity squelched or dismantled by others. John Callahan, in “Frequencies of Eloquence,” argues that the narrator’s initial artistry comes in the act of public speaking during which the narrator is “so thoroughly a performer that he tests his identity . . . by relying on the techniques of improvisation” (109). But as is the case with Ellison’s view of the jazz musician, in order to establish his identity as an artist, the narrator must successfully come to terms with his past and with relationship to the African-American cultural tradition. Like the bebop musicians who struggled to separate Armstrong’s musical identity (a symbol of this tradition) from his reliance on stereotypical modes of behavior rooted in minstrelsy, the narrator struggles to distinguish between aspects of black expressive culture and those that have been codified as “blackness” by the racist ideology of the dominant culture. Figures like Jim Trueblood and Peter Wheatstraw, who the narra-
tor encounters early in the text, inspire a great deal of ambivalence in him. For most of the novel, the narrator either rejects or fails to understand these characters as part of his cultural heritage. Initially he cannot resolve the tension between their virtuosity as speakers and the revulsion each character inspires in him. The narrator’s failure to incorporate their complicated voices into his own when he first encounters them limits his ability to find his improvisational and individual voice.

In the famous Trueblood episode of the novel, the narrator hesitantly and unwillingly takes Mr. Norton, a wealthy white patron of the black college he attends, to the low-income section of the Southern town where the sharecropper Jim Trueblood lives. Much to the narrator’s chagrin and increasing discomfort, Trueblood embarks on an extended soliloquy describing the surreal dream state that led to his rape of his daughter. As Houston Baker argues in his influential essay on the sequence, Trueblood, as “both a magical storyteller and a blues singer par excellence . . . incorporate(s) the lean economics and fateful intransience of the blues world into its autobiographical narrative” (85). As a result of his virtuosic skill and his manipulation of Mr. Norton’s latent sexual desires towards his own deceased daughter, Trueblood, in essence, “sells” his titillating and disturbing story to Norton for $100. The narrator is at once appalled by and envious of Trueblood’s ability to profit from his storytelling. Like his fellow students and the administrators at his college, the narrator sees Trueblood as a symbol of the stereotypes of “blackness” that must be cast aside for the benefit of the race as a whole. However, Trueblood’s presence in the text is much more complex. Although Trueblood clearly represents the more debased aspects of human (as opposed to black) sexuality, he also represents the trickster figure and the signifying blues singer all in one. Although the narrator immediately rejects Trueblood as an aspect of his cultural tradition as a blues figure and storyteller, in the retrospective process of telling his own story in narrative form, the narrator allows Trueblood to occupy a crucial space in the novel. By incorporating Trueblood’s voice into his own narration (or in improvisational terms, by “quoting” Trueblood’s blues song), the narrator infuses the text with the inflection of the blues. As readers we are witness, not only to Trueblood’s virtuosity, but also to the narrator’s improvisation and commentary on Trueblood’s blues song. The narrator’s virtuosic performance lies in his ability to contextualize Trueblood’s story within his own coming-of-age narrative and to incorporate an implicit critique of white patronage that his depiction of Mr. Norton’s incestuous and necrophilic desires implies.11

The narrator’s initial and subsequent response to Peter Wheatstraw operates in a similar fashion. Upon arriving in New York, the narrator encounters Wheatstraw pushing a shopping cart and singing a blues song in “a clear and ringing voice” (173). The song evokes memories of his childhood that he claims he has “long ago shut out of [his] mind” (173). When Wheatstraw appears he occupies the narrator’s consciousness (and his story) like a sagacious specter from the past, carrying blueprints not only of the city’s internal structures but also of the narrator’s cultural heritage. In spite of this, when Wheatstraw calls out to him using a familiar “down-home” expression (“Is you got the dog?”), the narrator’s initial reaction is one of revulsion and incomprehension. The narrator fails to understand Wheatstraw’s words and responds with anger and embarrassment. Gradually Wheatstraw’s signifying begins to seep into his
memory and cultural consciousness as he continues to speak to the narrator in familiar terms. The narrator tries to respond by drawing from the fragmented memories of his childhood but his phrases are hesitant, uncertain. Even though Wheatstraw’s presence can evoke a sense of his cultural past in him, at this early stage in the novel, the narrator’s sense of ambivalence prevails:

I strode along, hearing the cartman’s song become a lonesome, broad-toned whistle now that flowered at the end of each phrase into a tremulous, blue-toned chord. And in its flutter and swoop I heard the sound of a railroad train highballing it, lonely across the lonely night. He was the Devil’s son-in-law all right, and he was a man who could whistle a three-toned chord... God damn, I thought, they’re a hell of a people! And I didn’t know whether it was pride or disgust that suddenly flashed over me. (177)

Although the narrator’s revulsion towards Wheatstraw is not as absolute as those feelings are for Trueblood, he still remains uncertain of how to respond to Wheatstraw as a practitioner of his cultural tradition. At the time he encounters Wheatstraw, he resists the pull of the cartman’s “blue-toned” voice and fails to incorporate it into his own. However, as with Trueblood, in the process of telling his story from underground, the narrator returns to Wheatstraw’s prescient and guiding voice as a representation of the black folk tradition that forms the foundation of his own narrative virtuosity. But as the narrator lives through the events in the novel, he refuses to acknowledge that foundation. From Ellison’s perspective, the narrator suffers from a “crisis of identity” much like Charlie Parker and other bebop musicians of the post-World War II period experienced: an inability to discern the value of the folk tradition of their past from the racial stereotypes that perverted that tradition. For the narrator, this crisis of identity results in his subsequent exploitation at the hands of the brotherhood, much like Parker’s exploitation by an audience bent on consuming, his aesthetic production and his personal destruction.

In spite of the dilemmas that besiegged Parker and other jazz musicians of the 1940s, ultimately what most inspired Ellison’s own interest in bebop was the artistry with which these figures articulated their conflicted identities by simultaneously exploding and retaining the jazz tradition. Ellison realized that, even as Parker and others struggled with the weight of personal, social, and cultural chaos, their music embodied these elements in a form that significantly altered the state of jazz. Stylistically, bebop suggests a desire not only to “reduce the chaos of living into form” but also to retain that chaos and complexity within the form of the music itself. Drawing from the basic song structures like the twelve-bar blues and the chord changes of popular tunes of the day, bebop musicians created a forum for individual and personal expression unprecedented in jazz. Charlie Parker’s future jazz standards “Relaxin’ at Camarillo” [twelve-bar blues], “Moose the Mooche” [“I Got Rhythm”], and “Ornithology” [“How High the Moon”], abstracted their source material in the theme statements to an almost unrecognizable degree and became completely new compositions. But more important than the compositions themselves, Parker’s tunes became vehicles for
his illustrious improvised statements that Ellison described as “a mocking mimicry of other jazzmen’s styles and . . . motifs from extraneous melodies all of which added up to a dazzling display[s] of wit, satire, burlesque, and pathos” (258), words that could easily describe the invisible man’s kaleidoscopic attempt to tell his story, and Ellison’s own blues and jazz-inflected bildungsroman. In fact, Jerome de Romanet considers the novel as a whole as the “musical variation of a virtuoso on one melodic theme” (108). Horace Porter argues that Ellison’s appropriation of such literary forms and techniques like the picaresque novel, the use of flashback, interior monologue and stream of consciousness constitute a jazz virtuosity (76). For Bernard Ostendorf, it is in the improvisational synthesis of his “fluid anthropology and his stern Modernism” that Ellison achieves a jazz aesthetic in his novel (96). While I would agree with both of these critics’ assessments of the novel, I would also argue that Ellison incorporates narrative techniques rooted in the specific art of the bebop improviser more than in a general or modernist aesthetic. Through the narrator, Ellison uses concepts such as quoting (the interpolation of one song or melody into another), harmonic variation (redefining and extending the “traditional” notes associated with a scale) and asymmetrical phrasing (juxtaposing familiar notes with unfamiliar notes to produce ambiguity). Although what results is a highly ordered and composed literary work, there are key narrative moments in which Ellison, through the narrator, infuses the text with stylistic and improvisational chaos or dissonance. In these moments, the narrator draws upon the traditional materials and voices of his cultural past in order to improvise on “the melodic theme” of invisibility. What results is a narrative that is, at once, innovative and rooted in tradition.

The Prologue of the novel provides a useful paradigm for the narrator’s combination of standard composition and inspired improvisation in his narrative. In the opening pages the narrator attempts to define his state of invisibility in controlled and analytical terms. He states that invisibility “occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom [he] comes into contact” (3). Although he acknowledges the abstract nature of his invisibility, he tries to locate its source both in and beyond the physical realm as “a manner of construction” of the “inner eyes . . . with which [people] look through their physical eyes upon reality” (3). Although these descriptions convey the dimensions of his invisibility, the narrator eventually turns to jazz as a more evocative source of inspiration and method of description. The narrator listens to Louis Armstrong, whom describes as having “made poetry out of being invisible,” and uses the language of jazz improvisation to explain his own complex condition:

Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes you’re behind. Instead of the swift, 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. That’s what you hear vaguely in Louis’ music. (8)
Armstrong’s rendition of “What Did I Do to Be So Black And Blue” and his improvisational virtuosity provide the reader with an understanding of invisibility beyond the analytical descriptions that open the novel. In this sense, Armstrong occupies a space in the narrator’s story much like Trueblood and Wheatstraw do later on—he becomes the symbol and signpost of the cultural and artistic tradition that the narrator must embrace in order to find his identity and improvisational voice. Armstrong’s presence in this moment in the text also highlights the fact that the narrator operates on a different level of self-awareness at the time he tells us his story than he does as he lives the events he narrates. No longer plagued by ambivalence about his cultural past, the narrator has resolved his relationship to the tradition Armstrong represents. In this sense, Ellison’s narrator has moved beyond the identity crisis that Ellison sees in the bebop musicians of the 1940s. At this reflective stage in his life, the narrator can separate Armstrong’s virtuosity from the stereotypical limitations imposed on his art and his persona as a performer; the narrator of the Prologue is the bebop improviser fully realized who has reached a level of virtuosity that allows him to embrace Armstrong’s voice as a part of his own.

As the narrator recalls listening to Armstrong’s music while high on a reefer, his narration becomes chaotic and vaguely dissonant. The memory of the blaring music and the mild hallucinogen produce a mode of narration strikingly different from the tone that opens the novel:

So under the spell of the reefer I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. And beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual . . . and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother’s as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body, and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo and I heard someone shout . . .

“Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the ’Blackness of Blackness.’”(9)

The change in typeface reflects a shift from a traditional narrative technique to an improvisational narrative mode. What begins as an ordered and deeper reflection on the music leads to a chaotic dream sequence in which the narrator moves backward in time and deeper into the dimensions of his folk cultural tradition. His narration and the improvisations of Louis Armstrong that inspire it are products of and meditations on that tradition and lead him into an exploration of the “blackness of blackness” from a different angle within a similar context, altering the melody slightly yet adding to it through individual expression. Narrative dissonance comes in the form of this abrupt shift in narrative style. The narrator moves beyond the form that Armstrong
initially sets up and infuses his narration with the call and response of the sermonic form. Ultimately the shift allows the narrator to interweave all of these musical languages into his own, seemingly chaotic, narration. What results is a sequence rooted in a bebop aesthetic—distorted and dissonant on the surface but coherent and melodic on a deeper level. The narrator’s virtuosity lies in his ability to convert these disparate sources into his narrative improvisation.

The narrator’s solo improvisation contains the call and response elements of early African-American sermonic and musical forms by evoking the voice of a preacher and his congregation. However, in the contest of this dream sequence these traditions are familiar yet distorted in his narration through asymmetrical phrasing. It is not simply call and response but call and response with a difference—an element of chaos and violence, nervous anxiety not easily muted or resolved—this is narration rooted in tension. Through this charged narrative technique the narrator addresses the ambivalent realities of freedom in the context of a racist American society when he begins to question an old woman and her angry sons who appear in his dream. As the sons react violently, the narrator’s improvisation becomes more violent, intersecting the upper registers of the scale:

I was sore, and into my being had come a profound craving for tranquility, for peace and quiet, a state I felt I could never achieve. For one thing, the trumpet was blaring and the rhythm was too hectic. A tom-tom beating like heart-thuds began drowning out the \textit{trumpet filling my ears}. (12)

The narrator’s improvisational flight around the themes of invisibility and the pain of the “ironic” freedom of African Americans eventually returns to a more controlled narrative performance, restating the theme originally established by Louis Armstrong:

Then somehow I came out of it, ascending hastily from this underworld of sound to hear Louis Armstrong innocently asking,

\begin{quote}
What did I do
To be so black
\textit{And blue}? (12)
\end{quote}

The structure of this brief passage in the Prologue corresponds to the compositional patterns of bebop songs that build on traditional blues patterns, creating new ways to explore similar themes. The narrator from his underground hole begins to form his creative identity through these narrative improvisational techniques. But first he must work through his own past to arrive at a state in which he can ascend fully from hibernation and create the text as an artifact of his artistic expression.

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The narrator’s development as an improviser occurs gradually throughout the text, punctuated by brief and fledgling attempts at expressing his identity. But, before he can achieve the virtuosity he displays in the Prologue and epilogue of the novel, he must undergo a process of losing his identity amidst conflicting and dissonant forces. Two scenes that reflect this difficult process are the narrator’s experience in the Battle Royal and his later subjection to shock therapy in the Liberty Paints factory hospital. Their surrealistic and seemingly chaotic tone represents the formal and thematic intrusion of dissonance into the text. Much has been written about the justly famous Battle Royal sequence in which the stripped-down narrator must “battle” his fellow classmates for the amusement and delight of the wealthy white men of the Southern community. The narrator’s reflections on and descriptions of the scene, his juxtaposition of random images and sounds of drunken men jeering, a naked dancing woman tattooed with the American flag dancing to a frenzied beat and the nervous cries of his classmates, is an evocative and virtuosic display of narrative frenzy. The narrator’s own attempts to deliver his valedictorian speech in the middle of this chaos represent his initial (and failed) attempt to impose his voice on the chaos around him. Fewer critics, however, focus on the equally disturbing and perhaps more incongruous scene in which the narrator undergoes shock therapy at the hands of the nameless and faceless doctors employed at the factory hospital.

After the narrator suffers an injury in the explosion at Liberty Paints, he awakens enclosed in a glass and metal tube. Surrounded by unidentified doctors and nurses who debate the politics of performing shock therapy on him, the narrator struggles to find coherence in the jarring sound of their voices along with what he thinks he hears as the opening motif of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. The shock treatment the narrator ultimately undergoes, along with the disembodied voices of the doctors and the incongruity of the rhythmic refrain in his head, confuse the narrator to such an extent that he feels his consciousness and identity slip away. Under the strain of the treatment the narrator descends into a dream state much like that of the Prologue in which the sounds of the outside world transform into the sounds within his disordered consciousness:

Scenes of a shaded lawn in summer drifted past; I saw a uniformed military band arrayed decorously in concert, each musician with well-oiled hair, heard a sweet-voice trumpet rendering “The Holy City” as from an echoing distance, buoyed by a choir of muted horns; and above, the mocking obbligato of a mocking bird. I felt giddy. The air seemed to grow thick with fine white gnats, filling my eyes, boiling so thickly that the dark trumpeter breathed them in and expelled them through the bell of his golden horn, a live white cloud mixing with the tones upon the torpid air. (234)

In this disturbing reverie, the “dark trumpeter” serves a similar function as Louis Armstrong in the Prologue—his blaring trumpet tones pushing the narrator further into his hallucinatory state. The narrator transforms the external trauma of the shock therapy into a retreat into the past from which he has tried to distance himself. When
the narrator returns to consciousness it is only with the dimmest sense of his identity. Much like the electrified rug contributes to the narrator’s loss of self in the Battle Royal sequence, this shock therapy takes this erasure to a much more devastating level. The narrator’s description of his psychic state upon awakening reflects the fragmentary nature of his consciousness. As the doctors attempt to revive his memory, they speak random phrases ranging from “WHAT IS YOUR NAME” to “WHO WAS BUCKEYE THE RABBIT” which disrupt the narrative itself and the narrator’s interior monologue as he attempts to regain congruity between his internal disorder and his surreal external circumstances. What results is a dissonant narrative in which the narrator replays childhood folk rhymes and memories in an attempt to recall that “old identity” that he has struggled so hard to discard (242). At this point in the narrative he can neither escape his connection to the echoes of his past identity nor reclaim his new sense of self.

The presence of this surrealistic scene represents the moment in the novel when the narrator’s figurative and metaphysical invisibility takes on a literal and physical dimension; whereas the narrator has had his identity slowly stripped away by his earlier experiences, the shock therapy sequence is a moment of formal and thematic dissonance that reflects the systematic and scientific (medical) erasure of self. The narrator, in real and forceful terms, has become invisible to himself. In terms of form, Ellison abandons a mode of narrative realism in favor of an erratic narrative voice that combines surrealism, naturalism and the disjointed injection of vernacular rhymes that form the foundation of the narrator’s past.

The narrator’s subjection to shock therapy leaves him searching for a solid and coherent foundation upon which to regain his identity out of the fragments of voices and memories that fill his head. As in much of the text, the narrator views his invisible state in auditory as much as visual terms:

If only all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song in unison, whatever it was I wouldn’t care as long as they sang without dissonance; yes, and avoided the uncertain extremes of the scale. But there was no relief. I was wild with resentment but too much under ‘self-control,’ that frozen virtue, that freezing vice. (259)

The narrator’s development into an orator and the speeches he delivers, particularly the first speeches he makes before his indoctrination into the Brotherhood, are attempts on his part to harmonize the contradictory voices, not only inside his head, but also of those disparate people he wants to spark into action. His first speech is completely unplanned, inspired by the eviction of an elderly Harlem couple and the placement of their belongings on the sidewalk. Spurred on by objects that signify a conflicted past (the “knocking-bones” used to accompany music used in black-face minstrel shows, manumission papers, a picture of Marcus Garvey), the narrator improvises his speech to the crowd gathered there. In the second speech, delivered at a Brotherhood rally in Harlem, the narrator gains inspiration from the call and response he generates with the crowd. As successful as these early improvisations are,
the narrator still has yet to achieve his own voice as a speaker. At this early stage in his life, the "self-control" that renders him susceptible to the manipulations of others including and especially the Brotherhood, is what limits his improvisational voice the most. Ultimately the constraints imposed upon him by the Brotherhood limit his voice even further. Rather than drawing from his rich cultural heritage, the narrator himself and ultimately the Brotherhood reject these elements as the foundation of his oratory performance. In the instance of the former, this rejection is in service to a generalizable political agenda. In the instance of the latter, this rejection is in service to a self unencumbered by the complexities associated with racial identity. As a speaker, what the narrator fails to realize is that his improvisational voice lies in a confrontation with the uncertain extremes of the scale and in formalizing the dissonant voices. In the scheme of the novel, simply creating harmony from dissonance proves to be ineffective and unrewarding to the narrator.

Where the invisible man fails as an orator, he ultimately succeeds as a narrator. His success lies in his ability to retain the seemingly chaotic dissonance within the form of his narration. The culmination of the narrator's improvisational skills comes in his presentation of the Harlem Riot in the final chapter of the novel. In his salient reading of this sequence in his study of the jazz dimensions of Ellison's work, Horace Porter likens the juxtaposition of surrealistic images and street sounds to Ellison's literary equivalent of a jazz improvisation (83). However, while the climactic scene clearly is an indication of Ellison's literary virtuosity, it is also an example of the narrator's improvisational skill as well. And more than a jazz improvisation, the depiction of the Harlem Riot represents the bebop aesthetic at work. Already reeling from his sexual encounter with Sybil, the narrator stumbles upon four men rolling a safe down the middle of the street. His first reaction to the brewing chaos in the Harlem community echoes his description of invisibility in the Prologue, thus highlighting the connections between his internal state of confusion and the frustrations that gave rise to the riot. He states: "there was a sudden and brilliant suspension of time ... then time burst and I was down in the street" (535). Thus begins the narrator's improvisation on the events that surround him. As he finds himself swept into the wave of violence and disorder, the narrator, although only a peripheral figure, draws on the voices of other characters to convey the confusion in the streets. As he encounters figures like Dupree and Scofield, the narrator illustrates the futile attempts to understand or explain the source of the riot in simple terms. Rather than constructing a coherent and harmonious description of that which is, by nature, dissonant, the narrator infuses the "uncertain extremes of the scale" into his narrative. As such, the disturbing and incongruous images of Ras the Destroyer, "dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain and riding a black horse," or of mannequins "white, naked and horribly feminine" hanging from a lamppost, resemble figures "more out of a dream than out of Harlem" and offer no rational explanation of the events of the Harlem Riot of 1942 (556). The internal disorder of the invisible man's identity has found its external expression in the events around him. As such, the narrative itself takes on a kaleidoscopic tone, a frenzied commentary on the absurdity at the heart of the riot.

The narrator eventually escapes the Harlem Riot without harm when he inadvertently falls through an open manhole cover and into the sewers. As he navigates the
underground tunnels, the narrator begins to internalize the chaos above ground and enters a hallucinatory state much like the one he describes in the Prologue of the novel: “It was neither a state of dreaming nor of waking, but somewhere in between” (568). And, as in the Prologue, the typeface shifts to italics as the invisible man enters into a narrative improvisation that, as Porter argues, brings the familiar themes of the novel “now muted, distorted, and glissed—but nevertheless recognizable (87)” full circle.14 The patriarchal figures who have kept the narrator “running” re-appear in his dream-state, holding him captive and imploring him to submit. As the narrator struggles, Jack, Bledsoe, Norton, and Ras castrate him and ask him: “how does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?” Rather than succumbing to the pain, the narrator turns on Jack and the other men and proclaims the visibility of his castrated body. The violence of his dream-state, like the violence of the dream in the Prologue, leads him to an epiphany that allows him not only to regain his visibility but also provides him with the impetus to tell his story through the narrative act.

When the narrator returns his narration to the present moment in the epilogue (“the end was in the beginning”) we realize that, in essence, he has been what jazz artists refer to as “woodshedding.” A term that describes the process of sequestering oneself from public performance for the purpose of developing one’s improvisational skills, “woodshedding” usually occurs when a jazz artist has been bested by a rival improviser at a jam session. Although Ellison, in an oft-quoted essay, refers to the jam session as the jazzman’s “true academy,” part of the process of finding one’s own improvisational voice involves a period of self-examination in isolation. In fact, one of the most famous and apocryphal stories involving woodshedding involves Charlie Parker being laughed offstage in Kansas City for unsuccessfully trying out his new conception of improvisation only to return several months later to awe everyone with his advanced thinking and conception. The invisible man’s experiences throughout the novel involve the systematic and, in many ways unrelenting, dismantling of both his public and private persona. His retreat underground represents the culmination of this traumatic experience and his submission to the process of rejuvenation. The narrative itself exists as both the product of the narrator’s developing improvisational skills and the process through which he develops those skills. His ability to recast the circumstances around his deconstruction through a complex and, at times dissonant, narrative improvisation allows him not only to interpolate the voices of characters like Trueblood and Wheatstraw into his, but also to move beyond the aesthetic models they represent.

The emergence of the narrator’s distinctly modern (though steeped in tradition) improvisational voice gives him the confidence to contemplate leaving his state of hibernation. The narrator realizes that, rather than harmonizing the complex and contradictory voices that cause dissonance, the requisite for re-entry into the world above ground lies in the transformation of that chaos into narrative form:

In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. . . . Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos that lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out. I must emerge. (580)
The narrator acknowledges that he still feels conflicted even as he has located the means through which he can survive above ground. In contemplating this ambivalence he returns to a source of inspiration that had initially provided him with the language to express the nature of invisibility in the Prologue:

With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, "Open the window and let the foul air out," while the other says, "It was good green corn before the harvest." Of course Louis was kidding, he wouldn’t have thrown old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance, when it was the good music that came from old Bad Air’s horn that counted. Old Bad Air is still around with his music and his dancing and his diversity, and I’ll be up and around with mine. (380)

The narrator’s invocation of Armstrong at this moment illustrates his development beyond a mimicry of the tradition that preceded him but also beyond the bebop musicians themselves. No longer ashamed of his cultural heritage (only ashamed of the fact that he had once been ashamed), the narrator can add his voice to the tradition without anxiety or shame. As such, the famous words with which the narrator ends the text is not a question so much as a statement in the form of a question whose subsequent response lingers unspoken in the air: “Who knows but, that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” The narrative ending with an auditory reference rather than a visual one illustrates the fact that the guiding metaphor of the novel is the complex interaction between sight (or lack thereof) and sound, whether dissonant or harmonious.

The emphasis that critics have placed on the jazz elements in the novel are well-grounded, not only in the formal aspects of the text, but also in Ellison’s thematic treatment of improvisation as an expression of identity and its formation. But the novel is also a product of a particular moment in history and the jazz tradition: the evolution of bebop. Ellison’s attitude towards the musicians and their innovations was complex, born out of an ambivalence that he resolved for himself. Although the musicians succumbed to the perversity of an American culture industry that consumed their music and their identities as entertainment, their innovations became part of the tradition with which future improvisers had to contend. It is Ellison’s “long-view” of jazz in particular and African-American cultural expression as an art form in general that allow him to leave his narrator with a sense of optimism, albeit an open-ended one. The possibilities open to the narrator as a result of resolving his ambivalence towards his place in the cultural tradition ultimately exceeded those of Parker, who died three years after the novel’s publication.

On a final note, although it is impossible to say to what extent Ellison likened his troubled narrator to Charlie Parker, the tragic demise of the jazz innovator most certainly projected echoes of the invisible man for him. In his 1961 essay “On Bird, Bird-Watching & Jazz,” Ellison speculates on the source of Parker’s famous nickname. Ellison spends most of the essay making a case for Parker’s connection with the mockingbird, whose mimicry and variety of song closely resembled Parker’s saxo-
phone style. However, Ellison ends his essay with the speculation that Parker was most like the robin mentioned in lyrics written by Kansas City bandleader Walter Page:

Oh, they picked poor robin clean
(repeat)
They tied poor robin to a stump
Lawn, they picked all the feathers
Round from robin’s rump
Oh, they picked poor robin clean. (265)

Ellison writes: “Perhaps Charlie Parker was poor robin come to New York and here to be sacrificed to the need for entertainment” (265). Ellison has his narrator ruminate on the same lines as he realizes his quest for employment in New York City is a futile one (193). Although, at the time, the narrator cannot understand why the song repeats itself in his head, one gets the sense that, unlike Parker, by the end of his hibernation, the narrator can transform the song and its implications by converting it into his own.

NOTES

1. Although bebop never achieved the popularity of swing music, which dominated the airwaves in the 1930s and early 1940s, by the end of the 1940s bebop had become the dominant form of jazz in the marketplace. By most general accounts, the “bebopfad,” however, was short-lived and receded in popularity by the early 1950s. Its musical influences, though, persisted in the jazz styles that have developed since that time and have become part of the jazz mainstream. For in depth accounts of the bebop era see Ira Gitler’s Swing to Bop: An Oral History of the Transition in Jazz and Scott DeVeaux’s The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History.

2. In his biography of Ellison, Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius, Lawrence Jackson points out that although Ellison was aware of the development and radical innovations of bebop, the music and the musicians were, in many ways, at odds with his own musical studies at Tuskegee, which emphasized “sublimation through harmony” rather than abstract soling as the center of attraction. (275). This formal difference in perspective also reflected Ellison’s ambivalence towards beboppers’ rejection of the jazz tradition.

3. Benny Goodman was the only prominent bandleader to feature African Americans in a limited capacity with musicians like pianist Teddy Wilson, vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, and the innovative and short-lived guitarist Charlie Christian. Although all three played prominent musical roles in many of Goodman’s performances, these musicians were often billed as “guests” of his band to quell any controversy that might have arisen out of their permanent association with the band.

4. Eric Lott also notes a rising political consciousness in bebop musicians in the post-World War II period which manifested itself primarily in a “politics of style” that “made a virtue of isolation” (462). Lott identifies bebop as one of the “great modernisms” that rejected previous styles with hostility (462).

5. Ellison’s commitment to freeing his own work from the limitations of any political ideology subjected him to criticism from many writers of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, a movement out of which Baraka’s own cultural analysis of bebop springs.

6. In “The Art of Fiction,” an interview included in Shadow and Act, an interviewer asks Ellison if the search for identity is primarily an American theme to which Ellison responds: “It is the American theme. The nature of our society is that we are prevented from knowing who we are. It is still a young society, and this is an integral part of its development” (219).

7. Eliot asserts that the contemporary poet must, first and foremost, acknowledge his place within a national literary canon. The poet must cultivate a “historical sense, which . . . involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence: the historical sense
compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous order” (499). Such a commitment to this historical sense also involves the relinquishing of an aspect of the poet’s identity—"a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable . . . a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (500). Both Eliot and Ellison ground their conception of an aesthetic in an acknowledgement of the past and a perpetual submission of the self to that past. Ellison, however, places equal emphasis on the simultaneous definition of self in what amounts to a reinscription of identity through inspired improvisation.

8. The rise of bebop in the 1940s, often cited as the beginning of “modern” jazz, sparked a debate amongst (mostly white) music critics who either saw the music as an unnecessary departure from the “true” folk roots of Dixieland jazz or as a frenetic and un-danceable abstraction of the highly popular swing music of the years preceding World War II. For a thorough and insightful study of this debate and the critical reception of bebop, see Bernard Gendron’s “Moldy Figs and Modernists: Jazz at War (1942–1946)” in Krin Gabbard’s Jazz Among the Discourses.

9. Horace Porter, in Jazz Country, goes as far as to argue that Armstrong and Parker represent “the positive and negative or the marvelous and terrible dimensions of jazz life” (43). Porter asserts that Ellison saw Parker himself as a “modern descendent of Uncle Tom . . . reincarnated in hot flesh and jazz spirit” (46). Whether Parker’s excessive lifestyle corresponded to a conciliatory relationship to his white audience, Ellison clearly saw Parker as a symbol of the American public’s unwavering fascination with the degradation and self-destruction of the artist.

10. Parker’s lifestyle had a strong influence not only on his young, largely white, fan base but on contemporary jazz musicians as well, many who followed his lead in terms of excess. Numerous future jazz stars like Fats Navarro, Miles Davis, and Jackie McLean suffered from drug addiction and, in Navarro’s case, suffered a similar fate as Charlie Parker.

11. It is important to note that the narrator draws the explicit connection between Mr. Norton’s incestuous desires and Trueblood’s story when he retells the story at the time of narration. Trueblood is less aware of Mr. Norton’s desires than the narrator.

12. In an interview with John Hersey, Ellison stated, “I listened constantly to music trying to learn the processes of developing a theme, of expanding and contracting and turning it inside out, of making bridges, and working with techniques of musical continuity, and so on. I think that basically my instinctive approach to writing is through sound. A change of mood and mode comes to me in terms of sound. That’s one part of it, in the sense of composing the architecture of a fiction.” See Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays. Ed: John Hersey. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974.

13. It is interesting to note that Bud Powell, one of the developers and prominent figures of bebop was unjustly incarcerated, suffered a nervous breakdown, and in 1951, was subjected to shock therapy, all during the time Ellison wrote his novel. By most accounts, Powell never fully recovered from the experience and it affected his aesthetic production until his death in 1966. Charlie Parker was also institutionalized (though not subjected to shock treatment) in 1946.

14. Although Porter likens this recapitulation of themes to Ellison’s own swing-based “solo flight” (he names two Ellington songs “Blue Skies” and “Trumpet No More” as examples), I would argue that the distorted, yet mocking, images of castration, reflect the narrator’s own bebop-inflected improvisation. In the dream and in the novel as a whole, the narrator extends the foundations of his voice beyond his precursors and infuses the chaotic, the surreal and the incongruous into his improvised ruminations.

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