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Jazz and Early “Black” Basketball Style

Just as basketball is a distinctly American creation, so too, is African American styled jazz/blues: arguably the most original, important art form in the twentieth century. Most of today’s most popular and influential music has grown out of the jazz/blues matrix. Similarly, a stylized, distinctly “black” athletic aesthetic is the style of contemporary basketball. Both have evolved into their sophisticated contemporary forms through several generations of innovators in urban pockets throughout the country. Both players and musicians were types of cultural rebels who emphasized virility and defied the established (white) standards of performance. Moreover, what became the dominant form in both grew out of negotiations between whites and blacks within urban working class culture.

As such, the history of “black” popular music and basketball style evoke striking parallels. Both forms of stylized performance are animated by the improvised aesthetics of African-American culture. Both embody stylistic vestiges of the slave experience, and their subsequent interaction with the dominant white culture. Jazz/blues derive from the improvisatory tradition of rhythmically embellished work calls (and field hollers) accompanied by body movements to a pulsing beat. The development of black basketball was intimately connected to this musical style and the rural/urban confluence of the post-World War I northern migrations. Both emerged as recognized popular cultural forms in the 1920s when musicians converged in New York and Chicago at just the time that the leading black basketball teams (Harlem Renaissance and Harlem Globetrotters) were formed. Both were inextricably connected to the commercialization of popular culture in the 1920s and thereafter. Just as white basketball players encountered a quicker game of fast breaks, explosive speed, innovative ballhandling, and varied shots (than the orthodox northeastern style) when playing against black teams, so too, did white jazz musicians learn about rhythmic improvisation from the early African-American jazz pioneers.

Despite the vitality of early jazz/blues and black basketball, racial segregation obstructed both from the cultural mainstream until after World War II industrial production created new opportunities for southern black (and white) workers. With the electric guitar and bass, new forms of jazz and blues fused elements of gospel and swing into a propulsive sound that effectively blurred its racial origins and inspired new modes of behavior. Bebop jazz promoted a fluid, no-sweat, confident attitude known as “cool” in much the same way that the emerging black style of play defied traditional “white” performance. Rhythm and blues forever shattered the racially-segregated musical categories and became a musical style for all. Similarly, although the path was forged by the Rens, Trotters and several black collegiate teams, it was in the NCAA’s Division I that the African-American style burst through the locked doors into integrated national basketball competition. As Nelson George has argued, several noteworthy black players (Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, Elgin Baylor, Oscar Robertson, and Connie Hawkins) elevated the game

to new levels in the 1950s-60s in much the same way that Duke Ellington resolved the problems of integrating improvisation with composition on the one hand and the soloist with the band on the other. Post-WWII resolution on bebop, cool, R & B, electric Chicago style-and black basketball--came to be embraced by a wide, racially-mixed audience.

The fusion of black musical-basketball style, and the lingering racial stereotypes, are dramatized powerfully in the 1992 film, *White Men Can't Jump*. Set on the urban playgrounds of Los Angeles, the film reconciles the contemporary pathologies of African-American culture with the longer tradition of black-white negotiations in basketball and music. In one scene, Sidney (Wesley Snipes) ridicules Billy (Woody Harrelson) about playing, but not hearing, Jimi Hendrix—suggesting that whites cannot comprehend black style. Billy responds with an equally stereotypical denigration of Sidney's black style by suggesting that what looks good isn't necessarily conducive to winning. In the final scene, Sidney and Billy challenge two legendary playground heroes. Billy proves that he has learned the value of improvisational style when he rises to the occasion and dunks the game's winning basket-proving that some white men can, indeed, jump.

