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### An American Music

“Stop!” shouts our band director. This is turning out to be a typical Monday Big Band rehearsal, I think, as I lay my saxophone on my lap, waiting to find out who the culprit is. “Can you even hear the melody?” He says to our drummer, “You need to play softer. Jazz is a democracy; everyone needs to be heard!” I spend the rest of Big Band rehearsal musing over this.

The metaphor extends to encompass playing an appropriate volume. Each player must be able to hear the other players and adjust accordingly. This is called being an engaged citizen.

As jazz musicians, we have our own Bill of Rights, our own rules of freedom that govern our music. Perhaps this is why jazz sparked my interest as a ninth grade clarinet player, why I learned the tenor saxophone so that my band director would let me join the jazz band. Jazz just has this quality, this freedom that makes it unlike the music that we played in Concert Band. I was free to interpret each note, adding scoops, accents, slurs, and dynamic contrast.

Jazz emerged from New Orleans at a time when segregation in America was rampant. Yet even the social pressures, Jim Crow Laws, and segregation couldn't keep African Americans, Creoles and white musicians from coming together to create and explore this new type of music, which has since become the definition of American culture. One definition of democracy - the absence of hereditary or arbitrary privilege - is very apparent in early jazz. Each musician has an equal opportunity to learn an instrument and to express his or her thoughts with it.

America is often said to be a “melting pot” of cultures and people. Similarly, jazz is a melting pot of styles – ragtime, African, Latin, Caribbean, Blues, Gospel, funeral band, opera, and more traditional European styles. Jazz is all about trading ideas. Each individual player gets the chance to improvise, to create a melody or a musical idea. This can be stretched to include groups of instruments trading ideas. In one of the songs that our Big Band is playing this year, “Symphony In Riffs” by Benny Carter, entire sections trade choruses. The piece starts off with a brass melody accompanied by the saxophones, then saxophones answer the brass, then back to the brass theme, then saxophones reemerge, then a trombone solo, then the full ensemble joins in. This pattern continues throughout the piece, forming a conversation, an exchange of ideas, among sections of the band.

Furthermore, the form of a song can be arranged to suit the ensemble. At my smaller ensemble each Saturday, we have spent countless rehearsals practicing and trying out new arrangements of classic songs, such as “Blue Monk” by Thelonious Monk, and “Make Me a Memory” by Grover Washington Jr. Even though they are standard pieces, they can be a bit different depending on the instrumentation and the sound of the ensemble. For example, one member of our ensemble plays the steel drum, which lends a different flavor to our overall sound, especially in “Make Me a Memory”: the steel drum makes the tone of the ensemble fuller and more melancholy in the song.

One of the most significant and yet underappreciated right that we have in America is freedom of speech, guaranteed in the First Amendment. This right allows us to protest and to voice our political views. Jazz has long been used as a means of political expression. In our Facing History class this year, when studying lynching in America, we watched a video of Billie Holiday performing “Strange Fruit” in 1939, a poem by Abel Meeropol that he turned into a song. “Strange Fruit” is a prime example of an effective protest song. Written about the lynching of African Americans in the South, the song contrasts the “Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh/and the sudden smell of burning flesh!” Holiday bravely brought the issue of lynching into the limelight at a time when it was still dangerous to do so – in fact, Meeropol first published it under the pen name Lewis Allan in the 1930s. The song made it impossible for people to continue to ignore the issue, ultimately leading the anti-lynching movement.

Jazz represents the freedom and individual ideas that make up American culture. It is easy and boring to go through life passively. If each person did just that, our democracy would not be what it is today. Likewise, when musicians began to gather in New Orleans and exchange ideas, they broke the traditions of the Old World and invented a genre of music that is uniquely American.