

ESSAY

“But Amen is the Price:” James Baldwin and Ray Charles in “The Hallelujah Chorus”

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Abstract

Based on a recent, archival discovery of the script, “But Amen is the Price” is the first substantive writing about James Baldwin’s collaboration with Ray Charles, Cicely Tyson, and others in a performance of musical and dramatic pieces. Titled by Baldwin, “The Hallelujah Chorus” was performed in two shows at Carnegie Hall in New York City on 1 July 1973. The essay explores how the script and presentation of the material, at least in Baldwin’s mind, represented a call for people to more fully involve themselves in their own and in each other’s lives. In lyrical interludes and dramatic excerpts from his classic work, “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin addressed divisions between neighbors, brothers, and strangers, as well as people’s dissociations from themselves in contemporary American life. In solo and ensemble songs, both instrumental and vocal, Ray Charles’s music evinced an alternative to the tradition of Americans’ evasion of each other. Charles’s sound meant to signify the history and possibility of people’s attainment of presence in intimate, social, and political venues of experience. After situating the performance in Baldwin’s personal life and public worldview at the time and detailing the structure and content of the performance itself, “But Amen is the Price” discusses the largely negative critical response as a symptom faced by much of Baldwin’s other work during the era, responses that attempted to guard “aesthetics” generally—be they literary, dramatic, or musical—as class-blind, race-neutral, and apolitical. The essay presents “The Hallelujah Chorus” as a key moment in Baldwin’s search for a musical/literary form, a way to address, as he put it, “the person and the people,” in open contention with the social and political pressures of the time.

Keywords: James Baldwin, black music, Ray Charles, Carnegie Hall, “The Hallelujah Chorus”

Lights Dim

Shortly after 6 p.m. on 1 July 1973, the audience in Carnegie Hall heard Ray Charles's solo piano lilt out the opening, brightly lit and darkly toned choruses of his classic *Sweet Sixteen Bars*. A brilliant, seemingly effortless contest between simplicity and complexity, between joy and sorrow, invention and tradition, played out of Charles's touch on the keys. That sound bore musical witness to how a deft sense of simple touch can signal a basis for complex human presence. A political complexity. It carried clues to how history exists in the present tense of presence-sense; how the past happens, between people in the ways they touch, stay in touch, and in the ways they fail and fall out of touch, in everyday life. Standing behind the curtain while Charles played was the slim figure of James Baldwin, the most famous black writer in the world.

Such a complexly veiled and engaged sense of music informed the core of Baldwin's life and work. In one of his earliest essays, "Many Thousands Gone" (1951), he wrote that it was "only in his music . . . that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear."¹ Twenty-two years later, there he was sharing one of the nation's biggest stages with his favorite singer in "The Hallelujah Chorus," a performance Baldwin had designed to explore who was prepared to hear what.

After a few minutes, the curtain would rise to reveal Charles, a.k.a. *the genius*, sitting at a concert grand piano, flanked, as was customary, by his orchestra on one side. On the other, stood The Raelettes behind microphone stands in concert-length, matching gingham dresses. Nothing unusual there. For Charles, rare brilliance of sound and presentation had come to pass for normal, maybe even *natural*, in the minds of his critics and his audience. It was the unofficial opening of The Newport Jazz Festival-New York, performed at venues across the city between 29 June and 8 July. Including popular black acts such as Donny Hathaway, the Staple Singers, Stevie Wonder, and Aretha Franklin, the aim was to extend the reach of *Newport Jazz* to black audiences in the City. Even if the music he opened with cast its arm back to his jazz and blues recordings of the 1950s, all seemed normal-enough at the outset. But, something was bound to be different about this concert. With expectations set up by print advertisements, the audience had come out that Sunday evening, after all, to be witness to: "JOS. SCHLITZ BREWING COMPANY SALUTES 'THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RAY CHARLES' as written and narrated by James Baldwin and featuring Ray Charles and Cicely Tyson."²

Curtain

Downstage at a podium, or, as it was intended to seem, in the pulpit, listening to the rhythm of Charles's somehow intensely languid sound, stood Baldwin. Since July 1969, when he left Hollywood and returned to Istanbul, aborting his

attempt to adapt Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* to the screen with—or against—Columbia Studios, Baldwin had become increasingly reluctant, angular, and unpredictable as a spokesman for black America; in addition to being a famous writer, he was a cultural celebrity, therefore, whose public profile was, at the time, turbulent. Many thought at the time, and many since, that Baldwin's relevance was fading, that his profile was in decline. In fact, he'd been shifting his methods in a mix of conscious determination and unconscious intuition. As he often put it, he was flying by radar.

Since his exploded visibility propelled him into a position as a kind of prophetic-celebrity in 1963, Baldwin had interrogated and confronted the terms of his own success. On 26 June 1972, looking back on his career, he told George Goodman of *The New York Times*: "I myself began as a kind of dancing dog. There are still some people who think poets can be safely accommodated within the system."³ Owing to his shifting approach to engagement with the page as well as with his life and the stage, Baldwin's reputation as a literary genius was under some mix of dispute and attack. Responding to conscious and unconscious needs, he crafted his public persona into a lyrical mix of mystery and confrontational clarity. In ways unlike any of his high-profile friends and colleagues who were entertainers (Sidney Poitier, Lena Horne, Marlon Brando, Harry Belafonte, Ava Gardner and others including Ray Charles), Baldwin had positioned and repositioned his life, his image and his work so that it seemed to be many many things, but never normal and rarely natural.

The controversy associated with his career, especially as it might affect his family, had tormented Baldwin from the beginning. By 1973, they all knew that they'd have to accept it. In private conversations and in correspondence with his family, Baldwin would even argue that their dangerous *fate* must be embraced. In his latest book, *No Name in the Street*, released in May of 1972 to stormy and mixed reviews—reviews which, Baldwin told his brother, were intended to hurt, even to destroy—, about his audience, and even some of his friends, he'd concluded: "I had to face more about them than they could know about me, knew their rent, whereas they did not know mine, and was condemned to make them uncomfortable."⁴ As a basic frame, in his 1964 essay, "The White Problem," Baldwin wrote: "In this country, for a dangerously long time, there have been two levels of experience. One—to put it cruelly, but, I think, quite truthfully—can be summed up in the images of Doris Day and Gary Cooper: two of the most grotesque appeals to innocence the world has ever seen. And the other, subterranean, indispensable, and denied, can be summed up, let us say, in the tone and in the face of Ray Charles."⁵ In ways by 1973 he felt were condemned to be disruptive, but also in ways that by 1973 were beginning to be simply disregarded, Baldwin clearly hoped to lift the indispensable touch and presence of Ray Charles to the cultural surface in ways that couldn't be denied by everyone. The response to "The Hallelujah Chorus," in fact, as we'll see, presents a detailed chart of the ways critics displaced disruption with disregard when it came to Baldwin's work of the era.

It was a performance billed by renowned jazz producer and founder of The Newport Jazz Festival, George Wein, as “A unique experience in theatrical concert presentation”⁶ and described after the fact by *Jet* magazine as “a bit of theatrics, a touch of oratory and some righteous jazz music.”⁷ Authored and directed by Baldwin, the performance spliced together a conversation between himself and Charles, solo and ensemble performances by Charles, and dramatic presentation of excerpts from “Sonny’s Blues.” Three actors performed: Baldwin’s brother and principle confidant, a professional singer and actor himself, David Baldwin; Baldwin’s close friend, actor, preferred barber in Los Angeles, and a model for the character of Joseph Rivers in Baldwin’s next novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), David Moses; and the then-recently Oscar-nominated (*Sounder*, 1972) actress, Cicely Tyson. Described as the opening show for the Festival in New York, “The Hallelujah Chorus” was performed twice (6 p.m. and 10 p.m.) as the near-ninety degree afternoon heat cooled into evening. As it happened, it was a show jazz critics weren’t prepared to hear. And, it’s a performance even Baldwin’s most assiduous critics and biographers have almost totally ignored.

The reviews of “The Hallelujah Chorus” may or may not have been meant to destroy, but they would hurt.⁸ And, they most certainly would challenge any connection a general audience might have been inclined to take away from the confluence of Charles’s supposedly natural musical genius and James Baldwin’s prophetic insurgency in American culture. In remarks about the concert, jazz critic Whitney Balliett wrote that Charles and Baldwin “were born poor, black, and gifted, but beyond that they have little in common.”⁹ In the end, opined Balliett, “trying to weld their alien souls didn’t make sense.”¹⁰ The performers, on the other hand, had a sense of connection that refuted the perspective of the jazz critics typified by Balliett’s comments. In an interview for the *New York Times* printed the day before the show, Baldwin said, “I come out of the church and so does he. . . That’s the basis of his sound, and it’s the sound I was born hearing.”¹¹ Whatever the critics meant to do, their dismissal of “The Hallelujah Chorus” attacked the possibility of the touch and presence it meant to convey and did what it could to erase any serious contemporary consideration it may have provoked. In 40 years since its high-profile debut, the piece has totally vanished from the record. One wonders what we might hear, now, if we cast our listening back and bring Baldwin’s urgent, even insurgent, sense of Charles’s touch and presence into our hearing and serious consideration. In his novel *Molloy*, Samuel Beckett’s afflicted traveler informs, “I began to think, that is to say to listen harder.”¹² So, listening, now, both to and with Baldwin, let’s see what *we* can hear.

Toward Fluent Presence, a Sense of Healthy Touch

Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924 and left New York in 1948 for Paris. In the decades that followed that first big move, he constantly traveled between

venues, from New York to Tallahassee to Selma to San Francisco to Stockholm, from Jerusalem to Nairobi to Dakar, and from Broadway to Hollywood, where he could directly experience and engage a rapidly politicizing and internationalizing American culture. And, from positions in and around Paris, Fire Island to London, Ibiza to Istanbul, he searched out locations where he could hole up and write about his experiences dispatching articles, essays, interviews, novels and plays that circulated across the globe but were almost always designed, as he'd put it, to *do something*, to hit home, at home.

The peregrine structure of his experience had shown Baldwin that the lives of those people he most wanted to save, namely his family and friends, were inextricably linked to each other and, moreover, connected to others in complex networks and circles of expanding circumference. Manhattan connected directly to Charlotte and Macon, Chicago to Jackson and Birmingham, Los Angeles to Shreveport and Houston, Paris to Tunis, Algiers, and Saigon. These and other kinds of networks connected people all over the globe. On levels and in ways for which there was no available vocabulary, Baldwin sensed, these lives touched each other. These connections, for him, were factual, not mystical. The nonetheless ineffable links between people created social presences, experiential realities that were not under the control of any individual, nor were they intelligible from either end of the connected realities alone. Absent sufficient discourse, these realities, effectively, had no name. The result was a sense of connection that, he'd observed, provoked profound fear, even panic, within and between persons, within and between peoples, and even within and between nations.

On other levels and in other ways, as numerous commentators observed at the time, American life in the post-war years threatened to reduce people to cogs in a mechanical wheel. Rationalization. Racial divisions and sexual taboos policed the borders between the resulting, so-called rational, stratifications between a capstone of successful, if neurotic, elites, a thin, anxiety-ridden middle band of undetermined qualification, and the broad-based tenuousness of working class and poverty-ridden sectors of the American geographical and economic pyramid. All levels, but especially those at the top, Baldwin observed, in *No Name In the Street*, were plagued "by an emotional poverty so bottomless, and a terror of human life, of human touch, so deep, that virtually no American appears to be able to achieve any viable, organic connection between his public stance and his private life."¹³ The violence inherent in the situation was created when mythologies about *what* people were supposed to be thwarted connections between *who* people actually were and, at the same time, when other, more private fantasies about *who* people were supposed to be were impugned by the so-called facts of *what* people actually were. The result, Baldwin thought, made Americans uniquely reluctant to experience experience itself. Having lived on four continents himself, in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, of his time in the United States, D. H. Lawrence observed: "I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow countrymen."¹⁴

In general, Baldwin's call from the Carnegie Hall stage would be familiar to anyone who had heard him speak recently. One must say *Amen* to life, forego delusions of personal safety, and accept the twists and turns of experience in attempts to remain in touch with others doing the same. A denied experience *can't* be changed; from a sense of connected presence, however, serious and meaningful personal and political change was possible. What wouldn't have been known was the radical nature of Baldwin's own Amens at the time. His life in 1973 was far too *political* to qualify for what most Americans would consider *personal*, and, at home and abroad, the FBI surveillance alone prevented any sense he might have had that people would have recognized as *privacy*. Whatever he said or did, he assumed, was already *on the wire*. Nonetheless, even by his standards, the life he *did* have was uncommonly intense during the months of 1973 bracketing the performance of "The Hallelujah Chorus."

In April 1973, his closest friend and mentor, the painter Beauford Delaney then living in Clamart-Seine, outside of Paris, experienced acute psychological lapses requiring Baldwin to step in as Delaney's legal guardian. Baldwin had recently found an agent he trusted, a young black American woman living in Paris named Tria French. Unlike his representation in the states, she was game to work with him in an intensifying, years long, quasi-legal, international battle with his American publisher, The Dial Press, over existing and future contracts. The battle was tumult enough. But, tragically, also in April, Tria French died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage leaving Baldwin grieving, financially strapped, legally vulnerable, and, for a period, in charge of her two young children.

Baldwin's intimate life at the time was likewise complex. He was, however, learning, firsthand and for the first time, the extent to which human touch and presence involved an erotic life laced with confrontation, revelation *and*, something new to him, surrender. In vivid ways, in enabling and disabling ways, he could sense how public and political fears and desires found their way into intimate and erotic reaches of life and vice versa. His experience then centered on what he thought of as a marriage to an Italian painter, Yoran Cazac, who was also married to a woman with whom he had two children. The *marriage* between Baldwin and Cazac, which included a visit in April—on Easter Sunday—1973, to Cazac's home village in Italy for his son's baptism where Baldwin was named the child's godfather, would propel Baldwin toward a new point of view. What he learned from his connection to Cazac would directly inform his 1979 novel, *Just Above My Head*, his most fully and explicitly musical novel and his most deeply realized and profound exploration of human erotic, moral and political experience.¹⁵ Much of the energy of their relationship is likewise visible in Cazac's dazzling illustrations for Baldwin's 1976 children's book based on one of his beloved nephews, *Little Man, Little Man*.

Meanwhile, politically related uncertainties jeopardized Baldwin's permanent resident status in France, status necessary to complete his purchase of the residence where he'd been living in St. Paul de Vence—the money for which purchase

depended upon his winning the war with the publishers who were at the time (fraudulently, he believed) controlling his income. Amidst these intrigues, in early June 1973, internationally known fugitive Eldridge Cleaver had begun to contact Baldwin seeking assistance. Ultimately, about two weeks before returning to the United States to meet Charles and rehearse “The Hallelujah Chorus,” Cleaver’s messenger arrived at Baldwin’s house in St. Paul de Vence with a tape-recorded request for \$10,000. Under multiple kinds of pressure and, essentially, not trusting phones, his mail, or anyone outside his family and a very close-knit circle of friends at the time—what he called his *tribe*—, Baldwin sent the messenger away with a vague commitment. He concluded that Cleaver was either extremely politically naïve, or desperate, or that he’d become little more than a hustler or even an agent. It was from a maelstrom containing these pressures among others that Baldwin re-entered the United States—during an era of widespread political violence—to say *Amen*, to implore people to be present in their lives and works in ways that go beyond the taboos and divisions. And, Ray Charles was there to depict, in sound, what it meant to say *Hallelujah* in response.

Baldwin’s creative vision, ca. 1973, of a society *in touch* with itself and present across its differences was widely resisted then and is often misunderstood—or simply avoided—now. The vision then was as demanding as his politically and erotically charged personal life was complex. Neither the demands nor the complexities were totally new, of course. In his 1959 essay “The Discovery of What it Means to Be an American,” he wrote:

I was born in New York, but have lived in only pockets of it. In Paris, I lived in all parts of the city—on the Right Bank and the Left, among the bourgeoisie and among *les misérables*, and knew all kinds of people, from pimps and prostitutes in Pigalle to Egyptian Bankers in Neuilly. This may sound extremely unprincipled or even obscurely immoral: I found it healthy.¹⁶

From his point of view, in 1973, the anxiety-ridden upper classes, their brokers in the middle, the tenuous workers, and the poverty-ridden oppressed were all connected; their sense of themselves depended upon their sense of each other. Until the nation achieved some form of fluency with itself across those divisions, that is, until people became able to envision mobility in terms other than the mythic-schizoid fracture between a hopeful upward and a paranoiac downward, Americans’ sense of human touch and mutual human presence would be unhealthy, menaced—and so, in turn, menace all it did touch—at every level of experience from intimate/personal to international/political.

“The Hallelujah Chorus” came together in Baldwin’s mind in precisely these terms, an exemplification of healthy cultural presence, of the sound of being in touch. In the interview for the *New York Times* published the day before the concert in Carnegie Hall, sitting in his Plaza Hotel suite, Baldwin described his time with Charles in Los Angeles the previous week. Baldwin sensed how the singer defied Americans’ poverty-of-presence and their dangerously out-of-touch way

of being in their lives and in the world: "I just hung around a lot, watching him playing and talking. What struck me was his sense of touch, of presences entering or leaving a room, his fantastic ear."¹⁷

In Baldwin's mind, American culture was hurting for presence and touch something fierce. *No Name in the Street* documents the sexual and political violence that follows alienation at various levels of experience. A few months before the Carnegie date, in February 1973, Baldwin had travelled to Germany where the Stuttgart branch of the NAACP was to be inaugurated. Describing the event that took place in "the Mozart Saal" of the "Liederhalle" for *Stars and Stripes*, Ed Reavis wrote: "A white man stands up . . . and asks how, and in what direction, he should turn to seek a new identity in a culture that is not exclusive."¹⁸ From forty years in the future, we can plainly see how Baldwin's response frames both his vision in "The Hallelujah Chorus" and the critics' resistance to it:

Your history is not your fault. But there it is. I'm not trying to put you down but give you a sensible answer. Now, for all practical purposes, your situation would be very different, and your question would scarcely exist if America had a culture. Now, having said that, I mean, the Americans as a nation cannot be considered to have a culture, as no one can discover what it is that they have in common or respect except things, and that does not make a culture. They also have in common a certain terror and a certain hidden shame and despair, none of which makes a culture, either. Now, what you have to do with all that in order to free yourself from what I referred to as your history is, first of all, accept that history. Learn to accept, for example, that the American people never honored a single treaty that they made with the Indians, not one. That means that you are the issue of a very dishonorable people. Now, if you can get that far, you can also see that to condemn a culture is not to condemn a nation nor all the people in it. If you can get that far, you can see that American Slavery had two faces and still has two faces. One of them is visible, and that's my face, because the Americans imagine that I am their slave, but that other face is your face and that's the keystone to American slavery: what is happening to you. Now, it's not a matter of your fighting for my liberty, it's a matter of your contending with your parents, with your leaders for your life!"¹⁹

Baldwin's advice that the man reorient himself to his familiar frames of reference, the reality of his racial identity—a reality largely unexamined among white people frozen by associated guilt and blinded by what's termed *privilege*—among them, in fact, has a complex and contested career of its own. In 1962, in a letter from Loèche-les Bains, Switzerland to his agent, Bob Mills, eventually published in *Harper's* (1963), Baldwin had written: "There is a very grim secret hidden in the fact that so many of the people one hoped to rescue could not be rescued because the prison of color had become their hiding place."²⁰ In the early 1960s, Baldwin could see Americans furnishing enclaves of color in which, from his perspective, that is from the perspective of the kind of touch and

presence an actual culture entails, the principle differences between projects, condos, and prison cells were simply matters of décor. Writing to Mills, he continued, "I have said for years that color does not matter. I am now beginning to feel that it does not matter, *at all*, that it masks something else that *does* matter."²¹ His comments to the white man in Germany trace a route through precisely this terrain. One must, in essence, accept the false door, a door nonetheless made real by the lies and violence of American history and present-day sociological, so-called, *reality*, in order to contend at all with the harder, durable truths of human life. Functional reckonings with real human questions were impossible from any one position within the "prison of color" fundamental to existing cultural, personal, and psychological experience. Such was the American dilemma, positioned in uncomfortable proximity to a blues-laced version of the human condition, in Baldwin's view at the time.

In the 1960s, in dispatches from four continents, Baldwin moved through these options and their implications with an analytical ferocity few could follow intellectually and very very few could actually attempt in their lives. In mainstream terms, people's would-be sense of *who* they were, as he'd observed above, was largely hiding out, obsessed with its particular choice of curtains, within the—unmasked—question of *what* they were, a question involving everyone directly with the "prison of color."²² Of course, black people's sense of these dimensions of identity had, basically always, been undeniably tangled. The protest movements in the South were, among many other things, an attempt to untangle—but not to detach—these questions so that the relationship could be acknowledged, and then *changed*. The American twin fantasies of individuality and transcendence simply couldn't answer the realities. By 1973, in saying "American slavery had two faces,"²³ Baldwin was signifying his awareness that the dissonance between *who* and *what* people were in American life involved everyone. In order for a white man to be free, he'd have to confront *what* the world—the white and non-white worlds—saw when it looked at him. And that confrontation was and is almost meaningless in individual terms.

This un-named dissonance had been brewing in Baldwin's work and mind since at least the mid-1950s. In July of 1961 a breakthrough seems to have occurred when he was asked, pointedly, both *who* and *what* he was during a visit to Chicago. We've got real evidence of the first question. It came from Studs Terkel who interviewed Baldwin for Chicago Public Radio during a publicity tour for his second book of essays *Nobody Knows My Name*. At the close of a searching conversation, after detailing Baldwin's career—and after asking, hopefully, if his first novels were still in print—Terkel opts for a personal ending: "Perhaps one last question, James Baldwin, who are you, now?" And, Baldwin, in concert with the depth of the conversation, pauses thoughtfully, and responds with a kind of gentle precision: "Hm. Who indeed?" After seconds of open air, he continues: "Well, I may not be able to tell you quite who I am. But I think I'm discovering who I'm not."²⁴ Letting his punctuated last syllable sound into an audibly deep breath, he changes his approach. He tries quoting

his own “Autobiographical Notes” (1955)—an author’s questionnaire—from his previous book of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*: “I want to be an honest man. And I want to be a good writer.” But, even his actor’s sense of timing and heartfelt inflection can’t save it from its rehearsed, bygone ring; so, he tries again and, in-so-doing, shifts the terms of the question: “And, I don’t know if one *ever* gets to be what one wants to be.” In a way that almost emphasizes the music, again, he gets out of the scene: “I think you just have to play it by ear, and pray for rain.”²⁵ Who indeed.

Evidence of the second question comes from Baldwin’s most high-profile single piece, “Down at the Cross,” published in the 17 November 1962 issue of *The New Yorker*. During the same visit to Chicago where he’d talked with Terkel, sitting at dinner in the Hyde Park home of Elijah Muhammad, head of The Nation of Islam, Baldwin recounted his failure to answer Elijah’s religiously and politically inflected question, “And what are you, now?”²⁶ Unable to accept Muhammad’s rigid racial expectations, and conscious of the irrelevance, at least in this setting, of the personal responses available to him as a “writer,” Baldwin’s most high-profile essay records his defeat in debate. Leaving his rhetorical chin—for Baldwin, improbably—wide open, he finally responds, lying, “I don’t, anyway, . . . think about it a great deal.” Elijah seizes the opening before his home crowd, “I think he ought to think about it *all* the deal.”²⁷ The conversation then culminates in an impasse that left the famously articulate Baldwin speaking without speaking: “(I said to myself, but not to Elijah) . . . isn’t love more important than color?”²⁸ Even his literary persona ca. 1962 knew better than to ask this question out loud at Elijah Muhammad’s house in Chicago, on “the South Side,” with “a million in captivity—stretching from this door step as far as the eye could see.”²⁹ Baldwin could feel that what, or rather “who,” his writer’s mind had on its mind wasn’t relevant to Elijah Muhammad’s resolutely social concerns. Nor, when he thought about it, was it relevant to the million in captivity themselves, “they didn’t even read . . . don’t have the time or energy to spare.”³⁰

But, in saying it to himself, Baldwin asked that question of his readers in *The New Yorker* as well. And, by the time the essay was in print and the book version, *The Fire Next Time*, was in its place—call it captivity, the “dancing dog”³¹—at the top of the non-fiction best seller’s list in 1963, Baldwin could sense the answer to his parenthetical question on behalf of liberal America, at least. For these readers, insulated from questions of *what* they were, say, in the eyes of history, love was, indeed, more important than *their* color—the power of which would operate in an unexamined, even unconscious, silence in their lives—but not more important than *his*, a visible symbol of the danger their lives must avoid. Carrying the weight of history by itself, in these terms, the importance of *his* color would continue to dominate his readers’—especially but not only his white readers’—choices in love, real estate, politics, and education and alter the operation of all major institutions in the United States.

By 1963, Baldwin could feel a kind of burning wind sheer between the subtle and supple role and power of his color in his life and in the lives of his family and friends—that is, in the question of *who* he was—and the power of that color in the white American world—in the question of *what* he was—and, for that matter, in the world of international politics. At the close of *Take This Hammer*, a documentary film shot in San Francisco in 1963 and aired on KQED television in 1964, Baldwin faced the camera and addressed the wind sheer directly: “Now, in this country we’ve got something called ‘the nigger,’ which doesn’t in such terms I beg you to remark exist in any other country . . . white people invented it . . . I’ve always known that I am not the nigger. And if I am not the nigger, and if it is true that your invention reveals you, then who is the nigger? . . . But you still think, I gather, that the nigger is necessary. Well it’s not necessary to me. So he must be necessary to you. So, I give you your problem back. You’re the nigger, baby; it isn’t me.”³²

Sitting for the film’s final scene on director Richard O. Moore’s couch, exhausted by the filming but revived by a bubble bath and a few fingers of scotch, Baldwin recast his vision ca. 1963. In an America without a culture, without a sense of fluent presence across its divisions, identities held in place by lies about what people were entrapped the—connective, shared—truths of who people were. The two levels of experience were, nonetheless, inextricable. Therefore, Baldwin urged, one must accept the American duty to enter history through the false door created by the lies that rule one’s psyche and the world around it, which acceptance invests a person with a new—historically and politically charged—relationship to experience and the world that releases one from the terrifying (no matter the curtains) and destructive (no matter the lies about so-called advantages of *privilege*) prison of that history and into another, less isolated, level of experience. Such acceptance, he thought, made available a different set of encounters with human reality involving, first and foremost, a fuller, more various sense of touch and presence with other people. Coherent, fluent social presence, Baldwin held, was better than privileged isolation and certainly better than segregated oppression. Absent that sense of touch and presence in the world, a person caught in either form of isolation, Baldwin thought, could not reliably find out anything meaningful about their experience, or anything else that mattered. Any person willing to make connections beyond the position accorded to them by the system could accomplish this. “But,” as he’d insist from the Carnegie Hall stage ten years later, “Amen is the price.”³³

However impossible it might have been, Baldwin imagined “The Hallelujah Chorus” as a kind of crash course in the pleasures and demands of a radical set of repositionings such as he’d outlined to the viewers of *Take This Hammer* and as he’d recommended to the audience in Germany: of music from its role as entertainment into a window from which one re-encounters one’s life in the world; of the human joys and dangers that operate behind the false veil—however real—of race in American life; and, finally, a newly enlivened, more challenging but far less terrifying, sense of what goes on within and between

people. He thought America's racial (often masquerading as rational) realities menaced and thwarted any and all of the above elements of experience. "The Hallelujah Chorus" would present black music as a kind of phenomenological Virgil guiding people back to a living sense of themselves and each other, a sense of life not prisoner to the confines of class and color, a sense he thought was our only access to history, to an American sense of life. Absent such a radical reorientation, as he'd written in *No Name in the Street*, he thought, in fact, "there *are* no American people yet."³⁴ Of this peculiar and particular American pressure, in *Just Above My Head*, he'd write: "Our history is each other. That is our only guide. One thing is absolutely certain: one can repudiate, or despise, no one's history without repudiating and despising one's own."³⁵ The most sophisticated record of all this was, again, available in the music. He concluded the thought: "Perhaps that is what the gospel singer is singing."³⁶

Toward Subversive Fluency, a Non-murderous Revolutionary Presence

Baldwin introduced "The Hallelujah Chorus" into an immediate world where violence was intense, widespread, and commonplace. Historic levels of labor unrest marked the era in which the AFL-CIO began to veer toward catastrophe.



Figure 1 Ray Charles and James Baldwin (and the Raelettes at the right) on stage in Carnegie Hall performing "The Hallelujah Chorus." © (AP Photo/J. J. Lent) All rights reserved and permission to use this image must be obtained from the copyright holder.

In *Stayin' Alive*, Malcolm Cowie notes that 2.4 million workers were on strike in 1970 alone. During the summer of 1973, conflict between the Teamsters and the United Farm Workers over contracts with growers lead to dozens of shootings and multiple fatalities on the West Coast.³⁷ Urban crime rates were extremely high. New York City Police Department statistics list over 2000 murders and nearly 5000 "forcible rapes" in the city in 1973.³⁸ Apart from street crime, domestic violence, and labor's internecine maneuvers, organized political violence was also rampant. Christopher Hewitt's *Political Violence and Terrorism in Modern America* lists over seventy incidents of organized political violence across the nation in 1973 including kidnappings, bombings, bank robberies, racially motivated murders, and targeted attacks on police. Even by Baldwin's standards, violence between police and citizens was shockingly common at the time. A spectrum of black militant organizations such as the Black Liberation Army, The Death Angels, The 7 August Guerilla Movement, the Black Guerilla Family, and the Symbionese Liberation Army, radical leftists such as the Weather Underground, together with the American Indian Movement, the Secret Cuban Government, the Frente de Liberacion Nacional de Cuba, the Chicano Liberation Front, the Palestinian group Black Spring, and the Puerto Rican nationalist Armed Independence Movement carried out dozens of politically motivated robberies, shootouts with law enforcement, and racially motivated reprisal killings during the year.³⁹ During six months between October 1973 and April 1974, for instance, more than a dozen "motiveless" murders, known as the "Zebra" killings, of white people were directly linked to The Death Angels in San Francisco.⁴⁰ The police, FBI and other law enforcement agencies intensified tactics of surveillance and control leading to widespread and increased tension and violence between police and non-white communities nationwide.⁴¹ During the spring of 1974, fearing for his life amid racist death threats, Henry Aaron approached and eclipsed Babe Ruth's home-run record in major league baseball. The racial-rational schisms in modern American life had become politicized borders as numerous as they were deadly.

For years, thinking his fame would make him a prime target in the conflicts, Baldwin's family had advised him to minimize his time in the United States. The question of revolutionary action, of course, reached beyond the nation's borders. In his February appearance in Germany, Baldwin addressed the issue of political violence directly. After his remarks, a "tall black youth with a proud Afro" asked, "Mr. Baldwin, what is your opinion of armed revolution?" Obviously tired of engaging what he considered macho-militant fashion, Baldwin sardonically signified his response saying, "I'm not a general," and turned away. He was speaking on an United States Army base, after all. Not dissuaded, the young man caught up with Baldwin and confronted him on his way out, "You're not a general? What the hell does that have to do with my question?" Engaging the confrontation, Baldwin responded instantaneously: "I mean, if I tell you I'm for armed revolution, it would mean very little. Because I'm over 50, and you are the one that's going out there to get killed. I could say I'm for

picking up the gun, but anyone in his right mind ought to know that the cops are not going to let you get three blocks.”⁴²

Owing to the intricate tangle between so-called racial and would-be rational thought in American life, Baldwin also knew how difficult it was to maintain one's right mind. The violent kaleidoscope of American life in the 1970s amplified this basic American psychological and intellectual dilemma. In ways that he sought to resist but not to deny, Baldwin knew that much of the physical violence linked back to psychological violence inherent in manufacturing false-realities such as race and privilege and power and danger out of skin color. Linking racial typing directly to physical violence in his previous comments, he concluded, “You cannot treat another man as a human being if you first of all think that man is black or that you've got to treat him a certain way because he is in some way benighted, or that you know something he doesn't and that you have to teach him. The man is certainly going to resent it, or kill himself, or you. And that hasn't changed either.”⁴³ The effort to keep or attain one's right mind amounted to accepting the reality of the lies and then defeating that reality in pursuit of the joyous and challenging, even tragic, human truths they obscure. In this, he thought, the complex yet basic sense available in black music was one's best bet.

As “The Hallelujah Chorus” performance date loomed nearer, armed only with his experience of black music's powerful guide to historically resonant touch and presence, Baldwin was set to enter the fray and return to the United States. In what was by then, for him, a customary commuter routine, and a mission crucial to his sense of his work, in early June of 1973, supported by a subsidy from Pan Am Airlines obtained by promoter George Wein, Baldwin traveled from his home—a home he'd yet to pay for—in St. Paul de Vence, a village on La Côte d'Azur, in France, to New York City. He installed himself—courtesy of expenses paid by the concert's sponsor, Schlitz Brewing—in a suite at The Plaza Hotel just in time to leave for Los Angeles. In LA, between 15 June and 25 June, he'd reside—courtesy of expenses likewise paid by Schlitz—at The Beverly Hills Hotel and Bungalows. He'd gone to Los Angeles to meet Ray Charles where the two refined and rehearsed their plan for the performance. In LA, he reconnected with his long-time friend, pianist and jazz composer Alonzo Levister. Stirred by a brief erotic encounter with Levister, and owing to a uniquely fluent circulation of presences, the comings and goings between people he'd felt in Charles's presence and in Charles's touch on the piano, “of presences entering or leaving a room,” Baldwin had clarified the content and structure of the performance.⁴⁴

I'd read about “The Hallelujah Chorus” a few times. The title recurs in Baldwin's correspondence over the years in ways that tantalized me as I studied the life he recorded in his letters to his brother David. I searched the biographies for information about the performance but found only one very general reference to it. For years it had occupied its position in my mind as a minor, perhaps even regrettable, footnote to Baldwin's career. Then, while searching

through unrelated materials in the Harvard University archive, I discovered David Baldwin's copy of the script in a box. Recognizing the title, I knew what it was immediately. Or, so I thought. And, then, when I began to read the script, I recognized immediately that this was no minor footnote. I felt a sharp regret that the performance had been hidden for all these years. When I began to research the reception of the performance by critics, my sense of regret morphed into a strange sensation: I was shocked but not surprised. I'd witnessed, in print and in life, this brand of resistance to Baldwin's work, usually disguised as attacks, often enough. Clearly "The Hallelujah Chorus" had unearthed connections between music and experience, connections that were political and personal, to which people, at least reviewers, weren't eager to say Amen.

Toward a Politics of Being In-Touch, a Sense of Touch Revisited

With the possible exception of Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles was the contemporary singer that meant the most to Baldwin in the 1970s. His published praise of Charles's music appeared as early as 1964 and Baldwin invoked him often as a resonant instance of the energy and clarity he identified with artistic excellence. In his 1968 address to the World Council of Churches, "White Racism or World Community," Charles figures directly in Baldwin's thought about the danger of people living, as he put it, having "put themselves out of touch with themselves."⁴⁵ He wrote: "the Christian personality split itself in two, split itself into dark and light, in fact, and is now bewildered, at war with itself, is literally unable to comprehend the force of such a woman as Mahalia Jackson, who does not sound like anyone in Canterbury Cathedral, unable to accept the depth of sorrow, out of which a Ray Charles comes, unable to get itself in touch with itself, with its selfless totality."⁴⁶ When, during their 1971 conversation, Nikki Giovanni said, "personally, I hate critics," Baldwin said: "Actually, I love critics, but they're very rare. A real critic is very rare," continuing, "I will be able to accept critical judgments when I understand that they understand Ray Charles."⁴⁷ For Baldwin, criticism itself was a kind of mutual, musical recognition, a fluency between presences who move when we move; in other words, it was personal and impersonal, it was part of a culture. Giovanni, twenty-eight years old at the time, cast the possibility aside, "It'll never happen." Playing the elder, Baldwin left the door ajar, "When that day comes . . . we'll play it as we see it."⁴⁸ Well. It's been over 40 years; but, possibly, we can re-play it now as we might have seen it then.

The script shows how the performance proceeded at the time, the logic holding it together, at least in the performers' minds. As we've seen, with the Carnegie Hall curtain still down, the audience heard Charles's solo piano version of his *Sweet Sixteen Bars* which was actually an instrumental version of *A Fool For You*, a soft blues into which he folded equal parts modern, subtle jazz technique and a relaxed, gospel feeling. In his liner notes to the 1956 release of *The Great Ray Charles*, the pianist's first jazz sessions, sessions that included *Sweet Sixteen*

Bars, Gary Kramer quoted Charles on the connections between black musical idioms. Charles's words directly echo Baldwin's sense of the artists' connection quoted above, a connection refuted by the critics. The common ground lay in the force of an experience recreated in the music of the church:

All music is related. Gospel music background is important to a jazz musician, for it draws out feeling. What you speak of as *soul* in jazz is *soul* in gospel music. The important thing in jazz is to feel your music, but really feel it and believe it—the way a gospel singer like Mahalia Jackson obviously feels and believes the music that she is singing, with her whole body and soul. And if you feel and believe in your music, that conviction carries over to the public. You can create a very strong emotional bond between yourself and your listener that way.⁴⁹

In conversations with his brother David about having been in Jimmy Carter's hometown, Plains, GA, not far from where Ray Charles was born, Baldwin described having been stunned that the white people of the South bore mostly similar complexions while black people of the South carried complexions that ranged across the spectrum from light and bright to ebony-dark. Reacting to the denied truth of cross-racial connections in Southern life, ones made perfectly obvious simply by people's appearance, Baldwin said: "no lie can live forever, and the truth about America is to be found on the porches of the South."⁵⁰ It was but one truth made invisible, certainly unspeakable, by the reality lent to the lie of race in American so-called culture. At the same time, it was a truth lived out intimately—if rarely discussed openly—in black families and communities across the nation. Black communities' ability to say Amen to this historical American diversity, absorbing it into their families, formed the central drama of Baldwin's unproduced, unpublished screenplay from the early 1970s, "The Inheritance."⁵¹

According to the script, the Carnegie Hall curtain rose to reveal a "Single spot on Ray, alone on stage," playing *Seems like I Gotta Do Wrong*, an image of black people framed by American culture's selective blindness to its history and its present: "Nobody saw me walking / And nobody heard me talking / Seems like I gotta do wrong gotta do wrong gotta do wrong / before they notice me."⁵² The opening montage of music in "The Hallelujah Chorus" combined the deep roots where faith/trouble (gospel), pain/clarity (blues), and constant change (jazz) reconnect. The selections sounded the core of the tradition with which modern black life, as Baldwin would put it from the podium/pulpit, "descend[s] into the valley" of racism in America. It was a national tradition, "the truth about America." The anthem of that tradition, *that* nation, followed: "Then, lights up completely for *Lift Every Voice And Sing*."⁵³ Following Charles's version of The Negro National Anthem which was also the opening track from his 1972 album, *a message from the people . . . by the people . . . and for the people*, Baldwin's script reads: "As this song ends, we discover the narrator, (JB)

alone, downstage.”⁵⁴ Doing at least as much translation as narration, Baldwin read his opening testimony:

Amen.

This testimony service tonight is called The Hallelujah Chorus, which, as you know, is the name given to the final movement of Handel’s *The Messiah*, which is a relatively popular Christmas tune.

The hallelujah, however, to which this testimony service refers—and out of which it comes—is not a matter of the seasons. It testifies to a movement and a mystery in the soul.

I have observed that not many of us can say, or sing : hallelujah. Perhaps it is because one first [must] descend into the valley, where one learns to say : Amen. If one can find in oneself the force to say, Amen, it is possible to come to Hallelujah. But Amen is the price. The black experience in the valley of America remains, my friends, America’s only affirmation. We have sung the Lord’s song for a very long time, in a very very strange land.

One of the realities which has made this land so strange, and which has bequeathed it so striking a torment, is the invincible sound of those voices, rising from the valley, where—the song says—I couldn’t hear nobody pray.

Having had to accept Amen : and learned to sing Hallelujah : some of us know that love is the key to life and that life is stronger than death. We know that because we have had to teach our children that. Perhaps we can suggest to you, then, during this testimony service, that love and life and death and children are more real than all our illusions of safety; that perhaps we lose our lives and our loves and our children, and come to a waking, a walking death because we are afraid to say, Amen.

Perhaps that is why so many like to say that only black people can sing the blues.

But I am here only as a witness, to say, Amen. The right Reverend Ray Charles is testifying, singing Hallelujah :

Listen.⁵⁵

The political and personal intensity and the high stakes of what such an Amen, what all the Amens at all the levels, meant to Baldwin himself during that time obviously underscores the pathos of his call.

The script then calls for more music, “RC: *I Won’t Leave. And When I Stop Dreaming*,”⁵⁶ after which Baldwin, having moved from a podium to a stool placed in the curve of the piano, recasts Charles’s testifying in a complex personal/impersonal, inside/outside poetic idiom. He charts how any art re-creates experience transforming it from an inert thing received, endured, into a living something that one can accept, *bear*, and therefore change:

Tell me—tell us—a little bit more about—what you’re saying—about yourself, as music, because that is what you are—and also about yourself, as you. I am aware that by this time, certainly, they—the music and you—may be the same. But music, let us say, is an abstract reality. You are a reality, but you are not abstract. You are a man, and a man is never abstract. Tell us about the wedding: between you and you.⁵⁷

In the scripted dialogue, Charles recasts Baldwin’s conceptual statement in more visceral terms; he describes his origins in the music and the origins of the music in him:

Music was like a rib. I mean, it was in me before I got here—like your heart or your liver or your lungs. Those are things you’re born with. Listen. I remember a gentleman—Wiley Pittman was his name—well, he lived next door, and I used to listen to him play his boogie woogie piano all the time. All the time, man, all the time. I just used to listen. And he used to let me sit and play with him. Now, you know, I wasn’t no more than three years old—something like that, maybe a little bit older—and, so you know I wasn’t playing nothing. But he used to play with me, and I could play his piano anytime.⁵⁸

Of the orchestrated asymmetry aligned by Baldwin’s script and typified by this exchange, in his *The New York Times* review on 3 July, John S. Wilson wrote: “Mr. Charles responded in such a natural and engaging manner as to underline the pomposity of Mr. Baldwin’s approach.”⁵⁹ Apart from re-aligning what is natural and who is pompous, from our position in the present, one can easily discern the connection between the two statements. Delivered in different registers, to be sure, the two passages do not read as statements by strangers let alone of—as Whitney Balliett had described Baldwin and Charles—“alien souls.”⁶⁰ Near the end of the performance, naturally or not, in a moment no reviewer noted, Charles asks at least one clearly political, blues-informed question at the center of his own autobiography, “Like, man, I also know, being no fool, that I didn’t really have to go blind—in the richest country in the world? How come?”⁶¹ The script for Baldwin and Charles’s performance ends with a note about the necessity that people be in touch with their own lives if they’re to know anything about each other by way of “presences entering or leaving,”⁶² according to the rhythm of Amen and Hallelujah:

RC plays *Hey, Mister.*
and
America, America
JB

The valley—where you couldn't hear nobody pray. You want to tell us some more about it?

RC

If you know—if you really know—about your valley—then, you know about mine.

RC plays

My God And I.

Finale⁶³

Closing the act in Italian might well invoke a subtle sense of Yoran Cazac's presence into the performance.

The next section of the performance featured dramatic vignettes from Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues." Now acknowledged as a classic Baldwin work, "Sonny's Blues (a long story)" was first published in the Summer, 1957 issue of *Partisan Review*, a major left-leaning literary review of the era; the issue also featured poems by Theodor Roethke, John Hollander, Stanley Kunitz, and Carolyn Kizer.⁶⁴ The issue was released just as Baldwin was preparing for his first trip to the American South. With the title character partially based on one of Baldwin's most important early lovers, an aspiring jazz drummer and percussionist named Arnold, the story depicts the relationship of two estranged brothers, one an unnamed high school math teacher attempting to live a *normal*, middle class American life, the other, Sonny, an aspiring jazz piano player. Owing to his unwillingness to say Amen himself, the older brother suffers alienations Baldwin thought were typical of mainstream American lifestyles. Sonny suffers the early terrors associated with the "recreation of experience,"⁶⁵ or "the wedding: between you and you,"⁶⁶ key to artistic craft of any kind in Baldwin's mind as well as the archetypal accompanist of jazz performers in the popular imagination during the 1950s, heroin. The story ends in an unnamed downtown jazz club where Sonny plays with his brother in the audience, each man, we imagine, saying his own Amen to the turbulent risks Baldwin thought came along with a life lived in touch with living presences, historical and present day.

In the first scene, David Moses, playing the unnamed brother (named Robert in the script), talks to his mother about the risks facing Sonny. In the course of the conversation, the mother, played by Cicely Tyson, informs her son of an uncle, his father's brother, a guitar player, who had been run down on a country road in the South by a car full of white men. On stage, Tyson describes the cost of that racial trauma to her husband, the boy's father: "Oh,

yes. Your Daddy never did really get right again. Till the day he died he weren't sure that every white man he saw was the man that killed his brother."⁶⁷ Collapsing the history into the contemporary message to her son, and simultaneously connecting the mid-1950s setting of the story to the early 1970s, Tyson concludes her speech: "I ain't telling you all this, to make you scared or bitter or to make you hate nobody. I'm telling you this because you got a brother—And the world ain't changed."⁶⁸ In the "long story," the final, italicized, note of the scene accents the politics of personal presence. The mother concludes her talk with her nameless son: "'You may not be able to stop nothing from happening. But you got to let him know you's *there*.'"⁶⁹

In the two scenes that followed, David Moses plays Robert, the older brother, and David Baldwin plays Sonny. Scene two depicts a conversation early in the brothers' attempts at reconciliation. In the role of quasi-parent counseling practicality and security, of Sonny's musical ambitions, Robert asks: "Doesn't all this take a lot of time? Can you make a living at it?"⁷⁰ Urging his brother to accept Sonny's determination to be passionately present in his own life and work, Sonny retorts, "Everything takes time, and—well, yes sure, I can make a living at it. But what I don't seem to be able to make you understand is that it's the only thing I want to do."⁷¹ Scene three opens with David Baldwin reading a letter from Sonny, in prison, written to Robert. At the close of the letter, Sonny questions the authority of Baldwin's own sermon about the old-fashioned necessity of acceptance, of saying Amen to what life brings, from the outset of the performance with Charles: "I wish I could be like Mama and say may the Lord's will be done, but I don't know it seems to me that trouble is one thing that never does get stopped and I don't know what good it does to blame it on the Lord. But maybe it does some good if you believe it."⁷² From his comments on the gospel origins of his sound, the importance of believing with one's "body and soul,"⁷³ it's clear that Ray Charles agreed; in the musical marriage of "you and you,"⁷⁴ at least one of the intra-personal spouses better be a believer. The scene concludes with Sonny and Robert's attempts at coming to terms with the inevitability of Amen as the route to a resonant, mutual Hallelujah.

In dialogue on which James and David Baldwin's alterations appear written in felt tip and ball point respectively, Sonny and Robert discuss the role of music, drugs, faith, and skepticism and finally conclude that a sense of touch and presence between people is the only way of living with the reality that there is no final cure for life's turbulence, no sense of safety upon which any community or individual can depend. After a passage in which Sonny's drug addiction stands in for a generalized, universal sense of risk, the script ends on a note that clearly mirrors the violent political reality of the early 1970s:

Robert: All right, so it can come again. All right.

Sonny: I had to try and tell you.

Robert: Yes, I understand that.

Sonny: You're my brother.

Robert: Yes, yes. I understand that.

Sonny: All that hatred down there, all that hatred and misery and love. It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart.

The script ends with Baldwin's handwritten note:

R.C. Full Choir *If I Had My Way*⁷⁵

Can I get an Amen? [. . . crickets . . .]

In a sense, in their 1971 conversation about critical understanding, when she said, "It'll never happen," Nikki Giovanni had a point.⁷⁶ To say the very least, the day for critical recognitions of the sense of touch and presences Baldwin, Charles, and the actors presented on stage in "The Hallelujah Chorus" wasn't soon forthcoming. Few critics seemed to realize that the actors were reprising scenes from "Sonny's Blues." In *Jet*, the reviewer assumed that the "sketches were related to Charles' [sic] real life problems with dope addiction and to his genius as a musician."⁷⁷ Balliett wrote that a "couple of meaningless dramatic interludes . . . followed (one was taken from James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues")."⁷⁸ The *Chicago Defender* printed a review, which merely reprised the press release. Confirming little other than the fact that the reviewer hadn't been present, the short piece informs that the performance "featured poet and author James Baldwin and actress Cicely Tyson, reading from "The Life and Times of Ray Charles."⁷⁹ In *The New York Times*, jazz critic John S. Wilson opened his review noting his shock at the "molehill that this mountain of talent produced."⁸⁰ Apropos the dramatic scenes, Wilson wrote: "Mr. Baldwin also wrote four brief sketches concerning a mother and two sons that seemed, in a general sense, to relate to Mr. Charles's problems with drugs without really providing any enlightenment about Mr. Charles himself."⁸¹

Reviewing for the British music magazine, *Melody Maker*, Richard Williams rehearsed the common pre-1963 rise and post-1963 fall version of Baldwin's career—a narrative still inflecting mainstream perception of his career—and went out of his way to mock and criticize what he deemed "Baldwin's somewhat erratic literary form in recent years."⁸² In presenting scenes from "Sonny's Blues," a now-classic work from the era of Baldwin's career most associated with his meteoric rise, in a contemporary forum, knowingly or not, Baldwin created something of a blindfold test for the critics. Not able to resist the bait, Williams's review compares the would-be contemporary, "erratic," Baldwin unfavorably with the previous high quality of his work. Fooled by the a-chronology of the evening's dramatic material, Williams, in effect, compares "Sonny's Blues" unfavorably with itself: "The actors were adequate, the material was not. Baldwin once again parodied the emotional directness of his early work, and left us with overblown platitudes. Only the choir's performance of the traditional 'If I Had My Way' made any impression."⁸³ Reviewing for the *Boston Evening Globe*,

Ernie Santosuosso called the performance a “prolonged stretch of dreariness” and, after “a series of embarrassingly contrived song cues by the celebrated author,” seemed confused that the performers “walked off despite the sustained standing ovation with it’s [sic] request for an encore.”⁸⁴ Santosuosso solved the impasse between his disapproval and the New York audience’s appreciation concluding “standing ovations come comparatively easy in this city.”⁸⁵

In 1951, Baldwin had written that the story told in black music about black experience in America was a “story no American was prepared to hear.”⁸⁶ Much closer to the date of the performance, in 1969, giving a speech at the West Indian Student Center in London, Baldwin had revisited the politics of listening to black music:

And if I discover that those songs the darkies sang, and sing, were not just the innocent expressions of a primitive people, but extremely subtle and difficult, dangerous and tragic expressions of what it felt like to be in chains. Then by one’s presence simply, by the attempt to walk from here to there, you’ve begun to frighten the white world.⁸⁷

Apropos critics, in 1971, Nikki Giovanni said that such a politically engaged and resonant listening would never happen. When it came to the musical and conversational portions of the show, responding mostly through conscious and unconscious abuse of the performers, if the critics didn’t prove both Baldwin and Giovanni right, they certainly didn’t prove them wrong. Calling the performance “virtually a disaster in artistic terms,” *Melody Maker’s* Richard Williams signaled one source of dissonance preventing mutual, musical critical recognitions at the time.⁸⁸ Recoiling from both the sense of touch and presence Baldwin had hoped to convey with Charles, Williams observed “Baldwin blew a good chance to create something worthwhile with his faggoty mannerisms, both literary and personal.”⁸⁹ In attempts to warn readers away from associating Baldwin further with the music he supposedly valued, Williams forecasted that further work by Baldwin in connection to “major jazz artists . . . would do more harm than good.”⁹⁰ Jazz critic Whitney Balliett wrote that the musical portion of the show struggled because Baldwin and Charles “have little in common . . . Charles remains a canny, tough, pinewoods primitive, and Baldwin is a delicate urban visionary.”⁹¹ In contradiction to his overall impressions, Balliett noted that, late in the show, however, “a strange and moving thing had begun to happen”; it was a thing, moreover, that owed directly to the presence of Baldwin and Charles on stage together. Balliett wrote: “Apparently, Baldwin had suggested to Charles that he abandon his regular show, with its pop tunes, gospel numbers, and country-and-Western songs, and concentrate on his old blues. Charles did and the results, in blues after blues, were superb.”⁹² In his memoir, *Myself Among Others*, George Wein, wrote that “Although Jimmy and I grew very close in the ensuing years, I never told him that I had been disappointed with the concert.”⁹³

Since the reviews of the performance, historical commentary has been minimal. No mention of the performance appears in the 2004 bio-film, *Ray*, starring Jamie Foxx. Charles's complex and directly told autobiography, *Brother Ray*, written with David Ritz, makes no mention of the date either. Apart from Bob Stumpel's useful detailing of the program in May 2010 on his blog, *Ray Charles Video Museum*, commentary amounts to exactly five words.⁹⁴ David Leeming, the only Baldwin biographer to note the event at all, restricted his comments to logistical details leading up to the performance and, paraphrasing the *Chicago Defender* reviewer who wasn't there either, concluded "the overall effect was moving."⁹⁵ And that, as it's said, was *that*.

But, not for Baldwin. After the first performance, "The Hallelujah Chorus" presented, at least to *his* imagination, another opportunity to engage directly with American politics, the issue of prisoners in particular. He also entertained the possibility of a TV program or a commercial tour. But, the prison tour was obviously where his commitments solidified. Baldwin's experience with police, prisons, and prisoners, which began in his childhood, had been deepened by his recent work directing the hit, 1969–70 run of John Herbert's prison play, *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, in Istanbul. His attitude had been radicalized by his experiences with the imprisonment of his one-time personal assistant and long-time friend, Tony Maynard, and by his connection to widely publicized political prisoners Angela Davis, Huey Newton, George Jackson, and many others. Just weeks after the performance, on 21 July 1973, he wrote to his brother David about his intentions to organize, and fund if need be, a tour of the performance in American prisons. Determined to break the silence and invisibility surrounding American prisoners, he explained his intention to force the reality of prisons on the American public awareness and asked, in case David was pragmatically skeptical, his brother to have faith and go with him on the idea. While personally attracted to the Plazas and Beverly Hills Hotels of the world, and professionally willing to pursue deals in the popular culture (TV, national tours), he made it perfectly clear where his real priorities lay. He concluded his thoughts about "The Hallelujah Chorus" in the prisons saying that he realized it meant that nobody would make any money on the tour, but that there were more important things. He said they'd all worry about the money later. In *Myself With Others*, George Wein, who would later write that Baldwin's notorious recklessness "when it came to finances . . . was one of the traits that endeared him to you," and maybe Ray Charles, whose financial discipline was legion, too, might well have been inclined to worry about it sooner.⁹⁶

In the end, "The Hallelujah Chorus" didn't produce a lucrative commercial tour or TV program nor did it succeed in casting much light on the plight of American prisoners. The contemporary abuse of critics, more than anything else, demonstrated that they couldn't tell the supposedly *good* old Baldwin from the notoriously *bad* recent Baldwin any more than they could focus very well on the "natural," "pinewoods primitive" (one can now but wonder why?) of Charles's genius when it operated in association with Baldwin's explicitly

political, if “faggoty” and “erratic,” prophetic, celebrity-poet persona. From the present, we can see the outrageous numbness and prejudice embedded in the critics’ points of view. Read today, at least in my view, critics confess their resentment at how “The Hallelujah Chorus” had taken Charles hostage sundering him, and music in general, from its natural, politically neutral—basically, white—environment. Sadly, apart from that, there has been scarcely any comment at all on the vision the brothers Baldwin, David Moses, Cicely Tyson, George Wein, and Ray Charles intended to cast from the stage of Carnegie Hall on 1 July 1973. The critical abuse of “The Hallelujah Chorus” at the time, and the vacuum surrounding it since, testifies vividly to a profound American—and, in the case of Williams, British—distrust of what goes on in the work, to say nothing of in the lives, of our greatest artists.

Forty years after the fact, indeed, even from just the script and scraps of sound—such as those available to vinyl-philes on the 1974 Buddah Records release, *Recorded Live at Newport in New York*—capably set in the context of Baldwin’s career, we can, now, finally, begin to excavate some of the pressure and power, to say nothing of the pleasure, of the engaged vision they made available then.

It’s a vision of the things, many of which aren’t things, made visible by the presences that come and go in real music. And, it’s a sense of touch made possible by that presence—namely, ours—made available only in the work of our best writers. Whether framed in personal confidence or political contest, there’s no other window open on those dimensions of what and who we are. But, finally, as Baldwin noted again and again in his writings, speeches, and in performances such as “The Hallelujah Chorus,” and in ways that still trouble some critics today, the presences in music and what touches us in the literary work are painfully incomplete if they remain locked on stage, carved in vinyl, lasered onto pages or up-clouded into the inter-ether. In order to have our Hallelujah in life, we’ve got to say our Amen in the world. And, that Amen has to be said to each other, addressed to the truths of who we are and in defiance of the lies about what we are. In this, we must acknowledge *what* the world takes us for and is trying to make us into, as well, *and* deal with our own, personal delusions in *who* it is we think we are supposed to be. Because, whether we take the sentence from the *good* Baldwin in *Partisan Review*, 1957, or the *bad* Baldwin in Carnegie Hall, 1973, from Gaza to Cambridge, MA to Istanbul, from Aleppo to New Orleans, from Mombasa to Maiduguri, the world where our Amen counts is still so full of “hatred and misery and love” that it’s ever a “wonder it doesn’t blow the avenue apart.”⁹⁷ And, of course, it *does* blow many avenues apart, even at the time of this writing.

Some of the schisms are visibly invisible. As I was completing this essay in Cihangir Mah, Istanbul, on 1 July 2013, forty years to the day after “The Hallelujah Chorus” appeared in Carnegie Hall, CNN International blazed images of Cairo across the TV screen over my shoulder. Sitting there, I thought, “has anyone been to Cairo, IL lately?” The town in Southern Illinois looks as if it has

taken artillery strikes. A week before, amid protests, clouds of tear gas blew down this very street in Istanbul. Other schisms are numbly untouchable, Google Earth your own address and see how close you can get before the image breaks apart. Been *there* lately? There are, indeed, still many songs few are prepared to hear and presences abound, many within arms reach, that even fewer are prepared to touch.

Someone cue Ray Charles, or maybe let's substitute Georgia Ann Muldrow, for "If I Had My Way." She could do it as a Hallelujah duet with Oumou Sangare or Thandiswa Maswai. Or, hell, Jhené Aiko. In Madison Square Garden. They can open for Bruce. Or Kendrick Lamar. The house will be packed. Truth is, there are a lot of singers who could give us such a Hallelujah. We're hurting for writers—and publishers—who can do a credible job at what Baldwin had in mind with Amen. For those that are, well, Amen to that. And, Hallelujah.

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in Toni Morrison (ed.), *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 19.
- 2 Bob Stumpel, *The Ray Charles Video Museum*. n.d., <http://raycharlesvideomuseum.blogspot.com> (accessed 15 December 2014).
- 3 George Goodman, "For James Baldwin, A Rap on Baldwin," *New York Times*, 26 June 1972, p. 38.
- 4 James Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," in Toni Morrison (ed.), *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 365.
- 5 James Baldwin, "The White Problem," in Randal Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption* (New York, Pantheon, 2010), p. 78.
- 6 Stumple, *The Ray Charles Video Museum*.
- 7 "Baldwin Honors Ray Charles at Newport Jazz Fest," *Jet*, 19 July 1973, p. 60.
- 8 On 24 July 1973, Baldwin answered a letter from David Moses who was shaken by his sense of the performance and the reviews. Writing as his friend, director, and as a veteran of the public maelstrom, Baldwin told Moses to avoid listening to the chaos of responses. Baldwin concluded writing, simply, "Sweetheart, you were beautiful." Letters from James Baldwin to David Moses, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library (MARBL), Emory University.
- 9 Whitney Balliett, *Collected Works: A Journal of Jazz 1954–2001* (New York, St. Martin's, 2002), p. 397.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Tom Buckley, "Baldwin Enunciates Ray Charles' Soul," *New York Times*, 30 June 1971, p. 28.
- 12 Samuel Beckett, "Molloy," in Paul Auster (ed.), (New York, Grove, 2010), p. 56.
- 13 James Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," in *Collected Essays*, p. 385.
- 14 D. H. Lawrence, "1923," *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York, Penguin, 1977), p. 9.
- 15 The important thing here is the crucial role of emotional and, at whatever level, erotic, discoveries to Baldwin's personal, aesthetic, and political work and thought. The connection between the two men appears in correspondence as well as in poems

in *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems* (Boston, Beacon Press), 2014. Baldwin found the poem titled "Ballad (for Yoran)" in a notebook years after the immediate connection between the men had passed. After a thought to destroy the letter he decided to save it. The lines "you / and / you" and the line "Oh, Brother, say: / I couldn't hear nobody pray" (p. 93) echo very precisely moments in the script for "The Hallelujah Chorus" where Baldwin asks Ray Charles to explain "the wedding: between you and you" and, at the conclusion, where Baldwin refers back to "The valley—where you couldn't hear nobody pray." In that context, we can hear the echoes between "Oh, brother, say" from the poem and "Brother Ray" from the performance. In addition, the poem titled "Munich, Winter 1973 (for Y. S.)," from *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems*, was originally titled, simply, "For Yoran." The poem depicts a person waiting for the arrival of a beloved, "I know / I will see you tonight" (p. 28). The poem likens the desirous pair to "the birds above our heads" who are "making choices / are using what they have. / They are aware / that, on long journeys, / each bears the other, / whirring, / stirring / love occurring / in the middle of the terrifying air" (p. 29). Precise echoes between Baldwin's descriptions of what he learned from his connection to Cazac, even the phrase "above our heads," quoted above, appear in the deep, complex emotional, ethical, and erotic energies at work in Baldwin's next (and last) novel, *Just Above My Head* (New York, Grove, 2000). Among the crucial and challenging features of this novel are the deeply complex, at times dangerous, connections between brotherly, friendly, and erotic energy and between sexual/emotional and social/political dimensions of experience. Baldwin saw these dimensions of experience as reciprocal and, finally, as inextricable. In *Just Above My Head*, he writes, "Love forces, at last, this humility: you cannot love if you cannot be loved, you cannot see if you cannot be seen" (p. 84). In Baldwin's mind, somehow, his connection with Cazac had caused him to confront and understand the depth of this necessity in a new way.

- 16 James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What it Means to Be an American," in Toni Morrison (ed.), *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York, Library of America 1998), p. 140.
- 17 Buckley, "Baldwin Enunciates Ray Charles' Soul," p. 28.
- 18 Ed Reavis, "Viewpoint: James Baldwin," *Stars and Stripes*, 27 February 1973, <http://www.stripes.com/news/viewpoint-james-baldwin-1.17013> (accessed 10 December 2014).
- 19 Reavis, "Viewpoint: James Baldwin."
- 20 James Baldwin, "Letters from a Journey," in Randal Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption* (New York, Pantheon, 2010), p. 198.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Reavis, "Viewpoint: James Baldwin."
- 24 James Baldwin, in Fred L. Standley and Louis Pratt (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin* (Jackson, University of Mississippi Press, 1989). Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. The publication of this interview in *Conversations with James Baldwin*, however, contains some transcription errors. Therefore, I've provided my own transcriptions where errors in the published version of the interview impede understanding of what Baldwin was trying to say or where Baldwin's vocal emphasis of a term makes a difference in my listening in a way the published version doesn't mark. In the present instance, the published transcription of the present statement is inaccurate and misleading. Standley and Pratt quote:

- “Well, I may be able to tell you who I am, but I am also discovering who I am not” (p. 23). I’ve taken my own transcriptions from “James Baldwin Talks with Studs Terkel on WFMT,” 15 July 1961, <https://www.popuparchive.com/collections/938/items/6901> (accessed 10 May 2015). Quotations taken from this recording will be labeled “(author’s transcription).”
- 25 *Ibid.*, (author’s transcription).
- 26 *The Fire Next Time* in *Collected Essays*, p. 327. The similarity in the syntax between Terkel’s and Muhammad’s questions is tantalizing. Had Baldwin used Terkel’s personal appeal as the basis to script Muhammad’s political confrontation, merely twitching “who” to “what” as a kind of toggle switch between the literary/personal and the social/political in the ways the terms and spaces were understood at the time?
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 327.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 321.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Goodman, “For James Baldwin, A Rap on Baldwin,” p. 38.
- 32 *Take This Hammer*, 1963. Dir. Richard O. Moore, 1963 (San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive), n.d., <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/216518> (accessed 10 December 2014).
- 33 James Baldwin, “The Hallelujah Chorus,” (Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard Film Archive, Harvard University, 1973).
- 34 Baldwin, “No Name in the Street,” in *Collected Essays*, p. 358.
- 35 Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*, pp. 500–1.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 501.
- 37 Malcolm Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York, The New Press, 2010), p. 155.
- 38 “New York Crime Rates 1960–213,” <http://www.disastercenter.com/crime/nycrime.htm> (accessed 15 May 2015).
- 39 Christopher Hewitt, *Political Violence and Terrorism in Modern America* (Westport, CT, Praeger Security International, 2005).
- 40 Between 1972 and 1974 there were scores—up to 81 in some reports—of so-called “motiveless” murders of white people across the state of California. Investigating officer (and eventual Chief of Police) in San Francisco, Prentice Earl Sanders, discounts links between these murders and the verified 14 or so “Zebra” killings of white people in San Francisco he investigated in 1973 and 1974. Prentice Sanders and Ben Cohen, *The Zebra Murders: A Season of Killing, Racial Madness, and Civil Rights* (New York, Arcade, 2011), p. 235.
- 41 For about a week in mid-April 1974, for instance, black neighborhoods in San Francisco were under formal occupation by uniformed and undercover police who stopped, frisked, and assigned an ID card, a “Zebra Card,” to all black men in the street after dark. Needless to say, extreme measures such as these enraged black communities. Less extreme but similar practices would be common in American cities throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. See Sanders and Cohen, p. 201–17.
- 42 Reavis, “Viewpoint: James Baldwin.”
- 43 *Ibid.*

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- 44 Buckley, "Baldwin Enunciates Ray Charles' Soul," p. 28.
- 45 "White Racism or World Community," in Toni Morrison (ed.), *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 754.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 James Baldwin, *A Dialogue*, with Nikki Giovanni (New York, Lippincott, 1973), p. 84.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 Gary Kramer, 1956. Liner Notes, *The Great Ray Charles*. Rhino, 2004. CD.
- 50 James Baldwin, *The Dick Fontaine Collection*, Harvard Film Archive, Harvard University (Box 8, File 6).
- 51 James Baldwin, "The Inheritance," The Dick Fontaine Collection, Harvard Film Archive, Harvard University, n.d., ca. 1971.
- 52 Ray Charles, "Seems Like I Gotta Do Wrong," *A Message From the People*. Tangerine, 1972. CD.
- 53 Baldwin, "The Hallelujah Chorus."
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 John S. Wilson, "Ray Charles Times," *New York Times*, 3 July 1973, p. 10.
- 60 Balliett, *Collected Works*, p. 397.
- 61 Baldwin, "The Hallelujah Chorus."
- 62 Buckley, "Baldwin Enunciates Ray Charles' Soul," p. 28.
- 63 Baldwin, "The Hallelujah Chorus."
- 64 James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," *Partisan Review*, 24:3 (1957), pp. 327–58.
- 65 Standley and Pratt, *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 155.
- 66 Baldwin, "The Hallelujah Chorus."
- 67 *Ibid.*
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 340.
- 70 Baldwin, "The Hallelujah Chorus."
- 71 *Ibid.*
- 72 *Ibid.*
- 73 Kramer, Liner Notes, *The Great Ray Charles*.
- 74 Baldwin, "The Hallelujah Chorus."
- 75 *Ibid.*
- 76 Baldwin, *A Dialogue*, p. 84.
- 77 "Baldwin Honors Ray Charles at Newport Jazz Fest," p. 60.
- 78 Balliett, *Collected Works*, p. 397.
- 79 "Ray Charles honored at Jazz Festival," *Chicago Defender*, 5 July 1973, p. 15.
- 80 Wilson, "Ray Charles Times," p. 10.
- 81 *Ibid.*
- 82 Richard Williams, "Tribute to Ray—A Virtual Disaster," *Melody Maker*, 7 July 1973, p. 20.
- 83 *Ibid.*

- 84 Ernie Santosuosso, "Ray Charles Holds Forth at Carnegie," *Boston Evening Globe*, 2 July 1973, p. 28.
- 85 *Ibid.*
- 86 Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *Collected Essays*, p. 19.
- 87 Baldwin's *Nigger*, Dir. Horace Ov  (1969), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYuAW_gnjYQ (accessed 10 March 2015).
- 88 Williams, "Tribute to Ray—A Virtual Disaster," p. 20.
- 89 *Ibid.*
- 90 *Ibid.*
- 91 Balliett, *Collected Works*, p. 397.
- 92 *Ibid.*
- 93 George Wein, *Myself Among Others: A Life in Music* (New York, Da Capo, 2004), p. 388.
- 94 Stumpel, *The Ray Charles Video Museum*.
- 95 David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Knopf), p. 319.
- 96 Wein, *Myself Without Others*, p. 388.
- 97 Baldwin, "The Hallelujah Chorus."

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