

MULTI-MEDIA FEATURE

Jimmy's Songs: Listening over James Baldwin's Shoulder

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Abstract

Black music played a crucial role in the work and life of James Baldwin. What Baldwin heard in the music guided his sense of political reality and human possibility, his invention of character, his shifting analytical point of view, and his decisions about what to do, when, and how to do it during his life in private and career in public. The music, therefore, also offers his critics and his readers important insight and guidance in their own experience and interpretation of his work. This brief essay accounts for some of the most basic connections between Baldwin and black music; it serves here as an introduction to a list of songs, some of which offered Baldwin important guidance and some of which offer his readers access to deeper meanings in his work.

Keywords: James Baldwin, black music, language, Michael Ondaatje, speechlessness

Multi-Media: A playlist of songs, curated by Ed Pavlič and Justin A. Joyce, is available on YouTube. A listing of these songs is also included at the end of this article.*

I wrote *Who Can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners* (2015), because I'd lived forty-something years doused in the textures of black music. My family being what it was and not what it wasn't, it's possible that I might have had the rudiments of thought and voice—flesh—before this happened; but, American culture being what it is and isn't—namely, it has *never* been a white culture—it's also quite possible that never in the sinews of my being have I been without the textures and rhythms of black music, of black speech, of black being.

When I was a teenager—locked in a tangle with a world that seemed determined to deny these connections—I chanced into *The Price of the Ticket* whereupon I

began a new phase of my life doused in the textures and structures, the bafflingly clear sentence-streams of James Baldwin's writing. So I wrote *Who Can Afford to Improvise?* because Baldwin's life and work was and is indelibly doused in the rhythms and textures of black music; all of the sense in his work traffics to and fro what he felt and heard in the African-American musical tradition from gospel and blues, to jazz, soul, and r & b. A major map to one's itinerary traveling with Baldwin's work, therefore, lies in one's ability to hear and make sense of the sounds of the music which formed the molten moral core of Baldwin's literary and political, professional and personal, sensibility.

At the most recent James Baldwin conference in Paris, and really at the panel organized by Rich Blint, and mostly watching Rich and recognizing something in his loving insistence upon fidelity to nuances and inflections in quotations from Baldwin's spoken and written words, I realized that unlike most writers, certainly unlike most writers we consider "prose writers," we really do *listen* to Baldwin. We wait for certain turns of phrase, we listen and watch and read and re-read again and again, as with our favorite songs. This confirmed, again, one insistence I made in *Who Can Afford to Improvise?*: Baldwin's musicality is not restricted to pieces of his writing where he mentions musicians, quotes songs, and so on. Baldwin's writing smuggled the needful reality of *song* onto his pages, so we read his work rather like sitting with headphones on listening to tunes, to tones. He's not alone in this but it's my contention that Baldwin's song is high on the list of musical-literary work which takes from the music, yes, but also *adds* things that no singer or musician could do.

I've compiled a list of songs that intersect in illuminating and pleasurable ways with Baldwin's work throughout the eras of his career. Some of these songs were ones he listened to himself, quoted and named in his work, or noted in his correspondence. Others are songs that echo out of my reading of his work and living with its meaning. And I've added songs from decades after Baldwin's death late in 1987 to extend our hearing of his musical presence that's still with us, that's still out in front of us all—especially the musicians—in the future. The music spans Baldwin's life and career, from baby John Grimes pausing his tantrum for a moment's notice to listen to the blues in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), to Jimmy Baldwin showing up in the Five Spot to listen to the band in Dick Fontaine's documentary of Sonny Rollins, to Baldwin interviewing Edith Piaf in January 1960 and marveling that she seemed put together solely of a human skeleton, the power of the "holy ghost" and a speaking voice that could shake mountains. That and, he added, she had a *great* laugh.

Part of Jimmy's musicality extends from the importance he found in the ways things sound, in the ways people sound. In September 1964, while flying in an Air Italia flight over Nantucket, Baldwin wrote his friend Mary Painter a short letter. Early in the letter, handwritten in blue ink on airline stationery, Baldwin remarked on an American woman holding forth at loud volume, and in a "Dead Sea flat voice," about how awful the Italians and French people are. He wondered if the woman realized that she was riding in an Italian plane? Noting something

distinctly American in her voice, in her obvious obliviousness to how she sounded, he wondered by what system of torture this woman had been saddled with such an empty tone. On his way back to New York, he felt a kind of ill-greeting in the woman's voice and confided to his friend that the sound of many "antiseptic" Americans' voices alone make it impossible to believe anything they say.¹

One of the most important features of black music for Baldwin was his sense that the sound and texture of singers' voices—and the sound that musicians drew from their instruments—carried a complex authority, that the craft of a great musician's work amounted to a singular glimpse of experience made available to a listener. Through crafting, and by what alchemy no one knows, that—what Barthes called—"grain" in the voice, a musician or singer conveys a piece of the world that is at once their own and overlaps into the lives of the listeners. Noting exactly this in Fats Waller's music, in "In a Yellow Room," Michael Ondaatje described the "fact that Fats Waller was talking to someone over your shoulder as well as to you."² The Dead Sea and antiseptic grain of the American woman's voice on the plane in Baldwin's ear had, he thought, been designed to avoid just this kind of fluidly sophisticated and communicative "grain."

In 1962, Baldwin toured West Africa with his sister Gloria. In his 1964 essay (adapted from a speech he gave in May 1963), "The White Problem," he remembered a moment of that trip:

Let me tell you a small anecdote. I was in Dakar about a year ago, in Senegal, and just off Dakar there is a very small island, which was once the property of the Portuguese. It is simply a rock with a fortress; from Africa, it is the nearest point to America. My sister and I went to this island to visit something called the Slave House. The house was not terribly large. It looks a little like houses you see in New Orleans. That's the truth. It's got two stories and a courtyard and a staircase on each side, sweeping stone staircases. I assume that the captains and the slavers lived upstairs; downstairs were the slave quarters. You walked through a kind of archway, very dark, very low, made of stone, and on either side of you were a series of cells, with stone floors and rusted bits of iron still embedded in the walls. This may be my imagination, but it seemed to me that the odor was still there, that I could still smell it. What it must have smelled like, with all those human beings chained together, in such a place. I remember that they couldn't speak to each other, because they didn't come from the same tribe. In this corridor, as I say, there are the cells on either side of you, but straight ahead, as you enter the archway, or corridor, is a very much smaller doorway, cut out of the stone, which opens on the sea. You go to the edge of the door, and look down, and at your feet are some black stones and the foam of the Atlantic Ocean, bubbling up against you. The day that we were there, I tried, but it was impossible—the ocean is as vast as the horizon—I tried to imagine what it must have felt like to find yourself chained and speechless, speechless in the most total sense of that word, on your way to *where?*³

The point here isn't the historian's sense of a stage in the middle passage of Africans en route to the West. The point is Baldwin's musical-metaphoric imagination at work standing at the threshold to the origins of black speech, of black sound. He

asks us to imagine that those captive Africans were on their way into an experience that had no name in any existing languages. They all carried languages—most would have carried more than one—onto those boats, they'd encounter other languages on the voyage. Most would learn and pass on one or more European languages as communities took shape in the West. All of it taking place, Baldwin stresses, in a complex position in, and often intensely, violently, at odds with, the modern mercantile purposes established by the ways those European languages—for our purposes, and Baldwin's purposes, English—were adapted to the tasks at hand.

In Baldwin's mind—maybe in his ear—clearly one very important way black people made—and still make—homes in an inhospitable and often hostile West, and in what became the United States, was to take a language with origins in Europe and with off-limit uses in the West, and pour it into songs where it could take on unique shapes, fill necessary volumes. Whether the original scripts were taken by what James Weldon Johnson called “black and unknown bards”⁴ from the King James Bible or by club singers—such as a young Billie Holiday—or jazz visionaries—like Miles Davis or Thelonious Monk—from the American songbook, black music became a laboratory that adopted and adapted a language to the immediate circumstances and inherited traditions—including inherited African traditions—of black diasporic experience.

At its most basic level, that's the work going on in the songs on the list below. And, according to my scholarly and poetic explorations of the music and of Baldwin's life and work, this is the work Baldwin heard going on in the music: a struggle against “speechlessness in the most total sense of that word,” in a lover's tangle with the question—whether for captive Africans on the Atlantic or for an early morning subway full of workers commuting in a tunnel under the East River to Manhattan—“*on your way to where?*” That struggle to achieve voice, black voice, the textured grain in a voice, links Paul Robeson's address, direct, to Pharaoh ca. 1926, to Philip Bailey imploring, with all the tensile strength of black tenderness, children in the ghettos of the 1980s to “Keep your heads to the sky,” to Rihanna's intimate and angular twenty-first-century news from her song “Needed Me”: “that's the real on the real are you serious . . . you was just another nigger on the hit list.”

Here are a few highpoints and depth-notes from a many-lives long listen to the music James Baldwin loved. See what you hear—
Peace, Ed

Jimmy's Songs Playlist

Paul Robeson, “Go Down Moses” (ca. 1920s)
Blind Willie Johnson, “If I Had My Way” (1927)
Bessie Smith, “Jailhouse Blues” (1927)
Bessie Smith, “Back Water Blues” (1927)
Billie Holiday, “Long Gone Blues” (1939)
Billie Holiday, “Am I Blue” (1941)
Billie Holiday, “Billie's Blues” (1944)

Thelonious Monk, “Just a Gigolo” (1954)
Ray Charles, “Sweet Sixteen Bars” (1956)
Dinah Washington, “Trouble in Mind” (1952,
58)
Mahalia Jackson, “Come Sunday” (1958)
Dinah Washington, “This Bitter Earth” (1960)
Miles Davis, “My Funny Valentine” (1964)

- Ray Charles, "You're Just About to Lose Your Clown" (1966)
- Aretha Franklin, "I Wonder" (1967)
- Aretha Franklin, "Baby, I Love You" (1967)
- Edwin Hawkins Singers, "Oh Happy Day" (1969)
- Curtis Mayfield, "The Other Side of Town" (1970)
- Gil Scot Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (1970)
- Billy Preston, "Will it go Round in Circles" (1972)
- Stevie Wonder, "All in Love is Fair" (1973)
- Sylvia Striplin (with Roy Ayers), "You Can't Turn Me Away" (1981)
- Denise Williams, "It's Gonna Take a Miracle" (1982)
- Philip Bailey, "Children of the Ghetto" (1984)
- Luther Vandross, "Anyone Who Had a Heart" (1986)
- Courtney Pine (vocals, Susaye Greene), "Children of the Ghetto" (1986)
- Anita Baker, "Whatever it Takes" (1990)
- Faith Evans, "Love Like This" (1998)
- Cassandra Wilson and India Arie, "Just Another Parade" (2002)
- Amy Winehouse, "Love is a Losing Game" (2003)
- Thandiswa Mazwai, "Nizalwa Ngobani" (2006)
- Terrance Hope and the Vibe, "Walk in the Light" (2006)
- Georgia Anne Muldrow, "Kneecap Jelly" (2012)

Notes

- * The full URL for the multi-media aspect of this article is https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtSYQ5bCX-C-IZkeQ_PX7ncsbjI32HSy. The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for any external or third-party internet websites referred to in this article, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.
- 1 Letters from James Baldwin to Mary Painter, Manuscript, the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.
 - 2 Michael Ondaatje, "In A Yellow Room," in *Secular Love* (Toronto, Coach House Press, 1984), p. 119.
 - 3 James Baldwin, "The White Problem," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Pantheon, 2010), p. 77.
 - 4 James Weldon Johnson, "O Black and Unknown Bards," in James Weldon Johnson (ed.), *The Book of Negro American Poetry* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1922), p. 123.

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Contributor's Biography

Ed Pavlič is author of seven collections of poems and two critical books. His newest works are *Who Can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listener* (Fordham University Press, 2015), *Let's Let That Are Not Yet: Inferno* (National Poetry Series / Fence Books, 2015), and *Visiting Hours at the Color Line* (National Poetry Series / Milkweed Editions, 2013). His next book, *Live at the Bitter End: A Trial by Opera*, will appear in the fall of 2016. He lives in Athens, GA, and teaches in the Ph.D. Program in Creative Writing at the University of Georgia.