Blues in Stereo: The Texts of Langston Hughes in Jazz Music

The title of this essay is drawn from a section of Langston Hughes's long experimental poem ASK YOUR MAMA: 12 MOODS FOR JAZZ, published in 1961 as a stand-alone volume. The entire work is emblematic of Hughes's lifelong engagement with African American music and identity, and their relationships to domestic and international structures of white supremacy, even as the poem's experimentalism eluded the appreciation of critics contemporary and since (Rampersad 343-44). "Blues In Stereo," the fifth section of ASK YOUR MAMA, evokes colonialism in Africa and the slaughter in King Leopold's Congo, and alludes to the ways that black music is misheard if not misappropriated by those who consider themselves the superior of people of African descent.

Indeed, African American music, its beauty, cultural meanings, and creative representations of the people, was absolutely central to Langston Hughes's artistic project. His poetry and fiction return again and again to the figure of the black musician and scenes of music-making; his characters express themselves through traditional songs and song forms, and he pioneered in adapting the twelve-bar blues form to the printed page. He recorded his poetry with jazz bands, most notably with Charles Mingus in 1958 on the album Weary Blues. He helped Lonnie Elder III write the fascinating "Scenes in the City" that was the centerpiece of A Modern Jazz Symposium Of Music And Poetry With Charles Mingus the previous year. Hughes is also credited as being the inventor of the gospel musical play, with works such as Black Nativity and Simply Heavenly enjoying great popularity over the years. In addition, he was a librettist for operas by William Grant Still, Kurt Weill, and Jan Meyerowitz.

Scholars have rightly focused much attention on the role music plays in Hughes's literary aesthetics and cultural vision, as well as his ideas about and portrait of the African American musical tradition. He was one of the few intellectuals of his generation to take twentieth-century black music forms—especially blues and jazz—seriously, as both enriching aesthetic achievements and definitive expressions of black culture. His celebration of the music and language of working class and poor black people put him at odds with many of his contemporaries who were still searching for some soon-to-come high, refined, Negro art, but it was his vision which ultimately was of greatest influence on subsequent generations of African American writers, even when they did not acknowledge that influence.

This essay looks at another side of the connection between Langston Hughes and the black musical tradition. The question typically posed about this relationship is, what has Hughes to say about the black musical tradition? But let us instead consider the question's inversion: what has the black musical tradition to say about Langston Hughes? I will shortly consider several jazz performances of Hughes texts, but first, a bit more contextualization.

The setting of poetry to music has a long history in the West, dating back at least to ancient Greece, and this practice has continued to be commonplace in the European concert music tradition. Thus, when one adds up all the known recordings of Langston Hughes texts with music, one finds quite a few, perhaps the majority, from composers and performers of concert music. African American composers Florence Price, Howard Swanson, and Margaret Bonds each set several Hughes
poems to their compositions, and these have been performed and recorded repeatedly over the years. Bonds, a friend of Hughes, organized and assembled a 1964 tribute, "The Poetry of Langston Hughes Set to Music on the Occasion of Mr. Hughes' Birthday," that is representative of this thrust, featuring the music of William Grant Still, Harry T. Burleigh, and other major figures of the theater and concert stage.  

One might think that given Hughes's fondness for writing blues verse, he might have a presence in blues or rhythm & blues music, but that is not really the case. (Neither R&B nor blues is big on literary allusions or erudition.) In 1958, R&B singer Big Miller recorded *Did You Ever Hear The Blues*, an album of Hughes blues songs taken from his theatrical works (as distinct from his numerous blues poems). In the 1990s, Washington, D. C. disc jockey and performer Nap Turner recorded readings of Hughes's Simple stories with light jazz accompaniment; an album of this material was released posthumously in 2006 as *Hughes Views of the Blues*. Probably the most visible performance of Hughes blues material was "Goodbye Newport Blues," by the Muddy Waters Band at the 1960 Newport Jazz Festival. This was the year the festival was undone by the rioting of what producer George Wein referred to as a "large mob of inebriated kids." In response to the violence, the city council canceled the remainder of the festival, leaving the Sunday evening blues program, hosted by Hughes, a festival advisory board member, to be the final event. As the story goes, Hughes composed "Goodbye Newport Blues" on the back of a Western Union envelope and handed it to Waters as the band returned to the stage for an encore. Pianist Otis Spann sang the lament ("it's a gloomy day in Newport / one of the worst times they ever had"), which apparently was in fact the closing number of the festival (Wein 195-97; Rampersad 315).  

This brief list seems to be it for rhythm & blues performances of Hughes material.  

We must turn to the world of jazz to find Hughes's most significant mark on the world of black music. The recordings considered here were made between 1960 and 1973, a time frame that corresponds roughly to that of the Black Arts movement. This important phase in African American literary and cultural production, most often dated from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, was marked by pronounced efforts towards asserting authentic black identity and aesthetics, recovery of Africa as cultural and psychological homeland, militant confrontation with white supremacist ideology, and organizational and entrepreneurial self-determination. Though generally conceived of as primarily a literary and theatrical phenomenon, in fact visual art, dance, and music were all fields in which these impulses were manifested. Much has been made, rightly, of the inspiration that literary artists took from black music, especially jazz, in the early years of the movement, and later from soul music as that sound came of age. Prominent in Black Arts era poetry was a number of musical collaborations, leading to recordings of poems with musical accompaniment by Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, and the Last Poets, among others. Writers such as Baraka and Larry Neal even claimed at the time that there was no significant black literary tradition for the new writers to build on, that all who had come before them were fatally constrained by the desire to imitate white models. It was a new day now, and writers had better learn from the musicians, who were operating in a medium where black traditions less mediated by white domination were able to retain their authenticity.  

In truth, jazz musicians can be seen as harbingers of the shifts in black consciousness seen in the work of 1960s artists and African Americans in general. The "soul" concept that would hold such sway in that decade had its roots in developments in jazz in the 1950s. The interest in Africa that was so much a part of black identity concerns and politics in the 1960s was anticipated in jazz from the 1950s.  

Throughout his career, which began in the early part of that decade, Brooklyn's own Randy Weston was one of the jazz artists most engaged with Africa. Langston Hughes's input was an essential component of his 1960 recording project *Ushuru Afrika*.  

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African Lady

"Langston Hughes was the only one of our writers who wrote about the music," Weston explained to me when I asked him about how this collaboration came about. The two artists had met and formed a bond in the 1950s through involvements with the educational activities of Marshall Stearns and the Lenox School of Jazz. When Weston was conceiving his musical salute to and celebration of the rising African independence movement, Hughes was the one he turned to for providing lyrics for his compositions. Hughes wrote the liner notes for the album as well. Besides Hughes, Weston gathered numerous talents to produce Uburu Afrika; a partial list of performers includes his longtime collaborator, arranger and trombonist Melba Liston, drummers Max Roach and Charlie Persip, percussionists Babatunde Olatunji, Candido, and Armando Peraza, reedmen Yusef Lateef, Gigi Gryce, Cecil Payne, Budd Johnson, and Sahib Shihab, bassists Ron Carter and George Duvivier, brass players Clark Terry, Bennie Bailey, Slide Hampton, Julius Watkins, and a then little-known Freddie Hubbard.

Uburu Afrika was an expression, artifact, and archetype of the African American cultural identification with Africa that began to be more visible in the arts during this time period. The popularity of Olatunji's 1959 Drums of Africa LP and the Nigerian's subsequent collaborations with jazz musicians was an important part of the scene. Gestures such as saxophonist Sonny Rollins naming one of his major compositions "Airegin" (Nigeria spelled backwards), and Sun Ra's growing fondness for Egyptian symbolism spoke to this impulse. John Coltrane made similar moves with tunes like "Dakar" and "Dahomey Dance," and his Africa/Brass LP would be recorded six months after the Uburu Afrika sessions. Max Roach's We Insist: The Freedom Now Suite, recorded two months earlier than Uburu Afrika, had a strong Pan-Africanist thrust, with the drums of Olatunji and tunes such as "All Africa" and "Tears for Johannesburg" joining with the insurgent portrait of the African American freedom struggle. That 1960 was the year that saw seventeen former colonies in Africa become independent nation-states was obviously of great impact on the imagination of black people around the globe. Weston's project was musically even more Pan-African, including as it did not only musicians from Africa and America but the Caribbean as well (Weinstein 111). Weston's advocacy of Africa was presented in cultural rather than political terms, and while there is a clear anti-colonial character to the proceedings, it is primarily expressed through the exuberance of the music. Here, Hughes's participation in Uburu Afrika was important, for the Pan-Africanism each man clearly manifested was less that of the ideologue than the celebrant.

Hughes's liner notes describe the suite's four movements in both musical and visual terms, clearly conveying an atmosphere of work, joy and tribute, taking care to note the specific contributions of the individual performers during each number. No mention is made of the armed struggle against British colonialism in Kenya, which brought the word "uburu" into international circulation. What is primary in Hughes's account of the album's contents is the sense of mission Weston and the other musicians felt. For instance, in describing the musical action of the first movement, Hughes asserts that the "call to freedom mounts" as the ensemble raises its intensity. First, though, he offers two long paragraphs that contextualize the music. He opens by noting his own attendance at the recent Nigerian independence ceremonies (invited by his old Lincoln classmate President Nnamdi Azikiwe) and his awareness of the popularity of American jazz in Africa, as well as jazz's roots in the African musical tradition. He explicates the communal yet personal and functional nature of much traditional African music-making, and reveals that despite the composed and arranged format of the album, Uburu Afrika was also an example of a communal ethos, observing that "there is room for the personal creativity of each
musician to find the moment, or moments, for his own individual salute to music, and, through music, to freedom and Africa.”

Hughes wrote the words for the brief “Introduction” of the suite, declaimed by Tuntemek Sanga over rumbling African percussion. Here we are told that the “freedom wind blows” and the “new dawning breaks. Africa! / A young nation awakes! Africa!” (ll. 6, 3-4). Following this two-minute prelude, Uhuru Afrika had four movements, each merging the rhythms of African drums with Weston’s driving piano and the ensemble’s insistently percussive figures. The first, “Uhuru

“Langston Hughes was a patient man,”

Abbey Lincoln says. Reciting some of the lyrics of “African Lady” from memory, she added,

“He knew who he was, and he knew who we were.”

Kwanza”—“Freedom First!” as declared in the introduction—was seemingly built around lead drummer Olatunji on congas, a group piece with almost no jazz soloing. Liston’s arrangement has the brass approximating elephant roars and the flutes evoking scenes of village life. On the album’s second side, with the third and fourth sections “Bantu” and “Kucheza Blues,” a number of the jazz players offer solos.

Soprano Martha Flowers and actor Brock Peters sang the suite’s one vocal number—the second movement, titled “African Lady.” In fact, despite Hughes’s lyric, this is the most undistinguished track on the album. Opening with meditative piano, the song proceeds at a dirge-like tempo. Liston’s horn colorations cannot provide enough interest to overcome the lugubrious singing by Flowers, who takes the first verse, and Peters, who sings the second. An interlude of Payne soloing with strong riffing from the horns injects some life into the performance, but “African Lady” would matter far less in the historical record were it not for Abbey Lincoln’s outstanding version, laid down three months after the Uhuru Afrika recording session (but before the LP was released).

Lincoln, who used poetry in her work throughout her career, as seen in her adaptations of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “Sympathy” and “When Malindy Sings,” recorded “African Lady” for her Straight Ahead LP in February 1961.9 Lincoln does not recall the exact circumstances of her introduction to the song today. Though Max Roach, her partner and the arranger of the tune on her album, was a participant in the Uhuru Afrika sessions, it is more likely that “African Lady” was one of the “dozen or so” songs Hughes sent to Lincoln in November 1960. Hughes had heard Lincoln’s rendition of a song he wrote with Kurt Weill for the 1947 “American opera” Street Scene, recorded on the 1959 album Abbey Is Blue. “Lonely House,” a song of individual urban isolation, had been recorded by popular stylist June Christy in 1955 and received some radio play (Rampersad 114). This mournful brooder was subsequently recorded by many performers, including Betty Carter. After hearing the Lincoln version, Hughes wrote to thank her and invite her to get together to “hear some songs.” The two did not meet at that time, but Hughes sent her some songs the next month by mail, and it is quite likely that “African Lady” was among them. This demonstrates how active Hughes was in distributing his songs for possible performance and recording.9

Lincoln’s “African Lady” improves considerably on the original. Hughes’s lyric sheet contained three verses: the Lincoln and Weston versions each use only two. Both use the first verse, but while the Weston version uses verse three (sung by Peters), Lincoln sings the second verse. Max Roach’s brilliant, pulsing arrangement is taken at a quicker tempo than the original, giving it a surging, exuberant quality, with horn lines and percussion accents that amplify the song’s optimistic take on decolonization. Hughes’s first verse moves evocatively:

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Sunrise at dawn
Night is gone I hear your song
African lady
The dark fades away
Now it's day, a new morning breaks
The birds in the sky all sing for Africa awakes
Bright light floods the land
And tomorrow is in your hand
African lady

The African lady here may be seen as a representative young woman of the continent, a specific woman of who is the object of the speaker's desire, and also as the collective African people themselves. Hughes's lyric stresses light as an energizing and illuminating force, portending a new day, a rise from slumber, a bright future that beckons as colonial rule is ending. Like the civil rights movement anthem "I Got the Light of Freedom," the song emphasizes the light metaphor to signify victory over oppressive forces. Both the woman and the birds sing this song of rebirth. The verse that Peters sings may reflect indelibly the possessive male gaze, speaking of "my lovely one . . . you're my queen, my queen of dreams," and perhaps Lincoln chose to exclude this verse on that basis. But that seems unlikely because that second verse that she sings has sensual imagery also: "scented sheets wrap you in perfume dreams." Her singing projects a bold assertiveness and employs timbres such as the growling she does at the end of "Lady," which heralds a different aesthetic, a more "African" ideal of beauty. In Lincoln's (and Roach's) hands, "African Lady" captures the diasporic hopes for and confidence in an emerging period of liberation for the African continent.

Straight Ahead is an important LP and the last release for Lincoln for fifteen years, an absence reflecting the marginalization of a Pan-Africanist advocate and an increasingly outspoken critic of the United States cultural and socioeconomic order. The album, with its images of assertive and confident genius slaves, and a closing number, Lincoln's "Retribution," that promised comeuppance for the unjust, projected a defiant cultural stance that brought the radical thrust of "African Lady" into greater relief.

This new world of independence turned out very differently, of course, as the legacy of colonial institutions as well as the structure of the world economy hampers the project of self-sufficiency. But Hughes's rosy vision of a new day for African people was a crucial aspect of the soon-emerging black nationalism and pride among African Americans. "Langston Hughes was a patient man," Lincoln says. Reciting some of the lyrics of "African Lady" from memory, she added, "He knew who he was, and he knew who we were." His confidence in the beauty and soul of "My People" was a perspective to which many others had to arrive, and she sees "African Lady" as an important expression of black folks claiming their heritage and the responsibilities thereof (Lincoln.)

Backlash Blues

Another Black Arts era singer with whom Hughes had a friendship and who performed his material was Nina Simone, the "High Priestess of Soul." Hughes and Simone apparently first met at the Newport Jazz Festival of 1960 and shortly thereafter Hughes invited the singer to a cookout. A friend of his had returned from the South with a "coon," which was to be the featured dish. (For the record, the singer was unable to make the cookout, writing that though she "thoroughly
would enjoy” eating some coon, she would be out of town [Letter to Hughes].
Simon’s letters indicate that she held the poet in the highest esteem. In July 1965
she wrote from London to thank Hughes for sending her The Big Sea and waxed
rhapsodic about the impact the book was having on her. It gave her material for
documenting racism, appreciating the beauty of his adventures, and educating
herself generally about history. She noted, “I’ve always admired you and been
proud of you—respected you and felt honored to know you—but brother, you got
a fan now!”
The feeling was mutual as Hughes expressed support and advice for
her art in their correspondence, sent her songs (ones he wrote as well as others he
thought she might like) including the George Bass-penned “See Line Woman,” and
wrote positive reviews of her performances. His Chicago Defender column “Week By
Week” from November 1960, titled “Spotlight on Nina Simone,” was used as the
liner notes for Simone’s 1964 LP Broadway-Blues-Ballads. Hughes highlights her
originality and earthiness in the essay, which, though clearly kindly inclined, is
unfortunately not very informative. He writes that Simone was not an artist for
tastes, and spends a great deal of space in making the simple point that many
performers—Billie Holiday, Ethel Piaf, Pigmeat Markham, Valaida Snow, among
a long list—had fans as well as detractors.

In many ways, Simone was the definitive Black Arts musician; she was a pro-
der of very militant recordings, an outspoken endorser and supporter of SNCC
and other radical organizations, and an artist very willing to express rage about the
racism dominant in the United States. She used poetry in her work on numerous
occasions, such as her stunning a cappella rendition of Waring Coney’s “No Images”
and her interpolation of David Nelson’s “Today Is a Killer” in her version of
“My Sweet Lord.”11 The story of Simone and “The Backlash Blues” is slightly
complicated. Apparently it was written for the singer sometime in 1966, as the liner
notes of Simone’s Nuff Said! LP state. She recorded the tune on January 5, 1967
for the Nina Sings the Blues LP, the first for her new contract with RCA Victor. With
guitarists Eric Gale and Rudy Stevenson, drummer Bernard Purdie, plus organ, bass,
harmonica and tenor sax, Simone does indeed sing the blues in a more traditional
blues band context, and produces one of her most consistent and effective studio
albums. In some ways the album heralded the greater engagement with modern
(rock) rhythms and material that marked her late 1960s output. Hughes also sent
the poem to Dudley Randall for inclusion in his series of broadsides, and though it
wasn’t released until July 1967, 1966 is the date printed prominently on the sheet.12
Simone sings the text of Broadside #13 almost verbatim, turning its six stanzas into
three verses, adding only the refrain “Mister Backlash, I’m gonna leave you with the
backlash blues” to the poem as published by Randall. “Backlash Blues” features a
prominent lead guitar and a bottom-heavy chugging rhythm that creates a “down
home” feel, even as the lyric issues a defiant challenge and prophecy to a white
supremacist government and society.

There are significant differences between the Broadside version of “The
Backlash Blues” and Hughes’s final published version, which appeared in the June
1967 Crisis as well as Hughes’s posthumous poetry volume The Panther and the Last.13
Hughes converted the original text into a more standard AAB 12-bar blues format
by repeating the first lines of the five stanzas. He also changed the coda, eliminating
the last lines that follow the warning that Mister Backlash will have the blues,
“Not me— / Wait and see!” When Simone recorded the song again in April 1968,
she too substantially changed the text, by adding an entirely new final verse which
brought the two artists’ personal stories and relationship into the dialogue.

“Backlash Blues” is a highlight of the Nuff Said! album, which was recorded
three days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and is probably best
known for the tribute “Why? (The King of Love is Dead)”. The poem/lyric opens:

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Mister Backlash, Mister Backlash,
Just who do you think I am?
You raise my taxes, freeze my wages,
Send my son to Vietnam. (ll. 1-4)

Mr. Backlash is also accused of imposing inferior education and housing as well as unemployment upon the speaker. The poem promises that the colored majority of the earth stood with the speaker, and that, as the penultimate stanza declares,

Mister Backlash, Mister Backlash,
What do you think I got to lose?
I'm gonna leave you, Mister Backlash,
Singing your mean old backlash blues. (ll. 17-20)

The title of “The Backlash Blues” evoked what American mass media in the mid-1960s was calling the “white backlash,” the widespread and growing disapproval of the activities if not goals of the civil rights movement among white U.S. citizens. King, among others, challenged the idea that this rejection of the movement was a recent phenomenon, asserting repeatedly that “the white backlash is nothing new.” The text engages the supposedly new anti-civil rights clarion when it states that blacks seeking employment were met with “a white backlash.” But more broadly, the poem targets longstanding assumptions about the inferiority of the Negro, as well as governmental and institutional policies that marginalized African Americans: high taxes, low wages, death and destruction in imperialist wars. As Hughes scholar Steven Tracy points out, the poem focuses on the ways that “the system attempts to guarantee the failure of the black man in that society” (216). “Backlash Blues” also resonates with a central image of African American enslavement, the violence of corporal punishment meted out to the captives with bullwhips upon their backs.

The third verse of Simone’s 1968 “Backlash” is an entirely new update written by the singer, in which she invokes Hughes as a recently departed ancestor whose charge to her from beyond the grave was to continue to challenge white supremacy politically, intellectually, and culturally:

When Langston Hughes died, when he died he told me many months before
He said Nina keep on working till they open up the door
One of these days when you’ve made it and the doors are open wide
Make sure you tell ‘em exactly where it’s at so they’ll have no place to hide
So Mr. Backlash, Mr. Backlash, hear me now, I’m warning you, yeah
Somehow someway, yeah, I’m gonna leave you with the blues (ll. 11-16).

This verse speaks to the two artists’ relationship in a number of ways. Whether Hughes uttered these exact sentiments to her in specific conversations is not certain, but the verse informs us of their friendship and her respect for and affinity with his cultural project, as well as his belief in her truth-telling mission. In fact, by 1967 Simone had already “made it,” for years having been one of the highest paid singers in the country, with her own production company and offices in midtown in New York City. Simone had also for years been telling “’em exactly where it’s at,” as evidenced by her 1964 performance of “Mississippi Goddam,” 1965’s “Four Women,” and much other material that directly addressed white supremacy in the United States. Her linkage of Hughes to her own stance as an uncompromising radical voice of African American liberation, striking a tone of militancy that the poet often avoided in his work, may be read both as homage and appropriation of the elder artist’s immense legacy. Her rendition of “Backlash Blues” is thus a significant achievement for both singer and poet.
I've Known Rivers

The last piece I'll discuss was recorded in 1973 by the Gary Bartz Ntu Troop, and is Bartz's adaptation of Hughes's first published poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" from 1921. It is perhaps Hughes's best-known work, and seems to be a favorite of those musicians working in the concert tradition, usually with piano accompaniment. Certainly Margaret Bonds, with whom Hughes had a long personal correspondence, was extremely enthusiastic about her version of the poem and felt it to have significant commercial possibilities. She spent quite a bit of energy trying to get her arrangement performed in 1936. Other concert versions of the poem were recorded by Howard Swanson and Robert Honeysucker. Also, actress and cultural activist Val Gray Ward recorded her setting of the poem in 2002 for her CD Rhapsody in Hughes 101. It combines recitation and singing of the poem's lines, with percussion, flutes, and sitar-like synthesizer as musical accompaniment, incorporating such elements of the African American musical aesthetic as improvisation, repetition, and indeterminacy.

As important as the Simone and Lincoln pieces discussed above are, it may well be that Bartz's "I've Known Rivers" is the most significant of the jazz renditions of Hughes's work. It was the title tune of an important double LP by a major proponent of the Black Arts impulse in jazz, and proved for a time to be popular on jazz radio, stimulating further interest in if not actually introducing some listeners to the poet. Down Beat's reviewer, who gave the album the magazine's highest rating, stated that "If a band playing improvisational music can have a hit single, then Rivers will be one for Gary Bartz and the Ntu Troop." In 1995, British saxophonist Courtney Pine revived the Bartz tune (with Cassandra Wilson singing lead) and also garnered substantial exposure on the airwaves.

By 1973 Ntu Troop's original lead vocalist, the great Andy Bey, had left the band, and Bartz had taken over those duties. Though not a great singer, he was nonetheless often an effective vocalist, getting his point across with the humble charm of conviction. In any case, the reason "I've Known Rivers" is important and lasting is not the vocal performance, though the text is an important one, but the irresistible groove the band achieves and maintains, and especially the power of the alto solo that is the centerpiece of the song. Bartz quite simply delivers one of the most lyrical and passionate alto sax solos that we have on record.

In this performance, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was used as an iconic reference to the poet and his subject matter, but was used musically, not simply as a reiteration of the literary form. As Bartz says in his brief spoken introduction, "I've Known Rivers" is inspired by "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" rather than being a setting of the poem. Recording at the Montreux Jazz Festival, the saxophonist expresses confidence in his opening remarks that "most of you have heard of Langston Hughes." (Given that they were in Switzerland, how well placed this confidence was, or how sincerely Bartz was uttering such sentiments, is open to interpretation.) The song borrows the major repeating phrases of the poem—"I've known rivers" and "My soul has grown deep like the rivers"—and attaches them to a bright major-key melody in a manner that sounds truly organic. Whereas Hughes invokes the names of specific rivers in Africa (the Congo and the Nile), the Asian "cradle of civilization" (the Euphrates), and the Mississippi of North America in the poem's main, middle section, Bartz's text replaces river names with the four directions (North, South, East, and West) and notes that "all through Africa and North America, South America and Australia, I've known rivers." Perhaps for metric reasons, Asia was out of the mix. His verses are a prelude, however, to the central journey of the song, the alto solo. Full of a questing energy and reaching climax after brilliant
climax, the solo suggests constant movement and restlessness, as well as reservoirs of creativity and melodic imagination. Then, after one final plateau, the horn closes with a warm and wistful lick, and Bartz returns to reiterate in words what the journey has been all about, the rivers and how they represent the historical and worldwide journeys of African peoples. By turning Hughes's poem into music rather than merely setting it to music, Bartz further immortalized and inscribed "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" as a lasting definitive statement of black identity, and provided a prime example of the mutual nourishment of the black musical and literary traditions.

As an iconic force in African American music, Langston Hughes appears to stand as a singular landmark in the Black Arts era. Another notable musical performance of his work is from the vocal group Sweet Honey in the Rock's eponymous first LP, released in 1976. Their version of "Dream Variations," while certainly not jazz, relies on understated gospel piano and vocal harmonies rooted in the African American group singing tradition to render a slightly melancholic yet very pretty celebration of blackness.

Other than Betty Carter's version of "Lonely House" and Courtney Pine's "I've Known Rivers," these ears have heard no new invocations of his work in the jazz of recent decades. One might think that there probably have been performances that simply have not been recorded. In poetry and in black literary studies, Hughes continues to be a major resource and field of study. The recent poetry and jazz performances of which I am aware have tended to be original material rather than renditions of classic writers' work. As a champion of vernacular black musical traditions and of artists as a collaborator, Langston Hughes is an important jazz voice. His lifelong project of expressing the full humanity of everyday people of African descent is a legacy of such scope and power that surely others will find inspiration in his words for interesting musical statements in the future. This examination of how jazz artists have used his work illustrates his enduring significance.

Notes
1. Branford Marsalis recorded "Scenes" as the title tune of his 1984 debut album, Scenes in the City.
2. Most prominently, James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke saw the Spirituals as the raw material which a compositional black genius would fashion into great art.
3. For Hughes settings by Price and Bonds, see Watch and Pray: Spirituals and Art Songs by African-American Women Composers, music of Betty Jackson King, Margaret Bonds, Undine Smith Moore, Florence Price, and Julia Perry Vademus (Koch, 1994); and Dreamer: A Portrait of Langston Hughes (Naxos Records, 2002). For work by Swanson, see Langston Hughes, et al., Three Contemporaries: 200 years of American music (New York: American Recording Society, 1951). The program for the 1964 birthday program is found in the Margaret Bonds correspondence in the Langston Hughes Papers at Yale University, Box 16, Folder 380.
5. This basic idea was expressed in a number of places, but see Neal, "And Shine Swam On," Black Fire 653, and Baraka, "The Myth of Negro Literature," Home 105-07.
6. Artists such as Horace Silver, Jimmy Smith, and Bobby Timmons recorded many gospel and blues-drenched performances the titles of which often incorporated the term "soul" and used other black vernacular phraseology. The jazz "soul movement," as some critics called it, became a marketing phenomenon that peaked in the early 1960s.
7. This is not to discount longstanding anti-colonial activism among some African Americans, much of which was suppressed by Cold War machinations in the 1950s, but to assert that a rising Africa as a point of pride was a feature of jazz. See Meriwether.
8. "Sympathy" is the inspiration for "Caged Bird" from her 1979 LP Golden Lady. Her version of "When Malindy Sings" is also on the 1961 LP Straight Ahead under consideration here. There is also a live version of "Malindy" on the ill-titled Max Roach LP Sounds as a Roach, recorded in 1968.

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9. In a letter to Randy Weston in 1961, he encouraged the pianist to try to turn a lyric Hughes gave him for a stage project they were working on into a song "like AFRICAN LADY is in UHURU."

10. It is also not easy to explain why the original Weston version excludes the second verse. The performance is eight and one-half minutes long, but the album itself totals thirty-three minutes, enough time to add a couple of minutes for this verse.

11. "No Images" was titled "Images" on Let It All Out, Philips 1966; "My Sweet Lord" appeared on the 1972 RCA Victor LP Emergency Ward.

12. The poem was still reprinted by permission of Knopf and credited to The Panther and the Lash, despite the significant textual differences.

13. Trombonist Clifford Thornton titled his 1969 recording The Panther and the Lash as a nod to Hughes, but did so primarily in tribute to the Black Panther Party based in Oakland, California. The music on the LP is all instrumental and neither the liner notes nor the names of the compositions make any mention of Hughes.

14. Simone continued to memorialize Hughes in her performances. A recorded example is the version of "Young, Gifted, and Black" that appears on the live 1969 Black Gold LP. In a largely improvised and impassioned prayer for black unity she interpolates in the song, she appeals to Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Miriam Makeba, Stokely Carmichael, and her parents for aid and succor.

Works Cited
Rev. of I've Known Rivers & Other Bodies, by Gary Bartz. Down Beat 41.7 (11 Apr. 1974): n. pag.

Discography

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