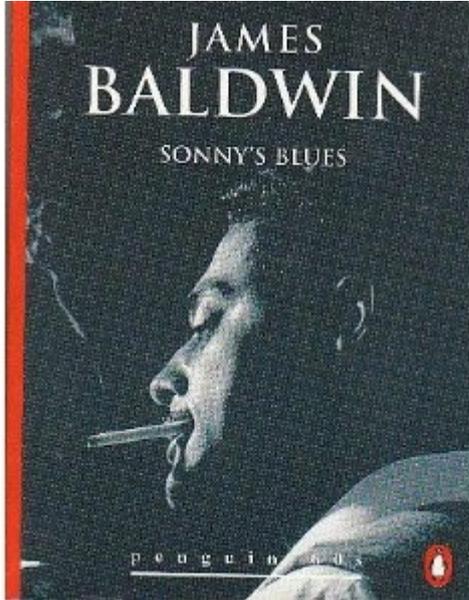


# Prose as Music: The Use of Language and Story Structure in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

written by Suzzanna Matthews-Amanzio | February 7, 2017



Sound is inescapable. In the city, it permeates everything. In that soundscape, there is music, and if one truly listens, within that music there are stories. When I was a young girl my father lectured at Columbia, and for a brief time we lived in a small apartment off 145<sup>th</sup> street in Harlem. It was in Harlem I learned to appreciate street music. Improvisational impromptu hip-hop erupted from every corner. I distinctly remember holding onto my father's hand as we rode the B train home after nights at the symphony, and hearing a different kind of music, a music that felt more tangible and intertwined with the surroundings, though I didn't yet have the words to articulate what I felt. On the train, young men rapped and improvised, telling their stories in melodic lyrics imposed over the sound of the subway moving along the tracks. Closing my eyes, I could feel the vibrating rhythm of the train rising through the soles of my feet, and I could hear the melodies of the voices and the surrounding conversations – all those stories blending into one sound.

Over the years I spent time studying music, learning classical piano and attempting to teach myself guitar. In struggling to compose and perform music, I learned to appreciate improvisational hip-hop composition on a structural level – taking note of its origins in the rich history of jazz, the hard jazz of the forties and fifties. This style of jazz, better known as be-bop, was quite influential on artists of the time, and this “new” jazz idiom greatly influenced the arts scene in Harlem, playing a key role in the works not only of musicians, but also painters like [Beauford Delaney](#), and young writers like James Baldwin for whom jazz was an important mode of expression. In 1945, (at about the time that Baldwin was starting out as a writer), one of bebop's best known recorded sessions was put to vinyl. The

session, known as The Savoy recordings, was led by the “messiah of modern jazz” Charlie Parker (better known as Bird), and included the great Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, and Max Roach.

The outstanding piece from that recording, “Now’s the Time”, exemplifies the blues-form jazz that influenced Baldwin’s writing and that he employs as the story form for “Sonny’s Blues”. The first few charged fast-passing piano chords and soft brush hits of high jazz cymbal in “Now’s the Time”, set a rhythmic (composed) melodic head for the tune. The melody is underlined with repeated bass tones, and it is then electrified by the improvised rising harmonies of saxophone and trumpet. Closing one’s eyes and listening to the head of the piece – the tune recalls the sounds of a train or trolley, struggling and then steadying along its route. Rising above that steadying sound are the bright harmonizing melodies of conversations between sax and trumpet – all riding along over that composed melodic train of rhythm. “Now’s The Time” is composed on a twelve bar blues form chord progression, different from the thirty-two bar song form jazz form chord progression of popular jazz-age players. Charlie Parker was a new breed of musician, taking from the old standards and improvising upon them, giving jazz a new voice. It is this new form, (bop or blues form jazz) that bears great importance in Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues.”

In “Sonny’s Blues”, Baldwin’s language conveys the rhythm, melody, and heavy mood of the jazz music of the late Harlem Renaissance. Baldwin uses music as a lens or controlling metaphor to examine questions of heritage, race, the African-American experience, and societal limitations and expectations. Through Baldwin’s careful construction of language and use of symbolism, jazz within the story becomes not only a forceful sonic medium but also a higher language relating more than the story of Sonny, or his brother (our unnamed narrator). Through the story’s structure and diction, Baldwin intones an underlying strain of music for the reader to *hear*. He composes a story that functions structurally like a jazz tune. Employing the basic components of compositional structure including: rhythm, melody, and harmony, along with the more complex jazz constructs of polyphony and improvisation, he creates a piece with tension and vocalization. It helps us to visualize this comparison if we break down the story alongside a work like *Now’s The Time* (which I will return to later).

Critics have made much about the use of music in Baldwin’s writing the use of music in “Sonny’s Blues”. While music is of great importance to the story, interpretations of how Baldwin uses music as a metaphor (or otherwise) has been a rather murky area of study, with varying ideas of what role Baldwin intended the music to play within the piece. Literary critics like Richard Albert claim that Baldwin uses too many mixed musical allusions in “Sonny’s Blues”, and that it is unclear what he is trying to accomplish through switching between jazz and blues as motif within the story. Albert claims that “a closer examination of Baldwin’s use of jazz and blues and of Luis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, the character Creole, and the song “Am I Blue” [at the end of the story] reveals some solid support for basic themes, as well as some possible thematic and structural flaws that might cause some readers to question whether Baldwin really understood the nature of the jazz/blues motif

that he used" (Albert, 175).

Albert claims that Baldwin uses the blues motif as an important signifier in the story because "the blues are synonymous with low spirits" and that "both the narrator and Sonny have had their fair share" (Albert, 175). In Albert's argument, the blues motif serves as a reminder of unhappiness and repression. He states that the jazz motif within the story "emphasizes the theme of individualism" through its adhering to ideals of improvisation that Sonny embodies as a jazz musician. He sees that individualism as causing the brothers' alienation from one another (Albert, 175). Albert's assertions separate jazz and blues into two different motifs and do not take account for their entire meaning/function in the story, when viewed together as a whole. Separating the two in such a way does not illuminate their overall use and importance in the story.

Baldwin was a lover of music and a singer, and I believe that he knew what he was doing in bringing together (what Albert refers to separately as) the blues motif and the jazz motif. Baldwin pulls into the story varied musical allusions and metaphors. By incorporating gospel, hymns, and blues metaphor as influences on jazz, and in creating a compositional tune structure for the story, he ties together the history of the evolution of jazz with the history of the African-American experience into an all-encompassing form.

Other literary critics, for example Susanna Lee and Suzy Bernstein-Goldman, have looked at the symbolic use of music and have considered musical structure within the story, but like Albert have also separated each use of musical metaphor (or structural element) into divided camps, and contracted (or confined) interpretations that do not fully examine the role of music in the story.

Lee discusses the jazz harmonies of connection and disconnection in the story, looking at correlations between music, narrative, and social theory. She argues that the narrative form mimics the interplay of jazz harmonies embodied by the two brothers, and that there is a connection between how the narrator and Sonny interact with one another through those harmonies, connecting and interacting with the history of the black community through jazz. She relates the musical idea to social theory through what she refers to as "jam and groove," stating that the interplay between the two is like the idea of "separation and association" of the brothers from each other and their larger community (Lee, 285). However, Lee focuses only on the harmonies, she does not consider the overall form of a jazz tune structure. She does not fully reconcile the overall use of metaphor and musical allusion within the story and their connection to a larger history and community of peoples, and not just the Harlem community.

Bernstein-Goldman however, implies that Baldwin may have adopted a compositional tune structure for his story. She states that, "in this story of a musician, four time signatures mark four movements while the leitmotifs of this symphonic lesson in communication are provided by the images of sound" (Bernstein-Goldman, 231). Bernstein-Goldman discusses the theme of music in the piece, but she does not discuss jazz specifically. Although her essay alludes to the use of a time signature, as she claims the story is

divided into four movements in time, and she also claims that the conclusion to the story is like a coda – recapitulating a recurrent theme – she does not make the connection to Baldwin using a jazz tune structure in assigning “four movements” or any such musical structure to his piece. Yet, it is almost impossible to talk about the story without bringing up jazz. Bernstein-Goldman is looking through a lens of music in the classical sense, for instance Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup> symphony that has four movements and ends in a grandiose coda. Separating the story from jazz (and indeed the world of jazz and its history) takes away from its message and feeling.

So, what exactly is Baldwin doing with jazz in the story? What does it mean to create a tune-structure? And, just what *is* jazz anyway? How can one begin to examine the ways in which music can be read in the text? To start with, the definition of jazz is far-reaching and difficult to relegate to one static list of compositional attributes.<sup>[1]</sup> Jazz “was born from old blues music, ragtime and gospel,” and through these influences jazz retains and encompasses all these musical forms (Porter, 13). Historically jazz tunes (from ragtime to swing) have had the following in common: syncopation, polyrhythms/polyphony, and harmonic progression. These early jazz styles (mostly ragtime pieces) were usually composed of four distinct themes that is, four distinct segments or arrangements. “These themes were typically sixteen bars, each theme divided into periods of four four-bar phrases and arranged in patterns of repeats and reprises” (Porter, 42). Later swing styles of jazz established a rhythmic *groove*, aligning rhythmic patterns (of various instruments) to create music with a forceful drive. While there were elements of improvisation, these standard (or song form) compositions used written arrangements with (to use a jazz phrase) *cornered* sound. That is, there was an element of predictability in the returning themes, time signatures, and repeated melodies (Porter, 159).

It is complicated to break down the elements of music, and analyzing these elements certainly doesn’t hold the same enjoyment as just listening to a composition and taking in as the whole sum of its parts. Jazz is a complicated being made up of layered musical styles, or as, Louis Armstrong related when asked to define swing during a broadcast of the [Bing Crosby](#) radio Show in 1954, “Ah, swing, well, we used to call it syncopation—then they called it [ragtime](#), then blues—then jazz. Now, it’s swing. White folks yo’all sho is a mess” (“Now You Has Jazz”, Youtube.com) What Armstrong said (assumedly in jest) is in essence true, in that these styles of jazz all built upon each other. They shared the same basic compositional traits along with their shared origins in the traditions of African tribal music and slave era spirituals. When we take that origin into account there is an intense and heavy history associated all these traditional jazz styles and performance forms. In their early history, these forms of music were subversive. They vocalized a story within their musical form and societal restraints.

During the nineteen-forties there was a breaking away from more traditional (and more cornered) jazz forms to more *improvisational* styles of composition. Blues-form and modal-form became the more popular choice among musicians emerging from the Harlem scene in the forties and throughout the fifties.

During this time a certain freedom of expression was attained through improvisation. Improvisational music (or bebop), vocalized the pain and frustration of a generation of youth. The music was also a conversation with the past, playing against/counterpoint to standard forms of jazz from the twenties and thirties that eventually conformed to appeal to a larger (and largely white) audience. The jazz of Parker and Baldwin's time called back to the intent of jazz's origins, and from that shifting away, of what the younger generation viewed as a staid format, blues-form and modal-form developed. Each of these forms harkened back to certain elements that lead to the development of jazz for example, vocalization in blues and syncopation in ragtime. It is important to note that these new forms did not completely deviate from standard/song form; the forms improvised upon them. The music evolved in conjunction with, and in response to, social and historical changes, making it difficult to sever the history from the music or to ignore the various layers of preceding styles and influences it contains. As an idiom, jazz is a powerful way to evoke history and memory.

In talking about the jazz idiom and writing – and its connection/importance to African-American history – jazz poet (and civil rights activist) Yusef Komunyakaa states that, “jazz works primarily as a type of discovery, to discover the emotional history behind things...and to get back to a place he had forgotten.” [2] (Komunyakaa, 645). And, Baldwin adopts the blues-form jazz structure in composing “Sonny’s Blues.” Blues-form jazz incorporates the “blues-motif” (the blues influence) into the “jazz motif.” That use of blues-form as a compositional technique in the story taps into the emotional history and experience of blacks in America, bringing that past and the sorrow associated with the blues to the present.

But, what exactly is a jazz-tune structure? And, how does Baldwin go about writing a story with a structure that is in effect a mimetic of a jazz composition? To better visualize and *hear* the connection between the two – you must listen. You must listen to jazz, and you must listen to the music in Baldwin’s language. We can look to “Now’s the Time”, as a piece representative of blues-form jazz and as a simple guide –through some basic components of composition – that will make it easier to understand how Baldwin adopts those components in his composition of “Sonny’s Blues.”

In general, “a jazz-tune composition usually consists of a theme and an arrangement that suggests when to play the theme and when to improvise...most jazz compositions contain a single primary theme that serves as the basis for further development and improvisation” (“The Elements of Jazz”). Blues-form jazz is further characterized by a specific emphasis on improvisation layered over changing or varied themes.

So, what constitutes a theme? A theme generally consists of a [melody](#), often called the head, and its accompanying [chord progression](#). This melody (introduced in the beginning of a tune) becomes the underlying rhythm establishing the mood of an arranged piece. A “theme often follows one of several common forms or outlines, such as the blues form or song form” (“The Elements of Jazz”). Up until the forties the predominating compositional form for a tune theme in jazz, was the song form. These tunes appropriately came to be referred to as standards. They adhere to a basic pattern of playing

within a prescribed chord progression, with limited or constrained polyphony or improvisation.<sup>[3]</sup> In blues-form jazz pieces like, “Now’s the Time,” the established melody rarely follows the standard pattern of chord progression seen in traditional or song-form jazz.<sup>[4]</sup>

If you close your eyes and listen to “Now’s the Time” – tuning your ear to pick out the different instruments – you can visualize what the various sounds are doing. The head begins with the piano chords layered over a cymbal tapping out a beat/rhythm – the chords are a bit jarring – clangy – these chords are repeated twice. The cymbals continue keeping time, and then a bass line enters while the piano changes and begins to play out new chords – a new melody – over which the saxophone rises playing a separate melody

(thus, creating harmony). A trumpet then enters adding another layer of sound, or polyphony. These sounds (though they are harmonizing) do not necessarily sound like what you expect harmony to sound like – this is dissonance – it may sound caucous or discordant. The bass line and piano chords then change, as the sax repeats its earlier melody and the piece is resolved. This is a very simplistic breakdown of this three minute eighteen second blues-form tune. In a jazz tune the head arrangement is quite like the sonata-allegro we often hear in classical music. That is, there is an introduction, then exposition, and then development in the composition. The music tells a story and at the end there is a recapitulation, or coda. In music, the terms exposition and recapitulation simply refer to the statement and then restatement of the theme.

“Sonny’s Blues” contains many of the components of a blues-form jazz composition: a head/intro that establishes a beat providing a rhythmic walking bass line through the story. This beat is aligned with the main “melody,” or narrative in the story. Baldwin also gives tension and interest to what we read in the dissonant harmonies (or polyphony) created by Sonny and the narrator, in how they chose to live their lives – each life becoming a different melody within the story. There are also several moments of hearing and not hearing – of silent pauses and shaking sound – that align with the concept of syncopation. And, the conclusion to the story functions as a *coda*, recapitulating the theme of oppression and evoking history, pain, and struggle.

We have discussed some of the origins of jazz, the history of its evolution, and we have and broken down some of the compositional elements of “Now’s the Time.” We can now examine how Baldwin accomplishes mimicking those compositional elements in the story as a means of composing a very present, living, and moving story that is imbued with a painful history and denotive of racial discrimination.

## Introduction/ The Head

In the opening of the story Baldwin creates a steadying rhythmic beat, through his use of diction. He repeats words and sounds within the short sentences. Read aloud Baldwin’s words with *t* sounds and *ed* endings sound like the soft tap of a jazz cymbal:

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside, it was not to be believed. (103)

This prose beginning is like a musical intro leading into the *tune* that sounds through the narrator's and Sonny's lives. Much like a jazz head, this intro lays the groundwork that the story/melody plays off. The tapping keeps the rhythm of Harlem life. The beat keeps time to the everyday existence of going to work, and subway cars, and of a people existing within the city's repetitive cycle.

As discussed earlier, the intro, or head, in a jazz composition sets the mood/theme for the piece. And, this theme is called back to within a composition. Several times within the story Baldwin returns to that idea of repetition, and the inability completely to break away from the past. Thus, the mood/theme of the story is created.

## Melody and Harmony

From the intro/head that Baldwin gives us (with the narrator reading the news about Sonny on the train) a melody emerges. This rhythmic melody is the main story line to follow through; it is the narrator's story. We hear this melody – we hear about this life – before we fully begin to hear about Sonny. Each of the brother's stories is composed differently; or rather the narrator's melody is composed conventionally, while Sonny's is improvisational. If you were reading a piece of sheet music, Sonny's story would be notated (*improvised*) upon the treble clef, and the narrator's story would be composed upon the bass clef, their separate melodies creating harmonic tension within each measure, and alongside each chord progression (or progression of narrative in the story). We can understand this more clearly by looking at the grand staff. The top is the treble, and the bottom is the bass.



The narrator and Sonny lead such different/dissonant lives that while they are brothers they cannot seem to truly live in sync (or in a non-dissonant harmony). The narrator tells us that:

The seven years' difference in our ages lay between us like a chasm: I wondered if these years would ever operate between us as a bridge. I was

remembering, and it made it hard to catch my breath, that I had been there when he was born; and I had heard the first words he had ever spoken. (111)

There are seven years between Sonny and the narrator, and comparably there are seven notes (CDEFGAB) in a major scale. There is a wide chasm between the notes played on the bass clef (the life of the narrator) and notes played on the treble clef (the improvised life of Sonny). Here the two brothers are set apart, each representative of the different parts that make up a tune. The bass clef is where the grounding steady rhythmic melody is composed (the notes sounding at a lower octave), and the rising melody is composed on the treble. This is generally true for piano compositions, the piano being Sonny's chosen instrument.

There exists another layer of melody and harmony in the piece as well. Various melodies stand improvised upon, or laid upon, what Susana Lee calls the "urban groove" or the beat of life in the city (Lee, 285). Sitting in his classroom, over the din of boys penned in the schoolyard, the narrator hears:

One boy was whistling a tune, at once a very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds. (104)

Lee writes that, "this separation of a voice from the chorus mirrors the schematic structure of jazz music" (Lee, 176). The main melodies here are of the narrator and Sonny, as each is distinguishable from the other "sounds" within the story. But it is important to understand that each of their melodies/stories functions alongside the other sounds within the piece. Just as in a jazz composition the main melodies are play upon a beat or rhythm, these main melodies are not separate from what else is going on in the composition and each need to be present for a piece of music to be fully realized/understood. In music, as in life, one does not live independently of one's community, culture, and history – it is something that is always carried with you.

The idea of an ever-present history is evident in the evolution of jazz. It is a musical form that has built upon its origins and is ever changing – yet it always retains that past within its meaning/context. This concept of continuity and change is evident in Sonny's discovery of music, and in the attitudes/views of music embodied by Sonny and the narrator.

"I'm going to be a musician," he said. For he had graduated, in the time I had been away, from dancing to the juke box to finding out who was playing what, and what they were doing with it, and he had bought himself a set of drums." You mean you want to be a drummer?" I somehow had the feeling that being a drummer might be all right for other people but not for my brother Sonny. "I don't think," he said, looking at me very gravely, "that I'll ever be a good drummer. But I think I can play a piano." Sonny bought himself a

set of drums a reminder this is there he started from.” (119)

The ever-present noise and sound (that beat) of Harlem life is something that Sonny learned from and that he carries with him. The narrator sees Sonny’s drum as a symbol of stagnation, as a signifier of not breaking away from the steady rhythm and the implied historical repression of African-Americans. He cannot imagine his brother as a drummer. Sonny knows that he can never be a good drummer and so he *graduates* from being a drummer to becoming a pianist, and then an improviser – improvising his own melody above that beat – improvising and evolving out of that musical and social history.

Sonny lives in the realm of improvisation and *bop*. The movement of blues-form jazz (referred to as bebop, or just bop) at the time Baldwin was writing “Sonny’s Blues,” was new and brash. It was another chapter in the evolution of jazz music – a new idiom for the present world in which he lived. In the story, not only is there a juxtaposition of the narrator’s and Sonny’s positions in life – but also the juxtaposition of two distinct periods in jazz history: one was the realm of Louis Armstrong and the other the world of Charles Parker Bird.

I had never thought about it before, had never been forced to, but I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called “good-time” people. I suggested, helpfully: “You mean-like Louis Armstrong?” His face closed as though I’d struck him. “No. I’m not talking about none of that old-time, down home crap.”

“Well, look, Sonny, I’m sorry, don’t get mad. I just don’t altogether get it, that’s all. Name somebody-you know, a jazz musician you admire.” “Bird.” (120-121)

There are two main periods of jazz history here; the jazz pre-WWII was that of the Cotton Club, jazz and blues adapted for vaudeville and a predominantly white audience. These compositions did not generally challenge convention. And, if they did, these subversive compositions were heavily coded. The jazz after WWII (and up through the post Korean war era of Sonny’s time) was often improvisational, lacking lyrics, and presented a challenge to convention. These compositions and performances were generally for an all-black audience, and their main drive was to be improvisational, and to challenge the hemming in of past compositional styles. During performances musicians, would break away into impromptu solos, and all of this was empowering. Though because of their trademark frenzy and dissonance tunes were often complicated and at times difficult to understand or even listen to.

Sonny embodies that frenzy and improvisational style associated with bebop. He presents a challenge to what is perceived as the “right way” of living. By being a musician Sonny was going against a normal and steady life, life that the narrator represents: as he has chosen to be a teacher, a husband, and a father.

When the narrator leaves to go fight in WWII, he leaves Sonny with his future wife's family. Sonny, and his music, bring discord to their ordered lives:

Isabel finally confessed that it wasn't like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound. And the sound didn't make any sense to her, didn't make any sense to any of them- naturally. They began, in a way, to be afflicted by this presence that was living in their home. It was as though Sonny were some sort of god, or monster. He moved in an atmosphere which wasn't like theirs at all. They fed him and he ate, he washed himself, he walked in and out of their door...as though he were all wrapped up in some cloud, some fire, some vision all his own. (124)

Sonny becomes a sound, a force, a (solo) singular unreachable force. Sonny's embodiment of dissonant sound becomes an afflicting presence, and that presence

disrupts the family's established rhythm of eat, wash, sleep. They cannot comprehend why Sonny chooses to move outside this/their measured realm.

### Gospel and Spiritual

Baldwin also brings in the musical tradition of gospel and spiritual – these forms being influential to blues and jazz. The first time we “hear” music being performed in the story is on the streets of Harlem. Sonny and the narrator witness an outpouring of song from a group of revival singers performing on the street. This is a very heavy moment in the story. It brings forward that tradition of gospel, and of a shared history, and of hope and longing for salvation and freedom that has not yet come.

The revival was being carried on by three sisters all in black, and a brother. All they had was their voices and their bible and their tambourine... “’Tis the ship of Zion,” they sang...Not a soul under the sound of their voices was hearing this song for the first time, not one of them had been rescued...The woman with the tambourine, whose voice dominated the air, whose face was bright with joy, was divided very little from the woman who stood watching her, a cigarette between her heavy chapped lips, her hair a cuckoo's nest, her face scarred and swollen from so many beatings, and her black eyes glittering like coal. Perhaps they both knew this, which was why, when, as rarely, they addressed each other, they addressed each other as Sister. (129)

The revivalists provide a connection to the past, and they are also symbolic of a spiritual rebirth, and of a future for the two brothers. Their song is one that *“Not a soul under the sound of their voices was hearing ... for the first time.”* It is a reminder of a shared pain, and of a shared past that connects a community. Witnessing the revival singers, the narrator and Sonny re-connect. For that moment, their narratives are aligned (and harmonious), they are sharing a space within the story, and they are not at odds.

## Syncopation and Ragtime

There are moments of syncopation (and *fermata*) throughout the story. These moments are aligned with the theme of hearing and not hearing, of sound and silence, or rather of played notes and rests. [5]

One physical (sound related) embodiment of syncopation appears in the story directly after that moment listening to the song of the revival singers. The narrator, begins to regard his brother a bit differently, Sonny's "melody" becomes less dissonant to him (the narrator is learning how to listen to a dissonant harmony). The narrator takes note of Sonny walking away from the revival singers on the street, noting (what he describes in musical terms as) how Sonny "has a slow, loping walk, something like the Harlem hipsters walk, only he's imposed on this his own half-beat. I had never really noticed it before" (Baldwin, 130). This walk, this half-beat of walking and pausing, is connotative of syncopation. [6]

Syncopation is a strong style element present in ragtime music. For most jazz connoisseurs and historians, the development of ragtime is the inception of jazz. One can't help but take note of Baldwin's progression in the story, nodding to an element of ragtime after a gospel/spiritual revival. The rise of ragtime music happened during in the reformation era South. The music itself was a blend of African syncopated tribal rhythms, and classical European rhythms. In breaking down the components of ragtime it is evident that "African music supplied the strong underlying beat (absent in most European music), the use of polyrhythms, and the idea of playing the melody separate from or above the beat, European music provided formal dance rhythms. Combined, these rhythms give jazz it's swing," and regarding the harmonies "the musical ideas of both continents are present...the blue notes derived from the pentatonic scale, the call and response and unconventional instrumental timbre of African music together with the conventional harmonies and structure of European music." ("The Origins of Jazz")

Ragtime rose out of the Red-Light Districts and came to be well regarded. At the height of its popularity, the Creole musicians that performed ragtime often received their musical in Paris. Yet, while these musicians performed in world tours and on stages across the country, they were still regarded as second-class citizens. There is another aspect of history alluded to here as well. The Creoles perceived themselves as being socially superior to blacks that were not of Creole heritage, and yet their struggles at the turn of the century America were shared (Burns, "Jazz").

## Music as Metaphor

The controlling metaphor of music is present at the inception of the piece. It is part of the compositional technique and structure that Baldwin uses. We

have seen how the prose beginning functions like a musical intro, leading into the melodies of the narrator's and Sonny's lives. We've noted how Baldwin uses diction to lay down a beat, laying the groundwork for the legacy of repression that the story builds on. The tapping keeps the beat of Harlem life. This beat keeps time to the everyday existence of going to work, riding subway cars, and of a people trapped within the city's repetitive cycle. The repetition of sound in the word endings and of the language (I, it) reflects the repetition of life, of the "I" never escaping the "it", the trappings of society and of dim of possibility. The narrator tells us that the young men in the city" were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities" (Baldwin,104). They become trapped in redundancy, poverty, and suffering. Very few can escape the life in Harlem.

This metaphorical beat plays throughout the fabric of the story. It exists not just in the lives of the narrator and Sonny, but also throbs in the backdrop on the streets of Harlem. "The juke-box was blasting away with something black and bouncy...I half watched the barmaid as she danced her way from the jukebox to her place behind the bar ...she responded to something someone said, still keeping time to the music. When she smiled one... sensed the doomed, still struggling-woman beneath the battered face. (107)

The barmaid moves from jukebox to bar- bar to juke box. She does not escape the rhythm of Harlem life – she lives with it – "still keeping time, still struggling" with the repetitive cycle that Baldwin describes as a menace. The narrator tells us that this beat is the rhythm of the city, and this rhythm "seemed to be causing the pavement to shake ...the music stopped; the barmaid paused and watched the juke box until the music began again. It did...[and] it filled everything, the people, the houses the music, the dark... the barmaid, with menace; and this menace was their reality" (Baldwin, 107). The narrator and Sonny both operate with this menace, with this underlying beat in the composition, and their stories are in tension with that menace.

## Bird and Bop

Another thread in the story, that cannot go un-noted, is that of drug use. Sonny's life parallels that of Charles Parker. While I have not examined the meaning of or effect of drug use in the story, it is important to note that Sonny's life parallels that of Charlie Parker – whom he names as a musician he admires. Many of our highly regarded jazz musicians have had issues, or experiences with drug use. There are even jazz songs written about drug use, for instance, Louis Armstrong's 1928 song "Muggles" that was a coded song about the use of marijuana (Porter 189). And, it is a well-known fact that Charlie parker was a heroin addict, as is Sonny.

But, in having Sonny's life parallel that of his favorite musician, Baldwin also aligns him with what Parker was an emblem of. Parker was the father of bebop, and bop represented "a revolt, not only from the monumental corn of

big band arrangements, but from the rigidity of tradition... consequently the boppers cast aside many traditional jazz ideas and forms and introduced new effects... boppers strove for dissonance" (Porter, 174). Bop posed a challenge to the status-quo, as did Parker himself. In his work, *Black Music, White Business*, Jazz historian Kofsky writes that Parker "did not blink at the risk of death at the price of expressing his deep-seated antipathy to racism...Parker was also so incensed at racist assaults on his human dignity that he was oblivious to the danger he courted inventing the hostility and resentment these insults inspired" (Kofsky, 112). Parker and many of his boppers were resentful and frustrated by their positions in society – both as icons, or artists. While they had gained fame due to their talents and perseverance, they were still relegated to being second-class citizens. That old gospel promise of the old ship of Zion (a promise of freedom) was an illusion that was not to be realized. For many, drug use provided the illusion of being free. The narrator relates that when watching the people listening to the revival singers, the song "seemed to sooth a poison out of them," and Sonny later tells the narrator that listening to the revival singer reminded him "of what heroin feels like." Drug use could be understood as a form of escape, or release from that frustration and anger for these jazz musicians, and that relates to music in the fact that music is also understood as a medium of escape and that for a performer it can be a form of catharsis.

#### The Resolution/ Coda

In composition, there is usually a coda, or a resolution, to the piece that restates the tune's theme, and then *concludes* in a way that captures, or quotes from, the mood of the entire tune. "Sonny's Blues" ends in such a performance. Sonny invites his brother (the narrator) to hear him perform at a nightclub in Harlem, and this musical performance that mimics the use of a coda. Functioning as a coda, his performance concludes the story by, recapitulating the theme(s) and mood of the entire piece. It is beautifully composed, tinged with sadness, and hope, and it leaves us with an awareness of the complexity of the African American experience.

It is during Sonny's performance that all the pieces of the story come together: the idea of beat, rhythm, melody and harmony act alongside the presence of blues, ragtime and gospel, coming together as a performance of improvisational *blues-form* jazz.

Jazz, as a compositional structure in the story, is a retainer of cultural memory, and it is that memory that is released (or evoked) during that performance. The pulse and beat of the story plays on into Sonny's performance.

There is also a harmonizing of the past and present. The standard form/ older form of jazz supports Sonny's current improvisation (within the performance). In his text Baldwin arranges these harmonies into a discussion between the musicians and their instruments as well as a discussion between the performers (Sonny) and their audience (the narrator). The narrator, seated at

the performance, begins telling us that,

*Creole, the leader of the group, is guiding Sonny as they begin to play ...I had the feeling that, in a way, everyone on the bandstand was waiting for him, both waiting for him and pushing him along. But as I began to watch Creole, I realized that it was Creole who held them all back. He had them on a short rein. Up there, keeping the beat with his whole body, wailing on the fiddle, with his eyes half closed, he was listening to everything, but he was listening to Sonny. He was having a dialogue with Sonny. He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for the deep water. He was Sonny's witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing-he had been there, and he knew. And he wanted Sonny to know. He was waiting for Sonny to do the things on the keys which would let Creole know that Sonny was in the water. And, while Creole listened, Sonny moved, deep within, exactly like someone in torment. (137-138)*

The dialogue set here, is between the past world of ragtime – represented by Creole –and of the present world bop – embodied by Sonny. It is that continuous beat of the past that hems them in, but Sonny must not be afraid to strike out and to move out to “deep water” no matter how painful it may be to remember, or to accept, one’s past. It is by remembering that one can move forward.

In his (nineteen-fifties) essays, “Notes of a Native Son” and “The Fire Next Time”, Baldwin wrote that, “it is only in his music...that the Negro of America has could tell his story” (Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”, 25). He discusses the relationship of blacks to their history in America, and the idea that “the American Negro can have no future anywhere...if he is unwilling to accept his past. To accept one’s history is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles like clay in a season of drought.” (Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time”, 65). That past, is embedded in jazz. And this concept, of an embedded past existing in music, is why it is important to note the use of the song Sonny plays at the end – a jazz cover of, “Am I Blue”?

Literary critics have made much of Baldwin ending the story with Sonny performing a blues song. A blues song made popular by Ethel Waters, a singer of Armstrong’s era, who is noted to have gained fame by playing to white audiences and performing in a Vaudeville troop called White Time. Waters was known for having a “light voice” in contrast to other female blues vocal stylists. What Sonny does in that final performance is to take that song, a song that came out of blues tradition, a song that was sung in so many ways, by so many different people, and perform it in a new way – as a jazz piece.

Creole began to tell us what he blues were all about...He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness. (140)

Sonny takes that song and improvises upon it. He builds on all that history, and as Baldwin writes, "the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him [as he plays], is of another order..." (Baldwin,140). And what is evoked in him, what is rising out of that void, is this immense history that carries with it a powerful emotion and a sweeping set of experiences.

[Sonny] began to make [the song] his. It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, and what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother's face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it...I felt my own tears begin to rise. And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky. (141)

Sonny makes the song his, and it is no longer a lament, in that jazz form it is no longer strictly the blues, it becomes a signifier evoking a sorrowful history, and he claims that history, and through music he vocalizes his story, and the story of his brothers and sisters that come from, as the narrator tells us, "that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy" (141). The story ends on that note: on the restatement of all that history, in a resonant blues-form jazz coda.

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## Reprise

Through his use of a mimetic structure, and musical metaphor, Baldwin has created a story imbued with history, and telling of the complexities of the African American experience. It speaks to that struggle of connection to one's past, one's self and one's community, and of truly knowing and accepting one's history to be able to move forward.

In a 1953 radio interview Charlie Parker spoke of the future. Stating that:

...your ideas change as you grow older. Most people fail to realize that most of the things that they hear, either coming out of a man's horn ad-lib, or else things that are written...they're just experiences. The way you feel, the beauty of the weather, the nice look of a mountain, maybe a nice fresh cool breath of air. I mean, all those things – you can never tell what you'll be

thinking tomorrow, but I definitely can say that music won't stop. It'll keep going forward. ("Now You Has Jazz", youtube.com)

Parker tells us the music won't stop, and it hasn't. On the street corners of Harlem, and on the trains traversing New York City, yet another generation struggles to come to terms with their history. They are improvising their lives and stories over the city that surrounds them, and upon the history that has preceded them, to be heard – for us all to listen.

[1] *jazz* noun /jaz/ jazzes, plural

A type of music of black American origin characterized by improvisation, syncopation, and usually a regular or forceful rhythm, emerging at the beginning of the 20th century. Brass and woodwind instruments and piano are particularly associated with *jazz*, although guitar and occasionally violin are also used; styles include Dixieland, swing, bebop, and free *jazz*

"Jazz is able to encompass all of the radically different eras: that it is music that includes qualities such as "swinging", improvising, group interaction, developing an 'individual voice', and being 'open' to different musical possibilities".

"Jazz is a construct" or category that, while artificial, still is useful to designate "a number of musics with enough in common to be understood as part of a coherent tradition".

[2] Yusef Komunyakaa Louisiana poet – civil rights activist. 1984 publication of *Copacetic*, a collection of poems built from colloquial speech which demonstrated his incorporation of jazz influences.

[3] This form is 32 measures long, and is divided into 8 measure phrases that follow the pattern AABA. The first phrase is repeated and followed by a contrasting phrase called the bridge, which is then followed by another repetition of the first phrase. Note that the repetitions of the A-section are not necessarily exact; they may differ slightly in the last couple of measures.

[4] Traditional blues form contains three four-measure phrases that follow the pattern AAB. That is, the first phrase is repeated and then followed by another phrase that answers or contrasts with the first. The chord progression in a blues composition is traditionally anchored by three chords: the I chord, which harmonizes the first phrase, the IV chord, which harmonizes the second phrase, and the V chord, which harmonizes the third phrase. In the key of C, these chords are C, F, and G, respectively. There are many variations on the blues progression.

[5] Fermata: A pause of unspecified length on a note or rest.

[6] Syncopation: In music, includes a variety of rhythms which are in some way unexpected in that they deviate from the strict succession of regularly spaced strong and weak beats in a meter or pulse. These include a stress on a normally unstressed beat or a rest where one would normally be stressed.