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manner among American youths, perhaps it is time we paid our respects to a man who has spent his life reducing the violence and chaos of American life to artistic order. I have no idea where we shall all be a hundred years from now, but if there is a classical music in which the American experience has finally discovered the voice of its own complexity, it will owe much of its direction to the achievements of Edward Kennedy Ellington. For many years he has been telling us how marvelous, mad, violent, hopeful, nostalgic, and (perhaps) decent we are. He is one of the musical fathers of our country, and throughout all these years he has, as he tells us so mockingly, loved us madly. We are privileged to have lived during his time and to have known so great a man, so great a musician.

**AS THE SPIRIT MOVES MAHALIA**

This review of recordings by Mahalia Jackson offers brilliantly sustained, poetic paragraphs in which the gospel singer’s art is compared not only with flamenco and a variety of world musics, but also most emphatically with the blues and jazz. One of her songs contains “a riff straight out of early Ellington.” Jackson glories in a church-song tradition which, says Ellison (continuing his critique of bebop jazz musicians), “could teach the jazz modernists quite a bit about polyrhythms and polystonality.” Elsewhere he observes that Jackson and her piano accompanist, Mildred Falls, “create a rhythmical drive such as is expected of the entire Basie band.” (Here perhaps Ellison takes a shot at Count Basie’s band of the fifties, generally so much less spontaneous and weaker, he felt, than that band’s earlier incarnations.) This essay’s main point, however, is that Mahalia Jackson is not primarily a popular concert entertainer but an “interpretive artist” and a “high priestess in the religious ceremony of her church” who is able (in a phrase Ellison also uses to praise jazz and blues artists) “to evoke a shared community of experience.” Decidedly not a jazz or blues singer—a position the former church boy Ellison understands and respects—she nonetheless performs one of the fundamental services of the public jazz dance: in a world of denials, she affirms the African-American, and therefore American, culture and
its traditions in all their kaleidoscopic multietnic variety. Not only are there significant "common singing techniques of the spirituals and the blues," but sometimes the function of the music of early Sunday morning and late Saturday night is virtually the same. (Saturday Review, September 27, 1958)

There are certain women singers who possess, beyond all the boundaries of our admiration for their art, an uncanny power to evoke our love. We warm with pleasure at mere mention of their names; their simplest songs sing in our hearts like the remembered voices of old dear friends, and when we are lost within the listening anonymity of darkened concert halls, they seem to seek us out unerringly. Standing regal within the bright isolation of the stage, their subtlest effects seem meant for us and us alone: privately, as across the intimate space of our own living rooms. And when we encounter the simple dignity of their immediate presence, we suddenly ponder the mystery of human greatness.

Perhaps this power springs from their dedication, their having subjected themselves successfully to the demanding discipline necessary to the mastery of their chosen art. Or perhaps it is a quality with which they are born, as some are born with bright orange hair. Perhaps, though we think not, it is acquired, a technique of "presence." But whatever its source, it touches us as a rich abundance of human warmth and sympathy. Indeed, we feel that if the idea of aristocracy is more than mere class conceit, then these surely are our natural queens. For they enchant the eye as they caress the ear, and in their presence we sense the full, moony glory of womanhood in all its mystery—maid, matron and matriarch. They are the sincere ones whose humanity dominates the artifices of the art with which they stir us, and when they sing we have some notion of our better selves.

Lotte Lehmann is one of these, and Marian Anderson. Both Madame Ernesteine Schumann-Heink and Kathleen Ferrier possessed it. Nor is it limited to these mistresses of high art. Pastora Pavon, La Niña de los Peines, the great flamenco singer, is another, and so is Mahalia Jackson, the subject of this piece, who reminds us that while not all great singers possess this quality, those who do, no matter how obscure their origin, are soon claimed by the world as its own.

Mahalia Jackson, a large, handsome brown-skinned woman in her middle forties, who began singing in her father's church at the age of five, is a Negro of the American Negroes, and is, as the Spanish say, a woman of much quality. Her early experience was typical of Negro women of a certain class in the South. Born in New Orleans, she left school in the eighth grade and went to work as a nursemaid. Later she worked in the cotton fields of Louisiana and as a domestic. Her main social life was centered in the Baptist church. She grew up with the sound of jazz in her ears, and, being an admirer of Bessie Smith, was aware of the prizes and acclaim awaiting any mistress of the blues, but in her religious views the blues and jazz are profane forms and a temptation to be resisted. She also knew something of the painful experiences which go into the forging of a true singer of the blues.

In 1927, following the classical pattern of Negro migration, Mahalia went to Chicago, where she worked as a laundress and studied beauty culture. Here, too, her social and artistic life was in the Negro community, centered in the Greater Salem Baptist Church. Here she became a member of the choir and a soloist with a quartet which toured the churches affiliated with the National Baptist Convention. Up until the forties she operated within a world of music which was confined, for the most part, to Negro communities, and it was by her ability to move such audiences as are found here that her reputation grew. It was also such audiences which, by purchasing over two million copies of her famous "Move On Up a Little Higher," brought her to national attention.
When listening to such recordings as *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*, *Bless This House*, *Mahalia Jackson*, or *In the Upper Room*, it is impossible to escape the fact that Mahalia Jackson is possessed of a profound religious conviction. Nor can we escape the awareness that no singer living has a greater ability to move us, regardless of our own religious attitudes, with the projected emotion of a song. Perhaps with the interpretive artist the distinction so often made between popular and serious art is not so great as it seems. Perhaps what counts is the personal quality of the individual artist, the depth of his experience and his sense of life. Certainly Miss Jackson possesses a quality of dignity and the ability to project a sincerity of purpose which is characteristic of only the greatest of interpretive artists.

Nor should it be assumed that her singing is simply the expression of the Negro’s “natural” ability as is held by the stereotype (would that it were only true!). For although its techniques are not taught formally, Miss Jackson is the master of an art of singing which is as complex and of an even older origin than that of jazz.

It is an art which was acquired during those years when she sang in the comparative obscurity of the Negro community, and which, with the inevitable dilutions, comes into our national song style usually through the singers of jazz and the blues. It is an art which depends upon the employment of the full expressive resources of the human voice—from the rough growls employed by blues singers, the intermediate sounds, half-cry, half-recitative, which are common to Eastern music, the shouts and Hollers of American Negro folk cries, the rough-edged tones and broad vibratos, the high, shrill and grating tones which rasp one’s ears like the agonized flourishes of flamenco, to the gut tones, which remind us of where the jazz trombone found its human source. It is an art which employs a broad rhythmic freedom and accents the lyric line to reinforce the emotional impact. It utilizes half-tones, glissandi, blue notes, humming and moaning. Or again, it calls upon the most lyrical, floating tones of which the voice is capable. Its diction ranges from the most precise to the near liquidation of word-meaning in the sound: a pronunciation which is almost of the academy one instant and of the broadest cotton-field dialect the next. And it is most eclectico in its use of other musical idioms; indeed, it borrows any effect which will aid in the arousing and control of emotion. Especially is it free in its use of the effects of jazz; its tempos (with the characteristic economy of Negro expression, it shares a common rhythmic and harmonic base—with jazz) are taken along with its intonations, and, in ensemble singing, its orchestral voicing. In Mahalia’s own “Move On Up a Little Higher” there is a riff straight out of early Ellington. Most of all it is an art which swings, and in the South there are many crudely trained groups who use it naturally for the expression of religious feeling who could teach the jazz modernists quite a bit about polyrhythms and polytonality.

Since the forties this type of vocal music, known loosely as “gospel singing,” has become a big business, both within the Negro community and without. Negro producers have found it highly profitable to hold contests in which groups of gospel singers are pitted against one another, and the radio stations which cater to the Negro market give many hours of their air time to this music. Today there are groups who follow regular circuits just as the old Negro jazzmen, blues singers and vaudeville acts followed the old T.O.B.A. circuit through the Negro communities of the nation. Some form the troupes of traveling evangelists and move about the country with their organs, tambourines, bones and drums. Some are led by ex-jazzmen who have put on the cloth, either sincerely or in response to the steady employment and growing market. So popular has the music become that there is a growing tendency to exploit its generic relationship to jazz and so-called rock-and-roll.

Indeed, many who come upon it outside the context of
the Negro community tend to think of it as just another form of jazz, and the same confusion is carried over to the art of Mahalia Jackson. There is a widely held belief that she is really a blues singer who refuses, out of religious superstitions, perhaps, to sing the blues; a jazz singer who coyly rejects her rightful place before a swinging band. And it is ironically true that just as a visitor who comes to Harlem seeking out many of the theaters and movie houses of the twenties will find them converted into churches, those who seek today for a living idea of the rich and moving art of Bessie Smith must go not to the night clubs and variety houses where those who call themselves blues singers find their existence, but must seek out Mahalia Jackson in a Negro church. And I insist upon the church and not the concert hall, because for all her concert appearances about the world she is not primarily a concert singer but a high priestess in the religious ceremony of her church. As such she is as far from the secular existentialism of the blues as St. John of the Cross is from Sartre. And it is in the setting of the church that the full timbre of her sincerity sounds most distinctly.

Certainly there was good evidence of this last July at the Newport Jazz Festival, where one of the most widely anticipated events was Miss Jackson’s appearance with the Ellington Orchestra. Ellington had supplied the “Come Sunday” movement of his Black, Brown and Beige Suite (which with its organlike close had contained one of Johnny Hodges’s most serenely moving solos, a superb evocation of Sunday peace) with lyrics for Mahalia to sing. To make way for her, three of the original movements were abandoned, along with the Hodges solo, but in their place she was given words of such banality that for all the fervor of her singing and the band’s excellent performance, that Sunday sun simply would not arise. Nor does the recorded version change our opinion that this was a most unfortunate marriage and an error of taste, and the rather unformed setting of the Twenty-third Psalm which completes the side does nothing to improve things. In fact, only the sound and certain of the transitions between movements are an improvement over the old version of the suite. Originally “Come Sunday” was Ellington’s moving impression of Sunday peace and religious quiet, but he got little of this into the words. So little, in fact, that it was impossible for Mahalia to release that vast fund of emotion with which Southern Negroes have charged the scenes and symbols of the Gospels.

Only the fortunate few who braved the Sunday-morning rain to attend the Afro-American Episcopal Church services heard Mahalia at her best at Newport. Many had doubtless been absent from church or synagogue for years, but here they saw her in her proper setting and the venture into the strangeness of the Negro church was worth the visit. Here they could see, to the extent we can visualize such a thing, the world which Mahalia summons up with her voice, the spiritual reality which infuses her song. Here it could be seen that the true function of her singing is not simply to entertain, but to prepare the congregation for the minister’s message, to make it receptive to the spirit, and with effects of voice and rhythm to evoke a shared community of experience.

As she herself put it while complaining of the length of the time allowed her during a recording session, “I’m used to singing in church, where they don’t stop me until the Lord comes.” By which she meant, not until she had created the spiritual and emotional climate in which the Word is made manifest; not until, and as the spirit moves her, the song of Mahalia the high priestess sings within the heart of the congregation as its own voice of faith.

When in possession of the words which embody her religious convictions, Mahalia can dominate even the strongest jazz beat and instill it with her own fervor. Bless This House contains songs set to rumba, waltz and two-step, but what she does to them provides a triumphal blending of popular
dance movements with religious passion. In *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*, the song “The Holy Babe” is a Negro version of an old English count-rhyme, and while enumerating the gifts of the Christian God to man, Mahalia and Mildred Falls, her pianist, create a rhythmical drive such as is expected of the entire Basie band. It is all joy and exultation and swing, but it is nonetheless religious music. Many who are moved by Mahalia and her spirit have been so impressed by the emotional release of her music that they fail to see the frame within which she moves. But even *In the Upper Room* and *Mahalia Jackson*—in which she reminds us most poignantly of Bessie Smith, and in which the common singing techniques of the spirituals and the blues are most clearly to be heard—are directed toward the afterlife and thus are intensely religious. For those who cannot, or will not, visit Mahalia in her proper setting, these records are the next best thing.

“Flamenco,” Ellison’s first published music essay, evokes his debt to Ernest Hemingway: the sweat-on-wine-bottle detail, the strings of independent clauses, the deadpan tone that is nonetheless full of passion. Like Hemingway, Ellison uses the occasion of the journalistic piece, in this case a review of new recordings of flamenco music, to make his own statement about life and art. Here the concern for spiritual values within the context of secular art and the conviction that art’s power derives significantly from its connection with ritual define Ellison’s perspective as a music writer here and throughout his career. Note particularly his sense of flamenco as an attractively hybrid music of Spain, “which is neither Europe nor Africa,” he writes, “but a blend of both”: flamenco, a form that rhymes with other world musics, particularly the blues. Note, too, Ellison’s emphasis on the inextinguishable power of the artist-as-hero. In an interview contemporaneous with this piece, Ellison said of the Spanish dancer/musician Vicente Escudero (celebrated here) that he “could recapitulate the history and spirit of the Spanish dance with a simple arabesque of his fingers.” In an intensely charged scene in *Invisible Man*, Ellison presents an old Negro woman who sings “a spiritual as full of welscherz as flamenco.” First published as “Introduction to Flamenco,” this piece was written for the Saturday Review, December 11, 1934.