Simplicity, Liberation, and Authenticity: Muddying Up Some Ideas

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Since it’s all about liberation, as Dr. Early said yesterday, I thought (or at least the smart-alecky side of me rather than the smart side of me thought) that I would break free from the confines of the presentation. Then I realized that I couldn’t define what I’d be liberated to, so I decided it was better to stay inside the drawer and look at all the junk lying around in here.

What did I learn this summer? For me at least, it has come down to three ideas: simplicity, liberation, and authenticity. Greg Allman once said something to the effect of “if you want somebody to muddy up the chords in some blues, then just give the song to me and it’ll get muddied up real good.” So I’ll try to muddy up these three simple ideas real good.

It’s simple. How many times have we heard that statement over the past weeks? And the interesting thing I’ve come away with is that it’s true. At least the questions are simple even if the responses to those simple questions have led to extremely complex answers or even no real answers at all. For example, think about the utter simplicity of a question like “What is music?” or “What’s the difference between music and noise?” Those are simplest questions to begin to ask about a topic like music, yet I realized that so often in my own teaching, the simple questions were the ones I often left unasked, even when they are the most important and essential questions of all. The question Dr. Early posed to us, “What is black music?” left all of us challenged to find words to actually describe black music beyond being able to say “that’s it” when we heard it.

The intellectual pain that question caused me was only surpassed by the question of authenticity, and I’ll muddy up that idea in a minute. As an AP US Government teacher, I realized that I had been asking my students to answer all kinds of complex questions, when a simple question such
as “What is politics?” would be far more challenging, and most importantly, more interesting for my students to consider. There is an intellectual power in attempting to answer the simple questions. Challenging my students to listen to and be transformed by the simple, elegant power of Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln’s “Triptych,” or the spirituality and deep pain in Coltrane’s “Alabama” is one lesson that I can’t wait to get to. The simple, yet incredibly powerful freedom songs brought courage, strength and a sense of efficacy to the participants in the Civil Rights Movement, not to mention the simple, poignant question posed by Marvin Gaye: “What’s Going On?”

Until yesterday, I didn’t ‘get’ “the New Music” at all. Most of it sounded like noise to me until Dr. Early pointed out that it’s all about liberation from the status quo. That statement was ironically liberating. Suddenly, I could look at Coltrane’s “Ascension” or the BAG Quintet’s “OLCSJBFLBC” in a new light. Well, “Ascension” at least. Transformation means to be able to become liberated from the past and to construct something new out of the remnants, both drawing on what has come before and looking to the future’s “Brave New World.” Berry Gordy set out to make money, to sell a product, but in the process of liberating himself from the institutions set in place by white-owned record labels, he was able to transform the way in which music was presented and consumed, at least for a while. Coltrane, BAG and others set out to liberate jazz from its confines, and while the result wasn’t commercial, it was no less important a contribution to the transformations sweeping through America in the era we studied. And, it also occurred to me that this cycle of liberation from the status quo, rinse and repeat, was a quintessentially American (and maybe even more broadly, a human) concept. What I mean by this is that Americans have liberated themselves from the status quo since before the Founding, and while liberation has certainly been bumpy and sometimes downright horrendous, it has often
contributed to innovation and advancement. Then, when things get stagnant, someone musters
the courage to liberate us from the status quo once again.

Which brings me to the most painful question I had to confront this summer, “What is
authentic?” It’s kind of like asking, “What’s real?” And “Is anything real?” I battled with this
intellectually, as the modernist in me struggled with the postmodernist. My conclusion, as far as
music is concerned is this: I think that when someone makes music with the intent of putting out
a piece that is good to him or her and/or good to the audience, then the piece is authentic.
Conversely, when someone cynically puts out a piece of music to simply co-opt the work of
others, then the music is inauthentic in that it lacks integrity. Is this a completely satisfying
answer? No, but it’s the best I’ve got for now. So, is Dyke and the Blazer’s “We Got More Soul”
an authentic version of contemporary music and culture? Yup, and Don McLean’s “American
Pie” is just as authentic to the distinctly different taste community he was speaking to. Both were
speaking to us through their songs. Authenticity belongs to both the artist and the audience as
they engage in a dialogue to create some kind of order out of all of the junk in this drawer.

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