

Going South: Representation in the *Deep South Suite*

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Let me begin by saying what a great honour it is just to hang out with such a group of eminent Ellingtonians, let alone to be invited, by our most distinguished hosts Walter and Louis, to give a keynote talk for the 22nd International Duke Ellington Study Group Conference. Given the amount of knowledge, expertise and, I'm sure, opinions in the room I look forward to your questions or corrections.

In my abstract I promised to discuss both the *Deep South Suite* and the *New Orleans Suite*—but, given our time restraints, I'll limit myself to the *Deep South*, indeed just to its first two movements. (I hope my remarks will complement the extended discussion of this work in *Lonesome Roads and Streets of Dreams* by Andrew Berish.) Before I start down my own lonesome roads I want to say how in re-hearing the *Deep South Suite* I was reminded once again of what an astonishing mountain range of large scale masterpieces Ellington and Strayhorn created in the 1940s: *Black, Brown and Beige*, *New World A-Coming*, *Perfume Suite*, *Deep South Suite*, *Liberian Suite* and *A Tone Parallel to Harlem*—an unprecedented achievement in American music, which nevertheless encountered considerable critical resistance at the time—and even now.

Nearly seventy years after its premiere, the *Deep South Suite* remains, to borrow a title from a different Ellington masterpiece, a swampy river. It carries in its currents many of the questions that abound in Ellington scholarship and criticism: questions of authorship, political intent and artistic success. It premiered in November 1946, first in Chicago, then at Carnegie Hall. Its four movement structure and collaborative authorship paralleled that of the *Perfume*

Suite that had premiered at Carnegie two years earlier in December 1944; both works are four movement quasi-symphonies with one movement serving as a display of Ellington's piano playing and another as a display of Strayhorn's daring modernism. Both suites juxtapose movements that go down easily with others that are more provocative. Their parallel structures make the suites fraternal twins, a close relationship that reminds us that in Ellington's music the personal is often political.

In 1946, we might remind ourselves, the American South was a one-party apartheid society, the Klu Klux Klan still operated without police intervention and lynchings were still an accepted form of justice; in Congress, Southern senators and representatives prevented the passage of any civil rights legislation. The political intent of the *Deep South Suite* was originally recited by Leonard Feather as an introduction to the V-disc recording. The words Feather recorded reappeared as Ellington's own account in *Music is My Mistress*: "The Deep South is many things to many people, but here (in *Magnolias Just Dripping with Molasses*) we were content to reproduce what might be called the Dixie Chamber of Commerce dream picture.... *Hearsay* was concerned with other things...that were not at all in accordance with the Chamber of Commerce dream picture, things that were at times almost directly the opposite." (MIMM p. 184) These understated but clearly aimed remarks were further amplified by Mercer Ellington in *Duke Ellington in Person*. Nevertheless James Lincoln Collier claimed that "it is difficult to relate the program to the music" (280).

Today, I want to consider the relation of music and programme—or music and representation—from a different perspective. Given the absence of lyrics in the *Deep South Suite* its representation of the South is—apart from the titles—strictly musical, but how does music represent anything, let alone a subject as fraught with history and mythology as the South? Before we can begin to pass judgment on the success or failure of representation we first must determine what musical mechanisms or devices could be used to this end.

In discussions of classical music, scholars use the term "topic" for musical metaphors; these devices enabled Mozart, for example, to indicate the gender, class and mental states of characters in his operas by relating the specific music of the operas to commonplaces of Mozart's musical culture: modes, rhythms, or melodic shapes that bore a considerable baggage of meaning. One famous instance of this use of topics, for instance, comes in the ballroom scene in *Don Giovanni* where Mozart superimposes three genres of dance to differentiate the social classes of three groups of dancers.

Are there similar "topics" in jazz? Let me begin to answer that question by posing a different one: in the

three famous train pieces from the Ellington/Strayhorn repertory, *Daybreak Express*, *Take the 'A' Train*, and *Happy-go-lucky Local*, in what direction are the trains moving? How can we tell — and why does it matter? Actually we know for certain the answer for one piece: the A train, as the lyrics tell us, is headed uptown — northward to Sugar Hill in Harlem. I suspect, though, that many listeners also assume that the *Daybreak Express* is headed north, because north is the direction of emancipation, of escape from slavery and segregation and racist violence. The jubilant tone of the music certainly suggests a freedom-bound trajectory. We might expect therefore that the implication of a southbound musical route would be correspondingly horrific, as it is, exceptionally, in *Strange Fruit*, and yet American popular song from Stephen Foster to Gladys Knight, has celebrated southward train travel not in terms of horror but of nostalgia whether for the Swanee River or that old Kentucky home.

The contrasting ideas of northbound liberation and southbound nostalgia actually have a long cultural history. You can hear them clearly figured in the lyrics of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* (“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”) versus those of Dixie (“I wish I were in the land of cotton/Old times there are not forgotten”), but they predate the Civil War. In his great study *Patriotic Gore*, Edmund Wilson claimed that the two sides in the war had “reciprocal myths”. The North pictured itself as pursuing a holy crusade, while the South as early as the 1820s had wrapped itself in notions of gallantry and aristocratic living, a romantic view that Mark Twain blamed on the influence of Sir Walter Scott; in *Life on the Mississippi* Twain called the South’s love of ghosts and phantoms the “Sir Walter disease”.

Neither myth had much basis in reality. After the war, the North, far from turning into a promised land of faith and freedom, became an industrial powerhouse, whose working conditions—as pictured for instance in *The Jungle*—might be termed a more advanced form of slavery. Both before and after the war the South was largely impoverished and backward with just a handful of wealthy families living “graciously”; The Sir Walter disease, nevertheless, persisted, and not just in the South, not least through *Gone With the Wind*.

In music the opposed thematics of Biblical hopes and rose-tinted dreams reproduced themselves in two streams of American song, the African American sorrow songs, or spirituals, and the popular songs stemming from blackface minstrelsy. Stephen Foster, a Pennsylvania-born white Northerner, laid the foundation for American popular song in the 1840s and 50s with his ersatz Plantation Melodies such as *The Old Folks at Home*, *My Old Kentucky Home* and

Old Black Joe, among many others. These hugely popular songs portrayed a longing for the South, a land full of happy “darkies” either dancing merrily or sadly mourning at the grave of their dear deceased Massa.

After the Civil War this antebellum formula was reborn and continued to evolve in the commercial music of Tin Pan Alley. A half-century after emancipation minstrel song stereotypes still appeared in such hit tunes as in *My Mammy* (1918), *Dinah* (1925) or Gershwin’s first hit, *Swanee*. While these songs avoided the more egregious racial stereotypes of their predecessors they nevertheless preserved the illusory sentimentalized picture of the Southland in their lyrics and in their manner of performance: blackface performances by such singers as Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor and even Fred Astaire continued as late as the 1930s.

During the same time period, however, beginning with the first concerts and subsequent international acclaim of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the 1870s, the repertory of the spiritual, including *Go Down, Moses*, *Steal Away* and *Deep River* came to represent African American resistance and aspirations. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, W.E. B. DuBois wrote: “Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence.” (cited in *Deep River*, p.35)

The relation between these two genres is complicated, neither black and white or even black and blackface. One of the most popular southbound songs, *Carry Me Back to Old Virginny* was composed by the African American singer/songwriter James Bland. The Fisk Jubilee singers recorded Foster’s *Old Black Joe*; Charles Ives used fragments of that song as a kind of cantus firmus to evoke the spirits of African American soldiers in the first of his *Three Places in New England*, —and jazz musicians drew on both genres, sometimes, but not always, with irony or at least discomfort.

We can hear the presence of these two genres—and two directions—in two popular songs from the 1920s: *Alabama Bound* and *Dear Old Southland*. First let’s listen to a bit of Al Jolson’s 1939 recording of *Alabama Bound* one of the most popular songs of the 1920s through the 1950s. *Alabama Bound* quickly entered the jazz repertory; here are two very early versions first by Paul Whiteman from 1924, second by Fletcher Henderson in 1925. In all three versions you’ll hear a disconnect between the older minstrel style and the new idiom of jazz, most obviously in Louis Armstrong’s hot solo on the Henderson recording—but how do we interpret the contrast? Henderson begins with the train whistle, while

Whiteman saves it for the end. Does that indicate a change in direction?

Listen to three instrumental versions of *Dear Old Southland*, written in 1921 by Turner Layton and Henry Creamer and based on two spirituals: *Deep River* and *Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child*. First we will hear Louis Armstrong from 1930, then Paul Whiteman from 1921 and finally Ellington's recording from 1934 (Ellington gave a quite different solo piano rendition in 1940.) The vocal on the Ellington is by Louis Bacon.

These three performances are very different from one another. Armstrong plays it reverently, like a hymn, as if he were really playing the two spirituals—he indulges in only one hot break. Whiteman's version, by sharp contrast, plays the song in a banjo – strumming minstrel-show style, throws in a medley of Foster tunes and bits of Dixie, turns *Motherless Child* into an up-tempo tango and *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen* into a sleek foxtrot before concluding with a bit more of Foster's *Old Folks at Home*. The Whiteman arrangement mixes minstrel song and sorrow song as if they were indistinguishable rather than inimical. As we will soon see, this odd stylistic stew foreshadows Ellington's more pointed blending of genres in the *Deep South Suite*.

But first, what are we to make of Ellington's performance of *Dear Old Southland* from 1933? It is up-tempo and so does not feel like a spiritual, but it also contains none of the minstrel style elements that are so conspicuous in the Whiteman recording. We might say that Ellington has translated the spirituals into the jazz idiom so that the melody is immediately subject to improvisatory treatment—but how do we interpret Louis Bacon's nearly wordless vocal? It sounds like a parody, but what would be its target? One explanation of such an irreverent touch, if that is what it is, would be the debate within African American culture about the special standing given the repertory of the spirituals especially in relation to the blues and jazz. Zora Neale Hurston, for instance, (as noted by Paul Allen Anderson in his study, *Deep River*) ridiculed the well-mannered concert spirituals “for squeezing all of the rich black juice out of the songs and presenting a sort of musical octoroon to the public.” (DR p. 172). In his essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, published in 1926, Langston Hughes argued that jazz was “one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tomtom beating in the Negro soul” while he identified the spirituals with what he termed the “unconscious ‘white is best’ mentality of the black bourgeoisie.” (DR p. 177) We might say then that Ellington's *Dear Old Southland* put the juice—and the tomtom--back in the song.

Before turning, at long last, to the *Deep South Suite*, I just want to restate the terms of our two musical topics. The sorrow songs were seen, for the most part, as African American emblems of pride, dignity and justice. The latter day plantation melodies, or neo-minstrelsy, were secular songs, often show tunes, aimed at white audiences, even when written or performed by African Americans. As sacred texts, the spirituals offered an alternative to the degrading images perpetuated in popular song, but they could not interact with that inimical genre. Such interaction—through parody, irony, erasure or what Henry Lewis Gates terms ‘signifyin’ demanded a more transgressive idiom than that of the spirituals—it demanded the allusive, subversive strategies of the blues or jazz.

The first movement of the *Deep South Suite* bears the title *Magnolias Just Dripping with Molasses*, but Ellington's short score calls it *Pseudo*—making his intentions even clearer. It is a little over four and a half minutes long, fifty percent longer than Ellington's usual three minutes, and is constructed out of thirteen distinct phrases, labeled in Ellington's manuscript as: Introduction, piano phrase, then phrases A-K. In MIMM Ellington wrote that the music attempted to “reproduce what might be called the Dixie Chamber of Commerce dream picture, with beautiful blue skies, Creole gals with flashing eyes, fried chicken, watermelons and all those good old nostalgic memories.” (MIMM p184) In other words the music exposes the pseudo-South through the imagery of minstrel song—but how does it make this audible? Andrew Berish has claimed that the irony is only spelled out in the solos by Lawrence Brown and Jimmy Hamilton that quote bits of *Dixie*, and *The Old Folks at Home*, but is somehow counteracted by the general “upbeat and exciting” feel of the music. Berish portrays Ray Nance, Brown and Hamilton as “the main musical actors and inventors” and questions accounts of the piece that impute “too much intent to Ellington as composer.”

I believe a look at Ellington's manuscript short score from the Ellington Archive at the Smithsonian Museum of American History gives us a different picture. The sketch is complete but is laid out in Ellington's typical montage form with some phrases indicated as inserts. On the first page we see is an intriguing three-part contrapuntal figure in the slow introduction. Against a descending chromatic melody two voices play the opening notes of *Old Folks at Home*—way down upon the Swanee River—in parallel major thirds—the harmonic equivalent of molasses. We find a second half-hidden Stephen Foster tune in the trombone at the end of phrase C—it plays another phrase from *Old Folks at Home*, the one to the words “All de world am (sad and dreamy). These two melodic fragments, hinting at a text and then not

stating it, set up the climactic allusion in the piece which appears first at phrase E with a burst in the brass that riffs on the opening phrase of *Dixie* (Oh I wish I were in the land of cotton). This allusion returns at phrase J- a repeated five-note figure to the alluding to opening of that phrase “But I wish I were” from *Dixie*; it never follows through to state the apparently unspeakable title. These carefully placed, artfully cropped allusions would have been an open invitation for the soloists to follow suit even if they had received no further oral instructions in rehearsal.

Ellington originally indicated a Charleston groove for the phrase that follows his piano introduction; he replaced this version of this phrase with an insert for saxes: a multi-tiered *Klangfarbenmelodie* on the pitch F superimposing four different rhythmic figures. To my ear this fascinating texture is meant to evoke a train: not a gospel train headed north but a sleek, segregated, streamliner headed south. Notice that the first time the phrase ends in a quizzical gesture, but the second time it goes to a grinning fanfare for four trumpets which almost whistles *Dixie*—perhaps the official, de rigeur, welcome aboard to the white passengers from the black porters.

This potent little phrase helps frame the entire *Deep South Suite* between two contrasting train “topics”—a southbound speeding express and a local moving slowly northward to a happy-go-lucky rhythm-and-blues groove; the two topics signal a metaphoric tension between the mechanisms of white power and black resistance, but we also hear this contrast within *Magnolias* itself. The tone of *Magnolias*, switches half-way through with Taft Jordan’s entrance—a very different fanfare from the official greeting heard earlier. From here to the end the voice of the music is the voice of the blues, or the voices of the blues musicians in the segregated rear car of the train. Above phrase F in the manuscript Ellington writes (if I am deciphering it correctly) “Pseudo Dixieland/ Jazzmine earthiness...Have never witnessed these heavenly (Etherealities) by their Chamber of Commerce...interpretation.” Following this instruction the solos mock the fake platitudes of the south. In the closing phrase these blues voices crescendo in an upward chromatic scale that reverses the sticky plantation sentiments heard at the very opening.

On close examination of the score, then, *Magnolias* turns out to be a slyly intertextual composition that half-hides and half-reveals very specific allusions by manipulating the topics of minstrel song and the blues. The choice of minstrel allusions, their fragmented hidden nature and their blues-inflected re-composition challenges their representational standing, as if they had all been printed in italics or surrounded by scare quotes. Much as this tactic may remind us of the role that composers like Charles Ives and Igor Stravinsky

gave to allusions or quotations in their work, we should remind ourselves that intertextual allusion is an essential strategy of blues music in general and of jazz improvisation in particular.

It is fascinating to turn from Ellington’s manuscript score for *Pseudo* to Strayhorn’s manuscript score for *Hearsay*. Unlike the on-page building-block multi-thematic construction we find in Ellington sketches, Strayhorn’s score looks like it was fully formed in his head before it was written down. *Hearsay* is a large ternary design AABACBA, all clearly developed out of the trumpet melody. Strayhorn begins the movement with a slow introduction that contains those same sticky parallel thirds we heard at the start of *Magnolias*—but without the Foster allusion. In Strayhorn’s sharply dissonant harmonization the figure evokes Debussy (*La Mer*) rather than Foster. The re-interpreted echo of *Magnolias* in effect pulls our ears out of the molasses and tells us to wake up to what is really happening.

Like *Strange Feeling* from the *Perfume Suite*, *Hearsay* exemplifies Strayhorn’s modernist side, but within the context of the *Deep South Suite*, we can hear the daring harmonies, carefully constructed tension, even the avoidance of any improvisation, itself as a topic, a musical metaphor. Where Ellington situated the jazz idiom in relation to the alien topic of minstrel song, Strayhorn locates *Hearsay* at a different contested border, European modernist composition, with hints of Debussy and Berg. The ternary design of the piece accentuates this contrast by wrapping a ballad melody around a central episode that differs sharply in metre, texture and mood (while at the same time developing ideas from the bridge of the ballad). It builds to a shocking climax, and then, equally shocking, returns to its opening melody as if nothing had happened, a dramatic irony reminiscent, again, of Alban Berg. Where Ellington’s use of the minstrelsy topic locates his music in relation to a long, painful history, Strayhorn’s modernist topic places the music in the equally painful present moment, undoing nostalgia with graphic realism.

Yes there’s even more, folks: *No One Was Watching* and *Happy Go Lucky Local*, different from each other and from the previous movements. The *Deep South Suite* is a vast panorama, but I hope my discussion of just some of its aspects will lead to further explorations of the whole suite.

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