



Suits to Robes: A study of Free Jazz Fashion

Christopher A. Cottle, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, USA

Frederick S. Cottle, Kansas State University, USA

Keywords: African, Jazz, Culture, Community

This presentation examines the presence and significance of African-derived clothing styles among Jazz musicians in the 1960's and 1970's. The study primarily focuses on musicians associated with progressive strains of the musical form, such as Free Jazz. The publically expressed beliefs and cultural involvement of some musicians who performed in avant-garde styles during this politically and artistically tumultuous period indicate their support and promotion of the general mindset of African-American Cultural Nationalism with their choice of clothing. Using Wenger's theory of Communities of Practice, a study of the discography of many free jazz artists shows how these musicians, working in a non-verbal form of expression, made a political statement through their choice of clothing in a show of solidarity with the African-American Cultural Nationalist movement.

Wenger's theory of Communities of Practice states that people within the same organization or profession share common ideas and communicate those ideas through various methods to achieve learning and pass along ideology within the community (Wenger, 1998). The participants in the avant-garde jazz movement between 1955 and 1975 certainly make up what Wenger describes as a community of practice. A quick scan of the discography of some artists in this relatively small community shows a distinct change in artwork and dress styles that reveals one of those messages (an example would be Pharaoh Sanders). When Pharaoh Sanders was a member of John Coltrane's band in the mid-1960's, there was a distinct and prevalent dress style among jazz musicians: dark, tailored suits in the Western tradition worn with white shirts and frequently dark colored ties. As time moved forward and Sanders became a solo artist, there was a change in many artists' album artwork toward more African-influenced styles and colors. Many artists made the transition from wearing traditional Western suits to African garments such as robes (including the ubiquitous dashiki). This shift in the jazz community can be seen in other artists' discographies and seems to have coincided with a proliferation of African-American Cultural Nationalist sentiments in the wider African-American community.

The roots of the African-American Cultural Nationalist movement lie in the expatriation of former slaves from their homeland, Africa, and the movement's manifestations continue today. The 1960's brought on a heightened emphasis of this movement within the African-American community and many of its principles were especially appealing to members of the free jazz community. The cultural allegiance of some free and avant-garde jazz musicians who performed in this time period is evidence of the political motivation behind their clothing choices. Free jazz musicians working in a non-verbal form of creative expression used their clothing in an open show of solidarity with the African-American Cultural Nationalist movement.

As Van Deberg points out, African-influenced fashions in 60's and 70's were a way for culturally conscious African-Americans to represent their cultural heritage and stand out from the "drab polyester mainstream" (Van Deberg 1992). Clothing is an integral component of Afro-centric expression, and prominent African-American cultural associations of the time (such as Maulana Karenga's US Organization) followed suit. Clothing is a fundamental form of cultural expression, and the members of the African-American Cultural Nationalist movement used it successfully to re-contextualize a rich heritage of fashion design that had previously been ignored in the Western cultural idiom. Future research could include a full discography content analysis of a random sample of artist with the intent to identify correlations between the African-American Cultural Nationalist movement and the appearance of African-influenced fashion in the free jazz community.

References

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