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History of Jazz

MUJS 3070.001

Word Count: 1595

Charles Mingus and the Diplomatic Dream

Political change does not happen within a vacuum and does not come solely from the top of the social hierarchy. For instance, the 1775 American Revolution began when the citizens of the thirteen colonies decided they had enough of the strictness of the British monarchy and wanted to be free to make their own choices independent of anyone else. The French plebeians heard what had happened in the United States and began their own revolution in 1789. Furthermore, music has proven itself to be a marker for change and deeply interwoven into politics time and time again. This can be seen in singer-songwriters Woody Guthrie and Billie Holiday, who sang about American liberty and racial justice issues respectively. It can be seen in the focus the N.W.A., a hip-hop group, had on speaking out against Ronald Reagan's war on drugs and their support for racial justice. Music has the ability to radicalize people and infiltrate homes and ideas better than any speech could.

Jazz, especially, has a history of being mixed into other unsavory situations. Before 1933, jazz could be heard throughout Germany, but many right-wing parties did not like the use of foreign - and Black, nonetheless - music being played by so many German citizens. After Adolf Hitler rose to power, he banned all foreign music. But people still listened to and enjoyed and loved it, "even by some Nazi functionaries" (Music and the Holocaust). Despite arrests of jazz musicians and enjoyers alike, jazz thrived. There was no other music in Germany like it. Even though Hitler was known for being strict and German citizens, at the time, for their

willingness and complacency, citizens were not willing to give up this art form. Because of this, the Nazi party eventually decided to create German jazz and big band music to curb people's craving, but it never fully stopped citizens from savoring the sound of jazz in its normal state.

From an American diplomatic standpoint, as Charles Mingus' music is incredibly political and could incite people to formulate political opinions outside of what their country would want them to, I would rehire him. I would use his music as a means of inspiring citizens to compare the rigidity of communism to the imagined freeness of democratism and choose to assist America in fighting communism. His actions in other countries would also positively impact how American citizens feel about America as he does represent a large portion of the country. However, I would want to look over the lyrics of any song he performs during his next performances and throughout his career as some of his pieces do paint the United States in a more negative light than would be ideal for an American diplomat in a foreign country.

The 1970s. America versus the Soviet Union. Democratism versus Communism. Nuclear power on both sides. The Cold War had been going on since 1947. During this decade, much progress was made in terms of finding resolutions to foreign issues, but there were also many domestic problems for the United States government. For instance, the United States makes a lot of headway in taking over communist governments and implementing foreign leaders, but many of its citizens are heavily protesting the Vietnam War. The U.S., in addition to 93 other nations, banned testing nuclear weapons on the ocean floor, but political unrest between parties and races is increasing rapidly. The United States found itself on the tipping edge of many issues. One wrong move or spurring sentiment and the U.S. could fall over into the metaphorical powder keg, and this would start to ignite.

Charles Mingus was a jazz bassist and composer. He was born in Arkansas and grew up in a predominantly Black and Mexican part of Los Angeles and started his music career playing the piano, trombone, and cello. Interestingly, he was told that he would not be successful career-wise as he was a Black man in the mid- to late-1900s. Thus, he made a switch to playing the bass as his main instrument. He originally signed with Columbia Records but after some creative differences, he moved to Candid Records and gained more control over his music and message. This control increased when he signed with Atlantic Records and published his “breakthrough album” (Jazz: essential listening). Throughout his career, he increasingly became more outspoken about issues he felt were unjust in America.

Orval Faubus was the 36th governor of Arkansas and a Democrat, who fought against the desegregation of nine Black students into an Arkansas high school in 1957, two years before this song was released. Faubus potentially did this as a means of rallying support in a state that thought highly of segregation. He wound up closing all the high schools in Little Rock high school rather than allowing these Black children to go to a White school. “Original Faubus Fables” was initially released sans lyrics as “Columbia Records [, his record label at the time,] deemed them too antagonistic” (Genius). The song takes on a very mocking tone of Faubus and those who take similar positions as him in positions of power, many of whom he names in the chorus. This can be heard before the music even begins when Mingus states, “We’d like to continue this ... set with a composition dedicated to the first or second or third all-American heel Faubus,” heel being a term to describe someone who attempts winning unethically. This tone is further highlighted through the instrumentation and sliding saxophone sound found in the first verse and throughout the piece. Mingus also plays on a rhyme typically used to congratulate people, “two, four, six, eight: who do we appreciate?” by changing the last line to “they

brainwash and teach you hate.” The timbre of this piece is very conversational. Though it is virtuosic and the instruments are, at times in the remastered version, as loud as or louder than the vocal lines, it does not take away from the piece. “Original Faubus Fables” can be considered to be a “Freedom Song,” a collection of music from the time that highlights racial injustices and civil rights activism that was incredibly prevalent in the Black community all across the country.

The Watergate scandal that shook the trust many Americans had in the government began as a burglary in June of 1972. Burglars were found in the office of the Democratic National Committee, having bugged the phones and stolen many important documents. After an investigation that he fervently tried to stop, it was found that the burglars were connected to Republican President Richard Nixon and his reelection campaign. Nixon resigned in August of 1974. His political aspirations and the willingness of Americans to believe the government would act ethically in most if not all situations were shot down in a series of fell moves. During Mingus’ diplomatic trip to Portugal in 1975, he spoke of Watergate and was heavily critical of Nixon, and even used “sometimes profane commentary” towards him (Unclassified). He also performed “Remember Rockefeller at Attica” at the Fifth Cascais Jazz Festival. The piece speaks of the Attica, New York Prison Riot of 1971. Prisoners at a state prison protested “better living conditions and political rights, claiming they were treated as beasts” (Wikipedia). 1, 281 men rioted and took control of the prison. After four days of negotiation that led nowhere, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller refused to meet with the inmates at the prison and instead sent armed officers in to control the situation. 35 of the 39 men killed were by law enforcement. Those who died included both inmates and employees of the jail. To say the audience was not expecting such a political message against the United States is an understatement. They “were stunned by the fact that a U.S. musician whose attendance at the Festival was made possible

through U.S. government support would feel free to criticize his country's political leaders," the president of the country and a governor of one of its states, nonetheless (Unclassified). The tempo of this piece is very lively and there are not many full spaces in the roughly six-minute song where the audience can take a breath, which is how the political climate was at the time. Furthermore, there is a heavy use of percussion and piano in this piece to symbolize the unrest happening both within the prison system as well as throughout the country. The use of trumpets also makes the piece more militaristic-sounding. The piece gives the listener the tension and unease that was felt by many American citizens at the time.

Overall, music has the power to shape nations and project new ideas to a broader range of people. Depending on the context, who is wielding the instrument, and what the intended impact is, what happens after the sword of music, so to speak, is brandished. Charles Mingus is an incredible musician and songwriter, and the United States had the right idea with recruiting him as an ambassador for the country. It would have made much more sense for the government to make the necessary changes to give Mingus a reason to write 'more positive' songs about the country. It can be argued that in order to love something, one has to be willing to see and speak about its darker underbelly. However, for diplomatic purposes, though, as it is America and those in power, especially at the time, were not eager to make those changes, his rehiring should be contingent on his ability to put America's best - and only its best - foot forward.

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