The Intersection of Jazz and Social Protest
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FARAI CHIDEYA, host:

This month we're taking a closer look at jazz, and today we're digging into jazz as social protest. This art form was forged by social struggle. Take an emancipated and transplanted race then put them up against discrimination during rapid industrialization. That cultural cauldron produced music, which criticized segregation with candor, sadness and humor. Right now with us we've got Robert O'Meally. He's the Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, and founder and former director of the Center for Jazz Studies. Hi, Robert.

Dr. ROBERT O'MEALLY (Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University, Founder, Center for Jazz Studies): Hi, Farai.

CHIDEYA: So...

Dr. O'MEALLY: Glad to be here.

CHIDEYA: Glad to have you and the little bit of music we heard was part of Louis Armstrong's "Black And Blue". Some people saw him as that man who smiled. A man too carefree for politics. But was he really?

Dr. O'MEALLY: Well it's fascinating that all this time later, Armstrong still is part of the cultural landscape. Many people did wonder about that handkerchief and the too ready smile on the "Ed Sullivan Show," and other late night TV programs, family time TV programs. But behind that smile was a man who didn't miss anything and who took political stands when it counted. The song that we're hearing a bit of in the background "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black And Blue," was for its time, a very, very forthright statement about being black in America, and being mad as hell about the injustices that that brought you.

CHIDEYA: Well, let's listen to a little bit more.

(Soundbite of song "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue")

Mr. LOUIS ARMSTRONG: (Singing) How will it end, ain't got a friend. My only sin is in my skin. What did I do to be so black and blue?

CHIDEYA: So how did social protest figure into the creativity of Armstrong and early jazz musicians?

Dr. O'MEALLY: I have to say that each jazz musician would have his or her own story here. But despite that fact, there is, within the music itself, an urgency and a will to celebrate a community. And the will to celebrate a community, because it stems from the black community originally, itself is a political statement.
And so that, you know, someone like Jelly Roll Morton might be doing the "Kansas City Wild Man Blues," that can just be a party song, but because that song in its form is saying we as black people are here and what we do has beauty and it matters to us, if not to anybody else, that in itself has a political urgency that scared the dickens out of many other people.

So you got protests against the music that was so celebratory of a people right from the beginning. And I might add that you also had very early on - that Armstrong song is 1929 - blues singers and then jazz players too, coming straight out and saying, what did I do to be so black and blue?

CHIDEYA: You know, some of these jazz artists dealt in a mainly segregated world. Duke Ellington had an element of social protest, quiet social protest, even at the segregated Cotton Club. He often simply said, I make black music, and didn't want to use jazz. But then you think of Billie Holiday, who made a name for herself at Cafe Society, one of the first integrated clubs. The song "Strange Fruit" was written by a white musician, but it's very much hers. Let's listen to a bit.

(Soundbite of song "Strange Fruit")

Ms. BILLIE HOLIDAY: (Singing) Southern trees bear a strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root. Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze. Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

CHIDEYA: You know, there's been an entire book written just about this song and her performance of it, obviously deeply evocative. How was it received at the time?

Dr. O'MEALLY: Well, when it was first brought to Billie Holiday's record company, they refused it because they felt it was too political for them, they were afraid of their Southern listeners. And so she couldn't record it there. So there's one response. And then she went to a small record store owner who had a record label as well, Commodore Records with Milt Gabler.

And he put it out, and it became an underground hit and then one of those hits that just left through the century. The immediate response was that for lefties in New York City, white and black, you wanted to make it down to Cafe Society, the downtown nightclub, to hear her sing this wonderful, disturbing protest song. So it was received with resistance at first, but then celebrated by the resistors.

CHIDEYA: Well, there's another artist who has - there's so many of these artists who have this incredible fire. Nina Simone, legendary vocalist, often performed her incendiary "Mississippi Goddam" to rapt audiences. Let's take a listen.

(Soundbite of song "Mississippi Goddam")

Ms. NINA SIMONE: (Singing) Hound dogs on my trail, school children sitting in jail. Black cat cross my path, I think every day's going to be my last. Lord have mercy on this land of mine, we all going to get it in due time. I don't belong here, I don't belong there, I've even stopped believing in prayer.

CHIDEYA: You know, we recently spoke with a singer who goes by the name Simone, who is Nina Simone's daughter and a wonderful artist in her own right. And she said that she believes that her mother sang "Mississippi
Goddam" so hard that she actually changed her own voice, kind of broke her voice and had a lower tenor after she did this song. What do you hear when you listen to that song?

Dr. O'MEALLY: Well, that, first of all, is a wonderful story. Nina Simone says in her autobiography that that song was inspired by her rage at the death - the murder of Medgar Evers and the killing of those four girls in Birmingham, Alabama. She says that that song - writing that song brought her through. She was a church girl, as you know, a church woman.

And she said that just as they say in church that you can hit the spirit and really see things, she says writing that song was for her the kind of coming through as a political agent. For the first time, she said, she felt what it meant to be black in America, and that we were in the midst of a very, very hot warfare. And she wasn't going get a gun out. But she was going to use her language and her music to make her point.

And I do hear the change in voice as well. She starts as a piano player, classically trained and singing in a beautiful, lyrical voice, which she kept all her life. But there's a toughness that we hear later, that's more associated, in my mind, with the jazz tradition, with the just kind of raw edge that you're going to take me just as I am, with all of the anger that's implied in that voice.

CHIDEYA: We're going to go to a break in a second. But before we do, is there any generalization, quickly, you can make about the differences between male jazz musicians' protest and female jazz musicians' protest?

Dr. O'MEALLY: I would say it - and I quote my colleague Farah Griffin - and say that the women have to be more concerned about the position of women in our society. And in their music, I hear - following Billie Holiday's example, we have to be free, but we have to also remember that we're not going to be anybody's prostitutes as musicians. We're not going to have agents that use us. We're going to be our own free agents.

CHIDEYA: All right. Well, Robert, stay with us. We are talking about jazz and social protest. And coming up, also next on News & Notes, the Williams sisters dominate Wimbeldon again. Our very own Tony Cox and the New York Times' Bill Rhoden have the latest in the world of sports. Plus, we read your letters.

(Soundbite of music)

CHIDEYA: I'm Farai Chideya, and this is News & Notes. We're back talking about the history of social protest in jazz, with Robert O'Meally. He's the Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English at Columbia University. Welcome back, and let's jump in again with Nina Simone. We were just talking about her. And another one of her songs is called "Backlash Blues." It was written by her friend, the poet Langston Hughes.

(Soundbite of song "Backlash Blues")

Ms. SIMONE: (Singing) Mr. Backlash, Mr. Backlash, Just who do you think I am? You raise my taxes, freeze my wages, send my son to Vietnam. You give me second class houses, and second class schools. Do you think that all colored folks are just second class fools? Mr. Backlash, I'm going to leave you with the backlash blues.

CHIDEYA: Now, that song was included on a Nina Simone compilation released in April called "The Nina Simone Protest Anthology," which suggests that there's more than one or two songs that have a protest theme. Let's talk about this song first, though. How did the civil rights message become a standard in Simone's repertoire?
Dr. O'MEALLY: Oh, Nina Simone was a political being from the beginning. But then at a certain point, she turns around and it's one song after another. After she has a breakthrough, she begins to do these songs for women, young, gifted and black and so forth. And this one, "Backlash Blues," she found in a collection of poems by her friend Langston Hughes.

And she could hear the songfulness (ph) of it. Hughes had written songs before and may have been thinking if this is a song. But she heard it right away. And the two of them, I think, joined hands in protest together with this thing. She cared about the lyrics, and that the sound of her voice is so powerful that she makes you hear the mean old backlash a part of that.

CHIDEYA: So, another passionate voice in the struggle was bassist, pianist and composer Charles Mingus. His "Fables of Faubus" protest Orval E. Faubus. He was the Arkansas governor who sent the National Guard in 1957 to Little Rock Central High School to stop the school's integration of nine African-American teenagers. And here's a little bit of "Fables of Faubus."

(Soundbite of song "Fables of Faubus")

CHIDEYA: You know, what I'm struck by is, Robert, is that this music is always on some level sly, and it has - it's not - even a song like "Strange Fruit" is not just poor me music. There's something more to it. You know, what do you think jazz has brought to the whole idea of looking at social justice?

Dr. O'MEALLY: Well, I think it's a very good question. I think jazz refuses this self-pity and sentimentality of most popular American music. And there's an aggressiveness. There's a tell-it-like-it-is, truth teller's impulse in this music. Though the version of "Fables of Faubus" that you're playing doesn't get yet to the lyrics, where Mingus gets to the microphone and says, why are you - Faubus, why are you so sick and ridiculous?

I mean, this is not the usual - and by the way, his company refused to record it just as Billie's had. And he had to put it on a small label, calling Eisenhower and others out. I think there's a very often an overtly political message, but even when it's not overtly political, there's a been there and gone truth-telling passion. Love is like a faucet, it turns off and on. You know, when you're talking about love and its vagaries. But that impulse to tell the truth, I think, is what makes love - what makes the music so strong in its aggressiveness.

CHIDEYA: Is there any of that left? Are contemporary jazz musicians, any of them, kind of lining up to do things that have an element of social protest or at least cultural observation?

Dr. O'MEALLY: Well, this is another great question. People have read jazz as being the music of democracy, the music of revolution. People of the right, the center, and the left all listen to a mainly instrumental music and hear these different things. And I think it's important to make that observation. I would say that there are, that if you listen to the music of Winton Marsalis, there's a sense of urgency, there's certainly a politics to that playing. If you listen to the music of the people who come out of the AACM in Chicago, there's definitely a politics there, a kind of insistence on the community based of the music, of the freeness of the music.

So I would say that even though it's hard to find any music at all on the radio dial, for people who know where to look for it, especially in big cities where jazz is to be heard, you do hear that same passionate will to tell the truth. I'm very optimistic about it. I teach jazz here at the university, and my students almost jump out of their chairs when they first hear Mingus. And then they want to go, they want to play like that. They want to play for real.
CHIDEYA: Well, Robert, thank you for this incredible tour.

Dr. O'MEALLY: Thank you for having me. Wonderful.

CHIDEYA: Robert O'Meally is the Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He's also the founder and former director of the Center for Jazz Studies.