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## **Nigerian Music and the Black Diaspora: African Identity, Black Power, and the Free Jazz of the 1960s**

**Abstract:** *The following article is the attempt of an historically oriented analysis focused on the role of Nigerian music as a cultural hub for the export of African cultural influences into the Black diaspora in the United States and its anticipation by the Free Jazz/Avantgarde-scene as well as the import of key-values related to the Black Power-movement to the African continent. The aim is to demonstrate the leading role and international impact of Nigerian cultural expression among sub-Saharan African nation states and its specific ability to absorb and incorporate elements of Western culture. After a short discussion of African influences on Jazz-music in general and the socio-political, cultural, and artistic context in which Free Jazz emerged, examples for the articulation of African consciousness among influencing key figures such as saxophonist John Coltrane or the Art Ensemble of Chicago are being presented. Furthermore, the personal and ideological links between the Free Jazz-scene and the Black Power-movement - especially the Black Panther Party - are made transparent. In a second step the central influence of the Nigerian drum-pioneer Babatunde Olatunji on the Africanization of US-Jazz-musicians, his personal and creative impact on John Coltrane, as well as on the Black Power-movement is being highlighted. On the other hand, Coltrane, Free Jazz, and the Black Panther Party are being portrayed as a central creative and ideological turn in the career and work of Fela Kuti towards political activism and his efforts to implement and apply the Africa-inspired Black Power-struggle of the US on the African continent in order to oppose post-colonial forms of oppression.*

**Keywords:** *Nigerian Music, Black Power, African Identity, Free Jazz, Avantgarde Jazz, Black Nationalism*

## **Introduction**

In order to provide the widest perspective on the subject, it is necessary to discuss the continuous circulation of musical elements of cultural symbols between West Africa and its descendants in the Americas, a process which has operated at least since the earliest years of this century, influencing stylistic development throughout Africa and the African diaspora. (Veal, 1995, p. 8)

Although the African trope has been used as a reference for Jazz music from the early New Orleans brass marching bands (Berry, 1988) and the seemingly collective nature of their generously improvised and counterpointed passages (Such, 1993) to Duke Ellington's muted horns and growl sounds during his *jungle music period* from 1927 to 1929 (Teal, 2012) it was mostly either applied by the Western critics or the audiences. On the contrary, with the heydays of Bebop in the 1940s, artists of African descent even took a leading role in bringing the indifferent, often enough substance abusing urban Western slickness to a peak with role models such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis etc. (DeVeaux, 1997). They served as father figures for hipsters and beatniks like Allen Ginsbourg or Jack Keroauc (Hopkins, 2005), with the sole link to their origins being the personification of the smart trickster that appears frequently in African lure (Gates, Jr., 2014).

One has to consider a period where Black musicians would straighten their hair, avoid everything that would scream *countryboy* or *motherland* and not only try to develop a new self-understanding of Black American citizens (Mazman, 2010) but even strongly look for inspiration as well as acceptance and recognition from contemporary European art music composers such as

Claude Debussy or Arnold Schönberg (Johnson, 2012). These musicians would see themselves as urban Americans, looking for respect from the culturally advanced Europeans and distance themselves somewhat from the overemphasized image of their African heritage often ridiculed in a stereotype of the *noble savage* as personified by Louis Armstrong who has been criticized for it by many of his younger fellow musicians (Pinheiro, 2015). It is from this historical perspective that the re-thinking of identity and re-discovering of African heritage that occurred in the 1960s has to be discussed.

From a creative point of view, the Bebop of the 1940s has been followed by the Cool Jazz-era of the 1950s. The nuclear tragedy that ended WWII has been cited often enough as the real *birth of the cool* (Pountain & Robins, 2000), a musical style that perfectly reflected an era of disillusioned, pessimistic understatement accompanied by the works of existentialists like Sartre. Emotions were to be suppressed in the music, the artists developed an approach of distant nihilism and less expressive aesthetic articulation, with trumpeter Miles Davis basically inventing the genre (*Birth of the Cool*, Davis, 1956) and white, California-based musicians such as Chet Baker, Gerry Mulligan, Dave Brubeck or Lennie Tristano commercializing it under the label of West Coast Jazz (Szwed, 1960).

Characterized by Ottenhoff (1996) as the very opposite to the Free Jazz-sound of the 1960s, in retrospect the Cool Jazz-era can be seen as the calm before the storm. After a short, Blues-oriented Hardbop-Phase starting in the mid-1950s (Rosenthal, 1993), one of the first forbearers of this coming outburst happened to be Californian resident Lennie Tristano himself, experimenting with forms

of intuitive and spontaneous music making and free improvisation (Tristano & Marsh, 1996), as well as Ornette Coleman (Alterhaug, 2004), who emancipated himself harmonically from the formal structures of Western-style influenced music (Gansinger, 2008a). On the *East Coast* piano player Cecil Taylor revolutionized the way to play his instrument, adding fists and elbows to the repertoire of its manipulation in his almost abusive approach to deconstruct the very symbol of European Classical music, and turned its 88 keys into *88 tuned drums* a musical statement and a clear reference for the growing interest to incorporate a more percussive and therefore African influence back into the music although not without emancipating himself from traditionalized Jazz clichés at the same time (Westendorf, 1994).

It is not for nothing that critics labeled the growing number of charismatic and energetic saxophone players that emerged in the shadow or even under the patronage of John Coltrane namely Archie Shepp, Pharoah Sanders or Albert Ayler as *the angry tenors* (Early, 1999), that were clearly seen and understood to reflect the frustration about the backlashes in the social struggle of their folks for equality and human rights in their ferocious outbursts on their instruments (Ottenhoff, 1996). The tenor saxophone turned into a machine gun which is exactly how the German musician and strict adherent of this kind of *energy playing*, Peter Brötzmann, named his first recording (Brötzmann, 1971).

As trombone player Vinko Globokar (Warnaby, 2007) has suggested before, the *radicalization of sound was a deep and far-ranging process of individual exploration* (Pressing, 2002, p. 203). Pressing continues to describe why

personalized musical articulation by referring to the specific conditions of sound production inherent to the instrument (p. 204):

The cries of animals, the screechings of machines, the susurrations of the natural elements, the conversational twitterings of evoked harmonics, and the gorgeous jazz ballad tone, were now all equally possible. Novel fingerings were able to evoke luxuriant and unanticipated harmonic structures in a single note.

Influential and innovative musicians such as Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy or John Coltrane had extended their personal vocabulary on the instrument by exploring unconventional sonic possibilities unforeseen even by its inventor Adolphe Sax and others such as Pharoah Sanders, Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, Dewey Redman or Frank Wright used these findings as a starting point for their very own explorations. In any case, the uncompromising sound of the tenor sax as introduced by Coltrane has been recognized as a non-verbal articulation demanding freedom not only in a musical but even more in a political sense far beyond Jazz circles, as is demonstrated by the following note about James Brown, who would somehow translate this perception into words, as noted by Veal (1995, p. 11):

Brown integrated free-jazz elements into his style to the extent that the (sic) would reinforce this political mood. Thus when, for example, in his 1970 *Super Bad*, he asked his tenor saxophonist (Coltrane), he was making an implicit political statement as well as an obvious musical one.

## ***Black Power and African Identity***

In fact, some of jazz's most prominent personalities in the fifties and sixties (...) were very active in terms of associating jazz music with personal standpoints of disagreement, first, with the way the music industry was operating (...) and second, with the white supremacy that prevailed in the United States and the colonial world. (Pinheiro, 2015, p. 1)

Change was in the air, Blacks became impatient about their unsolved issues of racial segregation in the USA and last but not least they got inspiration for their cause from the unstoppable wave of African nation states gaining independence, starting with Ghana in 1957, which clearly seems to have been adopted and integrated as a symbol of empowerment by the Black nationalists in the United States (Essien-Udom, 1970; Seale, 1991). An observation that has been shared by Ottenhoff (1996), who suggested that this process of liberation from colonial rule served as way to identify and connect with Africa for Black Americans, who found themselves in the middle of a process of seeking distance from the norms and conventions of a society they felt dominated by as well.

One might even refer to clear parallels between the structures of internal and external colonialism (Gansinger, 2008b) that seemed to have become more and more obvious for those who developed sympathies for the BPM (Black Power Movement) at that point of time, as described by Botchway (2014, p. 11):

The key condition that gave rise to and sustained this nationalism and its product, the BPM, was oppression, i.e., the for civil rights to agitation for national (Black) liberation, with a corresponding realignment of social forces, from all forms of internal colonialism from White power.

She further states this situation was recognized by many as being *similar to the campaign of Africans in colonial territories in the second half of the 20th century to liberate themselves from Europe-controlled classical colonialism and neocolonialism on the continent* (Botchway, 2014, p.11). Suddenly the long lost motherland became a source of inspiration and new hopes and promises of freedom, which is clearly reflected in song-titles that made reference to the political developments on the continent, such as Wayne Shorter's *Angola* (Shorter, 1965) or Randy Weston's *Uhuru Africa* (Weston, 1960), subtitled/translated as *Freedom Africa* and therefore banned in South Africa (Squinobal, 2007; Kelley, 2012).

But the turn of innovative musicians towards Africa was more than just a symbolic gesture. Although the above mentioned examples as well as John cordings from the late 1950s bearing titles such as *Liberia* (Coltrane, 1964), *Dial Africa*, *Tanganyika Strut*, *Gold Coast* (Coltrane, 2004, recorded 1958) or *Dakar* (Coltrane, 1963) reflected awareness of the political developments in Africa, musically they remained mainly within the tradition of the popular Jazz-sounds and musical possibilities started to deeply influence his own playing and composing and made recordings such as *Africa* (Coltrane, 1961a), *India* (Coltrane, 1963), *Brazilia* (Coltrane, 1965) or the Spanish/North-African-

heritage reflecting *Olé* (Coltrane, 1961b) more than just symbolic gestures of solidarity but added a clear cultural dimension that demonstrated strong political undertones and a re-negotiation of accepted Western values. According to Pinheiro (2015, p. 3):

(Africa/Brass, Impressions, 1963) unmistakably show the significance nonwestern music represented, not only as a source of musical inspiration for musicians, but also as a way of protesting against North-American mainstream cultural and social values.

Among these traditional social and cultural values seemed to be the dominant Christian religion as well since, although a lot of musicians have been socialized in churches not few of them turned to Islam and took on Muslim names (Chase, 2010), even if it was just to avoid the racism towards Black Americans by, at least name-wise, giving the impression to be North African citizen and already being treated differently (Gerard, 1998). Nevertheless, the search for their African identity required them to dig deeper in their spiritual heritage as well, as Pinheiro (2015, p. 3) has noted:

The attempt to construct a new black culture was deeply intertwined with the search for religious alternatives to mainstream Christianity, a search that included not only Islam, but also a renewed interest in the signs and symbols of pre-Islamic and traditional African religions (such as the Yoruban religion)...

To some extent the highly intense energy playing and its formal context of free or collective improvisation itself can be seen as a direct extension and invocation of practices dedicated to social *katharsis* (Carlisle, 2012) that could

and can be found among tribally organized societies in the non-Western hemisphere. As described by Pressing (2002, p. 205):

Free playing in jazz is not without historical precedent in music. Although in the mainstream folk or traditional musics of the world, free self-expression reliably gives way to social function, something at least approaching free improvisation can emerge in some situations of religious ecstasy, trance or transcendence of the self, notably in traditional shamanism, and traditions of the Arabic world, India, and many parts of Africa...

Even though this would suggest that the musical approach of free improvisation is to a certain degree rooted in traditional African practices, it has to be noted in that context that its application in performances does not necessarily result in the approval or acknowledgment among audiences or musicians of African descent. On the contrary, traditional African music usually employs a strictly hierarchic system where the master musicians instruct initiates in a highly disciplined ensemble play that leaves little space for individual expression but enforces the idea of music as a community-oriented experience, including dance and vocal expressions (Meyer, 2005). Therefore solo-spots are strictly reserved for the master musicians, while novices are mainly limited to provide the textual background.

An aspect, that could not be more contrasted as in the programmatic proclamation of Free Jazz-pioneer Ornette Coleman – *Let's play the music, not the background* that pretty much illustrates the tendency to free the musicians from the limitations of traditional harmonic and rhythmic functions of their instruments. Concerning the resulting unreliability of rhythmically

used instruments such as bass and drums to keep up with a repetitive and recognizable pattern, Baskerville (1994) has noted that *which was supposed to be the music for the "Black Revolution," never became widely accepted in the Black community* and that *(t)he music's lack of appeal to the Black community might be contributed to the music's abstractness or its lack of a steady pulse* (p. 495).

But Baskerville on the other hand clearly rejected the arguments of Jazz singer Betty Carter, who criticized Free Jazz- and Avantgarde-Music for not using typically Black rhythms (1994, p. 495):

Because of its polyrhythmic nature, this music was closer to the African tradition than any other forms of African-American music. The audience's ears had been corrupted by the European influence in other forms of African-American music.

However, he had to somehow agree with Carter in her claim that most ordinary people felt excluded from the Avantgarde-scene since they believed they had to be intellectuals to understand what the musicians are doing, *because it was the intelligentsia that was drawn to the music especially college-educated, White males* (Baskerville, 1994, p. 495).

Anderson (2007) has also been referring to her claims as well as those of bassist Ron Carter, that Free Jazz-forbearers such as Archie Shepp or Ornette Coleman were rather unknown among and not really relevant in working-class Black communities.

In this regard his remark that *free improvisation sometimes alienated the most culturally aware African American listeners* (2007, p. 129) does not sound too

surprising. He furthermore demonstrated this suggestion by referring to a benefit concert based on a free improvisation of drummer Milford Graves and pianist Don Pullen with the mainly African American audience in traditional clothes going from embarrassed giggling to out-loud laughter during the course of the performance, obviously unfamiliar with the musical approach of Pullen and Graves and unable to interpret its meaning. Anderson as well captured the reaction of the also present Black Power-poets Sherry Turner and Askia Touré Carter of blaming the audience *rather than holding the artist accountable for effective communication* (Anderson, 2007, p. 129).

By concluding that this time Graves and Pullen were not *entertaining white college students* (2007, p. 129) Anderson furthermore made a reference to a previous concert of the duo in front of an enthusiastic audience at Yale University, once again pointing out to the paradox that the ferocious Black Power-inspired Free Jazz-music apparently received more support from left-oriented, white intellectuals than in the Black community itself.

Therefore it should not come as a surprise that the festival that initiated the presentation of the then new style to the public and was organized by trumpet player Bill Dixon has been promoted with the ground-breaking title *October Revolution in Jazz*, which can be seen as an obvious programmatic statement (Gendron, 2009). With Archie Shepp recording compositions such as *Sweet Mao* (for Uniteledis, a French label founded by the Socialist Party; Roach & Shepp, 1976) and Ornette Coleman playing *Song for Ché* (a composition of his bass player Charlie Haden, self-described communist and initiator of the

communist-inspired folk tunes performing *Liberation Music Orchestra*; Coleman, 1972) it is not difficult to attest the Free Jazz-movement a certain openness for left ideology, certainly displayed more in elitist intellectual circles than typical Black neighborhoods.

However, there was a clear political dimension in the structure and output of the Free Jazz-scene that went much further than musicians trying to free themselves from the level of entertainer and striving to be recognized as serious artists (Francesconi, 1986; Carles & Comolli, 2015). But few of them presented their aims as organized and consequent as the *Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians* (AACM) in Chicago. The AACM is a direct result of Muhal Richard Abrams and his Experimental Band, who encouraged youngsters to stay away from drugs and crime and pick up an instrument instead to join him in his sessions as well as to engage in other forms of artistic expression such as poetry or painting (Gansinger, 2006). He quickly gathered a growing crowd of followers, among them a handful of musicians who later formed the ambitious *Art Ensemble of Chicago*, a group that clearly emphasized their African origins like hardly anybody else, by adding all kinds of optical, acoustic and theatre-inspired elements such as traditional African clothing or tribal facepaint to their performances (Lewis, 2009).

Although somehow overemphasized and not to be seen without a kind of humorous note as well, the *Art Ensemble* took a clear stand in terms of re shaping the identity that has been forced upon them for one they decided to define themselves (Ottenhoff, 1996). Another aspect to be taken into

consideration was that their concerts put the music in relation to performing arts and poetry unlikely to be seen in typical Jazz concert venues such as bars and night clubs and therefore questioned and re-negotiated the social function and practicability of the music. Relying on recognizable material in the popular song-format for its commercial use in clubs and dance venues, a lot of concert-organizers had simply no use for these new, innovative, and much more unpredictable sounds that questioned the established social function of music as a soundtrack for dance and entertainment (Baskerville, 1994).

It was exactly this commercial exploitation of Jazz as an art-form shaped and developed first and foremost by Black Americans and commercialized by more acceptable, white fellow musicians or businessmen that the AACM was criticizing. According to drum-innovator Sunny Murray (Gansinger, 2005) club owners and concert organizers, who rely on predictable sets of entertaining material to stimulate profitable consumer behavior instead of an art-oriented audience absorbed in a music that is being performed in community centers and at exhibitions even used physical threats on the leading exponents of the *Free Music*. Murray states that organized crime-related club owners used their contacts to run him over with a car and at a certain point even broke the arm of Cecil Taylor in order to threaten them out of business. He furthermore suggests that Ornette Coleman has been paid a certain amount of money after his successful *Town Hall* Concert in 1962 to quit playing, which would at least explain his 3-year hiatus from the scene that immediately followed the concert (Litweiler, 1992).

However, the highly controversial musical output of Free Jazz and Avantgarde artists in the 1960s not only refuted the commercial *modus operandi* of the record industry and club scene but seemed to challenge the whole of society on a much broader level by pushing its limits, as Pinheiro (2015, p. 3) underlined:

The free-jazz and avant-garde movements in the beginning of this decade had as their leading archetypes not only the promotion of freedom within music, through the abolition of the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic pre-determined structures, but also the application of these principles to daily life, through the use of musical experience as a “test tube” for society functioning.

Another important aspect of the AACM is that these musicians not only questioned the working conditions of Black artists but took a critical look at the situation of life in the ghettos in general and aimed at taking social responsibilities within their communities by offering free music lessons. As mentioned by Anderson (2007, p. 143), *(m)embers took greatest pride in the AACM school, at which they tutored inner city students in composition, theory, and instrumental techniques. Founded in 1968, the school enrolled up to seventy students in ten-week courses.*

This idea of community service might have been at least to a certain degree as well been influenced by the activities and strategies of the communal approach of the Black Panther Party that had opened a department in Chicago as well by that time (Vincent, 2013).

A creative climax in the process of re-shaping identity from Black American back to African has been reached in the year 1969, when the Organization of African Unity invited a group of established Avantgarde-players around saxophonist Archie Shepp to perform at the first Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algier together with Algerian and Tuareg musicians (Carles & Comolli, 2015). One can imagine the culture shock these *hip urban dwellers* must have faced by putting their foot down on African soil for the very first time. From there the group has been lured into an extended stay in Paris, with the prospect to record several albums for the owners of the questionable and half-honest French label BYG (Lewis, 2004). Nevertheless, the loose group of musicians around Shepp, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, drummer Sunny Murray, trombonist Grachan Moncur III. or cornetist Clifford Thornton managed to record a series of albums within a short period of time and a good part of them is enthusiastically celebrating their newly found African pride and heritage with titles such as *Hommage to Africa* (Murray, 1970), *New Africa* (Moncur, 1969), *Africanasia* (Delcloo & Jones, 1969), or *Black Suite* (Coursil, 1971), colorful album covers showing them in African clothes and clear musical influences.

It is worth taking a look at the ideological background of cornet player Clifford Thornton though, since he had an encounter with Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panther Party during his appearance at the Pan-African Cultural Festival and even claimed the rank of Minister for the Arts later on, as Lewis (2009) has stated. Interestingly enough his own work as a composer clearly reflects more influence from the side of contemporary European art music and the multi-layered Black Arts Movement (Robinson,

2005) than echoes of Africa but nevertheless he expresses unmistakable support for the Black Panther Party in his titles such as *Huey is Free* (Thornton, 1970), referring to Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Panthers. Considering this background it appears even more curious that due to an incendiary speech he gave in the context of the Antibes Juan-les-Pins Jazz Festival in France 1970 he not only got denied entry into the country for one year but even managed to shock his fellow Panthers by the uncompromising radical socialist content of his words, according to Lewis. But Thornton was by far not alone with his supportive attitude towards the radical and militant Black Panther Party. In order to illustrate the broad support the *Party* received from the Free Jazz/Avantgarde-movement it is noteworthy that this incident happened during a benefit concert to raise money for the cause of the Panthers which featured performances of the Frank Wright Quartet and the Art Ensemble of Chicago whose trumpet player Lester Bowie would form quite close ties with Nigerian bandleader Fela Kuti a few years later (Edwards, 2007).

## ***Babatunde Olatunji and the Africanization of Jazz***

We were playing ‘Afro-jazz’ before anybody called it that.

*(Babatunde Olatunji; Olatunji & Atkinson, 2005, p.14)*

In the midst of the above mentioned awakening interest of Black Americans for their cultural heritage Nigerian percussionist Babatunde Olatunji arrived on the scene and not only has been hailed *as the father of African drumming in the United States* (Williams, 2001, p.14) but for years and decades served as a vital link to African culture in the United States and helped to inspire musicians as well as political movements. Being born close to Lagos in 1927, his dream was to become a diplomat and thanks to a Rotary scholarship he moved to Atlanta to attend the Morehouse College in 1950. After being selected to contribute to the first UNICEF recording for children he got signed by Columbia Records in 1958 and one year later released his first record entitled *Drums of Passion*, *hailed as the first album to bring African music to Western ears*, as Williams (2001, p.14) has put it.

The blend of traditional Nigerian rhythms, Ghanaian, and Afro-Caribbean elements also made it to the ears of countless musicians and especially the Jazz-scene immediately started experiments to incorporate African music in their work. As mentioned before, although if Jazz musicians already started to refer to Africa in song-titles during the 1950s (interestingly enough, one of Sonny Rollins’ compositions entitled *Airegin* [Davis, 1954] is using

backward-spelling; in order to avoid an open dedication to the West African nation?) they were still sticking to traditional jazz idioms. As mentioned in the introduction to Olatunji's autobiography (Charry, 2005, p. 5): *An African consciousness was on the horizon, starting first with nods to the existence of the continent.*

This new found consciousness has turned into something much more demanding and provocative with the release of an ambitious piece of work by drummer Max Roach and vocalist Abbey Lincoln in 1960, the highly provocative *We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite* (Roach, 1960). It is quite remarkable in the context of this article that Olatunji has been invited to be part of this recording that served as one of the earliest and most direct examples of the ties between Jazz and the civil rights-movement (Monson, 2007). On the other hand, Eric Charry in his introduction to Olatunji's autobiography (Olatunji & Atkinson, 2005, p. 8) highlighted the drummer's personification of the African continent during that period: *Olatunji's presence on Freedom Now Suite was indicative of his standing at that time. He did not just represent Africa, he was Africa.* Therefore it does not come as a surprise that far from limiting himself to play the role of the *noble savage* he clearly understood the meaning of *Drums of Passion* for the social context around him. As he recalls in his autobiography (Olatunji & Atkinson, 2005, p. 157):

*Drums of Passion* played a significant role in all the social change taking place around that time. It was the first percussion album to be recognized as an African contribution to the music of African Americans. (...) This meant we were recognized as pioneers in the 'Black is Beautiful' movement. The whole idea of 'black power' came along at that time. And so did the wearing of the dashiki and the natural hair.

One of the first persons sporting a traditional Nigerian *dashiki* and corresponding head gear in downtown New York and among musicians circles must have been Olatunji himself though without a doubt. The warm welcome he enjoyed upon his arrival on the New York Jazz-scene is illustrated by his appearances at the prestigious *Village Gate* club in 1961 where he performed together with Art Blakey and John Coltrane and a regular engagement at the popular *Birdland* where his Jazz ensemble under the direction of saxophonist Yusef Lateef served as an opening act.

Especially Coltrane formed strong ties with the Nigerian musician who seemed to have a big influence on him in regard of discovering nonwestern musical traditions and Francesconi (1986) even suggested that Coltrane consciously intended an *Africanization* of Jazz by the incorporation of scalar improvisation in his playing. An assumption that seems to be confirmed by the following reference of Olatunji (Olatunji & Atkinson, 2005, p. 156) to a piece Coltrane dedicated to him in 1962:

At that time in his life, he was beginning to learn more about African language and chants. In 1962, in my honor, he recorded "Tunji" for his Coltrane album. With that piece he began bringing African forms into jazz. He wanted to express his interest in African traditions.

Considering the nature of the relationship between Coltrane and Olatunji that seemed to resemble those of master and disciple this assumption might not be too wrong, given the following account cited by Olatunji (Olatunji & Atkinson, 2005, p. 157):

John Coltrane became my number one fan and didn't hide it. He told me in no uncertain terms 'I really admire what you've been doing. Every chance I get, I come to see and hear you. And when I do, I listen close to every move you make, everything you play. So one day I want to come a little nearer and learn something from you.'

Now it is known that Coltrane was a truly humble man himself who was never ashamed to ask for other opinions may it be younger, far less talented and experienced players than him or the Indian master musician Ravi Shankar even though he was spending up to twelve hours every day playing or practicing. These words from the mouth of the man who although did not directly pioneer the Free Jazz-movement but whole-heartedly embraced it despite the harsh rejection from fellow-musicians and critics alike who coined the term *Anti-Jazz* and deemed the new musicians as imposters, violently destroying everything they tried to preserve (Breckenridge, 2012) should serve as a clear indication for the enormous African/Nigerian influence that Olatunji had for the re-*Africanization* of jazz music in the 1960s. It might even be not at least due to Olatunji's influence on Coltrane that he decided to record the extended piece *Kulu Se Mama* (Coltrane, 1966) by the rather obscure percussionist Juno Lewis and even the choice of his last drummer Rashied Ali with his percussion-inspired and multi-directional style of playing

allows to draw parallels to the Nigerian master drummer he did admire so much.

In any case, Coltrane as the musical genius he has been labeled and described by many has been deeply affected by this humble and skilled ambassador of African Art and culture and did commit himself to help him open and operate the *Olatunji Center for African Culture* in Harlem, where the saxophonist happened to play his last concert, later released as *The Olatunji Concert* (Coltrane, 2001) in 1967, not more than two months before he passed away.

There are no reported encounters between Coltrane's fellow-saxophonist and Free Jazz-innovator Ornette Coleman who passed away in June 2015 and Olatunji, but when he took a year off in 1973 to play with and learn from traditional musicians it might not be for no reason that next to Gnawa-ensembles of a mystical Sufi-brotherhood in Morocco he chose to go to Nigeria to get introduced to music of Yoruba and Hausa origin (Litweiler, 1992).

## ***The influence of Free Jazz and Black Power on the music and ideology of Fela Kuti***

If Babatunde Olatunji was the ambassador for African culture in the United States and helped to inspire the civil rights/Black Power-movements then his fellow citizen and Yoruba-tribesman Fela Kuti can be credited for his role in introducing these radical claims for self-respect and liberation to an African audience in reverse.

As settled as his biography sets off, the second half of his life easily qualifies as a Blaxploitation script, including 27 wives, drugs, notorious night clubs and hostile clashes with Nigerian government, military and police, leading to burned down houses and human casualties. Being exposed to High Life, a Western-African musical style combining Jazz-orchestration and Latin-Caribbean influences (Collins, 1989), the saxophonist and keyboarder spent time in the UK during the early 1960s where he studied the more contemporary musical styles of Bebop and Modal Jazz, as played by Art Blakey, Wayne Shorter, Miles Davis or John Coltrane. Fela had planned to introduce these latest musical directions to a Nigerian audience upon his arrival back home. But the more energetic, highly artistic and at times abstract nature inherent to the music, putting the improvising individual artist in the center of the performance somehow clashed with the typical song-, audience- and dance-oriented expectations of his local listeners (Okafor, 2005; Veal, 1995).

After basically dropping his ambitions to become the ambassador of Modern Jazz in Nigeria Fela chose to re-incorporate the more demanded High Life stylistics, stringent rhythms and call-and-response-patterns in his popular band *Koola Lobitos*, and managed to establish himself as a successful musician in the region. It was not before the end of the decade that he came in touch with the latest developments in the motherland of Jazz music again that proofed to go even far beyond the music at this time and that should have a distinctive influence on the shape of the further artistic conception, self-understanding and political activism of the Nigerian musician, as described by Veal (1995, p. 11):

In 1969, Fela and his Koola Lobitos band took a year-long trip to the United States where, in addition to experiencing a political and cultural awakening, he was exposed to the latest stylistic phase of jazz. This was the free-jazz typified by the work of Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor and the later work of John Coltrane. In addition to representing a radical break with jazz traditions, these styles also carried strong political associations.

A more clear definition of how these political associations could have looked like becomes transparent by the following mentioning of the trip by Stanovsky (1998, para. 11):

Fela's travel to the United States in the late sixties is often identified, both by himself and others, as an important radicalizing event in his life. The emerging blackpower movement in the United States evidently resonated strongly with Fela's own anticolonial views and strengthened his pan-Africanist populist commitments.

Being even more exact about his political socialization, Stanovsky (1998, para. 3) has stated that *Fela traveled to the United States and credits this trip with his own radicalization through exposure to the politics of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers.*

According to Langley (2010), Fela's trip to the States has been a crucial turning point, deeply influencing his musical as well as personal development. In regards to the purpose of this article we might want to summarize that as Botchway (2014, p. 17) has put it - An interpretation that receives strong support by the following words of Fela Kuti himself as illustrated by Darnton (1977, p. 6) although he might use the word *blackism* for what he found in the States:

For the first time, I saw the essence of blackism [black nationalism]. It's crazy; in the United States people think the black power movement drew inspiration from Africa. All these Americans come over here looking for awareness. They don't realize they're the ones who've got it over there. Why we were even ashamed to go around in national dress until we saw pictures of blacks wearing dashikis on 125th Street.

A statement that clearly describes that he not only absorbed the political connotations of that time and place but much more how these principles of self-awareness and empowerment have been put into practice, since he seemed to be really surprised and impressed by the way these Black Americans honored their African heritage. In a general way he quickly captured the paralleling structures of internal and external colonialism, as Botchway (2014, p. 16) describes:

Fela comprehended the similarity between the prevailing situation of oppression of people of African descent in the U.S. and those on the African continent. He particularly realized the downgrading of the masses by colonial regimes, apartheid in South Africa, and neocolonial African governments.

At this point it is interesting to take into consideration the early life, family background and upbringing of Fela Kuti, especially his mother Funmilayo, which is described by Howe (1997, para. 9) as *a ground-breaking feminist, fierce political activist and Lenin Peace Prize laureate who was a friend of Ghana's Nkrumah and had met Mao Tse-Tung*. Given this specific background as well as his sympathy and solidarity with the *Black Power*-movement and the revolutionary communalism of the *Black Panther Party* one could assume that Fela might have based his activism on left-oriented ideologies, but as has been clarified by Botchway (2014, p. 30), *Fela did not attack capitalism to favor Marxism or communism*. Not only did he reject the import of externally originated political thought to Africa but also the one of organized religions such as Christianity and Islam, which caused him a lot of resistance from Nigerian followers of these influential beliefs. Instead he lived and propagated a return to African spiritual concepts such as the one of his own Yoruba origins, including a generous number of ritual marriages and ancestral worshipping in his night club named African Shrine.

Nevertheless, even though he might not have agreed in detail with the *Ten-Point-Program* of the Black Panthers (Seale, 1991) he clearly recognized and embraced the unifying potential of the Black Power movement and was willing to make strong use of it in order to mobilize his fellow Nigerians against the corrupt post-colonial government.

But as reported by Veal (2000, p. 80), the very first performance of his now re-named band in Nigeria one year after his eye-(and ear-)opening stay in the United States confronted him with the possible cultural limitations of his strategy. While the musicians enthusiastically greeted the audience with raised fists as the Black Power salute the Nigerian crowd being unfamiliar with its meaning was completely unable to decode what the performers were trying to tell them. The dimension of Fela Kuti's missionary work for the cause of the *Black empowerment* becomes obvious when Veal refers to the British musicologist and Ghana-resident Prof. John Collins, who states that upon a visit in Nigeria he remembers that *(e)verywhere he [Fela] goes, people stop what they are doing, shout his name, and give the black power salute* (2000, p. 126).

From today's point of view, Fela can be considered a pioneer of edutainment, successfully re-contextualizing the ideology of the Black Power movement for an African audience and translating its basic messages for the ears of the local listeners (Falola & Abidogun, 2014). In a similar way, musically he combined the extended post-song-format of Free Jazz and Modal Jazz with the groove of Funk-musicians such as James Brown and the Blaxploitation-soundtracks of the 1970s and added the soul and sensitivity of African dance music, which resulted in the Afro-Beat-genre that he originated.

It is in consideration of this background that Botchway (2014, p. 3) has described *him and his musical career as a bridge for the Black Power movement to Africa* and examined him *as a charismatic continental African who, as a proponent of the empowerment of the diaspora and continental*

*African community, advocated key ideas and sentiments of the Black Power Movement in Africa* (p. 3). She furthermore referred to it as *a movement that took its genesis from the varieties of that African/Black nationalism tradition and the nationalist sentiment of the African (Black)-American community of the U.S. in the 20th century* (p. 3).

Another indication of his key position in this highly sensitive transfusional exchange-process between the African diaspora in the States and their homeland is reflected in her following statement, illustrating the far reaching consequences of his struggle (Botchway, 2014, p. 15):

Fela provided continental African support to the BPM, just as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Imamu Amiri Baraka gave African diaspora support to Africa's liberation struggle and Pan Africanism efforts, especially to those of Kwame Nkrumah, against colonialism, neocolonialism, and apartheid in South Africa.

From a creative as well as an ideological point of view it is worth mentioning that in the early 1970s Lester Bowie, the trumpet player of the Art Ensemble of Chicago spent like a year as a guest of honor in the presence of Fela Kuti in Lagos, serving as an influence for his musical development and participating in several concerts and recording sessions. On the other hand, the Art Ensemble recorded a version of *Zombie* (Kuti, 1977) as a reference to the Nigerian musician for their album *Ancient To The Future* (Art Ensemble of Chicago, 1994). The Art Ensemble of Chicago had recorded *Theme de Yoyo* for the soundtrack album of the French movie *Les Stances a Sophie* (Art Ensemble of Chicago, 1970), combining Free Jazz-atonality and - expressiveness with Funk-groove in an unprecedented manner and serving as

an inspiration for James Brown and the explosive Blaxploitation-movie soundtracks as well as influencing the artistic direction that would permit the Nigerian bandleader Fela Kuti to translate his political activism into proper musical terms. Lester Bowie, who has been shown as supportive to the Black Panther Party before is another direct personal link of US-originated Black Power ideology and its most successful advocate on the African continent.

However, although the Afro-Beat-genre, as originated by Fela Kuti, does not match the provoking de-fragmentation and re-construction rhythm and sound that can be found in the context of Free Jazz and the Avantgarde-scene, it nevertheless presents itself strongly inspired by the radical ideology promoted by many artists at that time, as is clearly reflected in Fela's provocative song titles and general attitude (Oikelome, 2014)

## ***Concluding remarks***

As a matter of fact, the course of history has created a situation at this specific point in time where African and Black American liberation-movements drew inspiration from each other in a truly symbiotic and transfusional way, re-assuring and confirming each other. If Babatunde Olatunji served as a truly original source for African culture, offering even the personal dimension of a musical mentor that is essential to the African concept of musical teaching and that even such a giant as John Coltrane accepted very willingly then Fela Kuti functioned as a door of Black empowerment-strategies that have been developed in the US back to the post-colonial African continent. And in both directions it is mainly the music that served as an efficient vehicle for the transportation of these highly culturally-sensitive issues with the inherent potential of radical social change.

Obviously, there have been the strong ties, flows and counter-flows between mutual influences of Nigeria and the African diaspora in the United States it seems to look like, while Black nationalist-movements of the early 1960s experienced a strong indirect support from the simultaneously liberating former African colonies gaining independence and making use of it as a boost to pursue their own agendas, transported and propagated not at last by artistic movements such as the Free Jazz-scene. Babatunde Olatunji plays a central role in this context, not only introducing African culture to a Black American public cut off from their roots as well as introducing it to society as a whole, but more important quenching the thirst of these curious musicians on how to

extend their vocabulary towards a more open, non-western direction that would represent their true ethnic identity more proper.

Nigeria and the African continent benefited from these impulses at the end of the decade on their behalf. The empowerment, self-awareness and confidence about their African origin Nigerian artists discovered in their celebrated and artistically acknowledged Black US-counterparts stimulated a rethinking about their post-colonial identity, with a central artist such as Fela Kuti as an influential torchbearer of Black Power ideology.

Interestingly enough, we are presented with a situation where Nigeria has been the main source of African cultural influence, providing Black American musicians and political activists with genuine input to re-discover their original descent and therefore stimulating progress in the Free Jazz/Black Power-movement, as well as the first African country to echo the voice of the Black struggle for civil rights on a Pan-African level in its popular music. Far from dealing with singular events, one has to acknowledge that up to today the Nigerian music- and movie-industry has to be considered the continent's most influential - competing only with the one of Egypt, that is catering mainly to an Arabic market, of course.

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## **Discography**

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