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History of Jazz

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Jazz and the Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement had a major impact on the direction of jazz in the 1960s and into the future. Singers such as Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong used their platform to ignite these topics of conversation and change within the Civil Rights Movement, and created a new use of jazz and voice for the future. Jazz musicians used their celebrity-like presence to take the cause into their own hands, promoting racial equality and social justice in song. Jazz musicians were able to voice their opinions through music and gain notoriety which helped to amplify the civil rights movement.

Music in general is a way of self expression. As racial tensions continued to arise in America, jazz became an avenue for black artists to express their feelings and emotions throughout this time. Listeners were able to hear the sheer pain and longing for a more equal world that black musicians felt so deeply in their hearts and soul. Not only in their tone of voice and expression, but by the strategic lyrics used by many musicians, this created more of an awareness and consciousness of what was happening in our nation. A prime example of these tactics in song is John Coltrane. Coltrane often reached back to African American musical roots for inspiration and pushed music beyond limits to create new and attractive sound.

Another musician example is the work of Billie Holiday. Even though she was more well known in the years before the Civil Rights Movement, one of her songs, "Strange Fruit" helped to spark conversation and eventually became an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. Her choice in lyrics and vocal delivery to tell the story of two Black men being lynched, emotionally moved the audience and put these graphic images in their minds. She was very blunt in her lyrics, getting straight to the point such as when she said, "Blood on the leaves and blood at the root, Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze". Being bold in these lyrics and delivery was truly effective in getting a point across and helping to ignite the Civil Rights Movement.

Overall, the direction of Jazz is heavily connected to the Civil Rights Movement. This movement provided artists with the opportunity to use their music for activism and rightfully so as their community was being wrongfully treated. Music then and now can be used for change and is oftentimes more effective than other activist tactics.