

YOU DON'T NEED A BULLDOZER

WAYS OF TROPICAL BEING

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When I was about eight or nine, having abandoned any inclination to curry my parents' favour by claiming to be interested in medicine, once the Beatles with their three guitars belted out "I want to hold your hand", I pictured myself becoming a great guitarist. I joined the school band where I was perhaps its youngest member. There I learned to reluctantly squeak my way through the national anthem on a clarinet for sports day.

I hated, hated, hated it, the instrument, its sound, the song, the instructions, the teacher, the thin bamboo mouthpiece reeds that I had to regularly replace because I'd absent-mindedly chewed the old one to bits. I never practised and avoided music lessons after class on the flimsiest of excuses until I was given a good licking for "forgetting" my instrument at home yet again. That put paid to my ambitions to rock-n-roll stardom. For decades thereafter I blamed the closure of that career path on an instrument completely out of sync with the dawning era of guitar heroes.

Our autobiographies are stories we tell ourselves, and like all unfinished narratives they're subject to revision. I now am convinced that it wasn't the well-intentioned woodwind that wrecked my rockstar aspirations but the formal approach to music education that must be blamed, along with, of course, my chronic solitude.

Had I reappraised my selfstory in time - before my daughters arrived on the scene - I'd not have subjected them when their time came around to the selfsame regime of so-called music theory that, I realize now, turned generations of Trinidadian girls (boys rejected its irrelevant discipline), indeed young people around the Western world, I suspect, away from the piano and music-making in general as it turned me off the clarinet.

I should have known. Thirty years after my childhood clarinet debacle, shortly after became a journalist and my first daughter was born, I joined a small steelband, Merry Tones. On my first day they stood all of the newbies behind instruments in a room - I was at a tenor pan - and explained the musical stave on a blackboard. And the captain of the band taught us the national anthem. It was déjà vu. I didn't last long, which I blamed on the duties of fatherhood and mediawork. Again, I now realize the real culprit was the theory of eighteenth-century European classical music.

“Music theory” is a system of rules, concepts and ideas that grew out of centuries of music composed for European elites, starting with their religious rulers. At core it’s an “explanation” of notes, scales, intervals and keys; chords and counterpoint; rhythm and meter - what’s right and what’s wrong, which is the first big divergence from Black music which has no right or wrong, only what sounds good and what doesn’t. But music theory all starts with notation - how the music is written. That’s what is first drilled into beginners, children and adults alike, in my part of the world, to the grievous disappointment of anyone who expected music-making to be fun.

Standard literacy wasn’t necessary for most of the great popular musicians. Aretha, Dylan, Sparrow, Marley, Lennon-McCartney, Stevie and Shadow did brilliantly without it.

Standard literacy can be very useful, true. (Less so the rules and regulations of what’s right and wrong.) If you can read a score it might save considerable time learning and practising a complex, new work - especially if it’s orchestral. Steelbands in Trinidad take weeks to learn together what individual players could take days alone at home - but that’s not necessarily beneficial.

Literacy should be taught after the student knows how to make music with their instrument and then only if he or she wants to learn it. It definitely should be kept away from beginners who don’t yet know how to improvise. No one would think it’s a good idea to teach infants to read and write before they could speak and express themselves. Even adults learning a foreign language start with conversation. So why is formal music training introduced with standard literacy, which kills the desire to play music in most? And as if that isn’t colonial enough, in Trinidadian schools pan students are taught music literacy like English - in a classroom on a blackboard and with pen and exercise but no instrument.

Standard music script was launched in the eleventh century when Italian monk Guido of Arezzo (c. 991 - 1033) invented a system to accurately transcribe music. Until then - for the previous five centuries - monks throughout Christendom were expected to sing in exactly the same way thousands of Office Antiphons, 600 Greater Responsories, 150 Communions, 107 Offertories, 70 Introits, 18 Tracts and 118 Graduals. Ritual music must be sung precisely for its power to manifest, like magical spells that have to be pronounced properly. Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) (famed for the Gregorian chants), who established singing schools, centralised power in the Church and reformed and standardized the liturgy, insisted on it.

Half a century later Guido drew four lines and placed dots on or between them to indicate precisely how high or low a melody’s notes were to be sung. He explained it in 1030:

Any intelligent and studious person may learn the chant by means of it. Small boys can do this under our direction, boys who until now have been beaten for their gross ignorance of the Psalms and vulgar letters. Often they do not know how to pronounce the words and syllables of the very antiphon which they sing.

It was a less cruel and wasteful way of enforcing compliance and accuracy in the performance of church music. But power was its *raison d'être*. In that it was similar to linguistic literacy, which was invented in Mesopotamia and Egypt to compel exactness in tax accounting, administration and rituals. Literacy in Latin, long after the language was dead, enhanced the domination of the Catholic Church. Translating the Bible and liturgy into various vernaculars was punishable by execution because it democratized interpretation of god's word and indeed written words in general. That's why literacy was subsequently denied enslaved Africans - to withhold its demotic potential.

Standard music literacy, on the other hand, was never democratized. More difficult to learn than written language and less necessary, musical notation passed from the clerics through composers funded by the church and aristocracy, to classical musicians supported by concerts, sheet music sales, state patronage and, in modern times, big bands, orchestras and Hollywood. Inculcated through private lessons and in conservatories, music theory still exudes an air of privilege and high culture. Its teachers demeaned the unwritten music of colonial peoples and indeed everyone else, down to the present. For instance, Nitin Sawhney, today a highly-accomplished British musician of Indian background, recalled a schoolboy experience:

I was playing an Indian classical raga at the time on the piano and he came into the practice room and saw me doing that and asked me where my sheet music was and I was 11 years old and I said, 'We don't have sheet music for this, it's an oral tradition' and he said: 'If you don't have sheet music it's not music so get out!' and then I was banned for six years.

That was not an isolated attitude. One highly-lauded musician, composer and BBC presenter Howard Goodall, the author of *Big Bangs: The Story of Five Discoveries That Changed Musical History*, describes musical improvisation with so much loathing he's practically foaming at the mouth:

The structure of an improvised piece, whoever is creating it, is going to be necessarily much simpler than that of a written work. You may, as a listener, of course prefer the simpler forms that emanate from improvised music: the overwhelming bulk of popular music is made this way, after all. I'm not making a qualitative judgement here at all, merely talking about form and structure. If buildings were built by trial and error

rather by reference to an architect's plan, you could have a perfectly lovely mud hut or garden shed, or even a house, but you couldn't do a pyramid, an Aztec temple, St. Paul's Cathedral or the Kremlin.

Since when did more complex mean more beautiful? Besides, an improvised work is not necessarily simpler than a scored one - it just requires fewer musicians and a more open structure. Certainly improvisation is not easier to master. Nor is popular music usually composed by improvisation (although Mozart's manuscripts often had no corrections or additions). Does Goodall think Stevie Wonder walked on stage and improvised "Sir Duke"? And no music, indeed nothing creative, is done by "trial and error", with a musician trying hundreds or thousands of possible notes to find one that sounds right. What utter garbage.

Those who follow the standard music syllabus all the way become highly skilled at reading and performing scores, and that's useful. For the sound track of my film *Wishing For Wings* I needed someone to record the "Moonlight Sonata" - so I got the score and a musician played it. Compliance and accuracy, not creativity and self-expression. Such a "musician" is like someone who can only say what's written for them but can't engage you in conversation. No matter how eloquently they can read, you'd be better conversing with an inarticulate stammerer in a difficult accent. Similarly, a musician who cannot improvise cannot exchange energy with their audience, which all European musicians did before the nineteenth century. Madame de Staël could note in late eighteenth-century Germany: "On occasion I entered poor households blackened by tobacco smoke and at once heard not just the mistress but the master of the house improvising at the keyboard."

Bach and Mozart were exceptional at improvisation. Beethoven was too, but he insisted performers submit themselves to his scores. After he wrote his 1806 violin concerto in D major, he dedicated it to virtuoso violinist Franz Clement, the musical director of the theatre where the concerto was scheduled to premiere. "Concerto par Clemenza pour Clement", punned the dedication, begging Clement for clemency. In other words, please don't mess with my composition - perhaps because he'd long been considered, and considered himself, a supreme genius; or maybe because he was going deaf and needed to know exactly what was being performed under his name. Either way Clement ignored the request. He didn't read the score before the concert. Then, after the first movement, he introduced some of his own ideas. At the time concertos included a "cadenza" section for the virtuoso to display his improvisational skills. So Clement inserted one, inventing a fantasia while horsing around with his violin, holding it backwards, upside down. Beethoven took back his dedication.

The ideology of European art music came of age in the era of European expansion. The power of the composer over the performer was also the power of an educated elite over the uneducated and "uncultured" masses. And it eventually came to denote the power of one culture over others whose music could be defined in terms of mud huts, garden sheds, cave men and mere entertainment. The

new bourgeois, wealthy with the blood of enslaved Africans, sought to acquire the cultural cachet of the declining aristocracy by affecting a taste for black-tie aristocratic recitals and despising the improvised folk music. The Grove Encyclopedia of Music, for instance, in 1935 (after jazz had swept the Western world) defined “extempore playing” as:

The primitive act of music-making, existing from the moment that the untutored individual obeys the impulse to relieve his feelings by bursting into song. Accordingly, therefore, amongst all primitive people's musical composition consists of extemporization subsequently memorized.

The pejorative reference to “primitive peoples” is central to American racism. The Disney *Jungle Book* that my daughters loved featured an orangutan who wanted to be taught to be a human too. The “king of the swingers”, his name was King Papa Louis and he sang (and scatted) in a raspy voice like Louis “Pops” Armstrong, the king of swing music. In Disney’s *The Aristocats* a genteel house cat is led astray by some swinging alley cats whose jazzy song uses all Black slangs:

Everybody wants to be a cat

Because a cat's the only cat

Who knows where it's at.

Everybody's moving to the feline beat

Cos everything else is obsolete.

A square with a horn

Could make you wish you weren't born

Every time he plays.

But put a cat in the act

And you can take music back

To the cave man days.

Ba-bad da-be-do be do-dah.

How can those people despise the same music that clearly gives them such sensuous pleasure? That ingredient in their maggot bucket was the founding fathers’ puritanic Calvinism. Christianity in general castigates the body, starting when Eve gave Adam the fruit of knowledge to eat and they became ashamed of their own bodies. Saint Augustine made sure of that. But in its Calvinist

variation North American Christianity alienated whites even further from their own physical, sensual and “fallen” nature.

That self-hatred was projected onto the enslaved Africans, which twisted American culture into knots of contradictions. It made white people desire Black sensuous bodies and hate themselves - and the Blacks they envied - for it. Black Christians hated their own secular music - their beautiful blues - but their religious beliefs were contradicted by how they were practiced. Bodily denial was preached but in an African way that W.E.B. DuBois described as a trinity of “the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy.” The contradiction is between the dysmorphia of Christianity and the African way of worship, and both Black and white people lived that contradiction.

The paradox produced whites like the Proud Boys, who blame Black people for their self-emasculatation and cling to their guns, bibles and hatred. It formed Black men like O.J. Simpson and Tiger Woods, who tried to jump out of their skin. But it also created the gospel music that birthed every Black soul musician from Ray Charles to Otis Redding, Mahalia Jackson and Gladys Knight, Solomon Burke and even, believe it or not, James Brown - the godfather of soul.

The pleasure of music-making is that of communion with others. It’s like the pleasures of conversation and of lovemaking. The better to sell it back to you capitalism has stolen the pleasures of making music from many people by convincing them they cannot sing and by making it difficult and unpleasant to learn to play an instrument. That is especially egregious in Trinidad where there was a genuinely popular form of collective music-making - pan - that schools now use to turn young people away from learning to make music - with any instrument - by teaching them music theory in as sterile a fashion as possible.

As ever I fall back on the wit and wisdom of the calypsonian, in this case Shadow’s “Dingolay”, which lays it out clearly:

You don’t need a bulldozer

To become a composer

Every little “Pock!” or a “Tock!”

May help you construct

A melody.

