

The Cry of Jazz

By Chuck Kleinhans

“The Cry of Jazz” is a remarkable and unique film that demonstrates the imaginative power of black intellectuals and artists in the Civil Rights Era. Combining sophisticated music theory with a social analysis of race in the post-war period, the self-financed work uses some of the familiar tropes of educational films of the time along with ingenious demonstrations of jazz art by the young Afro-Futurist composer and performer Sun Ra. The result is a passionate essay about music and race presented in a novel form by first-time filmmakers.

Edward O. Bland directed “The Cry of Jazz,” making it with several others who were part of the Chicago art world of the time. A 34-minute-long argument about the nature and status of jazz music and the situation of black Americans, the film uses dramatic dialogue, direct address argumentation, realist documentary illustration, an innovative music soundtrack, and essayistic construction to argue for jazz music as an expression of the situation of black Americans. Seeing jazz as both empowering and limiting, the film is an acute and even painful statement of its political, social, cultural, and artistic moment.

Rather than provide a dramatic narrative carrying the film, the initial scenes establish the basis for a very didactic lecture about politics and music. In this sense the film is like educational and classroom films of the era, creating an initial drama or dilemma that is then addressed with authoritative intent. The goal of instruction and enlightenment is clear: this is the discourse of sobriety.

The film starts with a post-meeting discussion at the “Parkwood Jazz Club” among a racially mixed group of 20-something members. When a young white guy offers the opinion that rock ‘n’ roll is jazz, he is schooled by several very articulate black fellows who give an elaborate explanation of both the formal musical qualities of jazz and an explanation of jazz as an African American cultural form.

At several key moments in the film, white Natalie provides a foil for black expert Alex by objecting to



Ronnie Boykins, bassist for Sun Ra and His Arkestra, appears as one of the musicians in the film.

one of his statements. That then redirects the argument. As Alex says that white America oppresses the Negro, Natalie objects that he’s saying whites (like her) are “not human.” This sets up Alex’s next line of argument in a directly confrontational style. The film is remarkable in allowing both sides to strongly express their views heavily laden with emotion in the fictional drama sequences.

The first phase of Alex’s explanation lays out the musicological basis of jazz, explaining formal elements such as harmony and rhythmic repetition as restraints, and melodic improvisation as freedom. After his initial definition of jazz, Alex returns to the African American cultural nature of jazz. Interwoven with his exposition are illustrative shots that make their own connections through editing. In one sequence the editing cuts back and forth between a large religious service in a gospel church and barroom with a couple dancing with a juke box in the background. Rhythmic movement is seen in two very different environments: a dark club or bar setting and a bright congregation with several of the worshippers clapping hands and moved by the spirit to dance with the gospel music. Thus sacred and profane are linked as having a shared basis in black music.

Having established the musical and social/cultural nature of jazz, Alex goes on to explain the historical development of jazz, accompanied by the Sun Ra group playing in successive styles: Dixieland, swing,

be bop, etc. Climaxing his analysis of the contradictions in jazz form, Alex startles his white listeners by saying that “jazz is dead.” He elaborates, arguing that the music cannot transcend its inherent limits. This segues into a passage of increasingly discordant instrumentals. Images of destruction then appear such as an outdoor fire, with the rapid flickers of the flames matching the rapidly intensified music track. Alex rests his case with the statement that the only way forward is for white America to accept Negro Americans as full members of society who can lead the way into a new future.

At the time of its release the film’s unabashed critique of white racism raised anxious concern among the nominally liberal white jazz fan community. In its first screenings, it was denounced as “Negro chauvinism” by some; it was also promoted as bearing a message whites needed to hear and understand. The film’s message was influential and became the core argument of the widely read polemic “Blues People” by Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka). Thus the film is a foundational declaration providing a political interpretation of African American cultural expression. Whereas a dominant trend earlier among black artists and intellectuals was to establish African American artistic production as equal to the dominant white accomplishments, the core exposition in “The Cry of Jazz” states that jazz is uniquely African American and to be judged on its own terms as speaking for, of, and through Black lives and experience.

In retrospect the film appeared at a critical node of jazz development. While gaining increasing popular and commercial success, jazz also was in a process of change with newer complex expressions by musicians such as Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane,

Chicago’s AACM, and militant performers such as Archie Shepp and Nina Simone. When Alex, in the film, declares “jazz is dead” he seems to be articulating composer Ed Bland’s own view, based in training in “modern classical” music. However, needing to support his family, Bland left filmmaking and turned to being an executive of commercial recording work in New York and later Los Angeles. Later in life he returned to writing modernist compositions and also tutored teens developing rap and hip-hop music in a community program. The film experienced a new surge of interest following the revived reputation of musician Sun Ra whose group is seen and heard extensively illustrating the didactic points.

“The Cry of Jazz” remains a remarkable testament to the desire to make strong argumentative essayistic films to participate in the social and political transformation of its moment. Arguing for a unique and leading African American sensibility, and demonstrating its commitment with imaginative sound, image, and editing, the film shows artistic and cultural expression as just as powerful and essential as the black struggle for equality taking place in courtrooms, legislatures, and executive administrations.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Chuck Kleinhans taught film and video at Northwestern University. He has served as co-editor of JUMP CUT: a review of contemporary media and he has written widely on popular film and video, including essays on Charles Burnett, Billy Woodberry, Marlon Riggs, and the “L.A. Rebellion” filmmakers. His extended interview with Ed Bland appears online in Jump Cut.