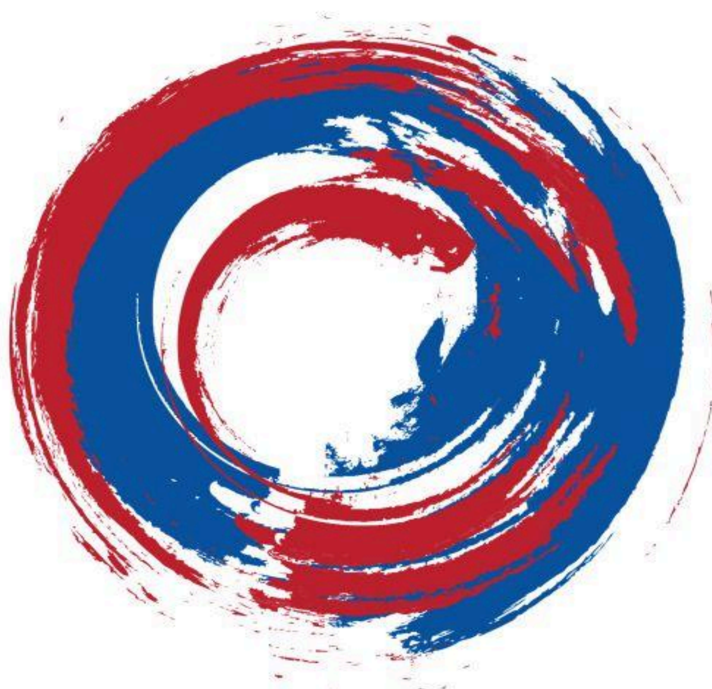

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Albert Murray’s Conversation Partners, Ancient and Modern

by Aryeh Tepper

True liberals today have no more pressing duty than to counteract the perverted liberalism which contends “that just to live, securely and happily, and protected… is man's simple but supreme goal” and which forgets quality, excellence, or virtue.

Leo Strauss, "The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy"

Writer, critic, poet, and self-declared “all-purpose intellectual,” Albert Murray (1916-2013), interpreted his life in story-book terms. Given up for adoption at birth during Jim Crow and raised by his adoptive parents just outside of Mobile, Alabama, little Al did not consider himself to be abandoned or a victim. Instead, the dark-skinned hero-in-waiting felt chosen.

It took time for little Al’s heroic task to mature. Albert-the-schoolboy earned a BS at Tuskegee University before serving in the U.S. Air Force from 1943-1962, retiring with the rank of major. Along the way, Major Murray earned an MA in literature at NYU on the GI Bill and developed a life-long friendship (and later, a low-burning rivalry) with his Tuskegee upperclassman, Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*.

In 1970 at the ripe age of fifty-four, Albert Murray published his first book, *The Omni-Americans*, a lucid, combative and entertaining collection of essays in which Murray stepped on the scene like a gun-slinging hero from the intellectual-spiritual frontier shooting down racial essentialists left and right:

> *American culture, even in its most rigidly segregated precincts, is patently and irrevocably composite* . . . Indeed, for all their traditional antagonisms and obvious differences, the so-called black people and so-called white people of the United States resemble nobody else in the world so much as they resemble each other (Italics in the original; Murray 1970, 22).

Seeing through “traditional antagonisms and obvious differences” to a deeper Omni-American reality, Murray likewise rejected the social science fiction that Black Americans are psychologically deformed. Speaking from experience, Murray saw quintessential Americans who often “live with gusto and a sense of elegance that has always been downright enviable,” and he recommended jazz instead of social science for a more accurate depiction of the sense of life that he knew from the inside (Murray 1970, 6). Murray heard in the music a reflection of his heroic mode, elaborating, extending and refining the blues into high art, “Jazz is a fully orchestrated blues statement” (Murray & Devlin 2016, 101).

To be clear, “The blues as such are synonymous with low spirits. Blues music is not" (Murray 2017, 45). Blues music and the fully orchestrated blues statement, jazz, stomp the "blue devils” causing chaos and misery in our lives (Murray 2017, 23). Hence the title of Murray's classic study, *Stomping the Blues.* Stomp is the name of a dance, and through blues *music* we stomp the blues *feeling*.

But the blue devils are only standing by, so it’s only a matter of time before the hero will need to step on stage again. No amount of technological or political progress can change the fundamental fact that "life is at bottom… a never-ending struggle," a principle that Murray embraced because

> heroism… is measured in terms of the stress and strain it can endure and the magnitude and complexity of the obstacles it overcomes. Thus difficulties and vicissitudes which

> beset the potential hero on all sides not only threaten his existence and jeopardize his prospects; they also, by bringing out the best in him, serve his purpose. They make it possible for him to make something of himself (Murray 1995, 38).

The heroic mode of Murray's work is foreign to the spirit of the contemporary academy, but leading artists and writers like Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch thoroughly assimilated his thought, and Murray and his students shaped the founding of one of America's premiere cultural institutions, Jazz at Lincoln Center. Creating a vocabulary that interprets jazz in terms of the hero's journey, Murray consciously aspired to shape the contours of American culture, "We've got Louis, Duke, Count and Ralph, and now we're trying to do it with Wynton and Stanley. That's all we are – just a bunch of Negros trying to save America" (Boynton 1995). A funny punch-line animated by a serious intent.

All that said, Murray was no naïve romantic. He was learned, and he was experienced, and he knew that music is not good, simply. Music is an ambiguous power:

> As much as we like jazz and as much as I use it, I never forget… [that] music is politically suspect.… You can have just as good musicians playing for Nazis as playing for freedom (Murray 2016, 179).

The awareness of music's problematic power coupled with Murray's intention to use jazz to inform the shape of American culture places him in venerable company. There is an old tradition dating back to the Hebrew Bible, Plato and Aristotle, and transmitted to us via the modern rebels against modernity, Rousseau and Nietzsche, that takes seriously the power of music to shape the character of individuals and political communities.[1] This tradition is not taught in the academy today, but like music itself, it takes you straight to soulful depths.[2] When we embed Murray's thought in this history of conversations about music, we better understand what is great both in jazz and in Murray. *Ipso facto*, we see a vision of American greatness. And after listening to the deep talking to the deep, we will be able to return to the surface and hear some of the unheroic sounds of contemporary American life more distinctly.

Rhythm or Chaos

In a 1959 letter to Ralph Ellison, Murray related a strange conversation with Norman Mailer, the hipster-writer and champion of emancipated sexuality. "I pointed out," Murray wrote, "that jazz represented CONTROL not abandon" (Murray & Ellison 2000, 212; all caps in the original).

Control, in the sense of self-control, getting one's self together and staying cool, is a leading term in Murray's thought. As he wrote in *Stomping the Blues:*

> Blues-idiom merriment is not marked either by the sensual abandon of the voodoo orgy or by the ecstatic trance of a religious possession. One of its most distinctive features…

> is its unique combination of spontaneity, improvisation, and control. Sensual abandon is, like overindulgence in alcohol and drugs, only another kind of disintegration (Murray 2017, 50).

The self-control that maintains equilibrium while ascending through pain plus tricky circumstances is stylized via elegant improvisation. Flowing through the pressure of the (chord) changes, jazz bands create dynamic structures of rhythmic power that go by the name of "Swing…" an inimitable mix of "rhythm, tempo, and syncopation, all in the spirit of unrepressible improvisation to achieve, if not grace, at least a tentative equilibrium under the pressure of all tempos and unforeseeable but not unanticipated disjunctures" (Murray 1996, 81). Since jazz is "geared to the syntax of the drummer," Murray clarifies that "it is a mistake for the uninitiated listener to approach blues music with the assumption that rhythm is only incidental to the melody" (Murray 2017, 118).

Keep in mind Murray's emphasis on rhythm's role in stylizing CONTROL not abandon – like a riff, repeating a primal warning – while listening to Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Richard Wagner and his infinite melodies rising and spiraling out of the "complete degeneration of the sense of rhythm" (Nietzsche 1976, 666).

Friedrich Nietzsche was not only a 19th-century psychologist-philosopher whose nose for declining life led him far beyond the academy. He was also a serious amateur musician and composer who averred that "without music life would be an error" and who testified that "music liberates the spirit" and "gives wing to thought" (Nietzsche 1976, 471; 1967, 158).

Nietzsche initially loved Wagner, deeply, but in time he heard at the heart of Wagner's "infinite melody," the swirling, surging, relentlessly striving ocean of color that agitated weary German nerves in the latter half of the 19th c., "*chaos* in place of rhythm" (Nietzsche 1976, 666; italics in the original). Wagner's music was an act that counterfeited great passions, "an imitation of the high tide of the soul" that aimed to excite spiritually exhausted audiences (Nietzsche 2008, 74). Watching Germans cede CONTROL and abandon their self-possession to an infinite melody, Nietzsche declared Wagner "a danger" (Nietzsche 1976, 666).

Rhythm provides measure. CONTROL, not disintegration, is a foundation of Swing. Following Wagner, however, "one walks into the sea, gradually loses one's secure footing, and finally surrenders oneself to the elements without reservation: one must swim" (Nietzsche 1976, 666).

Nietzsche loved Bizet's *Carmen*, but not only because he could troll German readers by celebrating a Frenchman. Nietzsche loved *Carmen* because the music dances "lightly, supplely... 'What is good is light; what is divine moves on tender feet'" (Nietzsche 1967, 157).

The Flute, the Lyre and the Beat

In Book III of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates and his young interlocutors decide to permit the guitar's ancient ancestors, the "lyre and cither," in their ideal republic, but to banish "the flute." Socrates justifies the purge by appealing to a traditional precedent, "It's nothing new we're doing… in choosing Apollo and Apollo's instruments ahead of Marsyas and his instruments" (Plato, *The Republic*, 399 d-e). It was an old story already in Socrates' time: once, Apollo the god and Marsyas the satyr fought a musical battle, with Apollo on lyre and Marsyas on flute. Apollo won.

Socrates doesn't say what was at stake in the battle, but Plutarch offers a gloss in his "Life of Alcibiades," the uber-talented statesman and general and Socrates' sometime-student, "When he came to study, (Alcibiades) was fairly obedient to most of his teachers, but refused to learn the flute, which he regarded as an ignoble accomplishment and quite unsuitable for a free citizen" (Plutarch 1976, 246-7).

Why did Alcibiades refuse to play the flute?

> He argued that… the lyre accompanies… the words or the song of its performer, but the flute seals and barricades his mouth and deprives him both of voice and speech. 'Leave the flute to the sons of Thebes,' Alcibiades concluded, 'for they have no idea of conversation. We Athenians, as our fathers say, have… Apollo for our patron' (Plutarch 1976, 247).

Plutarch's Alcibiades preferred Apollo's lyre for the same reason that Socrates and his young friends allowed the instrument into their imagined republic. The lyre, like the cither, is a string instrument, not a wind instrument. You play with your hands, not your mouth. And with musicians free to speak, or sing, Socrates accordingly was free to give the lyrics and, as such, the logos the leading role in the music played in his ideal city:

> We'll see which are the rhythms of an orderly… life, and when we have seen them, we'll compel the foot and the tune to follow the speech of such a man, rather than the speech following the foot and the tune (Plato, *The Republic,* 400a).[3]

Albert Murray was deeply interested in the relationship between instrumental music and speech, and he shared the concern for shaping citizens' capacity for self-control. His emphasis on heroic spiritedness, however, compelled Murray to overturn Plato's order.

Murray began by counter-stating the common fallacy that blues music is sad music because blues lyrics so often include litanies of troubles and woes, "Definitions of blues music in most standard American dictionaries confuse it with the blues as such. They… leave the impression that what it represents is the expression of sadness" (Murray 2017, 57). Dictionary definitions focus on the lyrics, but "the words… are only a part of the statement" whose function is "to state the facts of life" (Murray 1996, 203; 1995, 36). Once the facts of life are stated and accepted, however, the counter-stating stomp can begin:

> What blues instrumentation in fact does, often in direct contrast to the words, is define the nature of the response to the blues situation at hand, whatever the source. Accordingly, more often than not, even as the words of the lyrics recount a tale of woe, the instrumentation may mock, shout defiance, or voice resolution and determination (Murray 2017, 68-69).

And in the highly distilled, rhythmic propulsion of Count Basie's "classic Kansas City-style shout, stomp, shuffle and jump, the very beat of the music actually belies or in effect even *denies* the words" (Murray 1996, 204; italics not in the original).

Control, not abandon, is one pillar of jazz. Resilient joy is another. Deep joy, for a spirited, heroic resilience deeper than words powers the music.

In entrusting music with the task of stylizing spiritedness, Murray wasn't alone. Nietzsche did the same.

Stylizing Spiritedness

Friedrich Nietzsche deeply critiqued the leveling energy of modernity. He saw resentment as the fundamental power animating the modern democratic movement and judged the desire for comfortable self-preservation, the effectual spring of modernity, to be a sign of decline. Nietzsche responded by using music to open a channel to spirited depths buried beneath the dominant *zeitgeist* of our time.

In Nietzsche's teaching, music provides a source of energy for noble souls who embrace suffering and danger with life-affirming strength. Nietzsche's musical loves changed over the course of his career but the use of music for the sake of life remained constant, as did his ear for overflowing souls and music that embraces "every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life…" (Nietzsche 2008, 170-71) Everything, again! From the top!

Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (originally subtitled "Out of the Spirit of Music"), celebrated Wagner's Dionysian compositions as a source for conjuring a life-affirming philosophy of the future. The mature Nietzsche, however, held Wagner's infinite melodies and melting audiences in contempt, celebrating instead *Carmen*'s rhythm and a "pessimism of strength" that opposes the enlightenment failure to acknowledge, let alone embrace, that risk and suffering are essential for enhancing life, "Modern men, very tender, very easily hurt, and offering as well as receiving consideration a hundredfold, really have the conceit that this tender humanity… represents positive progress" (Nietzsche 1976, 538).

Albert Murray wasn't troubled by modernity per se, but he believed that a potent brew of Marxist political thought and Freudian psychoanalysis, often mediated by the social sciences

and literature written under their influence, augmented the inclination to play the victim in America. He likewise wrote that the aspiration to create a society free from "ambivalence, complexity and strife" diminishes the capacity for heroic action (Murray 1995, 42). Like Nietzsche before him, Murray turned to music to articulate a more heroic vision of life, and despite their different evaluations of modernity, Nietzsche and Murray are linked by their use of musical tools to resist enfeebling tendencies produced by, or within, the modern project. Murray diverged from Nietzsche in his aspiration to cultivate heroic action within liberal democracy.

Murray was a self-declared FDR Democrat and a proud American who knew that Black Americans made a decisive contribution to American culture. He didn't consider modernity to be sick or decadent, and he championed the ideals of American democracy as articulated in "the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Gettysburg Address, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments" (Murray 2010, 14).

Still, Murray contrasted the ways in which the hero and the modern "social-science-oriented intellectual" respond to adversity:

> The outlying regions, the sinister circumstances beyond statistics, *cooperate* with the hero by virtue of the very fact of and nature of their existence. They help beget real-life and storybook heroes alike, not only by generating the necessity for heroism in the first place but by contesting its development at every stage and by furnishing the occasion for its fulfillment. Indeed, since in the final analysis the greatness of the hero can be measured only in scale with the mischief, malaise, or menace he can dispatch, the degree of cooperation is always equal to the amount of antagonism (Murray 1995, 39).

The hero not only accepts, he or she welcomes the "sinister circumstances." After all

> complicated diseases… bring out the best doctors and the best in doctors. Without exasperating legal snarls there are only ordinary inexperienced lawyers, however promising… And so it goes… What brings out the best also shows up the worst, a procedure as indispensable as it is paradoxical (Murray 1995, 40).

Murray's fear was that Americans were losing the capacity to accept that risk, pain and suffering are integral to life. In contrast to the hero's embrace of "antagonistic cooperation," the basic assumption of the "social science-oriented intellectual" is that

> life can be free of ambivalence, complexity and strife. He proceeds as if there were actually environments antiseptically free from folly… welfare states, as it were, moderately taxed but well budgeted against social problems and therefore immune to personal conflicts (Murray 1995, 41).

That passage was originally published in 1973. How would Murray respond to the present-day proliferation of “microaggressions,” “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings”?

Let’s imagine visiting the Jazz Master in his Harlem apartment. After an introductory discussion exploring heroism in American culture, Murray offers you single-malt scotch served in crystal-glass chalices specially cut with the names of his books. He hands you whisky in a glass etched *Good Morning Blues*. “Safe spaces? *The Hero and the Blues* and *Stomping the Blues* should be taught in American schools,” he says. Then, looking you over with a wry sparkle in his eye, he smiles, “Work it into your consciousness: when the modes of music change, the ways of the state change with them” (Plato, *The Republic*, 424c).[4]

A Monumental Interpretation

One can criticize Murray’s interpretation of jazz from a variety of angles. For instance, his interpretation of blues-idiom music is a secular interpretation. In *Stomping the Blues,* Murray explicitly opposes the earthy ritual function of blues and jazz to the other-worldly focus of the church. How does he account for the musical mysticism of John Coltrane, one of the great jazz musicians of the latter half of the 20th c. whose classic 1965 album, *A Love Supreme*, is explicitly religious? Where Murray saw chaos, Coltrane saw creation, “I think the main thing a musician would like to do is give a picture to the listener of the many wonderful things that he knows of and senses in the universe” (DeMichael 2010, 153).

Murray’s response was to treat anomalies in perfunctory fashion and to squeeze the remainder into the contours of his strong theory, “John Coltrane… is essentially a post-Charlie Parker instrumental extension of the traditional hard-driving blues shouter” (Murray 2017, 229). True enough, but far from the whole story.

Do anomalies diminish the power of Murray’s interpretation of jazz? Only if we expect Murray’s interpretation to be universally applicable, which is to say, scientific. But interpretation is not a science, and a limited horizon is inherent to any monumental interpretation of history. What’s more, jazz invites this monumental interpretation. Reflect upon the pain that preceded the music and the names of the legends involved in its making: King Oliver, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Louis “Pops” Armstrong, Lester “Prez” Young, and so on. As the godmother of American moxie, Zora Neale Hurston, clarified almost a century ago, oppression “intensified (the) inner life” of some Black Americans “instead of destroying it” (Hurston 2022, 107).

But even if we acknowledge the depth and spirited power of his interpretation, Albert Murray’s vision is a minority view today. The post-colonial, progressive left and the racist, identitarian right reject the Omni-American idea and ideal. There are no *human* depths for them, just structures of dominance and oppression. Race is real, not ‘so-called.’ What, in this context, are the prospects for Murray’s thought?

The answer depends on two related questions. First, are Americans open to exploring music for wisdom? If so, not only Murray but also a rich tradition waits to aid in the quest.

Secondly, are Americans ready to believe that a joyous and heroic sense of life that originally grew out of Black American culture potentially belongs to *every citizen* as their national birthright?

If these questions are answered in the affirmative, then we can imagine little Al's boyhood mission fulfilled in Albert Murray's Omni-American vision of swinging through the changes, even when they break your heart, noble souls stomping the blues with grace, gratitude and conviction saying Yes, to life.

Endnotes

1. The teachings of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau and Nietzsche on music are well-known, if largely ignored. For the Hebrew Bible's teaching regarding instrumental music, see Aryeh Tepper, "The Problematic Power of Musical Instruments in the Bible," *Interpretation,* Vol. 41, 2-3, 2014-15, pp. 227-46.
2. Notable scholarly exceptions to the general rule include Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Bob O'Meally, Joel Dinerstein and Paul Devlin.
3. See, however, *The Symposium,* 215 b-c, and Alcibiades' comparison of Socrates to "a flute player… far more marvelous… than Marsyas." Socrates' speeches leave his listeners "thunderstruck and possessed."
4. While Bloom's translation of *The Republic* was used above, this particular translation is found online and appears to be a slight revision of Jowett's translation, "When modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the State always change with them."

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