

BLACK ART AND CULTURE: THE 70s

The areas of black art and culture are, of course, vast. They subsume and permeate all of black life as well as the life of the society that oppresses us. Notwithstanding, it is necessary to begin again the process of assessing our knowledge of ourselves so that we may order our priorities for research, for criticism, and for creation to the end of black liberation and black celebration. This paper is thus a brief tentative statement of those concerns and makes no pretense of completeness, if such a thing were, indeed possible.

It seems to me that our present knowledge and awareness of black art and culture leave a great deal to be desired, especially as we move from the relatively few persons with great masses of specific information to the vast majority of black people, both schooled and unschooled, who still believe that European standards and tastes and contributions to a vague "universal culture" should govern our preferences, our education, our aspirations--should, in short, govern our lives. The problem is thus one of education, and although I said that it is one both for the schooled and unschooled, paradoxically enough, it is chiefly one for the schooled. By this I mean that although the man on the street may admire Euroamerican booklearning or might be deferential when one of his educated

brothers extols the virtues of symphonic music, he still knows what he likes and understands and what is meaningful to him in black culture. The problem for him then is to become aware of the value of the culture which he knows and, in addition, to become aware of the fact that certain aspects of black culture rival or exceed anything comparable in Euroamerican culture. For the schooled person the problem is much more complex because it involves first of all a systematic questioning of the assumptions upon which formal education was largely based, particularly in those areas, disciplines, and subjects which involve concepts of beauty, morality, sensibility, taste; which involve value judgments and concepts of reality, and which raise the questions which are usually crystallized by or embodied in the arts, practical and applied, and in that group of studies and techniques which address themselves to an evaluation or interpretation of the arts, or, by extension, of the interior life of a people.

Put another way, the educational problem of black art and culture may be broken down as follows:

1. Discontinuous knowledge
2. Neglected areas of knowledge
3. Undefined areas of knowledge
4. Apathy and inferiority feelings regarding black culture

5. Problems of personal vision vs. commitment to collective movement

These topics may be further resolved into specific kinds of research and artistic and political concerns; but for the present let us spell them out, or at least illustrate, what they may involve.

By discontinuous knowledge I mean knowledge of segments of a whole without any comprehensive sense of the whole. This is obviously the case of much of human knowledge, for various reasons; so, for example, one might speak of medical knowledge--which has no cure for cancer--as discontinuous. Notwithstanding, the disease is being attacked in systematic fashion, which includes theory as well as laboratory analysis and experimentation. So an attempt is being made to eliminate the discontinuity, chiefly because dedicated and skilled people can see the problem.

Admittedly, questions which involve value judgments, and, hence, questions of art and culture, are less subject to the kind of precise response which science and technology can make. Still there are precise responses which can be made which violate neither intellectual integrity nor the larger human concerns of the people whose art and culture are being discussed. In this case, we are, of course, talking about the art and culture of black people, chiefly in North America. And many of the gaps in our knowledge are painfully obvious. Still the obvious may be with us for so long that we take it for granted and fail to

respect its significance to our larger struggle and ultimate well-being.

A good case in point would be in music, the most obvious aspect of black culture anywhere, but especially here in the United States. Where is the black college or university which has seriously examined the sources of our music? Where are the black scholars who treat the complexities of modern jazz with the intelligence and compassion which they deserve? Where are the seminars in jazz history which examine the development and the influence of our music? Where is the historian of the blues? Where is the historian of gospel music? Where is the historian of the music of the Civil Rights Movement? Where is the analysis of the music of the World War II generation?

It is that much needed analysis of the economics of black music which would indicate why men of genius have had to starve to death or make humiliating compromises in order to survive in a white consumer-oriented society? Where is the analysis of the role of the mass media in suppressing and distorting black music? The questions could go on ad nauseum, but the point is that one of the chief ironies of the education of black people in the United States is that these questions have largely been ignored by the very people who produced the music, and although one has to respect the sincerity and dedication and basic fairness of scholars like Gunther Schuller and Paul Oliver, they are solitary beacons in a sea of willful distortion and