

TechNews

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Room 221
3201 South State Street
Chicago, Illinois 60616E-mail: editor@technewsiit.com
Website: http://www.technewsiit.com

TechNews STAFF

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Opinion Editor	Austin Gonzalez
IT Manager	Kristal Copeland
Copy Editors	Vijai Baskar Kristal Copeland Sharath Ramesh Anoop Sundararajan
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Jazz as Expression

Kristal Copeland
IT MANAGER

Editor's Note: This article was submitted in response to an article published in last week's issue titled "Contemporary Jazz at the Chicago Jazz Festival."

Jazz has historically been a medium used as a form of musical expression by the African American community. It has been used to promote change and self-expression in a community generally looked down upon by the majority. Jazz was seen as being unrefined, strange, and jarring at its advent, yet now it has been used by artists to express a wide range of emotions; in fact, every sin has been expressed in a jazz song. Knowing this, it isn't surprising at all that jazz has been used to express wrath. This wrath is created; it is not a thing with which anyone is born. It is formed by a deep-seated and long running life of being attacked, hated, looked down upon, and killed.

It begins at childhood, being told that the light-skinned fictional character, let us say Barbie, is prettier than the darker-skinned Barbie. Did you know that most African American children believe that white dolls are inherently prettier than black dolls? That some children are told not to color in the faces of people in coloring books because "No one wants to be colored?" Black children grow up in a world where they are told that it is a definite, absolute, and irrefutable fact that the human-shaped-thing-that-does-not-look-like-them is automatically better than them. As children, they learn very quickly that they are not physically beautiful.

This shame continues to breed through adolescence, when they are told constantly that smooth, straight hair is better than the curly, "nappy hair" (unkempt or full of tangles) of a 'fro, regardless of the time and energy it takes to maintain an afro. Did you know that there is a hair typing system? Bone straight hair is 1A and the hair with the tightest coil is 4C. This is meant to help aid people find useful products and styles, but there is a strong correlation between higher alphanumeric values, and "less professional hair." Most people who know about the hair typing system at all are African Americans who spend hours every single week or even day making their hair look straighter, sleeker, and shinier, and therefore better, and it is called having "good hair." The vast majority of commercial black hair products are full of ingredients that cannot physically penetrate and moisturize a hair strand, but are cheaper and comprised primarily of byproducts like mineral oil and silicone. Have you ever met a white person who did not get a job because the interviewer said "Do you think I could hire you with that hair?" after going to an interview having "only" combed his natural hair? We learn that our bodies are professionally unacceptable.

Continuing into teenage years, the seeds of wrath have been firmly planted when African Americans are statistically less likely to go to better schools due to a lack of resources. They go to a school with less funding and students who look like them, gaining less opportunity as a result. These students, generally poorer, then have even less comparative opportunity in the future because they went to a school with less of an important name, or they miss out on some core knowledge required by a better college. They're told it's because "I mean, scientifically speaking, black people's brains are just smaller." Alternatively, they go to a school with more funding and fewer students. They're called things like "Oreo" by their

fellow black students (it implies black on the outside and white on the inside. When used by black people, it is a form of self-hate stemming from the idea that white people are always better educated; therefore, anyone who is better educated must actually be white.) If they do try, they're told that they "speak well" and should "stay in school," by their nonblack peers and professors, who seem to think it odd that an African American could speak well or might not have been planning to drop out of school.

This carries on into most social interactions, both outward racism like, "You don't look like you belong here," and that oh so hateful word, and the unfortunate societal racism, such as, "You should know how to jump a fence," and, "Don't you people like rap music?" Before even getting into college, they learn that they're stereotypes, not real people. They will never be treated as a "person," only an "African American."

In college, there will automatically be fewer black students (unless it is a historically black college) who will have entirely different life experiences even from the same economic class. This is worse if you go to a technical school or suburban school. Generally, this is the time you realize just how undesirable you are. "You're attractive for a black person," becomes something you might hear too frequently, but if you do not and you decide to join a dating site, you are bombarded with profiles featuring the phrase "no blacks," or return messages saying "I'm not racist, I'm just not attracted to black people." This has been shown to permeate dating sites, from every gender orientation, every sexual preference, to even fetish sites. The single most common exclusion of race, by far, is African American (specifically; that is, "exotic races" can apply.) When a black woman has heard several friends express the sentiment, "I don't think black women are attractive. They're too obnoxious," because they don't believe she'll be offended—either because they don't think she is or they think she's Strong Black Woman enough to Not Need No Man—they aren't realizing that the same woman has probably heard that from several of their crushes, from bosses and coworkers, and from random passersby on the street. They learn that they aren't just unattractive; they were never an option in the first place.

As an adult, African Americans are seen as loud, obnoxious, stupid, lazy, and privileged, especially if the fury of past slights has already gotten to them. They hear, "You'll always get better opportunities because you're black." And "It's harder to be a white male in America now." When they—as anyone who grew up learning they are ugly, unprofessional, and stupid—go to seek psychiatric help, they are bombarded with stereotypes. The Angry Black Woman can't possibly be sad. The Tough Black Man is too busy committing crimes to have emotional instability, so that cannot be the problem. Black Americans are therefore less likely to be diagnosed with depression. It is fairly difficult to be treated for something you have not been diagnosed with in the first place. They learn that they are hopeless and alone.

With no aid, no hope for the future and no self-confidence, African Americans, especially women attempting to avoid the stereotype, are forced to be quiet. They learn to accept the things that happen to them, to quietly move out of the way when someone cuts them in line, because complaining leads to someone calling you obnoxious and ignoring your points. Black women cannot talk in mov-

ie theatres at all, discuss anything in a library, or speak up even to defend someone else when they have been wronged without risking themselves. Black men cannot wear hoodies, cannot look down with their hands in their pockets. Even on this very campus black students have been harassed, been asked "Do you go here?" by CDAs mere minutes after scanning their IDs. They've been avoided when walking down streets in groups, been told "I thought you were going to rob me, but then you started speaking."

African Americans play games described as, "Let's see how long this security guard follows us around the store." Or "How long this security car follows me around the school." The amount of calculation that goes into every single thing a black American says is exhausting, it is stressful, and it should be unnecessary, so they learn to be silent.

Hopefully, those individuals are not yet wrathful and get a job where they can afford a place to live, they might own a car. If it is nice, when they are pulled over the police might even ask "Is this your car?" or "Where did you steal this?" even if they are dressed like someone who would own just such a car. At home, they watch TV as they eat breakfast or dinner, where they see more people who look like them being shot—and the killer going free—than any other race. They talk about it, seldomly, on public media and are given so many reasons why that specific time was not racially motivated, even when the murderer explicitly states that it is. They are told that "Racism is over," and they need to "Stop talking about things that didn't happen to them, like slavery." They're called angry and hateful when they are not by people who do not know them, and are told to stop "pulling racial triggers" or "playing the race card" when someone, for example, says "My friends and I are lazy," and they respond, simply "My friends are not lazy," while being black. They see that no one cares, because they are not scene as human.

After (let us say 30) years of being told we are ugly, stupid, unprofessional by birth, lazy with so many opportunities, alone, and inhuman to the point of it not mattering when we are killed, that seed has grown into a veritable stalk of misery and rage. Its roots firmly planted and reaching out up into the mind of that person. They then write a song about their experiences, a song meant to provoke others for three to five minutes. One song, not a threat, not violence, not hurting those who have wronged them, but a song. They scream and yell in an attempt to let out 30 years of fear and repression, knowing they will be ridiculed, called one of many stereotypes or worse, ignored.

Three students from IIT go to witness that song, they stand and are shocked and angered at being provoked and used for those five minutes, and that song has done part of its job. In the end, when at least one of them realizes he should not have felt anger for being used, but an empathetic anger with the singer and not against, that song finished its job. Being blindsided by anything of this sort isn't meant to make you feel bad, it is meant to make you think about how much suffering led to this point. 30 years of misery led to five minutes of a concert.

How is that anything but beautiful? How is that not the point of Jazz, or music, or theatre, or painting, or of any form of art?

Every applicable quotation in this text is something this author has either been personally told, or something a friend has been personally told.

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