

Art in America

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THE COLOR OF SOUND

BY STANLEY WHITNEY



The Five Spot Café, New York, 1957.
Photo Burt Glinn. Courtesy Magnum Photos.

WHEN I WAS A KID growing up outside Philadelphia, music was always there with me. Just being African-American, music was a thing that really got people through. There was a lot of music on the radio in Philadelphia, a lot of black stations. I began with rock 'n' roll, then moved on to jazz—Ornette Coleman and Coltrane. Sam Rivers, who died in 2011. That music was a real reach, because it wasn't easy to listen to. I used to go up to New York frequently, to Slugs or the Five Spot, but I was really young and didn't know quite what I was doing. I just felt that was where I wanted to be. I knew I was a painter, an artist, but I didn't know what that meant.

As an artist, I was always asking, "Where is the Other?" I looked everywhere, but I didn't see myself. I would ask, "Where am I?" When I heard that music, though, I thought, "There I am." That Other: it wasn't something you saw easily in the world. It wasn't

something you saw in high school. It wasn't something in the books I was reading. You know, when I finally read James Baldwin, when I started listing to Ornette, to Coltrane, I realized, "That's my life."

I never played music, and when I hung out with musicians, I didn't want to be one, because I didn't like that lifestyle. I'd think, "Oh God, I want to go home to bed." Because the thing about painting is that you have to grow roots. Music is a hard, hard lifestyle. People died young. I don't play, and I don't read music. All I know is what I hear, what sounds right and feels right. With an African beat, or an African-American beat, you have to get to the center of it. I want my paintings to do that, to be in the music, to have all kinds of beats. Color is closely related to music because there's so much feeling to it. You really feel that red, that blue.

When I first saw Cézanne, I thought of Charlie Parker. The way the painting moved—I thought of that in terms of music. The painting didn't stay still. You know: mark, mark, mark; movement, movement, movement. It really is put together in pieces. You can see every brushstroke. I understood that in terms of music. I attended the Columbus College of Art and Design, in Ohio. At the Columbus Museum of Art I saw this painting—Cézanne's *Victor Chocquet Seated*—and that was it. It's really not so much a portrait as a lesson in how to put a painting together. Just in terms of the rhythm—light, dark, light, dark. No matter what you're painting—a face, a head—you have to get the right rhythm.

I am a colorist, but for me Albers is too institutional. I like Mondrian when he gets to *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Judd—when he gets to those last pieces, where he puts all the color things together. I love Joan Mitchell. When Albers was working, people were trying to devise a new language. But there were places where they wouldn't go. They wouldn't go to India or Africa. These days, people are comfortable going everywhere. Being black in America now—it's out. It's allowed to be. The kind of language, the kind of walk, the kind of talk. Before, it was real-



ly underground. Everyone is allowed to be who they say they are, who they want to be. That's the kind of color I want.

Paintings really are the color of sound. Music is, in a sense, the heartbeat. I'll be listening to something—say, Fela's "Sorrow, Tears and Blood." I'll start the painting. Miles Davis's "Bitches Brew": that's the music I want playing when I begin, to get me going—a kind of door. Maybe I'm listening in the beginning, but as the painting becomes more real I go into a trance. I sense the music somewhere, but when I paint I'm really focused. I'll hear it again as I'm coming out. Maybe I'll start dancing then, if I get a painting I really like.

For a long time I was really into discovering music. You know, going to these huge record collections. Now I'm not. I'm not out discovering hip-hop. Every generation chooses what they want from music. What I want is very different from what my son wants. I'm really marked by the music of my youth during the '70s—mostly American. But I like music with a big beat. James Brown, African music. Johnny Cash. But classical music, country and western—they are too moody. Even Arab music—it's like the burden of life.

The African-American experience isn't really about the burden of life. We don't get into the graveyard. You see these black guys on a corner in a run-down neighborhood and they're all laughing and giggling and having a good time. Even Billie Holiday. They just tortured her over "Strange Fruit." In fact, she was completely inspirational. John Chamberlain once said that the two biggest things he did in his life were have a drink with Billie Holiday and smoke a joint with Louis Armstrong.

My painting is call-and-response.

STANLEY WHITNEY is a New York-based artist.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Solos by Stanley Whitney at Team Gallery, New York, through Apr. 28, and at Omi International Arts Center, Ghent, N.Y., Apr. 7-June 3.



Stanley Whitney: *Just Like Ornette*, 2010, oil on linen, 96 inches square. Courtesy Team Gallery, New York.

Opposite bottom, Whitney in his studio. Photo Sarah Kurz.

I put a color down, then call for another color. I never know—the colors are not planned out. It's a simple system that allows the color to be very complicated. Even when I go through the same bowls of paint two or three times, I can never get back to the exact same hue. There might be two or three layers of one color, or one color on top of another. Sometimes things shift a little, to the left, to the right, more space or less space. They're in sync, they're not in sync. They have more value, more density, or less. I'm always striving to make the colors more tactile.

I found a great recording of Bud Powell playing a bad piano in Paris and it's just incredible. I gave it to someone once and they complained, "The piano isn't even tuned!" And I said, "That's what's so great about it." And the beat!—not off-beat, but a kind of

in-between beat. Those were brilliant, brilliant people. And so out on their own, you know? That's why they didn't survive. That music is still really hard for a lot of people to understand.

My paintings seem very easy. It's basically the same thing with jazz. It has to appear as if you just get up and play these instruments, that there's no struggle with how it's done. People don't really get the intellect of it. It's like Coltrane using a simple melody. I just use a simple square. You could say, "Oh, he just paints squares," or, "He just paints squares on a grid." They think they know what they see but when they really look they don't recognize it. It's not just squares. It's like Cézanne: not just apples. It's sort of getting to the question, "What is it to be human?" Jazz really gets to that.

—As told to Faye Hirsch