The Jazz & People’s Movement: Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s Struggle to Open the American Media to Black Classical Music.

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THE JAZZ & PEOPLE’S MOVEMENT:
Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s Struggle to Open the American Media
To Black Classical Music

By

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Acknowledgments

This project began on a smaller scale, as a term paper for a historical research and writing seminar titled “The History of Racism” in the fall of 2006. Based on a longtime love of jazz, I originally intended to write my paper on the comparative racial dimensions of East and West Coast jazz. With this in mind, I picked up Charley Gerard’s book, *Jazz in Black and White* (Greenwood Press, 1998), to do some background reading. It was in this book that I first read about the Jazz and People’s Movement (JPM), Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s activist group from 1970-1. Almost immediately, I decided to switch my topic and focus on the JPM.

My initial research centered on periodical coverage of the movement, which I gathered at Boston University’s Mugar Library and the Boston Public Library. While these sources were informative, they were less than comprehensive, and failed to portray the energy and excitement that I sensed in the JPM’s story. Seeking a personal perspective, I made contact with Rahsaan’s widow, Dorthann Kirk. Dorthann, who currently works at radio station WBGO in Newark, New Jersey, was not married to
Rahsaan at the time of the movement, but she very graciously put me in touch with his close friend and co-leader of the JPM, Mark Davis. I interviewed Mark for the original term paper, and again when writing this thesis. With his candid and sincere testimony, the project came alive, and for that I owe him countless thanks.

In the spring of 2007, when I decided to revisit the JPM for my senior thesis, I called Dorthann back in search of more contacts and documents. She invited me to Newark, where she allowed me to examine a collection of papers, correspondence, and news clippings relating to the JPM. She also helped me arrange an illuminating interview with former *Down Beat* editor Dan Morgenstern, who covered the movement while it was active. The generous assistance she has given me is but a small element of her unflagging commitment to Rahsaan’s memory, evidenced by the beautiful celebration she organized in his honor at St. Peter’s Church in New York City in December, 2007, on the thirtieth anniversary of his passing.

I am also very much in debt to George Bonifacio, an insatiable fan of Rahsaan who has taken it upon himself to collect and catalogue every known piece of music and cultural ephemera relating to the artist. George has been extremely forthcoming in sharing documents and audio recordings with me that have factored prominently in my research. I cannot thank him enough!

At Boston College, numerous people have helped, encouraged, and guided me through the research and writing process. Professors Benjamin Braude and Alan Rogers, who led the “History of Racism” and Senior Honors seminars, respectively, have both been very supportive. Reference librarian and fellow jazz devotee Ken Liss has also alerted me to rare and important resources.
Finally, I must express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Professor Davarian Baldwin. I came to him with a fascinating topic, but without a sufficient understanding of African American history and the black freedom struggle, subjects of extreme relevance for my proposed study. By recommending highly pertinent readings, he has helped me gain some ground on these topics. He has also aided me in constructing an effective and meaningful framework through which to scrutinize the JPM. Most importantly, though, he has guided me in formulating those questions which have been most necessary for throwing new light on the topic. Thank you, Professor!

While this thesis represents the most complete investigation of the JPM to date, some questions remain unanswered. In order to continue learning, future research must involve a more expansive interview sample with participants and observers of the movement who are still living. This should include musicians Andrew Cyrille, Billy Harper, and Archie Shepp, Reverend Jesse Jackson, and members of the media establishment, all of whom I was unable to contact for this paper.

It is my hope that the findings I present here will stimulate renewed interest and inquiry into the JPM, a movement whose motivating grievances persist to this day. Through the JPM, we can look back at the politics of race and culture in the Sixties and Seventies, but we can also look forward towards a fresh assessment of the relationship between American society and the culture industries in the twenty-first century.

April 2008
Sunday, January 24, 1971. Rahsaan Roland Kirk, the blind musician stood at center-stage in the stately Ed Sullivan Theater. Four big television cameras labeled “CBS Color” pointed their lenses at him, their recording lights blinking, and “ON AIR” signs to the side of the stage were lit red. Kirk was wearing thick black sunglasses, a white, striped short-sleeved pullover, and was clutching his customary assortment of saxophones, flutes, and whistles close to his chest.¹

“True black music will be heard tonight!” he declared to the hundreds in the theater and the millions watching on television.

The cameras panned across the nine other musicians who flanked Kirk on the small set; Archie Shepp on tenor saxophone, Dick Griffin on trombone, Charles McGhee on trumpet, Sonelius Smith at the piano, Charles Mingus and Pete Pearson on basses, Roy Haynes on drums, and Maurice McKinley and Joe Texidor on percussion. Sullivan

¹ This account derives primarily from an audio recording of Kirk’s performance on the Ed Sullivan Show. Also contributing to the narrative are an interview by the author with Mark Davis, a leader of the JPM; critic Leonard Feather’s coverage of the event in Down Beat magazine (April 1,1970); and John Kruth’s biography of Kirk, Bright Moments (2000).
himself, hair slicked back and arms crossed, stood offstage eyeing the band. Behind him sat an attentive sellout studio crowd who had earlier in the night enjoyed songs by popular singers B.J. Thomas and Nancy Ames, and a dance routine by Peter Gennaro.

“We want you to get into it with us, out in the audience – don’t let ‘em wave a sign, you just get into it,” Kirk invited. Then, without warning, he yelled, “Kujumba!” McKinley smacked out a quick hand roll on the congas while Kirk took a moment to fit the mouthpieces for his three saxophones (tenor, manzello, and stritch) into his mouth. Set to play, he burst into the dense opening block chords of his composition “The Inflated Tear,” the title track from an album he had recorded four years earlier in 1967. But he didn’t stick to this song long, and instead proceeded to introduce the other major guest musicians onstage.

“Roy Haynes on the drums!” he said. Haynes unleashed a small explosion from his drum set, starting with a loud cymbal crash and continuing with authoritative pounding on the toms. “Did you hear Roy Haynes on the drums?” demanded Kirk, unsatisfied with the meager applause from the audience. Haynes took another spin around his kit, and this time the crowd obliged with somewhat louder clapping.

Kirk next reached for his flute, and blew a short series of piercing, harshly articulated and vocalized notes. He punctuated these cries with a delicate “tweet” from a small whistle hung around his neck, at which the audience giggled nervously. “True artist, playwright and saxophonist, Archie Shepp!” Kirk announced, continuing the round of introductions. Shepp played a short, fluid sequence of ascending and descending lines in his tenor sax’s middle range.

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2 Name of cities in Uganda and Zambia
“Charles Mingus on the bass fiddle. Mr. Charles Mingus!” Many in the crowd recognized this name, and gave the bassist the loudest ovation yet, with audible shouts, whistles, and hollers. Mingus, grinning, plucked a few staccato notes, which Kirk then mimicked on his tenor sax. This initiated a brief, abstract musical dialogue between the two, full of squawks and screeches from Kirk. Only a few scattered shouts of approval broke the stunned silence in the audience.

In the production booth above the balcony, the Sullivan Show producers looked at each other, pale-faced and bewildered as to what was happening below. “What the hell happened to ‘My Cherie Amour’?!?” growled one. “I must have reminded him ten times what song he was supposed to play! Who does he think he is?!”

Before the men upstairs could object any further, though, Kirk launched into the machinegun-like pulse of Mingus’ revolutionary anthem “Haitian Fight Song.” After four quick measures, the rhythm section filled in, driving the song ahead without looking back. McGhee, then Shepp, then Griffin entered with the blues-drenched refrain.

Shepp took the first solo, beginning with a variation on the song’s melody and a brief blues cliché. His solo gathered energy and vigor, and his tone became noticeably throatier as he reached for upper-range altissimo notes. Kirk played the next solo on tenor sax as well. After a few initial acrobatic leaps about the horn, Kirk established a driving three-note repeating pattern to which he more or less stuck for the remainder of his solo.

Kirk’s solo morphed seamlessly back into a brief reiteration of the melody, which ended in a directed refrain on the main theme, and a final strident chord. McGhee and
Kirk climbed the staff as Griffin and Shepp honked along below and Haynes punched out a few last thumps on his drums.

Sensing closure, Sullivan took a few steps towards the stage, but stopped short when he saw Kirk reaching for his clarinet. Before the audience had finished applauding, Kirk struck up a loosely recognizable Dixieland tune. The tongue-in-cheek ditty was supremely rough around the edges and only lasted forty seconds. It culminated in another held-out chord, this one much longer and more raucous than the one after “Haitian Fight Song.” Physically exhausted, the musicians let down their instruments, nodded to each other, and squinted through the spotlights out at the crowd.

“That was wonderful!” pronounced Sullivan as he came forward to shake hands with Kirk. “Rahsaan Roland Kirk, ladies and gentlemen!” At that moment, the show’s black comedian Godfrey Cambridge appeared from offstage carrying an afro wig. He snuck up from behind Sullivan, placed the wig on the host’s head, and declared him to be “an honorary Negro” for the evening. The audience erupted into laughter, and Sullivan, unfazed, turned to the cameras and introduced the show’s final act. “Our last performer tonight will be the wonderful opera singer Sergio Franchi, along with the Texas A&M Singing Cadets! Goodnight folks!”

*   *   *

* Down Beat* magazine critic Leonard Feather called the performance “a unique night in the history of jazz on the small screen.” It was the culmination of a process that had begun the previous summer to win greater exposure for black jazz artists through

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network television. Kirk, with fellow musicians and friends, circulated petitions throughout New York jazz clubs airing grievances about the paucity of jazz on television and the resulting suppression of black culture. In late August 1970, under the title Jazz and People’s Movement (JPM), the group initiated a slew of high-profile demonstrations against the major television studios, and forced a series of negotiations with network officials. Through these talks, the JPM secured a handful of televised appearances to perform jazz and discuss its objections. The *Ed Sullivan Show* would be the last of these, effectively marking the finale of the social movement.

Almost four decades later, how do we remember Kirk’s political activism? How does the JPM contribute to our collective memory of the period? While it was active, the JPM attracted a mixture of positive and critical attention in the press, but in the time since its activities ceased in the spring of 1971, the movement has received only tangential treatment in jazz and historical literature. For the most part, writers have cited the JPM as an example of music’s involvement in the black freedom struggle. The JPM may be an instance of this link, but these brief treatments do not capture the vibrant complexity of the JPM as a subject of its own.

In order to fully appreciate the environment which gave rise to the JPM, it is necessary to understand the precipitous decline of jazz in the 1960s. The music’s fall was partly due to the growth of rock and roll and other popular forms, but was also a result of deeper socio-economic challenges facing the black urban community that in turn rippled through the jazz industry.\(^4\) This serious economic squeeze reinforced musicians’

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\(^4\) The postwar period was shaped by massive deindustrialization, resulting in heavy job losses for many black Americans who had moved into cities during the first half of the twentieth century. Largely federal funded and racially exclusionary white suburbanization accompanied by urban deindustrialization, aided in large part by the federally funded construction of the interstate highway system and slum clearance.
attention to a political imperative, in the interest of restoring musicians’ livelihood, and as a means of strengthening the cultural prestige of jazz music among African American audiences.

The growth of rock and soul’s popularity also affected media practices. Whereas entire albums once enjoyed radio airtime, the nature of these new forms helped shift broadcast patterns towards a focus on potential hit singles. On television, rock bands increasingly filled performance slots on nighttime variety shows, and jazz groups mainly migrated to public stations. As the music industry became more crowded, there became less space for an assortment of jazz styles, and inevitably the more experimental strains ended up at the margins of American culture.5

I will argue that the JPM was a fitting example of a larger trend of jazz collectivism and activism that emerged within the context of the increasingly worsening condition of jazz music and jazz artists in the mid- to late-Sixties. These city-based self-help collectives were part of a larger musical collective movement but were specifically dedicated to mediating the stresses facing black music, which were both economic and programs. The situation for those remaining in the cities further deteriorated with discriminatory housing loan practices and the breakdown of public education systems. For more information on this see: Robert O. Self, American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Thomas J. Sugrue, Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Douglas Massey, American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Arnold R. Hirsch, Making of the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). According to scholar Scott Saul, by decade’s end, nearly 80 percent of recorded music fit into the rock genre, while jazz albums generated relatively tiny sales. Anderson writes that Chicago’s postwar entertainment scene boasted 75 jazz clubs and thousands of private social clubs which regularly employed jazz bands. Spurred by the deindustrialization, suburbanization, and the growth of alternative popular music forms, most of these spots in Chicago eliminated live music, or closed entirely within the space of two years in the early 1960s. See Scott Saul, Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

5 Iain Anderson, This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 82-5.
cultural in nature. The redemptive measures which these organizations took exhibited both of these currents.

As much as the JPM fit the pattern of the jazz collectivism of the Sixties and early-Seventies, it also had its own unique characteristics which set it apart. The JPM moved beyond desires for local collective control of the music and identified the mainstream culture industries as a key site of struggle in the politics of musical production, documentation, and dissemination. It specifically argued that television’s communicative power had special potential to expose black jazz artists to millions of Americans and in so doing, provide for new audience markets. Kirk hoped some of these new audiences would be young blacks who had lost touch with their cultural heritage and knowledge of black musical history. Kirk also believed the medium’s social aura would bestow a degree of cultural legitimacy upon black jazz music. The JPM demonstrated that the mass production and consumption of art and culture had important political relevance and power for the liberation of black music specifically, and of black America more generally.

The JPM assumed a position of aesthetic inclusivism, in contrast to most other jazz organizations which championed avant-garde jazz almost exclusively. Also, none of the other major jazz community groups of the time pursued strategies as public and dramatic as the takeovers of network television studios while shows were being taped. Whereas most of those groups engaged in collective bargaining with studios and club owners and set up independent recording labels, the JPM followed a unique course of civil disobedience.
Newspaper and magazine coverage provided the most information about the movement to Americans at the time. The two most frequent commentators were Don Heckman for the arts-oriented alternative weekly newspaper, *The Village Voice*, and Dan Morgenstern for *Down Beat* magazine. Both writers commended the JPM at the start, but eventually became skeptical of its chances for success (Heckman) and outright critical of the group’s motives (Morgenstern). Following the breakup of the JPM in mid-1971, much of the continued press attention focused on weighing the limited results of the group. Writers reached the conclusion that the JPM’s mission had been misguided, or that network television simply wasn’t the proper medium for jazz in the first place.

These ambivalent feelings towards the JPM have had the effect for some time of devaluing the movement’s social and historical importance in our collective memory. It was not until 1980 that a brief account of the JPM appeared in book form. Valerie Wilmer, whose subject in *As Serious as Your Life* was avant-garde jazz, placed Kirk’s movement within the context of the growth of jazz community collectives in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet since she devoted little time to the movement, she did not advance a complex argument regarding the JPM. The next reference to the JPM was a two-paragraph section in Charley Gerard’s *Jazz in Black and White* from 1998, again within the context of jazz community organizing.

The most complete treatment of the JPM to date is in John Kruth’s biography of Rahsaan Roland Kirk, *Bright Moments*. Kruth’s chapter “The Dance of Revolution” deals exclusively with the movement, covering its protest activities and its dissolution. However, Kruth does not adequately establish the social and historical context behind the movement, nor fully examine Kirk’s goals and objectives; while neglecting to provide a
nuanced analysis of why the JPM dissolved relatively quickly. It is the purpose of this study to provide a broader and deeper picture of the movement within context and on its own terms to answer questions so far unresolved by the current literature.

A number of scholarly works have been helpful towards the goal of filling in the background cultural environment of the JPM. Some, like *What is This Thing Called Jazz* by Eric Porter, and *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t* by Scott Saul, include passing references to the JPM. Porter and Saul represent the most recent trend in jazz scholarship: an attempt to construct intellectual history by consulting the artists as “thinkers in their own right, engaged in the struggle to define themselves and the fault lines of their world.”\(^6\)

This approach to writing history is refreshingly multi-faceted, and I hope to follow Porter and Saul’s nuanced approach as I fill in the gap of scholarship on the JPM. Other volumes, such as Iain Anderson’s *This is Our Music*, William L. Van Deburg’s *New Day in Babylon*, and James E. Smethurst’s *The Black Arts Movement*, do not directly mention the JPM, but have been invaluable nonetheless in constructing the broader social situation from which the JPM emerged.

For a subject like the JPM, about which scant little has been written in books, primary sources are necessary for providing the bulk of details. Primary sources for this study fall into three main categories: periodical articles (both magazine and newspaper), interviews, and personal papers. There are very few full-length articles on the subject of the JPM. Most of the pieces are short news blurbs from the opening pages of magazines, and they do not constitute in-depth coverage of my topic. As a result, short notices

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mainly aid in constructing the narrative and timeline of JPM activities. The few more substantial articles then allow us to understand the public responses to the JPM.

Interviews are extremely useful in gaining the perspective of the participants in the JPM. Most of these interviews were conducted at or around the time of the events in question, and published in magazines and newspapers. These are the closest possible representation of the participants’ thoughts from the time, but since editors and publishers have pared down the statements, they may not be fully comprehensive. Nevertheless, these sources are critically important, as they allow the subjects to answer criticisms leveled at them in editorials and opinion pieces from other periodicals. Other than the sound-bite quotes occasionally included in longer articles, these interviews are the only forum in which the artists speak candidly and at length. Some of the interviews, including a few I have taken, are more current and removed from the time in question. By giving significant weight to interviews, it is my intention to emulate Porter’s and Saul’s method of intellectual history.

The third category of primary materials is personal papers. This grouping is fairly underdeveloped, as the JPM was a loosely organized collective and lacked in paper records. The documents I have are from Rahsaan’s personal file, which his widow Dorthann holds at her home in New Jersey. The most valuable pieces are a JPM petition and a press release from Jesse Jackson’s civil rights organization Operation Breadbasket proclaiming its support for the movement. Other sources from Dorthann’s file include correspondence from various organizations stating their support for the JPM, as well as some newspaper clippings and photographs.
I will tell the story of the JPM in a loosely chronological order, as the nature of the events lends well to this type of account. Still, as the total timeframe is quite short, I will depart from the narrative at times to discuss broader themes or examine a particular document especially closely. To avoid confusion, I have included a time-line of JPM activities at the back of the thesis.

Rahsaan Roland Kirk is the central character in this study, and thus it is necessary to get to know him before analyzing his time as leader of the JPM. As such, Chapter One provides a background biographical sketch of the man through the year 1970. I include essential general elements, but this small personal history leads us specifically towards his eventual creation and leadership of the JPM. There follows an examination of Kirk’s unique musical style, a topic of particular importance in understanding his ideal musical aesthetic and his vision for the JPM.

Chapter Two recounts the origin of the JPM, starting with the evolution of a plan to win more recognition for Kirk into a larger social movement. Of critical importance here is a short history of jazz on television, and Kirk’s sense that the medium had thus far failed to give adequate and accurate attention to black music. With the concept for the JPM now initiated, I examine how the group’s diverse membership composed its list of objectives. The demands themselves break down into four main theme areas: education, exposure, employment, and advertising. Throughout all of the demands, however, I identify interrelated economic and cultural motivations that shaped the set of organization’s course of action.

Chapter Three contains the narrative of JPM protests; the real story within the study. In addition to recounting the actions of the group, I look at responses to the
movement from music critics, social commentators, and other musicians. A few episodes received relatively more attention and created controversy, namely the discussion panel on the *Dick Cavett Show* and the *Ed Sullivan Show*, and I focus special attention on these. This chapter concludes with a look at Black Artists for Community Action (BACA), Archie Shepp’s breakaway group off the JPM which led a series of protest actions at the Guggenheim Foundation in New York in 1971.

In Chapter Four, I explore the JPM’s breakup in the spring of 1971. This was a complex issue, a result of many forces. The fallout from Kirk’s remarkable performance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* was the immediate cause for the group’s dissolution, but other long term factors within and without the JPM also played a major role in bringing down the movement. This chapter then sums up the results of the JPM’s activities, including both the immediate effects, and the long-term impact.

Exploration of the JPM is warranted because of the dearth of scholarship and the group’s distinctive articulation of the politics of culture. A focused study does not need to misrepresent or inflate the movement’s level of success in order to prove historical significance. Rather, its unique value lies in its position as a visible intersection of music, race, and society.
1. Rahsaan, Rahsaan

“There’s 36 black notes and 52 white notes. We don’t mean to eliminate nothin’, but we’re gonna just hear the black notes at this time if you don’t mind.”

Rahsaan Roland Kirk, spoken introduction to “Blacknuss”  

Raucous applause rose from the full audience as soon as the band punctuated the last downbeat. The blind bandleader, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, beamed as he rearranged the bevy of saxophones, flutes, and whistles hanging around his neck, making ready for the next tune. Appearing to stare out at the packed Buffalo club through his thick sunglasses, Kirk took the microphone: “Thank you, thank you! Thank you for coming out tonight and supporting black music. We’ve really enjoyed bein’ here, and—

“Play ‘We Free Kings!’” yelled a voice from the back of the club, referring to the title track from Kirk’s 1961 breakthrough album.

“What?!” Rahsaan demanded incredulously as he craned his neck towards the source of the request. “Who out there just interrupted me? What’d you say?”

“Play ‘We Free Kings!’”

“What do you mean play ‘We Free Kings’?” Rahsaan retorted. “Slavery days is over! We don’t play what people tell us to play. It seems like white folks always want to

7 “Blacknuss” is the final track on Kirk’s 1971 album by the same name, recorded on the Collectables label.
be tellin’ us what to do!” Across the small stage from Rahsaan, Dick Wells put down his trombone, pulled over a stool, and sat down next to pianist Ron Burton. The two exchanged a knowing glance. “Now, that there’s a beautiful song, but we just don’t play requests,” Kirk continued. “I decide what to play and that’s that. And if you can’t get hip to that, well then son, you can just mosey on back to your apartment and put on my record. Because you comin’ in here, tellin’ me what to play, that shows me you got no respect for me! No respect at all! My freedom ain’t worth nothin’ if I can’t even decide which songs I’m gonna play next! White folks done used us and abused us, and they still usin’ us! You’re expectin’ to use me right now, just thinkin’ I’ll bow to you every wish and desire! Black musicians been dealin’ with this shit for long enough! Well let me tell you, those days is over! All this love and peace shit, but you still dolin’ out orders like we’re still on the plantation…” The reprimand wore on for near twenty minutes.

“Now, I know it’s getting’ late, and there are a lot of beautiful people here who I’m sure would love to hear some more music. So once again, thank you for comin’ out tonight, thank you for openin’ your ears and takin’ this ride with us. We’ll just play one more, and then we’ll be on our way. Good night!”

The band members scrambled back to their places just in time for Kirk to point back towards Maurice McKinley on the drums and stomp four times on the stage floor. McKinley laid down a steady groove on the tambourine and after four measures, Kirk’s growly tenor voice entered with the savory descending blues arpeggio that kicks off ‘Volunteered Slavery.’

* * *
Had Kirk not been blind he would have seen that the audience member who requested he play ‘We Free Kings’ was in fact black! But this may not have stopped him from sharing his mind with the audience. Indeed, Kirk gave such speeches quite commonly, and he didn’t always require a new reason to turn the bandstand into his personal soapbox. His lectures were not always disciplinary, but they often hit upon racial injustice, with particular reference to the music industry.

The frequency with which Kirk publicly and passionately expressed his views demonstrates how deeply the struggle for racial equality shaped his outlook on the world. This provocative exchange between audience and performer encapsulates the racial consciousness that informed his conception of jazz history as a black music continuum, his demand that American society give black artists credit and fair compensation for their work, and his desire to see younger black generations learn about and take ownership of their rich cultural heritage. From this perspective, Kirk’s foray into social activism with the Jazz and People’s Movement, however brief, was not an isolated event, but rather an extension of the ideals he had been formulating for years.

* * *

Ronald Theodore Kirk was born on August 7, 1936 in Columbus, Ohio. His parents, Gertrude and Theodore, ran a convenience store in front of the family’s house, 

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8 Story is told in Bright Moments by musician/composer-arranger/bandleader Frank Foster, who was in the audience that night. The author has taken artistic liberties in constructing the scene and Kirk’s speech, but has drawn on quotations for reference. See Kruth, Bright Moments, 169.

9 Mark Davis explains this wasn’t common until Kirk had achieved considerable success.
called Kirk’s Confectionary. When Ronald was an infant, his parents noticed that he had a degree of visual impairment, and took him to the hospital for a series of treatments. On one occasion, a doctor or nurse mistakenly gave Kirk too heavy a dosage of eye drops, an accident that exacerbated his condition, and before long he had lost all sight. He would continue to suffer from soreness and irritation in his eyes his whole life.¹⁰

Lacking vision did not prevent Ronald from learning about racial inequalities. Despite the relative tolerance of Columbus, racial incidents were fairly common in the years prior to World War Two. The city’s black community accounted for less than ten percent of the population, and was segregated into its own separate space. Its focal point was the “Million Dollar Block” on Long Street, a teeming social mecca which by the end of the 1940s had become a destination for local and touring jazz and R&B bands.¹¹

Kirk’s biographer John Kruth relates that Kirk’s passion for music began long before he was old enough to visit the clubs on Long Street. He had a natural affinity for sounds of all kinds, perhaps due in part to his blindness. At a very early age, he started experimenting with various household items as instruments, and achieved considerable success by buzzing his lips into one end of a water hose. By the time ‘Ronnie’ was four years old, his Uncle Elijah Broderick, a pianist, had taken notice of the boy’s creativity, and stopped by the house regularly to invite the young boy to go play music together.¹²

After a few years on the water hose, Ronnie’s parents decided it was time for an upgrade, and his mother bought him an old second-hand bugle at a rummage sale. Now that he had a real instrument to play, his jam sessions with Uncle Elijah became a little more interesting. By age seven, he was blowing ‘Taps’ every summer morning at the

camp where his parents worked, and at age nine he tried playing the trumpet. The family
doctor, however, warned that the pressure from the instrument would aggravate the
discomfort in his eyes, and thus ended Kirk’s brass days.\textsuperscript{13}

In need of some musical outlet, he began taking clarinet lessons at the Ohio State
School for the Blind when he was twelve years old. His mother’s assortment of Artie
Shaw records sparked his initial interest in “the black stick,” although he would later
come to worship another clarinetist, the legendary Sidney Bechet.\textsuperscript{14} Kirk’s affection for
the clarinet later helped him establish a connection to the musical tradition of New
Orleans and in so doing informed his philosophy about the history of black music as a
continuum. In addition, the fingerings he learned for the clarinet translated well to his
next, and ultimately his favorite, instrument.

Kirk’s Uncle John Johnson first exposed the boy to the saxophone. Ronnie heard
the instrument at a young age when Johnson rehearsed his church group at the Kirks’
house, but he truly fell in love with its sound at age thirteen when he heard the melody of
Count Basie’s ‘Jumpin’ at the Woodside’ floating out of a house window down the street.
It was Kirk’s neighbor, a young mechanic named ‘Cat,’ who was playing. Kirk was
transfixed, and stood outside the window listening for two or three straight days.
Needing to get closer to the source, he asked Cat to show him how to hold the instrument.
Cat, although skeptical that a blind boy could learn an instrument, showed Ronnie some
fingerings, and even allowed him to borrow the saxophone for a week. The horn quickly
became the center of the boy’s universe, and after much begging and pleading, his
parents took out a loan in order to buy him his own saxophone at a local pawnshop.

\textsuperscript{13} Kruth, \textit{Bright Moments}, 15-6.
\textsuperscript{14} Kruth, \textit{Bright Moments}, 69-70.
Though Kirk would continue experimenting with numerous instruments all his life, the tenor saxophone would always be his favorite instrument, and the one on which he was most technically accomplished.¹⁵

Kirk’s uncles Elijah Broderick and John Johnson guided him into the world of music, but these men were not especially fans of jazz, and neither were Kirk’s parents. According to Kirk, Elijah had created his own piano style without ever listening to exemplars like Fats Waller, and John’s music was heavily rooted in the Baptist Church. As a result, Kirk’s childhood musical experience was fairly free-spirited and not confined to a particular genre or style. These early influences would persist, but Kirk’s formative musical period began when he met his neighbors, the McCreary family.

A large black family that lived about five blocks away, the McCreary’s were insatiable jazz fans and most, if not all, of the family members played an instrument. Kirk recalled:

I was sittin’ out on the porch, so they invited me over to their house. These people were music fanatics. They really loved music. They had all the records, 78s. Bird [Charlie Parker] and Dizzy [Gillespie], Dexter [Gordon] and Sonny Stitt – Everybody! They could hum all the solos. I was stunned!

One can imagine thirteen-year old Ronnie spending hours huddled around the turntable with his jazz brethren, learning classic swing and bebop melodies and memorizing the twists and turns of masterful improvised solos. Jazz became his predominant musical focus, and throughout the rest of his life, Kirk continued listening to early jazz music. Sidney Bechet, Fats Waller, and Lester Young had the same, if not more, significance for Kirk as his formidable contemporaries. Biographer John Kruth points to the McCreary’s as those most responsible for instilling in Kirk a love of the long tradition of jazz, and

“planting the seeds” of his concepts of ‘black classical music’ and a black musical continuum.16

Kirk’s professional music career began when he was fifteen. He played tenor saxophone for two years with Boyd Moore’s R&B band in Columbus, and then joined Bruce Woody & The Chips. Woody’s band, with whom Kirk first recorded, was a local band that dressed in sharp, Ivy League sport jackets and played blues and boogie-woogie for mostly white crowds.17

In his mid-teens, Kirk’s unending musical curiosity led him to try playing multiple saxophones at once. To the right of his tenor saxophone he held a new acquisition, the ‘moon zellar’ or ‘manzello.’ The manzello was a modified saxello soprano sax that Kirk bought from Gaetz’s Music Store on West Long Street in Columbus. He later added to his collection the ‘stritch,’ a straight alto saxophone.18 He worked hard to perfect the three-horn technique, and first performed his new craft onstage with Bruce Woody’s band, and later went on to achieve the rare feat of producing two moving lines at once.19

In addition to his saxophones, Kirk continued to play the clarinet, took up the flute, and even added a nose flute and a whistle that let out a siren-like yelp. At performances, he strung nearly all of these instruments were either intricately around his neck. Jazz critic Grover Sales summed up Kirk’s horn collection as “a profusion of obsolete pawnshop offshoots of the sax family [that] draped his bulky frame like some

16 “Black classical music” was Kirk’s alternative label for the music most commonly referred to as jazz. His continuum view of black music valued early and contemporary jazz styles as equally important and influential. More on these concepts follows later in this chapter. See Kruth, Bright Moments, 20-1.
17 Kruth, Bright Moments, 25-7.
19 This technique is similar to a pianist playing separate melody and harmony lines in his left and right hands. Kirk learned to accomplish this with multiple saxophones, operating each with one hand. See photo section in Kruth, which shows Kirk with three horns in Woody band.
Baghdad peddler’s.” According to *Down Beat* writer Don DeMichael, Kirk’s inspiration to adorn his body with horns came from an African drummer whose body functioned as a human drum rack. This may have been the case; although it is also possible Kirk’s blindness necessitated keeping his entire collection of horns close.

Kirk longed to move beyond R&B and play the music he had learned with the McCreary’s, and he also wanted to experience the country outside of Ohio, so he soon went out on the road. Now going by Roland, instead of Ronald, Kirk headed west, but failed to find steady work in Los Angeles. On his way home he heard two of his musical heroes live; Count Basie with his band in El Paso, and Charlie Parker in St. Louis. Basie let the young blind man sit in, and his technique impressed the veteran members of the band. Parker was intrigued when Kirk said he could play multiple horns at once, and the bop icon gave him strong words of encouragement.

Still hoping to move out of Columbus, and energized by the two special encounters, Kirk moved to New York City in 1956. He soon recorded his first solo album, *Triple Threat*, on King Records. The set was rooted in the blues, and featured four of Kirk’s original compositions. The record suffered from poor distribution though, and without royalties or a strong reputation, Kirk couldn’t settle in New York. He lived on the road until 1960, when he returned to New York at the age of twenty four and recorded his second ‘debut’ album, entitled *Introducing Roland Kirk* (Argo).

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23 This brief account of Kirk’s national travels does not capture the immense difficulty he must have faced as a young blind musician on the road, especially before he established a regular working band, which would have afforded him valuable assistants in his bandmates. The brevity here should not discount this reality.
In August 1961, he recorded his third LP, *We Free Kings* (Mercury), which generated much higher sales than his first albums. Later that same year, pioneer bassist Charles Mingus invited Kirk to play with his band. The two developed a close bond, and Kirk had the opportunity to play tenor sax on Mingus’ album *Oh Yeah* (Atlantic). Kirk’s circle of connections expanded, and the following year he played and recorded with the drummer Roy Haynes. After his short apprenticeships with Mingus and Haynes, Kirk worked almost exclusively as a leader. He established himself as a strong presence in the New York jazz scene over the course of the Sixties, both through a steady performing schedule and a prolific recording output. Kirk incorporated a variety of influences in forming his own distinctive compositional and improvisational identity. As the Sixties wore on, he demonstrated a keen ability to absorb and integrate experimental jazz and R&B into his original aesthetic framework based on New Orleans, bebop, and blues styles.

Kirk dubbed his highly eclectic ensemble the Vibration Society, revealing both his spiritual conception of an entire human race held together by common vibrations, and also a collectivist social ethic. He explained the thinking behind the band’s name to Michael Bourne during a backstage interview for *Down Beat* in 1970:

Bourne: Why is the group the Vibration Society?
Kirk: I’m not talking about my group, not necessarily. I’m not talking about the group that you see. The group we’re talking about includes this group and a whole lot of other people.
Bourne: Musicians?

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25 Kirk and Mingus were both very race conscious, and both incorporated the civil rights struggle into their music. This may have been a basis for their friendship, or Mingus may have helped influence Kirk’s outlook.
26 One critic called Kirk the “great discovery” of the 1962 Newport Jazz Festival. See Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 48-54.
Kirk: No, just people! I got a whole big book of people all through this land in the Vibration Society...Our music is the vibrations that hold the Society together.²⁸

Here was a clear attempt on the part of musicians to move towards an ideal community model with no clear distinction between artist and audience, a cooperative of like-minded souls.

Kirk did not define the Vibration Society (either the band or the world at large) as specifically black, but the message of the band, as outlined by bassist Vernon Martin, unmistakably resonated with themes of cultural distinctiveness. Martin explained that part of the group’s mission was to help black audiences reconnect with their heritage:

We have a tremendous concern in this country about blackness and what blackness represents. One thing that the Vibration Society would like to relate to all people who consider themselves black is, that until they reaffirm and involve themselves in all the various studies with the music – which is part of their basic make-up and positively essential – they are off balance. They are off equilibrium and they can not go around talking about being black, because the trueness of being black cannot be expressed any more clear than through the sounds of music...So all you black people out there in the black land you better wake up and really know where you’re coming from because you are out of touch with your basic essence – which is sound!²⁹

Martin’s rhetoric shows clear influences of contemporary black writers such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, who had theorized about the central importance of music to black culture and history. Baraka and Neal were leading figures in the Black Arts Movement, a loose collection of African American intellectuals and artists working from the late 1950s

²⁹ Kruth, Bright Moments, 97. Martin’s language here suggests at least cross-fertilization with Kirk’s ideas, and possibly direct influence.
through the early 1970s who infused their literature, poetry, art, and music with black cultural nationalist themes that varied in intensity.\(^\text{30}\)

Kirk shared these theorists’ conviction that sound and music were critical to racial identification and racial struggle. As culture critic Josh Kun argues, “When Kirk talked of blackness and black civil rights, he did so using sonic vocabularies and made his commentaries through musical languages…The road to social change was a musical one.”\(^\text{31}\) This sensibility was consistent with Baraka’s argument for the unifying and liberating potential of black music, as expressed in his 1966 essay, “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music).”\(^\text{32}\)

‘Blacknuss,’ Kirk’s sense of the black experience through sound, certainly drew on Black Arts theories of black cultural distinctiveness, yet his aesthetic vision of black music diverged from those theories in a very important way. In the early 1960s, Baraka and other Black Arts thinkers gravitated towards jazz as the form of black music most

\(^{30}\) Artistic nationalism was not a new phenomenon in the 1950s. Expressions of national distinctiveness in African American artwork and literature date as early as the late 1850s, and a variety of cultural links bridged nineteenth century examples to artistic production in the first half of the twentieth century. By the time of the Harlem Renaissance, Smethurst asserts that nationalism “deeply marked” black art. The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s drew on these earlier precedents, but also found more immediate inspiration in postwar avant-garde models, the civil rights movement and the associated black student movement, black modernism of the 1950s, Cold War cultural repression, and decolonization in Africa. The Black Arts Movement was an integral component of the Black Power Movement. Although “Black Power” assumed a variety of different meanings, and often received sensationalized coverage in the media, historian Iain Anderson explains that, “many African Americans saw black power as an extension of the freedom struggle for dignity, equality, freedom of choice, jobs, and security.” See Iain Anderson, *This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 95; James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7, 23-4; Robin D.G. Kelley, “Dig They Freedom: Meditations of History and the Black Avant-Garde,” *Lenox Avenue* Vol.3 (1997): 18.


\(^{32}\) Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Woodard argues that Amiri Baraka’s Black Arts Reparatory Theater/School (BARTS), which started in 1965, paved the way for the broader Black Arts Movement. Baraka’s ideology shifted throughout his life, most notably moving towards Marxism in the 1970s, but during the period with which we are dealing, he strongly believed in a separatist cultural nationalism through which music aided black spiritual liberation. See Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 195.
suitable as a black cultural paradigm. Within jazz, these intellectuals deemed free jazz
the most authentic black music for interrelated musical and social reasons. Free jazz had
developed in the mid to late-1950s in reaction to the highly structured nature of bebop,
the perceived white leanings of cool jazz, and the commercial focus of soul jazz. For
many Black Arts theorists, free jazz’s distance from the mainstream reinforced its black
authenticity. For musicians struggling to build their careers, the inability of free jazz to
gain market traction provided the impetus to take greater control of their industry.

Free jazz derived its name from two related elements; its emphasis on less
prescribed chord progressions for solos, and a new collective approach to improvisation.
Stylistically, free jazz artists departed from some of the traditional Western rubrics of
musicality, and in so doing, provided a symbol to Black Arts thinkers looking to define a
separate or distinct black aesthetic. In addition to the musical distinctiveness of free
jazz, Black Arts thinkers attributed social and political meaning to the collective spirit of
the music. To both writers and some musicians, collective improvisation, in its move
away from the single soloist culture of bebop, was a larger repudiation of Western liberal
social constructs.

Kirk however, adopted a far more inclusive aesthetic outlook. He conceptualized
black music as a continuum, and his early dedication to learning the history of jazz was
critical in leading him to this opinion. In his view, the jazz of the Sixties clearly
derived from the earlier black music styles and young artists had to demonstrate their
indebtedness to their black musical forbearers by paying them musical homage. Kirk’s

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33 Anderson, This Is Our Music, 109.
34 Kirk’s continuum theory was inclusive with regard to jazz and R&B styles, but not necessarily all black
music. He frequently issued harsh criticisms of Motown, saying on one occasion, “[Black people] weren’t
raised up listening to Motown, they was raised up listening to good music and they threw it away, man.”
unique aesthetic and ideological beliefs system contributed to the uniqueness of his activism via the JPM.

Artistic recognition for the giants of the past ensured that they not slide into obscurity in the midst of accelerating mass music production and consumption. At the same time, recognition strengthened the black ownership claim over the music’s origins and development. As Kirk wrote in the liner notes to his 1967 album *The Inflated Tear*, “Words can’t describe what I think of [Duke] Ellington’s music. The only way I can show how much I dig his music is just to keep playing it.”

In one of his later interviews, Kirk told *Down Beat*’s Todd Barkan, “People like Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins, and John Coltrane left music here to be played and I feel it’s part of my calling to keep this music alive.” Early standards, such as “The Entertainer” and “Jitterbug Waltz” were part of his regular concert repertoire, and he rarely played these tunes without first giving his audience a sense of each song’s place in the tradition of black music. Kirk’s fluency in all manners and styles of jazz earned him great respect among fellow musicians, even when critical reviews remained lukewarm to his music.

Kirk’s familiarity with the history of black music in America and his consciousness of racial inequality alerted him to the fact that its common label, jazz, needed revising. Kirk proposed the term ‘black classical music’ instead, and mostly avoided using the label jazz for his entire career. He gave his reasoning in a 1973 interview with Jack Winter for *Coda* magazine:

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37 Trombonist Steve Turre, who played with the Vibration Society, remembered, “When we worked in Chicago everybody came down to see him. They recognized what he was doing but the press didn’t, because he played all the music.” See Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 113.
If you talk to a lot of musicians, for example if you talk with the people of New Orleans, the musicians didn’t have a chance to name their music, it was a European that named the music ‘jazz.’ And that’s the only reason that I think a lot of musicians object to it, because they didn’t have a chance to say what they were playing; someone else said what they were playing…The only reason I call it ‘black classical music’ is because I feel that Milt Jackson, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Ben Webster, Sidney Bechet, Mingus, Coleman Hawkins, Bird, all these people, I feel that they are classics, they are black classical musicians. Just like they have European classical music, and I feel that these people are just as equipped on their instruments…

In this we see a clear effort towards self-definition and self-determination, which were among the foremost goals of cultural nationalists and Black Arts theorists.

In addition to self-definition, Kirk intended for the characterization “black classical music” to give African Americans, especially younger generations, a sense of ownership over their musical and cultural heritage. “Black people don’t know the roots of where they come from and where their music comes from,” he lamented in his Down Beat interview with Michael Bourne. Through his comprehensive approach to music, and his educational remarks onstage, Kirk continually seized the performance venue as a space for exposing blacks to their musical roots. It was his belief that major founding figures of the music would be positive, empowering role models for black youth.

Kirk’s historical theory of continuum informed his own music, which bore heavy influences from early jazz, as well as the blues and R&B styles he had played in Columbus. One jazz historian has described Kirk’s composing as “so straightforward harmonically that it appears to be rooted in prebop jazz.” People who were involved in jazz and were close to Kirk also describe his distance from the free jazz in a series of telling quotes collected in Kruth’s biography of Kirk. Michael Cuscuna, a record

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39 Kruth, Bright Moments, 98.
producer and radio show host, recalled, “[Rahsaan and I] used to talk a lot about the avant-garde, which he was quite capable of carrying out, but it wasn’t part of his musical ethic.” And Chris Welch, music critic for the British music newspaper *Melody Maker*, affirmed, “Kirk doesn’t fit into the avant-garde.” So even though Vernon Martin’s social-cultural sense of the Vibration Society was consistent with Black Arts theories, the actual music the band produced was not in accord with the most pronounced framework of the Black Arts aesthetic. It is important to highlight Kirk’s position in the spectrum of the 1960s jazz scene as this factor played a critical role in shaping Kirk’s activist mission.

Kirk may have drawn on a number of black musical sources in creating his own distinctive sound, but according to his long-time producer, Joel Dorn, Kirk was hesitant to acknowledge influences “outside the American black experience.” He is known to have listened to a host of romantic, impressionist, and twentieth century composers. However, when asked if he liked French composer Edgar Varese, Kirk curtly stated that he had heard the man’s music, and then quickly changed the subject. And despite having performed alongside a number of rock artists, Kirk frequently spoke disparagingly about the rock invasion and its impure electronic influences. In this way, Kirk fit a trend which historian James E. Smethurst identifies, by which black writers and artists frequently sought to “develop, or expand upon, a distinctly African American or African culture that stood in opposition to white culture or cultures.” This involved distancing

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42 Joel Dorn, interview by John Kruth (date unknown).
43 Fellow musicians and friends have cited Peter Tchaikovsky, Maurice Ravel, Camille Saint-Saens, Antonin Dvorak, Bela Bartok, and Edgar Varese. See Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 65, 93
44 Kirk, interview by Cuscuna in *Jazz & Pop*, 36-7.
45 Kirk played with Eric Clapton, Led Zeppelin, and Frank Zappa, was good friends with Jimi Hendrix. See Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 214, 224.
black art from European precedents, and those who proclaimed the interdependence and mutual influences of black and white American cultures.\textsuperscript{46}  

As his popularity grew, Kirk also gradually changed his image, moving away from the conservative style of dress he had sported in the Fifties and early Sixties.\textsuperscript{47}  As late as 1963, Kirk appeared on the cover of \textit{Down Beat} in a pressed suit, shiny cufflinks, and clean-cut hairdo.\textsuperscript{48}  But over the following years, Kirk adopted a variety of traditional African clothing choices and jumpsuits. In 1967, he was back on the cover of \textit{Down Beat}, though this time with thicker sunglasses, a large knit hat, and facial hair that was reminiscent of a Black Bohemian style. Not only was his clothing style visibly different, the throng of horns around his neck was noticeably bigger and somewhat more disorderly, adding to his new look.

Kirk punctuated his physical changes with a decision in 1969-70 to change his first name to Rahsaan.\textsuperscript{49}  He explained that the name had come to him in a dream, and that each letter in the name indicated a personal quality or value by which he meant to guide his lifestyle.\textsuperscript{50}  As Kruth rightly points out, Kirk’s name change coincided with a trend among black athletes, artists, writers, and musicians at this time to adopt traditional African or Muslim names. But while Kruth is careful to distinguish Kirk’s decision from others’ prompted by conversion to Islam (Kirk had his own unique spirituality of dreams


\textsuperscript{47} The suit-and-tie Ivy League style that Kirk had worn as a teen when performing in Columbus remained popular through the early 1960s, and was more or less the dress code for jazz musicians at the time.

\textsuperscript{48} Kruth, \textit{Bright Moments}, photograph section.

\textsuperscript{49} Dating is not definite, but judging by his album credits, it appears Kirk changed his name in late 1969 or early 1970. On \textit{Volunteered Slavery} (1968) he is listed as Roland Kirk, while his next record, \textit{Rahsaan Rahsaan} (1970) displays his new name. Once Kirk made the change, he strictly demanded that everyone call him by his new name, and did not hesitate to correct those who called him “Roland.” See Kruth, \textit{Bright Moments}, 259.

\textsuperscript{50} Kirk never made the content of the anagram public, wishing to “live the letters to a T” first. However, a close family friend remembered that some of the words were ‘Royal,’ ‘Adventurous,’ ‘Heroic,’ and ‘Noble.’ See Kruth, \textit{Bright Moments}, 256-60.
and vibrations), he does not give enough attention to Kirk’s decision as a manifestation of the larger black pride aesthetic.

If we examine Kirk’s decision to change his name in the context of his words and deeds from this period in his life, we can reason that his new name was a way for him to reaffirm and reconstruct his black cultural heritage, of which he was increasingly aware. This shift was partly evident in his album titles of the period. None of his LP titles prior to 1968 referenced race or blackness, but three of the four records he released between 1968 and 1971 did; *Volunteered Slavery* (Atlantic, 1968), *Natural Black Inventions: Root Strata* (Atlantic, 1971), and *Blacknuss* (Atlantic, 1971).

Kirk’s recorded statements from the late Sixties and early Seventies also indicate a trend towards greater racial awareness. In a published interview, Kirk identified the Black Panther Party as a “beautiful organization,” and percussionist Joe Texidor has testified that Kirk was personally acquainted with Panther leaders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale.51 Trombonist Dick Griffin has stated that, “[Kirk] was a rebel and he was always conscious of the Civil Rights Movement,” and that this consciousness informed his rhetoric when speaking to audiences in the clubs.52

His rebellious personality also came out in two wild habits he developed at around this time: smashing chairs onstage and burning money. When setting fire to paper bills, symbols of Western capitalism and racial economic inequality, he would yell, “We’re gonna burn it down!”53 Both behaviors were aggressive repudiations of the establishment, and signaled his outrage at the current position of blacks in the American

51 Kirk, interview by Cuscuna in *Jazz & Pop*, 33; Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 243.
52 Dick Griffin, interview by John Kruth (date unknown).
53 Griffin, interview by Kruth; Joe Texidor adds that “Rahsaan used to talk a lot of revolutionary stuff.” See Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 243.
Given these actions and the above statements, it appears that Kirk’s decision to adopt a new name was a component of a larger effort to articulate his black cultural distinctiveness.

The name ‘Rahsaan,’ in combination with his already unique image and charismatic personality, cemented his otherworldly reputation among his relatively small, but extremely devoted fan base. With the new name, he inspired a new magical aura. As Kruth writes, “[After changing his name] Kirk’s persona suddenly seemed to extend beyond that of a jazz musician into the realm of a mystical priest or shaman.” Kirk relished this role, playfully referring to his audiences as “believers.” In this, Kirk may have been complementing his fans for their musical taste and appreciation, or poking fun at the current white fascination with popular black ‘mystics.’ He also may have been hinting at the fact that there were many non-believers in the jazz world.

Throughout his career, Kirk’s eclectic style and approach to both blackness and music made it difficult for the critical establishment to make sense of him within the larger jazz world and hence he failed to garner clear critical approval for his musicianship. Writers often sequestered him to his own category, “multi-instrumentalist,” a classification that suggested he was a jack-of-all-trades, or a side-show oddity. Some refused to hear his three-horn artistry as anything more than a gimmick, and others attacked him for his unconventional behavior on stage. Many of Kirk’s fans believed if he stuck to tenor alone, he would win higher praise. At the top of a short

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54 It may be that rock and roll showmanship inspired these actions. Kirk disliked the electronic influences of rock, and he lamented its popular growth at the expense of jazz, but he was nonetheless friends with Jimi Hendrix.
56 Amiri Baraka, for one, took offense when he saw Rahsaan spinning an acoustic bass on his head while playing sax at the Five Spot. See Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 136.
57 Mark Davis, interview by Benjamin Tress (December 2, 2006).
interview published in *Down Beat* in October 1970, critic Michael Bourne wrote, “It is strange that Rahsaan Roland Kirk has so consistently escaped frantic adoration, for the frenzied theater of his performance is the stuff of pop idolatry.” In a day of heightened seriousness among jazz musicians, that “frenzied theater” was partly responsible for Kirk’s lack of recognition. But in Kirk’s mind, it was not the only explanation.

By the late 1960s, Kirk had reached a point in his career at which he felt he could air grievances regarding his tepid critical reception. He believed strongly that his skin color prevented him from receiving the credit (and earnings) his multi-horn technique specifically deserved. Speaking with Michael Cuscuna in a 1971 *Jazz & Pop* interview, Kirk showed his deep frustration:

> I’m saying that if it would be somebody else [playing two melodies at once], I believe it be somebody else, man, like some white cat, dig? It would be plastered all over and you would know what this man was doing and the people would be looking inside his head to see what made him do something like this or how could he even think about doing something like this. So why is it a showman when I do it…why is it on a different level?  

Kirk’s opinion here is representative of his consistent belief that black musicians too often went unrecognized, verbally and monetarily, for their artistic contributions. It is also indicative of his great anxiety that white jazz musicians were steadily encroaching on what was supposed to be black cultural terrain. These concerns were all crucial in motivating his activist efforts with the JPM.

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59 Kirk, interview by Cuscuna in *Jazz & Pop*, 34.
60 Kirk was especially sensitive to the commercial success of saxophonist Stan Getz and flautist Herbie Mann, both of whom were white. He believed Getz and Mann were beneficiaries of unjust popular acclaim. In a 1971 interview for *Jazz & Pop*, Kirk complained, “Stan Getz could take prayers of sound and sweeten it up and play some licks with a bossa nova beat and make a whole lotta money. See, I can’t accept that.” In regards to Mann, Kirk argued that if the flautist was black, he would have had to play all the reeds to make a career. Kirk was also likely jealous of Mann’s thirteen straight *Down Beat* Readers’
While Rahsaan’s persona inspired cult-like worship from his listeners, he made friends easily with fans, many of whom approached him after performance sets to thank and congratulate him. His openness and sincerity, along with his strong memory for human voices, allowed him to establish a cadre of acolytes in each of the major cities he toured. When Kirk was in their city, these friends helped him move around town and get to gigs. Many of these fans were white, illustrating that even though Kirk vocally criticized racial suppression, he was quite capable of making personal friendships with white people, especially if they were music lovers.

In New York, Rahsaan’s man was Mark Davis, a Jewish hippie with classical piano training. Davis’ father was a concert pianist, and Mark came of age listening to and learning to play classical music. It wasn’t until his college years in the mid-Sixties that he discovered jazz, being first taken with Charles Mingus and Pharoah Sanders. One New Year’s Eve in the mid-to-late 1960s, Davis went with a friend to hear the pianist Thelonious Monk at the Village Vanguard, but he was soon entranced by the other artist on the split-bill, Roland Kirk. “When Rahsaan played,” Davis remembered later, “I was tremendously moved by what he did. I was swept away, just amazed!” After the set, Davis greeted Kirk and thanked him for the rousing show. In the following weeks and months, Mark went to hear Kirk whenever he played in New York. After each performance, they spoke, and before long the two became close friends.

Davis collected Kirk’s albums and listened to them constantly, for he was unable to go for weeks at a time without hearing him play. When Kirk was in New York, Davis

Poll Awards (1957-70) as the best jazz flautist. See Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 112; Kirk, interview by Cuscuna, 33-4; also supported in Davis, interview by Tress (2006).

62 Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 105-6; According to Davis, the two spent Christmas together, and Kirk took Davis to the Newport Jazz Festival one summer.
took him to the record stores. Davis, the jazz convert clad in the tie-dyed trappings and long hair of the New Left, trailed the blind ‘reedman’ down the aisles, listening to his recommendations of classic albums. Jazz LPs were always playing in Kirk’s apartment, and when Davis visited, the musician challenged his younger friend to identify legendary saxophonists by ear. Davis’ jazz horizons expanded, and thanks to Kirk’s music history education, he was soon familiar with sax giants like Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Ben Webster, Sonny Rollins, and John Coltrane (although recognizing them by ear took longer!). But Davis’ new knowledge of jazz led him to the impression that Kirk was being slighted in comparison to other contemporary artists. In his words, Rahsaan’s music “wasn’t getting anywhere near the serious recognition it deserved.” Whatever the reason for this shortage of attention, Davis was determined to help Kirk achieve the critical acclaim he believed his musicianship warranted.⁶³

2. Jazz and People

“The media has been so thoroughly effective in obstructing the exposure of true black genius that many black people are not even remotely familiar with or interested in the creative giants within black society.”

Jazz and People’s Movement Petition, 1970

Drummer Roy Haynes sat at the bar in the back of the Five Spot, nursing a beer and a cigarette. His Hip Ensemble had just finished its first set of the night, and the band was resting before embarking on a second. Haynes finished his beer, and was about to get up to step outside when he saw Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s burly frame coming towards him through the smoky low-light of the club, aided by a young bearded white man. “Rahsaan, that you? I didn’t see you in the house, ‘else I would have invited you up on stage!” exclaimed Haynes. “Come over here and sit down! What did you think of the set?”

“Beautiful, beautiful Roy! You cats are really bouncin’! Matter of fact though, I didn’t come just for the music tonight. I got somethin’ I want you to read. Mark, you got that paper?” Davis nodded and handed Kirk a single printed page, which Kirk passed over to Haynes.

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64 Jazz & People’s Movement Petition, Rahsaan Roland Kirk Papers, East Orange, NJ (undated).
Haynes turned his attention to Davis for the first time. “Who’s the boy, Rah?” he inquired. “Roy, this is my friend Mark, Mark Davis. He’s helpin’ me on this project here. Come on, read the paper!” Haynes took a minute to read the sheet. The five paragraphs outlined the “subjugation” and “suppression” of black people and black music on the part of the mass media, and how a pattern of “whitewash” was obstructing “true black genius.” The paper ended with the promise of an active response, and urged the reader to sign in support of the struggle to “open the media” and to “breathe new life into black culture.”

“This is some provocative shit, Rah!” said Hayes, smiling. “What brought this about?”

“You know, man, television’s been a closed shop long enough,” Kirk explained. “Networks ain’t got no respect for black musicians, and it’s at the point now that they’re really suppressing the whole culture. When was the last time you saw a black cat playin’ on the TV set – other than Louie or Duke or Ella? Don’t get me wrong, Duke is the tops. But black people gotta know their whole music – black kids gotta know their whole music! Clubs closing all over the place, we need the media outlet more than ever.”

“I’m with you, man, and you know I’ll sign your petition. But what’s there to do about it?” asked Haynes.

“For right now, tell your band. Get them hip to it, have ‘em sign it. Mark and I have been up through a number of the other clubs, and a lot of other cats have already signed on. This is gatherin’ steam, Roy. Once we get some more people on board, we’re gonna have some meetings and decide what type of action to take. There will be action, and I want you right there with me!”

65 For the full text of the petition, see Appendix B.
“You got a name for this?”

“Yeah man, Jazz and People’s Movement.”\textsuperscript{66}

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In the summer of 1970, the Jazz and People’s Movement (JPM) burst onto the New York jazz scene, calling on television networks to adjust programming and employment practices so as to favor black jazz artists and their music. Kirk, the group’s leader, took the season off from performing in order to circulate the movement’s fiery petition around the city’s jazz clubs in the interest of gathering support for its demands among musicians and fans. His friend Mark Davis, who had helped author the petition, accompanied Kirk through the city in a search which quickly generated a high level of interest and paved the way for a dramatic series of protest actions against the mass media establishment.

The cursory summaries of the JPM that exist in jazz and historical literature define the movement by its most basic objective: to enhance the quantity and quality of black music in the mass media, and on television specifically. This definition is accurate, but it is incomplete. By giving a close reading to key documents, we can achieve a fuller picture of the goals and objectives of the movement. The first section of this chapter examines the origin of the JPM and the motives for its creation. The second, longer

\textsuperscript{66} This particular narrative involving Haynes is not supported by documents, and is the construct of the author’s informed imagination. It is a fact, however, that Kirk and Davis visited numerous New York jazz clubs during the summer of 1970, circulating the petition and explaining their grievances. That Haynes became an active member of the JPM suggests that a similar conversation likely took place during that summer.
section will focus in-depth on the movement’s demands and show how these demands exhibited a complex interrelationship of cultural and material concerns.

**Conception**

Mark Davis’ discovery of jazz’s old guard reinforced his admiration for Kirk as the latest in a line of great artists. But while Davis’ own respect for Kirk grew, he did not witness a parallel trend in the wider music world. He was surprised and frustrated that while Kirk wowed club audiences, the multi-instrumentalist failed to garner the same type of press coverage, radio time, and television exposure as some more mainstream jazz musicians, whom Davis believed Kirk could match in technique and aesthetic appeal. Even though Kirk already had a busy touring schedule with his band, the Vibration Society, Davis wanted to help him achieve greater national prominence. “There’s gotta be something we can do so that the world will realize what they’re missing in terms of the music you’re playing!” Davis told Kirk around 1969.

Kirk, of course, was amenable to Davis’ proposal, and together the two brainstormed a few ideas to help Kirk attain more recognition. Kirk wanted to play in the back cargo bay of a pickup truck while Davis drove around the city. Davis thought Kirk should put on free, impromptu concerts in the New York City parks. Neither idea materialized.

Then Davis turned his attention to television. For some time already, he had been trying to alert network talent scouts to Kirk’s music by preparing and mailing out promotional packages that included recordings and newspaper clippings, but these efforts

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67 Mark Davis, interview by Benjamin Tress (December 2, 2006).
68 Mark Davis, interview by John Kruth (date unknown).
had yielded nothing. Davis was tired of making polite requests. Inspired by the protest politics of the 1960s, especially the recent 1968 student takeover of Columbia University, and motivated by his sincere belief in Kirk’s musical message, Davis conceived of a plan to launch musician-led protests at television studios with the goal of forcing the networks to invite Kirk on the air.

When Davis proposed the television protest plan, Kirk was intrigued, but did not want to restrict the project to self-promotion. He was very sensitive to the way in which television networks presented jazz, and he viewed demonstrations as a vehicle for forcing significant wholesale reforms. Jazz had been on television since the 1930s, but it was not until the 1950s that two main presentation formats emerged. The more common of these was the variety show, by which jazz musicians had the opportunity to perform for a very short period of time within the context of a larger program with multiple guests. *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *The Tonight Show with Steve Allen* exemplified this format.

The second and rarer format was the feature special, which allowed artists to play multiple selections and often involved interviews. Examples of this arrangement from the Fifties included *The Sound of Jazz, The Subject is Jazz, Satchmo the Great*, and the *Timex All-Star Jazz* shows. The feature format held more potential for presenting genuine music, but as jazz critic and former *Down Beat* magazine editor Dan Morgenstern laments, “show-business values” often took precedence over “artistic considerations.”

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70 Mark Davis, interview by Benjamin Tress (January 20, 2008).
Most jazz on television in the 1950s had been of the swing variety, as the producers and performers had grown up in the 1930s when that style was most popular.\textsuperscript{72} By the 1960s swing was passé, and through new public television outlets, there was a move away from the swing emphasis of the Fifties. Still, only a few black musicians made it onto television. Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington became major TV figures, but some began to regard these men as mere tokens from the networks to blacks, kept on only for their entertainment value and popularity among white audiences.\textsuperscript{73}

The overall lack of exposure for black artists troubled many in the jazz community. The prevalence of white jazz artists on TV – with the recognition that TV appearances guaranteed – contributed to their disproportionate commercial success.\textsuperscript{74} Adding insult to injury, TV left its audiences with a flawed impression of the creative origins of jazz. Kirk was cognizant of television’s artistic and racial mistreatment of jazz, and believed that this manipulation had contributed to the worsening cultural and economic position of jazz in America. On the other hand, Kirk thought that if the networks corrected these problems, television could begin to reverse the music’s general downward slide by helping black musicians win just compensation for their artistic output, and by enhancing America’s appreciation of the music’s black heritage.

\textsuperscript{72} Morgenstern, “Jazz on Television,” 25; Many swing bands, like those of Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, and Bob Crosby, were composed of white musicians. White bands consistently made more money than African-American bands. Still, it should be noted that Goodman was the first major white musician to hire black musicians. See Gerard, \textit{Jazz in Black and White}, 21.

\textsuperscript{73} In addition to Armstrong’s television performances, he appeared in twenty three feature-length films over the course of his career. In contrast to charges of tokenism, Gabbard claims that, “From the beginning, [Ellington] was portrayed as a devoted composer rather than as a mere entertainer.” See Krin Gabbard, “Jazz on Television at the Library of Congress,” in \textit{Performing Arts Broadcasting} (Washington, DC: The Library of Congress, 2002), 179-83.

\textsuperscript{74} The most common white jazz artists on television included musicians Benny Goodman, Buddy Rich, Doc Severinsen, and composer/arranger Gil Evans. See Morgenstern, “Jazz and Television,” 9-37.
Establishing a group to lead high-profile protests against the networks would be his means of forcing the television establishment to make those corrections.\(^{75}\)

Jazz musicians had been forming community organizations similar to the one Kirk envisioned beginning in the early 1960s, in response to the worsening conditions in the music industry, and the related decline in jazz’s popularity and prestige.\(^{76}\) While their methods varied, they all generally sought control over production in the music industry, and looked to restore the cultural dignity of jazz by reconnecting with African American communities.\(^{77}\)

The jazz collectives of the 1960s and 1970s generally served the interests of the Black Arts Movement. Their collective organizing principle, which was tied closely to the collective value of jazz itself, resonated for African American musicians and writers looking to implement non-Western social systems as a means of achieving cultural empowerment.\(^{78}\) Until they became self-sufficient, Baraka’s argument went in his book

\(^{75}\) One should note that Kirk’s criticism of racial imbalances on television did not stop with televised jazz. He was unhappy with the heavily white nature of all television programming, especially children’s shows. In a 1971 interview with The Phoenix, he complained, “My kids watch TV every Saturday morning. They have never seen a black super-hero, in a society whose whole structure is based on the super-hero.”

\(^{76}\) New York was home to the first of these groups, the Jazz Composers Guild (JCG), which trumpeter Bill Dixon and pianist Cecil Taylor established in 1964. The JCG mainly functioned as a collective bargaining unit for avant-garde jazz artists, but also organized a series of concerts. Also in New York was Collective Black Artists (CBA), which emerged in 1969-70 under the direction of mainstream bassist Reggie Workman. Jazz collectives formed outside the east coast as well, as evidenced by the Union of God’s Musicians and Artists Ascension in Los Angeles, the Black Artists Group in St. Louis, and the Creative Musicians’ Association in Detroit. The most well-known collective nationwide was the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) in Chicago, which pianist Muhal Richard Abrams started in 1965.

See Saul, Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t, 303; Anderson, This Is Our Music, 75; Porter, What is This Thing Called Jazz?, 207-8; Charley Gerard, Jazz in Black and White (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 90-4.

\(^{77}\) Porter summarizes a number of the common interests and values which collectives adopted, citing economic self-determination, collective business practices, education programs for musicians and community members, and varying levels of commitment to black nationalism. See Porter, What is This Thing Called Jazz?, 207-8; Charley Gerard, Jazz in Black and White (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 20.

\(^{78}\) Townsend, “Free Jazz,” 155.
*Black Music*, blacks would not achieve the powers of self-determination and self-definition.

Kirk’s name for his activist group, the Jazz and People’s Movement, is puzzling in a number of ways. First, as we saw in Chapter One, Kirk objected to the musical label “jazz,” preferring instead “black classical music.”79 Conceiving of the music as black art was central to the JPM’s mission, and race figured clearly in nearly every one of the group’s demands. Second, the name made no connection with television or media, which was the main focus of the movement’s political action. Third, it is unclear to which “People” the name refers. Davis interpreted the name as “Jazz and its Followers,” but could not be sure of Kirk’s thinking. According to Davis, the name was never up for debate.80

The JPM’s name may not seem to line up with Kirk’s own philosophy or the group’s objectives, but its vagueness makes perfect sense in light of Kirk’s broad-based, inclusive vision for the organization. Through not specifying a particular race he hoped to create an atmosphere in the movement that would welcome musicians and fans of all races, assuming they were prepared to fight for black interests. And by not giving any reference to television in the group’s name, he left open the possibility that the JPM would someday expand its activism beyond the media.

There are two observable shifts in the evolution in the plans of Kirk and Davis. First, the initial plans focused on performances as a way of directly enhancing appreciation for Kirk’s music. The protest plan marked a new, indirect path towards exposure. Rather than making appeals on aesthetic grounds, Davis and Kirk intended to

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80 Davis, interview by Tress (January 20, 2008).
use the protests as a leverage tool to gain access to television airtime, whether or not producers were familiar with the music or thought it could sell. Second, both of the original plans, the truck tour and the park concerts, involved promoting only Kirk, whereas the television protests sought to represent and benefit a wider range of black musicians. It was this broad-based model that guided the creation of the JPM and served as a basis for the two founding documents we will consider in the next section.

The JPM was a prominent example of a less stylistically-specific agenda. Much of the scholarship on jazz collectives of the period emphasizes this alliance between collectives and free jazz, but we should be careful not to generalize too broadly. Few, if any, jazz musicians were ultimately spared the damaging effects of the music’s decline, and therefore it was not only free jazz players who were politically involved. Porter is virtually alone in stressing a more nuanced appraisal of the situation:

The compulsion to bring jazz to the black community, to explore its spiritual elements, and to alleviate the economic and social hardships facing musicians was not restricted to musicians associated with the current wave of avant-garde music. Musicians across the ideological, generational, and stylistic spectrum tried in various ways to address these issues.¹¹

Indeed, as the challenges grew more difficult, more and more constituencies of the jazz community became involved in collectives. Unlike collectives such as the AACM and JCG, the JPM did not necessitate an avant-garde aesthetic, and was an example of the expanding scope of social activism in the jazz community in the 1960s. But we will see that this widening circle of activism set the stage for the JPM’s eventual disintegration, as different generations and schools of musicians failed to reach a consensus on the nature of that activism.

¹¹ Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 207-8; Saul claims that all black performers of the period, whether post-modern or not, whether adherents to Black Power or not, “participated in the project of cultural reclamation,” but it is unclear whether or not he is specifically referring to collectives.
Demands

Until now, writers have given little if any attention to two documents that were central to the construction of the JPM mission. The first is the petition which the JPM circulated among musicians and jazz audiences in an effort to spread its word and gather support. The second, and more crucial, is the enumerated list of demands which the JPM distributed to the major media networks in advance of the demonstrations. Those demands do not exist as an independent document today, but the fact that they were published in multiple periodical sources from the period attests to their once being a single document authored by the JPM leadership, constructing a coherent political and aesthetic vision.

In order to understand the goals of the movement beyond the basic premise of TV inclusion, a close reading of these documents is absolutely necessary. Through these documents we can begin to uncover precisely what Kirk hoped to achieve, beyond the simple goal of ‘more jazz on TV.’ We find that at least dual motives were at work in the JPM, namely a concern for the economic position of jazz and its artists, and a cultural nationalist impulse to preserve jazz as an expression of black culture and history. When one looks at the JPM demands, both of those objectives are consistently at work.

The only recent literature that begins to deal in-depth with the demands of the JPM is John Kruth’s biography of Kirk, Bright Moments. In the beginning of his chapter on the movement, Kruth recounts how Kirk and Davis authored the “Statement of Purpose” for the movement in the summer of 1970. However, to call this document the “Statement of Purpose” is misleading, since it includes very little talk of the specific

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82 Kruth incorrectly writes that Archie Shepp also helped author the JPM petition.
objectives or strategies of the group. The more accurate label for it is a petition, since its final paragraph (which Kruth truncates) implores the reader to sign on in support:

Your signature on this petition will be interpreted as an indication of sincere dedication to the struggle to open the media, and to enable black artists to reach the positions of prominence that their artistry deserves – to breathe new life into black culture. Failure to sign this petition will be interpreted as signifying your disagreement with and opposition to its fundamental concepts (emphasis original).

The majority of the petition describes the state of inequality in the mass media, and gives a justification for focused action to address that inequality. The central allegation is that the mass media establishment has systematically obstructed black art, especially in the form of music, from the airwaves. The authors identify two intertwined results of that obstruction, one material, and the other cultural. The material consequence is that, “the white man has managed to avoid competitive confrontation” in the music industry. The cultural upshot is that, “[the white man] has partially succeeded once more in emasculating a facet of black culture and the black quest for freedom.”

That final paragraph of the petition establishes generally the dual goals for the JPM. It is crucial to observe that the material clause (“enable black artists to reach the positions of prominence”), and the cultural clause (“breathe new life into black culture”) grow organically out of each other in the same sentence. This literary device informs us of the close relationship between the two issues in the eyes of the JPM leaders, a true manifestation of the politics of culture. These twin material and cultural goals, first evidenced in the petition, would reappear in the comprehensive demands, and persist throughout the duration of the JPM’s activities.

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83 Jazz & People’s Movement Petition, Rahsaan Roland Kirk Papers.
In this early stage, the petition was purposefully general. Kirk and Davis drafted the petition as the initial call to arms. The pair, along with a small assortment of other musicians and friends, spent the summer months of 1970 personally circulating the petition throughout New York jazz clubs. Before, between, and after sets, they explained their grievances to those present with the hopes of stimulating interest and support. Davis’ forceful language in the petition and Kirk’s trustworthy presence resonated with the musicians and fans. Kirk sacrificed his own performance schedule that summer, but his efforts paid off, since before long the nascent movement had collected a few hundred signatures, including many of the top jazz artists of the day.\(^8^4\)

Encouraged by the positive response in the jazz community, the JPM began holding meetings in the late summer of 1970. Village Vanguard owner Max Gordon allowed the group to meet in his club on Monday nights before the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra performed.\(^8^5\) Sympathetic disc-jockeys at New York radio stations like WLIB and WRVR, whose audiences included socially-conscious jazz fans, announced the dates and times of “Special Events” at the Village Vanguard. With this enlarged support base, the movement would now compose a more specific set of objectives and decide which strategies could help achieve their goals.

Kirk led these meetings, which boasted between 120 and 150 attendees early on.\(^8^6\) Members debated how to define the movement’s musical protectorate, argued about potential targets for the JPM, discussed the demands that the group would send to the

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\(^8^4\) The original petition did not survive, and thus we cannot know for sure exactly how many people, and who in particular, signed on. From secondary sources, we know that signers (and thus, members) included Lee Morgan, Ron Jefferson, Billy Harper, Andrew Cyrille, Freddie Hubbard, Cecil Taylor, Elvin Jones, Pharaoh Sanders, Archie Shepp, Charles Mingus, Roy Haynes, Ron Burton, and Harold Mabern.

\(^8^5\) Davis, interview by Kruth.

\(^8^6\) Dan Morgenstern, “Grass Roots Jazz Protest Hits TV.” *Down Beat* 37, no.21 (October 15, 1970): 12, 39; Dan Morgenstern, interview by Benjamin Tress (October 11, 2007).
television networks, and later examined the merits and drawbacks of civil disobedience strategy. With so many people in attendance, ideological divisions were unavoidable. Morgenstern has assessed that there were, “a lot of different opinions across the whole scale from very extreme to very moderate.”\textsuperscript{87} Still, Kirk’s strong leadership skills and charisma allowed him to build a working consensus around the group’s objectives and methods.\textsuperscript{88} He also delegated some power to saxophonist Billy Harper and drummer Andrew Cyrille, each of whom headed loosely organized committees to write letters and investigate the current status of jazz on television.\textsuperscript{89}

At the first few meetings, in August 1970, participants drafted the comprehensive set of demands which would shape the movement’s course of action.\textsuperscript{90} The JPM made seven demands to the networks:

1. The establishment of a board of musicians to coordinate the production of three to four jazz specials each season, designed to educate the public about the history of black music
2. Increased exposure of black musicians (both established names and those without wide recognition)
3. Increased employment of black musicians and technicians throughout the medium (on game shows, soaps, etc.)

\textsuperscript{87} Morgenstern, interview by Tress.
\textsuperscript{88} In interviews, both Davis and Morgenstern support this point.
\textsuperscript{89} Davis, interview by Tress (2006); Morgenstern, “Grass Roots Jazz Protest,” 12.
\textsuperscript{90} The JPM would not publicly release the demands until after the first demonstration at the \textit{Merv Griffin Show} on August 27, but we can assume that they were in place prior to that action because Kirk would have wanted to be able to present a clear platform to Griffin and the CBS producers when meeting with them the day of the protest. Indeed, we know from an October 15 \textit{Down Beat} article that the JPM held its fourth meeting on September 8, at which time the membership debated implementation of its demands, implying that the group’s demands were already agreed upon. The exact dates of the first three meetings are unknown, but it is reasonable to assume that they occurred prior to the August 27 demonstration. If one of those meetings was set aside to plan logistics for the \textit{Griffin Show}, Kirk could still have allowed two meetings to draft demands. Therefore, the JPM demands must date from early- to mid-August 1970.
4. Recognition of talent: acknowledgement for solos, musical arrangements, and members of the staff band

5. The option for guest musicians to be interviewed by variety show hosts or participate in discussion panels

6. Greater promotion of black art in media and trade advertising

7. Hiring of black producers, directors, and talent coordinators at the networks

This specific set of objectives, like the petition before it, exhibits dual material and cultural concerns. Throughout the entire list, the two are so closely linked and equally represented that it is oftentimes impossible to distinguish one from the other, much less claim that one was the ultimate priority. Improved commercial success for black jazz musicians would enhance black cultural prestige, while greater recognition of black cultural heritage in the media had the potential to boost jazz’s popularity among new listeners, especially African Americans. Kirk’s own statements further highlight the indivisibility of culture and material matters. In a 1971 interview with radio host and critic Michael Cuscuna for Jazz & Pop, Kirk’s definitive statement, “Art is politics,” speaks to his conception of music’s importance for political activism.92

Peter Townsend, a professor of American literature and film who has published work on the history and cultural setting of jazz, notes the same parallel concerns in other jazz community collectives from the period leading up to the JPM:

91 Unfortunately, the exact wording of these demands is unknown today since there is no existing official copy of the list. As a result, the list above is taken from periodical reproductions of the demands. See Morgenstern, “Grass Roots Jazz Protest,” 12; Don Heckman, “A Beginning,” The Village Voice, October 8, 1970: 37; “Jazz Avant-Garde Wants on Tube,” Rolling Stone, November 26, 1970: 8; “Jazz & People’s Movement Promised NBC Action,” Down Beat, November 12, 1970: 11.

92 Kirk’s statement was in response to Cuscuna’s attempt to distinguish Black Panthers as a ‘political’ group, one whose organizational model was not necessarily applicable to JPM, musicians more generally.
From 1960 onwards a series of formalized groupings primarily of African American musicians were dedicated to the provision of better work opportunity, sympathetic recording and performing environments, and mutual support...Contemporary conditions imposed an increasing necessity for this kind of initiative...There were also cultural and political resonances to such groups, especially for African American musicians...

The JPM is particularly emblematic of the multifaceted trend Townsend observes. However, even Townsend stops short of drawing the direct line between material and cultural matters. What he and others have so far failed to do is to combine these two spheres into a single, broader category which we will call a *politics of cultural production*. This new approach provides a more accurate interpretation of the vision of the activists of the time, for whom there was often no clear division between music, culture, and economics.

**A. Educational Jazz Specials**

The JPM’s first demand sought the creation of a board of musicians to coordinate three to four jazz television specials each season. The intention was that these specials be educational, documenting the history of jazz and black music more broadly for the American public. To Kirk, it was most crucial that this history lesson reach African American viewers. He was deeply concerned that blacks were out of touch with their own heritage. In a 1971 interview, he spoke optimistically about a “new awareness” emerging among black people in regards to their musical past, but in 1973, he was still frustrated, saying, “Today, people don’t know their roots. Black people don’t know the roots of where they came from and where their music comes from.”94 It was this

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phenomenon of apparent ignorance that Kirk sought to eliminate through the educational jazz specials.

Kirk, himself a father, was aware of the great potential benefits of exposing young people, especially young African Americans to the musical traditions of their culture. In his 1971 *Jazz & Pop* interview with Cuscuna, Kirk said, “Kids is very open, man. They’re very open to music and if people would give music a chance and let the kids hear the whole total thing, you’d have a better situation.”95 But not only did black kids need to hear their music, they needed to see black musicians playing it. Kirk voiced this concern onstage at the *Griffin Show* protest, while trying to plead his case to the assembled CBS producers and disgruntled audience members, saying, “We all have kids, and they can’t relate to us at all, because they see nothing that relates to us on television. The only thing they see is Superman, rock groups, and long hair – nothing that relates to me at all.”96 Kirk may have been stating the obvious, but by relating the programming imbalance to role models for children, he was hoping his audience would sympathize with him as a parent.

Blacks were not the only intended audience for these lessons in black music history; Kirk sought to reach whites, too. An important step towards fostering racial-cultural consciousness among blacks was warning whites away from the misperception that they had any ownership rights over black music. This is not to say that Kirk or other cultural nationalists forbade whites from playing jazz or other black musical genres. Still, there was a feeling that as a result of the increasing number of white jazz musicians,

95 Kirk, interview by Cuscuna in *Jazz & Pop* (1970).
many of whom were visible on television, there had developed a sense among whites that they shared credit for the original creation of the music.

In truth, many people, black and white, thought of jazz as a unique American interracial concoction. Kirk did not ascribe to this historical narrative, and he was worried that those in power were manipulating this ‘cooperative’ account such that blacks lost credit entirely for their contribution. The music and mass media industries were at the forefront of that manipulation (whether malicious or not). The cultural machine provided a racially uneven set of privileges for white musicians, including compensation for performances and recordings, exposure, and critical acclaim. The network television specials which the JPM demanded would serve the purpose of redefining the historical narratives of American music, and reclaiming black classical music for its rightful inheritors.

The JPM’s demand for television specials to educate Americans about the history of black music was consistent with Kirk’s earlier night club jazz history lessons (See Chapter One). The motives and messages were to be the same, only the electronic medium would afford a much larger audience. Now, the cultural nationalist message would reach blacks who did not frequent jazz clubs and who had missed Kirk’s history lectures. The message would also go out to the white middle class intelligentsia who were attracted to jazz. Although public television would have been the expected carrier for documentaries, it was crucial for Kirk that these specials air on the networks, since the networks enjoyed a larger number of viewers. The board of musicians to oversee the production of the specials would safeguard the integrity of the historical narrative.
B. Exposure & Recognition

Through direct advocacy for black artists, the JPM sought to achieve greater exposure for their music on television, and likewise, encourage more formal recognition of these artists’ talents. Kirk meant this exposure to benefit a large number of jazz musicians who could not compete with the widespread and continuous parade of rock artists in the media. It was his hope that this exposure hasten commercial success for those featured artists by improving their sales and attendance at clubs. The exposure would also heighten public interest in jazz more broadly so that many artists beyond those shown on television would benefit. Variety show appearances, jazz performance specials, and talk show interviews were all possible means for gaining national exposure.

The JPM specified that it expected exposure not only for established jazz musicians, but also for those musicians who did not yet enjoy mass popularity. The JPM was committed to improving the trying economic conditions facing jazz musicians, and this required winning airtime for musicians beyond the familiar handful.97 There were a host of artists who were well-known figures in the jazz community, but were hardly household names in the United States. It was this slate of names that the JPM hoped to promote through television.

Television interviews were an important component of the fight for exposure. The JPM insisted that whenever jazz musicians appeared as guest performers on network shows that they also have the option to speak, either one on one with the host, or as part of a larger panel. The JPM designed this demand in order to help display the personal dimensions of jazz musicians, an improvement with both cultural and material

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97 The jazz musicians appearing on television at this time with any regularity were Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Ella Fitzgerald.
consequences. Don Heckman, the jazz columnist at the Village Vanguard, wrote in an October 22, 1970 piece, “Jazz artists rarely have the opportunity to be seen by the mass audience as the bright, intelligent human beings they are.”

Enhancing the individual dignity of the musicians would go a long way towards heightening the prestige, and possibly the popularity of the music in general. Inviting black musicians to be interviewed on network shows by white hosts was also a step forward in struggle for racial equality. The interview, essentially a conversation, would take place between two people on an even level.

JPM leaders also saw televised interviews as a valuable means of explaining music that might be otherwise inaccessible for beginning listeners. This type of guidance could enhance the audience’s appreciation of the music, and in turn, hopefully broaden the music’s market base. In a 1971 group interview for Jazz & Pop, Vibration Society percussionist and Kirk’s personal aide Joe Texidor recalled how similar explanation efforts had paid off at college performances:

You know, something that encourages me, Rah, is like when we go to these colleges, the way we have a rap session before the concert. We sit on stage and they sit and they relax and they ask us questions and we communicate as people. Then later in the evening when the concert goes down, I think they enjoy the music much more because if they weren’t familiar with Rahsaan before, already now they can come up to Rahsaan and say, “Rahsaan, how you doin’? This is so-and-so,” and it’s that rap communication.

Texidor’s comment speaks to the JPM goal of constructing a national cultural community of recognition and respect, aided by the communicative strength of mass media.

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100 It may also be that musicians who spoke in televised interviews accrued higher pay than musicians who only performed. If so, this would introduce another material component to the demand for interviews.
Related to the fight for exposure was the JPM’s intention to achieve greater formal recognition for black artists whose music was seen and heard on television, as seen in the fourth demand. This point again illustrates a political program that integrated cultural and economic concerns. Recognition meant acknowledging black musicians’ varied contributions to television in program credits, including special solos, musical scores and arrangements, and membership in house bands. Kirk and other JPM leaders knew that television had a legitimizing power, and these musicians desperately wanted the American public to view them as legitimate artists. Also motivating this demand was Kirk’s wish to visibly preserve the ranks of black musicians so as to strengthen the racial identification with the music’s origins. Economically, recognition would arguably benefit those individuals who received credit through greater name recognition, and in turn, album sales, recording contracts, and club dates.

Heckman wrote in a October 8, 1970 column that, “Underneath all of [the JPM demands]…is the cry for recognition.” The group’s fourth demand is perhaps the clearest example of that desire for credit that was due. “Jazz players,” Heckman continued, “like so many groups, are starting to realize their uniqueness, and they are understandably angry that this uniqueness, this very special talent, has been stolen, exploited, copied, imitated, modified, and god knows what else by performers with less ability and – usually – with white skin.”\footnote{101}{Heckman, “A Beginning,” 37.} Heckman’s assessment needs some qualification. It is not fair or reasonable to assume that jazz players didn’t know of their own unique talents. Truly, the force that drives most artists is the knowledge that they have a special gift, even if they have yet to gain popularity or respect for that gift. What Heckman as more likely referring to here is the shift away from the inward-looking attitude that had characterized
jazz musicians in the bebop and post-bop years. The “process of consciousness” of which he wrote, the so-called key to social change, was a matter of artists becoming more aware of their social and political position in the world, and the relation of their art to that position. According to Heckman, the JPM was making important, but still tentative, progress in this direction.

Heckman comes close to suggesting a white conspiracy to steal jazz. This, of course, was as likely as it was provable. Rather, the heart of the problem was not that latecomers had copied or imitated a musical style. The real issue for Kirk and the JPM, that Heckman did not emphasize enough, was the institutionalization of the white imitation, and the implications that had for black artists.

The cultural aspect of Kirk’s demand for media recognition of jazz was distinctive from similar demands made by cultural nationalist writers and artists. In keeping with his black musical continuum theory, Kirk’s activist effort was more inclusive. He wished to raise the level of acknowledgment for black jazz artists in the hopes of making jazz a more visibly black art form, an art form in which black audiences could take great pride. Cultural nationalists generally adopted free jazz as the highest black art form. Their efforts to wed politics and music centered on that sub-genre exclusively. The JPM, on the other hand, did not single out a specific music form.

C. Employment Opportunities

The leaders of the JPM recognized television as something more than a means of communicating black art and culture – it was a huge industry which offered myriad employment opportunities for those facing the economic pinch due to jazz’s decline.
Thus, the JPM called on the networks to hire black musicians and technicians across the whole television medium, including game shows, daytime soaps, and variety shows. Television exposure, like that which was called for in the second demand, was mainly a vehicle towards notoriety and commercial success, but the less glorified television jobs to which the third demand referred would provide steady employment and steady pay.\footnote{In this way, the JPM showed a concern for fostering a strong black economic base, a hallmark of the Black Power Movement.}

For Kirk and the JPM, it was critical that these new jobs for black musicians and technicians be at network television stations, not public stations. An obvious reason for this was that the networks, through their more diverse programming, offered more diverse playing opportunities. Network shows presented a number of potential jobs for musicians, including playing in a house band, providing pre-recorded background music, and scoring and recording soundtracks. In contrast, public television had only limited room for documentaries and performance specials.

More importantly, public television, or “educational television” as many called it, did not have a large enough budget to support struggling musicians. Kirk frequently recoiled against the suggestion of pursuing guest appearances on public television. In a March 1971 interview for \textit{The Phoenix}, he explained, “Educational TV don’t pay you anything more than union scale – they pay the leaders something like $82. They don’t give you any royalties or residuals for the re-runs, but they show those shows over and over again. That’s no kind of money to give to a man like John Coltrane.”\footnote{Stephen Curwood, “Black Notes: The Righteous Anger of R. Roland Kirk,” \textit{The Phoenix}, March 9, 1971: 16.} As the author of the \textit{Phoenix} article summarized, Kirk found public broadcasting to be a “second class gig,” even though historically it had a better track record of presenting jazz. When
it came to jobs in the television industry and their respective paychecks, both for black musicians and technicians, educational television could not compete with the networks. Kirk’s quotation proves quite clearly that improving labor relations in the culture industries was part of his own economic vision, and was a central issue for the JPM.

The JPM also sought to secure employment for blacks in the upper echelons of the television industry, as producers, directors, and talent coordinators. This demand was similar to the first demand, which called for a board of musicians to oversee the production of jazz education specials. But unlike that temporary body, this demand insisted on permanent employment, and had more serious implications for gaining control over the means of production in the culture industries. Here was an effort to help blacks achieve positions of power in the mass media, a move that would have a variety of implications.

In addition to creating an improved social and material standing for blacks associated with the music business, there was also the expectation that if blacks assumed these positions, they would become in-house advocates at the networks for more black music on television. In his October 8th column in the Village Voice, Heckman lamented that, “More than a century of exploitation of black music by an industry that has emphasized the profit motive – and the profit motive alone – is not going to go away overnight.” Kirk hoped that these new black producers would help develop a new confidence in the entertainment and selling power of jazz, and prove that jazz and profits were not mutually exclusive. A shift in programming could be beneficial to both the networks and the musicians and new employees.

The most important positions to fill would have been talent coordinators. It was these people that musicians most commonly had to impress in order to win an invitation to perform on television. It had been Kirk and other musicians’ experience that the majority of these talent coordinators were not well attuned to jazz. They acknowledged the entertainment value of certain types of jazz, but they visited clubs so infrequently that they never became familiar with more than a few top artists. More commonly though, these scouts remained aloof, and did not make an effort to learn about or consider jazz as viable musical option for their shows.\textsuperscript{105} If the JPM could not help place blacks in the highest positions, the simpler, lower-level turnover to black talent coordinators who were hip to jazz could be a major improvement.

\textbf{D. Advertising}

The sixth demand was a call for greater promotion for jazz in media and trade advertising. Perhaps the most tangible evidence of rock’s hegemony in the music market was its omnipresent advertising. Jazz had long sustained itself on a small, but reliable fan base, by which advertising was mainly a word-of-mouth activity. But as jazz increasingly lost its consumers to rock, soul, and folk, there developed a new necessity for more extensive formal advertising. Unfortunately, rock held complete sway over advertising space, both on the air, and on the printed page. The demand for more advertising also had a cultural angle. Higher volume of ads would have a similar effect to the general television exposure discussed earlier. Greater visibility for jazz would contribute to its artistic legitimacy, and, the JPM hoped, remind black listeners that they had a particular music which they could call their own.

\textsuperscript{105} Davis, interview by Tress (2006).
In order to appreciate the totality of the rock presence, it is helpful to examine the pages of the *Village Voice* containing Don Heckman’s jazz column. On the first page of each of the four articles dealing with the JPM (September 3, 1970; October 8, 1970; October 22, 1970; April 15, 1971), the text of the jazz column shares anywhere from one third to three quarters of the page with rock advertisements. The ads, both for records and performances, in some cases dwarf Heckman’s articles. The most ironic of these is the April 15th issue, in which Heckman’s title is “It’s Jazz Month. So?” The article is squeezed into the upper margin, while an enormous ad for the rock opera Tommy completely dominates the page.\(^{106}\)

What began as an effort to promote one artist grew into a larger movement that sought to address the worsening cultural and economic position of jazz in America. The JPM’s demands were its theoretical centerpiece, and thus they require our understanding before we examine other facets of the movement. I have shown that the JPM demands consistently sought material and cultural improvements. These interrelated goals were present in the earliest document of the movement, its petition, and continued to function behind the more comprehensive list of demands circulated to the television networks. The degree to which the two areas overlap illustrates the direct relationship between culture and economics. Instead of trying to employ either one of these categories, it is more helpful to conceive of a broader grouping, the politics of cultural production; a definition that encompasses issues of socio-economics, culture, and legal and civil rights. Indeed, Kirk and the JPM showed that if jazz music could fall victim politically, then it could just as easily be a medium for a political response. Understanding the stated

demands of the JPM is important for studying the JPM’s activist strategy, and will also be crucial when later examining splits in the collective around conflicting objectives.
3. Actions and Reactions

“The airways belong to the people, man, and we are here to dramatize that fact!”

Lee Morgan

_The Merv Griffin Show_ 107

Around 5:30 PM on August 27, 1970, Rahsaan Roland Kirk and the other principal leaders of the JPM, Mark Davis, saxophonist Billy Harper, drummer Andrew Cyrille, and trumpeter Lee Morgan, led fifty other musicians, friends, and fans in a small parade up Sixth Avenue in New York. At 49th Street, a long line was forming to enter the CBS Studios building for the taping of the _Merv Griffin Show_. As Kirk’s retinue joined at the back, some folks, eyed the big group with some suspicion, but most were so excited about the upcoming show that they do not notice the group. Kirk and others presented their tickets to the ushers, entered the studio, and took their seats.

After a short standup comedy bit, the show’s producer, Walter Kepmley, cued the cameras to start filming. The orchestra struck up the fanfare, and out from behind the stage curtain appeared Griffin, who surprised the audience by sporting a bright red

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matador’s cape and an enormous sombrero. After the laughter died down, he announced it was “Festival Night,” and the first half hour of the taping session consisted of Mexican music by a traditional mariachi band and Spanish flamenco dancing.

Griffin then introduced his next musical guest, the Broadway actor and singer Larry Kert, who was greeted with a short entrance bit from the band. Just as Kert was about to sit down beside Griffin’s desk, Kirk stood up from his seat. He pulled his clarinet out from underneath his coat, raised it to his mouth, and began to play a New Orleans-style tune. On cue, the fifty other JPM members stood up too, and immediately started blowing flutes and whistles they had smuggled into the theater. Kirk’s melody rose above the high-pitched screams of the whistles, and he kept playing as he moved, with aid, from his seat into the aisle, and began to make his way down towards the stage.

From beside the stage, Kempley cued the studio band to start playing in an effort to drown out the shrieking whistles, but it couldn’t muffle the racket and soon gave up. By now a clamor was rising from the audience, which was shocked and offended on behalf of the show’s host, and angry that these protestors had ruined their evening. “How can they do this to poor Merv? They have it too good here – they couldn’t get away with this in any other country!”

Kempley, sensing all was lost, signaled the cameramen to cut the recording. Griffin rose from behind his desk and walked to the front of the stage with his arms raised above his head. “Ok everyone, we’re going to have to cancel the taping,” he yelled above the whistles and flutes.

Kirk, at the foot of the stage, called out, “Please, let us tell you why we’re here! Please!” But Griffin had already ducked back behind the curtain. With trumpeter Lee
Morgan’s help, Kirk located Kempley, and persuaded the producer to allow him backstage to explain the interruption. Kempley, wishing to resolve this crisis as soon as possible, whisked Kirk and Morgan up to the stage and through a side door which led to a hallway of offices.

Meanwhile, the rest of the group clambered down the stairs to the stage area, carrying posters above their heads. The slogans read: “STOP THE WHITEWASH NOW! HIRE MORE BLACK ARTISTS ON TV,” “HONOR AMERICAN JAZZ MUSIC,” and “END POLLUTION OF THE EYE AND EAR – WE DEMAND THE TERMINATION OF TELEVISION’S FROZEN MUSIC TODAY!” At the foot of the stage, some members of the television crew who remained took a few shots at the musicians. “How ‘bout you people get out of here, and take your Black Power business out with you!” said one.

“I don’t think you understand, man,” responded one musician. “We’re not talking about Black Power, we’re talking about music. Jazz is the last thing presented in the media in this country. Why? Why should it be that way? When was the last time Charlie Mingus was on television? What do [the television networks] do with Ellington when he’s on the tube? They give him a back-up group of white studio musicians!”

In this midst of this shouting match, Kirk reappeared from backstage with Morgan. By now, a television news crew had arrived, and the reporter was eager to ask Kirk what the disturbance was all about, and why the group had chosen to interrupt the *Griffin Show*.

“This show is merely a symbol of TV,” explained Kirk calmly. “Our intention is to obtain recognition for black music throughout all television. Mr. Kempley and I talked
about why black music has been kept off television. He showed me a lot of information that said he had more black music than any other shows. But I showed him where he hasn’t had that much – especially the young music that’s going on.”

“If Merv Griffin is in charge of his own program,” quipped the reporter, “why can’t he choose what music he shows?”

“The airways belong to the people, man,” Morgan retorted. “And we are here to dramatize that fact. Jazz is the only real American music, but how often do you see jazz musicians in front of the camera? And we’re not just talking about jazz musicians playing in the house band!”

The newsman said that just days ago he had seen Louis Armstrong on television. “Louis Armstrong!” yelled Morgan. “Have you even seen [pianist] Thelonious Monk on television, or [pianist] Horace Silver, or [trombonist] J.J. Johnson? You probably don’t even know who they are! Look man, when we go to Europe or South America, we do hour-long color shows for BBC and stations like that. This is the only country where you see no jazz. And I’m not just talking about myself. It wouldn’t bother me if I never go on Merv Griffin’s or Johnny Carson’s show. But if I could see some jazz on once and a while, I’d be satisfied.”

Kirk jumped back in, “We’re not violent people. All we did was blow whistles and hold up signs. We all have kids, and they can’t relate to us at all, because they see nothing that relates to us on television. When I tell my son I’m on television in Europe, he doesn’t get excited about it, because he’s never seen it. He says, ‘Well, why aren’t you on television over here, daddy?’” Kirk explained that he had gotten a commitment from Griffin’s talent booker to seek out more black music in the New York clubs and
consider it for the show. Morgan added sternly, “We intend to keep dramatizing, in any way that we deem necessary, the fact that we are unsatisfied with the current situation.”

That night New York’s local CBS Channel 2 opened its eleven o’clock broadcast with a short story on the protest. The anchor reported that a “group of black militants” had taken over the *Merv Griffin Show*. The following day, CBS Network President Robert Wood sat watch from beside the stage as Griffin re-taped the previous day’s show for broadcast.

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The protest at the *Merv Griffin Show* was the first major public action by the JPM. At planning meetings at the Village Vanguard over the previous month, leaders of the movement had decided that this type of dramatic action would be the best strategy for trying to implement their demands. The television networks had consistently rebuffed efforts by Kirk, Mark Davis, and others to reach out and establish a dialogue through written correspondence, and thus JPM members believed that it was time to bring more public pressure to bear.

Kirk arranged for a lawyer to advise the group regarding the legal considerations of launching an invasion into a television studio, and members understood that through such an action they risked arrest on charges of breach of peace and breaking Federal Communications Commission regulations. Still, Kirk believed that if the group bought

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110 Prior to the *Griffin Show* demonstration, the JPM had initiated a minor protest at WLIB radio in New Jersey over the station’s music programming imbalances.
tickets ahead of time, and if the demonstration was peaceful, the JPM would not get into trouble. “There’ll be a demonstration if I have to demonstrate by myself!” Kirk declared in the midst of one of these planning discussions.\textsuperscript{111}

In examining the recorded statements by JPM members from the \textit{Griffin} demonstration, one finds that their language reflected the combined cultural and material themes of the movement’s petition and set of demands. Embedded in a number of key quotations were the intertwined calls for cultural respect and better employment opportunities for jazz music and musicians. Also in keeping with the earlier JPM documents, their statements at the event made it clear that the movement sought to benefit black artists specifically.

The call for respect for black culture was evident in many of the remarks that JPM members made at the protest. The anonymous demonstrator, who criticized the common network practice of pairing a black soloist (in this case, Duke Ellington) with a white backup band, equated this treatment with total disrespect. From a musical standpoint, this routine of separating a musician from his or her regular working band caused disruption, and detracted from the art to be produced. But this custom also had obvious racial undertones, and suggested that a black musician was not self-sufficient without whites supporting him. Allowing Ellington to appear on television with his entire orchestra, most which was black, signaled a higher degree of respect on the part of the networks for all black musicians.

Morgan expressed a similar desire to bestow greater dignity upon black musicians through television. By saying the addition of black house band members would not satisfy the JPM, he was expressing the need for the cultural respect and recognition

\textsuperscript{111} Morgenstern, “Grass Roots Jazz Protest,” 12.
provided by with full-length jazz features. In addition, Morgan’s outrage at the reporter’s reference to Louis Armstrong derived from his wish to see television present a fuller picture of jazz culture. Beyond securing Monk, Silver, and Johnson with individual credit through television, Morgan indicated that the networks’ reliance on Armstrong gave a shallow impression of jazz and its culture. By giving airtime and recognition to a broader swath of musicians, the networks could show the artistic depth of jazz and demonstrate that black music was not just the preserve of a token few.

The material angle of the JPM was also audible at the Griffin Show protest. In the statement noted above, we observe that the economic imperative was inseparable from cultural concerns. The anonymous musician who was angry about the cultural implications of Ellington playing with a white backup band must have also been upset about the fact that the pianist’s black colleagues lost a paid television gig to whites. Likewise, Morgan’s statement that “the airways belong to the people” had both cultural and material connotations. Not only should programming fully reflect the diverse cultures of America in a dignified manner, but also, no single group should exercise exclusive control over the means of broadcasting, and the associated profits.

JPM members’ posters at the Griffin Show also reflected the mutual cultural and material goals of the movement. The poster which best encapsulated this read, “STOP THE WHITENASH NOW! HIRE MORE BLACK ARTISTS ON TV.” The term “whitewash” functioned on two levels. In general, it articulated that television had become a wholly white medium, both in its entertainment content, and also in its power structure. Television neglected black culture and artists, and projected almost exclusively what could be called white culture.
More specifically, and more serious to Kirk, was the whitewash of jazz itself. Aside from a small handful of featured black musicians, white musicians made up the majority of those playing jazz on television. As a result, television broadcasts often left audiences with a flawed impression of the black creative origins of jazz. In addition, the prevalence of white jazz musicians on television – with the recognition that TV appearances guaranteed – contributed to disproportionate commercial success. The second sentence on the poster, “Hire more black artists on TV,” indicated that the movement sought more than a simple increase in the one-time guest appearances by black artists; it wanted to secure longer-term employment through the television industry (See Chapter Two).

The placard reading “HONOR AMERICAN JAZZ MUSIC” was most obviously an appeal for cultural respect. By demanding honor, the poster’s author was indicating that such honor did not already exist, either as a result of unintentional ignorance, or perhaps through a more negative rejection or dishonor. Unlike the previous poster, this one did not make an overt material demand. Still, the author may have been suggesting that honoring jazz was a first step towards alleviating the systemic economic challenges facing the music.

The third poster, which declared, “END POLLUTION OF THE EYE AND EAR – WE DEMAND THE TERMINATION OF TELEVISION’S FROZEN MUSIC TODAY!” did depart somewhat from the JPM rubric. Given avant-garde jazz’s association with black cultural activism in the Sixties, and the membership of many younger players in the JPM, suggests that this poster was displaying a narrower aesthetic grievance than the other posters. Beyond being unsatisfied with the dearth of jazz on
television, this sign’s author was upset with the types of jazz that television presented. Kirk repeatedly went on record saying that the JPM was not for the benefit of any one strain of jazz, that it was rather a movement on behalf of all black music, old and new. Still, Kirk’s statement at the Griffin Show protest that it was the “younger music” that was particularly lacking on television implied that he appreciated the relative levels of media success among different jazz genres, and that he may have been amenable to giving a little extra push for the new music.

Kirk repeatedly used his “black music” terminology at the protest, but for the most part he and the other JPM members tried to distance themselves from other black activist groups. An anonymous protestorsaid, “We’re not talking about Black Power,” and Kirk stressed that he and the others were “not violent people.” The responses of the CBS stage crew and the slanted local news coverage showed why the JPM took this tact. The white media establishment demonstrated a clear tendency to represent black activism automatically as militant and radical, even before taking time to learn about the issue at hand. JPM leaders sensed that this type of categorization prevented progress and tried to make their specific demands clear to their audiences. This proved a difficult position to uphold, though, and some observers misunderstood the movement’s aims.

Apart from the CBS evening news segment, reactions to the Griffin protest were typically quite positive. A letter which Kirk received just four days after the action congratulated him for speaking up for jazz music. Mrs. Ann H. Sneed, Program Director for the International Art of Jazz, Incorporated, wrote, “We are heartened and encouraged that – at last – the jazz artists themselves have protested the neglect of their art – the only
art form which is America’s own. We look upon this neglect as a national disgrace.”

International Art of Jazz was a non-profit arts and cultural center based in Suffolk County, Long Island which offered educational programs on jazz music and history. That Kirk received Sneed’s letter so quickly speaks to the speed with which news of the JPM protest spread throughout the Greater New York jazz community.

The initial response by CBS and Griffin’s production staff to the JPM interruption was fairly open. Kempley’s eagerness to meet with Kirk and listen to the movement’s demands on the day of the protest may have shown more pragmatism than sympathy, but the fact that the studio continued to negotiate with the JPM in the weeks following the protest demonstrated a degree of willingness to reevaluate its programming. These negotiations yielded a promise by Griffin producers to broadcast more jazz on their show; a promise to which the show did not stick, but whose mere declaration was noteworthy.

Reactions in the press to the JPM’s opening round were rather limited, but typically positive. The first full-length coverage came from Don Heckman, a music critic for The Village Voice. His article from September 3, 1970, entitled, “Music on TV: Just One Color?” was a dramatic firsthand account of the protest. Daniel Morgenstern, the editor of Down Beat, wrote another summary of the event (also firsthand), but his “Grass Roots Jazz Protest Hits TV” did not print until October 15, 1970. Both writers were supportive of Kirk and his movement, which they characterized as important and

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113 “Musicians Disrupt TV Show,” Down Beat, 11; Morgenstern, “Grass Roots Jazz Protest,” Down Beat, 12,39; Not long after the protest, the Merv Griffin Show moved to Los Angeles, far from the influence of JPM.
justified, although one can see in the articles the seeds of skepticism and disappointment, especially with regard to the media’s inability to compromise.

In his piece, Heckman made no effort to hide his alignment with the JPM; he wrote at the outset that Kirk contacted him a few days prior to the protest and asked him to attend and provide some press for the event. And in the opening paragraphs, he repeatedly used the pronoun “we” when speaking of the assemblage of protestors, and his intense disdain for Griffin and his audience is unmistakable.

But while Heckman was unequivocally on the JPM’s side, he displayed some pessimism over the protest’s potential to bring change. His vivid narrative of the action evoked the notion of two disparate worlds colliding, and the misunderstandings that resulted. He writes, “Kirk seems to think he has gotten a commitment for a substantive meeting with Griffin and the show’s producer…but Kempley seems focused on the idea that all Kirk and the others want is a few appearances on his show.” He reported that when the Voice issue went to press, the results of such a meeting were unknown, and his pessimistic tone suggested that no results would come soon. Yet it is clear that he faulted the network, not the musicians, for preventing meaningful discussion and progress, and put the onus on CBS to adjust its mindset in the interest of resolving the problems at hand: “If media representatives continue to reveal the kind of blind lack of consciousness that was evident in the actions of Griffin, his producers, and his various flunkies during the Thursday disruptions, more non-violent action could be forthcoming.”

Morgenstern’s piece was un-credited (he has claimed authoring it since), and unlike Heckman’s column, attempted to maintain some degree of journalistic neutrality. Still, he praised the JPM’s objectives as “much-needed” and “overdue,” and exhibited

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strong optimism that Kirk’s command of “the respect and affection of the jazz community” would bode well for the movement’s future. At the close of the article, Morgenstern provided contact information for the JPM, should readers have been interested in joining the group.

Morgenstern’s language in the article indicated that while he supported the JPM in its efforts, he somewhat misinterpreted some members’ statements at the protest. While he correctly reported that “the movement’s aim was to obtain across-the-board recognition for jazz and black music on television and radio,” his summary of the JPM’s demands made little reference to black music or musicians, and instead employed the looser term “jazz.” In a recent interview with the author, Morgenstern maintained this belief, saying, “Spokespeople for the JPM made it clear that they were not exclusively arguing for black musicians to appear, but that it was for the general cause of the music.”

It seems that as a result of the JPM members’ relatively moderate language at the *Griffin* protest, and their attempt to distinguish themselves from more militant black activist groups, Morgenstern expected the movement’s platform to completely avoid political (or racial) elements. But Kirk’s aesthetic vision of “black classical music” and his awareness of black social injustices were proof that there had always been a strong racial element at play in the JPM mission. We will see that when the JPM public language later became more overtly political, Morgenstern assumed that the movement had shifted away from its original aesthetic or musical focus.

In addition to being the first national full-length coverage of the JPM, the “Grass Roots” article included the only existing photograph of a JPM protest in progress. Unfortunately the image is not particularly powerful, and in many ways must have done a
disservice to the group from a public relations perspective. The picture shows the backsides of a handful of studio staffers, behind which the protestors are grouped, waving signs which are mostly legible. Leadership figures from both sides are nowhere to be seen, and only one JPM member’s face is visible, peeking out from behind the staffers’ coats. A large “CBS Color” camera is the only reference to the picture’s setting. Overall, it is difficult to appreciate the scale of the protest, and the scene seems disorganized and unproductive.

Opinions regarding the JPM eventually accentuated ideological splits in the so-called “jazz community,” but its reception following the Griffin protest was generally strong. Still, a decision by the JPM caused it to lose a potentially valuable musician ally. Art Davis, who had played bass on Kirk’s breakthrough album *We Free Kings*, was playing in Merv Griffin’s orchestra at the time of the protest, and neither Kirk nor anyone else in the JPM informed Davis as to the planned actions. Davis later related to Kruth, “All these people [in the JPM] knew me. I had recorded with them and they did not let me know in advance. Which in a sense hurt me because I wouldn’t have gone and told and said, ‘They’re gonna do this and I don’t want any part of it.’ God help me!”

It is likely that Kirk kept Davis in the dark to protect his friend’s integrity and spare him the consequences of knowing about the protest and not alerting the Griffin staff. As it turned out, Davis was fired anyways when Griffin moved his show to California the next year. He even found that jingle, soundtrack, and studio work was no longer available to him, and he was largely absent from the jazz scene for most of the

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Kirk couldn’t have known that Davis would be fired, but prior notification might have salvaged an important friendship and working connection. Not only did the JPM’s decision damage this personal relationship, it was counterproductive to its objectives of bringing more black jazz musicians onto television.

The Tonight Show

Thursday, October 1, 1970 was the eighth anniversary of The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. That night’s episode was scheduled to include a number of high-profile guests and celebrities, to celebrate the occasion, including New York City Mayor John Lindsay.

JPM leaders assumed that the fresh memory of their August invasion at CBS might create difficulties getting into the NBC studio, so they formulated a different plan. In the afternoon of October 1st, about fifty JPM members arrived at Rockefeller Plaza and entered the RCA Building. They found their way to the main visitor information desk, and the young lady on duty asked, “What may I help you folks with today?”

“We’re here with the Harlem Baptist Church, ma’am. We made reservations a few days ago for a four o’clock studio tour,” said Billy Harper, smiling.

“Oh, very well. Let me just check our records,” said the clerk as she leafed through a folder. “Ok, Mr. Harper, your guide should be right down. Enjoy the tour!”

For the next hour and a half, the Harper, Davis, and the other JPM members got a behind-the-scenes look at the vaunted NBC studios and sound stages. The tour came to


This account synthesizes the following sources: Davis, interview by Kruth (date unknown); “Jazz & People’s Movement Promised NBC Action,” Down Beat 37 no.23 (November 12, 1970): 11; Kruth, Bright Moments, 241-2.
an end outside the entrance to the *Tonight Show* studio, where the audience was already streaming in to take their seats for the anniversary taping. Harper and the JPM crew attempted to sneak into line and enter the studio, but the security guards at the doors refused to let the group get in without tickets. Faced with the prospect of having to leave without making their point, the band of musicians sat down en masse in front of the studio doors, and refused to move.

The taping set to begin soon, the NBC staff urgently wanted the protestors out of the way. A few security guards tried to push their way through the seated cluster, while Harper tried to explain that the group was protesting the lack of jazz on television, and that they would not leave until they were allowed to speak with network officials.

When it looked as if one or the other side would have to budge, the elevator doors in the lobby opened, and out walked Kirk playing clarinet, accompanied by Mingus and drummer Ron Jefferson. The three had planned to set up and play in the main lobby downstairs as a diversion, but had come upstairs when they heard about the commotion. Kirk approached the security guard outside the studio entrance and commanded, “Open that door and let us in or I’ll blow it down!” The guard complied.

Waiting on the other side of the studio doors was Joseph Cuneff, the Director of NBC Nighttime Programming, who was had come out from his office after being notified of the disturbance. Cuneff introduced himself to Kirk, and the two men stepped aside. After a short discussion, Kirk motioned to Harper and Davis that the protestors could give up their position in front of the entrance.

Kirk, the JPM members, and Cuneff went downstairs to the main lobby of the RCA building, where some reporters had assembled on short notice. Cuneff spoke first.
He announced to the press that a series of discussions between JPM representatives and NBC officials would begin the following week. “I want to have more meetings – meaningful meetings,” he said. “I’m not here just to put together shows; I’m here to help.”

“I am satisfied with Mr. Cuneff’s initial response to our actions,” said Kirk. “And I hope that we can work together towards achieving better recognition for black music on television. But I would also like to add that we will continue to plan more demonstrations until we feel our demands have been met at all the networks.”

The Tonight Show protest received little press coverage compared to the JPM’s first action at CBS. The next week, Heckman wrote another column on the movement in The Village Voice, but it only mentioned the NBC protest in passing, showing that he was almost surely not present for it. Yet the article, titled “A Beginning,” is still worth examining here, because it is an indication of how opinion of the JPM was evolved in early October 1970.118

Throughout his piece, Heckman’s theme was the need for greater consciousness in the jazz community regarding the degree of exploitation of the music by the media. To him, every liberation movement first required its members to realize the problems at hand. In his opinion, that realization was “a little late in coming” in the jazz community, and its tardiness may have prevented significant improvements. Heckman implied (and wrote more overtly in later columns) that jazz musicians have for too long been inward-looking and stubborn about the prospects of sustaining itself without expanding its

audience base. He wrote that the JPM “is making a first tentative, but very significant step on the pathway of self-awareness. But it is only a beginning.”

The JPM was only a start, Heckman believed, because bringing jazz musicians together on issues such as media exclusion or exploitation is extremely challenging. Aside from the racial divisions that the JPM’s rhetoric would soon ignite, Heckman predicted that the youth-dominated movement would have a hard time bridging the gap with older, more recognized musicians. He wrote, “Internal problems have always made the job of organizing musicians difficult. The contradiction is obvious enough: established performers are always more eager to work within the system for change than are the less successful – and usually younger – musicians.” The JPM certainly had a few established names at the top (Kirk, Mingus, Morgan, and Haynes), but young musicians did dominate the movement’s ranks. In the months and years following the JPM’s dissolution, Kirk would lament this very challenge, saying in one interview “[The door] was open, but it couldn’t be done by just one segment of a people.”

The Dick Cavett Show

Only two weeks later the JPM hit the Dick Cavett Show at ABC Studios. This time, however, Kirk was out of town performing in New Orleans, and his absence threw off some organizational aspects of the group. Mark Davis was happy to organize the action and search around Lower Greenwich Village for whistles to give the protestors, but he was worried that he would not be an effective leader when the group convened for

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119 Kirk, interview by Winter, Coda, 10.
120 Evidence for this narrative comes from “Jazz Protestors Do Cavett Show, Push On,” Down Beat 37, no.24 (November 26, 1970): 8; “Taping of Cavett’s Show Disrupted by Jazz Group,” New York Times, October 14, 1970; Davis, interview by Kruth (date unknown); Kruth, Bright Moments, 244.
the demonstration. He admitted afterwards, “I may have been the coordinator, but why would these musicians listen to me?” It was the largest crowd of JPM supporters for an invasion thus far, and to ensure the affair to come off smoothly Billy Harper, Andrew Cyrille, and Lee Morgan assumed leadership of the group. The three sat together towards the front of the audience and planned to signal the rest of the protestors when the time was right to play. Ironically, it was Cavett’s first guest, Trevor Howard, who provided the perfect cue.

To start the interview, the host casually asked the handsome Academy Award-winning British actor how he was enjoying New York City. “Well Dick, I used to love this city very much,” said the fifty-seven year old Howard. “I’ve come here many times, especially since the war, you know, and even shot a few films here. I used to simply adore going out at night to the jazz clubs – there were so many! My wife Helen and I could not get enough of that music. But I have certainly noticed the last times I have been here that this aspect of the city has changed. It has certainly been a surprise, and I’m not sure quite how to explain it.”

Scattered throughout the studio audience, all the protestors immediately stood up and started blowing the whistles. The noise was so loud that Cavett covered his ears, and Howard ducked down in his chair in surprise. Morgan had managed to sneak his trumpet into the show, and he was playing a New Orleans style ditty as he and Harper moved down towards the stage.

The interruption lasted for one hour, during which time Davis, Harper, Morgan, and Cyrille met privately with Cavett Show and ABC network executives. From this meeting came the most substantial concession yet – an invitation for representatives of
the JPM to appear on Cavett’s stage two weeks later and express their grievances and demands on national television for fifteen minutes. ABC officials also promised to engage in further negotiations regarding musical programming on their network’s shows. After the meeting concluded, the JPM exited peacefully, and Cavett finished taping his show.

The protestors left the studio with a bittersweet sense of accomplishment. For scheduling reasons, October 22nd was the only date that ABC was prepared to offer the JPM a slot on the show. Yet the leaders knew that Kirk would still be touring in two weeks, and that he would not be able to make it to New York for the Cavett segment. But the opportunity had been too valuable to pass up, and they had accepted the invitation.

Five JPM representatives joined Cavett on stage for the panel: Billy Harper, Andrew Cyrille, pianist Cecil Taylor, trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, and Kirk’s wife Edith. This collection of delegates showed a clear tendency towards younger jazz music and musicians.121 Taylor, 41, was the most senior musician by ten years, and was the most articulate and outspoken of those assembled. Cyrille, who was 30, had been drumming for Taylor since 1964. Taylor’s band embodied the height of the free direction in jazz. Hubbard and Harper, 31 and 27, respectively, came from fairly more mainstream, hard bop backgrounds, both having played with Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers in the 1960s.

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121 Kirk told Davis he wanted a “mixed group covering all the music,” on the Cavett Show panel, but it is not clear how Kirk or others chose this specific group of musicians. Kirk’s marriage with Edith failed in the early 1970s. Shortly afterwards, he married his second wife, Dorthann.
Hubbard was no stranger to freer settings though, as he had recorded on Eric Dolphy’s *Out to Lunch* (1964) and John Coltrane’s *Ascension* (1965).  

Until days before, then-28-year-old Reverend Jesse Jackson had expected to join the panel too. The Greater New York branch of Jackson’s civil rights organization, Operation Breadbasket, had recently taken an interest in the JPM, and had sent representatives to attend some of the group’s meetings at the Village Vanguard. Breadbasket, which was an outgrowth of Dr. Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, functioned mainly as a fund-raising group, and its approach to aiding the black American community focused on economic measures. In the JPM, Breadbasket saw an opportunity to challenge the high-profile mass media establishment, and try to win more black control over the means and rewards of cultural production.

At the last minute, however, Jackson cancelled his engagement. In lieu of appearing on the *Cavett Show*, he issued a statement on behalf of his organization, stating its full support for the JPM. Edith Kirk began the panel proceedings by reading that news release, which was signed by Jackson, and Breadbasket’s New York Chairman, Reverends William A. Jones, and Director, John L. Scott:

> Operation Breadbasket of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference unequivocally supports the just goals and demands of the Jazz and Peoples Movement.

> The interruption of major network shows in recent days is the inevitable response to racism in the television industry. Black artists in the jazz idiom have been historically and systematically excluded from the networks. Their peculiar talents born out of the agony of the Black Experience have been almost totally ignored. Operation Breadbasket challenges the media to immediately institute redemptive

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122 These general aesthetic commonalities would not have been apparent to average Cavett audiences, but to anyone familiar with contemporary jazz, the group of panelists would have indicated a fairly obvious trend.

123 It is unclear as to exactly when or how Operation Breadbasket came to participate in the JPM. Mark Davis remembers Jesse Jackson and/or Ralph Abernathy attending a JPM meeting at the Vanguard.
means to achieve justice and equity in this area which represents the only
authentic American contribution to the world music.

We are fully committed to use the total resources of black consumption power to
correct this gross inequity and to raise the media to a level of humanness and
cultural responsibility. Operation Breadbasket expects to meet with the president
of ABC immediately to begin negotiations regarding this matter so critical to the
concept of people-hood and the total emancipation of the blacks in America.124

Without a separate televised statement of the JPM petition or demands, the Breadbasket
press release became the de facto mission statement of the movement. For the most part
the release stuck to the same cultural and material themes as the JPM petition (although it
emphasized the material side). The author drew attention to the current lack of “cultural
responsibility,” and the need to recognize the artistic products of the “Black Experience,”
and at the same time, made reference to “redemptive means” and “black consumption
power,” underlining a clear economic perspective.

If there was a major difference between the original JPM petition and the
Breadbasket release, it was in the directness of the message. To be sure, both used strong
language and had a forceful tone, but the latter singled out “racism” as the central cause
of imbalances in television programming, whereas the former never used the word. The
press release also charged the networks with “systematic exclusion.” The petition did
speak repeatedly of “suppression,” but it left open the possibility that some people were
“unaware” of their role in said suppression. The Breadbasket statement, with its direct
political rhetoric, set the tone for the discussion to follow.

On the Cavett panel, Taylor and Cyrille were the most outspoken of the group,
and they put the emphasis squarely on the racial dimension of the movement. Recurring

Papers, East Orange, NJ.
themes in the discussion were the suppression of black culture and music in the media; the need for Americans to respect jazz as a serious art form, not simply entertainment; the overrated status of white jazz musicians; the exclusion of avant-garde jazz from television and radio; and the question of whether whites were capable of playing jazz.\footnote{No video recording or transcript exists from the panel.} After fifteen minutes, Cavett felt it important to continue, and allowed for the conversation to go an additional fifteen minutes.

In responding to Cavett’s questions, Taylor and the others made it clear that while they did not necessarily consider jazz a black-only art, the actions of the JPM were for the specific benefit and protection of black musicians. This type of rhetoric was not new for the JPM. One has to look no further than the movement’s petition, which the JPM circulated at each disturbance, to find the same strong political-cultural language as was apparently voiced on the Cavett discussion. Indeed, Davis’ language in the petition was in many ways stronger than that of the Breadbasket statement. The difference, though, was that on the Cavett Show, these types of statements were coming directly from the mouths of the musicians, who up until this time had mostly used language that was relatively less confrontational. The stern tone and racially distinctive language of the panelists surprised and upset some viewers who had previously conceived of the JPM as simply a jazz-advocacy group.\footnote{Those who became bored or offended had the option of watching the Woody Herman Band on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. See Dan Morgenstern, “It Don’t Mean a Thing…,” Down Beat 37, no.25 (December 10, 1970), 37.}

It is hard to know if the Cavett panel would have taken a different course, either in its personnel or its tone, if Kirk had been present. According to Dan Morgenstern, Kirk was a very good debater, and he “did not hesitate to interrupt or express his opinion,
and if he thought someone was going off in the wrong direction, he would correct them.\textsuperscript{127} It is possible, then, that Kirk would have mitigated Taylor’s supposedly strident manner had he thought the pianist was making false statements. At least he would have symbolically balanced the panel in favor of mainstream jazz. However, without a video or transcript of the actual discussion, we cannot analyze Taylor’s rhetoric; much less speculate about Kirk’s possible impact.

It is with the Cavett demonstration and ensuing panel discussion that we first hear a response from blacks outside the music community. The first was the press release from Operation Breadbasket on October 22, 1970, which we noted above. The second came from Floyd McKissick, former Director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and columnist for \textit{The New York Amsterdam News}. He published his response to the Cavett panel, and the jazz protests more generally, in November 21, 1970 issue of the \textit{Amsterdam News} under the title “Black Music on Television.”\textsuperscript{128} It is quite possible that this article was the first many black New Yorkers had read on the JPM, and as a result, McKissick was in a strong position to sway many opinions.

On the immediate issue of the panel, McKissick praised the “representative group of Black jazz musicians” (interestingly, he does not use the name ‘Jazz and People’s Movement’ in his column) for “concisely and effectively” stating their grievances to the national audience. He was uncertain, though, whether any “tangible results” would come from the televised discussion. Overall, he did not spend much space reviewing the panel,

\textsuperscript{127} Dan Morgenstern, interview by Benjamin Tress, 11 October 2007.
and instead used the *Cavett* appearance as a springboard to discuss the larger issue at hand; jazz on television.

McKissick articulated the argument that more jazz belonged on television because of its importance to black cultural heritage. Claiming jazz as a product of the black community, he wrote, “Jazz is an art form which was born of the Black experience and nurtured in the culture of Black America. It is our music and we deserve the chance to hear it via the mass media.” Later in the column he called jazz a “legitimate form of Black self-expression” that, when it has not been ignored, it has been “co-opted” by white musicians. With these words, he seeks to arouse black pride and a black sense of ownership over jazz music.

McKissick believed the ultimate object should be to connect blacks, especially “black youngsters,” with their musical heritage. Broadcasting jazz via television was one means to that end, but he viewed it as a secondary means. The primary solution, he wrote, should be for the government and charitable foundations to finance “well-promoted jazz tours by prominent Black stars” in an effort to match those finances already available for white classical musicians. In the absence of this, though, he did see television as a helpful conduit to bring black music to the masses. And he whole-heartedly supported protests in order to gain access to that medium: “If it takes dozens of disruptions by Black musicians and music lovers to get jazz on television, then disruptions, demonstrations, and sit-ins should become the order of the day.”

The *Cavett Show* panel may have initiated a greater awareness and support for the JPM in the black community, but it seriously tested the support of Dan Morgenstern. The *Down Beat* editor had supported the movement from its early meetings and first protest,
and supplied it with significant coverage in the magazine. Yet his support was based on an incorrect assumption he had imposed on the JPM, the notion that the movement was advocating for jazz in its broadest sense, and that the group’s demands were racially disinterested.

The discussion panel made it clear, however, that the JPM mission did give priority to black jazz musicians, and as a result Morgenstern became intensely disenchanted, and authored a stinging critical response to the panel, entitled “It Don’t Mean a Thing…,” which ran in the December 10, 1970 issue of Down Beat. Alerted by the apparent disproportion of ‘free’ musicians on the panel, he developed the impression that the representatives were expressing ‘political’ messages because of their own musical idiom and political interests. He inquired, “Was this, then, not the Jazz and People’s Movement, but the Movement for the Furtherance of Avant-Garde Jazz on Television?”, in effect charging the panelists of hijacking the supposedly once-apolitical JPM for their own benefit.

In this lengthy opinion piece, Morgenstern restated his faulty view that the JPM’s tenets had originally contained a more aesthetic message, and that the most recent television appearance marked a departure from the original objectives. His ideal was for the JPM to promote the musical worth of jazz above its apparent racial character in the interest of achieving tangible results. To him, jazz should have been on television for the basic reason that it is “pleasurable to listen to…beyond those [reasons] pertaining to social justice, the welfare of struggling artists, and ego-gratification.”

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129 For more on the aesthetic-political affinity between free jazz and the Black Arts Movement, see Chapter One.
Morgenstern failed to appreciate that all of the above aesthetic, cultural, and material factors were interrelated. He expected the JPM to be “cultural first and political second,” suggesting that the two were separable, that ‘culture’ was only an aesthetic category, and that ‘political’ automatically referred to black nationalist activism. But from analyzing the original JPM petition and the list of demands, we know that for Kirk these distinctions did not exist!

Cultural historian Jon Gennari’s study of jazz critics, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, helps to explain Morgenstern’s aesthetic ideal and his aversion to so-called ‘radical’ or ‘protest’ politics. According to Gennari, Morgenstern’s mindset was rooted in his disdain for the political activism strategies of the 1960s. In the editorial, Morgenstern demonstrated that distaste for the contemporary political climate, in which, “slogans are substituted for ideas, sociological verbiage for plain speech, conviction for logic, oratory for dialogue.” Throughout the piece, he used “political” as a dirty word, and displayed a deep fear that the increasing “politicization of jazz” undermined jazz’s supposed democratic culture. It was not only racial politics that worried Morgenstern, but in the case of the JPM, this was the most relevant topic. As Gennari writes, “for jazz to be associated with the voicing of racial grievances was [in Morgenstern’s opinion] a travesty of the tradition.”

Given this attitude, it is surprising that Morgenstern was ever enthusiastic about the JPM. That he was proves that in the beginning he had misunderstood the root values and objectives of Kirk and the movement.

To set the record straight, Andrew Cyrille authored a response to Morgenstern’s critique, which *Down Beat* published on January 21, 1971, just three days before Kirk

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would lead his group onto the *Ed Sullivan Show*. In his letter, Cyrille set out to correct Morgenstern’s misunderstandings regarding the JPM’s objectives by reiterating the cultural-material framework of the movement. He also rebutted the charge that the JPM’s actions were only for the benefit of new music artists. Cyrille’s letter represented the longest and most detailed published explanation of the JPM from a member of the movement, even though its audience was restricted to *Down Beat* readers.

Whereas Morgenstern’s ideal was to argue the merits of jazz on television from a purely aesthetic perspective, Cyrille contended that this approach was insufficient. Jazz would not win exposure on television simply because it was “pleasurable;” its extremely limited airtime spoke to this reality. Rather, wrote Cyrille, jazz’s decline and its absence from television was the result of larger social and economic forces to which the JPM was appropriately responding. He argued:

> As artists, to be aware of the things that control our lives externally, like politics, economics, and culture, is essential to our very being as artists…We as black artists cannot separate ourselves, willingly or unwillingly, from the reasons for the controlling influences that affect the lives of all black people here in the United States.”

In his words was the recognition that the challenges facing jazz were in many ways tied to the worsening social conditions in the black American community, and that a simple art for art’s sake mindset was an impossible dream.

In the opinion of the JPM, said Cyrille, racism was the most significant controlling influence blocking jazz from television, and commercial success more broadly. In this way, he echoed the direct language of the Operation Breadbasket press release. In contrast to Morgenstern’s belief, Cyrille made it clear that the JPM’s priority was, and always had been, on black music, and that the panel discussion was in no way a

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departure from the group’s goals. In summarizing the entire movement, he wrote, “These recent JPM protest demonstrations and the opinions voiced by the jazz musicians on the 10/22/70 Dick Cavett show were specifically designed to protest the suppression of black culture and subsequently black creative music.”

Cyrille also took care to assure Morgenstern and other readers that although the JPM did have a racially exclusive agenda, it was musically inclusive. Contrary to Morgenstern’s assumption that a jazz political action group must automatically represent the avant-garde, Cyrille promised that the JPM has great tolerance for the entire spectrum of jazz, as would only be fitting under the leadership of Kirk. He wrote, “Among knowledgeable and sincere musicians credit is and has always been given to the great styles and great musicians of the past and present. To deny the integrity of other styles in jazz would be ridiculous at best and at the same time negate the panels’ own heritage, culture, and integrity.” Throughout his article, he referenced the names of black artists who were representative of a variety of jazz genres, from swing to hard bop to free.

Just as the JPM petition and demands expressed, Cyrille demonstrated that there was a direct link between American cultural respect for jazz, and jazz’s commercial position in the music market. According to him, televising jazz would help audiences comprehend the “seriousness and significance” of black creative musicians, which would help accord more dignity to musicians and dispel racist bias against the music. These types of improvements had the potential to aid a cultural and material resurgence for jazz and its artists. His language rang powerfully at the end of his letter:

Once jazz musicians are accepted and recognized as culturally important, worthwhile, responsible human beings and given their due justice socially and economically by this society for their real worth, those who will appear on more Cavett-like programs, etc., will perhaps be more congenial to people like yourself.
Of all the press coverage the JPM received, Cyrille’s letter provided the clearest, most unambiguous picture of the movement’s goals. One wonders if the JPM had published such a statement in the press earlier that misunderstandings like those of Morgenstern would not have persisted.

The *Cavett Show* panel also attracted some press attention from another music community; that of rock and roll. In its November 1970 issue, *Rolling Stone* magazine ran a short review of the JPM’s recent activities, along with a quarter page photograph of Kirk performing. Unfortunately, the article misinformed readers through its title, “Jazz Avant-Garde Wants on Tube,” and through its characterization of the panelists and the movement at large as only representative of “New York’s black jazz avant-garde.” In one sense, the author’s perception here supports Morgenstern’s charge that the panel focused too heavily on the new music. However, included in the article is a quote by Kirk, asserting the musical inclusiveness of the movement: “People think we’re doing it for ourselves but we’re doing it for the people in New Orleans, too…We’re trying to get it back to the source and let the source get some credit.” Given this statement, it is clear that the title of the article was contradictory and misleading, and may have wrongly shaped readers’ views.133

As is evident from the above excerpts, the vast majority of the press coverage focused on the musicians’ grievances, and whether or not the particular artists on the panel adequately represented the jazz community as a whole. But very few writers gave any attention to the atmosphere inside the ABC studio during the discussion. Only

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133 The fact that the author incorrectly lumped Kirk with the New York avant-garde scene calls into questions his/her knowledge of modern jazz. If anything, the erroneous title speaks to the perception of the JPM from those less well-versed in the subtleties of the jazz communities.
Morgenstern noticed the *Cavett Show* band’s not-so-subtle messages during the taping. In between segments, musical cues included excerpts from jazz standards whose titles, “It Don’t Mean a Thing (if it Aint’ Got That Swing),” “What am I Here For?” and “Take the A Train,” combined to create a rather unwelcoming posture on the part of the show’s host, the production staff, the band (which included some jazz players), and the network as a whole.\(^{134}\) The first of these was the basis for Morgenstern’s op-ed piece from December 10, 1970, and he referenced these song titles as part of his own critique of the panelists.

It is surprising that no other writer picked up on the musical cues, as they illustrated quite clearly the network’s unfriendly reception to the JPM. Despite Cavett’s willingness to extend the discussion an extra fifteen minutes, and his admission of not being more familiar with modern jazz artists, the band’s selections demonstrate that among programming decision makers at ABC, there was little, if any, intention of seriously considering the JPM’s demands.

**The Today Show**

Kirk appeared as a guest on *The Today Show* with host Hugh Downes the following month.\(^{135}\) NBC invited Kirk to both perform and speak on the program, and according to Davis, Kirk took the offer because, “[Downes] would really talk to him, and

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\(^{134}\) Morgenstern, “It Don’t Mean a Thing…,” 13, 37.

\(^{135}\) Chronology not definite – taped on Nov. 30\(^{th}\), but suggested by Kruth that it did not air until after Sullivan? It is not fully clear how Kirk came to appear. It is possible the invitation came out of negotiations with NBC officials following the *Tonight Show* protest. Also of note though, is a letter from musician/composer/arranger/producer Quincy Jones, on behalf of the Institute of Black American Music, to Kirk, stating, “…Please consider your going on the ‘Today’ Show the first step toward opening the doors of the media. I am happy that you have contacted the IBAM…” The letter is dated a week prior to the *Today Show* appearance, and Jones’ comment seems to indicate that he played some part in arranging for Kirk to appear on the program.
he would get to talk about the movement.\textsuperscript{136} One of the JPM’s original demands was that black musicians be afforded the chance to speak with television hosts in addition to performing, and so Kirk must have been excited about this chance.

There were other incentives in appearing on the \textit{Today} program as well, though. During his contract negotiations with NBC for the appearance, Kirk took the opportunity to push for more jazz musicians to get on television. The network conceded, and joining Kirk on \textit{Today} were swing-era bandleader Claude Hopkins (who had never enjoyed much national publicity despite his great popularity among jazz audiences), and Count Basie Band members Dick Wells (trombone) and Eddie Dougherty (drums). Kirk also made NBC promise to set up a separate performance spot on the same show for fellow tenor saxophonist and composer/arranger/bandleader Frank Foster.\textsuperscript{137} Not only were these deals a way for Kirk to advocate on behalf of other jazz musicians, they were a means for him to prove that the JPM was not a self-promotion tool for him and the other movement leaders.

In his interview with Downes, Kirk pushed the same cultural and material issues that had been integral to the JPM since its beginning. For much of the conversation, Kirk focused on issues of cultural respect for black art and music, making it clear that the JPM had a specific interest in reinforcing the black aspects of jazz. He also touched on the necessity that musicians collect fair compensation for their performances, be they in concert halls or on television. He made repeated references to rock music, but not from a marketplace perspective. Rather, he stressed that rock’s derivation from forms of black music was proof that black musicians needed greater recognition. And as in other

\textsuperscript{136} Mark Davis, “The Jazz and People’s Movement,” Program 4 on \textit{Memories of Rahsaan} Radio Show, Steve Robinson, Producer. 1978.

\textsuperscript{137} Mark Davis, interview by John Kruth (date unknown).
interviews, Kirk underscored the importance of children learning more about the music; a matter of particular importance for black children.

Since an audio recording of the interview exists, I believe it best to allow Kirk to speak for himself at length:

Kirk: The [JPM] is about black music in general...We’re talking about the whole black spectrum of music. Without this black music there would be no rock. Without black music there would be no Tom Jones, there would be no Beatles, there would be no hip talk...the so-called jazz musician is a revolutionary himself. He’s been using this diction for years... The reason that it’s beautiful to have Mr. Hopkins and Mr. Wells and Mr. Dougherty here is because these are people that motivated this music, motivated rock music to the extent that it is now, and these people haven’t really got the credit they deserve...When these gentlemen go to Europe, they are able to play music in concert halls, and television, and do radio shows and get paid for them... Kids [in Europe] know Mr. Wells and Mr. Hopkin, kids five and six years old. The kids here [in the United States] just know people like Batman and things like that. And it’s a shame because these people are making music. These are beautiful black people. This music is the only culture that we have. The only motivating force – this is the force, the voice America sends over when they want to start wars and when they want to bring peace to the world. They send some jazz music.

Downes: Can whites learn to appreciate and to play black music?
Kirk: Definitely, definitely. The only we’re saying is that we think the credit should be given to the black man in this country for what he has contributed. In other words, we credit Bach and Beethoven in Europe, with all the beautiful works that they’ve written, without any qualms. And we figure that the music of Sidney Bechet and Duke Ellington and John Coltrane, all these beautiful people are just like classical musicians in their own right, and we call them black classical musicians. And we just feel that since all the rock music and all the styles and fads have been borrowed from this music for years, it’s time there be more recognition, and the musicians should be able to come on the shows, just like you’re giving us a chance to do, and go on panel shows, and go on game shows, and talk, and be treated just like people in the country...

Downes: Via a visual medium, to be able to watch you play is something very worthwhile.
Kirk: There are a lot of beautiful musicians who have the same visual thing going on that have never been on television, and will probably never be on unless something’s done...

Kirk’s language on the Today Show was positive and fairly moderate, most likely as a result of his keen sense of audience. He spoke of the celebrity treatment Europe afforded jazz artists with the hope this would arouse more support for black music in the United States. When he talked about jazz’s influence on rock, and rock’s indebtedness, he used the word “borrow” instead of “steal” in an effort not to alienate what was likely a majority-white audience. He shied away from using strong words such as “suppression” and “exclusion,” which alluded to a systematic conspiracy, and opted instead to say, “these people haven’t really got the credit they deserve.” While the former may have more accurately represented his personal beliefs, his knowledge of the audience likely led him to temper his speech.

Following the Today Show program, Kirk won special acclaim from the Jazz at Home Club of America (JAHC), a Philadelphia-based community music society. In a letter dated December 3, 1970, JAHC President Chett Carmichael wrote that the organization had chosen to present Kirk with their 1970 Jazz Achievement Award in appreciation of his “outstanding work in helping to further the perpetuation of the American Jazz Culture through your ‘Jazz and People’s Movement.’”\(^{139}\) Carmichael expressed that the award was on behalf of the whole “Jazz Community,” an ambitious claim to make, but one which must have encouraged Kirk. Notably, Carmichael included the following postscript in his letter: “Dan Morgenstern, whom we honored November 1970, sends you his best regards.” Morgenstern’s opinion piece on the Cavett panel

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\(^{139}\) Chett Carmichael to Rahsaan Roland Kirk, 3 December 1970, Rahsaan Roland Kirk Papers, East Orange, New Jersey.
would print a week later, but this footnote shows that his negative view of the JPM panel had not affected his respect and admiration for Kirk.

*The Ed Sullivan Show*

By the fall of 1970, the JPM was in close contact with the three major television networks. The movement had established itself as a credible threat, and industry officials were willing to meet with its representatives and listen to their demands, if only to prevent future disturbances. But real progress on the JPM objectives was modest at best, and Kirk sought to keep the pressure on the media. He instructed Davis to contact the production staff at the *Ed Sullivan Show* and inform them that their show would be the next target unless substantive meetings began immediately.\(^{140}\)

Sullivan’s Sunday night variety show began in 1948 as “Toast of the Town.” After seven years, CBS renamed the program “The Ed Sullivan Show.” For over a decade the show enjoyed top-ten ratings, with between 45 and 50 million viewers tuning in for each broadcast. The show featured a wide range of entertainment and musical styles, and had famously hosted two major rock and roll acts; Elvis Presley in 1955 and The Beatles in 1964.\(^{141}\)

Sullivan’s show was different than the other late-night programs in that it was not taped in the early evening; it aired live each week. As Kruth points out, the show’s live format and strict commercial schedule made *Sullivan* especially vulnerable to a JPM invasion. The program’s production staff realized their weakness, and settled to send

\(^{140}\) Mark Davis, interview by John Kruth (date unknown).

\(^{141}\) “Ed Sullivan is Dead at 73; Charmed Millions on TV,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1974.
talent bookers to hear Kirk and other jazz musicians in the New York clubs in order to stave off a demonstration.

Shortly after that initial agreement, Davis accompanied a talent booker from the show to the Village Vanguard, where Kirk was performing. The booker especially enjoyed Kirk’s arrangement of the Stevie Wonder song “My Cherie Amour,” which featured Kirk’s full-bodied tone on the flute.\footnote{Kirk had recorded “Ma Cherie Amour” a year earlier on his album \textit{Volunteered Slavery} (Atlantic).} He told Davis that the mellow, lilting song would be perfect for a \textit{Sullivan} broadcast. Between sets, Davis called Kirk over to join him and the CBS rep. Dick Griffin helped the blind musician over to the table, and the booker pitched the offer.

“All the networks keep invitin’ me on,” responded Kirk with a mix of amusement and frustration. “And I keep telling them, man, the movement is not about me. It’s about all of the beautiful black musicians out there makin’ music.” But the booker was insistent. He had truly enjoyed “My Cherie Amour,” and said he knew it would be an instant crowd-pleaser. “Well, if we’re going to do this, you’ve got to let me choose my own group,” said Kirk. “I ain’t playing with no house band; I’m going to get an all-star band together! And I want assurances from you that they will be paid in keeping with their black creative genius.” The coordinator nodded, and Kirk continued, “And I want you to know that this won’t be the end of the movement, just ‘cuz you’re puttin’ me on national television. You can’t buy me off!” After a short pause, Kirk asked, “When’s the soonest we can get on?”

The talent booker pulled out a pocket calendar. “I have January 24\textsuperscript{th},” he said as he thumbed through the pages. “Ok, how much time will you give us?” inquired Kirk. “Five minutes is all I can offer.” Kirk sighed. “Mark, you fill out the paperwork.” He
stood up and went back to the dressing room with Griffin. Davis and the talent coordinator completed the preliminary forms and shook hands.

In the next weeks, Kirk made a flurry of phone calls to fellow musicians in anticipation of the *Sullivan* performance. He secured the other members of the Vibration Society, but he also wanted to take advantage of this very unique opportunity to help win recognition for a few other major jazz artists.\(^\text{143}\) In this interest, he got in touch with two mentors from his early New York days, bassist Charles Mingus and drummer Roy Haynes. Both had already been active at the JPM protests, and they both agreed to play, giving him an outstanding core rhythm section. Kirk also made an invitation to tenor saxophonist Archie Shepp. Shepp had only been to a few of the movement’s planning meetings at the Vanguard, but Kirk felt he would be a good musical addition as a representative of the new freer aesthetic.\(^\text{144}\)

On the afternoon of January 24, 1971, five months after JPM’s first protest action at the *Merv Griffin Show*, Kirk and his fellow musicians arrived as legitimate guests at the Ed Sullivan Theater on Broadway, between 53\(^{\text{rd}}\) and 54\(^{\text{th}}\) Streets. CBS officials greeted the band in the grandly carpeted lobby, and led them around a series of hallways to the backstage entrance. Davis and Kirk spoke with production staffers, who ran down the program schedule, reminded Kirk about the time limit, and double-checked the song selection. Meanwhile, the other musicians set up their equipment and began to warm up. Kirk unpacked his flute and led the band through a quick dress rehearsal of the tranquil

\(^{143}\) Vibration Society members included Kirk, Charles McGhee on trumpet, Dick Griffin on trombone, Sonelius Smith on piano, Pete Pearson on bass, Maurice McKinley on conga, and Joe Texidor on percussion.

\(^{144}\) Davis, interview by Kruth.
Stevie Wonder song, giving the Sullivan crew a chance to check sound levels and play with lighting settings. Satisfied that all was in order, the band filed off stage and upstairs to the Green Room to relax and enjoy a complementary dinner before the show started.

The program that night featured vocal performances by singers B.J. Thomas and Nancy Ames, a dance sequence by choreographer and dancer Peter Gennaro and his troupe, and an interview with Baltimore Colts place-kicker Jim O’Brien, the hero of the previous week’s Super Bowl. The band watched the series of acts live on a monitor in the Green Room, and Kirk’s adrenaline was starting to kick in. When Ames sang her folksong “Heaven Help Us All,” he excitedly declared, “That’s right, heaven help you all! We’re gonna burn this place down. We’re gonna burn this place down!” Davis managed to calm Kirk down before a page arrived at the room to bring the band down to the stage. At around 9:45, just before the final commercial break of the evening, Sullivan turned to the camera and said, “Please stay tuned folks, because coming up after these messages will be Rahsaan Roland Kirk and his classical jazz musicians!”

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Of all the JPM actions, the performance on the Sullivan Show produced the most wide-ranging attention. It did not initiate the type of theoretical debate that followed the Cavett Show panel, but the appearance did attract national press coverage, with reviews in The Washington Post, Rolling Stone and Creem magazines, and the customary

treatment in *Down Beat*.

For the most part, these articles praised the night’s music as uncompromising, with some labeling it as avant-garde jazz. Most critics also agreed that the segment had not been long enough, a point that led some to question the worth of featuring jazz in prime time variety slots.

Interestingly, jazz journalist Leonard Feather wrote in his *Down Beat* review that he had happened upon Kirk’s performance purely by chance, and that he could hardly believe his eyes or ears when he caught Sullivan introducing the band. The writer of the blurb review in *Rolling Stone* also expressed amazement at seeing not only Kirk on television, but especially Mingus, who prior to the appearance had been absent from the jazz scene for two long years. Feather’s surprise in particular seems strange, given the degree to which *Down Beat* had already been following the JPM, and may indicate that the performance was poorly promoted by CBS and the JPM.

The critics invariably categorize the music on the *Sullivan Show* as avant-garde jazz. Feather refers to the performance of “Haitian Fight Song” as “a general exercise in freedom music,” while the reviewer from *Creem* calls it “New Music.” And Hollie West, writing for *The Washington Post*, deems the band’s music “the most original American art.”

The performance was raucous, to be sure, but whether it was typical of free jazz is another issue. The brief dialogue between Mingus and Kirk was a free moment, but both “Haitian Fight Song” and the Dixieland tune exhibited a clear form with distinguishable solo sections for different musicians. One should remember that Mingus enjoyed a very high reputation as one of the foremost composers in all of jazz, perhaps second only to

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Duke Ellington. As such, it seems that the music’s description from *Rolling Stone* is most accurate: “a three minute excursion of cacophonous, wailing jazz.”

West and Feather both expressed deep concerns that the time limitations of the segment severely dampened its impact. West flatly stated, “Five or six minutes are not enough exposure for some of the most important musicians this country has produced.” Feather echoed this sentiment, claiming that the six-minute time slot at the close of the *Sullivan Show* was simply too short to be effectual. He wrote, “It all happened so fast – as is invariably the case on those rare occasions when uncompromising jazz is presented on a network show – there was scarcely time to drink in the reality of these men’s presence before their performance was over.” Here, and throughout the rest of the review, Feather conveyed that the rushed atmosphere in the studio was far from conducive to any variety of improvised music, not just the rowdy version of “Haitian Fight Song” played that night.

Beyond the time constrictions of a live television broadcast, Feather and *Rolling Stone* hit upon a more serious problem, namely the quite obvious anxiety on the part of the network over broadcasting Kirk’s music. In particular, both magazines were troubled by comedian Godfrey Cambridge’s stunt following the song, in which he crowned Sullivan an “honorary Negro” for the evening by placing an afro wig on the host’s head. *Rolling Stone* criticized the episode, but did not seem surprised by it. Feather took deeper offense, writing that Cambridge’s antics turned what had been a serious exercise into an “ethnic joke.” He further charged, “It would seem that none of the men in positions of power at the networks will allow the music to speak earnestly for itself, without some apologetic joke to cover their evident misgivings.”
Although West and Feather praise Kirk’s principles and objectives, it is clear that both were more than a little skeptical about the usefulness of jazz musicians appearing on prime-time network variety shows, based on both the time considerations and the unwelcoming undertones of the environment. West lauded non-commercial television’s initiative in presenting jazz, and proposes that “what they have programmed might serve as a model for commercial television.” Feather wrote that after months of pressure, “Kirk and his colleagues finally got what they wanted,” yet his tone suggested that perhaps Kirk should have been more careful in choosing what to wish for. In any event, Feather clearly sympathized with the JPM’s principles, and avoids criticizing the movement in this piece.

Negative opinions of the performance surfaced as well, most of which called the performance too wild and inaccessible for mainstream television audiences. But Leroy Jenkins, a prominent avant-garde violinist from the Chicago scene, saw other faults. He wrote a short letter to Down Beat following the show in which he expressed great disappointment in the band’s performance and its apparent lack of self-respect in trying to cram an artistic performance into such a short allotment of time:

I’m writing concerning the appearance of Rahsaan, Archie, Mingus, Roy Haynes, etc. on the Ed Sullivan Show.

It was a drag. First and most of all, the music was inferior because it was mixed up with too many dominant personalities. Second, it was a sellout on the part of CBS and the performing artists. Everybody knows why they appeared on TV: because of the Jazz & People’s Movement. So CBS was obliging and go a bunch of jazz “greats” and put them on TV without any musical forethought. The artists had a chance to have at least four groups on CBS from the one group that did appear.

When will our great musicians realize their worth and stop letting the man exploit them – not to speak of the music? Well, CBS did their part – our side flubbed.
I respect the musicians who appeared on that show, but you can count me as one who knows they didn’t do s… but make some small amount of bread for a very few. Of CBS, I ask: was that the token show – our only choice?\textsuperscript{147}

Kirk was able to withstand criticism from the press, but it was this type of approval from other musicians which really discouraged him. Negative reviews accumulated after the performance, and got the sense that his movement had taken an irredeemable turn for the worst. As Mark Davis recalled afterwards to Kruth, “After The Ed Sullivan Show, Rahsaan’s heart was broken.”\textsuperscript{148} Seeing little promise of progress given the declining support, Kirk abruptly pulled his energies out of the movement. Thus, not only was Sullivan a climax for the JPM; it also became its finale.

\textit{The Guggenheim Foundation}

In the months following Sullivan, Kirk became busy composing, scoring, and performing the soundtrack for Rush Toward Freedom, a six-part television series documenting the history of the Civil Rights Movement. It is not absolutely certain whether the show’s director, Thomas J. Knott, hired Kirk with knowledge of his JPM activities, but it is clear that Knott saw in him a strong personification of black cultural liberation. As quoted in a Down Beat news blurb on April 1, 1971, Knott said, “What I was looking for, and got, was music with lots of gusto and lots of sound – whistles, gongs and voice hums, barks and growls – as well as soulful jazz. Roland’s music interprets with vigor the conviction and direct action of the young people in the civil rights movement.” Black music and its role in the black freedom struggle figured prominently in the series.

\textsuperscript{147} This letter did not print until May 1971, but it is likely that Kirk received feedback such as this personally.
\textsuperscript{148} Kruth, Bright Moments, 248.
As Kirk pursued this project, the JPM languished, but it did not die completely. The group made one last public appearance, this time in conjunction of a group Archie Shepp had started as an adjunct of the JPM, called Black Artists for Community Action (BACA). Shepp’s short-lived organization sought the same general objectives as the JPM, cultural recognition and socio-economic improvements for black artists, but it took a different tact. Rather than targeting the media establishment, BACA leveled its criticism at wealthy foundations and institutions. Shepp charged that these bodies failed to adequately support jazz artists as a result of racial prejudice, and that such decisions accounted for much of jazz’s difficulties in the music market. The conception for BACA owed some inspiration to Jesse Jackson’s Operation Breadbasket. Jackson’s group had been loosely affiliated with the JPM, and according to Davis, had always put great stress on financial aspects of jazz’s decline.\footnote{According to Davis, Operation Breadbasket sought to “revive the black community by dealing with Green, the economic aspects.” Davis, interview by Kruth (date unknown).}

BACA’s first and only protest target was the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Since 1925, the Foundation had been awarding yearly fellowships to advanced professionals in a variety of fields, including the creative arts, but excluding the performing arts. Despite this caveat, a few jazz artists, including alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman, had already won the prestigious scholarship in the category of music composition. Shepp himself had applied for the prize in 1971, but had been rejected. He insisted that this was not his only motivation for singling out the Guggenheim, telling Jazz & Pop interviewer Robert Levin, “It isn’t simply that I didn’t get a grant. It’s that black musicians in general aren’t getting them.”\footnote{Robert Levin, “The Third World,” Jazz & Pop (May, 1971): 10-11.}
On March 16, 1971, Shepp and a small group of musicians went to the Foundation’s office on Park Avenue to meet with the administrative Vice President, James F. Mathias. Joining Shepp were Shepp’s drummer Beaver Harris, poet Thomas Drayton, writer Roger Riggins, and others. Kirk was not in attendance that day, but the statement Shepp presented to Mathias referenced the full backing of the JPM, if not its leadership role:

The leadership of the Jazz & People’s Movement and Black Artists for Community Action, with the support of Operation Breadbasket, demands an end to the obvious and blatant racist policies of the Guggenheim Foundation in the allocation of awards. For years artists representative of the black experience and black culture have been systematically excluded from the Foundation’s monies. While the Foundation has instituted a policy a tokenism to assuage and silence the black community, the time has clearly come when such policies are no longer effective – the black community as a whole has become outraged by the acute suffering, degradation, and GENOCIDE (emphasis original) of the black artist by such white run foundations. No longer will the racist policies of these foundations be tolerated. This protest is just the beginning of a long campaign. For the Guggenheim Foundation and others like it, if changes in policy are not promptly instituted, we guarantee you that this protest is the beginning of the end.151

The language of this statement in many ways mirrored the language of the original JPM petition, only having substituted the Guggenheim Foundation for the major television networks. The statement’s author (Shepp?) noted the exclusion of artists who represented black culture, and talked of those artists’ degradation as a result of their low level of social respect. Material grievances were inherently part of this statement, given that its target was a grant foundation. The author implied that if black artists win more Guggenheim fellowships, then black artists (individually, and collectively) would begin to experience less suffering. BACA’s central demand was a one million dollar yearly allocation to a council of black arts experts, who would then distribute that money as they

saw fit. But the second demand showed a concern for broader cultural dignity, in that it called for honorary awards for black men and women older than fifty (or deceased) who had made significant contributions to the arts and humanities.

BACA representatives met with Mathias for some time on March 16th, but he was neither prepared nor authorized to make any substantial decisions or concessions at that time. Instead, he and Shepp arranged for a meeting later that month, on March 30th, at which time point they planned to discuss the group’s statement and demands more thoroughly.

However, a week prior to the scheduled meeting, on March 26th, Mathias sent Shepp a letter canceling the meeting on the grounds that BACA’s statement had no factual standing. From the letter it seems Mathias was worried that meeting with the group again would be a tacit admission of its charges. As such, he declared, “[BACA’s accusations] derive from the reflex reaction of racism, not from reality, and we repudiate them altogether ... Our Board of Trustees does not regard as reasonable the demands upon us listed in the statement you delivered me. In view of this total lack of agreement, I do not see that any useful purpose would be served by continuing our long discussions of March 16th.”

When the day of the canceled meeting came, Shepp’s tried to draw public attention to his group’s grievances by staging a ‘play-in’ in the lobby of the Foundation offices. This time, Kirk was present, and he took a leading role at the demonstration along with Shepp and trombonist Roswell Rudd. He was armed with his clarinet and manzello, and was dressed sharply in slacks, shirt and tie, trench coat, and wool knit hat.
News came on April 12th that Charles Mingus had won a Guggenheim Fellowship for musical composition. Throughout the course of BACA’s actions, Shepp had known that Mingus was a finalist, and this may help to explain his persistent pressure on the Foundation, even though Shepp maintained that a single award to Mingus would simply be a continuation of the organization’s tokenism. Dan Morgenstern maintains today that Mingus would have received the grant with or without the BACA protests, but Saul implies some connection, writing, “[The JPM] lobbied the Guggenheim Foundation to recognize the idiom, and a month later Mingus received a grant as a composer.”

Down Beat’s coverage of the episode, titled “Guggenheim to Mingus; Protest at Foundation,” suggested a link as well. Interestingly, the magazine grouped Mingus with two sets of past grant winners: jazz musicians (Ornette Coleman, Gil Evans, Jimmy Giuffre, George Russell, and Charlie Haden), and black artists and writers (Langston Hughes and Lofton Mitchell). It seems that by distinguishing these two categories, Down Beat was attempting to separate jazz out from black art and culture. If so, this would indicate the persistent opinion of Down Beat editors that jazz was American, not black.

The BACA statement may have proclaimed the Guggenheim actions to be the beginning of a long campaign, but the group essentially faded away without executing another major protest. JPM/BACA meetings became less frequent, and ever fewer people attended. For all intents and purposes, the JPM had come to an end.

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152 Dan Morgenstern, interview by Benjamin Tress (11 October 2007); Saul, Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t, 329.
4. Disintegration

“I knew it was something that couldn’t last.”

Rahsaan Roland Kirk

The *Ed Sullivan Show* marked the immediate cause for the JPM’s dissolution, but there were also long term factors that contributed to the movement’s breakdown. At the organizational level, the JPM suffered from commitment problems and an inability to expand its membership geographically much beyond the New York jazz scene. The movement was also fragmented on a variety of core issues, a quality that put great strain on Kirk as a leader. Finally, the accumulated negative criticism of the JPM’s motives and its musical and political orientation hurt Kirk personally and led him to question the worth of his commitment and sacrifices for the movement. All of these features produced increasing instability, and made it impossible for the JPM to recover from the setbacks which the *Sullivan Show* performance caused.

After the primetime performance, confused and disapproving reviews began to outweigh the praises of critics like Feather and West. For non-jazz fans, whose only knowledge of the JPM came from the prime time appearance, the group must have appeared to be some sort of fringe group whose music was far removed from what little
Those viewers who were more familiar with jazz may have recognized the tune and found some pleasure in the music, but they would have likely lumped the performance, and hence the JPM, exclusively with the new music scene. Kirk’s longtime producer, Joel Dorn, recalled, “[Kirk] was gone. Thin air man! Thin fuckin’ air!” Rather than experiencing a boost in popularity, support for the movement began to wane, and Kirk became increasingly disheartened.

Kirk’s decision to play “Haitian Fight Song” instead of “My Cherie Amour” must have also caused an irreparable rift with CBS, and potentially ABC and NBC as well. By breaking his promise to perform the jazz cover of a more popular and less politicized song, he undermined his own credibility as a negotiating partner with the networks. Not only was “Haitian Fight Song” an aesthetic affront to the CBS production team, but it also had the potential to upset Sullivan’s commercial ratings and earnings. Meetings between the movement and television officials stopped; if JPM musicians were to appear on television again, it would not be under the banner of the movement.

Given the immediate impact of the Sullivan performance on the dissolution of the JPM, we must briefly examine Kirk’s decision to change the program. This task is somewhat difficult, however, because his decision to play “Haitian Fight Song” was a secret he kept with the other band members only. Mark Davis remembers arriving at the Ed Sullivan Theater on the day of the performance, curious about Kirk’s choice for other musicians: “I was thinking, why does Rahsaan have Roy Hayes and Charles Mingus for ‘My Cherie Amour’?” Davis watched the performance from the production booth, and

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154 Morgenstern commented afterwards, “As far as the great unwashed were concerned, [the performance] must have been a total puzzle.” See Kruth, Bright Moments, 246.
155 Kruth, Bright Moments, 246.
156 Mark Davis, interview by John Kruth (date unknown).
he was just as surprised (but not as angry) as the CBS producers when the raucous explosion of sound began. It is not clear when Kirk made his decision. The music from that night does not suggest a great deal of preparation or rehearsal, so it may have been rather last minute.\textsuperscript{157}

There are a number of explanations for Kirk’s course of action on the Sullivan Show broadcast, depending on who one believes his intended audience to have been. If he was playing to the black community, he may have expected the liberationist theme of “Haitian Fight Song” to function as a rallying call to musicians across the country to join the JPM and make it into a nationwide movement. It is also possible that by the time of the appearance, Kirk was pessimistic about the JPM’s potential progress, and that he viewed the spot as the only big opening the group would ever win. As such, he may have felt this was his only opportunity to present “true black music” to a black and white national audience. Kirk’s stunt may have also been his way of declaring that the white media industry couldn’t control him – a sign that in the course of negotiations, he had not allowed the networks to co-opt him. Or perhaps it could have been a combination of all three of these perspectives.

Without Kirk’s testimony, the mystery surrounding this episode persists. What one must assume, though, is that Kirk understood the consequences that his decision would cause. Whether or not he anticipated the backlash, he must have known that going back on the agreement to play “My Cherie Amour” would break the fragile trust he had built with the networks over the course of the past months. Was he, then, sabotaging his

\textsuperscript{157} On the audio recording, one hears the band hesitantly entering on “Haitian Fight Song” after Kirk’s solo introduction. Then at the end of that song, it sounds as if some of the band members were surprised by the cutoff. A video recording would offer more clues on this question of preparation.
own movement just as much as the *Sullivan Show*? Or was his decision a desperate attempt to showcase black cultural distinctiveness. One can only speculate.

Between 120 and 150 people had crowded into the tiny Village Vanguard for the planning meetings in the early fall of 1970, but this support dwindled down once the protest phase ended in October. The three protest actions came in fairly rapid succession, at roughly the rate of one protest per month. This is when the JPM membership was at its height, when the excitement of crashing the hallmark shows of the major television networks was contagious.

In one sense, the quick results of these protests dampened the momentum of the movement. Once JPM leaders began negotiating with network officials, immediately launching more protests became an inappropriate strategy which would have damaged new relationships with producers and talent coordinators. But as Lee Morgan observed in his last *Down Beat* interview, “It’s unfortunate; as soon as you stop, if you don’t do it again, [the networks] go right back.” 158 The drop in support after the first series of protests prevented the JPM from mounting a second round when the networks failed to make the demanded reforms.

Lagging support confined the movement geographically. The fact that New York was the hub of both the jazz and television worlds made it logical for the JPM to base itself there, but Kirk sought a national movement of musicians. He believed that such unity would surely demand more respect and more concessions from the media and the entertainment industry at large. In the *Jazz & Pop* interview from 1971, Kirk mused about his designs, saying, “...all the musicians in the cities we have like Los Angeles and

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158 Morgan, interview by Bourne, *Downbeat*, 11.
San Francisco, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and New York and St. Louis, New Orleans and Memphis, none of these people have hooked up… It would be possible for us to get together and stop music from being played altogether for one day.”

We see here a grand plan, far beyond media reform, but one that would only have been possible with a strong, committed base in New York that could then expand.

Fragmentation within the JPM also contributed to its collapse. One division was based on the aesthetic vision for the movement, and what types of music it should promote. According to Mark Davis, there was a noticeable rift between Kirk, Lee Morgan, and other mainly mainstream musicians and Cecil Taylor, drummer Sunny Murray, and other more avant-garde artists. The former group had a more inclusive musical outlook, and thought that the JPM needed to promote black jazz generally. The latter group, on the other hand, argued that the JPM should give some preference to the newer jazz avant-garde, based on the proportion of younger members who were associated with this genre. As Billy Harper, who aligned with Kirk, commented some years later, “There were gaps before, and there still are, really, in the different styles of music.”

This division mainly showed itself at planning meetings at the Village Vanguard, and in decisions as to who would represent the movement at public appearances. Kirk occasionally stressed the need for television shows to incorporate newer, younger artists, and he made a point of incorporating a representative of the avant-garde into his Sullivan performance, but he never expressly prioritized free jazz over any other variety of jazz. His broad musical conception for the movement, which was grounded in his belief in a

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159 Kirk, interview by Cuscuna, *Jazz & Pop*, 33.
160 Mark Davis, interview by Benjamin Tress (2006).
black musical continuum, was always the JPM’s official platform. Still, the aesthetic split created tensions in the group which helped lead to its dissolution.

There was also an internal racial strain on the group. The majority of the JPM membership was black, but there were also some white musicians, fans, and friends who came to meetings and participated in protests. More significant, though, was Mark Davis’ role as a leading organizer for the movement. Davis, who was not black and was not a jazz musician, had helped Kirk conceive of the JPM, helped author the movement’s petition, and had spent countless hours shepherding network talent scouts to the New York jazz clubs in search of music to televise.

Kirk obviously had no qualms about Davis’ position in the group, but some others did. Especially when Operation Breadbasket became more heavily involved with the JPM, there was increased pressure on Davis to leave. Davis recalls that at one meeting, black community leaders told Kirk that Davis had to go. If the JPM was to represent black culture, they argued, it was inappropriate for a white man to have such an important leadership spot. By Davis’ story, Kirk insisted that if his friend had to leave, he would leave, too. This temporarily silenced the internal dissent, but Kruth suggests that it may have also stymied a possible merger with Operation Breadbasket, a move which could have helped the JPM expand in size and scope.

In addition to internal debates on the JPM’s aesthetic purpose and its racial identity, there were disagreements on strategy issues. From its inception, the movement had aimed its political action at the media. Its petition spoke of the mass media

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“obstructing the exposure of true black genius,” and the group’s set of demands all centered on the television industry. However, as time passed, another type of target came into view. Archie Shepp’s Black Artists for Community Action (BACA), as an adjunct to the JPM, concentrated on philanthropic foundations as a means of pursuing the cultural and material objectives of its parent organization (see the Guggenheim Foundation section of Chapter Three). We can tell from Kirk’s relatively limited participation in BACA, however, that he was less passionate about pursuing Shepp’s strategy, and that JPM support for the Guggenheim project may have only been nominal.

A major reason for this shift in targets was the increased involvement of Operation Breadbasket in the JPM affairs. Although Breadbasket never became an official partner with the JPM, the organization verbally supported both the JPM and BACA, and sent representatives to sit in at a few Vanguard planning sessions. Its material approach to black liberation made an impression on some members. As Davis explained recently, “[Breadbasket’s] way to try to revive the black community was by dealing with Green, the economic aspects.” As we have repeatedly noted, the JPM always had an economic component, but it had coexisted with the cultural aspects of the mass media. The Breadbasket strategy focused more exclusively on financial stimulus, and helped steer BACA in that same direction.

Kirk was a strong, natural leader, and he did his best to mediate the ideological, racial, and strategic divisions that emerged within the movement. At planning meetings, he made sure everyone had a chance to speak, and he listened carefully to the variety of opinions present. This was on ongoing effort, though. Davis remembers Kirk and JPM

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165 Mark Davis believes that Ralph Abernathy and/or Jesse Jackson attended at least one meeting.
166 Mark Davis, interview by John Kruth (date unknown).
committee leaders Billy Harper and Andrew Cyrille continually having to pull members of the group together. In his December 10th editorial, Morgenstern wrote that Kirk “inspire[d] trust among all factions of the jazz community,” but even this respect did not guarantee that Kirk could always unite the JPM under his authority.

A major factor in Kirk’s difficulty reconciling differences within the JPM was that he could not always be present to play the role of moderator and mediator. During the movement’s activities, he reduced his own gigging schedule, but he did not stop playing completely. Kirk’s performance commitments meant that he was sometimes absent from meetings, protests, and television appearances.\(^{167}\) *Rolling Stone* magazine went as far as to call him the JPM’s “non-leader.”\(^{168}\) This characterization was definitely an exaggeration, but it spoke to the fact that Kirk could not always manage the group, nor did he want to.\(^{169}\) But when he was gone, nobody else seemed prepared or capable of filling his place.

As much as the JPM faltered due to internal divisions, it also broke down because of external criticism. Morgenstern’s “It Don’t Mean a Thing…” editorial was the most extensive and in-depth negative review of the movement, and it focused mainly on the supposedly self-serving political nature of the *Cavett* panel discussion. Some other

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\(^{167}\) In his *Jazz & Pop* interview with Michael Cuscuna, Kirk said, “Nothing interferes with my music but God. I don’t let [the JPM] interfere with my music because my basic strata is music and I never have deserted music…this thing that we’re into about getting people on television is certainly not interfering with my music.”


\(^{169}\) In the *Jazz & Pop* interview, Kirk stated “I certainly don’t intend to talk about these situations the rest of my life.”
commentators took issue with the JPM's racial platform, and the faulty impression that the movement favored avant-garde jazz within its advocacy.170  

Kirk was unapologetic about the priority the JPM gave to black musicians, but he was extremely sensitive to accusations that the movement was a selfish promotional tool.171  Kirk became so concerned about this type of charge, that in his 1971 interview with Michael Cuscuna for Jazz & Pop, he was hesitant to even take credit for initiating the movement:

Cuscuna: Did you start the Jazz & People’s Movement?  
Kirk: Well, in what-  
Cuscuna: In the sense of putting it together and getting everyone together and going out and doing it.  
Kirk: Well, I’ll say this, that the thought – I guess it’s the way that we did it – the strategy in the way that we – like the disruption of television shows with instruments; that came from me. But as you know, to do anything like that it takes more than one person. So there’s a lot of other musicians plus a lot of other people, people that relate to the music and are motivated by the music. So I would be very wrong to take full credit, but I’ll say that the thought and the idea came from me, as far as the way to do it.

His quickness to recognize others who had helped in the movement indicates his concern that critics might twist his comments into proof of his supposedly selfish motives.

To Kirk’s disappointment and offense, some observers insisted that the JPM was a self-promotion tool. These impressions persisted despite Kirk’s efforts to secure televised spots for older musicians like Claude Hopkins, Dick Wells, Eddie Dougherty, Frank Foster, Charles Mingus, and Roy Haynes. Still unable to prove his sincerity, though, he reexamined his commitment to the movement and decided that his time and

170 In her Washington Post article on the JPM, Hollie I. West quoted white vibraphonist as saying, “They weren’t representative of jazz in general. The fact is, TV should use a lot more middle-of-the-road modern jazz, black and white.”
171 There is a paucity of these types of accusations in print. The closest is Leroy Jenkins’ letter to Down Beat (May 31, 1971), in which he stated that the Sullivan Show performance only made “a small amount of bread for a very few.” Mark Davis attested that this types of charge was numerous.
energy was not worth the pain which these accusations caused him. In a recent interview, Mark Davis claimed that Kirk’s intense discouragement at being labeled selfish was the saxophonist’s main reason for abruptly pulling out of the JPM.172

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In the seven short months that it was active, the JPM was only able to achieve limited results. The group initially received positive responses from television networks and the jazz community, but it was unable to transform that opening into the realization of its goals and objectives. The effects of the movement were short-term in nature, and did not reach much beyond the period of the group’s activity. For the record, it is important to understand what the JPM did and did not accomplish, and why it couldn’t do more. However, it is also imperative not to become preoccupied with the apparent success or failure of the movement, because its real value as a historical subject lies in its raison d’etre, and its unique approach to furthering the African American freedom struggle through the context of the television industry.

The series of meetings between JPM representatives and network officials were the first product of the protests, and these meetings seemed to be a promising start. Kirk was eager to initiate a dialogue with the television industry, and the industry was in turn eager to prevent costly protests. These talks paved the way for some concessions: the panel discussion on the Dick Cavett Show, and Kirk’s appearances on the Today Show and Ed Sullivan Show. The meetings also resulted in promises by the networks to send talent coordinators into jazz clubs in search of potential guest artists.

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The network officials, however, showed a consistent tendency to restrict their offers to Kirk and JPM members, and never made a significant effort to extend invitations to other black jazz musicians. In *The Village Voice*, Heckman wrote that this exclusionary tendency was a mark of misunderstanding between the two parties. But from Lee Morgan’s testimony, we learn that it was more likely an attempt by the networks to bribe Kirk and other members.173 From his experiences, Morgan characterized the networks’ bargaining strategy as a “divide and conquer” approach by which they offered to broadcast Kirk’s group and Morgan’s group in a perceived effort to stir up competition between the leaders.174 Kirk tried to counteract this trend by using his clout to arrange for other, non-JPM musicians to get on television too, such as Hopkins, Wells, Dougherty, and Foster (see *Today Show* section in Chapter Three). Still, Kirk was never able to induce the networks to make such invitations on their own.

Beyond securing the three television appearances, negotiations between the JPM and the networks did not result in the formalization of substantive aspects of the movement’s platform. The board of black artists, which Kirk had wanted to oversee the production of educational jazz specials on television, never came to fruition. There was no significant move on the part of the networks to employ more black musicians, producers, directors, and technicians throughout the industry, and there was also no noticeable shift in advertising to benefit jazz.

These demands had been quite bold, and Morgenstern argues that a more practical set of demands might have achieved more lasting results. In a recent interview, he said

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173 Morgan, interview by Bourne, 8.
174 Morgan, interview by Bourne, 8; Morgan insisted that he would be happy never to appear on a night-time variety show, and he stuck by his words. Some might interpret this to mean that Morgan was more selfless than Kirk. But with Kirk as the leader of the JPM, there was greater expectation that he would make some television appearances, if only to explain the movement, as he did on *The Today Show.*
that the networks would never have agreed to any kind of quota for jazz specials or racial employment standards, and that the JPM was “overambitious” in its goals.\footnote{Dan Morgenstern, interview by Benjamin Tress (11 October 2007).} In his opinion, Kirk should have started with small-scale objectives, such as promoting more mainstream jazz, which the commercial networks could market more easily. He also wished to see the JPM avoid grand political-cultural language, which he viewed as confrontational.

Morgenstern is correct that commercial and entertainment concerns put strictures on television programming, and that network officials were constantly preoccupied with the need to generate advertising revenues. But while Morgenstern viewed this reality as a simple guideline with which the JPM could work, Heckman more accurately understood the serious prohibitive nature of the commercial environment. In its effort to avoid offending anyone, the television industry broadcast only the most average culture, and its “compromise-popularization” left little, room for anything outside this tiny realm.\footnote{Don Heckman, “Excluded,” \textit{The Village Voice} (October 22, 1970): 42.}

If, like Morgenstern advised, the JPM had moderated its demands, and pushed a more palatable variety of mainstream jazz, it may have secured more numerous jazz appearances on television. But the nature of that exposure would have represented the same type of compromise aesthetic against which the JPM was fighting. By the same token, if Kirk’s band had performed “My Cherie Amour” on the \textit{Sullivan Show}, it may have paved the way for more appearances, but only more appearances of the same palatable, unoffensive variety. Kirk wanted to do more than just work for practical results, and he wanted to achieve more than a few additional television spots for black jazz musicians. Through the JPM, he sought to make a moral statement about the
absence of jazz on television, and intended to use television as a medium through which
to construct a vision of Black-American culture for black youth and white Americans at
large. Simply kowtowing to the industry’s standards would have been hypocritical and
self-defeating.

Following the JPM’s breakup, jazz remained almost completely absent from
commercial television, with a few exceptions. The Jazz Show on KNBC/Los Angeles
debuted on March 27, 1971. The program came about in part due to the efforts of the
JPM, as the programs administrator at the station, Clavin E. Burton, was familiar with the
movement and reported it to his executives. Leonard Feather was a co-producer of the
show, and he proudly announced that the series would “give television exposure to many
groups, particularly groups in the black Los Angeles community, that have had very few
if any TV breaks.”

WTTW, a PBS station in Chicago, also produced the show Just Jazz, which aired
through the summer of 1971. The show was co-produced by Dan Morgenstern, although
in this case the JPM did not provide inspiration for the program, as the concept for the
show had been born before the movement started. Just Jazz featured performances by
national names such as Dexter Gordon, Erroll Garner, and Don Byas, but did not include
a historical or educational component. Like Just Jazz, most televised jazz in the 1970s
and afterwards was on public stations only.

The members of the JPM were under no illusions when it came to the limited
results of their movement. Kirk, in the Coda interview from 1973, expressed
disappointment in the national jazz community for not aiding the effort more. He and the

179 Morgenstern, “Jazz and Television,” 25; Morgenstern, interview by Tress.
JPM had opened the door, but “it was up to other musicians throughout the country to come and help this thing too…a lot of musicians didn’t follow through on this.”\textsuperscript{180} Lee Morgan, in the last interview before his death in February of 1972, reminded activists of the long term commitment required to make lasting changes in the television industry\textsuperscript{181} And in a 1974 interview Andrew Cyrille spoke of the same persisting problems facing black musicians which had driven the JPM to action five years prior, namely underexposure due to the highly competitive music market, and the resulting misinformed or uninformed public.\textsuperscript{182}

\textbf{Radio Free Rahsaan}

With the JPM finished, Kirk resumed his active performing schedule with the Vibration Society in mid-1971. But he did not lose sight of the principles and objectives which had driven him to initiate the movement a year earlier. He still felt passionately about repairing black music’s cultural position in American society, and about educating younger generations of blacks about their musical heritage. However, he found a new communication outlet through which to pursue these goals – radio.

After a gig at Boston’s Jazz Workshop in 1971, Kirk met Steve Robinson, a young local DJ. Kirk expressed a great interest in putting together a radio program, and even though Robinson was a classical music expert who knew next to nothing about jazz, he offered to let Kirk come into the studio to put some ideas on tape. The result of their collaboration was “Radio Free Rahsaan,” a miniseries of half-hour segments with Kirk

\textsuperscript{180} Rahsaan Roland Kirk, interview by Winter in \textit{Coda}. 10.
\textsuperscript{181} Morgan, interview by Bourne in \textit{Down Beat}, 11.
hosting.\textsuperscript{183} The show’s title was possibly a nod to “Radio Free Dixie,” Robert F. Williams’ black liberationist AM radio program which aired in the United States from Havana in the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{184}

The mood of the show was serene, with each episode creating a meditative train journey into the world of jazz. It followed a documentary format, and provided Kirk with the opportunity to promulgate his musical-historical lessons to a large audience, much in the way he had envisioned television documentary specials. He interviewed musicians, club owners, and fans in order to build a vibrant auditory illustration of the black music community. And staying true to his black music continuum, he programmed a variety of artists, including Fats Waller, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Philly Joe Jones, Sonny Rollins, and Cecil Taylor. Whereas the television networks had failed to provide exposure for all of these musicians, Kirk was now assuming responsibility for that task. He hoped that this assortment would convey the breadth of styles under the black classical music umbrella, and that hopefully every listener could enjoy at least one or two artists.\textsuperscript{185}

Of all the goals of the JPM, it was the cultural and educational themes which played most prominently in “Radio Free Rahsaan,” with the material concerns operating less overtly. Music critic Michael Cuscuna has said, “Rahsaan was a natural-born teacher in a lot of ways. That’s why I think he was so interested in radio.”\textsuperscript{186} Radio, which was free of the commercial pressures of network television, allowed him to speak to

\textsuperscript{183} No radio station bought the program while Kirk was alive. The series eventually aired in 1984. See Kruth, \textit{Bright Moments}, 251-3.

\textsuperscript{184} If this was indeed the reference, the show’s title would appear to solidify Kirk’s racial politics as more in line with the Black Freedom than the Civil Rights Movement.

\textsuperscript{185} Kruth, \textit{Bright Moments}, 253-4.

\textsuperscript{186} Kruth, \textit{Bright Moments}, 253.
audiences more freely than any television documentary would have permitted. The emphasis of his lessons was black music; its history, its champions, its continued vitality, and its importance for new black generations. The exposure he provided for certain artists doubled as a form of advertising.

“Radio Free Rahsaan” helps us further understand Kirk’s original intentions for the JPM, and demonstrates that the object of the movement was not simply to get on television. Kirk’s radio-based drive to broadcast the black musical continuum and educate audiences about that music’s centrality to American culture indicates that these were the very same goals he had a few years prior for the JPM. The media was primarily to be a means for generating a higher racial-cultural consciousness among blacks and whites. At the same time, Kirk’s efforts to penetrate the mass media establishment were his way of inviting Americans to rethink the power relationships between culture and the commercial marketplace.

Kirk still maintained his strong vocal criticism of the media. In a 1973 speech at Princeton University, he spoke out against imbalances in television and radio music programming. And his temper flared again in October of 1975, after ABC cancelled without notice a segment which he and the Vibration Society had taped for *The Morning Show*. Speaking after the incident with Bob Rusch of *Cadence* magazine, Kirk said:

[ABC] was not man or woman enough to contact us to tell us that they show wasn’t going to be showed and we had people all over the country watching, you know at seven o’clock in the morning, for the Vibration Society. So I would say the only real progress in the minds of so-called businessmen out there isn’t a thing, all of this mind compassion, love and peace shit, things everybody’s talkin’ still hasn’t really showed itself to be true all the way around.187

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The program would have been his last television appearance. A month later, Kirk suffered a debilitating stroke. After a stunning recovery, he briefly returned to his music in 1976, but his body proved unable to recuperate from a second stroke the next year, and he passed away on December 5, 1977.\footnote{Kruth, \textit{Bright Moments}, 327, 361-3.}
EPILOGUE

Periodical sources from the period almost obsessively focus on the results of the JPM, which in effect overshadows the more fundamental need to understand the movement’s original motives and objectives. In contemporary coverage of the JPM, especially after its end, the press consistently concentrated on the outcomes, and hence the seeming failure of the movement, always asking Kirk and others what it had achieved. When Coda magazine’s Jack Winter interviewed Kirk, his first question on the JPM was, “What were the results of [the JPM’s] efforts?” Michael Cuscuna, who interviewed Kirk for Jazz & Pop, first asked “Did you found the Jazz & People’s Movement,” and immediately followed this by inquiring, “How successful has it been?” Morgenstern’s October 15th Down Beat article and Don Heckman’s columns in The Village Voice provided more background and motives analysis, but overall the journalistic accounts of the JPM were outcome-oriented, and as such, shallow.

In secondary works, this fixation has thankfully abated. In *As Serious as Your Life*, Valerie Wilmer dedicates an entire chapter to jazz collectivism. Wilmer does not trace the specific back-history of the JPM, but she does closely examine the societal origins of the larger phenomenon of jazz activism in a way that moves away from the success-or-failure rubric. Similarly, in *Audiotopia*, Josh Kun provides a brief (and non-sequential) account of the JPM’s activities, and does not get caught up in assessing the group’s accomplishments. Instead, he shows great interest in the development and interrelationship of Kirk’s social, political, and aesthetic beliefs, and traces how these informed his musical activism with the JPM.

This study has been an attempt to follow Wilmer and Kun’s lead. Through examining the historical and theoretical bases for the creation of the JPM, we have sought to understand Kirk’s movement through its anticipated possibilities, rather than its received outcomes. The JPM was a musical-political community with a combined cultural and material infrastructure. Through a protest strategy that was without parallel in the jazz community, it actively fought for black rights and power by focusing specifically on the mass media industry. Its focal point, commercial television, was unique among jazz community collectives and within the larger Black Freedom Movement, as was Kirk’s musical and historical philosophy. These distinctive features make the JPM a valuable topic for extensive research and a unique part of history!

* * *
The jazz community collective phenomenon, of which Kirk’s Jazz & People’s Movement was an example, was largely the preserve of the Sixties and Seventies, and very few of the major groups are still in operation. However, the trend has recently generated increased interest among cultural historians seeking a new perspective from which to learn about jazz and the black experience during those decades. Eric Porter’s 2002 volume, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, was among the first to provide a detailed and complex study of the activist impulse in the jazz community in the post-bop era. Appearing in May 2008 will be a new book by George E. Lewis about Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, entitled *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (University of Chicago Press). By all accounts, Lewis’ book will be the first monograph entirely devoted to a single jazz community collective. Hopefully this is a field of scholarship that will continue to grow and provide ever more insight into the black cultural experience and its impact on expanding and complicating studies of American culture and politics.
Kirk, ca. early 1960s

Kirk, ca. 1973
JPM Protest at *The Merv Griffin Show*, August 27, 1970

Kirk with Mingus, Shepp, McGhee, and Texidor on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, January 24, 1971
Appendix A.

Timeline of JPM Activities

1970

Summer: Rahsaan Roland Kirk and Mark Davis brainstorm, draft Petition, and visit New York Jazz Clubs

August 27: JPM demonstrators interrupt taping of The Merv Griffin Show (CBS)

September 8: planning meeting at Village Vanguard

October 1: JPM demonstrators interrupt taping of The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson (NBC)

October 13: JPM demonstrators interrupt taping of The Dick Cavett Show (ABC)

October 22: JPM panel discussion on The Dick Cavett Show

November 30: Kirk appears on The Today Show with Hugh Downes (NBC)

1971

January 24: Kirk performs on The Ed Sullivan Show (CBS)

March 30: JPM/Black Artists for Community Action demonstrators protest at the Guggenheim Foundation, NYC
Appendix B.

JPM Petition

Many approaches have been used through the ages in the attempted subjugation of masses of people. One of the very essential facets of the attempted subjugation of the black man in America has been an effort to stifle, obstruct and ultimately destroy black creative genius; and thus, rob the black man of a vital source of pride and liberating strength. In the musical world, for many years a pattern of suppression has been thoroughly inculcated into most Americans. Today many are seemingly unaware that their actions serve in this suppression – others are of course more intentionally guilty. In any event, most Americans for generations have had their eyes, ears and minds closed to what the black artist has to say.

Obviously only utilization of the mass media has enabled white society to establish the present state of bigotry and whitewash. The media have been so thoroughly effective in obstructing the exposure of true black genius that many black people are not even remotely familiar with or interested in the creative giants within black society.

Such injustice has reaped immense ramifications for white society. By suppressing black creativity the white man has managed to avoid competitive confrontation – thus insuring his own position and security, both emotionally and monetarily. Concomitantly, he has partially succeeded once more in emasculating a facet of black culture and the black quest for freedom. However, in one respect the pattern of suppression has clearly failed, for though there has been success in blocking the exposure of black artists, and in whitewashing the minds of most Americans, attempts to destroy the sources of creation have not succeeded.

Action to end this injustice should have begun long ago. For years only imitators and those would sell their souls have been able to attain and sustain prominence on the mass media. Partially through the utilization of an outlandish myth, that in artistic and entertainment fields bigotry largely no longer exists, and by showrooming those few blacks who have sold out, the media have so far escaped the types of response that such suppression and injustice should and now will evoke.

Your signature on this petition will be interpreted as an indication of sincere dedication to the struggle to open the media, and to enable black artists to reach the positions of prominence that their artistry so deserves – to breathe new life into black culture. Failure to sign this petition will be interpreted as signifying your disagreement with and opposition to its fundamental concepts.
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