MY ONLY SIN IS MY SKIN – A MUSICAL CHRONICLE OF SYSTEMIC RACISM IN THE UNITED STATES

CD Liner Notes by Cameron Stedman
Middle School Music

Track Listing:

1) Is it Because I’m Black? – Syl Johnson
2) Fables of Faubus – Charles Mingus
3) Strange Fruit – Billie Holiday
4) Black and Blue – Louis Armstrong
5) Living for the City – Stevie Wonder
6) Mississippi Goddam – Nina Simone

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School of Education

UNIVERSITY OF PUGET SOUND
I recently completed my student teaching as part of the University of Puget Sound’s Master of Arts in Teaching program, and during that time I was given the privilege to teach a small middle school jazz band. This zero-hour class only contained White students, possibly due in part to the largely White demographic of the school. We accomplished a lot as a jazz band, but after my time teaching I reflected on how I never addressed race as part of my instruction around playing jazz. I was inspired by Sensoy and DiAngelo’s work surrounding the difference between “multicultural” and “antiracist” education to think about how I missed an opportunity to use music as a tool to bring conversations about race into my classroom, seeing antiracist education as the goal to explicitly combat racism rather than simply celebrate diversity for diversity’s sake. Jazz has a history directly linked to the African American experience in the United States, and understanding its context is vital to creating an authentic performance of the music we studied. As I thought about how my fear of speaking about race in my classroom held me back, I began to wonder: what impact does context, or lack thereof, of the music studied in band perpetuate racial inequalities in our school systems and music education, and how can my curriculum best combat this?

To further my own understanding of the role of race in jazz history, as well as my own implicit biases, I compiled a series of ‘liner notes’ to a fictional mixtape of music containing songs by some of the most influential jazz and blues songwriters of the twentieth century. This booklet is intended to be used as a tool for myself in the future as a way to quickly refer to these pieces when designing lessons to be built around the discussion of the issues of race. By researching the contexts of these songs, I expanded my knowledge of jazz repertoire to include music that explicitly names and pushes back on the racist systems that have been present in American society. Although I feel there is still much more I can learn, I have come to a better understanding of how we live in a racist society through our work as a cohort at the University. I wanted to draw on this new personal understanding of systemic racism by including imagery that connected to White nationalism and compare that imagery to similar instances in the past such as the aggression that Little Rock Nine received in 1957. As I created this project I gained a clearer sense that these were the issues that made jazz into what it is today, and my choices of when to address (or ignore) this history have lasting consequences on my students and classroom. I am a White male that has historically had a lot of privilege and has been part of a group that has perpetuated inequalities, so I have a responsibility to be a catalyst for antiracist education even in a rehearsal setting, and I have come to new understandings regarding to what extent we must also teach history while teaching music.

I chose to model my project after a CD booklet because of the association between commercial recordings and jazz, as recorded music was (and continues to be) a crucial tool in learning music by ear, rather than by ink on a page. The booklet allowed me to treat the lyrics that the artists wrote as poetry, and their written format allows the reader to see and internalize what the musicians have to say about race. Having a visual depiction of the lyrics creates an opportunity for the reader to interpret and analyze the text to a degree that is not as easily accessible to some after a single listen. The book format also allowed me to supplement the text with visuals that drew upon associations between what the artists are saying in their songs and the actual political and systemic issues that they represent. As the reader turns the pages of the booklet, my hope is that they will interact with the music contained within in the same way that they would if the words were spoken directly by the artists.