

Chapter 6

The Voice of the Other America

African-American Music and Political Protest in the German Democratic Republic

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African-American music represents a synthesis of African and European traditions, its origins reaching as far back as the early sixteenth century to the beginning of the systematic importation of “black” slaves to the European colonies of the American continent.¹ Out of a plethora of forms and styles, three basic pillars of African-American music came to prominence during the wave of industrialization that took place at the start of the twentieth century: blues, jazz, and gospel. These forms laid the foundation for nearly all important developments in popular music up to the present—whether R&B, soul and funk, house music, or hip-hop. Thanks to its continual innovation and evolution, African-American music has become a constitutive presence in the daily life of several generations. In East Germany, as throughout European countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain, manifold directions and derivatives of these forms took root. They were carried through the airwaves and seeped into cultural niches until, finally, this music landed on the political agenda. Both fans and functionaries discovered an enormous social potential beneath the melodious surface, even if their aims were for the most part in opposition. For the government, the implicit rejection of the communist social model represented by African-American music was seen as a security issue and a threat to the stability of the system. Even though the state’s reactions became weaker over time, the official interaction with African-American music retained a political connotation for the life of the regime. The following essay will sketch out the varying ways in which African-American music was received, understood, and put to political use in the German Democratic Republic.

African-American Music and State Propaganda

The Sound of the Cold War

In the 1950s, debates about popular music were especially intense and contradictory in light of the regime’s attempts to politically assess and shape young East

Germans. Music became a populist vehicle for contesting “the system”: trapped between the two fronts of the Cold War, music provided ammunition for discussions in the media about the national perspective in a divided Germany. Even the “light” genres fell under the doctrine according to which art functioned as a “weapon in the class struggle.” The governmental attitude toward jazz followed a truly zigzag course. Initially encouraged after the Second World War by a regime anxious to distinguish itself from the anti-jazz Nazis, jazz fans soon detected an ill wind. In February of 1950, the Soviet Union intervened with a frontal assault on “abhorrent American jazz” and demanded that the SED (Socialist Unity Party—the ruling regime in East Germany) follow the party line. The new principle was clarified by two Russian cultural commissars in the *Tägliche Rundschau*:

The resolute battle against the tasteless American jazz music (Boogie-Woogie etc.) and against the formalistic direction in the music, so hostile toward the *Volk*, is necessary, as is the nurturing of the traditional German classical and folk music and the expounding of the musical classics from all over the world, of which, as is well known, not one composer is an American.²

Henceforth, the public dispute over jazz oscillated between restriction and acceptance. Only as “Beat music” entered the scene in the early 1960s did the tug-of-war finally slacken.³

The capriciousness of official attitudes toward jazz was not only a product of climatic fluctuations at the level of high policy, but also reflected the unconventional construction of African-American music itself. Unlike Western pop and rock, which were flatly demonized as the “nerve gas” of the “class enemy,” jazz was recognized by SED ideologues to hold a positive potential for socialist culture. They differentiated between “commercialized,” “false” jazz on the one hand, and an “original jazz” traced back to its authentic roots in “black folklore.” Widespread after the First World War, this original form of jazz was seen to fulfill “real needs of workers.” However, it was argued, this music had been seized “at an early stage by the American industry solely for the purpose of making profit” and had thereby been robbed of its progressive character. Now monopolists were pulling the strings and misusing jazz as a means of infiltration.⁴

The vague system of categorization that put all developments since the triumphal procession of swing up for discussion was in no way a fabrication of the SED nomenclatura, but was rooted rather in the missionary writings of Western authors such as Hugues Panassié, Rudi Blesh, and Sidney Finkelstein.⁵ The aesthetic viewpoints of these authors were, however, given an additional political gloss in the GDR. The starting point for this maneuver was the Leninist hypothesis of two antagonistic cultures in capitalist society: on the one hand a ruling, bourgeois-reactionary culture; and on the other a progressive-democratic culture represented by the working class. According to this logic, “deformed” jazz acted

as an anesthetic in the hands of the powerful against the American people, but also as a foreign policy weapon of “ideological diversion.”

In 1951, the renowned East German musicologist Georg Knepler, writing of Stan Kenton’s composition “Fantasy,” noted: “This is a music that portrays chaos; that is chaos; that is not only preparation for war, but is itself war. It is an attempt to smuggle the war into the minds of the people.”⁶ The composer Ernst Hermann Meyer argued in a similar vein, writing that

present-day “Boogie-Woogie” is a channel through which the barbarizing poison of Americanism penetrates and threatens to numb the minds of the workers. This threat is just as dangerous as a military strike with poison gas—who wouldn’t want to protect themselves against an attack with Lewisite? The American entertainment industry is killing many flies with one swat of the flyswatter: It conquers the music market of other countries and helps to erode their cultural independence with Boogie-Woogie-Cosmopolitanism; it propagates the degenerate ideology of American monopolistic capitalism with its lack of culture, its criminal and psychopathic movies, its empty sensationalism, and above all its warmongering and destructiveness.⁷

This sort of rhetoric, which not infrequently lapsed into Nazi terminology, signaled that African-American music was to be portrayed as an inferno of “decadence” and “demagoguery” by any means necessary. Modern, rhythmic styles of African-American music were subsumed under the effective onomatopoeic label “Boogie-Woogie,” which contradicted the historical stylistic reality yet fit perfectly with the propaganda program.

Positive assessments of jazz by Western militaries only reinforced East German allegations of “diversion” and “Americanization.” A report in the *Tagesspiegel* on 8 August 1958 caused massive commotion in the GDR press:

“I find the elements expressed in jazz positive, because its community-building force is in accordance with our efforts in the Bundeswehr,” explained National Minister of Defense Franz Josef Strauß in response to a question before the German Jazz-Federation. . . . Strauß disclosed that there were a range of ensembles which practiced jazz in their free-time and that were supported as much as possible by the army’s music corps. The minister hoped to create a “Lead-Jazz-Band” which would be composed of especially qualified musicians and would render trend-setting progress in this direction.⁸

The 1958 October issue of the NATO-friendly periodical *Allgemeine Militärrundschau* delivered even more explosive material for GDR propagandists. It reprinted an excerpt from the book *La Paix révolutionnaire riposte à la Subversion*—

namely, the chapter “Tension psychologique”—in which the author, addressing the issue of the explosiveness of popular music for foreign policy, demanded “more productive techniques” than the “crude anti-Communist actions” of McCarthyism. One must appeal to the “conditional reflexes” of one’s rival and in this manner move him to “escape from the ideological constraints.” It was furthermore maintained, with regard to the power of song, that

jazz could help by making a certain contribution; music is a means comprehended by all human beings, and the Soviet youth understood this form of escapism more than all others. The distraction can easily be carried out by radio stations located close to the borders of Communist countries and it can lead to a form of escapism, which as a result of a new reactionary manner could lead in a whole new direction. Moreover, a certain ideological detoxification could take hold if it is accompanied by musical fascination. The Soviet leaders have clearly recognized this danger and have forbidden all forms of barbaric music in their territory ... Every time that rock and roll or a calypso is stamped on a Communist consciousness, it serves to erase something else which always has to do with ideology.⁹

The dictum of NATO’s Field Marshal Montgomery also was quoted many times: “If we can’t conquer the Communist East with weapons, then we will do it with jazz trumpets.”¹⁰

With the publication of Penny M. von Eschen’s *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, the relevance of such paradigms has been proven, even if no serious strategist at the time believed that battles against the Eastern Bloc could be won merely with sounds and syncopes. The US government’s plans for “psychological warfare in Germany” placed heavy emphasis on Radio in the American Sector (RIAS), which began broadcasting from Berlin in 1946.¹¹ Popular music, above all African-American music, was presented as a banner of democracy and a symbol of opposition to state authoritarianism. With this aim, the US State Department organized tours with prominent jazz, blues, and rock bands in Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe, accompanied by secretive CIA operations, for more than twenty years.¹² The West, in its media, celebrated the subversive power of its music, inflating it into lurid headlines such as the one that appeared in the *New York Times* on 6 November 1955: “The United States has a secret sonic weapon—jazz”.¹³

Such reports produced an immense effect in the GDR, cementing the dogma of “musical armament.” The extent to which aesthetic and political aversions became intertwined in East German propaganda comes out clearly in the conflict over the best-known offspring of “black” rhythm and blues: rock ‘n’ roll. Unlike jazz, rock ‘n’ roll was ascribed no positive value whatsoever. Stars such as Bill Haley and Elvis Presley were characterized as marionettes of political interests and moral vermin. Of “the King,” one could read:

His voice resembles his face: featherbrained, dull and brutal. The guy was completely nonmusical, croaked like a coughing crow and tried to make up for vocal disadvantages with wild hip-swings à la Marilyn Monroe. ... He jumped around like a high-grade lunatic, shook his pelvis as if someone gave him hydrochloric acid to drink, and shook like a deer that had been shot, but less melodic [sic].¹⁴

This morally and politically degraded “art form” was, for GDR propagandists, a pure product of the American economic system. In tune with Leninist imperialism theory, rock ‘n’ roll was condemned as the soundtrack of a “parasitic,” “putrescent,” and finally “dying” capitalism.

In an exacerbated form of the music-as-militarization hypothesis, rock ‘n’ roll was criticized as the harbinger of a new world war (Figure 6.1).

An internal party instruction manual, published by the Department of Agitation and Propaganda of the SED Central Committee, interpreted the hysterical reception of Bill Haley’s concerts in West Germany as follows: “They want to train by these means conscience-less NATO-mercenaries that can be recruited as compliable instruments of oppression toward other peoples.”¹⁵ Photos that showed Elvis Presley in a GI uniform merely served as further illustration of the connection between American music and “warmongering”. A caption read:

Presley holds hands with a German Fräulein. For 13 years, hands extending from the same uniform have been snatching at German women, here smirking with chocolate and taking advantage of a dire situation, there preying brutally, animalistic and unrestrained on the victim. Presley’s “love songs” ... when the boy isn’t whining them, when his paws aren’t groping over the sweater of a German girl, then the greasy-haired softy is tinkering with American atomic weapons, and positioning them for war to target German cities, German people, German land.¹⁶

This line of argument was taken to a crude and disturbing extreme in the juxtaposition of two photos: The first showed a young lady on the floor, apparently in a rock ‘n’ roll trance; the second a naked, mutilated corpse in the same pose lying between piles of bones. “The demolition orgy begins,” read the caption, “... and ended once before—in the concentration camp of Nordhausen.”¹⁷

Songs of the “Other America”

Alongside official condemnation of rock and roll, there existed, for African-American music more generally, an alternative schema emphasizing the music’s “anti-imperialistic potential for resistance.”¹⁸ According to one version of this argument, African-American music was destined to become a “second culture” in the sense of Lenin, both through its proletarian roots and through the cross

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NATO-Politik und Tanzmusik

Als Ergänzung zu der mit vielen Jugendlichen und in Presse und Fernsehen geführten Auseinandersetzung über die politische Funktion der Tanzmusik bringen wir nachstehenden Beitrag.

Die Abteilung Kultur beim Zentralkomitee stellt den Bezirksleitungen außerdem ein Tonband mit entsprechenden Beispielen und Kommentaren zur Verfügung. Im Unterschied zu diesem Beitrag werden auf dem Tonband in Gegenüberstellung mit der reaktionären Ideologie der westlichen Schlager Titel aus der DDR angeführt, die zeigen, auf welche Weise unsere Lebensauffassung im Schlager gestaltet wird.

Es ist ein offenes Geheimnis, daß Schlager- und Tanzmusik durch ihre außerordentliche Massenverbreitung Einfluß auf sehr viele Menschen ausübt, besonders auf die Jugendlichen. Die Schlager- und Tanzmusik ist neben dem Film die einzige Kunstform, die auf fast alle Jugendlichen wirkt, während andere Kunstgattungen nur von einem Teil der Jugendlichen beachtet werden.

Auf Grund dieser Rolle, die die Schlager- und Tanzmusik spielt, gibt es bei uns seit langen Diskussionen über ihre gesellschaftliche Funktion. Die Auseinandersetzung mit dieser Problematik ist unter unseren Bedingungen besonders wichtig, weil durch die westlichen Sender, insbesondere Radio Luxemburg, Riss und SFB, ständig schädliche Einflüsse durch die dort verbreitete Schlagermusik ausgehen. Das Kommando des Folliclubs zu Problemen der Jugend weist auf diese Erscheinung hin:

„Wir grenzen uns entschieden von der sogenannten westlichen Lebensweise ab, die die Jugendlichen moralisch veruscht und das Ziel verfolgt, die menschlichen Gefühle in ihnen abzutöten und willfähige Werkzeuge der Kriegspolitik aus ihnen zu machen. Schundliteratur, Horrorfilme, Verunstümung von Sprache, Musik und Tanz. Rücksichtslosigkeit gegenüber Erwachsenen sowie Rohheit in den Beziehungen zwischen den Geschlechtern zeichnen diese abendländische Kultur“ aus.“

Bei der Propagierung dieser sogenannten westlichen Lebensweise spielt die Schlagermusik im Bonner Staat neben Schund- und Schmutzliteratur und entsprechenden Filmen eine wesentliche Rolle. Im Unterschied zur Schund- und Schmutzliteratur und zu den Filmen dringen westliche Schlager dieser Prägung bei uns überall ein durch die Verbreitung über die Atherwellen. Die Benutzung von reaktionären westlichen Filmen ist in der DDR unmöglich, Schund- und Schmutzliteratur wird beschlagnahmt, wenn sie eindringt, ebenso geschieht es mit illegal eingeführten Schallplatten mit schädlicher Schlagermusik. Aber um das Abhören der entsprechenden westlichen Tanzmusiksendungen einschränken und überwinden zu können, ist eine beharrliche Überzeugungsarbeit nötig, die den reaktionären politischen Charakter des bestimmenden Teils der westlichen Schlagerproduktion aufdeckt. Um dies zu erreichen, bedarf es einer einigermaßen fundierten Kenntnis der Wirkungsweise der Grundtypen der Westschlager, die reaktionäre Ideologie verbreiten. Nachfolgend soll eine kurze Charakterisierung dieser Grundtypen an Hand einiger Beispiele gegeben werden. Unsere Genossen können, ausgehend von dieser Darlegung, bei der Fülle der Tanzmusik aus dem Westen, die täglich auf uns einwirkt, selbst den reaktionären Charakter vieler Schlager

erkennen. Es sei darauf hingewiesen, daß der reaktionäre Inhalt in der Regel nicht offen, sondern raffiniert getarnt in Erscheinung tritt.

Ausflucht ins zweifelhafte Vergnügen

Im ersten Jahrzehnt nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg wurde in Westdeutschland vor allem eine Tanzmusik propagiert, die die Menschen davon abhalten sollte, über ihr durch den Krieg zerbrochenes Leben nachzudenken und die Ausflucht in das zweifelhafte Vergnügen prägte. Das wird deutlich in einem Schlager mit dem Titel „Aber nachts in der Bar“. Es heißt darin:

„Jeden Morgen sitz' ich um halbneun
in der Bürgermeisterei
und führe dort tagaus, tagein still und fleißig
die Kartei.“

Die Musik dazu ist bieder, ja geradezu spießig gehalten. Im Refrain kreischt sie aber plötzlich wild los, wie wir das aus hektisch aufpeitschender westlicher Tanzmusik à la Rock'n'Roll kennen, und jetzt heißt es im Text:

„Aber nachts in der Bar fängt für mich das
wahre Leben an!
Aber nachts in der Bar rette sich vor mir,
wer kann!“

Unfreiwillig wird damit eingestanden, daß die herrschenden Kreise im imperialistischen Westdeutschland der Jugend keine begeisternden Ziele und Ideale geben können. Als Ablenkung von der eintönigen Arbeit — so wird sie ja im Schlager gestaltet — preist man den Weg in das zweifelhafte Vergnügen.

In dieser Richtung wirkt auch heute noch ein nicht unbeträchtlicher Teil der Schlagermusik in Westdeutschland. Es werden große Theorien entwickelt, die begründen sollen, daß damit ein „freies Ausleben“ der Jugend verwirklicht werde. In Wirklichkeit ist es ein wildes Ausleben, bei jeder menschlichen Würde.

Andererseits zielt speziell die hektisch aufpeitschende Schlagermusik à la Rock'n'Roll, zu der in der Regel mehr oder weniger sinnlose Texte gestampelt werden, darauf ab, das menschliche Gewissen und das menschliche Verantwortungsbewußtsein abzutöten. Zu welchem Ausschreitungen eine solche Musik bei Dauereinwirkung auf Jugendliche führt, die kein kritisches, ablehnendes Verhältnis zu solcher Musik haben, das zeigte höchst anschaulich das Auftreten des amerikanischen Rock'n'Roll-Sängers Bill Haley in Westdeutschland und Westberlin, das stets von Kravallen, von Schlagerereien, vom sinnlosen Zerstören der Saaleinrichtungen begleitet war. Man will auf diese Art und Weise gewissenlose NATO-Söldner erziehen, die als willfähige Instrumente zur Unter-

Figure 6.1. Propaganda material of the Socialist Unity Party, 1961. Courtesy of Michael Rauhut.

of racism. Here the singer and actor Paul Robeson became the leading figure. In the 1950s and 1960s, Robeson was considered the very incarnation of the “other America.” Robeson did not just interpret “unaltered” folklore and a politically ambiguous religious repertoire, but championed the visions of communism in his speeches and writing. He was boycotted and kept under observation by the US government for many years. His mission of promoting a peaceful and just world led him for the first time to the Soviet Union in 1934 and then later in 1960 to East Germany for a visit and concert. Party leader Walter Ulbricht honored Robeson with the “Star of Friendship of Nations” (*Stern der Völkerfreundschaft*), and the Humboldt University bestowed upon him an honorary doctorate. In his acceptance speech, the artist appealed to the students:

Don't believe what the people on the other side of the Brandenburg Gate tell you about the promised land America. We are fighting a hard and bitter battle—there are two Americas. Also in our country, millions long for peace and to be free from fear of atomic bombs. But one day, the power and the will of the people will also prevail in America.¹⁹

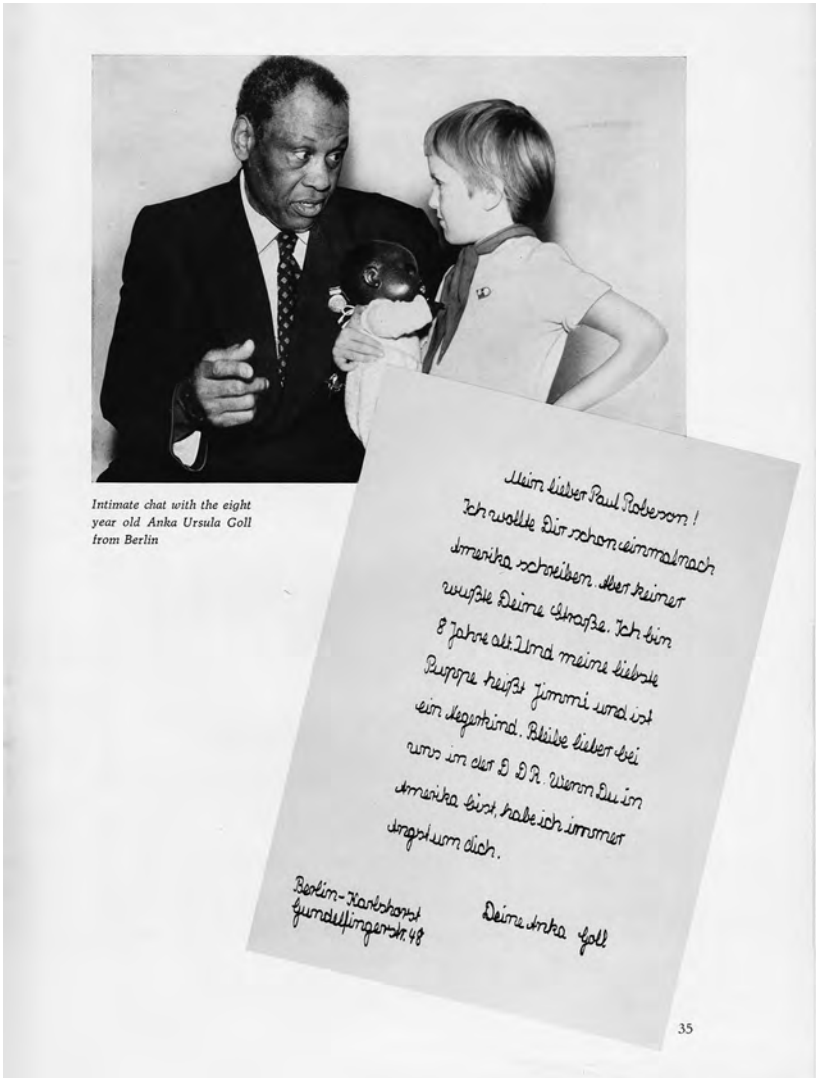
The SED praised Robeson as a “black champion of humanity” and “a great of this century's history.”²⁰ Robeson's

ability to link rationality and emotion in his propagandistic work and to use his art in the service of class struggle goes almost unparalleled. He provided a solution: “My song, my weapon,”²¹ behind which stands a Marxist-Leninist theory of art, that can only be realized in consistent struggle against imperialist and revisionist conceptions of art. Robeson was able to bring the culture of the American blacks, their songs and spirituals out of the abyss of official ostracism into the leading concert halls of America and to let the cultural heritage of the international proletariat influence his work.²²

The author Anna Seghers compared Paul Robeson's influence to a natural phenomenon: “Just as the first view of the ocean or a glacier can excite, this voice excites us likewise. ... He has been rousing always and everywhere. What he sang and how he sang made the people listening to him burn for the struggle.”²³

Robeson's list of official honors in the GDR is long: in 1964 the Paul-Robeson-Committee of the GDR was created, and in 1965 a Robeson-Archive was founded at the Academy of Arts; soon streets, schools, choirs, sports teams, and even a commemorative medallion bore his name. Political campaigns named him as a patron. A letter written “on behalf of 7,000 Jena pioneers” and simply addressed to “Mr. Paul Robeson, Berlin,” calculated in great detail the outcome of the solidarity campaign “We are helping Children in Africa”: “26,21 DM, 898 notebooks, 224 pencils, 68 erasers, 13 pen and pencil cases, 41 pencil sharp-

eners, 29 sketch pads, 2 satchels.”²⁴ Propaganda mirrored and perpetuated the notion of a deep affection for the artist on behalf of the “simple people” (Figure 6.2). In 1960, the German peace council made public a greeting written by an East German girl who asserted: “I am 8 years old. And my most favorite doll is named Jimmi and is a negro child. Stay with us in the GDR. When you are in America, I am always afraid for you.”²⁵



Intimate chat with the eight year old Anka Ursula Goll from Berlin

Figure 6.2. Paul Robeson in a brochure of the Deutscher Friedensrat. Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

The GDR's tendentious and blatantly politicized presentation of African-American music provoked opposition as well. The singer Aubrey Pankey, a pedagogue at the German Music School of higher education since 1956, complained about the instrumentalization of his skin color, protesting to the party leadership that the national opera house had offered him a part based solely on his "traits as a negro."²⁶ Alfred Kurella, head of the Cultural Commission at the Political Bureau of the SED Central Committee, sought to pour oil on troubled waters, arguing that it was time to "speak out publicly against the pseudo-sympathetic voices for negroes, behind which in reality racist attitudes are concealed. I find that, also in the uncritical cult which certain individuals, unfortunately, still pursue with respect to spirituals, is hidden the same condescending and belittling attitude toward negroes."²⁷

This one-dimensionally positive outlook soon affected the perception of jazz as well. In 1967 jazz became part of the coursework at the Polytechnical School. The tenth-grade music class scheduled two hours of class time to deal with the subject. In the first hour, "the students were introduced to work song, gospel/spiritual, blues, ragtime, and New-Orleans jazz," as well as to theoretical principles of music. The second hour made the connection between the past and the present: "Using characteristic examples, at least those at the disposal of the teachers, the further development, or in other words, the decline of this form of music by commercialization and the current reinventing taking place was exemplified."²⁸ What had been earlier defamed as "Ape-Culture" now increasingly carried "progressive" accentuations.²⁹ The content in schoolbooks was rewritten with "jazz as an expression of a position of protest against exploitation and racial oppression."³⁰ In parallel with a more general (positive) reassessment of international phenomena, the tendency toward repression of jazz turned gradually into its opposite. "Jazz is a part of the socialist musical culture in the GDR," it would be proclaimed; "[i]t contributes to the socialist life style and complies with the demand of the workers in the GDR for sophisticated entertainment and sociability as well as musical education."³¹

A similar ideological connection characterized discussions about the blues, which were reduced to an outcry of "the other America." The prevalent model of interpretation followed Western constructions that placed blues in the political context of racial discrimination, the civil rights movement, or the Vietnam War and identified blues as a counterweight to the "illusionary world" of "show business." The blues are an "existential art—the art of naked existence,"³² explained the West German "Pope of Jazz" Joachim Ernst Berendt in 1962. The stereotypes were to a certain extent imported by the American Folk Blues Festivals organized by the West German agency Lippmann + Rau, which visited the GDR in 1964, 1966, 1982, 1983, and 1985.³³ The East Berlin jazz expert Karlheinz Drechsel, who presented all the performances between Dresden and Frankfurt/Oder, remembered:

I received the information in written form from Horst Lippmann. I introduced the artists in the opening announcements and told their history. It moved us to hear that these great artists received hardly any recognition in the USA and that some of them lived on the edge of existence. It was the same with the topic of “racism.” The subject matter of the songs also played a central role. The organizer attached great importance to having the audience understand what was being sung, which, of course, was not a bad idea.³⁴

The Amiga-Label of the VEB Deutsche Schallplatten, the German record producer responsible for popular genres, produced a live recording of the 1966 and 1982 tours as well as a LP record with studio material recorded on 1 November 1964. The liner notes portrayed the artists and highlighted the social, “racial,” and political aspects of their music. The Chicago singer and harmonica virtuoso Junior Wells was introduced as the representative of an entire generation “which no longer waited for the granting of civil rights to negroes, but instead demanded them loudly, also using the blues. With his ‘Vietnam Blues,’ Junior Wells is in the front row of progressive artists of the ‘other America.’”³⁵ This perspective echoed culture-critical and anti-capitalist voices in the West, and likewise marked the official relationship to rhythm and blues, the “aggressive sound of the negro,” and to soul. The latter was considered a “synonym for their self-assurance, for their own, soulful ego vis-à-vis the soulless white exploiters and oppressors.”³⁶

Although the political focus in the discussion of African-American music remained constant until the fall of the Berlin Wall, beginning in the 1970s it began little by little to lose its poignancy and incisiveness as a result of the “modernization and liberalization tendencies” of the Honecker era.³⁷ When the hip-hop movie “Beat Street”³⁸ opened in movie theaters in the GDR in 1985, the reception was mixed. The GDR film distribution company Progress praised the “socio-critical aspects” of the movie—because it showed the “real life situation of the youth in the black ghetto of New York” in an “authentic” way—and advertised the film with slogans such as: “The life aspirations of a lost generation in a movie from the USA.”³⁹ The Free German Youth newspaper *Junge Welt* countered: “This film is a disappointment. Why? Because the forms of American street culture, like the graffiti with spray-cans and the unusual broken artistic dance, in fact, the whole alternative culture, which was born out of the harsh poetry of rock and street dirt, are being used here in the same manner as disco glamour. The possibility of giving the hard dance from the Bronx and matching hard story was not even attempted.”⁴⁰

In an earlier period, such a scathing critique would have been impossible for one very simple reason: Harry Belafonte, honorary member of the GDR Academy of Arts and iconic figure of East German Agitprop (Agitation and

Propaganda)—a “freedom fighter” and “great artist”⁴¹ who refused to sell himself for attractive offers or capitalistic stardom⁴²— was primarily responsible for the idea of the film and its realization.

African-American Music in Cultural Practice

Social Movements

While ideological and aesthetic-moral aspects came to the fore in the East German media, the regime’s internal discussions concentrated on the social explosiveness of African-American music. The security institutions did not fail to recognize that, under the influence of music, spaces for communication and action developed in which otherwise repressed experiences could be assembled and affinities given full expression. The habitual peculiarities and attitudes of the fans, the group behavior of like-minded people, and the rule-breaking perceptions of sexuality, morality, and pleasure produced political dynamite. Here the regime faced the prospect of losing influence over that which it most wished to control: the realization of the ideal socialist personality. In the hothouse climate of the “closed society,” jazz, blues, and hip-hop grew into a symbol for “freedom,” “resistance,” and “being different.” And over these values reigned one unifying idea: America. For countless youth, the “land of unlimited opportunities” became a myth and a symbol; they worshiped cultural goods such as jeans, rock ‘n’ roll and Beatnik poetry “as bearers of emancipatory energies.”⁴³

These perceptions of America gained more attractiveness in the long run thanks to negative attention from the SED.⁴⁴ As Peter Wicke has trenchantly observed:

What ever the ideological terrain upon which these differences were fought out, strictly speaking—whether in the East or West—it was always centered on one thing, namely a youth culture that found its way into all industrial societies by means of the media and, in effect, was produced by the media and functioned as a powerful, commercially organized socialization mechanism. This youth culture was independent from the traditional institutions such as family and school and quickly began to rival the cultural and educational elites on a broad scale.⁴⁵

Even in the East, intellectuals and realists were capable of more nuanced assessments than those found in the mainstream press or in official pronouncements of the SED. This was illustrated by a convention of the Greater-Berlin Committee of Culture Producers (Groß-Berliner Komitee der Kulturschaffenden), which brought together around a single table representatives from the Culture Ministry, the German Concert and Guest Performance Directorate, and the State Radio Committee, as well as writers, actors, dramatists, composers, orchestra leaders,

and top athletes. The cause for the meeting was a concert by the “American rock ’n’ roll gangster”⁴⁶ Bill Haley on 26 October, which had attracted some 7,000 fans to the Sportpalast in West Berlin and—as in his concerts in Hamburg, Essen, and Stuttgart—had been accompanied by mass hysteria and riots.

The discussion, which lasted several hours, used the events to contemplate controversial questions regarding juvenile labor and grievances in the area of popular music. The riots were, as usual, blamed on “decline of morals,” “manipulation,” and “warmongering,” but also on a lack of ideas and orientation on the part of the government. It was concluded that the GDR was not on the offensive when it came to the musical waves spilling over the land, and that existing bans amounted to nothing more than tilting at windmills. Hans Kahle, an actor with the state theater Volksbühne, condemned the campaign against jazz with drastic words. He answered his own rhetorical question of “Why?” as follows:

I highly suspect that it is because of a few aging officials in responsible positions in the field of cultural politics who, for 13 years, have not been able to decide for us what jazz really is. Every year in *Neues Deutschland*, I read another analysis of jazz, one just as unscholarly as the next. Why don’t we give the youth their jazz, but decently, such as Wonneberg⁴⁷ did? Those who go over there and listen to the howls of Haley or Presley are used to hot, burning schnapps. Then we come along and want to offer them lemonade. . . . If we grow a Karl Marx beard and go around preaching, we won’t achieve anything.⁴⁸

While social conflicts in the capitalist hemisphere were papered over by market interests, in the worker and peasants’ state they still received pride of place on the political agenda. Propagandists avoided openly pinpointing deep-rooted social causes, falling back instead on the rubric of a “battle of the systems.” Both internally and in official pronouncements, musical preferences, outfits, and accessories were offered up as evidence of enemy influence. In the 1950s and 1960s, studded jeans, cowboy shirts, and an “Elvis hairdo” came under fire; later the peace sign, the victory fist, and the army parka were targeted. In 1977 the youth magazine *Neues Leben* launched a reader discussion with the rhetorical question: “What does a shirt have to do with mindset?” The hook was a fictional story in which two boys were fighting about a t-shirt bearing an American flag. The correct position, in adolescent slang, went as follows: “The same flag you want to stretch over your stomach flew over all the evils in committed by American soldiers in Vietnam; the same Stars and Stripes twinkled from the bomber planes that carpet-bombed North Vietnam.”⁴⁹ After four months of debate over taste and attitude, the editorial staff clearly stated its position. By wearing such a piece of clothing “one demonstrates automatically his or her mindset, because the symbolism has a political content. At the least, one is showing his or her

mindset toward political questions, which can be characterized as naïve, imprudent, unheeding, uninterested in what is going on in the world.”⁵⁰

Before the state decided to revise its strategy in order to channel and manipulate adolescent cultural currents, it operated using repression and prohibition. The trend toward building informal groups was especially identified as a threat to “order and security.” Although fans of jazz, blues, and hip-hop accounted for a small minority when compared to the mainstream of pop consumers, they were active everywhere and stood out because of the intensity of their involvement with the music in everyday life. Their networks reached to the farthest corners of the GDR and often even across the Iron Curtain. Before the construction of the Wall, Bill Haley and Ted Herold fans fraternized across all boundaries, causing the police and Stasi to wake up and respond. The Ministry of the Interior monitored the correspondence between a girl in Rostock and the “International Elvis Presley Club” in Munich, assessing it as a dangerous “intrigue.” The teenager asked to become a member and was promptly sent a membership card. The accompanying letter showed solidarity with the fan and even gave cause for envy: “I am sorry that you can’t listen to El very often. Imagine! We have all of El’s records here in the club (some 130 songs) and can dance to rock ‘n’ roll as often as we want at our dance parties. In addition, we listen to AFN [American Forces Network] every day—which, of course, is also broadcast in Munich—and can hear Elvis’ newest record ‘A Big Hunk o’ Love’ with the flip side ‘My Wish Came True.’”⁵¹

The German-German alliance was also typical of the numerous jazz communities that followed the model of the French Hot Club Movement,⁵² assembling, trading, and sharing music, and then disbanding. Their increasing use of official structures in order to get results caused a great deal of irritation. Sympathizers brought jazz into the cultural centers of the Free German Youth (FDJ) and into the state institutions of higher education, causing the outbreak of trench warfare. In November 1961 it was observed that in East Berlin, since the measures of 13 August (i.e., the building of the Berlin Wall), “jazz clubs have been shooting out of the ground like mushrooms.”⁵³ The student club of the Humboldt University was the “center.” As a result, debates over principles wended their way anew to the top political elite. Even Walter Ulbricht himself was personally informed on the efforts of “negative groups” to “get acquainted with jazz and, in general, with western culture, since it was no longer permitted to attend such events in West Berlin.”⁵⁴

The leaders of the responsible FDJ branch in Berlin castigated the manner of discussion that prevailed at the convivial gatherings of jazz fanatics: “Instead of condemning the imperialistic social order, American episodes of late-night ‘sessions’ and drinking bouts promote the glorification of such undoubtedly gifted musicians like Parker, called ‘Byrd’ [sic], who, in this society, was ruined early on by drugs. His music was technically accomplished, but meaningless and desperate and had nothing more to do with the original elements of negro folk-

lore.” One thing was certain: “Real revisions in musical culture, the development of all positive traits, care, and the evolution of all good and humane traditions come from the socialist camp nowadays. The world standard in music is also determined by socialism.” Even if “the positive elements of jazz (forms of instrumentation, certain melodies, rhythm, and improvisation)” have the right to exist, there cannot exist “jazz organizations or jazz club movements because this contradicts the construction of a national people’s culture. In the GDR, there is no other comparable allegiance to other music styles (for example, Soviet, Hungarian, Chinese, etc.).”⁵⁵ The Ministry of Culture was even more direct. It ranged itself “decisively against every [attempt] at organizing a jazz movement”⁵⁶ because the propagation of this music “is tied to the concept of an ideological coexistence.”⁵⁷

A short time later, the relationship between the state and jazz fundamentally changed. Now it was twist and beat that attracted the attention of the functionaries. The formerly attacked jazz clubs found their institutional basis as so-called “interest associations” (*Interessengemeinschaften*) or “work associations” (*Arbeitsgemeinschaften*) in the GDR Cultural Association (Kulturbund). More than fifty of these clubs, with memberships ranging between ten and sixty members,⁵⁸ were registered in the late 1980s.⁵⁹ With jazz now anointed as highly civilized, the media opened their doors to it. Radio stations designated special jazz time slots, the press established jazz columns, and the VEB Deutsche Schallplatten record company released domestic artists and acquired several Western licenses.⁶⁰ The offering of concerts with international artists was comparably rich. In contrast to rock and pop, Anglo-American jazz artists were continually showcased on East German stages. The situation was similar for the blues.

Blues as Emancipation Ritual

In the view of youth culture, the blues stood out among the different forms of African-American music. The popularity of the blues reached its zenith along with a new movement in the second half of the 1970s. The followers of this movement, with their long hair and beards, jeans, and parkas, referred to themselves as “*Blueser*,” “*Kunden*” (customers), and “*Tramper*” (hitchhikers). The movement was not only the most vital and longest-lasting in the nation, but also a genuine peculiarity of the GDR.⁶¹ Born as a reverberation of the Woodstock festival in the US, it retained its relevance until the 1980s, when it suddenly had to compete against punk, heavy metal, and other new, attractive identity movements. The ideals of the hippie era remained the leading principles for the generations that followed the “*Kunden*,” and each in their turn replaced the other. “Freedom,” “authenticity,” and “nonconformity” were the primary values reflected in their behavioral patterns, musical preferences, and clothing fashions.

The almost religious glorification of the blues was derived from two sources: on the one hand it was a relic of the Anglo-American hippie wave; on the other it



Figure 6.3. “Blueser” in Altenburg, 1976. BStU.

was a reflection of traditional European and romantic views. African-American music projected the craving for “authenticity” and “pure emotion,” and young misfits considered the oppression of “the black” as an ancestral example of historical suffering. The blues became an escape, idealized as a counter-world to

the GDR system of social tutelage. Local bands outside the sphere of the mainstream media functioned as the driving force behind the movement, conveying a down-to-earth feeling while playing the songs of the great blues idols. Their performances guaranteed a full house without need of official announcements or posters. Dates were passed on by word of mouth. The escape from the pressure of an “egalitarian” society, from bourgeois vanity, from confinement, found its equivalence in high mobility. “*Blueser*” (Figure 6.3) were constantly on the go on the weekends, compensating for the boredom of everyday life with movement, hitchhiking or travel by train (often without a ticket) across the GDR. In a communication network of capillary density, one could find like-minded people in almost every town in the republic, and disappear for the night.

Because the government was permanently in pursuit of them, the “*Kunden*” escaped to the “village Diaspora” of the East German South, populating the private pubs and dance halls. There, the business owners ran an anarchic regime that was not interested in hygiene, the protection of minors, fire prevention, or the official approval of bands. Whoever passed the entrance stepped into a practically rule-free zone where excess reigned. The “*Kunden*” also found political asylum in the sovereign territory of the Evangelical Church, which began holding so-called “blues masses” in 1979. These masses were a mixture of blatant heresy and outlaw attitudes expressed in strained musical contributions.⁶² That the events struck a communicative vacuum is shown by the number of participants: one single “blues mass” attracted up to 7,000 youths.

The celebrated weekend “exit of the GDR” provoked endless discussion within the security organizations.⁶³ “Operations” and “personal monitoring”—going by code words such as “Blues,” “*Penner*” (bum), “Hitch-Hiker” or “*Diesel*”—observed especially suspicious musicians and people with long hair. Often these suspects were shadowed for years, constrained in their field of activity, and slowly crippled by subtle terror—“demoralized” (*zersetzt*), in the phrase of the Ministry for State Security (Stasi). In May of 1978, the regional administration in Gera led “Operation Hitchhiker” (Operativer Vorgang Trampler), which combined all these methods. It was directed toward a group of forty to fifty people, with a core consisting of fifteen “politically and morally disoriented adolescents.” The plan, which was to involve “all appropriate educational authorities,” was to isolate them, to make them unsure of themselves, to restrict their ‘freedom’ of movement, and finally to disband them.”⁶⁴ The Stasi and its four cleverly placed informants finished the job: five group members went to prison, one to the West, and another was drafted, rendering him “harmless.” The “collapse and disintegration of the group” was declared in 1982 and the case closed.⁶⁵

Over time, the “*Kunden*” began to have difficulties recruiting new blood because the blues began to sound outmoded in the ears of teenagers, who rejected it as a form of self-realization. From the mid 1980s on, the primary form of African-American music that attracted young people was hip-hop. Hip-hop populated a small but lively niche⁶⁶ in society in which rappers, break-dancers,



Figure 6.4. The East Berlin underground band Freygang at an open-air concert in Ketzin, 1983. Archiv André Greiner-Pol.

sprayers, and skaters organized events, workshops, and contests. Rap tapes produced with great skill in conditions of economic privation even sometimes made it onto state radio.⁶⁷ Phenomena that were previously resisted and had lost their subversive sting now received absolution and were admitted to the canon of “cultivated entertainment” (Figure 6.4). The “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” whom propagandists once crucified, was rehabilitated in vinyl and book form.⁶⁸ The first legal Elvis fan club received approval as well, almost exactly one year before the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁶⁹