

## **Applying Memetics to the Historical Understanding of the African Diasporan Music Culture of North America**

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I don't entertain, I enter the brain..."  
-DJ Spooky -

Reggae music is like a disease that is incurable,  
Once you catch, you have it for life,  
We spreading the virus till the whole world get infected.  
-Prezident Brown-

Introduction/Abstract:

It was Bunny Livingston, founding member along with Bob Marley and Peter Tosh of the legendary Jamaican reggae group The Wailers, that first ventured the comparison of reggae music to a virus, a comparison that has resonated within and throughout reggae aficionado and performance circles worldwide, inspiring dozens of couplets celebrating this effect. The most popular riddim in 2001 was the Virus Riddim, an old Duke Reid track reinterpreted by Madd Dawg, which in turn has providing the rhythmic foundation for a dozen further dancehall spinoffs. There is even a recently-opened reggae club in the Netherlands called The Virus. The World Wide Web, no stranger to viruses or discussions about them, contains dozens of reggae-related websites that are especially prone to playing up this metaphor. Echoing the sentiment expressed by Prezident Brown, one site describes the reggae virus as being "... very contagious and believed to be airborne. It cannot, however, be contracted from mere physical contact. Musical exchange or the exchange of reggae tapes and CDs can transmit it from one person to another. At present, there is no known cure for the disease" (Alpeche 2001).

The use of a term that is associated in this era with both cybernetics and epidemiology to describe processes of musical transmission, may seem on the surface as incongruous or even absurd. Yet what if musical ideas were similar to viruses, "mind/body infections" that our cognitive systems either accept then transmit to others in replicated or mutated forms, or reject and discard until the next one comes along? This presentation is a playful exploration of the idea of "music as virus," specifically as that idea relates to the African diaspora in North America, and why it might be seen as an apt metaphor with considerable explanatory power.

Questions

I begin my discussion with a series of questions. First, how does one explain and situate the musical genius that is James Brown, historically? James Brown, funk inventor extraordinaire, son of America, grandson of the soil of Africa, yet a musician whose compositions and performance aesthetic exhibit musical sensibilities that in a hyper-real sense are somehow more African than Africa

herself. James Brown, the musical genius who has most had a profound and lasting effect on popular music worldwide, no more so than on the popular music of the African continent. By genius, I mean his particular take on what Charles Keil calls “participatory discrepancies” (1995), or in more common “street-cred” parlance, the “groove.” Groove concerns the animation and decoration of time as it is shared by musicians and audience, and occurs when overlapping patterns of cognitively imperceptible (but bodily perceptible) offbeat rhythms and lingering sonorities interlock in a synchronized or semi-synchronized manner, until they generate an entrained automotion effect on the body, creating an effortless sensation which pushes you along from behind until, in the Godfather’s own words, “You are funky like a train” (Brown and Tucker 1986).

From what historical and cultural milieu did this extraordinary musician emerge? Where did his musical genius come from? A standard response to this query might read something like this: James Brown operates in the African American tradition, a tradition born of Africa and transformed in America, a tradition that encompasses several inter-related genres, to include the blues, gospel, jazz, r & b, soul, funk, rap, hip hop, and so on. When people of different backgrounds found themselves living side by side in a new setting, the result was a fusion of musical traditions, as people borrowed from one another and transformed what they borrowed to reflect new social realities. The word “tradition” as it is used here might also be substituted in this explanation with any number of other terms, for instance “aesthetic”, or “sensibility”. Yet this explanation begs further inquiry:

- What is the nature of this African American tradition/aesthetic/sensibility? How is it a “tradition”? How is it of Africa? How is it American? How is it of the Black Atlantic?
- What were the specific processes of change that this tradition underwent overtime? What are the aspects of this musical culture that remained the same? In what ways has this musical culture been “regenerative”?
- Are there other, more suitable rhetorical strategies that we might apply to this particular body of musical culture when writing about its history?

This last question is more than just a question of semantic quibbling. What I wish to address is the explanatory power of certain types of historical, musicological, and ethnographic narratives that take aspects of this cultural body for granted, especially those aspects related to musical memory, transmission, musical conservatism, and musical change

#### The Middle Passage & Musical Memories Deferred.

When historians discuss the legacy of the slave trade in relation to its effects on the music of the African diaspora, a thread that inevitably emerges is the comparison of North American African diasporan populations with the rest of the African diaspora. It is generally taken as a starting point that those populations that were forcibly removed to the United States were subject to such extreme conditions that the stable continuity with previous musical traditions that depended on teacher-disciple relationships was severely disrupted. Those musical traits that were transmitted

took place at a level of transmission under the greatest cultural duress imaginable. Historians point out that in North America, where whites outnumbered the enslaved Africans and (except in Louisiana) the predominant religion was Protestantism, slave owners acted to deprive the African of anything that might aid them in organizing resistance. New African arrivals were purposefully separated from their linguistic group communities once they arrived. The practice of traditional African religions was prohibited. Drumming was banned on most plantations, for fear of the very idea of the “talking drum.” Dancing “native style” was also frowned on, if only because it might remind the dancers of their previous lives of freedom. Historians also point out that in the Caribbean, successful slave revolts, relative leniency towards African expressive traditions exhibited by French or Spanish Catholic plantation owners, together with the large numbers of indentured African laborers who were conscripted to work in the Caribbean after the abolition of the slave trade, contributed to a more pronounced transmission of African traditions in that part of the world.

However to say that the continuity of musical transmission was lost in North America, in comparison with those relatively intact traditions extant in Haiti, Jamaica, Bahia Brazil, or Cuba, is only recognizing dissimilarity at the level of performance modality. Recent historical scholarship has shown that even though the more obvious examples of time-line bell parts, polymetric structures, drum-type complexes, or specific tunes, genres, and rhythm families did not for the most part survive the ravages of the African Holocaust as they did in the Caribbean, other aspects of African musical culture, to include musical materials such as ostinato patterning, aesthetic sensibilities such as harsh and gritty timbres, or modes of socio-musical organization such as call-and-response, were transmitted beyond the first generation arrivals up to the present. Where this recent historical narrative falls short however is in providing a nuanced model of how the specific transmission of these musical aspects survived under generations of extreme duress, or how the regenerative processes harnessed by master musicians like James Brown might operate.

#### Transposable Dispositions and Musical Artifacts

Anthropology, though rightfully critiqued as it has been of late, provides some insight towards understanding culture as a re-generative process. From Ruth Benedict’s discussion of “ patterns of culture” (1934), to Marshall Sahlins’ “structure of the conjuncture” (Sahlins 1982), there has been a long-standing concern in anthropology to discern and explain prominent, recurring, and transformative themes and habits. Other terms that have been used to identify “that which is culturally recurring” include “transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu 1990: 52), “ur-tropes” (Floyd 1995: 79), “cultural flow” (Gilroy 1993), “re-constellated cultural elements” (Noble 1970: 4), “formulaic reshuffling” (Gates 1988; Hebdige 1987), or recurring “cultural sensibilities” (Keyes 1996). Specific to African American musical culture, these recurring patterns have been called “Africanisms” (Maultsby 1990), “survivals” (Small 1987), “cultural circulations” (Gilroy 1993), and “flashes of the spirit” (Thompson 1983).

What specifically might these transposable dispositions and flashes of the spirit be, as they relate to music? Essentially they can be broken down into two categories: musical artifacts that recur (the music itself), and cultural patterning that shapes musical practice. At the musical artifact level, in relation to African American music, these are what Malcom Floyd has identified as the “ring shout elements”:  
Calls, cries and hollers; call and response devices; additive rhythms and polyrhythms; heterophony, pendular thirds, blue notes, bent notes and elisions, hums, moans, grunts, vocables, and other rhythmic oral declamations, interjections, and punctuations; off beat melodic phrasings and parallel intervals and chords; constant repetition of rhythmic and melodic figures and phrases (from which riffs and v amps would be derived); timbral distortions of various kinds; musical individuality within collectivity; game rivalry, hand clapping, foot patting and approximations thereof; apart playing; and the metronome pulse that underlies all African American music (Floyd 1995: 6)

At the level of cultural patterning, we can include what Nketia calls “intensity factors” (1988), the informal relationship between the artist and the audience, the idea of improvisation itself, musical competitive practices, the relationship between music and labor (Gunderson 1999), the relationship between spirituality and music, or Gilroy’s identification of musical spaces that creates a vision of an alternate utopia (Gilroy 1993), to mention a few. Though it is crucial that we not limit African American musical experience by essentializing it, these patterns and musical materials are characteristic to a large degree of African American musical experience, in the same way that we can typify Western Classical music as a music utilizing functional harmony, scores, conductors and so on.

### The Memetics Model

Though the “transposable dispositions” motif has compelling explanatory power, it fails to account for the bodily and cognitive aspects of culture, instead limiting its ; realm to “social structures.” For this crucial aspect, I turn to the school of thought emerging from cognitive science known as memetics. Memetics argues that culture transmits itself via replicators called memes. A meme is any cognitive or behavioral pattern that is transmitted from one individual to another. Since the individual who transmits the meme will continue to carry it, the transmission can be interpreted as either a perfect or a mutated replication, depending on the nature of the relationship between the transmitter and the transmittee, as well as on the media employed to carry it. In any event, a perfect or mutated copy of the meme is made in the memory of another individual, making him or her a new carrier of the meme, with variants giving some carriers a competitive advantage over their neighbors. This process of self-reproduction is similar in many respects to the gene, however unlike the gene, a meme is nothing more than a pattern of information, one that happens to have transformed into a form which induces people to repeat that pattern. The biologist Richard Dawkins, who coined the term as a neologism that combines hints of “memory”, “mimetic” and “gene” in one package, explains that: Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene

pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passed it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain ... memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. (Dawkins 1976).

The meme is thus a metaphor for the ideas, thoughts, customs, myths, customs, works of art and science that are passed along in human cultures as unitary and competing entities. But more than metaphors or cultural units, memes are also physical processes that exist in the brain. As Delius notes:

Any cultural trait [meme] that is taken over by a given individual from another individual must accordingly be thought of as the transfer of a particular pattern of synaptic hotspots within the associative networks of one brain to the associative networks of another brain (1989: 44-45).

In other words, memes are also literally chemical connections and physical hookups in the fabric of the brain that enable the brain to develop understanding. These memes "reproduce" by jumping from one brain to another via communication, competing to get into as many brains as possible. New memes must overcome previously existing memes and induce the host to transmit the new meme to other potential hosts. This memetic competition has fashioned our minds and culture, just as natural selection has designed our bodies. And just as DNA changes through time, so do memes. Natural selection weeds out combinations of genes which are not adaptive, and which do not lead to understanding.

### Musical Memes

One of the criticisms being leveled at this emerging school of thought asks, what is this model good for? Is there any agency in what we say and do, or are we all merely carriers of brain parasites that act like viruses? Can memetics really explain historical processes any better than existing narratives? Can it make better predictions? If not, it can hardly be called a paradigm shift in understanding culture. One topic that it may be able to shed some light on is music transmission.

Traditional evolutionary theory – which doesn't take memes into account -- boils down to the idea that in the end, all life is about improving an organism's chances for reproducing its genes. While there has been ample speculation as to the biological function of music, most evolutionary theorists have concluded that at best, music is some kind of not-yet-understood social-group bonding mechanism, and at worst a mistake that hasn't been weeded out yet by Mother Nature. Given enough time, they say, genes for liking music will be out-competed by genes for something more productively related to reproduction. With this positivistic and reductionist view of art, is it any wonder then that historical musicologists have

been loathe to attempt to understand where music fits into any evolutionary paradigm? Meme theory would propose however that music has less to do with genes, and more to do with more quickly-transmitted memes. For example, memetic theory would show that some rhythms, for whatever groovological reasons, are catchier than others, and are more quickly received than others. Crowds tend to gather whenever they are played, thus insuring their infectious spread to more bodies. From the bio-evolutionary standpoint, we might say that the best rhythm-makers thus gain in social status and therefore get a better chance to spread their genes. The process is all driven by the memes, which transmit and change exponentially faster than genes do.

### Memes and African American Musical Culture

What memetic theory offers the historical understanding of African American music history is how music might have been transmitted under duress, and what specifically was transmitted. Because of the extreme nature under which music was being transmitted, in order to survive, music transmission needed to be effective, catchy, as well as a quick study. Perhaps the most compelling example of a musical meme operating at this level would be the previously described concept of the groove, or better yet, what is known as the “riff” in African American music. By “riff,” I mean the short repeated segments of sound known as ostinatos in musicological terms, which are deployed singularly or in overlapped layers in drum parts, in melody fragments, as accompaniment, and as bass lines. The riff is crucial in supporting improvisation and call and response exchanges, and once employed as a groove, it is the musical unit that most compels the body to move.

The riff is the most tenacious of African American musical memes, the definitive competitive musical virus. Ultimately, it is the riff meme that constitutes the basis of African American musical tradition, not any one corpus or genre or tradition where repetition was the major factor. Revisiting our initial question about James Brown, we can envision “the hardest working man in show business” as a replicator vessel with a particular genius affinity for collecting and transforming riff and groove memes, operating in a milieu where he creatively put together these most essential materials from the existing musical meme pool. In James Brown’s own words: “I mapped the music’s DNA-cracked its code-and found grooves” (Brown and Tucker 1986).

### Conclusion: On Musical Memory, Transmission, and Regeneration in the Global African Inter-Diaspora

Memetic theory, when applied to music, can be used to explain large swaths of history of the African musical diaspora. A memetic approach explains rap music not only as something that can be traced to any one person, lineage or site (the musicological approach), but as a music type generated and regenerated from a certain cultural body of meme complexes, replicated, mutated and spread via oral transmission, concert performance, electronic sampling and networking. Memetic theory explains why there is no Sunjata epic in the United States, a body of work that would have required a more formal master-disciple pedagogical environment

for transmission between first and second-generation arrivals. It explains how Bo Diddley could recall a vague West African-derived timeline pattern from the field hollers of his youth, and turn it into a guitar riff that would transform American popular music. And it explains how the tumbao pattern on the conga finds itself transferred and played out in other ensemble instruments in genres such as the rhumba, the son, the son-montuno, the cha cha cha, and the mambo, as well as its creative re-application in Congolese popular music. Indeed, the processes of combination and re-combination of riffs and grooves, which are widely shared despite an enormous variety of styles within African diasporic musics in genres such as funk, blues, soukous, zouk, reggae, mbalax, rumba, plena and soca to name only a few, contribute to their free circulation in contemporary popular music worldwide. By understanding the history and practice of African American music performance in this way, as a history of memories deferred, found, and regenerated, we can better situate its history in relation to the Black Atlantic and Africa, as well as anticipate its global post-modern and inter-diasporic future.

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