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America's Heartbeat

Jazz is at the heart of America. Even the U.S. government says so. On December 4, 1987, the United States Senate approved the House Concurrent Resolution 57, designating jazz as a "national treasure." The resolution stated that jazz, "a unifying force, bridging cultural, religious, ethnic and age differences in our diverse society, is a true music of the people."

Indeed, the spirit of jazz embodies the freedom of expression that resonates in the hearts of all Americans. It echoes the sentiments that characterize the founding ideal of our nation: democracy. Jazz and democracy both came about as a result of oppression and both share the ability to unify people of different races, genders, and opinions, especially in times of hardship. They are a direct reflection of the people.

As a jazz musician, I appreciate the deep history of the music that I play, as well as the ideals that gave it life. The masters of jazz created works that carry the spirit of democracy within. One of the greats, Duke Ellington, composed and recorded many masterpieces. "Cotton Tail," for one, clearly illustrates Ellington's mastery of swing. In it, each section of his orchestra performs a "talk and listen" technique, in which the members alternate between melody and background. Every person in the band has a voice. Take Ben Webster's magnificent solo: Contrary to sound of the term "solo," Webster's turn in the light here serves to complement all the sounds surrounding him. As he tells his eloquent story on the tenor saxophone, he invites the rhythm section to join him. Then he blends his mellow, melodic sounds with the brazen shouts of the brass. Such balance is what Ellington always strived for. He sought to bring the voices of all instruments together to form one cohesive song.

The underlying strength of both jazz and democracy is the people. Each member of a jazz band is vital to the ensemble's success, no matter how small his or her role may seem. Solos celebrate the uniqueness found in each instrument and each musician. Likewise, democracy values individuals and their opinions and contributions. But the point is not simply to highlight one person. The strength of the individual musician and of the citizen depends upon the whole ensemble playing in perfect alignment. "We the people," begins the preamble to the Constitution.

Democracy and jazz are best characterized by their enduring spirit. Both show their true strength in times of adversity. During the 1930s and early 1940s, the age of the Great Depression, the country was impoverished and the nation was in peril. It was no coincidence that the 1930s also brought about the age of swing. Jazz giants brightened the atmosphere during dark times with the upbeat, light, and relaxing genres of big band swing. Ellington, the prominent "King of Swing," revitalized the nation and the world with genuine swing compositions that unified all sections of his big band. America responded. People forgot their struggles, if only for a moment, found their smiles, and danced joyously to this hot new sound.

Not only has jazz helped bolster the faltering spirit of our nation in decades past, but it has also helped us through more recent disasters, such as the tragic events of September 11th, 2001.

Thousands of lives were lost in the destruction of the Twin Towers and the hearts of millions of Americans were wounded. The very structure of American democracy was threatened. But America did not crumble. Once again, jazz played a role in America's recovery.

I vividly remember Sonny Rollins's 9/11 concert, *Without a Song*. In his comeback tour, Sonny soothed the hearts of the nation. His bright, lyrical tone spoke of hope despite all odds. The concert reminded us of the freedom and irrepressible spirit and determination that lay deep within the soul of the nation. Terrorists may have thought they'd brought America to its knees, but instead the U.S. stood taller and even more united as a country. Citizens of all races, genders, and ages came together and remembered American democracy. As a nation, we resolved that we would never fall in the face of danger. We remembered that, as the Duke once put it: "A problem is a chance to do your best."