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I recently came across a painting that illustrated the connection between jazz and democracy beautifully. It depicted a great tree in front of a colorful sky, the roots clearly visible underneath the soil. The deepest roots twisted and turned to form the profiles of great jazz pioneers such as Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and Count Basie. As the roots ascended from the soil they formed the profiles of other legendary men and women, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. Men and women who, fueled by their ancestor's laments for freedom, were determined to fight for their rights despite the countless adversities.

To me, it is almost as if jazz was the seed that grew into the great tree of democracy we reside under today. Watered by the blood, sweat, and tears of any and all who were/are willing to stand up and let their voice be heard, that "tree" brings forth fruit that embodies the freedoms we enjoy today.

During a time when black and white musicians were not allowed to play together, people of different races like Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke jammed together "after hours." In the 1930s, Benny Goodman hired Teddy Wilson, and Lionel Hampton and Artie Shaw hired Billie Holiday and Roy Eldridge. Jazz musicians judged one another on their sound and soul rather than their color. In his recent *Wall Street Journal* article, "How Jazz Helped Hasten the Civil Rights Movement," Nat Hentoff tells the story of how conductor Norman Granz used jazz to fight against segregation in the 1950s by forcing the audience to occupy an integrated auditorium.

"The whole reason for Jazz at the Philharmonic," [Granz] said, "was to take it to places where I could break down segregation." "After renting an auditorium in Houston in the 1950s, he hired the ticket seller and laid down the terms. Then Granz personally, before the concert, removed the signs that said WHITE TOILETS and NEGRO TOILETS. When the musicians—Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, Buddy Rich, Lester Young—arrived, Granz watched as some white Texans objected to sitting alongside black Texans. Said the impresario: "You sit where I sit you. You don't want to sit next to a black, here's your money back."

Even the physical makeup of the jazz band is a reflection of democracy today. Within the musical ensemble, a group of independent individuals works together for a common purpose. The rhythm section can be compared to our branches of government. Much as the U.S. government is subject to a system of checks and balances, the piano, bass, guitar, and drums rely on each other to synchronize time for the ensemble. The lead players, responsible for interpretation, could be compared to our civic leaders: independent men and women who work toward creating an overall cohesiveness and uniformity for the band.

On an individual level, there is a parallel between the jazz musician and the American citizen. Shortly after the inauguration of President Barack Obama, the jazz instructor for my community big band said to us, "Jazz is democracy. There are some folks who don't vote because they don't see how their one voice will make a difference. Whenever you play your horn, that's your vote. What you're saying *does* matter."

One of the greatest things about learning to play music, regardless of style, is that it instills in the student a strong work ethic. Life's challenges often involve things that we do not want to do, whether it's taking out the trash or practicing a solo, but later we realize how happy we are we did it. Jazz is especially remarkable because not only does it teach the American's relentless work ethic, but it also teaches the American standard of independence and expression of passion. In Chet Baker's recording of "My Funny Valentine" at times, the listener wonders if the lugubrious tone they are hearing is a trumpet, saxophone, or Baker himself. Duke Ellington was known for trying to emulate the human voice in his arrangements through the use of mutes and plungers. Improvisation is not only the product of countless hours tirelessly pursuing technical excellence, but it is the embodiment of our Freedom of speech and expression. Jazz is the voice of democracy and the expression of the American spirit.