

Bearden and the Jazz/Blues Tradition

As an African American born just after the first decade of the twentieth century, Romare Bearden was a contemporary of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and a host of other performers and composers who figure in the Blues/Jazz tradition. While some commentators have taken pains to find a sharp distinction between blues and jazz, such a distinction was not recognized by its practitioners and is rejected by Bearden's friend and close collaborator Albert Murray in his monumental study Stomping the Blues (New York, 1976). Moreover Murray effaces the line some would draw between the music of the dance hall and the music of the evangelical church, seeing little difference between the jazz of Saturday night and the gospel music of Sunday morning.

The jazz/blues tradition has its roots in the folk-urban culture which arose from the transposition of the folk-rural culture of the plantation South to cities. Developing at the turn of the century in places such as New Orleans and Memphis and on riverboats plying between them, jazz/blues entered a new expansionist phase following World War I in a succeeding cultural epoch which I call the trans-urban. The onset of the trans-urban in the nineteen-twenties is the result of a major South-North migration of African Americans, the extension of the phonograph, and a vast networking of organizations, publications and entertainment venues, enhanced by automobile and train travel. It should be remembered that the twenties is by common consent known as the jazz