The Seven League Boots: Albert Murray's 'Swing' Poetics

Robert S. Maguire
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

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Albert Murray is an important and controversial figure in jazz studies today. Since the 1960s he has been writing about jazz as the quintessential American art form rooted in the African American "blues idiom" and therefore a sign that African Americans are central to any conception of the national character and culture. In seven books of nonfiction published between 1970 and 2001 he has made these arguments, while also suggesting that U.S. writers would do well to adopt "blues idiom-based" jazz attitudes and stylistics in their work, a point he makes most clearly in his two books of aesthetics, The Hero and the Blues (1973) and The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary Approach to Aesthetic Statement (1996). Murray, not surprisingly, has followed his own advice, and his three novels and one collection of poetry are saturated with references to the blues and jazz as well as to the figures he sees as most important in the jazz tradition-notably Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie. Yet this part of his oeuvre has received markedly little attention, and, remarkably, what attention it has received more often than not has failed to address the implications of what must be termed Murray's jazz poetics. This is particularly the case for Murray's third and most recent novel, The Seven League Boots (1996). In the little commentary that has appeared on the novel—primarily in review-essays published in the Sunday book sections of major newspapers or in magazines such as The Nation—critics have faulted the book for puzzling lapses in plot or character development. In this paper I am arguing that such seeming "lapses" might better be understood in the context of what is finally a coherent jazz poetics, one modeled on the Kansas City swing of bandleader/pianist/head arranger Count Basie and saxophonist Lester Young, who played in Basie's band in the 1930s and 1940s. But I am also arguing that reading the novel through such a lens does more than simply make sense of curious "lapses." It brings into focus one of Murray's more controversial—and basic—positions: that "race" is not so much an unstable, newly constructed signifier as Michael Omi and Howard Winant in Racial Formation suggest that African Americans are central to any conception of the national character and culture. 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This is particularly the case for Murray's third and most recent novel, The Seven League Boots (1996). In this paper I am arguing that such seeming "lapses" might better be understood in the context of what is finally a coherent jazz poetics, one modeled on the Kansas City swing of bandleader/pianist/head arranger Count Basie and saxophonist Lester Young, who played in Basie's band in the 1930s and 1940s. But I am also arguing that reading the novel through such a lens does more than simply make sense of curious "lapses." It brings into focus one of Murray's more controversial—and basic—positions: that "race" is not so much an unstable, newly constructed signifier as Michael Omi and Howard Winant in Racial Formation argue, but rather an empty one, which then makes "race" and "culture" for Murray entirely separable terms. It is my contention that the "swing" narrative style both accommodates and reveals the limitations of such a position. The Seven League Boots is Murray's most recent installment in what some have termed the "Scooter cycle," a series of novels that follows from boyhood into adulthood a son of the South nicknamed Scooter. Born in Alabama in the late 1910s, Scooter spends his public school years in a tightly knit African American community known as Gasoline Point, which is on the outskirts of Mobile. The approximate year of his birth, his interests, his cultural background and even his family background all closely parallel Murray's, leading critics to refer to Scooter as Murray's "alter ego." In particular, what he shares with Murray is a somewhat complicated family history—he was raised by foster parents, having been given up to them shortly after his birth by a young woman who then went on to play an active role in his life as his aunt. That these foster parents weren't in fact his biological parents is something Murray accidentally discovered at the age of 11, as does Scooter in the first novel of the cycle, Train Whistle Guitar (1974). This discovery is the highlight of the book, and it solidifies Scooter's identity as the blues hero, which in his discursive work Murray argues is a kind of epic hero whose most salient trait is the ability to improvise on the break. The second novel, The Spyglass Tree (1991), focuses on Scooter's experiences at college, which, again, paralleling Murray's life, take place during the 1930s, when swing became an enormously popular musical form in part because it was an antidote for the psychological effects of economic hard times. Scooter is a very serious student at his college, modeled on Murray's alma mater Tuskegee Institute, taking advantage of the school's excellent library and finding intellectual mentors in an especially well-read and inquisitive roommate and a bright, young English professor. But he is also a student who recognizes that what he is gathering is "equipment for living," to use a phrase from Kenneth Burke, a theoretician Murray long admired, which requires Scooter to extend his learning beyond the campus. He becomes a regular at a local jazz club, intent on studying the music he hears there as seriously as he studies his books at school, and as a result befriends the "main attraction," a blues singer named Hortense Hightower, and her partner of sorts, Giles Cunningham, a local businessman who owns the club and several other establishments in and around town. Impressed with his ability to listen to the whole band, Hightower at the novel's end gives Scooter a bass fiddle, telling him that he ought to try his hand at playing the kind of music he has taken the effort to educate himself about. We are left quite certain that Scooter will take her advice, and The Seven League Boots opens to confirm that: Scooter is on the road, heading toward California, as a temporary replacement for the bass player in one of the country's best swing bands. This occurs at what seems to be the height of the nation's infatuation not only with the band Scooter joins, but with the musical form as well. Scooter leads a charmed life in the novel, beginning with how quickly he catches on to the band's way of playing (which also contributes to the appropriateness of his new nickname, "Schoolboy"). For mastering the band's sound so soon, he gains accolades from the other band members and anyone else who hears him play, for that matter, including other bandleaders and the occasional record producer. His luck continues after he leaves the band in Los Angeles to strike out on his own for awhile (even as it is understood that playing the bass is a temporary gig until he figures out what he is really going to do with his life). At that point he so impresses a movie star who happens to hear him that she has him move in with her for a time to teach her about the music and, even more importantly, the blues idiom that serves as the basis for the music. That leads to a trip to Europe—another stroke of good fortune—and an introduction to a Marquis who had inspired the movie star's exploration of the blues and jazz. After Scooter wows his European audience in a small jazz club, he heads for home in the U.S. (where he expects to see the college girlfriend he temporarily left behind) and wonders what life will offer him next.

The synopsis of the most recent installment of the Scooter cycle suggests why critics have been at best
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These criticisms of the book are true enough. There is no overt conflict in the book; there is no dramatic character development, and there is very little plot, since what orders the novel are Scooter's travels through the country with the band, around L.A. on his own, and across the ocean with the movie star. But if we shift our focus from story to technique and read The Seven League Boots as a serious experiment with narrative form—as Murray's effort to render in language the sound, texture, and meaning of Kansas City swing as promoted by Count Basie and Lester Young—the novel becomes a much more interesting and, finally, culturally important book.

But, first, to define Kansas City swing, a task made fairly easy since there is general agreement among jazz historians and aficionados not only on the nature of swing but on Basie's contributions to it as a bandleader and Young's innovations as a soloist. It is a jazz style that began evolving in the 1920s, dominated the 1930s and a good deal of the 40s, and, because of bandleaders like Basie, continued to have a significant presence into the 50s and beyond even as other styles like bebop began to evolve. As Gunther Schuller explains in his study of the Swing Era, "we played how they are begun, ended, and connected" to other musical notes (225). Mark Gridley offers a fairly concrete description of these hows: When eighth notes are treated neither as tied triplets nor as even eighth notes, but as something in between, what is produced is a sound that is at once loose and rhythmic, a musical phrase that "swings" (90).

Several additional characteristics combine to create Kansas City swing. Nathan Pearson names three: "a strong 4/4 rhythm, fluid soloists, and most important, riffs"—short musical phrases that repeat throughout a tune, typically having slight but important variations (114). Or, as Gene Ramey, once a member of the Basie band, explains, "It's the solo playing and the moving background below it, and a strong rhythm section" (Pearson 117). That strong rhythm section contributed to the overriding sense of swing as up tempo music. But in contrast to East Coast swing, that which evolved in Kansas City "was lighter and more relaxed," according to Gridley. And, as all commentators point out, it never forgot its blues roots.

Count Basie's swinging can be even more particularized. Gridley describes it as "very light and extremely precise" (134), and, most importantly, smooth: "Basie led the first rhythm section in jazz history that consistently swung in a smooth, relaxed way," obviating the need for "a hard-driving, pressured approach." As a result, the hallmark of Basie's sound was "buoyancy rather than intensity" (134-35), simplicity and quietness rather than "complexity and colorful sounds" (145), all of which added up to a "high level of polish." This was an excellent complement to Lester Young's playing in the 1930s. One of the most innovative and innovative tenor sax players of all time, Young sought to create a sound on the tenor that was a rough approximation of Frankie Trumbauer's sound on the C-melody sax. The result was a "light, breathy style," according to Pearson (197), one that focused on working and reworking melody, what Young referred to as "telling a story" (Russell 1971). As Schuller puts it, Young had a pronounced "distaste for loud, aggressive, noisy ostentation" (549), preferring smooth transitions from note to note and de-emphasizing the vibrato, which his contemporary, Coleman Hawkins maximized. Or, in Gridley's estimation, whereas Hawkins favored a "heavy tone, fast vibrato, and complicated style," Young used a "light tone, slow vibrato, and buoyant phrases" (141). That buoyancy was attributable in part to the fact that he "generally avoided the traditional blue notes, preferring instead . . . the more 'open,' the more 'positive' major steps of the scale" (Schuller 553). But what helped him create his distinctive swing was something else he had in common with Basie—an ability to manipulate silence. Basie "used silence to space his [solo] lines"—a technique that has led Basie admirers to claim that he was a man who could make one note swing; similarly, Young "sometimes purposely ignored the notes in chords" to alter "the effect of both the tone and chord" (Gridley 141).

I offer such details about Kansas City swing in general and the Basie-Young style in particular because I think they offer a framework for understanding the tone, pace, and texture of The Seven League Boots. Murray himself suggests we might think about the sound and feel of his text in such terms by including in the novel several pointed references to swing and also subtle as well as overt references to Basie and Young. One band member, Joe States, who serves as Scooter's mentor while he's with the band, calls up Young when he explains, "It's always that little story that counts" with both Old Pro, the band's clarinetist and arranger, and the Bossman, the beloved bandleader (32). When Scooter is tutoring the movie star, Jewel Templeton, about jazz, he speaks of "the infinite flexibility of Kansas City four/four" and then demonstrates it by playing a recording of "The Dirty Dozens," "with Count Basie on piano with his rhythm section of Walter Page on bass, Jo Jones on drums, and Freddie Green on guitar" (176-77). And when Scooter is in Europe, sitting in with a small combo in France, he plays at the Marquis's request "Indiana" in such a way that causes the Marquis to think of Basie and Young. Immediately after complimenting Scooter's live playing as well as the recording of it he made with the Bossman, the Marquis remarks, "On the recordings of Count Basie's radio broadcasts from the Famous Door it sounds like the perfect place for a holiday romp. And there are the Lester Young combo recordings that make you feel as if you are somewhere being caressed by an elegant lullaby" (306). But it is Jewel Templeton who suggests that Scooter himself is an embodiment of the Basie-inflected swing style when she describes him in this way: "Always the completely charming proportion of ever so tentative but undeniable naughtiness and irresistible enthusiasm," adding "no wonder you became such a wonderful bass player in such a short time" (299). No wonder indeed.

Of course, such references in and of themselves do not a swing text make. What more accurately signals Murray's technique is the book's opening: Scooter is on a bus with the Bossman's band en route to California, and he is recalling his first bus trip with the band, when, having joined the group in Ohio, they were continuing on
Recalling Basie band member Gene Ramey’s description of swing-solo playing, a moving background, and a strong rhythm section—we might think of the landscape the bus cuts across as the moving background, the traveling bus itself as the strong rhythm, and the conversation of the band members, inspired by what they see out their windows, as the solos. A good example of this occurs when the bus is moving through southern states along the East Coast:

Well, there’s old man Johnny Jim Crow, Schoolboy, he said just loud enough not to disturb anybody else. And I knew that we had recrossed the line and were back in the section of the country that had been a part of the old Confederacy and that we had stopped for a traffic light in a courthouse square that had a gray monument of either a CSA officer on horseback, or a pack bearing riflemen, facing north.

Still up there, Ike Ellis said; and Alan Meadows said, Still up there trying to make out like them people didn’t get the living dooky kicked out of them. And Ike Ellis said, Man, did they ever mo. Man once them Yankees got all of their stuff together and got them gunboats rolling down the Mississippi and then cut across Tennessee to Georgia and the sea, kicking every living and swinging ass until times got tolerable, I’m telling you, mister. (62)

Murray’s approach to addressing racism in the U.S., or more accurately, his approach to ameliorating it, is to argue for an absolute distinction between the terms “race” and “culture.” In his first book, The Omni-Americans (1970), he set out the position he has maintained ever since: “That U.S. Negros make up a very distinct sociopolitical group with discernable cultural features peculiar to itself goes without saying, but by no ethnological definition or measurements are they a race” (124), he insists in one essay. Not only do black Americans fail to constitute a distinctive race “by ethnological definition,” but even by legal definition—the notorious “one drop rule”—“most native-born U.S. Negros, far from being non-white, are in fact part-white” (79-80). Given those facts, racism to Murray’s mind is just silly. And smart people, both black and white, realize that, Murray repeatedly insists in his work, including The Seven League Boots, when he has Scooter reflect on his public school years and favorite teachers in Gasoline Point while he is traveling in France:

Certainly the most basic of all things about universal free public education in the United States is that for all its widespread and longstanding entanglement with racial segregation it is predicated on the completely democratic assumption that individual development, self-realization, and self-fulfillment is [sic] a matter of inspiring learning contexts not of one’s family background and certainly not a matter of one’s ancient racial forebears. So assumed Miss Lexine Metcalf and Mr. B. Franklin Fisher, neither of whom ever confused race with culture. (321-22)
Schuller's evaluation of the Basie-Young sound, while generally complimentary, also points out its limitations.
Young was a brilliant innovator who created astounding music with a "small range in terms of pitches and notes" (230), something that could be accomplished against the background of the Basie band's sound. But Basie and his band's "formula for success," Schuller suggests, was finally "extracted at a price," with that price having been the need to "forgo initiative, innovation, and creativity in a large sense" (234). The Basie style, he goes on to write, finally "suffered from considerable neglect of dynamics and lack of harmonic invention" (252). As a result, the band's music was "rarely memorable thematically," although most enjoyable for "its swing, its often exciting call and response brass and reed exchanges, and above all its superior soloists" (263). The narrative style of The Seven League Boots I think might be seen in similar terms. On one hand, I see the novel as an artistic triumph in terms of style. Murray has found a way to create in language the sound, the very texture, of Basie swing. In part because he has been so successful, his novel also points up why bop would go on to supplant swing as the favored style of jazz musicians. Swing's propulsive rhythm, buoyancy and overall up tempo attitude did not permit prolonged agitation or, finally, deep reflection, at least not deep reflection about discordance. The Seven League Boots, like swing, demands that discordance be introduced. And for Murray, there is no greater discord than racism. But such discordance cannot be probed in an up-tempo narrative, something Murray no doubt fully realizes. Probing racism, indeed, probing race at all, Murray has made clear is not something he is interested in doing, for the danger it opens up is that his work will only be read in terms of what it has to say about race relations. His intent, he has argued, is to create black characters who stand for the American ideal, an ideal that is thoroughly democratic and inflected with the blues idiom of the black community. But the idiom, even his work suggests, grows out of the social reality of race, an idea that a narrative style based on bebop might be better equipped to explore.

Notes

1 Wolfgang Karrer is the exception to this lack of attention to Murray's narrative transcription of African American musical idiom. In "The Novel as Blues: Albert Murray's 'Train Whistle Guitar.'" (1974), he indeed reads Murray's first novel as a blues novel, but as a failed blues novel. A major problem here is that Karrer has not accounted for Murray's take on the blues. I would instead argue that the novel actually functions as an extended Murrayan definition of the blues-its philosophy, its tropes, its techniques-and that one would do well to read it as a companion piece with Stomping the Blues.

2 I am paraphrasing the definition of "racism" found in Webster's Third New International Dictionary.

Works Cited


