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article

Creativity and Aging: The Black Musician's Perspective

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Introduction

Teacher preparation in gerontology is plagued with many problems common to teacher preparation in general, but the problems are vastly multiplied by the complexities unique to the elderly and are exacerbated by the gap that exists between theory and practice. In most training institutions, the time allowed for students to assimilate intellectually the theoretical principles of working with the elderly and to apply these in supervised internships continues to be exceedingly short. Thus, we must do all we can to help students integrate these principles by arming them with positive professional strategies, while assisting them in rejecting biased attitudes and values regarding the elderly.

Differences between the elderly student and the typical learner can be readily observed. The practitioner, however, must take into account other, more subtle, psychological and personal distinctions. For example, the elderly learner is apt to feel 'lost in the shuffle' or increasingly useless in today's intensely demanding, competitive culture. In many cases, a negative sense of self tends to reinforce feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and resignation.

In addition, the elderly learner can be faced with other problems which include reduction of short-term memory capacity (Inglis et

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al, 1975, Monge, 1969), motivational changes (Kuhlen, 1962), and anxiety toward learning.

One special difficulty often faced is in applying principles to individuals, each with his or her unique interests and needs resulting from personality, physiological, and emotional characteristics. As a cultural group, the black elderly have unique problems which warrant careful study (Golden and Weinstock, 1971; Hill, 1973; and Morris, 1975). Moreover, the black elderly may require practitioners with special skills and sensitivities because their lives have frequently seen poverty and racial discrimination in addition to the discrimination suffered because of advancing years. Research which addresses the needs of this group could do much to diminish the traumatic experiences of the black aged as well as that of the practitioners working with them (Dancy, 1977).

Unfortunately, research on the black elderly is limited. Although the literature on aging and creativity has increased vastly in the past decade (Alpaugh, Renner, and Birren, 1976), empirical studies are still lacking. While everyone seems to agree on the value of the arts as a creative force in the human personality and on the vast potential of music to enrich the lives of the elderly, scholarly research on both music and the elderly is difficult to find.

Millions of able and active elderly persons possess creative talent and wisdom which is being wasted as a result of age-based societal stereotypes. Recent efforts, such as the creation in 1973 of the National Center on the Arts and Aging and the resulting National Council on the Arts and Aging in 1976, have served to illustrate and document the need for programs that can establish a meaningful link between the arts and the elderly.

While the aged in general are plagued by discrimination, the black elderly have been especially stereotyped and maligned.

This report is based on selected parts of an oral history project which used videotaped interview techniques and was conducted with elderly black musicians. The purposes were to: (1) provide implications for education and care of the black elderly in particular and to suggest techniques that can apply to the elderly in general; (2) raise the consciousness of practitioners and their employing institutions and agencies in regard to the particular needs, problems, and strengths of the black elderly; (3) suggest how the

black elderly can be served more appropriately and supportively; (4) encourage the practitioner to reexamine his or her own attitudes about aging and minorities; and (5) suggest a philosophical basis for promoting a rich and creative life in later years.

The Study

The study is an examination of the lives and creative musical output of thirty-five black elderly musicians ranging in age from sixty-five to ninety-eight. (To date, four of the subjects have died.) The subjects are historically important black musicians who figured prominently in creating and shaping black American music (i.e., spirituals, blues, gospel, ragtime, jazz, and rhythm and blues).

At the urging of Eubie Blake, one of the "grand old men" of black and American music, the preliminary research was begun in 1974. Lack of time and finances precluded obtaining more than a few interviews prior to 1980. Those obtained included: Eubie Blake, a ragtime composer and performer, age 98; William Grant Still, composer and conductor, 85 (now deceased); Count Basie, band leader, pianist, and composer, 76; Etta Moten, who popularized the role of Bess in the opera "Porgy and Bess"; Eva Jessye, actress, conductor and composer, 85; and Charles Handy, brother and business partner of W. C. Handy, 85.

During the author's sabbatical (1980), more than thirty additional individuals were interviewed, including blues singers Alberta Hunter, 82, Edith Wilson, 82 (who died March, 1981), and Sippie Wallace, 82; Thomas Dorsey, father of gospel music and composer, 82; Sallie Martin, gospel singer and co-founder with Thomas Dorsey of the American Gospel Convention, 84; Edward "Montudie" Garland, New Orleans jazz drummer and bassist, 85 (now deceased); Andy Kirk, band leader and arranger, 82; Katherine Dunham, dancer and choreographer, 65; and Mary Lou Williams, 71 (who died during the preparation of this paper); and Anne Brown, the 71-year-old singer who was the first Bess of the opera "Porgy and Bess."

All subjects are performers; dancers, conductors, arrangers and/or composers; more than half are vocalists. While all are active in some phase of music and many play several instruments, the degree to which they are involved professionally varies widely.

Discussion of Methodology

Few documentaries of the musical activities of black Americans are extant, particularly those which include visual and written accounts including the testimonies of actual participants. Fortunately, because of the relatively short time span of black American music history, many individuals who figured prominently in its creation are alive and able to recount the evolution of features of black music culture.

To insure that the most appropriate information would be obtained, carefully structured questions and interview procedures were used, taking into consideration the experiences of earlier oral historians who warned that professional musicians are apt to respond in the interview situation in the manner that they see as being most beneficial to their careers and/or on the basis of what is appropriate to the audience at the moment (Haring, 1972; Pearson, 1977).

Videotaped interviews and informal conversations (ranging in length from four to six hours over a period of two days) were augmented by an examination of musical examples representing the creative life of each artist. Additionally, oral and/or written views of individuals closely associated with the artist were obtained. These included road managers, traveling companions, promoters, friends of many years, biographers, and close relatives. While most of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the artists, opportunities to observe them in both performance and informal situations were taken whenever possible.

Videotaped interviews and informal conversations (each ranging in length from four to six hours over a period of two days) were expert, and sensitive use of this popular technology offers unlimited opportunities to do research on any age group. Moreover, for the practitioner, the use of videotape techniques in oral history projects can be a highly effective means of examining an individual's cultural/historical perspective in a manner that is impossible when one is limited to the written or spoken word. This is particularly true of accounts by elderly black musicians whose verbal recalls are apt to be in need of some expert "translation" when studied in the absence of the highly meaningful gestures, body lan-

guage, and tonal inflections which often accompany their speech patterns (Hurston, 1970). Many revealing body gestures that affect the content of the oral narrative would simply be missed in the absence of video.

Results and Implications

Results obtained to date are significant and many are yet to be analyzed. Several results have been selected for discussion on the basis of their implication for the elderly and for music education.

All of the informants emphasized that elderly blacks (especially elderly black musicians) share common experiences of hardship that teach them survival techniques useful in old age. All informants stressed that in order to survive with grace and interact effectively with others, not only did they have to be creative in dealing with the usual problems associated with musical careers, they also had to use talent and skill to cope with growing old and being poor and black in America. The informants felt that only when performing were they able to capitalize on things that they know work and to avoid those that do not work. In life, they are now able to accept more gracefully, or at the very least "adjust to", those things that resist change. Further, informants felt that change came so rapidly in their lives and that the perplexities of today's world are so great, that flexibility and adaptation are necessary to longevity. While knowledge and repetition of the old and familiar are comfortable and sometimes lucrative (e.g., recently rediscovered elderly black musicians who are now constantly called on to do over and over those things for which they are best known) making the old work along side the new takes stamina and flexibility. "Being flexible," according to one artist, "is often frightening, but, believe me, it keeps me young at heart, mind and body."

All of this suggests that helping the black elderly to be flexible should be a prime objective. This is a quality which can benefit all elderly, regardless of race. Helping the elderly resist the temptation toward rigidity seems to be a first step toward getting them to cope effectively with the countless and ostensibly inevitable problems associated with aging.

How can the practitioner encourage such flexibility in the older adult? First, it must be seen that the aged person has had a lifetime

in which to develop patterns of thought, habits, attitudes, and values. In any learning situation, interference (similar to a prior experience) (Monge, 1969) is likely to create difficulty in learning. There are ways to deal with this kind of problem in order to allow for more flexibility. Alan Knox (1977) suggests that persistence to learn can be encouraged by the teacher or practitioner through the setting of educational objectives that, when achieved, will help the adult make the connection between current competencies (or habits, attitudes, etc.) and new learnings.

Allowing the older adult to proceed at his own rate, giving clear explanations, using a logical sequence of instruction, and capitalizing on feedback can facilitate the learning process as well as encourage creative activity. In addition, memorable encounters, in which the older adult feels something about what he learns, will provide a stronger chance that practice and subsequent positive reinforcement will take place as a result of effective intensity of learning. This cannot be overlooked when dealing with music, where encounters or experiences are quite likely to be personally meaningful, especially to the elderly.

The informants in the study were quite grateful for having had someone to help them “reawake” and put to use talents that they thought were long dead. The noted author, John McLeish, in a speech “The Arts, Aging, Creativity, and the Ulyssean Process,” reinforced this point when he said: “. . . in place of the scattered and isolated seminars on creative techniques for adults . . . we might see many centers where adults from 18 to 90 and beyond could be, not taught creativity, but taught at least how to arouse the sleeping powers which we all have and fail to use in the conscious and unconscious minds” (McLeish, 1978).

With notable exceptions, most of the informants were grossly undereducated both musically and academically. Yet, on the other hand, these so-called undereducated persons are living examples of what we attempt to train people to be: effective in their chosen field, flexible and adaptive, and able to cope constantly with change. In other words, as Carl Rogers so aptly points out: “. . . to constructively meet the perplexities of a world in which problems spawn much faster than their answers” (Rogers, 1967).

Most of these informants had enjoyed full but often highly

problem-oriented lives. Their education, for the most part, was the experience gained through living in a world that was often distinctly hostile. Insofar as music training was concerned, few attributed their creativity and musical innovation to school. The singers pointed repeatedly to the black church as a highly motivating and rewarding environment, while the instrumentalists pointed to clandestine work (at least during their early years) in clubs, at private parties, carnivals, and the like for their best experience. The instrumentalists, many of whom were composers, frequently pointed to one or more individual teachers who encouraged them and served as role models. In all instances, the data collected strongly suggest that these individuals were continuously nurtured in environments which allowed and, indeed, required divergent thinking and experimentation. It was this psychological motivation, born of constant competition, that encouraged original musical expression.

Life situations in a black's music education, with black music's somewhat free and improvisatory characteristics, are more apt to foster creativity than the often artificial and restricting music education programs frequently found in our schools. Apparently environments such as the black church, the informal atmosphere typical of parties, backyard or front stoop jam sessions, parades and the like are quite effective in motivating original music thought as opposed to the more restricted responses often motivated in school or school-like music settings.

At first glance, one might conclude that creativity cannot be fostered amidst the structured atmosphere of the traditional school setting; it must again be recognized that the black musical experience has historically been limited to these more informal, free-wheeling environments, which have served to contribute to the distinctive flavor of black music.

Informants unanimously agreed that process rather than product is the essential ingredient for understanding, participating, and being able to respond appropriately to black music. One of the most important differences between black music and forms of Western art or classical music is the intent of the creator. To vast numbers of blacks, the music *becoming what it is* is immensely more important than the *result*. The operation of creating is the

essence of the black music experience. The implication is clear: (overt and consistent) involvement with music is crucial. Moreover, the freedom to make mistakes and to experiment are essential to this active involvement. Freedom to improvise, try the untried (but, according to the informants, within prescribed limits), should be the watchword. Older persons are in constant need of encouragement to experiment and to take risks with new alternatives. They probably are in need of more encouragement than youngsters because the elderly are often more concerned with getting the right answers (Alpaugh, 1975). Older adults experience optimal learning in situations where difficulties and failures are minimized and where anxiety is alleviated (Arenberg and Robertson, 1977).

With regard to raising the consciousness of practitioners and their employing institutions concerning particular needs and interests of black elderly, one point on music preference bears mentioning: while black music was confirmed as the most preferred style by the individuals participating in this study, a wide variety of other musics heard on television and radio figured prominently in their musical diet. These musics included popular, country and western, and a bit of classical. The implication of this finding is that teachers should not consider black music (i.e., gospel, blues, spirituals, ragtime, dixieland, jazz, swing, bop, rhythm and blues) the only generic style that has a degree of acceptance by the black elderly.

The thirty-five elderly musicians repeatedly referred to their perceived role as models for young blacks. They emphasized that American society literally worships youth and, as such, it is somewhat difficult to grow old gracefully today in America. They also pointed out that each time they perform, they inadvertently encourage and challenge the young to value the elderly. As the 84 year old gospel great and former blues accompanist Thomas ("Georgia Tom") Dorsey pointed out: "When we perform, youngsters see us and are forced to examine what they might become in their later years. More than one young person has told me that he now appreciates more the scars and furrows (of old people like myself) which have resulted from years of adaptation to life and to a society that demands much of man, and especially of the talented and creative."

The informants emphasized that the old are experienced sur-

vivors who have much to teach the young and to whom the young should be willing to listen. They proudly pointed out that young people comprise the largest segment of their audience, and that response from them is more likely than from any other age group. The young apparently enjoy being in the presence of elderly people who are doing exciting things. This suggests that young people, including elementary age children, may derive some specific gratification from associating with grandpersons and listening to their life experiences. It also suggests that the elderly who exemplify the Ulyssean characteristics described by the noted writer on aging, John McLeish (1976)—persons who wish to do, *can*; persons who use the ability to learn, to produce, and above all, to create—are even more sought after, respected, and admired by the young and older adults alike. Alan Knox (1977) concurs, stating that “adults can learn almost anything they want to, given time, persistence, and assistance.”

One may generalize that the role of a personal model is significantly strengthened with contacts between old persons and children (Bergman and Cybulski, 1978). It may also be assumed that schools and communities which work to bring the elderly and young together in a kind of teaching/learning community are likely to share in a highly profitable harvest of learning, love, and respect unlike any of that hoped for through the usual process of education. Breaking down the intergenerational barriers is but one of the important fruits of that harvest. This, and the destruction of some widely held myths about elderly persons which often create a generation gap between the young and the elderly, seemed to have been reason enough for informants in this study to continue performing and reaching out creatively to others through music.

As a result of this look at these black elderly musicians, some important implications emerge for the practices of music education and lifelong learning.

Musical learning for the aged can become far more than a mere pastime. As continuing education becomes more widespread in contemporary society, the notion of children as learners, adults as doers, and the elderly as watchers becomes increasingly outdated.

It is the responsibility of the music education profession to conduct research in lifelong learning in music, and to implement more

programs that adequately reflect the needs, interests, and artistic aspirations of the elderly learner.

James A. Standifer's specialties include secondary general music, multi-cultural music, and curriculum construction.

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