

The Sanctuary of Music

During times of slavery, African Americans created their own genre of music to live to the beat of, beginning with folk spirituals and field hollers. As time went on, work songs developed into what is now known as jazz and the blues. Langston Hughes wrote a poem about "The Weary Blues," telling the tale of a man expressing his story through music. Even though the lyrics of the pianist's song appear sad, the singer is releasing and facing his pain with his song in order to heal. The music is his medicine.

James Baldwin was inspired by the poem to write "Sonny's Blues." The story tells the tale of the nameless narrator, an African American man from Harlem, and his troubled little brother Sonny during the 1950s. Sonny is a musician that struggles with a heroin addiction and the narrator attempts to understand him. In the story, Baldwin reveals how music can heal the soul, especially in the closing scene. The narrator's experience with music helps him realize that in order to overcome his pain, he must face it. Denying struggles only makes the pain worse. Through imagery that evokes a sense of empathy, Baldwin allows the reader to get into the shoes of the characters.

When Sonny plays the piano, something strange and new happens. The narrator explains that "the face I saw on Sonny I'd never seen before. Everything had been burned out of it, and, at the same time, things usually hidden were being burned in, by the fire and fury of the battle which was occurring in him up there." As Sonny plays, everything held up inside him is let out. No more bottling up emotions or shooting up heroin, just a pure flow from soul to piano. There is so much he has to face after so much heartache. All of his repressed potential is being revealed and released. He pours his entire being into making music for others, and yet it is somehow for himself. Passion at last is making its grand appearance in his soul. The music has just begun its journey.

The longer the music plays, the further it can reach into one's soul. As Sonny plays, "he began to make it his...it wasn't hurried...it was no longer a lament...Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did." Even though he is playing for his audience, the flow of cathartic energy goes both ways. Part of Sonny's healing experience is the audience's

reaction to the outpour of his soul. The song may start off as a mourning, but it is a release of the sadness, gradually growing more and more liberating as it goes. Each note brings freedom from the weight of one's troubles. He cannot be held back by the low expectations placed upon him his whole life because of his race. Anything is possible when the piano keys are underneath his swift fingers. The musician is not alone in the experience.

The narrator provides a bigger window into what the song is like for the audience. He ponders how "the tale of how we suffer, how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it must always be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness." Music tells stories in an idiosyncratic way, even though the story itself has not changed. Individuals have disparate interpretations of the songs as well. The stories may not be new, but they unveil different emotions each time. People need to hear the stories of others in order to understand their own. The only way to truly heal is to feel the emotions one despises so much, from despair to anger. Nothing else heals quite like music.

The narrator has his own personal experience with the music. He describes how "it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tears again, and I felt my own begin to rise. And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky." Although the music brings up painful memories that the narrator previously illustrated, he enjoys the experience. Feeling the pain from his life sets him free for that moment. No longer will he let his denial hold him back from living. It is the acceptance of the darkness that lets him see the light. Fear of the unfortunate only prevents one from seeing the truth in the world. Despite the darkness of the world, there are moments that set one free.

Sonny's concert is the first time the narrator really sees Sonny. Sonny orders a Scotch and milk, and "as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling." Rather than seeing Sonny as his irresponsible baby brother, he sees him for who he is. He discerns that his brother has to play music in order to relieve himself of his suffering. Sonny is now a mature adult in his brother's eyes,

although he still has that touch of childlike energy about him. The music brings the narrator one step closer to true understanding of his brother. The music yet again opens a door in someone's view of the world.

Music remains the universal language even today. It is a language that everyone can understand, no matter where they are from or what they have been through. Being one of the most discriminated against peoples, African Americans used the language of music to release their pain, and they used it well. Through suffering can come the most beautiful accomplishments, such as Sonny's blues. The way to live life is to accept what has been, and what will be, and move past it.