Chicago Jazz Musicians and Commercial Dance Bands: A Relationship

By Charles A. Sengstock Jr.

By 1920, as jazz music was beginning to take root on Chicago’s South Side, a dynamic working relationship developed between the new jazz players and the older, more established commercial danceband leaders and theater orchestra conductors. It came about tentatively at first, then moved forward a bit more aggressively as the new jazz music began to capture the fancy of more and more people.

New Orleans Jazz Musician in Chicago
Curious about the new music from New Orleans, both white and black musicians became regular visitors to the city’s South Side cabarets and small clubs where many New Orleans musicians played. By 1922, when Joseph “King” Oliver had brought young Louis Armstrong north to play second cornet alongside him at Lincoln Gardens, a group of younger Chicago musicians came to listen, slack-jawed, to the marvelous sounds emanating from Oliver’s Creole Band.

The Sunset and Plantation Cafes on 35th Street became the preferred after-hours hangouts for musicians by the mid-1920s, and it was not long before a few of the more adventurous bandleaders realized that adding a jazz musician or two to their bands could widen audience appeal. Not surprisingly, some of the black commercial leaders were among the first to augment their bands with jazz players. By 1923, Charles Cook, most commonly known as “Doc Cook,” had added New Orleans musicians Jimmy Noone and Freddie Keppard to his West Side Dreamland Ballroom band. Noone was the fluid-styled clarinetist and Keppard, the hulking and powerful cornetist who, ten years earlier, had earned the title “king” of the trumpeters in the Crescent City. John Wycliffe, another early black bandleader in Chicago and the first to take a black band into a Loop hotel—the Morrison in 1919—also hired Freddie Keppard early in the New Orleans cornetist’s tenure in Chicago.

A few years later, Keppard was hired...

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as a jazz soloist by director Erskine Tate for his pit orchestra at the Vendome Theater. Pianist Teddy Weatherford, local violinist Eddie South, and rising trumpet star Louis Armstrong also appeared as featured soloists in Tate’s orchestra later in the 1920s, much to the delight of theater audiences. Fats Waller joined the Vendome Theater staff as organist in 1927 and kept theater patrons happy with his colorful style at the console. Even Dave Peyton, the conservative theater conductor at the Grand and later the Regal Theater, gave in to the jazz craze by briefly hiring Joe “King” Oliver for his band at the Plantation Cafe in 1925.

Carroll Dickerson, another of the city’s South Side bandleaders, hired Earl Hines, then a popular young solo pianist, when Dickerson took his band on a tour of the Pantages Vaudeville Circuit in 1924. The band also featured three New Orleans jazzmen: trumpeter Willie Hightower, drummer Fred “Tubby” Hall, and trombonist Honore Dutrey. When Dickerson returned with a reorganized band to play a stint at the Sunset Cafe, his personnel included New Orleans or Louisiana musicians Hightower, Dutrey, drummer Zutty Singleton, and trumpeter Natty Domineque. Dickerson also added now-trumpet-star Louis Armstrong and Chicago jazz clarinetist Darnell Howard.

Chicago Jazz Musicians Come of Age
By the 1920s, a new, younger group of black Chicago musicians was emerging. Darnell Howard, a young violinist and clarinetist and one of the older members of this group, was by 1920 playing in Charlie Elgar’s dance band at the Dreamland Ballroom. Many other young black musicians growing up during the early 1920s were gaining valuable experience at Wendell Phillips High School—and later at DuSable High School—under the tutelage of N. Clark Smith and Walter Dyett. Ray Nance, Milton Hinton, Preston Jackson, Lionel Hampton, Franz Jackson, Nat Cole, Gene Ammons, and others emerged from this outstanding program. Many of them joined local South Side Chicago cabaret and dance bands of the
1920s and 1930s. A few, like Lionel Hampton and Ray Nance, eventually headed their own groups, and several, such as Milt Hinton, Preston Jackson, Gene Ammons, and Franz Jackson, became well-known jazz stars of the 1930s and 1940s.

While still a young player, Hinton joined the bands of Boyd Atkins and Tiny Parham. Tenor saxophonist Franz Jackson seemed to have worked with most of the South Side bands of the 1920s and 1930s. He began playing with Carroll Dickerson at the Grand Terrace while still in high school. Jackson also worked with Fletcher Henderson, Walter Barnes, Earl Hines, Jimmy Noone, and later, Roy Eldridge and Cab Calloway. Nat Cole became known as Nat "King" Cole after his success as a pianist/vocalist/leader of a small combo in California.

The situation in Chicago's white musical community developed somewhat differently. Quite a few of the veteran white New Orleans musicians who arrived in Chicago during the 1920s and earlier easily found their way into Chicago bands, the leaders of which were anxious to showcase their talents and learn about this new sound from the South. Gussie Mueller, clarinetist with Tom Brown's early band, went to work with Chicago bandleader and booking agent Bert Kelly. Beginning in 1920, white New Orleans bassist Steve "Ted" Brown, brother of Tom, worked with a variety of Chicago's commercial dance groups, starting with Cope Harvey. Eventually he worked and recorded with the Benson Orchestra of Chicago, Jean Goldkette's Chicago orchestra at WGN radio, and with Elmer Schoebel's orchestra at Midway Gardens. He also played for several years at the Friars Inn on Wabash Avenue with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, a band equally comprised of musicians from New Orleans and the Midwest.

Trombonist George Brunis, clarinetist Leon Rappolo, bassist Arnold Loyocano, and cornetist Paul Mares—all Crescent City members of the Rhythm Kings—also worked with other Chicago bands following the band's Friars Inn tenure. Brunis, for example, worked briefly as a leader at the Loop's Valentino's Inn before accepting a job with the Ted Lewis Orchestra. Lewis, who later hired Chicago jazz trumpeter Muggsy Spanier, quickly and astutely recognized the added value of augmenting (continued on page 4)
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his show band with a few jazz musicians.

But the situation was different for a group of young musicians from Chicago's white neighborhoods during the 1920s, who, like the young black musicians on the South Side, were enamoured of jazz music. While the young black musicians seemed to blend almost seamlessly into the South Side bands, the commercial white leaders at first took an arm-length view of these youngsters. Quite a few of these young musicians received a good musical education through private instruction and at places like the famed West Side settlement house, Hull House. But many learned to play on their own, often imitating parts that they heard on the jazz records of their heroes, such as the New Orleans Rhythm Kings and others. Many of these white musicians had also trekked to the South Side to listen to and learn from the great New Orleans jazzmen working in the clubs. Young musicians like Muggsy Spanier, Jimmy McPartland, Milton Mezzrow, Frank Teschemacher, Bud Freeman, Dave Tough, Gene Krupa, Dave North, Maurie Bercov, Art Hodes, Jim Lannigan, Voltaire (Volly) De Faut, Joe Sullivan, Floyd O'Brien, and Benny Goodman just could not get enough of this new, fascinating music from the South.

Many associates of the young Chicago musicians were, in fact, from other areas of the country but were mesmerized by the music they heard in the city and felt compelled to follow its beat. Bill Davison, Eddie Condon, Bix Beiderbecke, Danny Alvin, and Jess Stacey were just a few of the out-of-towners who perfected their craft alongside the young Chicagoans.

Commercial Dance Bands Jazz It Up

The new jazz music emerging on the South Side eventually piqued the interest of some of the white commercial danceband leaders, and many of them joined their associates and ventured into the South Side clubs and theaters to see what was transpiring there. Generally, however, they saw little purpose in hiring young white musicians who could play a hot chorus or two but who may have had trouble reading the dance band's written arrangements. They saw little purpose, that is, until a few of their more adventurous peers began adding jazzmen to their organizations for the resulting spark of excitement they provided. Sig Meyer, Husk O'Hare, Art Kassel, Bill Paley, Joe Kaysen, and Charley Straught were among the first of those to add hot jazzmen to their organizations.

Meyer, whose popular band played at the Columbia Ballroom on north Clark Street and at White City Amusement Park's ballroom on the far South Side, had in his band at one time or another Muggsy Spanier, Marvin Saxbe, Volly

De Faut, Dave Tough, Joe Sullivan, Frank Teschemacher, and Danny Altieri. Meyer also for a time is said to have hired two former New Orleans Rhythm Kings: bassist Arnold Loyocano and clarinetist Leon Rappolo. Meyer's strategy worked like a charm. The young white dancers crowded around the bandstand whenever one of the young men in the band took off on an improvised chorus.

Husk O'Hare, a Chicago booking agent who eventually had a score or more commercial bands working in town and throughout the Midwest, immediately saw what was happening and hired, intact, a band of young Chicago jazzmen, which he renamed Husk O'Hare's Wolverines. In the band were the McPartland brothers, Jimmy (cornet) and Dick (banjo); Frank Teschemacher (clarinet); Bud Freeman (tenor sax); Floyd O'Brien (trombone); Jim Lannigan (bass); Dave Tough (drums); and Dave North (piano). Later, several of the O'Hare Wolverines came together (with others) for a few recording sessions.
Charley Straight, like Meyer, was a commercial danceband leader but, toward the end of the 1920s, began using a few selected jazzmen in his band. Bix Beiderbecke, who was popular among both black and white Chicago musicians for his tone, phrasing, and attack, briefly played with Straight at the Rendezvous near Diversey and Clark streets. Wingy Manone, a one-armed New Orleans trumpeter, also was engaged as a Straight sideman about this time.

In 1928, ballroom and theater bandleader Joe Kayser, then working at the Arcadia Ballroom on the North Side, employed Muggsy Spanier on trumpet, Jess Stacey on piano, Danny Alvin on drums, and Maurie Bercov and Danny Altier on saxophone. With such a hot line-up for a straight commercial ballroom orchestra, Kayser demonstrated his understanding of the value of showmanship. In fact, according to the payroll sheet for the week of November 22, 1928, the jazzmen were all making more money than the commercial musicians in the band.

One challenge faced by commercial bandleaders was keeping the white jazz players motivated to play. For example, bandleader Art Kassel was said to have had difficulty inspiring musicians Jimmy McPartland and Bud Freeman to play straight dance music.

As distant as the Chicago jazz world was at first from that of the commercial dance bands, a certain understanding and, eventually, admiration developed out of reciprocal need. On the one hand, the young jazz players in Chicago—especially the white jazzmen—could not make a living by playing jazz alone. On the other hand, the city's commercial dance bands offered employment that would provide them with a regular income.

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, many of the young black and white Chicago musicians began moving to New York to play their style of music to a more receptive audience, taking advantage of both the growing employment opportunities there and the lure of the recording studios. Many of them owed their early experience to the Chicago leaders who reluctantly hired them more as attractions than for their music, but, in the process, helped them hone their musical talent.

Over the past forty years, Chicago music historian CHARLES A. SENGSTOCK JR. has written extensively about the development of jazz in Chicago. He is the author of Jazz Music in Chicago's Early South-side Theaters (Canterbury Press, 2000), and his articles have appeared in both U.S. and U.K. publications. He is a member of The Browsers, a group of Chicago big band nostalgia buffs who have a weekly program airs on the Satellite Music Network. A retired corporate public relations executive, Sengstock has written numerous articles on public relations, communications, and Chicago history, as well as a book titled Quality in the Communications Process (Motorola University Press, 1997).
Members of Project Stop-Time Advisory Committee

Jamu Wayne Tukes is a senior academic advisor at Columbia College Chicago. He holds degrees in counseling psychology (Ph.D.), urban studies (M.A.), and social psychology (B.A.). An educator, counselor, administrator, researcher, writer, and community activist, he has had employment affiliations with Bobby E. Wright Comprehensive Community Mental Health Center, Institute of Juvenile Research (University of Illinois at Chicago), the Better Boys Foundation, General Employment Enterprises, and Radio Marketing Research.

Tukes is an innovative thinker and practitioner who believes that “the foundation of a truly educated person rests upon character development and a thorough command of the senses.” His essays have appeared in local, national, and international publications, and he has made guest appearances on various broadcast media.

He is currently working on two major research projects. The first, under the auspices of The Aura Centre (TAC), is a wholistic and comprehensive approach to empowering individuals through sensory stimulus. The second, The Assessment Project (TAP), is a strategic instrument designed to gauge in a systematic way the pulse of our assets—i.e., providing an accounting and clear picture of our knowledge, skills, talents, gifts, genius, and resource—for the purpose of confidence, marketing, and institution building.

Richard Wang, associate professor of music in the Department of Performing Arts at the University of Illinois at Chicago since 1973, has been the department’s resident jazz scholar, historian, and all-around jazz authority. A native of Chicago’s South Side, he grew up with this uniquely American art form, playing trumpet professionally by the time he was fifteen and haunting the now-legendary clubs and theaters where jazz flourished in the 1930s and 1940s.

Speaking of the Regal Theatre on 47th Street, he describes it as “the center of the musical world for me at that time.” And he points out that Chicago has played a unique role in jazz history; today “it is a living museum of jazz. You can go to clubs almost any night and hear jazz in any of the important styles—that’s amazing. Maybe you could also do that in New York. You can’t do it in New Orleans or Kansas City. But you can do it here.”

Wang is director of the UIC Jazz Ensemble, a classic big band of between sixteen and twenty student musicians that performs both on and off campus during the course of the school year. The ensemble has appeared at the Green Mill on Chicago’s North Side, the Chicago Cultural Center, the Jazz Showcase, and the DuSable Museum. Its repertory includes classics from the recent and not-so-recent past by some of the great names in jazz: Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, Billy Strayhorn, and Wang’s all-time favorite, Duke Ellington.

Wang’s work in reconstructing Ellington’s musical comedy Jump for Joy for performance by the Pegasus Players brought him considerable fame, including prominent mention in Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report. And in 1990, for the annual Chicago Jazz Festival, he produced the Midwest premiere of Charles Mingus’ Epitaph, a complex, multimovement work that combines gospel, blues, and a whole range of jazz styles within the extended forms of Duke Ellington.

The National Endowment for the Humanities has recognized Wang’s scholarship with two research grants, as has the Illinois Arts Council. His articles have appeared in Black Music Research Journal, Musical Quarterly, Jazz Educators Journal, and in the New Grove Dictionary of Jazz. He has lectured at the Terra Museum of American Art, the Block Gallery of Northwestern University, and the Field Museum of Natural History.

Wang is past president of the Jazz Institute of Chicago, which programs the Chicago Jazz Festival. The Institute arranges concerts, collects archival materials, and offers educational programs—all designed to increase awareness and appreciation for jazz and of Chicago’s unique role in its history.
Members of Ensemble Stop-Time

Guitarist, banjoist, and mandolinist Buddy Fambro holds a degree in professional music from Berklee College of Music, where he studied guitar, composition, and arranging.

An active musician and producer, Fambro is leader of the group Higher Consciousness, which performs and records original compositions and arrangements. The music of Higher Consciousness features provocative melodies layered upon ethereal synthesizer textures, driven by dynamically diverse rhythms from around the world. As owner and operator of Higher Consciousness Recording Studio, Fambro records and produces his own projects, as well as those of others.

In addition to his performances with Ensemble Stop-Time, he has performed and recorded with Jon Faddis and the Chicago Jazz Institute, music producer Steve “Silk” Hurley, Michelle Shocked, Christopher Williams, the Staple Singers, and Otis Clay.

Keyboardist Roger Harris is a native Chicagoan whose musical talents were evident at an early age. After receiving his B.M. degree in music education/instrumental from Roosevelt University, he taught music in various school districts. In 1987, he won the Gary (Indiana) Public School system’s Teacher of the Year Award for the commercial music class (songwriters workshop) that he created.

As an instrumentalist, Harris has performed with most of Chicago’s prominent local musicians; jazz greats Stanley Turrentine, James Carter, and Freddy Hubbard; and on the soundtrack of the movie The Babe. As an arranger and composer, Harris scored the Emmy-nominated and Angel Award–winning Christian feature film, Go for Bad; and, in 1998, he served as the musical director for singer Melba Moore. Harris can be heard on the soundtrack of the Goodman Theatre production Oo-Blu-Dee and on many commercial jingles, both on television and radio. His acting credits include appearances in episodes of the television series “The Untouchables” and the movie The Babe.

In 1995, as a member of the Orbert Davis Quintet, he won the Cognac Hennessey Jazz Search contest in New York City.

Aaron Horne is the Acting Director of Northeastern Illinois University’s Center for Inner City Studies. He holds the Doctoral of Musical Arts and Master of Fine Arts (University of Iowa), Master of Music (Roosevelt University), and Bachelor of Science (Tennessee State University) degrees. Horne has completed postdoctoral study at Northwestern University, University of New Hampshire, and Harvard University.

He is active as a national and international performing artist and as a scholar. Among his publications are Brass Music of Black Composers (1996), String Music of Black Composers (1992), and Woodwind Music of Black Composers (1990), all published by Greenwood Press. Horne is also very active as a keynote speaker and consultant on minority issues, enrollment management, and the arts.

For more than thirty-five years, bassist John Whitfield has been known as “Mr. Bass Man.” A self-taught musician, he developed a masterful style of playing by listening to and emulating such greats as Ray Brown and James Jamerson.

John has played with Muddy Waters, James Moody, Joe Henderson, singer Peggy Lee, and numerous others. In addition to his performances with Ensemble Stop-Time, John regularly performs in and around Chicago.
Ensemble Stop-Time and The New Black Music Repertory Ensemble
May 5 and 6, 2000
Buntrock Hall, Symphony Center

Program

New Black Music Repertory Ensemble
Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, Conductor

String Overture (1994) William Foster McDaniel (b. 1940)
Violin Concerto in G Major, op. 2, no. 1 (1775) Chevalier de St. Georges (1739–1799)
Largo Rondeau

Ashley Horne, Violin

Suing Overmore (1994) William Foster McDaniel
McDaniel (b. 1940)

Brass Staves (1990) Wendell Logan (b. 1940)
Git Funk-Ky (to James Brown)

David Young, Trumpet
Prerecorded tape

Misterioso–Allegro
Alla Sarabande
Alla Burletta
Allegro Vivace

Intermission

Ensemble Stop-Time
T.S. Galloway, Music Director

King Porter Stomp Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton (1890–1941)
New Orleans/Chicago Style Jazz (in the style of Louis Armstrong)
Late Swing (in the style of Teddy Hill)
Modern Jazz (in the style of Gil Evans)

Main Stem Duke Ellington (1899–1974)
Concerto for Cootie Arthur Hoyle, Trumpet
Duke Ellington

I’ve Been ‘Buked (Negro spiritual, late 19th century) Traditional

The St. Louis Blues (blues, 1914) W. C. Handy (1873–1958)
Shining Star (soul, 1975) Maurice White, Philip Bailey, Larry Dunn
(Originally performed by Earth, Wind and Fire)
Maggie Brown, Vocals

Finale

Ensemble Stop-Time and New Black Music Repertory Ensemble

Stretch Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson

“Over the weekend, the center staged its boldest effort yet in illustrating the grand sweep of black musical tradition, with a concert featuring two of its performance groups: the New Black Music Repertory Ensemble and Ensemble Stop-Time. These bands performed concertos, overtures, stomps, blues, soul tunes and more. To hear all of this music in a single, marathon concert was to acquire new respect for the breadth of black musical expression of the past three centuries.”

Howard Reich, Arts Critic for The Chicago Tribune, in his review of the May 5 and 6 performances in Buntrock Hall, Symphony Center, Chicago.

Ensemble Stop-Time Activities: Year Two

The second season of Ensemble Stop-Time officially came to a close on August 27, 2000, with a rousing performance for more than 2,000 people at Little Black Pearl Workshop’s “Pearl Fest.” Since its debut performance on October 26, 1998, this amazing ensemble of 16 musicians, conducted by T. S. Galloway, has provided twenty-five lecture-demonstrations and five major performances throughout the Chicago metropolitan area. The Project Stop-Time goal for the ensemble was to present eighteen lecture-demonstrations and two major performances, but the public response to the group was so overwhelming that an additional seven lecture-demonstrations and three major performances were offered, as well as a special appearance at the Chicago Humanities Festival on November 11.
In addition to public events, Ensemble Stop-Time hosted four workshops with Chicago's All City Jazz Band, which featured twenty five talented young musicians from schools across the city, including Gordon Hubbard High, Lincoln Park High, Chicago Vocational High, Kenwood Academy, Morgan Park High, Shields High, and John Marshall High. The youth ensemble was able to sit in with the full Ensemble Stop-Time, whose members also provided sectional rehearsals. At the conclusion of the workshop series, the All City Jazz Band performed with Ensemble Stop-Time for the May 13 event in Douglas Park, pictured above.

During the second year of the project, Stop-Time presentations were made as follows:

- May 13, 2000
  Chicago Park District's Douglas Park

- July 15, 2000
  Chicago Park District's Humboldt Park Stables

- August 27, 2000
  Little Black Pearl Workshop's "Pearl Fest"

- November 11, 2000
  Field Museum
  Chicago Humanities Festival

The Center extends its gratitude to Kim Ransom, Community Development Coordinator, and to Columbia College Chicago's Office of Community Arts Partnerships, whose efforts in building a Community Culture Council resulted in scheduling and producing many of the lecture-demonstrations.

A limited number of Ensemble Stop-Time events will be scheduled during the coming year.
Photographs were used courtesy of Mr. Charles Walton, the Chicago Public Library’s Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, among others.
Love Jones (continued from page 12)

Intra-black diversity is the feeling. The characters listen to jazz, the Isley Brothers, and urban contemporary music. Their calculated and robust funkiness translates into frank talk about sensuality. They read Amiri Baraka, smoke, drink, swear, play cards, and, like carefree adolescents, they delight in playing the dozens with each other. With fluency, they pepper their musings on poetry, sexuality, Charlie Parker, gender relations, religion, and art with spicy, up-to-the-minute “black-speak” rhetoric. Witcher apparently wants us to associate these verbal exchanges and their accompanying body language with a contemporary performance-oriented African-American expressive culture.

Love Jones’s characters portray a hip, “big shoulders” black ethnicity that insiders recognize as realistic in cultural spaces like contemporary black Chicago. In this setting, the film’s narrative winds through various venues and situations wherein acts of ethnic performance can take place. One such space is a nightclub called the Sanctuary. Modeled after a jazz club, the Sanctuary features spoken-word poetry and live music and caters to black Generation X-ers. Its audience respects the performers, paying rapt attention to the time, timbre, lyric, and substance of each poet’s offering. Quiet music flows from the bandstand and jukebox, enveloping the Sanctuary with the soundtrack of hip, polite society.

Although contemporary R&B serves as the core musical lexicon of Love Jones, jazz references surface in the Sanctuary’s performance space and as a way to show how “enlightened” the characters are. In one scene, the blues piece “Jelly, Jelly, Jelly” becomes the soundtrack of the sexual frustration Darius and Nina experience as they try to ignore their lustful feelings for one another. Rap music, on the other hand, is heard only once in the film—during a car scene in which one of Darius’ friends is secretly courting Nina. In this very brief scene, rap music becomes quickly associated with a less-than-desirable character trait. It is important that the music in Love Jones is linked in many cases to other cultural practices like playing the dozens, dancing, card playing, and so on.

Representin’ in Hip-Hop Film

During the age of hip hop, black filmmakers worked to portray what they thought would be interpreted as realistic portraits of black urban life. Although some of these portrayals were popular, some critics believed that because of their influence, they helped to erect harmful stereotypes. Witcher, for example, was challenged to convince Hollywood executives that his kind of story could find a niche in the market of the early 1990s, which featured many “ghetto-centric” black films.

But Witcher succeeded in providing a glimpse into a world that is rarely depicted in mainstream Hollywood cinema. The expressive cultural world of Chicago’s black community shines through in Love Jones, confirming its leadership role in the black arts, and at the same time, expanding the representational possibilities of hip hop.
Project Stop-Time set as one of its goals to teach the history of Chicago’s rich black music legacy. Indeed, this tradition of music making was, at various times during the twentieth century, at the forefront of innovation in the American popular music scene. Historically, Chicago-area elementary schools, high schools, and colleges have in a variety of ways participated in the development and proliferation of some of these musical styles. For example, Columbia College Chicago, the home of the Center for Black Music Research, has produced a number of important artists who have played active roles in the continuation of the “Chicago aesthetic.” One such artist is filmmaker and poet Theodore Witcher, who graduated from Columbia College in 1991. His debut film, Love Jones, which he wrote and directed, appeared in 1997 to wide critical acclaim.

During the twentieth century, the art of film shaped myriad public perceptions of black culture. Music has served a similar role. When these two narrative forms are combined, they become powerful sites for the representation of black expressive culture. In the film Love Jones, for example, Witcher succeeds in expanding the lexicon of acceptable black subjects within the hip-hop culture. He achieves this largely through a dynamic use of music and its association with character types, geographic locations, and plot situations.

Love Jones’s Chi-Town Vibe
The film is an urban, Afro romantic comedy set in contemporary Chicago. An important element of the film is that Darryl Jones, a bassist and native Chicagoan, scored the original music. Love Jones’s eclectic soundtrack and the “musicking” practices associated with the music distinguishes the film from run-of-the-mill romantic comedies.

During the first few minutes of the film, Witcher sets the tone for the story that follows. He strings together a collage of brief urban scenes shot in black and white. The shots include the Chicago skyline, the El train, a rundown neighborhood, a modest storefront shop, trash-lined railroad tracks, a Baptist church, the hands of a shoeshine man, and the faces of black people—old, young, some profiling, others showing no awareness of the camera at all, but all of them are striking. Witcher’s stylish montage forecasts an approach to the presentation of inner-city blackness that departs from, and is, in my view, more expansive than previous films connected with hip-hop culture, such as Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing and John Singleton’s Boyz N the Hood.

The music underscoring this opening features the genteel song “Hopeless,” performed by the alternative hip-hop/R&B/rock singer Dionne Farris. The tune borders on soft rock and has virtually none of the hip-hop legacy. Indeed, this tradition of Love Jones’s Chi-Town Vibe conventions that one expects in rap music. The lyrics of “Hopeless” play a trick on the viewer because we hear the word hopeless against the first few scenes in the montage, which at first appear to paint a somewhat bleak depiction of inner-city life. But as the visual sequences progress, smiles begin to appear on the faces of the subjects, and as the musical narrative spins out, we learn that Farris is, in fact, singing about romantic love and not social commentary. She is as “hopeless as a penny with a hole in it.”

Signifying Styles in the Age of Hip-Hop
Love Jones features an attractive group of educated, comfortably middle class, twenty-something, Generation-X characters. Their hairdos (always a political statement with regard to African-American culture) cover the spectrum from close-cropped, dreadlocks, and braids to chemically straightened. They live in tastefully appointed homes, lofts, and apartments that are lined with books and stylishly decorated with modern and African art. They are dressed for success and “wearing the right thing,” if I might borrow Lee’s film title for the moment.

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