MUZING NEW HOODS, MAKING NEW IDENTITIES
Film, Hip-Hop Culture, and Jazz Music

by Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.

We make our lives in identifications with the texts around us everyday.

Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film Music*

The medium of film has communicated, shaped, reproduced and challenged various notions of black subjectivity in 20th century America since D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* appeared in 1915. Writing in 1949, Ralph Ellison argued that *Birth of a Nation* “forged the twin screen image of the Negro as bestial rapist and grinning, eye-rolling clown—stereotypes that are still with us today” (Ellison 275). Such depictions in cinema had already existed in print media; and they have persisted in all mass-mediated contexts in varying degrees throughout the century. Film, however, has provided a most salient medium for the visual representation of African American subjects. If, as Manthia Diawara has argued, the camera is, “the most important invention of modern time,” then it becomes an even more powerful tool when its technology is combined with the powers of music. Indeed, when filmmakers combine cinematic images and musical gestures they unite two of our most compelling modes of perception: the visual and the aural.

Below I consider two films produced during the Age of Hip Hop: Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and Theodore Witcher’s *Love Jones* (1997).1 On an immediate level, I am interested how music shapes the way we perceive these cinematic narratives individually; how music informs the way audiences experience their characters, locations, and plots. But I am also making a larger argument for how the musical scores of these films are sites for the negotiation of personal identity and self-fashioning on the one hand, and the making and negotiation of group identity, on the other. Both of these activities inform “meaning” in important ways. Jazz music, in these films generally serves as a foil to hip hop music, which the directors use as the primary musical index for the black “authentic” subject. While the use of jazz in these three films may be comparatively minor, a discussion of it is instructive about the developing meanings of various black musical styles.

Below I address several questions with regard to this cinematic function of music in hip-hop film. What role does musical discourse play in cinematic representation? If one of the primary thrusts of black cultural production has been the resistance to
and countering of negative black stereotypes forwarded since Birth of a Nation, how
does the musical score of the film participate in this agenda? How does the score, in
fact, score or artistically (re)invent a black cinematic nation? The musical scores of Do
the Right Thing and Love Jones provides excellent examples of the fluidity and
contestation embedded in the notion “black identity,” a topic that had become such a
compelling one for theoretical, political, and artistic reflection in the late 20th
century. Before moving to the music in these films, I need to address an important
topic raised in most discussions of them: the degree to which they accurately portray
an “authentic” black cultural experience.

Keeping it Reel: Diversity, Authenticity,
and the Hip-Hop Muze

Hip hop culture has taken on the profile of a cottage industry because of aggressive
corporate commodification. The postindustrial decline of United States urban cen-
ters, a downward turn that ironically spawned hip hop’s developments, has been co-
opted by corporate America and represented as a glossy, yet gritty complex of music
idioms, sports imagery, fashion statements, racial themes, danger, and pleasure.
While history shows us the persistence of the exploitation of African American
culture in the United States, hip hop represents an exemplary case in this regard. As
the historian Robin D.G. Kelley writes, “few employment opportunities for African-
Americans and a white consumer market eager to be entertained by the Other, blacks
have historically occupied a central place in the popular culture industry” (Kelley 46).
Kelley argues further that

Nike, Reebok, L.A. Gear, and other athletic shoe conglomerates
have profited enormously from postindustrial decline. TV com-
mercials and print ads romanticize the crumbling urban spaces
in which African American youth must play, and in so doing
they have created a vast market for overpriced sneakers. These
televisual representations of “street ball” are quite remarkable;
marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and
rusted netless hoops, graffiti-scrawled walls, and empty build-
ings, they have created a world where young black males do
nothing but play. (44)

The omnipresence of such imagery in the media has made a strong impact on notions
of “authenticity” in African American culture. And moreover, music and musical
practices continue to play a crucial role in the creation, re-negotiation, and critique of
the authenticity trope.

The intersection of hip hop musical practices and film serves as a cogent example.
Hollywood in the early 1990s presented young fans with films like New Jack City, Boyz
N the Hood, Strictly Business, and Juice, among others. Taken together, these films have
helped to create a highly recognizable hip-hop mode of representing a one dimension-
al black youth culture. As filmmaker Spike Lee notes, these “inner-city homeboy revues” created a world in which “all black people lived in ghettos, did crack and rapped” (quoted in Gates 12). As thematic heirs of the 1970s blaxploitation genre of film, the 1990s’ version has been dubbed “rapsplotiation” or as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has labeled it, “guiltplotiation.” Gates uses the latter term to characterize what he sees as a key message underlying many of these films: ambiguity about upward mobility. His observations about class status and black mobility are worth noting:

The politics of black identity, and the determined quest to reconcile upward mobility with cultural “authenticity,” is a central preoccupation of these films. If genuine black culture is the culture of the streets, a point on which the blaxploitation films were clear, how can you climb the corporate ladder without being a traitor to your race? What happens when homeboy leaves home? A new genre—guiltplotiation—is born. (Gates 12)

Gates sees this trend as directly linked to the attitudes and backgrounds of the filmmakers. Rapsplotiation of the early 1990s occurred, in part, because of an emergence of young, black, college-educated, and middle class directors. Gates argues that these auteurs did not choose to close “the gulf between the real black people behind the camera and the characters they’ve assembled in front of it” (Gates 13).

Beyond this underlying class status tension, critics have also raised questions with respect to gender issues in these films. Feminist critics such as Valerie Smith, Michele Wallace, bell hooks, Wahneema Lubiana, and Jacquie Jones, among others, have noted that the perceived “realness” of the rapsplotiation film genre is also real hostile to black women. But the class-based and feminist critiques of these films are sometimes difficult to articulate because of the compelling nature of the film experience itself and what Smith has identified as a documentary impulse. Michele Wallace, for example, admitted: “The first time I say John Singleton’s Boyz N the Hood [1991], I was completely swept away by the drama and the tragedy. It was like watching the last act of Hamlet or Titus Andronicus for the first time. When I left the theater, I was crying for all the dead black men in my family” (Wallace 123). Upon subsequent viewings, however, Wallace noticed the strain of misogyny running throughout much of the film. She perceived that Boyz and other films like it seemed to be saying that the dismal social conditions depicted in these films were due to character flaws in the women.

Valerie Smith has argued that a documentary impulse authenticates these films with claims that they represent the “real.” They achieve this documentary aura through an uncritical use of various aural and visual markers of “real” black living conditions, reproducing stereotypical ideas about African-Americans. The boundaries separating fact and fiction, truth and artistic invention become blurred. Smith notes that critics, reviewers, and press kits assure audiences that these black male directors were “endangered species” themselves and are thus “in positions of authority relative to their material” (Smith 58).

While the importance of film cannot be dismissed, we should be careful to recognize the difference between cinematic entertainment and the “truth” of lived
experience. There does not exist a one-to-one homology between lived experience and representations of such in film. At the same time, we should keep in mind that the same social energy that sustains ideologies like misogyny and other forms of discrimination also circulates in the narratives of these films. In other words, these directors didn’t invent the misogyny, but they help to reproduce it. In this sense, they—perhaps unconsciously—kept it real, as the saying goes.

Writer Lisa Kennedy has argued that the complex of money, narrative, and pleasure bound up in film experiences makes them “extraordinarily powerful.” Film, she writes, is how America looks at itself.” Nonetheless, she warns us against confusing the “individual vision” of an artist like a filmmaker with “the” collective reality of a group of people. Despite this warning, the dialogic interplay among “real” lived experience and film narratives (and for that matter, television shows news programs, independent documentaries, print media, and music) remains an important fact of late-twentieth century life. In the case of film, “the real lives of people are substantiated by their reel lives” (Kennedy 110).

And as I will argue over the next few pages, the nexus of “reel life” and music and musical practices have import on the topic of black music and meaning. What interests me here is not so much the critique of monolithic representations of black class status and life expectations represented in these films. (As we shall see, the film *Love Jones* does this more than adequately.) Nor do I want to question Hollywood’s capital driven fixation on exploiting this topic. Rather, I want to explore film as one way to enter into an analysis of the intersection of black identity and musical practice. As writers, directors, producers, and composers work together to create convincing characters and story worlds for audiences, they do so with the help of musical codes that circulate and in some ways create cultural knowledge, in the present case, about how “blackness” is experienced in the social world at that historical moment in question.

What’s the Score? Functions of Music in Film

Before turning to the specific films in question, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of how music in cinema works generally. Broadly speaking, music works to enhance the storyworld of the film; it deepens the audience’s experience of the narrative and adds continuity to the film’s scene by scene progression, providing what Claudia Gorbman calls the “bath of affect” (Gorbman 6). Anahid Kassabian argues that the study of music in film should not be an afterthought to what might be considered the more important areas of plot and characterization: “Music draws filmgoers into a film’s world, measure by measure. It is . . . at least as significant as the visual and narrative components that have dominated film studies. It conditions identification processes, the encounters between film texts and filmgoers’ psyches” (Kassabian 1).

The music in contemporary Hollywood films divide into two broad categories. The first is the composed score, which consists of music written specifically for the film. The second type is the compiled score: songs collected from sources that often preexisted the film. According to a Kassabian, these two modes of musical address are
designed to generate different responses from the perceiver. The composed score, she argues, is usually associated with the classical Hollywood score and encourages “assimilating identifications,” that is, it helps to “draw perceivers into socially and historically unfamiliar positions, as do larger scale processes of assimilation” (Kassabian 2).

The scoring techniques of the classical Hollywood cinema can achieve this end because of their unconscious familiarity to filmgoers: They have become naturalized through constant repetition. With few exceptions, the musical language of 19th-Century Romanticism forms the “core musical lexicon” of American films. Music’s cultural and cinematic work depends on its ability to signify an emotion, a location, a personality-type, a frightening situation, and so on. The specific musical language of 19th-century Romanticism works well in this function because it has been used in this way repeatedly since the 1930s. This repetition has produced a desired result in film scores, since as Gorbman notes, “a music cue’s signification must be instantly recognized as such in order to work” (Gorbman 4).

We can experience the hallmarks of these scoring techniques in the classic Hollywood film, In This Our Life. As the opening credits roll in this black & white film, we hear Max Steiner’s familiar orchestral strains typical of films during this era. The string section bathes the soundscape with sweeping melodies and a Wagnerian orchestral lushness that signals to the audience intense emotion and melodrama. Throughout the film, orchestral codes sharpen our perception of characters’ interior motivations, propel the narrative forward, and help to provide smooth transitions between edits. During the plot exposition of the film, for example, we met the vixen Stanley, played by the inimitable queen of melodrama Bette Davis.

Although the other characters’ dialogues have revealed some of her less than desirable personal qualities, the orchestral strains of the score reveal to the audience much more than mere plot exposition could ever suggest. In her first appearance, Stanley drives up to the house with a male passenger. Viewers hear an ominous sounding minor chord that is scored in the lower registers of the sounding instruments. As it turns out, the male passenger is her sister’s husband, a man with whom Stanley is having a torrid affair. After a brief dialog between the two reveals Stanley’s manipulative personality—underscored, of course, with melodramatic orchestral passages—the score transitions into animated rhythmic gestures that dissolve into an ascending pizzacato string passage as Stanley leaves the car and bounds up the steps into the family’s spacious Victorian home. The music has helped to situate us in the plot and to identify with its characters despite our own subject positions, which may or may not be quite different from those depicted in the film.

The compiled score, a staple feature of many Hollywood films since the 1980s, brings with it “the immediate threat of history” (Kassabian 3). It encourages perceivers to make external associations with the song in question and these reactions become part of the cultural transaction occurring between the film and its audience. Compiled scores produce what Kassabian calls “affiliating identifications.” The connections that perceivers make depend on the relationship they have developed with the songs outside of the context of the film experience. “If offers of assimilating identifications try to narrow the psychic field,” Kassabian argues, “then offers of affiliating identifications open it wide” (Kassabian 3). The discussion that follows will explore how
such distinctions bear on the interpretation of music in hip hop film, a body of cinema with obvious and strong associations with a genre of music with a discreet history unto itself.

Both the classic and compiled scores’ relationship to the story world of the film can be divided into two primary modes of presentation: diegetic and nondiegetic music. Diegetic (or source music) is produced from within the perceived narrative world of the film. By contrast, nondiegetic music, that is, music produced from outside the story world of the film serves the narration by signaling emotional states, propelling dramatic action, depicting a geographical location or time period, among other factors. Most of the music in a film fits into this category.

Another kind of musical address in film blends the diegetic and nondiegetic. Earle Hagen calls this type of film music source scoring. In source scoring the musical cue can start out as diegetic but then change over to nondiegetic. This kind of shift usually occurs concurrently with a change in the cue’s relationship to onscreen events, most likely with the narrative world and the musical score demonstrating a much closer fit (Kassabian 44–45). With these ideas about music in film in mind, I turn now to Spike Lee’s now classic film Do the Right Thing.

Do the Right Thing

As I stated above, Griffin’s Birth of a Nation stands as the symbolic beginning of American cinema, providing a grammar book for Hollywood’s historic (and unquestionably negative) depiction of black subjects. Likewise, Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing (hereafter DTRT) may be viewed as a kind of Ur-text for black representation in the so-called ghetto-centric, New Jack flicks of the Hip-Hop Era. This film is important for a number of reasons. Lee succeeded in showing powerful Hollywood studios that this new genre of comparatively low-budget films could be profitable to the major studios. DTRT’s popular and critical reception (it earned millions and an Academy Award nomination) caused Lee’s star to rise to such a degree that he became the most visible black filmmaker of the past decade. Hollywood studios tried to duplicate DTRT’s success, thus allowing other black directors access to the Hollywood production system, albeit within predictably prescribed limits (Watkins 108).

Lee’s use of rap music (and some of the musical practices associated with it) demonstrated how it could be used to depict a range of associations. Some of these include: black male and female subjectivity, ethnic identity, a sense of location, emotional and mental states, a specific historical moment, and the perspectives of age groups. In these realms, DTRT cast a long shadow over the repertoire of acceptable character types, plots, and themes in subsequent ghetto-centric films during the Age of Hip Hop.

Scoring the Right Thing

DTRT conforms to some of the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema discussed above but with marked differences. Victoria E. Johnson has recognized the
importance of music in *DTRT*, calling it Lee’s most musical film (Johnson). She identifies two primary modes of musical rhetoric in the score. What she calls the “historic-nostalgic” strain encompasses, for the most part, orchestral music written by Lee’s father, Bill Lee. The sound is reminiscent of some of the chamber music by African-American composer William Grant Still—quaint, genteel, and staid. Interestingly, Branford Marsalis’s jazz-inflected saxophone and Terrance Blanchard’s trumpet perform the melodies. This music is always non-diegetic, and in Johnson’s view, serves to convey a romanticized vision of community in the ethnically mixed neighborhood in which the story takes place. This use of music corresponds to the classical approach.

Rap music rests at the other end of the aesthetic continuum in this film. The group Public Enemy’s rap anthem “Fight the Power” (1989) is heard diegetically at various points in the film as it pours out of the character Radio Raheem’s boom box. Johnson argues that the other musical styles heard in the film, which includes jazz, soul, and R&B, mediate the two extremes represented by rap and Bill Lee’s original score. There is one exception to this observation, however. Jazz is also used non-diegetically to help depict emotional exchanges between characters.

While I generally agree with Johnson’s reading, I depart from it on several points. Johnson stresses that Lee is conversant with classical scoring conventions and that he “manipulates convention in a traditional manner to orient spectators within the film story” (Johnson 52). I experience *DTRT* somewhat differently here. The somewhat unconventional approach of the score “disorients” the audience in my view. This musical strategy is joined to unusual cinematic techniques such as “unrealistic” visual angles that call attention to the camera, and a use of music that moves back and forth between “bath of affect” and “listen to me” narrative positions.

The three modes of musical language in the film—the orchestral music of the Natural Spiritual Orchestra (non-diegetic), the popular music played by WLOV radio station (diegetic), and the rap music from Radio Raheem’s boom box (diegetic) create a rather hectic and conflicted semiotic field. Consider, for example, the first five scenes in which we hear the orchestral music that Johnson believes signals a romanticized community. During a monologue in front of the Yes, Jesus Light Baptist Church, the speech-impaired character Smiley talks about the futility of hate in society while holding up a small placard of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Smiley’s stammering seems somewhat at odds with the placid musical gestures heard in conjunction with it.

The next time we hear this mode of music, the Italian pizzeria owner Sal and his sons Vito and Pino drive up to their shop, which sits on a garbage strewn corner of a primarily black neighborhood. (Ironically, other scenes in the film portray the neighborhood as whistle clean.) In this scene we learn of the deep hatred Vito harbors for this neighborhood and for the people who live there. Although Sal admits with glib resolution that the air-conditioner repairman had refused to come around without an escort, he can barely contain his anger over both Vito’s attitude about working in the neighborhood. This scene does not, in my view, conjure a romanticized community. Again, the placid strains of the score seem strangely at odds with the narrative world on screen.
When the character Mookie (played by Spike Lee) exits his brownstone into the morning sun, the neighborhood is stirring with Saturday morning activity. The orchestral strains do portray a cozy, communal feeling in this third instance of hearing this mode of music. But in the very next scene in which music of this type is heard, the character Mother-Sister and Da Major, the neighborhood’s matriarch and patriarch, respectively, trade insults with one another. The fifth time the orchestra is heard, Jade, Mookie’s sister, is lovingly combing Mother-Sister’s hair on the sun-baked front stoop of a brownstone. The communal feeling created by the music and the scene quickly dissipates, however, as Mother-Sister deflects a compliment from Da Major, responding to his polite advance by hurling more insults. Thus, I see the score not so much signaling community. It functions, rather, to highlight conflict and tension in the narrative world of the film. This strategy sets the viewer on edge and frustrates any “settle-ness” that might be forwarded in the scene.

But the music that Mister Senor Love Daddy plays on the radio station WLOV does seem to signal community. It marks the geographic space of the neighborhood and underscores his references to love and the importance of community togetherness. In the early scenes of the film, the radio music, which consists of various styles of R&B—replete with gospel singing and funk beats—is heard in sundry settings. We hear it in Da Major’s bedroom as he rises, in Mookie’s and Jade’s apartment, in a Puerto Rican home, and in a Korean-owned grocery store—in every cultural space except Sal’s Pizzaria. This compiled score music inspires the idea of a “community,” one created by the spatial boundaries of the radio station’s broadcast span.

Nonetheless, WLOV’s programming inspires one instance of community conflict. When Mookie, an African American, dedicates a song (Rueben Blades’s “Tu y Yo”) to his Puerto Rican girlfriend, Tina, a group of Puerto Rican young men enjoy the tune on a front stoop. As Radio Raheem passes by playing “Fight the Power,” a battle of decibels ensues. “Fight the Power” wins the bout as Radio Raheem’s boom box overpowers the scene with one turn of the volume knob. This confrontation contrasts with the first meeting of Radio Raheem’s music and that of WLOV. Community alliances, like Lee’s cinematic uses of various musical styles, are fluid and situational. Why, one might ask, didn’t the Puerto Ricans identify with the “Fight the Power” message?

Gorbman writes that “music is codified in the filmic context itself, and assumes meaning by virtue of its placement in the film” (Gorbman 3). Because of the audience’s familiarity with rap music and the dynamic formal qualities of the music, Lee is able to highlight its “difference” from other musical styles in DTRT’s score. As the film progresses, however, the audience experiences a level of familiarity with “Fight the Power” because of its persistent use. Lee is able to re-encode rap music’s signifying affect during the film’s narrative.

Lee can achieve this because he capitalizes on the history of Public Enemy’s reputation outside the use of “Fight the Power” in this film. Clearly, this use fits into the affiliating identifications category. At the same time, the repetitive hearings of the piece also allow us to spill over into the assimilating identifications arena. I argue this because the repetitive use of “Fight the Power” allows Lee to manipulate audience members of different subject positions to relate to the musical conventions and political message of the piece because they understand what it means cinematically.
Thus, they have been assimilated into a particular reaction or identification with the music and, perhaps, the story world and its characters as well.

If the typical classic Hollywood film score renders the audience “less awake,” as Gorbman contends, then Lee’s use of rap music breaks that pattern. He positions it as an intrusive, embodied presence in the film.

Among all of the music rooted in the black vernacular, jazz plays a minimal role. When jazz is heard, it functions much like the music of classical Hollywood scoring. Its signifying affect narrows the psychic field, assimilating a diverse audience of perceivers into identifications with an emotional state, for instance. This observation cuts two ways. For one, it shows where jazz is situated in hip hop discourse of the late 1980s. It had a somewhat marginal status, one that would certainly change, however, in subsequent years. Second, jazz had achieved a level of familiarity that approached that of 19th-century orchestral music and could, therefore, be used to situate a listener’s identifications in the storyworld of a film. As we shall see below, jazz-related and inspired practices would soon become a more important factor in hip hop’s aesthetic profile.

Constructing the New Black Bohemia in *Love Jones*

The film *Love Jones* expands the hip-hop lexicon of acceptable black subjects and their corresponding musical associations. The film is an urban, Afro-romantic comedy, written and directed by Theodore Witcher and is set in contemporary Chicago. Darryl Jones, a bassist and native Chicagoan, scored the original music. *Love Jones’* eclectic soundtrack and the “musicking” practices associated with the music distinguishes the film from run-of-the mill romantic comedies.

Consider the first few minutes of the film, in which Witcher, (like Lee and Singleton before him), sets the tone for the story that follows. During the opening, Witcher strings together a jumble of short urban scenes, including the Chicago skyline, the El train, a run-down 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 striking. Filmed in black and white, 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, the two previous films I have discussed.

The music underscoring the opening features the genteel song “Hopeless” performed by singer Dionne Farris. The tune borders on soft rock and has virtually none of the hip hop conventions heard in *DTRT* and *BNTH*. The lyrics of “Hopeless” plays a slight trick on the viewer because we hear the lyric “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 and begin wipe across the subjects’ faces. And as the musical narrative spins out, we learn that Farris is singing about romantic love and not social commentary: she’s as “hopeless as a penny with a hole in it.”
Love Jones features an attractive posse of educated, widely read, comfortably middle-class twenty-something, generation X styled characters. Their hairdos (always a politically statement with regard to African American culture) cover the spectrum: close cropped, dred-locks, braids, 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 title for the moment. 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 talk a boatload of shit in grand style. Like carefree adolescents, they delight in playing the dozens with each other. And 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 recognize these verbal exchanges and their accompanying body attitudes with a contemporary performance-oriented African American 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. The Sanctuary appears to cater to black generations X-ers. Its audience respects the performers, paying rapt attention to the time, timbre, lyric, and substance of each poet’s offering. Quiet diegetic music from the bandstand and jukebox envelopes the Sanctuary with the soundtrack of hip, polite society.

The film tells a love story between Darius Lovehall, an aspiring novelist and spoken word poet, and Nina Mosley, an ambitious freelance photographer. Darius is a regular performer at the Monday night open-mike session; Nina, who is on the rebound from a bad relationship, is there relaxing with a female friend. Nina and Darius meet. Nina initiates a conversation, following their exchange of curious glances. Shortly thereafter, an M.C. invites Darius to the stage and he performs a sexually explicit poem, which he titles at the last moment (in true “Mack Daddy” fashion), “A Blues for Nina.”

The performance itself is, in fact, not blues or jazz performance but what might be described as easy listening funk: an ostinato bass pattern in D-minor splashed with subdued colors from a saxophone’s soulful riffing. References from black music history inform the poetry; in one line Darius says that he’s “the blues in your left thigh, trying to become the funk in your right.” The audience, which is depicted in a series of very flattering close-ups that are reminiscent of the opening montage, responds with sporadic declaratory affirmations. These vocables provide an obligatory bow to the southern past, even if these verbal exclamations may no longer signify that history solely.

Music in Love Jones works overtime. Its characters are, in my view, more fully constructed, engaging in more musical practices and cultural spaces than in the previous film discussed. Music in the pool hall, the night club, the house party, the WVON “stepper’s set,” the reggae club, and the residences expands the representa-
tions of Hip-Hop Era blackness on screen. While this depiction of black bohemia may be a caricature itself, when compared to contemporaneous visions of black life in America like DRTT, Love Jones can only be viewed as a counterweight to those characterizations.

Although contemporary R&B forms 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 case, the jazz/blues piece “Jelly, Jelly, Jelly” becomes the soundtrack of sexual frustration as Darius and Nina try to suppress their lust for one another. Importantly, rap music is heard only one time in the film: during a car scene in which one of Darius’ friends is courting Nina behind his back. In this very brief scene, rap music becomes associated with a questionable character trait.

Interestingly, in both these films (and in John Singleton’s Boyz N the Hood), music was linked to other black cultural practices like the dozens, dance, card playing, and so on. Music was central to constructing black characters within these films’ narratives. Rap music, for example, helped to create specific kinds of character traits in (male) subjects: politicized, nihilistic, or underhanded. Various styles of jazz were used for their identifications with middle-class culture or to enhance the audience’s experience of emotional states. R&B styles, for the most part, were used to depict communal associations. The quasi-orchestral music linked most closely to the sound of classic Hollywood scoring—when it did appear in these films—was used in traditional ways: to assimilate audiences into a particular mode of identification with characters and plot situations.

During the Age of Hip-Hop, filmmakers like Spike Lee and Theodore Witcher, among others, worked to portray what they thought were realistic portraits of urban life. While their portrayals were popular, many critics believed that they helped to erect harmful stereotypes. Witcher, director of Love Jones, for example, was challenged to convince film executives that his kind of story could find a niche in the market or was even plausible because of the ghettocentric focus of so many black films of the early 1990s (Watkins 233). Thus, despite the way in which directors might have positioned their work as countering hegemony in Hollywood, their approaches and the repetition of such, became conventions against which those interested in other kinds of representations would have to struggle.

The juxtaposition of different black musical styles in these films demands that audiences grapple with the ways in which numerous musical developments have appeared under the cultural umbrella of hip hop. How these styles relate to one another cinematically represents only one arena of interest. These expressions have enlarged the boundaries of hip hop, and this expansion has inspired celebration, descent, and, of course, debate of exactly where these boundaries should be. Because of the persistence of older styles of black music and their continual evolution of meanings during the Age of Hip Hop, filmmakers were able to use these external associations as part of the way in which audiences would experience these scores, and thus their cinematic representations.

Do the Right Thing’s and Love Jones’s portrayals are meditations on how modern blackness is experienced in cities that in the 1940s represented the promised land—the cultural spaces to which black humanity flocked in order to participate fully in
modern America. The urban conditions recently called the postindustrial and the artistic responses to these conditions reflect the changing social configuration of the late 20th-century American city. Just as Dizzy Gillespie’s Afro-Cuban experiments participated in a new demographic shift in the 1940s (that is Cubans migrating to the United States), today’s musicians mix hip hop conventions with other expressions to reflect the configuration and constant refigurations of their social worlds and the statements they want to make in them.

If it is indeed true, as the epigraph to this article purposes, that contemporary people fashion their lives with the texts around them, then the study of hip hop film provides a fruitful site of inquiry in this regard. In the two films discussed here, directors and composers worked together to create narratives in which audience members could engage and with which they could form identifications. These texts became ways through which some understood themselves and others in their social world. Music formed an important component in these narratives, serving to order the social world in both the cinematic and real life domains.

NOTES

2. In This Our Life, directed by John Houston and with a score by Max Steiner (1942).
3. The original score is played by The Natural Spiritual Orchestra, William Lee, conductor. The ensemble is organized as a string orchestra and jazz combo. It features Branford Marsalis, Terrance Blanchard, Kenny Baron, Jeff Watts and other noted jazz musicians.

WORKS CITED

This article is a shortened version of a chapter in my Race Music: Migration, Modernism and Gender Politics in Black Popular Culture (forthcoming from the University of California Press).