THE NARRATIVE, THE HISTORY AND THE STORIES OF BLACK MUSIC

by Alberto Popolla

Nicola Gaeta
Black Beauty. Storie di musica nera
Introduction by Logan Richardson
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In 1967, the Italian version of Nino Ferrer's *Je veux être noir* appeared, a song released the previous year in France that was an authentic declaration of love for music and musicians united by the color of their skin. It went like this:

> *"Mr. King, Mr. Charles, Mr. Brown / I do everything I can to sing like you / But there is nothing I can do, I will never manage it / I think it is only because my color is wrong / That is why I would like / I would like to have black skin."*

Reading *Black Beauty. Storie di musica nera*, written by Nicola Gaeta, one finds the same desire that moved Ferrer, that sincere wish to feel close to African American culture. Gaeta, after all, is a long-established voice in jazz criticism (and, throughout his professional life, a doctor), a passionate and discerning expert on the subject, as shown by his constant presence in the pages of *Musica Jazz* (and, for some time now, also in *Quaderni d'Altri Tempi*). In this imposing publishing endeavor, running to some eight hundred pages, a number of fixed points must first be identified, elements that substantially characterize the work: its ability to stimulate reflection and debate, critical thinking, and even opposing opinions, especially in the first eighty pages, which provide the interpretive key with which to approach the journey.

Another cornerstone is the overturning of musical genres, the bringing together under the acronym BAM, Black American Music, of a whole range of music and artists that are usually kept separate, thereby generating a cultural experience divided into watertight compartments and lacking flexibility and open-mindedness. The book's principal aim lies precisely here: in the desire to break down barriers and offer as comprehensive a picture as possible of the musical world derived from African American culture, for musicians and ordinary listeners alike, for scholars and enthusiasts, while seeking a position equidistant from the historical Eurocentric view and the Afrocentric one (Ferrer echoes once again).

> *"This is why I find any discussion that creates oppositions in music between Black people on one side and white people on the other useless, an irrelevance demonstrated by what actually happens: a good fifty percent of jazz concert audiences are white, many Black musicians of our time express themselves, and at their best, with the contribution of musicians of other ethnicities, and most groups that support BAM are mixed."*
> *(Gaeta, 2026)*

All this is presented with intellectual honesty, another cornerstone of the work: its language, exposition and treatment are the result of deep work carried out by an enthusiast with full knowledge of the subject, an expert who favors feeling and passionate impulse over scientific analysis.

> *"Writing a book about Black music is like trying to collect the sea in a bottle. For every artist mentioned, there are ten waiting, silent or unheard, at the edge of the page. This book is not a compendium, nor a dictionary, and it does not wish to be one. It is, rather, one possible path, a*

subjective and evolving map traced across eras, voices, struggles and visions. [...]
If there is a thread linking these pages, it is that of deep listening: not only to sound, but to the world that sound reflects, rejects or dreams of. Every trumpet that calls, every sampler that fractures, every chorus that answers reminds us that Black music is more than a genre. It is an unfinished history. A mother tongue. A geography of self and other."
(Gaeta, 2026)

From this point of view, the source of inspiration is clear and is often cited in the pages of *Black Beauty*: Arrigo Polillo's fundamental book *Jazz. La vicenda e i protagonisti della musica afro-americana*, first published by Mondadori in October 1975, repeatedly reprinted and for a long time one of the very few, if not the only, histories of jazz available in Italy. The other point of reference is *Il Libro del Jazz* by German journalist and critic Joachim Ernst Berendt, published by Vallardi in 1979. From Berendt, Gaeta takes the decade-by-decade organization, from 1900 to 2020, with a final chapter addressing the most recent period, from 2020 to 2025. Each chapter is preceded by a brief historical overview that places the most significant artists of the decade fully within the political, social and cultural dynamics of their time. The surprise, compared with Polillo and Berendt, is of course the inclusion, across the various decades, of artists connected not only with jazz or blues (and rock in Berendt's case), but with all the different musical currents that African American culture has expressed over the years.

Thus we find Sam Cooke alongside Charles Mingus and Booker Little, Robert Johnson and Cuban percussionist Machito, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, James Brown and Aretha Franklin, Michael Jackson and Prince, D'Angelo, Erykah Badu and Roy Hargrove, the Roots and Meshell Ndegeocello, Kamasi Washington, Logan Richardson (who also wrote the introduction), Kendrick Lamar, Nicholas Payton and Ambrose Akinmusire (both featured in the book, together with other musicians, in detailed and in-depth interviews). In short, it is a genuine handbook that reaches the present day and also attempts to outline possible future directions and developments, telling the stories of musicians with passion and involvement, without dwelling excessively on musical analysis, and trying to reshuffle the usual historical-artistic treatment by emphasizing the Black, African American component that lies at the foundation of much of the music we listen to, at least in the West.

Let us take a step back, however, and clarify more precisely what Black American Music means, and what perspective the successful acronym BAM indicates. It is difficult to explain it better than trumpeter Nicholas Payton, one of BAM's leading advocates and theorists, who, in an interview given to Gaeta for *Musica Jazz* and reproduced in the book, says:

"It means paying tribute to the great Black artists who gave us this music. I don't like the term jazz; I don't use it because I think it is reductive and has racist origins. I also think it carries something derogatory. Under the banner of jazz, for example, it is considered acceptable to pay musicians a reduced fee. And it is a term that tends to marginalize, preventing the musicians who play it from evolving outside well-defined spaces. Jazz is something that tends to cage you economically, politically and creatively, something that ultimately runs counter to what making art truly means. If we call it Black Music, at least we acknowledge the culture from which it comes, without confusion. It seems that anything played today, even the most banal thing, can be given the jazz label. I don't understand: when we talk about mariachi music we know that it comes from Mexico; when we use the term Celtic music we know that it is played by Irish people; likewise, we know that klezmer is the music of the Jews and that Latin or Afro-Cuban music comes from Cuba and Afro-Caribbean countries. When we use the term jazz, we speak of something that seems to have no defined origins, no precise place from which it comes. Everyone debates its origins, and its culture is partly European, partly Black, partly this and partly that. It is true that many people of different ethnicities have played this music, but I

> *believe no one can dispute that Black musicians are those who made the greatest innovative contribution to its evolution. They are the custodians of this tradition, and I believe it is important to remember and acknowledge that."*
> *(Payton in Gaeta, 2026)*

So much for Payton and his point of view. The question is certainly complicated; we could probably discuss it for days without finding the right answer, and Gaeta's book intelligently tries to stimulate reflection and consideration by exploring the contours of the issue. I believe no one can question the enormous and fundamental contribution made by the African American population to the birth of a whole series of musical forms that exploded during the twentieth century. If for no other reason, music was practically the only artistic expression that Black people were able to cultivate and through which they had an important opportunity to live and work, from the era of slavery to the present day. Yet it is music born of mixture, probably the most hybrid of the many musics that have circulated around the world. To begin with, we certainly cannot reduce to a single culture the vast African continent that tragically supplied labor to the New World and that, within the abhorrent logic of slavery, brought together different peoples and cultures united only by the color of their skin and, of course, by the same form of exploitation. Already at this first, initial level, cultural mixing was at work, later hybridizing further with the different backgrounds of the white European population that emigrated to the United States. It was a truly unique and unrepeatable series of contacts, clashes, confrontations, assimilations and upheavals occurring in a relatively virgin territory (Native peoples, from this perspective, were the population subjected to a kind of physical and cultural annihilation), an immense land that grew at breakneck speed until it became the capitalist country par excellence, shaping its inhabitants in different ways. Jazz became a fertile and universal music (at least in the West) because, although certainly born in mysterious circumstances - as, mutatis mutandis, is true of every artistic expression - unlike other local musics it was the product of various and diverse cultures within which the African American population was predominant.

The other determining factor lies in the United States economy: already after the First World War, and even more so after the Second, the USA became the hegemonic country of the West, constituting a genuine economic empire and, without wishing to be didactically Marxian, consequently projecting its own musical, literary, cinematic and artistic culture into its sphere of influence. Wisely, the book does not question the hybrid nature of jazz; for some supporters of the term BAM, however, it is blues that should be taken as the primary reference, since that, they argue, is the authentic and unique musical genre of purely Black derivation. The problem is that even here it is difficult to escape the interweaving of cultures produced by the particular economic, cultural and social situation of the United States. It is true that Delta blues was probably a musical form originating exclusively among African Americans, but its exponents certainly played all kinds of music at parties and in juke joints, in a highly varied melting pot rich in different influences, and the famous twelve bars were not so rigidly immutable, since the music still had to accompany the lyrics:

> *"A great many blues are built according to this structure: three lines, twelve musical bars... But while many authentic blues performers adhere to this pattern, many others use an irregular and variable number of bars: eight, eleven, twelve and a half, according to the expressive needs of the piece."*
> *(Oakley, 2009)*

If one looks at the repertoire of Charley Patton, one of the leading figures of Delta blues, but also at Lead Belly, Henry Thomas (whose nickname Ragtime Texas is significant in itself), or many other bluesmen, one can hear countless songs that follow neither the twelve-bar pattern nor, in many cases, even the typical I-IV-V movement identified as an authentically Black structure. What happened in

Chicago after the Second World War, with the electrification of the blues and the resulting stabilization of the form later made famous by Muddy Waters, B.B. King and subsequently by the whole phenomenon of British blues-rock, often causes confusion and casts its shadow over the origins of the blues. Other forms were even more diverse, above all those coming from the southern Appalachians (consider, for example, the well-known bluesman Rev. Gary Davis), where European reminiscences, ragtime and early forms of country music can be heard. None of this, of course, detracts from the African American component which, we repeat, is certainly fundamental and indispensable, even though the market has often tried to obscure its origins by commercializing and bringing white authors and performers to fame, as in the case of rock'n'roll.

In conclusion, Gaeta's book undoubtedly has the merit of stimulating debate and highlighting the great variety of styles and currents that all refer to the African American world. But this should not obscure the particular historical, social and economic conditions in which musicians found themselves, giving rise to music born from cultural interweavings unlike anything previously seen in history, and which helped determine its success - a success further favored by US economic and cultural expansionism, as well as by the extraordinary technological development underway during the twentieth century. The following words by the author sum up, with a polemical note if one wishes, the method and approach behind this substantial work of unquestionable value:

> *“I am sure I will not find much solidarity within the world of jazz criticism, populated by intellectuals accustomed to considering music a subject for discussion to be explored through historiographical and scientific parameters, very often forgetting that what we are dealing with is a language to be lived rather than discussed and dissected. As a man of science, I prefer to leave scientific and bibliographical analyses and evidence to subjects that need to be treated in that way because they serve different purposes. It is far drier and sadder to treat music in this way than to read structural engineering or anatomy.”*
> *(Gaeta, 2026)*

Reading

Giles Oakley, *Blues. La musica del diavolo*, Shake, Milan, 2009.

Joachim-Ernst Berendt, Gunther Huesmann, *Il libro del jazz. Dal Ragtime al XXI secolo*, Odoya, Citta di Castello (PG), 2015.

Arrigo Polillo, *Jazz: La vicenda e i protagonisti della musica afro-americana*, Mondadori, Milan, 2017.

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