

Shamans, Griots and Trading Fours: Jazz as Jungian Meta-narrative

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The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung posited that humans are connected to each other and to our collective past by a species- or genetic memory that he called the Collective Unconscious. He further argues, as the term denotes, that such relationships do not depend upon the specific cognitive or intellectual agency of the individual.

Although Jung's evidence consists primarily in the analysis of rituals and visual art, this perspective is equally compelling (if not more so) in music. And while it is possible to make a strong case in this regard using almost any genre of music (especially folk or classical oral traditions), it is particularly useful with respect to jazz and its relationship to, and as an expression of, the African Diaspora — of which, to take the point (and recent genomics research) a step further we are all members.

In the Jungian construct, it makes no difference whether or not Monk ever listened to the balafon. Many of the more impenetrable aspects of his technical and melodic sense are considerably more accessible, however, if we credit him with having Africanized the piano. It is likewise difficult to watch him dance onstage (something most critics either ignored or dismissed as eccentricity or (worse) pathology) without being reminded of Sufis and the devotional/meditative dance Westerners call “whirling.”

This presentation considers case examples from the work of Monk and other jazz artists whom the conventional wisdom regards as outliers in one way or another (e.g. Pharoah Sanders, Alice Coltrane, Art Ensemble of Chicago), in Jungian terms (including references to neurologist and self-described “musicophile” Oliver Sacks).