

# FOUR “Pure Eye Music”: Norman Lewis, Abstract Expressionism, and Bebop

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There is a temptation to think the artist a musician as well as a painter for he starts in softly on the blank page like a musician improvising and as he sees a suitable motif take shape, swings into it with confidence, plays it up for what it is worth and then satisfied he has gone the whole way with it, permits it to fade softly out.<sup>1</sup>

This description, from a review of a 1951 exhibition of the paintings of the African American abstract expressionist artist Norman Lewis, draws attention to the lyrical qualities of his work and invites the viewer to compare his approach as a visual artist to that of a musical performer. The impulse to think of Lewis in this context presents a valuable opportunity to open up readings of his paintings and explore his uses of music; it also offers a chance to reassess his contribution to American abstract expressionism and the issues that have defined his position within it.

Establishing when (and even where) abstract expressionist art emerged has become a problematic issue, though perhaps not as contentious as questions regarding who should be included in its history. Recent critical work has highlighted how a gendered and racialized mythology of white American masculinity has become embedded within the ideological and stylistic legacy of this movement.<sup>2</sup> The critical debates that surround issues such as canon building and exclusion are well documented and, while they necessarily interact in a number of important ways with the issues under discussion, I consider them here primarily in relation to the work of Norman Lewis and his relationship to jazz and, in particular, to bebop. First, though, I want to look briefly at Lewis in the larger context of abstract expressionism and race.

The re-evaluation of Lewis's work in recent years has focused upon his status as the first major African American abstract expressionist artist. Although black painters, including Hale Woodruff, Romare Bearden, and Thelma Johnson Streat, worked within the abstract expressionist mode, Lewis's career and artwork demonstrate a strong social and formal connection with the movement from its earliest stages. His artistic development, from social realism in the 1930s through experimentation with cubism and expressionism to abstraction in the 1940s, charts a course similar to many of the figures we now associate with abstract expressionism. Lewis attended Studio 35 meetings organized by Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline and was present at the invitation-only Studio Artists sessions in 1950, in the company of Clifford Still, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock. These connections testify to his involvement with the New York School at its crucial stages from the very beginning, and Lewis's

credentials are offered up as a way to interrogate his continued omission from mainstream accounts of this movement. Race is a principal factor here, and the exclusion of an African American artist from an art movement that would become so enmeshed with the mythology of American nationhood comes, disappointingly, as little surprise. However, as Ann Gibson, a scholar who has rigorously explored the politics of canon building within this movement, has unequivocally stated: “Geographically, socially and formally, Norman Lewis was an American Abstract Expressionist.”<sup>3</sup>

While Lewis remains largely excluded from the movement’s cultural legacy, it is vital to acknowledge that he was immersed in its activities and intellectual pursuits. He participated in a major abstract expressionist show in 1949 and was represented by the prestigious Willard Gallery in New York from 1946 until the mid-1960s. He had eight solo exhibitions during this period, which won him limited but positive critical attention. Gibson has suggested that, as abstract expressionism developed, it became increasingly clear that an individual artist’s presence was central to securing financial success from the sale of artwork:

Abstract Expressionism was an art in which making and meaning were seen as interdependent to an unprecedented degree. The meanings of the paintings reverberated like electricity in the charged space between the objects and the artists—the subjects—who produced them; the work and the artist were inseparable.<sup>4</sup>

In the mid-1950s, many of the most prominent abstract expressionist artists were beginning to reap financial rewards in line with their established critical reputations. After Jackson Pollock’s death in 1956, the Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased one of his paintings, *Autumn Rhythm*, for \$30,000, setting a new precedent for abstract expressionist work.<sup>5</sup> One year later, in 1957, despite continuing favorable reviews for his solo Willard Gallery shows, Lewis submitted an application for a taxi driver’s license, stating in a supporting affidavit: “During the last year I have found it impossible to get odd jobs and the sales of my paintings have fallen off so that I have no income and I am jobless.”<sup>6</sup>

The reasons for this disparity in both the fortunes and ongoing critical legacies of Lewis and his white contemporaries are encapsulated in Gibson’s observation that “when you bought the work you bought the man.”<sup>7</sup> In a 1974 interview with the artist Vivian Browne, Lewis speculated upon the reasons for his limited commercial success, suggesting that the restricted social contact between artists and patrons had proved to be a crucial determining factor. Describing his experience at the Willard Gallery, he commented:

This was a good gallery. For the white artists there it was financially successful, but not for me. There is a hell of a lot of discrimination because black artists don’t have this intercourse of meeting people.... I don’t enjoy half the success of people like de Kooning. I’ve been in shows with Picasso, but I don’t have that intercourse.<sup>8</sup>

He added, “Many patrons who buy your work would like to know who you are,” and “Since I

don't frequent certain places I am apt to be forgotten.”<sup>9</sup> Lewis's exclusion from the social intercourse that underpinned sales both to influential private collectors and to museum curators marks the point at which race intervenes most explicitly to determine his status within the abstract expressionist movement. This sense of debarment is echoed by Lewis's contemporary and friend, Romare Bearden, who remarked that prejudice in the art world was not directly expressed but “oblique” and alluded to experiences similar to Lewis's: “The Negro artist is usually not what you might say ‘on the scene.’ He's not moving where a number of the better-known white artists are.”<sup>10</sup>

Recent critical studies have revealed the extent to which abstract expressionism was promoted and financially supported by the U.S. government and corporations during the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> Abstract expressionism attained a high profile on the Cold War cultural front due to its homegrown status and its potential to function around the world as a visual cipher of American freedom. Lewis's racial identity, and the signifiers of African American experience that he wove into his canvases, not only challenged the implicit whiteness of abstract expressionism's supposed universalism but also served as a reminder that, to large numbers of African Americans, freedom was itself still an abstract concept in the United States. However, to attribute Lewis's marginal position solely to the ostracism fostered by racial prejudice potentially undermines the complexity of his own self-determined intellectual and artistic program. There is a danger that a narrative that casts Lewis merely as a victim of racist practice may overshadow his own innovative responses to an art movement that was being largely defined by white artists and critics. Though his exclusion must be acknowledged, it needs to be balanced with a discussion of Lewis's very personal and particular artistic dialogue with that movement.

## **NORMAN LEWIS AND ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM**

*Metropolitan Crowd*, painted in 1946, demonstrates Lewis's immersion in abstract expressionism. It features the key elements of a flat picture plane and the “allover” composition, with no dominant focal point. The intersecting and chaotic lines record the spontaneity and physical dynamism of a fast and fluid bodily movement, which would be defined by critic Harold Rosenberg in 1952 as a basic characteristic of action painting.<sup>12</sup> Foregrounding the process of painting in the moment reaffirmed the subjective vision of the artist through spontaneous action and carried the promise of creative authenticity. Lewis was certainly interested in the physical dimension of the painting process, and he employed techniques that both reflected a sense of immediacy and attempted to access the unconscious impulse through improvisation (although, as I argue below, his relationship to music went well beyond a familiarity with improvisatory procedures).

Lewis also subscribed to the prevailing idea within the New York School that aesthetic interests should take priority over ideological subject matter. The didactic imagery of social realism and the socio-political issues it depicted were considered antithetical to the desire for an intuitive, subjective artistic vision that could create art with a universal resonance. Many of

the artists who had practiced styles of social realism and been involved in artistic projects sponsored by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s felt that the new non-representational form of painting, free from direct state sponsorship, could transcend the divisive issues of politics and exist simply as art for art's sake.<sup>13</sup> This critical agenda sought to guarantee the integrity of individual artistic vision, while aspiring to the elusive quality of the universal in art, but it was the rejection of political representation that would become a major defining issue of American abstract expressionism.

We now view the concept of political neutrality with skepticism: the idea, propagated overwhelmingly by white male artists and critics, that the political subject and divisive issues such as gender, race, and class can simply be transcended by an act of will assumes the privilege to do so. This is where the mythology of abstract expressionism has to be separated from the practical strategies that Lewis and his contemporaries employed. Their aim to make apolitical art was more a reaction against the state-sponsored artistic projects with which they had previously been involved. Like many of his fellow artists, Lewis had become ambivalent toward the aesthetic program endorsed by the Left and believed that excelling in his field would prove to be the “most effective blow against stereotype.”<sup>14</sup> He adopted a resolute position that his art was non-political. In 1946 he addressed the issues that were pertinent to him as a black artist:

I have been concerned not only with my own creative and technical development but with the limitations which every American Negro who is desirous of a broad kind of development must face, namely, the limitations which come under the names “African Idiom,” “Negro Idiom” or “Social Painting.”<sup>15</sup>

Through the 1930s and early 1940s, Lewis had worked within a social realist framework and had taught and exhibited in this style to some acclaim. The emerging critical narrative of abstract expressionism was clearly an influence on Lewis, but it was also the perceived failure of addressing social issues such as lynching and poverty through art that led him to embrace left-wing political activism while renouncing the political subject in his art.

I used to paint just Black people in their struggle for existence. I soon found out that this was a waste of time, because the very people who you want to see this painting don't see it.... Later I became involved in unions and demonstrations, which I felt made more of an impression than painting a picture of struggle.<sup>16</sup>

Lewis claimed no political content existed in his work after the mid-1940s, despite producing works that appeared to have racial subjects.<sup>17</sup> *Harlem Turns White*, painted in 1955, is one example; although painted in an abstract style, it is a provocative work that evokes the notion of white and black presence in Harlem (Figure 4.1). By its nature an abstract expressionist canvas supports multiple and varied readings, but the interaction between this composition and its title prompts the viewer to question racial categories and how they acquire meaning. While



Sharon F. Patton reads *Harlem Turns White* as “an imaginary scene: the black community of Harlem transformed to reflect its earlier history as a white community,”<sup>18</sup> it may also refer to the influx of white revelers to Harlem’s jazz clubs in the 1920s, or, as Bearden and Henderson suggest, it could be a warning that Harlem’s people “may lose their identity in a white mass.”<sup>19</sup> The canvas is populated by a crowd of abstract figures and the enveloping white mist that shrouds and obscures them certainly supports not only these readings but many more besides. Harlem, the black metropolis, turns white in this painting through the medium of abstraction. The painting carefully and skillfully maintains a tension between a racially charged commentary and an abstract experiment with the viewer’s register of color and its social meanings.



**Figure 4.1** Norman Lewis, *Harlem Turns White*. 1955. Oil on canvas, 50 in. × 63¾ in. © 2007 The Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Iandor Fine Arts, Newark, New Jersey. Courtesy of Bill Hodges Gallery.

Indeed, it is possible to read the canvas as a playful critique of Lewis’s own position as an African American artist in the midst of a predominantly white avant-garde movement. Lewis faced considerable criticism from friends and WPA colleagues when his first series of abstract paintings emerged. Bearden and Henderson noted that Lewis “had to face the hard-pressed charge that an involvement with Abstract Expressionism was a desertion of black people.”<sup>20</sup> These reactions implied that abstract expressionism was an inadequate, or inappropriate, way to represent black experiences. The delicately balanced ambiguity of *Harlem Turns White* can be read not only as Lewis’s response to those who viewed black cultural perspectives as inexpressible within an abstract expressionist context but also as a critique of the limited role that the white avant-garde offered him as a black artist. It is difficult to view this solely as an abstract work when its title frames it so allusively; however, the painting, even with its residual figural traces, is abstract. *Harlem Turns White* can be re-viewed not as a compromise between the two genres but as a challenge to the restrictions of both.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1960s, Lewis produced another series of paintings that engaged with contemporary

issues of race, violence, and civil rights. Biomorph shapes re-surface in this period: a crowd bearing crosses and flags punctuates the otherwise black canvas of *America the Beautiful* (1960); a white mass, evoked in the play of firelight and shadow, appears in *Alabama* (also 1960); the triangular hoods of the figures in *Ku Klux* (1963) give way to the strident motion of civil rights marchers in the intersecting lines of *Processional* (1964). Once again, highly abstract visual images were engaged in a dynamic interplay with the suggestive titles that Lewis attached to them. These paintings demonstrate that the abstract canvas still has the potential to initiate social or political discourse, but at the same time responses to the paintings do not have to be dictated or fixed by these themes. Lewis's improvisations within the boundaries of abstract expressionism indicate his sustained negotiation with the style and its principles and are clearly illustrated in *Harlem Turns White* and these early '60s examples of his "black paintings."<sup>22</sup>

Critical reviews of Lewis's solo exhibitions reveal the extent to which the influence of other artistic styles and schools on his work was a contributing factor to his critical neglect. Lewis's work was often consciously arranged, and he would blend recognizable forms, inspired by artists such as Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Pablo Picasso, within his own abstract compositions. But this conscious stylization brought him negative reviews in a critical climate that privileged the intuitive impulse, and his use of cubist motifs into the late 1940s did little to advance him within an art scene dominated by the desire for independence from European influence.<sup>23</sup> As abstract expressionism's reputation as a significant international art movement grew through the 1950s, its value was often related to its separation from Europe. This was not simply an impulse to "make it new" but was bound up with the burgeoning mythology of abstract expressionism and the distinctly Americanist thrust that accompanied it. As Michael Leja has argued, "The functions served by Abstract Expressionism's aura of masculinity have ... come into clearer focus: it was a crucial component of Cold War U.S. national identity, differentiating the nation politically and culturally from a Europe portrayed as weakened and effeminate."<sup>24</sup> Lewis's "borrowed visual phrasing," taken from European artists, was not viewed as inventive but often seen as mere imitation.<sup>25</sup> However, Lewis, who admired Picasso's use of African art in his cubist designs, did not view hybridity as antithetical to originality and continued to recontextualize European stylistic referents in his own compositions.

As originality became the measure of value, Gibson writes that it was "wielded like a critical club" and adds that it was defined as innovation in a stylistic rather than an ideological sense.<sup>26</sup> Within this critical framework, artists with something original to say about race or gender were eclipsed by artists who advanced new stylistic approaches. In an otherwise favorable review in the *New York Sun* in 1949, Lewis's style was considered to be too close to that of his fellow Willard Gallery artist Mark Tobey: the review concluded that "one Mark Tobey is enough."<sup>27</sup> Originality was not only wielded as a critical club but also operated like a club in the other sense of the term. Once original styles had been identified and critically approved, any work bearing similarities to them were dismissed as derivative and, if they were acknowledged at all, it was within a second tier of abstract expressionism. This critical paradigm left no possibility of generative relationships developing between artists' styles but

instead prized originality as differentiation and looked to an elite of white male “heroic” American artists to embody it.

Another aspect of Lewis’s creative approach that went against abstract expressionism’s critical agenda was the frequent changes he employed in his style. The recognition of a signature style was crucial to the establishment of an artistic reputation. Lewis’s inventive changes worked against that process by not allowing a singular style to define his work. Gallery owner Bill Hodges noted how people complained that Lewis’s painting had “no clear and secure direction and his style changed too often.”<sup>28</sup> This willingness to pursue multiple artistic directions disrupts the narrative of forceful self-assertion at the heart of abstract expressionism’s critical mythology: Lewis’s visually complex, changeable, and multivalent work actually suggests a resistance to defining an artistic identity in any fixed sense.

Perhaps Lewis’s most significant departure from the narrative of abstract expressionism, however, was articulated through his relationship to the viewer. Many of the artists within the movement imagined that their stylistic experiments and the absence of a recognizable subject ensured that their work was free of the taint of commercial demands and popular viewing tastes: the reaction of the viewer became incidental to the creative process. The prevailing distrust of language among these artists prompted them to withdraw titles from their paintings, often replacing them with more neutral numbers or leaving them untitled, so as to avoid influencing the viewing process. Lewis did leave some of his works untitled but often chose to title the more experimental and evocative paintings to open a creative dialogue with the viewer. Although Lewis subscribed to many of the aesthetic and formal principles of abstract expressionism, he was keen to explore the question of what the relationship of the artist to society should be and sought ways of making his work accessible to people. But his interest in fostering connections between artist and viewing public was not always a priority for other painters in the movement.<sup>29</sup>

## **NORMAN LEWIS AND BEBOP**

Lewis’s concern with the social connection between artist and audience is reflected in the incorporation of music into his paintings—by which I mean not only his inclusion of musical scenes as subject matter but also the way the social dimensions of jazz surfaced in his paintings and mediated his approach to abstract expressionism. Significantly, there is a distinct musical presence that animates Lewis’s paintings during his artistic development from the social realism of the early 1940s toward the more experimental abstract mode of painting that characterized his work in the mid-to late 1940s. It was during this vital transitional period that Lewis produced a number of works that either depicted musicians, predominantly though not exclusively in groups, or referred directly to musical forms.

What are we to make of the fact that, as Lewis began to work more confidently and assertively in the abstract expressionist mode, musical influences appear in his paintings? I would argue that jazz is central to Lewis’s development at this point, as it offers an artistic paradigm that allows him to address those aspects of abstract expressionism that he felt posed



limitations to his own self-determined artistic program. An examination of performance-inspired works produced between 1945 and 1948 reveals a focus on the relationship between artist and medium and on the individual within a group context.



**Figure 4.2** Norman Lewis, *Musicians*. 1945. Oil on canvas, 25¾ in. × 19¾ in. © 2007 The Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Iandor Fine Arts, Newark, New Jersey. Courtesy of Kenkeleba Gallery.

The painting entitled *Musicians*, produced in 1945, illustrates Lewis's movement toward abstraction, while still retaining a strong figurative dimension (Figure 4.2). The heads of two male figures are positioned at the top of the composition. The angular line on the right appears to trace the rough outline of a body; to the left, a bent arm frames the central action. The shape that meets the curve of this line suggests a hand or face and is possibly meant to invoke both. A smaller figure can be identified in the lower middle portion of the painting featuring visual motifs associated with a female figure; for example, the horizontal line at the bottom traces the hemline of a skirt and a bow is positioned on top of the head (this could also be shared as a bow tie with the larger central figure). The depiction of these multiple figures sharing lines and space in this painting suggests a strong connection or intimacy between individuals in the act of performing within a group. This merging of lines and overlapping spaces is also repeated in



Lewis's depiction of musical instruments in the painting; for example, the mouth of the smaller figure is obscured by what may be a wind instrument or a microphone. On the right-hand side of the canvas, the vertical line appears to suggest a microphone stand, whose shape mirrors the leg and foot of the figure on the left. This blending of corporeal shapes with images and motifs of musical instruments and equipment foregrounds the expressionistic and communal possibilities of performance, as the musicians visually merge with their instruments and with one another.

These techniques are also consistent with Lewis's 1946 painting *Bassist*, the image of which emerges from its dark background through the use of light, angular brushstrokes (Figure 4.3). The composition of the body is minimal and actually derives from its relationship to the bass. A number of shared lines are used to create the overall image. The distinct curve of the body of the instrument and its neck are clearly visible, but the lines and shapes that surround it create the impression of a player deeply enmeshed with his instrument and the movements and sounds associated with its playing.

In the relatively short period between 1946, when *Bassist* was finished, and 1948, when Lewis produced another selection of performance-themed paintings, his style became even more abstract. In 1948 Lewis completed two paintings entitled *Jazz Musicians*, in the first of which a background of muted colors adds emphasis to the thick, scrawled dark lines and shading that make up the foreground image (Figure 4.4). The middle section of the canvas contains a mesh of overlapping lines that forms a dense and chaotic overall image, in which individual shapes and features are difficult to discern. However, the spaces that emerge in the top portion of the painting hint at the presence of the figures that its title implies. The shapes that rise vertically in this image, though abstract, evoke heads or faces due to their proportions and the spacing around them. The dense layering of the composition and the tangled shapes within it represent a development of the themes of group intimacy and individual virtuosity that I identified in the two earlier paintings, *Musicians* and *Bassist*. Ann Gibson comments that a number of abstract expressionist artists, such as Pollock for example, "adapted the formal structures of jazz but left its explicit references to its African American roots behind": in contrast, Lewis "meshed analyses of the structure of jazz with visual references to its production."<sup>30</sup> One of the ways that he achieves this referencing of production, through human creativity and performance even as he is moving away from figuration, is through the use of this vertical line as a kind of visual trace of the human form that is left on the canvas.



**Figure 4.3** Norman Lewis, *Bassist*. 1946. Oil on canvas, 31 in.× 13½ in. © 2007 The Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Iandor Fine Arts, Newark, New Jersey. Collection of Walt Pearson. Courtesy of Bill Hodges Gallery.

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**Figure 4.4** Norman Lewis, *Jazz Musicians*. 1948. Oil on canvas, 50 in. × 42 in. © 2007 The Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Iandor Fine Arts, Newark, New Jersey. Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Harmon Kelley. Courtesy of bill Hodges Gallery





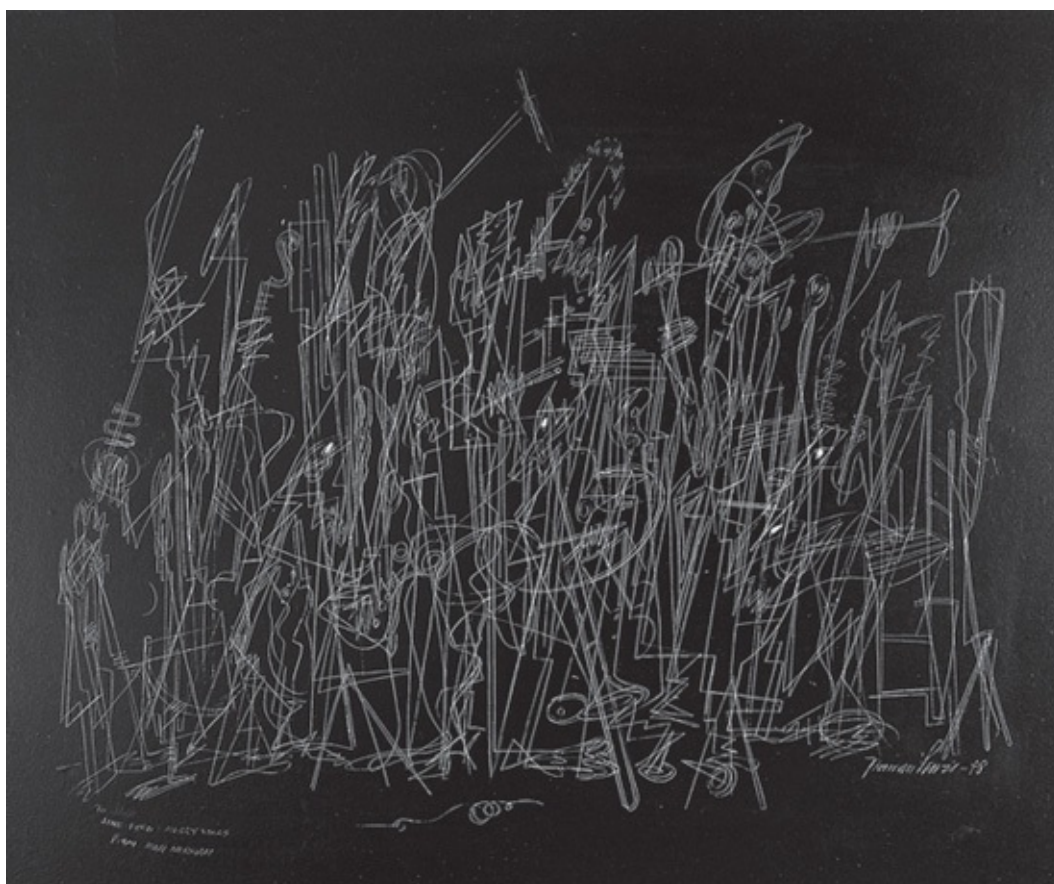
**Figure 4.5** Norman Lewis, *Jazz Musicians*. 1948. Oil on canvas, 36 in. × 26 in. © 2007 The Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Iandor Fine Arts, Newark, New Jersey. Courtesy of Kenkeleba Gallery.

In the second 1948 painting called *Jazz Musicians*, Lewis suppresses the figurative elements of his earlier style to the point where the human content becomes more allusive than visible, conjured chiefly by the title he assigns to his work (Figure 4.5). Yet the dark shadows painted against the red background and around the periphery of the central image evoke a bodily presence. The synthesis, of musicians both with one another and with their instruments, is developed further into a style that aims to present the musician through what may be seen as a visual representation of music. The connection between the musicians and their art, alluded to in the earlier paintings, is taken further through abstraction so that the performers of the music are no longer divisible from the sounds they create. The figurative presence of the musicians may be lost to abstraction but the fact that their bodies now conflate with a visual perception of their music affirms the synthesis of identity and musical expression. No longer contained within the contours of bodies or instruments, the musicians are limned in rhythmic brushstrokes that emulate the motion of the music they are performing.<sup>31</sup> The vertical emphasis alludes to the shape of figures, the neck and body shapes of instruments, while the musical



structure of lines, melody, and embellishment is exemplified by the small dabs of color and sweeping brushstrokes.

The visual motifs outlined above are also present in another 1948 painting, entitled *Jazz Band* (Figure 4.6). However, the dense, oblique composition of the previous painting is replaced by a kind of visual X-ray, a black-and-white composition made up of a long, flowing calligraphic line incised on coated board rather than applied with a brush. Because of its more pared-down, sparse style, the viewer can pick out a number of figural elements, such as hands and head shapes and numerous forms alluding to the shapes of musical instruments. The angular T-shaped lines emerging at the top suggest horns being played; the neck and body of an upright bass are visible; and there are wires coiled around stands and along the bottom of the picture. Phantom-like figures appear to populate the canvas but under close scrutiny seem equally to be components of instruments; limbs merge into strings and wires, while human frames blend with stands and the bodies of instruments in what appears to be a continuous conjoined line. It is only in this bold-lined picture that we can see the huge amount of musical activity that is going on in this limited, crowded space. Once again the impulse appears to be moving toward a visual representation of the music itself as figuration becomes less apparent. This painting seems to work against the oblique representations of the previous paintings to reveal a leaner, more economical representation of music that combines clarity and chaos.



**Figure 4.6** Norman Lewis, *Jazz Band*. 1948. Incised on black coated masonite board, 20 in. × 23 in. © 2007 The Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Iandor Fine Arts, Newark, New Jersey. Collection of Rodney Miller. Courtesy of Bill Hodges Gallery.

Lewis would often use musical analogies to convey his feelings about art; he talked of the

“beauty in dissonance” and emphasized the confrontational nature of jazz performance.<sup>32</sup> He admired the way that music, particularly jazz, fostered competitiveness as a way of maintaining standards of excellence (and complained that, by the 1950s, the period of intense experimentation in the New York art scene had given way to mediocrity). He claimed that onstage performance kept standards high in music, arguing that a musician who had not impressed the audience within ten minutes should forget it.<sup>33</sup> It is Lewis’ engagement with these various aspects of the performance process that leads us now into a discussion of a bebop aesthetic, in particular, and how that may illuminate his artistic practice.

Scott Deveaux has argued that bebop’s stylistic and ideological innovation enacted a form of social disruption between performer and audience:

Jazz enjoyed no privileged status as high art before 1945. As a music created for immediate consumption through commercial channels, it had depended directly upon audience approval. Suddenly, with bebop, the terms of the relationship seem reversed: artists, acting on their own initiative, force radical and disorienting innovations upon a reluctant and bewildered audience, in this way guaranteeing a minority role in American culture for jazz as “avant garde” art.<sup>34</sup>

This view of artists rejecting popular tastes for their own creative impulses and confronting their audiences with the radically unfamiliar summarizes abstract expressionism as accurately as it does bebop. The pioneers of bebop did prioritize musical innovation above the commercial demands of the post-war audience: however, as Deveaux has argued, and a study of the recordings produced in this era confirms, musicians like Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and Charlie Parker considered themselves professional musicians, and although they resisted the banality of contemporary musical trends they did not relinquish the economic gains of their profession nor the possibility of appealing to an audience.<sup>35</sup> Conversely, their engagement with the capitalist structures of the music industry, through recordings and live performances, does not nullify the considerable challenges they posed to their audience’s sensibilities.

Bebop emerged from an entertainment scene dominated by the swing orchestra, and the beboppers’ unpredictable chord substitutions and experiments with tempo were not always conducive to dancing. In a significant change to the relationship between black popular music and its audience, bebop was no longer functioning primarily to facilitate entertainment. Although dancing and bebop were not mutually exclusive, the unfamiliarity and frequent changes of musical direction at the very least complicated this relationship. Bebop redirected the focus of musical performance: rather than pleasing the audience with popular dance tunes, musicians now made demands on the listener as they pursued individual virtuosity. And it was not only new musical complexities that signaled the shift between bebop musicians and their audience; aspects of their performance practice also changed. Performers talked less to their audiences, and many avoided the comedic routines and rituals of showmanship that had been adopted by earlier swing-era stars like Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong.<sup>36</sup> Although critics,

including Ralph Ellison, questioned the validity of this attempt to be “completely and absolutely free of the obligations of the entertainer,”<sup>37</sup> the beboppers’ cool, serious demeanor and apparent indifference to their audience certainly represented an attempt to register contempt for the racist coding that had been implicit in white audiences’ expectations of black musical performers.

Yet, although they sought to challenge their audiences, the bebop musicians did not regard them as incidental to the creative process. It is the trope of performance that maintains this creative connection. Deveaux argues that, by taking the format of the jam session as the basis for public presentation, “bebop offered the spectacle of musicians playing for their own enjoyment, capturing some of the dignity and autonomy of the concert stage without losing the informal atmosphere that tied jazz to a vernacular social context.”<sup>38</sup> I would argue that it is precisely this relationship to which Norman Lewis was aspiring with his improvisations within the boundaries of abstract expressionism. The bebop model offered all of the experimentation, audience confrontation, and emphasis on individual artistic freedom that modernism promoted, but without its disengagement from social relations.

Bebop also offers us another way to read Lewis’s relationship to influence and originality. An important characteristic of bebop is the process by which established harmonic structures were combined with new melodic formulations. Dizzy Gillespie has outlined this musical methodology:

[We would take] the chord structures of various standard and pop tunes and create new chords, melodies and songs from them. We found out what the composers were doing by analyzing these tunes and then added substitute chords.... When we borrowed from a standard, we added and substituted so many chords that most people didn’t know what song we were really playing.... That was our thing in bebop, putting in substitutions.<sup>39</sup>

This aesthetic of defamiliarization was integral to bebop’s stylistic approach, and the practice of borrowing-cum-reinvention that it involved resulted in a highly distinctive and original musical genre. The issues of influence and derivation that have restricted the scope of Lewis’s success and critical legacy can be radically rethought in this kind of creative context. To borrow a phrase from Ralph Ellison, Lewis’s “endless improvisations upon traditional materials” do not compromise his individual artistic vision but reaffirm his ability to draw inspiration from a variety of sources.<sup>40</sup> His experiments with elements of Miró, Picasso, and Tobey may have been out of step with the critical demands of American abstract expressionism, but I would argue that they reflect the creative impulses of bebop.

The influence of music endures in Lewis’s paintings long after the identifiable forms of its players have been absorbed into abstraction: for example, the distinct T-shaped motifs of horns that feature in the music-themed paintings of 1948 appear refashioned into the delicate branches of *Green Bough* in 1951. As Lewis continued to explore both the freedom and the limits of the abstract expressionist mode, the musical qualities and dimensions of his paintings became less overt and were later channeled into the representation of the rhythm and lyricism

of sound, prompting one reviewer to describe a canvas in a 1949 show as “pure eye music.”<sup>41</sup>

In 1946, Lewis wrote:

Art comes to have a life of its own; to be evidence of the emotional, intellectual and aesthetic level of men in a specific era.... It comes to be an activity of discovery in that it seeks to find hitherto ignored or unknown combinations of forms, colors, and textures and even psychological phenomena, and perhaps to cause new types of experience in the artist as well as the viewer. Above all, it breaks away from its stagnation in too much tradition and establishes new traditions to be broken away from by coming generations of artists.<sup>42</sup>

Lewis locates the potential for discovery in new combinations of existing forms, emphasizing how processes of blending and synthesis can give art a life of its own. This acknowledgment of the creative possibilities of recontextualizing established styles and motifs echoes Gillespie’s appraisal of bebop’s inventive borrowing. By adopting this approach, Lewis was able not only to compose freely with African, European, and American artistic traditions but also to incorporate the equally valued impulses of innovation and aesthetic challenge. And his view of traditions being established and broken away from in a constant cycle of invention and reinvention resembles a characteristic identified as integral to jazz by Ralph Ellison:

Each true jazz moment ... springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it.<sup>43</sup>

Viewing Lewis’s paintings in these musical contexts enables the viewer to better appreciate his contribution to abstract expressionism and to see his frequent changes and hybrid formations not as a failure to develop a definitive signature style but rather as articulations of resistance to a fixed artistic identity. These strategies can be read as the responses of an artist whose experiences led him to oppose the confines of stereotype as well as the prescribed views on how to resist racism. In an interview with Esther Rolick in 1971, Lewis asked, “Are they looking for art or are they looking for blackness?”<sup>44</sup> His paintings should be recognized as a challenge to those who sought to define one without the other.

## NOTES

1. Henry McBride, review, *Art News*, December 1951, quoted in Thomas Lawson, *Norman Lewis: A Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue (New York: City University of



- New York, 1976), n.p.
2. See Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940's* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
  3. Ann Gibson, "Diaspora and Ritual: Norman Lewis's Civil Rights Paintings," *Third Text* 45 (1998–99): 29.
  4. Ann Gibson, "Recasting the Canon," in *Modern Art and Society: An Anthology of Social and Multicultural Readings*, ed. Maurice Berger (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 228.
  5. See A. Deirdre Robson, "The Market for Abstract Expressionism," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (London: Routledge, 2000), 288–93.
  6. Norman Lewis, written statement, *Norman Lewis Papers, 1919–1971*, microfilm roll 91, frame 619, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (hereafter abbreviated AAA).
  7. Ann Gibson, "Recasting the Canon," 220.
  8. Vivian Browne, interview with Norman Lewis, 1974, reprinted in *Artist and Influence*, Vol. 18, (1999): 77. The complete original interview is held in the Hatch–Billups Collections, New York City.
  9. *Ibid.*
  10. Henri Ghent, "Oral History Interview with Romare Bearden for the Archives of American Art," 1968, AAA. Available: <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/bearde68.htm> [1 January 2003].
  11. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
  12. The term *action painting* was introduced by Harold Rosenberg in his 1952 article, "The American Action Painters," reprinted in *American Art 1700–1960, Sources and Documents*, ed. John W. McCoubrey (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965), 213–22.
  13. For a discussion of these concepts, see Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," first published in *Partisan Review* in 1939, and reprinted in Frascina, *Pollock and After*, 48–60.
  14. Norman Lewis, "Thesis 1946," in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, ed. Corinne Jennings, exhibition catalogue (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 63.
  15. *Ibid.*
  16. Browne, interview with Norman Lewis, 76.
  17. For a discussion of the political subject in Lewis's work, see David Craven, "Norman Lewis as Political Activist and Post-Colonial Artist," in *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings*

1946–1977, Kinshasa Holman Conwill et al., exhibition catalogue (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1998), 51–60.

18. Sharon F. Patton, *African American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 175.
19. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 324.
20. *Ibid.*, 323.
21. Lewis's strategy of working within and against European American art traditions could be seen as an act of visual Signifyin(g), or Bakhtian double-voicing, as outlined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. Lewis not only demonstrates his skill in, and in reconfiguring, the abstract expressionist mode, but he also opens up a critical perspective on the movement's evasion of racial issues in America at the onset of the civil rights movement. That Lewis may also be offering a subtle critique of his own experience as a black visual artist working within abstract expressionist circles raises the further possibility that *Harlem Turns White* is a dextrous and playful extension of Signifyin(g) into the realm of the triple-voiced. See Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), esp. 110–11. Coincidentally, the jazz musician Julian Euell, who was a friend of Lewis, has remarked that Lewis was familiar with what he calls the technique of double entendre common to much black music, and employed it in his painting. See Julian Euell, "Thoughts about Norman Lewis," in Jennings, *Norman Lewis*, 54.
22. For more on Lewis's "black paintings," see Conwill et al., *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings*, passim, and especially Ann Eden Gibson, "Black Is a Color: Norman Lewis and Modernism in New York," 11–30. Gibson observes that, although Norman Lewis did refer to some of his paintings "singly and in a series, as 'black'," his use of black, and his experimentation with it as a theme, was a recurring feature throughout his artistic career. As the essayists in the catalogue demonstrate, it provides a fruitful starting point to explore Lewis's complex and brilliant negotiations between his aesthetic and political concerns.
23. Charles Corwin, "The Art Galleries," *Daily Worker* 19 March 1949, 12.
24. Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 350.
25. Gylbert Coker, untitled essay, *Norman Lewis: The Second Transition 1947–1951*, ed. Bill Hodges, exhibition catalogue (New York: Bill Hodges Gallery, 1995), n.p.
26. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, xxvii.
27. Henry McBride, review, *New York Sun*, 4 March 1949, quoted in Lawson, *Norman Lewis*, n.p.
28. Bill Hodges, foreword, *Norman Lewis: The Second Transition 1947–1951*, n.p.
29. See, for example, Lewis's attempts to raise this issue, with little success, in discussion with other painters at the Studio Artists sessions in 1950. This exchange is recorded in *Modern Artists in America: First Series*, ed. Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt, and Bernard Karpel (New York: Wittenborn Schultz, 1952), 15–16.

30. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 32.
31. Though I would argue that performance in its social dimension remains the primary trope for Lewis in this series of paintings, the movement from figuration to a more abstract representation of sound might also draw upon the more private experience of listening to musical recordings, either on the radio or on disc. As Evan Eisenberg has argued, the phonograph enabled music to be heard independent of live performance and its visual milieu; the disembodied or abstract voice that emerged from this technological shift is certainly suggestive of an “absent presence” comparable to that which Lewis projects in this series of music-inspired paintings. See Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); and Jorge Daniel Veneciano, “The Quality of Absence in the Black Paintings of Norman Lewis,” in Conwill et al., *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings*, 31–46.
32. See Bearden and Henderson, *History of African American Artists*, 313–27; Euell, “Thoughts about Norman Lewis,” 54.
33. See Henri Ghent, “Oral History Interview with Norman Lewis for the Archives of American Art,” 1959, AAA. Available: <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/lewisn68.htm> [1 January 2003].
34. Scott Deveaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (London: Picador Books, 1999), 8.
35. It should be noted here that there were massive inequalities in rates of pay between black and white musicians and when the popularity of swing began to decline, black musicians were the first to feel the pinch. The subsequent musical experimentation of African American bebop musicians in the early 1940s can be viewed, at least in part, as a creative response to their position within what many writers have argued was the increasing white co-optation of the jazz industry.
36. Dizzy Gillespie could be read as an interesting exception to this idea. His onstage antics were reportedly a source of great annoyance to Charlie Parker. See Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 182.
37. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 211.
38. Deveaux, *Birth of Bebop*, 202.
39. Quoted in Kenny Mathieson, *Giant Steps: Bebop and the Creators of Modern Jazz 1945–65* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999), 17.
40. Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 234. See, too, Julian Euell’s contention, when referring to Lewis in relation to his fellow abstract expressionists: “There was no way that his work could be viewed as imitative. To do so would be like comparing Jimmy Dorsey to Charlie Parker. Both were superb technicians on the saxophone, but Parker’s playing of ‘Night and Day’ and Jimmy Dorsey’s version of the same song represented a difference. Parker’s version was almost a new composition. I would suggest that Norman brought that same kind of embellishment, insight, and expansion to his art.” Euell, “Thoughts about Norman

Lewis,” 53.

41. McBride, review, *New York Sun*, 4 March 1949, quoted in Lawson, *Norman Lewis*, n.p.
42. Lewis, “Thesis 1946,” 63.
43. Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 234.
44. Esther G. Rolick, interview with Norman Lewis, 1970, audiotape, Esther G. Rolick Papers, AAA.

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