CARL VAN VECHTEN: CHAMPIONING THE BLACK ARTS

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Of course, it took more than salons to do the job. After all, there is a limit to the number of people who can be invited even to Madison Square Garden. Fortunately, Carl Van Vechten had a powerful and potent pen. He had been influential in the world of opinion since he lost his first job with the Chicago American in 1906 for "lowering the tone of the Hearst papers."\(^1\)

During the decade in which Carl Van Vechten piloted his salon, he also wrote many articles on the black arts. Naturally, he wrote for and about white people as well, but in 1925 and 1926 he concentrated his writing almost solely on the black arts, contributing five articles to *Vanity Fair*, "a swank, slick paper periodical avidly read by the cognoscenti,"\(^2\) and one article to the *Crisis*, which devoted a good deal of space to young black writers and offered cash prizes for excellent work. For *Vanity Fair* he wrote: "The Folksongs of the American Negro" (July 1925), "The Black Blues" (August 1925), "Prescription for the Negro Theatre" (October 1925), and "Moanin’ Wid a Sword In Ma Han’" (February 1926); for the *Crisis*, "The Negro in Art" (March 1926). Van Vechten was one of the pioneers in espousing America’s greatest music (jazz, blues, and spirituals) and because of his reputation as a music critic and his rising status as a writer, these articles carried
great weight with readers.

In 1925 his book of music criticism, *Red*, was also published. In it he mentioned that “jazz may not be the last hope of American music, nor yet the best hope, but at present, I am convinced, it is its only hope.”[^3] He understood that jazz, a colorful and vital kind of music, created by black people in America, was a major contribution to American culture. Although jazz was highly professional by the nineteen-twenties, it was not until the nineteen-thirties that most critics took it seriously. That Van Vechten realized and wrote about the importance of jazz in the nineteen-twenties shows he farsighted. In the same year he also wrote an article on George Gershwin, who had been one of his best friends since 1919, and concluded that “Negro spirituals, Broadway and jazz are Gershwin's musical godparents. Whatever he does, or however far he goes in the future, I hope that these influences will beneficently pursue him.”[^4]

In “The Black Blues” Van Vechten pointed out that blues, which were then looked down upon especially by black people, had a close relationship with spirituals and jazz in their origins, although they were independent art forms. Blues, he said, was one of the three great musical gifts of black Americans to American culture, and he predicted that they would undergo a resurrection like the spirituals had already:

Like the Spirituals, the Blues are folksongs and are conceived in the same pentatonic scale, omitting the fourth and seventh tones—although those that have achieved publication or performance under sophisticated auspices have generally passed through a process of transmutation—and at present they are looked down

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upon, as the Spirituals once were, especially by the Negroes themselves. The humbleness of their origin and occasionally the frank obscenity of their sentiment are probably responsible for this condition. In this connection it may be recalled that it has taken over fifty years for the Negroes to recover from their repugnance to the Spirituals, because of the fact that they were born during slave days. Now, however, the Negroes are proud of their Spirituals, regarding them as one of the race's greatest gifts to the musical pleasure of mankind. I predict that it will not belong before the Blues will enjoy a similar resurrection which will make them as respectable, at least in the artistic sense, as the religious songs.\(^5\)

Black Americans, Van Vechten said, used their artistic ability to express their deepest feelings: "Perhaps the most poignant of all his feelings are those related to his disappointments in love, out of which have sprung the songs known as the Blues."\(^6\)

In the same article, Van Vechten introduced W.C. Handy (1873–1938) to Vanity Fair readers, extolling him for his musical expertise. Handy, who composed "The Memphis Blues" and "The St. Louis Blues," was famous for his blues artistry. He exploited the old blues from the South, retaining their titles and melodies but inventing the harmonies and changing the words to "have more meaning to casual hearers."\(^7\) At the conclusion of the article on the blues Van Vechten said:

They are not only an essential part of Negro folklore but also they contain a wealth of eerie melody, borne along by a savage, recalcitrant rhythm. They deserve, therefore, from every point of view the same serious attention that has tardily been awarded
Van Vechten's interest in and knowledge of the black arts included the theater, and his concern expressed itself in "Prescription for the Negro Theatre." In this article he pointed out that there had been no great black show to appear on Broadway since *Shuffle Along* in 1921. As a sympathetic witness who had attended black entertainment of various sorts for twenty-five years, he could not help but suggest ideas for the then-ailing black theater. Commenting on its condition he noted that:

Latterly, the lack of public interest in these African frolics has become so pronounced that it has come to be believed along the upper stretches of Seventh Avenue and in the dusky section of Tin Pan Alley that any Negro musical show is now foredoomed to certain failure and faces are long and features are glum as a result.9

He cited three basic reasons for the apathy of admirers of what should then have been an exotic form of entertainment: first, "these entertainments are built upon a formula which varies so little in its details," that they become extremely boring; second, while "the dancing of the chorus was in *Shuffle Along* a delight (the dancing in any Negro revue is always hors de concours), all the old stuff was strutted, together with the fulsome imitation of white revues which has come to be such a discouraging feature of these entertainments"10; third, "the comedians blacked their faces and carmined and enlarged their lip....a minstrel tradition that seems to die hard even with colored minstrels."11 Decrying this minstrel tradition, Van Vechten noted that "for it to be followed blindly, unthinkingly, by practically every comedian in the Negro
theater is worse than an absurdity. In the end it will amount to suicide."
Furthermore, he frankly warned the black theater that:

This is not the only unworthy tradition perpetuated by *Shuffle Along* and its less vital successors. The tendency which is likely to have the ultimate effect of destroying the last revues is the persistent demand, on the part of the producers, for light chorus and dancing girls.13)

His prescription for curing the black theater was caustic but single:

First and last: advertise for a dark chorus. . . . Indeed, a fascinating effect might be achieved by engaging a rainbow chorus. . . . With the proper costumes, and a director capable of contriving appropriate evolutions and groupings, it is impossible to set a limit to what might be done with this human palette of color. In case, for some reason, this scheme is found impracticable, as many dark girls as possible should be engaged. . . . Seek beauties who can dance and sing. . . . and I guarantee that your show will be a success even if you throw in all the old stuff. . . [including] the I want to be in Dixie, or the Mammy, or the cotton-bale song. It might be well, however, to eliminate these stale features also, together with the repulsive liver-lips and cork complexions of the comedians.14)

He insisted that there was much more highly skilled black talent than was currently displayed on the stage. As evidence he listed the names of many musicians, actors, actresses, and dancers, some whom were yet undiscovered. He strongly recommended the following people for the black theater: Eddie Rector, Johnny Dunn, Johnny Nit, Johnny Hudgins, Clara Smith, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter,
Byron Jones, known as Strappy, Mamie Smith, Greenlee and Drayton, Edith, Wilson, Shelton Brooks, Turner Layton, Abbie Mitchell, Eva Taylor, Bill Robinson, Willie Covan, Leonard Ruffin, Billy Cain, and Alma Smith. Of these, he made special mention of Bessie Smith and Clara Smith:

Why doesn't some sapient manager engage Bessie Smith, "the empress of the Blues," or Clara Smith, "the world's greatest moaner," to sing Blues, not Blues written by Sissle and Blake or Irving Berlin, but honest-to-God Blues, full of trouble and pain and misery and heartache and tribulation, Blues like Any Woman's Blues, If you only knewed, or Nobody knows the way I feel dis mornin' ....

Additionally, he warned black producers, who were not fully utilizing the potentials of black theater, that: "The white producer... quite intelligently steals the best features of the Negro stage," and that black theater would not come into its own until it ceased trying to imitate the white theater and concentrated instead on developing its own unique genius. Obviously American modern theater would not have developed either if it had continued to imitate European Drama.

In "Moanin' Wid A Sword In Ma Han'," he commented that black audiences were reluctant to show appreciation for any developing black art forms and that, equally sad, many excellent blues singers preferred white ballads. He pointed to the excellent black talent in folk music, dance, and theater and as always had someone to recommend. He cited Paul Robeson as a "great artist" and Taylor Gordon for giving "evangelical performances of these rich and beautiful melodies rendered by a brilliant tenor voice." Incidentally, he also recommended Roland Hayes, "an unusually gifted artist" for having made a "successful spe-
cialty" of the conventional recital program, although he claimed that most people were tired of song recitals.\textsuperscript{20}

It was many years before black people would admit that there was significant value in spirituals even though the Fisk Jubilee Singers had sung them since 1871 and such songs had already spread around the world. The same attitude was now prevalent toward the blues. Assailing this general tendency to disclaim or withhold their own racial gifts, Van Vechten wondered whether blacks were implying that the spiritual was a song of slavery and the blues a song of defeat. According to LeRoi Jones, the spirituals were “The Camp Meeting Songs at back woods churches... or Slave Songs talking about deliverance” and blues a “part of 'the national genius,' of the Black man...”, an “expression of urban and rural (in its various stylistic variations) Black America.”\textsuperscript{21} Whatever the reason, there was a strong reluctance on the part of blacks to support their own music, and Van Vechten again warned:

As a matter of fact, no one but Negroes, as I have often before remarked in print, can give satisfactory renderings of these songs [spirituals], but that will not deter white men, who have a nose that senses demand, from making the attempt. It is a foregone conclusion that with the craving to hear these songs that is known to exist on the part of the public, it will not be long before white singers have taken them over and made them enough their own so that the public will be surfeited sooner or later with opportunities to enjoy them, and—when the Negro tardily offers to sing them in public—it will perhaps be too late to stir the interest which now lies latent in the breast of every music lover.\textsuperscript{22}
On the refusal of blacks to support their arts, Langston Hughes cited the example of Charles Gilpin who “acted for years in Negro theaters without any special acclaim from his own, but when Broadway gave him eight curtain calls, Negroes, too, began to beat a tin pan in his honor.” Unfortunately, with such acclaim the black performer often started aping the white performer. For example, the director of a prominent phonograph company told Van Vechten that “a few such contacts [white theaters] and they won’t sing Blues any more; they prefer white ballads. We’ve lost several excellent Blues singers this way.” This tendency by both audience and performers reflected the black middle-class attitudes of “Don’t be like niggers” and “Look how well a white man does things,” expressions commonly heard in Harlem. As Langston Hughes sadly reflected:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, “I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,” meaning, I believe, “I want to write like a white poet”; meaning subconsciously “I would like to be a white poet”; meaning behind that, “I would like to be white.” And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

But, to my mind, ...it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through
the force of his art that old whispering, "I want to be white," hidden in the aspirations of his people, to "Why should I want to be White? I am a Negro—and beautiful!"

In an article on the black theater, Alain Locke, like Van Vechten also maintained that the primary thrust for successful growth had to be the development of its own uniqueness:

These barriers are slowly breaking down both on the legitimate stage and in the popular drama, but the great handicap, as Carl Van Vechten so keenly points-out in his "Prescription for the Negro Theatre," is blind imitation and stagnant conventionalism. Negro dramatic art must not only be liberated from the handicaps of external disparagement but from its self-imposed limitations. It must more and more have the courage to be original, to break with established dramatic convention of all sorts. It must have the courage to develop its own idiom, to pour itself into new molds; in short, to be experimental.

Although both Locke's article and Van Vechten's article on the theater were written expressly for that medium, the problems presented and their suggested solutions were applicable to all aspects of black culture in America.

In Van Vechten's biographical note on Langston Hughes, he introduced the young writer by publicizing the fact that his poem, "The Weary Blues," had received the first prize in a contest for Negro writers sponsored by Opportunity and that, the following year, a collection of his poetry would be published by Alfred A. Knopf. Van Vechten assessed Hughes and his poetry in the following manner:
The work of this poet is informed with a sensitivity and a nostalgia, racial in origin, for beauty, color, and warmth. His subjects are extraordinarily diversified. A lyric simplicity marks his sea pieces; his cabaret verses dance to the rhythm of Negro jazz; now he mourns for the hurt of the black man; again he celebrates the splendor of the women of Mexico or the savage beauty of the natives of the African coast.

Although still a very young man, Langston Hughes has crowded more adventure into his life than most of us will experience.27)

Five months later Hughes' name was again mentioned by Van Vechten to Vanity Fair readers as one of the new school of black authors:

Lately, however, a new school of coloured writers, of which the best known and the most gifted are probably Rudolph Fisher, Jean Toomer, and Langston Hughes—the talents of Countee Cullen, Walter White, and Jessie Fauset have been exercised in other directions—have perceived the advantage of writing about squalid Negro life from the inside.28)

Van Vechten believed that this type of writing was more interesting in that "the low-life of Negroes offers a wealth of exotic and novel material while the life of the cultured Negro does not differ in essentials from the life of the cultured white man."29) He held to his point of view by siding with a white author who, in The Wooings of Jezebel Pettyfer, had attempted to deal with the reality of Negro life in Barbados. The author, Haldane MacFall, had been criticized by Emmett J. Scott, Jr., in Crisis, and Van Vechten came to MacFall's assistance. In the process of protecting MacFall, he entered into a subtle situation. He was no
longer just espousing the black cause and encouraging blacks to appreciate their heritage, but, as a white writer, he was confronting black opposition to his and other whites’ right to portray Negro life while at the same time insisting that the work of an author be criticized from an aesthetic rather than a racial standpoint. He pointed out that some black people were overly sensitive to what a white author wrote about Negro life:

There exists, it would appear, an explicable tendency on the part of the Negro to be sensitive concerning all that is written about him, particularly by a white man, to regard even the fiction in which he plays a role in the light of propaganda. Mr. Scott seems to be suffering from this prevalent sensitiveness.\(^3\)

Van Vechten knew that Scott was not the only black who suffered from this “prevalent sentiveness”, and, appreciating the seriousness of such feelings, he attempted to show how, in trying to protect their image, they were inclined to conceal their beautiful spirituals and emotional blues, thus robbing themselves of significant opportunities to enhance their position in American society. We can assume that in addition to what he believed he had also begun preparing his next novel, Nigger Heaven. If this was so, it is understandable that he would be highly sensitive to the probable reactions resulting from black sensitivity and felt a need to confront his dilemma publicly. He, therefore, sent an article to Crisis, one of the most influential black periodicals, asking the artists of the world, and more particularly the black community, the following:

1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of charac-
ter he will portray?

2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group?

3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?

4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?

5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as “Porgy” received?

6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?

7. Is there not a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class?31)

By contributing this article to Crisis, Van Vechten was appealing for the cooperation of all who were interested in these questions. The answers to these seven questions were given by Crisis on the same page:

1. The artist is under no obligations or limitations whatsoever. He should be free to depict things exactly as he sees them.

2. No, so long as his portrait is reasonably accurate.
3. I know of no publisher who sets up any such doctrine. The objection is to Negro characters who are really only white men, i.e., Negro characters who are false.

4. The remedy of a Negro novelist is to depict the white man at his worst. Walter White has already done it, and very effectively.

5. This question is simply rhetorical. Who denies the fact?

6. The sound artist pays no attention to bad art. Why should he?

7. If they are bad artists, yes. If they are good, no.32)

It might be said that Van Vechten created an opportunity to establish a legitimate foothold for his novel Nigger Heaven. The opportunity to present his viewpoint and receive support from Crisis may have bolstered his morale but in actuality the article could not, and did not, resolve the problem, one that was deeply ingrained in the black community at that time.

NOTES


2. Ibid., p. 365


5. Carl Van Vechten, “The Black Blues: Negro Songs of Disappointment in Love–Their Pathos Hardened with Laughter,” Vanity Fair (August, 1925), p. 57. The expression “hardened with laughter” was used by Langston Hughes in a letter he wrote to Van Vechten

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 86

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8. Ibid., p. 92.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 46.
16. Ibid., p. 92.
17. Ibid., p. 98.
15. Ibid., p. 46.
16. Ibid., p. 92.
17. Ibid., p. 98.
19. Ibid., pp. 61, 100.
20. Ibid., p. 61.
22. Van Vechten, *op. cit.*, “Moanin’ Wid A Sword in Ma Han’”, p. 100.
24. Van Vechten, “‘Moanin’ Wid A Sword in Ma Han’”, p. 100.
28. Van Vechten, “Moanin’ Wid A Sword In Ma Han’”, p. 100.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., p. 102.