



Enumerating the Importance of African American Music Beyond the Moment

A Call for Advocacy, Reflection, and Action—June 2020

In August 2019, NAFME endorsed a second bicameral resolution to celebrate the musical contributions of African Americans to United States culture and history. The resolution highlights the importance of increasing African American students' broad participation in music education, as well as recognizing June as African American Music Appreciation Month.

While first decreed in the Carter administration as Black Music Month, it was not until 2000 that the first congressional resolution to officially commemorate African American music formally established African American Music Appreciation Month.

As NCMEA celebrates our fiftieth anniversary we want to celebrate and recognize the significant milestones and struggles of the African American music experience within North Carolina. There is no question that the power of African American music has defined the American experience and we also know from our own beginnings that strong leadership from within African American music associations paved the way for NCMEA to form. Great leaders such as Theresa Claggett, Eloise Penn, and Emily Kelly were disturbed by the professional isolation resulting from the separateness inherent in the segregated system.

Through the intentional and forward thinking process of a merger rather than integration of membership, it took nearly four years to complete the dissolution of scrapping the constitutions of NCSMTA, NCBDA, and NCMEC as a scaffold for the new constitution of NCMEA. This was difficult, but necessary work. Recent events remind us of the legacy of these visionary leaders. As Dr. Hortense R. Kerr (NCMEA's first President) shared, "We have been rewarded for taking such a tremendous risk, for we have lived to see the potential for a greater, richer, and healthier music educators organization."

In this same spirit, we want to uplift this music, their creators, and the music educators that have inspired them. We want to take this opportunity to especially celebrate the great works of significant African American musicians from North Carolina such as Maceo Parker, Billy Strayhorn, Nina Simone, John Coltrane, and countless others. The enumeration of African American Music Month provides NCMEA an opportunity to reflect on how African Americans have shaped our musical heritage and contributed to music in enriching human life throughout our state and nation's history.

While African American Music Month is a celebration, recent unrest in our state and nation demonstrates the work of celebrating the accomplishments of Black musicians must not be confined to merely one moment in the calendar year. We must continuously promote the work and music of these musicians, educators, and students.

Society often celebrates and reaps the benefits of the accomplishments of Black music and its people, and the collective work of its communities, but it is equally important to acknowledge the



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daily struggles of the Black American experience. Through the teaching process music educators must actively research and seek out information and pedagogy that promotes Black music and works to dismantle harmful stereotypes and unconscious bias within our teaching and interactions throughout the year. If music educators have not researched the experiences and struggles of the Black musicians and communities as well as their pedagogy and teaching process, the work and ultimate celebration of Black music is not complete. Just as Dr. Kerr reiterated, it is important to ensure the vast positive impacts of a people can be continued for generations to come.

Recent studies by the U.S. Department of Education affirm, “Teachers of color are positive role models for all students in breaking down negative stereotypes and preparing students to live and work in a multiracial society.” NCMEA and NAFME believe that having music teachers who both represent and are prepared to respond to students’ diverse creative interests will ensure African American youth have a space in the classroom and the optimal conditions to confidently pursue music.

Music is a great unifier, but unification does not uplift some and relegate the marginalized to designated months or predetermined expectations. As NCMEA navigates the uncomfortable work of uprooting the unconscious bias within the association, individual members are encouraged to equally reflect and respond. This work is not easy and it must be done with purpose and intention.

As music educators often challenge students to stretch beyond what they dream to be possible, teachers themselves must be challenged to do the same. While the work continues throughout local communities, the state, and the nation, NCMEA will continue to seek experts in this field to provide more resources for members in the coming future. Now is a wonderful time to research and reflect so that NCMEA may move forward in shaping a better music education landscape for all.

With much reflection,
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