

spring 1975

COMMUNITY NOTICE

"... THERE IS A FEELING THAT YOU HAVE AN EXPECTATION OF STUDENT AND COLLEAGUE LOYALTIES THAT ARE, PERHAPS, A LITTLE EXAGGERATED, //THE NEED FOR LOYALTY"*

The FPC in the course of reviewing Bill Dixon's appointment at the college has suggested that Mr. Dixon in some way requires loyalty from both his students and colleagues. Though I consider this allegation to be patently untrue an unusual social situation does exist within the Black Music Division that could, if viewed superficially, give that type of impression. That is, there exists in the Division a distinguishable group of committed and impassioned students, including a number of students outside of the Division with a fierce allegiance to the music. It is my belief that this marked enthusiasm and/or vehemence results from an attitude about learning characterized by the following:

1. An assumption that students taking courses in the Division are interested in obtaining the "information" (which they have indicated by signing up for a course);
2. That a certain calibre of work can reasonably be expected from any college population (though this can, of course, vary from individual to individual);
3. The realization of faculty and students in the Division that learning is not a magical process, but requires the following:
 - A. Committed work on the part of the student;
 - B. Discipline;
 - C. Sufficient curiosity and motivation to search for the necessary sources (literature, critical works, recordings), which in this music are neither plentiful nor readily available.

These are, at least in part, the educational and behavioral expectations of the Division. What makes the Black Music Division unique in this respect that these expectations are held not only by the Faculty but by the students, the committed students as well. At the center of this committed group are the majors in the Division and the advanced students, who are viewed by themselves and others in the Division as the "Strong players". **The members of this group recognize their own membership; there is a certain amount of fraternity, of what is described as in group behavior. And there is perhaps, a certain mystique about them; all of which is very attractive to the outsider.

*One of four areas of 'concern' raised by the FPC about Bill Dixon that has caused that committee not to recommend him for reappointment to the college.

** It is important to note that this commitment to, or enthusiasm about the music exists not only among the recognized "Black Music Crew", but also in students who have taken only one or two courses in the Division.

The members of this group have "paid some heavy dues", they have committed themselves to their work. Naturally, the members of this group are going to require that others fulfill the same requirements. Their investment, in terms of effort, determines this attitude. How can people who've literally sweated blood for a given period of time in order to attain a goal, that being a certain level of expertise and thus membership in that group, be expected to be "blaise"? An alteration of the requirements for entrance would necessarily entail a denial of their efforts. The important point here is that the only requirement for entrance into this high status group is a lot of hard work and contrary to popularly held opinion, indeed, brilliance is neither necessary nor sufficient for entrance. The realization that "I too can be a part of this" has been the source of much motivation and may in part account for the fervor of the Division's students. In the Black Music Division one can be either a "good student" or a "fuck-up", the single requirement for the former being hard work and the single requirement for the latter being the lack thereof. Clearly, such is the case in any Division, but Black Music is a very open Division, that is everyone knows just what you're doing and just what you're not doing. This situation results largely from the fact that most Bennington students entering the Division are complete beginners, thus progress and lack of progress made by these students is clearly evident.

A second factor effecting the behavior of those involved in the Division is the societal position of Black Music. Black Music has never been widely recognized as an art music in this country (see A.B. Spellman's FOUR LIVES), and although this is not the case in Europe, I think that the behavioral effects of this disenfranchisement are visible in the individual proponents of the music, and in the "attitudinal" stance of the Black Music Division here at Bennington. These effects have been variously described as "Fanaticism", racism and here as "Paranoia". The history of this music has been, and continues to be, one of oppression. And those who have done even minimal research in the area recognize this statement as one of fact, unpleasant though it may be, rather than an inflammatory statement of belief. Clearly, this fact and others, are necessarily a part of the student's education in the Division, for the social role and position of the music has in many ways effected its direction and movement through time.

It seems evident to me that members of this Division tend to view themselves a part, and a potentially significant part, of the history of this music. Further, members of this Division, like all artists and academicians, view what they do, and the response to what they do, in terms of their history. In this case the artistic and social history of Black Music in America. If this tendency to view the present in terms of history seems more prominent in Black Music than in other areas of study, it probably is due to the fact that there has been no substantial improvement of the music's social position. In order to understand the collective behavior of the Division one must take into account these factors.

Community Notice

Page 3.

The brief history of Black Music at Bennington has been equally disconcerting. The move to include Black Music in the Bennington curriculum was not initiated by the College, indeed it was quite literally a campaign mounted by proponents of the music which resulted in that inclusion. When Black Music was accorded divisional status it became apparent that it was still to be regarded by the college as the 'poor relation' of the arts (i.e., consider the Black Music operating budget as compared to the rest of the arts divisions). And finally I would say that what is seen as the "paranoia" of the student members of the division might in part be accounted for, not only by the preceding but also by the realization that they have spent a considerable amount of energy studying Black Music and that there is, quite literally, "no future in it". *

Returning to the FPC's allegation that Bill Dixon requires "loyalty" from his students it is important to make several points. Bill Dixon's students are very loyal, and it is, in part, a personal loyalty. For the students of the Division know the history of this music and know what Bill has done to alter that history. They know what Bill, as a teacher, has done for them as individuals. More significant than this is the loyalty of the students of the Black Music Division to the music. And one wonders how this can be anything but admirable. The point then is that the FPC, and perhaps the college generally, have misinterpreted the devotion of the Division's students for the music, as devotion for Bill Dixon as an individual. I think the problem here is that the college has, for too long, viewed Bill Dixon as Black music, and Black Music as only Bill Dixon. This is, however, a cognitive confusion which students in the Division could neither afford academically nor tolerate aesthetically.

Finally, it appears to this student, who has for three years observed Black Music, that the main loyalty of the students in the Division is to themselves; to themselves as students of a little recognized art. And to themselves as growing musicians. How can you hate that?

B. MacGregor
Bennington College
May 22, 1975

*(See L. Festinger's THEORY OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE)