“All You Got to Do Is Sing It. Then You Be Free”: August Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone

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Every serious theatre-goer by now is familiar with August Wilson’s “Twentieth Century Cycle,” ten plays written between 1979 and 2005, each one depicting African American life during a different decade. Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (1984), the second play in the cycle, depicts the second decade of the century. In 1911, African Americans, to a significant extent, have become rootless. With the end of the “peculiar institution” of slavery in 1865, many of the formerly enslaved begin the search for family members from whom they had been forcibly separated. There was then the brief period of Reconstruction (1865-1877), when Black people attained various rights, but it ended far too soon. In addition, because of the rise of the Klan, the fear of lynching, and various environmental disasters, this decade marked the beginning of The Great Migration, when millions of African Americans left the South and migrated to the North in search of jobs, freedom, and a new sense of identity (see Jacob Lawrence’s monumental The Migration Series (1941), sixty tempera paintings that document the journey). The exodus would be further stimulated later in the decade when World War I started, European immigration dwindled, and there were jobs galore in the North. In the South, even though slavery had officially ended, it was replaced by the system of sharecropping, which was simply slavery by another name, another way to force Black workers into hard work for little to no pay, and often leaving them in debt. Because of a more limited lack of free labor, there was also a wide-spread policy of arresting African American men on the trumped-up charge of vagrancy for which they would have to work for free, often for as many as seven years to pay off their “debt.” The notorious Black Codes further limited Black freedom, restricting voting, labor, and property ownership, and this would be continued with Jim Crow. Also adding to the tension in the play, there is the additional situation of northern free-born, middle-class Blacks looking down on their newly-arrived, southern, usually lower class, brethren with their “country” ways. Another form of tension had to do with Christianity, in which the enslaved had been told to obey their masters and wait for salvation in the next life. Some still clung to it and believed,

some had abandoned it completely, and others had returned to African to (or still kept) various forms of African religious practices. This is the background of Wilson's play.

In the midst of all this turmoil, the Pittsburgh boardinghouse of Seth and Bertha Holly becomes a kind of oasis, or a lighthouse for lost ships/souls. All of the nine other characters spend time there. Some have lived there for years, some have lived there and moved on, some are just passing through, and some are neighbors just there for a visit.

In a 1999 Paris Review interview, Wilson revealed that his greatest source of inspiration was what he called the "Four Bs." The Bs stand for the blues, African American painter and collagist Romare Bearden, African poet and playwright Amiri Baraka, and Argentine poet and short story writer Jorge Luis Borges. The influence of Borges (1899-1986) comes from both his sense of the fantastic in texts such as Ficciones and The Aleph, and his detective stories written with Adolfo Bioy Casares. From Bearden (1911-1988), Wilson gets an appreciation for working class Blacks both northern and southern, an appreciation for Black folk traditions such as conjure men and women, and looking at the lives of Blacks through a single Black lens as opposed to the limiting double-consciousness lens of W.E.B. Du Bois, made famous in The Souls of Black Folk (1903). From Baraka (1934-2014), Wilson gets an appreciation for all forms of Black music and the importance of theatre by, for, and about Black people, especially Baraka's Afro-centric work during the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and '70s.

There are many themes in this play: the husband-wife relationship, the parent-child relationship, the role of Christianity in Black life, migration, conjure practices, and a detective mystery, among others; but the most important theme is music. As Baraka notes in Black Music, "Music as the consciousness, the expression of where we are (210). And as Baldwin notes in the first sentence of "Many Thousands Gone," from Notes of a Native Son, "It is only in his music… that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story." The basis of this play is rooted in the blues, the form of African American music developed from field hollers and spirituals. For too many people, the blues is merely a musical form of tragedy. For them, a

typical blues song is just a lament about a lost lover. Ralph Ellison, in “Richard Wright’s Blues,” however, provides the most comprehensive definition of the genre:

> *The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically…Let us close with one final word about the blues. Their attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self.*
> (Shadow and Act 78-79, 94)

What is most important here is the word “transcend.” By changing the negative experience of a lost lover into a lyrical expression, the negativity is transcended. The blues is thus not primarily about negativity, but about lyrically overcoming negativity.

The character in the play most connected to music is Bynum, whom Wilson describes as a “conjure man, or rootworker, he gives the impression of always being in control of everything. Nothing ever bothers him” (4). In his “talking blues,” he tells the story of how he found the “secret of life” and his connection to the “shiny man.” Many years back, he found a man wandering on the road who rubbed blood on him, then began to glow, and everything around grew to be enormously large. Bynum notes that “I had to cover up my eyes to keep from being blinded. He shining like new money with that light” (9), an experience reminiscent of the biblical story of Saul’s being blinded by the light on the road to Damascus before he becomes Paul. The shiny man then disappears and is replaced by Bynum’s father, who is his normal size except for larger- than- life hands and mouth. (As an aside, this vision of a man with oversized hands and mouth recalls Bearden’s 1978 collage Mill Hand Lunch Bucket, whose title was Wilson’s original title for the play, and whose extra-large features signify the potential for growth.) Bynum’s

father is grieved to see his son "carrying other people's songs" (9), but not having one of his own, and shows him how to find it. He also explains the meaning of the shiny man, and tells his son that the shiny man is "the One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way," clearly a reference to the role of John the Baptist in the New Testament. He further tells his son that if he sees a shiny man again, he will know that his song has been "accepted and worked its full power in the world," and that then he will be able to die in peace. Bynum's father allows him to realize that his song is the "Binding Song." In his travels, he has seen "people walking away and leaving one another, "So I takes the power of my song and binds them together… Been binding people ever since. That's why they call me Bynum. Just like glue I sticks people together" (10). Bynum's mission, therefore, is to help people bind, to help them find their own individual songs, and to continue to search for his shiny man. For Bynum, this is the secret of life. He does note, however, that finding your song isn't an easy task, "Then one day my daddy gave me a song. That song had a weight to it that was hard to handle. That song was hard to carry … I tried to find my daddy to give him back the song. But I found out it wasn't his song. It was my song.It had come from way deep inside me … when a man forgets his song he goes off in search of it (71). As Bynum's song is a binding song, his father's song was a healing song. He tells a story of his father's healing a "little white girl" when the "Doctors standing around can't do nothing to help her. And they had my daddy come up and sing his song … It was just somebody singing. But the song was its own thing and it come out and took upon this little girl with its power and it healed her" (61).

Bynum tells the story of the shiny man and the secret of life to Rutherford Selig, the play's only white character. Wilson makes it clear that Selig is questionable in many ways. Wilson describes him as "a thin white man with greasy hair" (6). On the one hand, he is known as "the People Finder." During this time of separated family members, he finds and reunites people, for which service he charges a dollar. Bynum has in fact hired him to find his shiny man. On the other hand, both Seth and Bertha have significant doubts about his skill. Seth notes that "He talk all that ... but unless he get lucky he can't find her. That's the only way he find anybody. He got to get lucky" (38). Bertha's position is even stronger. She states that "You can call him a

People Finder if you want to. I know Rutherford Selig carries people away too… This old People Finding business is for the birds He ain't never found nobody he ain't took away" (42). Another mark against him is that he refers to Black people collectively as "Nigras." Even worse is when he tells the history of his "profession." He recalls that "my great-grandaddy used to bring Nigras across the ocean on ships…My daddy, rest his soul, used to find runaway slaves for the plantation bosses"; and that "After Abraham Lincoln give you all Nigras your freedom papers… we started finding Nigras for Nigras. Of course, it don't pay as much. But the People Finding business ain't so bad" (41). Selig clearly sees what he does as being in a continuum with his ancestors' work in the slave trade, and this makes him a questionable figure at best. Another strike against him is that while most of the play is about binding and relationships, Selig is proud to be in the opposite camp. On the topic of women and relationships, he asserts, "you better off without them… I ain't met one yet I could understand… That's all a man needs is a good horse. I say giddup and she go. Say whoa and she stop" (40). In addition to finding people, Selig has another profession. He provides sheet metal to Seth, who uses it to make pots, pans, and dustpans; and when they are ready, he takes them and sells them out in the community. Wilson's point here is that even in the northern city of Pittsburgh, Seth doesn't have the same freedom of mobility that Selig has.

Seth and Bertha Holly are the center around which everyone else rotates, and they perfectly complement each other. Seth is the outside and Bertha is the inside. She takes care of the house, doing the cooking, cleaning, and laundry, being a source of advice, protection, and welcoming. This is how Bertha shows love. As she later says, "but the only thing that man needs is somebody to make him laugh. That's all you need in the world is love and laughter. That's all anybody needs. To have love in one hand and laughter in the other … The kind of laugh that comes from way deep inside … Just laugh to let yourself know you're alive" (87). To a large extent, because she doesn't have children, the various people in the house have become her children, whom she protects like a mother hen. That also includes her husband Seth. Seth takes care of the outside. He chooses who gets to live in the house, he grows vegetables in the

back yard, and he supplements the rental income by working in a mill. For Seth, the possession of the house is of the utmost importance. He has inherited the house from his father, and insists on keeping it "respectable" and proper with no "riffraff" allowed. He is extremely proud of the fact that he is northern, free-born, and he has never had to pick cotton. This is not to say that his life is picture-perfect. Work in the mill is physically demanding. It is the type of work that involves bending, climbing, and squatting, and can cause various types of injuries such as cuts, abrasions, back injuries, tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, burns, and eye injuries. An additional problem is that he has been moved from working the day shift to working at night. And despite his boss's promise to return him days, this hasn't happened, and this is a source of concern for both Seth and Bertha. As he notes, "This is what Mr. Olowski told me. I got to wait till he say when. He tell me what to do I don't tell him" (4). As earlier noted, to further supplement the family income, he has started his own business on the side where he makes pots, pans, and dustpans. He firmly believes in some form of Booker T. Washington's capitalist philosophy; but even here he is thwarted. On the one hand, he wants a loan from his white employers so he can hire and train other workers to make more pots, a skill he learned from his father; but they won't do it unless he signs over the house to them, which he certainly isn't going to do, clearly a form of racism. Another form of racism is the labor market and who gets hired when. According to Seth, "White fellows coming from all over the world. White fellow come over and in six months got more than what I got" (6). And so despite a seeming middle class life at the time, the economic situation for Seth and Bertha is not close to what it could be.

The most important boarder in the house is Bynum, the conjure man who has been living with Seth and Bertha for three years, and who, to Seth's consternation, grows roots and herbs in the back yard (listen to the 1961 Art Blakey album of the same title). Seth's problem or concern is that in growing what he grows and tending to his own garden, Bynum will trample on Seth's vegetables. Seth is also distrustful of Bynum's conjure practices, which include sacrificing, burying, dancing around, and pouring blood over pigeons, activities Seth refers to as "that old mumbo jumbo nonsense" (1) and that "heebie-jeebie stuff" (2). Despite what might seem to be tension between them, they are actually friends; Seth confides in Bynum, Bertha enjoys him

and his appreciation of her biscuits and fried chicken; and it turns out that even though Bertha is a regular church-goer, she also engages in some of the same ritual practices as Bynum. She lines pennies across the threshold, she tosses salt over her shoulder after church, humorously noting that "It don't hurt none. I can't say if it help … but it don't hurt none" (2), she defends Bynum when Seth complains about the "mumbo jumbo nonsense," and she also notes that Seth doesn't complain when Bynum "bless the house" (2). And so the seeming wall between the material and the spiritual, between the old African ways and the new American capitalist material ways, is much more porous than it might at first seem. When Seth gets upset at the very beginning about Bynum's "pigeon practices," Bertha is quick to note that "I done seen Bynum out there with them pigeons before" (1). There is, therefore, nothing to be "concerned" about, but this does establish an aura of mystery around Bynum, which continues later when Mattie Campbell comes to visit, wanting Bynum to give her something to "fix it so my man come back to me" (21), and he gives her a gris- gris, the West African voodoo amulet believed to bring good luck, and tells her to sleep with it under her pillow. And in another merging of the past with the present, Bynum, of course, charges a fee for this service. We don't see Bynum do any other work, so being a conjure man is how he pays the rent: two dollars a week, payable on Saturday, and an extra twenty-five cents if one doesn't have a towel, for two meals a day, breakfast and dinner, and fried chicken on Sunday.

Being a conjure man isn't Bynum's only skill. He is also an expert on women. This comes out in his interactions with Jeremy, a guitar player recently arrived from North Carolina, about whom Wilson notes that "his spirit has yet to be molded into song" (12). There are two sides to Jeremy's story. There is the side that is his life as a worker. He is working in construction, helping to build a new road, when he is arrested, fined two dollars, and forced to spend the night in jail. He has done nothing wrong. Later, we learn he has been fired because a "White fellow come by told me to give him fifty cents if I wanted to keep working… Them other fellows, they was giving it to him. I kept hold to mine and they fired me." Seth criticizes him, saying he should have given in because "This way you ain't got nothing" (64), but Jeremy refuses to be exploited by whites. This is the second time this has happened to him; earlier, he recounts the story of

entering a guitar-playing contest and being economically exploited, again by a white man (17-18), but his confidence in playing skill remains, and he does manage to make enough to support himself. He is less successful in his thoughts of what it takes to get and keep a woman. He thinks that his sexual prowess is all he needs. As he says to Mattie, in proposing that he be her new man, at least until the old one returns, "I got a ten-pound hammer and I knows how to drive it down. Good god … you ought to hear my hammer ring!" (26). He later says to Bynum about her, "Got them long legs. Knows how to treat a fellow too. Treat you like you wanna be treated" (45). This limited view of women generates not one but two "talking blues" arias by Bynum. In the first, he tries to explain that a relationship with a woman is not just about touch, "Anybody can do that. When you grab hold to that woman and look at the whole thing and see what you got … why, she can take and make something out of you … Your mother was a woman. That's enough right there to show you what a woman is." (45-46). Unfortunately, or not surprisingly, this completely goes over Jeremy's head, and Bynum has to try again, "Alright. Let's try it this way." Bynum then goes into an extended metaphor about how if you are on a ship at see and you finally come upon land, that land is just a line on the horizon; but once you actually get there, an entire world is exposed to you. This is what it means to encounter and to truly know a woman. You can't rely on a vague first impression. You have to see the full picture. This passage is reminiscent of the opening paragraph of Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), talking about ships on the horizon, which itself signifies on the famous passage in Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself (1845), in which he watches ships travelling on the Chesapeake Bay and dreams of freedom. As Bynum puts it, "Anything you can think of you can find on that land. Same with a woman. A woman is everything a man need. To a smart man she water and berries. And that's all a man need. That's all he need to live on. You give me some water and berries and if there ain't nothing else I can live a hundred years … But you got to learn it. My telling you ain't gonna mean nothing (46). Immediately after this, there is a knock on the door, Molly Cunningham arrives, and Jeremy's "heart jumps out of his chest when he sees her" (47). Later, when Jeremy and Molly have cemented their relationship, Jeremy says to her, "I wanna go everywhere and do everything there is to be got out of life. With a woman like you it's like

having water and berries. A man got everything he need" (66). By repeating Bynum's language, Wilson is making it clear that Jeremy has gotten the message and that his spirit has now been "molded into song" (12).

The most significant visitor to Seth and Bertha's house is Herald Loomis, who brings with him his eleven-year-old daughter Zonia. Wilson describes him thusly, "He is at times possessed. A man driven not by the hellhounds that seemingly bay at his heels, but by his search for a world that speaks to something about himself. He is unable to harmonize the forces that swirl around him, and seeks to recreate the world into one that contains his image. He wears a hat and a long wool coat" (13-14). In keeping with the play's musical theme, Wilson's choice of the word "harmonize" is of particular importance. The play takes place in August, so Herald's hat and long coat make him immediately strange. He announces that he is looking for his missing wife Martha, and this sets the play off into the land of the major mysteries/questions at its heart.

There are at least four major mysteries/questions that the play wants us to think about. The first is the detective story of whether Herald Loomis will find his wife. Eleven years ago, although a church deacon in Tennessee, he was mistakenly taken to be a vagrant and forced to work on Joe Turner's farm for seven years. After his release, he returned to the sharecropping farm where he and his wife had worked to find her and their child gone. Traveling to the home of his mother-in-law, he discovers that his wife has left and gone north, leaving their daughter behind. Herald and Zonia have now spent four years traveling from town to town looking for his wife. The two of them arrive in Pittsburgh on their search and end up at the Holly home. In addition to the loss of his wife, Loomis has also completely lost his sense of God and religion. From his perspective, working for Joe Turner has completely changed him for the negative, and working for Joe Turner became a new form of slavery, and therefore reminders of the African past and the Middle Passage are to be avoided. In the language of Bynum, everyone has a song, and they must recognize it and accept it in order to be whole. And so Loomis has lost not only his wife and his religion, but his soul and sense of self. That being said, it is also clear that for

these past four years, he has been a good father to Zonia. But whether he will be able to find his song and be able to fully stand on his feet is the source of the second mystery. Midway through the play, Loomis has a vision and begins speaking in tongues. He has a vision of a series of "bone people." Who they are, what they represent, why this vision happens when it does, what the vision means differently to Loomis and Bynum, and the changing relationship between them during the vision, is the source of the third mystery. The fourth mystery is whether Bynum will find his shiny man.

In the final scene of the first act, the characters, with the exception of Loomis, are all in the kitchen, having just enjoyed Bertha's Sunday fried chicken, when Bynum announces, "Come on, we gonna Juba" (51), apparently something they do every Sunday. As Wilson tells us, "The Juba is reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African slaves. It is a call and response dance … It should be as African as possible, with the performers working themselves up into a near frenzy. The words can be improvised, but should include some mention of the Holy Ghost" (52). There are at least three things interesting about this. The first is that it demonstrates clear African retentions into the Twentieth Century. The second is the combination of African and Christian ritual practices, and the third is Seth's joyful participation. One might think he wouldn't allow such goings-on in his house because he might think they were too connected to what he has already referred to as Bynum's "that old mumbo jumbo nonsense." That being said, everyone is clearly having a good time when Loomis enters, and "In a rage," shouts, "Stop it! Stop!", leaps onto the table, and proceeds to deliver a "sermon" on the evils of the Holy Ghost and God, "Why God got to be so big? Why he got to be bigger than me?" He then starts to unzip his pants to show that his sexual power is greater than any power God has. At that moment, he "begins to speak in tongues and dance around the kitchen" (52), and then he has his vision of the bone people.

Herald Loomis's vision of the bones, first of all, signifies on in a passage in the Hebrew Bible from The Book of Ezekiel. The relevant, but also somewhat long, passage is as follows. It is about one of the visions Ezekiel experiences during the Babylonian Captivity (597-538 BCE):

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley: it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Soverign Lord, you alone know."

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Soverign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, "This is what the Soverign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live." So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army. (37:1-10)

The meaning of the biblical passage is clear. The Israelites have lost faith and consider themselves to be bead bones. Yahweh restores their faith by breathing life into the dead bones, bringing them back to life. Despite despair, there is reason to hope. Clearly, Wilson had this passage in mind. There are the walking bones, the need for breath, and a promise of salvation. There is also a significance difference. Ezekiel deals with the present and the future, while Wilson deals with the past, present, and future. The first part of Loomis's vision represents the experience of the Middle Passage, the enslaved on slave ships, many of whom died enroute and

were thrown overboard, and just as many who, preferring death to slavery, threw themselves overboard. Loomis, however, sees them "Rise up and walk across the water … and begin to walk on top of it, clearly also referencing Jesus's walking on the water (Matthew 14:22-33) But the second part of Loomis's vision significantly moves beyond slavery. The bones become flesh and are able to walk away and move on. Black life is not just victimhood, but moves beyond victimhood to possibility.

The form of the vision is equally important. In the first part, Loomis recites what he sees, and Bynum essentially asks clarifying questions, or he might even embellish a detail. But it is clear that Loomis is in control of the narrative. But midway through, the dynamic shifts, and Bynum begins to lead Loomis; and they engage in a call-and-response with Bynum as the preacher. As an example, Loomis says, "Everywhere you look the waves is washing them up on the land right on top of one another." Bynum responds with, "They black. Just like you and me. Ain't no difference" (55). Bynum has moved from an asker of questions to a provider of Information. This is a moment of great significance in the play. Through this interaction, Bynum has recognized that Loomis is his shiny man, and he is trying to lead Loomis to the place where Loomis can first recognize that and then be able to sing his own song. Loomis, unfortunately, doesn't understand his vision, and this is symbolized by his inability to stand at the end of it. The proof that this is the case is that Bynum, who has been singing throughout, changes his tune. First he sings, "Soon my work will all be done" (58); and then he sings, "They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone" (67). He clearly recognizes who Loomis is and is trying to bring him to full consciousness.

The final movement of the play begins with a confrontation between Bynum and Loomis. Loomis is upset about Bynum's singing the Joe Turner song because it obviously reminds him of his recent past. Bynum then diagnoses Loomis's major problem. Bynum's father taught him how to recognize when someone has lost their song, and that is the problem Bynum sees in Loomis, "Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forgot his song. Forgot how to sing it. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is. Forget how he's

supposed to mark down life … That's why I can tell you one of Joe Turner's niggers. 'Cause you forgot how to sing your song" (71). Bynum is suggesting several things here. The first is the connection between song and identity for African Americans. The second is that Joe Turner stole Loomis's song from him during the seven years of captivity. Even more important, however, is that in the ensuing four years, Loomis has allowed Joe Turner to keep his song. He has not fought to take it back, and therefore is complicit in his condition. I am reminded of Baraka's statement from Black Music, "Music as the consciousness, the expression of where we are" (210). What Wilson is really saying here is that music is connected to "soul," that special quality of Black life, not invented by James Brown, Sam and Dave, or Don Cornelius, but that goes back at least as far as Saunders Redding in his pioneering book of African American literary criticism, To Make a Poet Black (1939), a text that marks the close of the Harlem Renaissance. Speaking of the work of Langston Hughes, Redding remarks, "he is a Negro divinely capable of realizing … and giving expression to … the dark perturbation of the soul – there is no other word – of the Negro" (115). And he later says that "the thing the new Negro followed was soul-deep (119). In his use of the word "soul," Redding is not talking about the soul as opposed to the body, but a specific quality or force in Black life.

All of this is to say that Joe Turner has robbed Loomis of his soul power by taking his song away. Bynum makes this clear when he says, "What he wanted was your song. He wanted to have that song be his … Every nigger he catch he's looking for the one he can learn that song from… But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it" (73). It is clear from these words that the song is equivalent to soul and that it is something that only Black people have. Despite the truth of Bynum's words, Loomis still doesn't get it, as demonstrated by his response, "I know who you are. You one of them bones people" (73). Loomis is clearly not saying this as some form of praise. It is the equivalent of Seth's using the term "mumbo jumbo." For Loomis, regaining his song is connected to finding his wife; and just as he and Zonia are about to leave to look for her somewhere else, Selig arrives with Martha. Incidentally, Selig finds her in the exact place Bynum had spoken of earlier, again calling into question Selig's "people finding" ability. Loomis has felt that both he and Zonia have been abandoned by Martha, and she tells her story

and demonstrates how Loomis is incorrect in that perception. Loomis also falsely accuses Bynum of having bound him to the road all these years, and then draws a knife. Bynum corrects him by reminding him that all he needs to be bound to is his song, “It’s right there kicking in your throat. All you got to do is sing it. Then you be free” (91). What is Loomis thinking of doing by drawing the knife is unclear, attack Bynum, attack himself? Martha, who has been living in a church community then tries to get Loomis to come to Jesus, and they engage in a call and response with Martha reciting the 23rd Psalm, and Loomis responding in some form of negativity, seeing God as just a “Great big old white man” (92). When Martha says to Loomis, “You got to be clean, Herald. You got to be washed with the blood of the lamb,” Loomis proceeds to slash himself across the chest. Presumably, this is an act in which Loomis attempts to demonstrate that he is on the same level as God, similar to the moment when he starts to unzip his pants when he jumps up on the table to stop the juba. But what happens is that he rubs himself with his own blood and he comes to a miraculous revelation. The blood becomes a purification ritual similar to the moment of Bynum’s being rubbed in blood from the shiny man. At that precise moment, Loomis shouts, “I’m standing! I’m standing. My legs stood up! I’m standing now!” As Wilson notes, “Having found his song, the song of self-sufficiency, fully resurrected, cleansed and given breath, … having accepted the responsibility for his own presence in the world, he is free to soar”; and Bynum responds with, “Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money! (93-94), the phrase Bynum had used earlier to describe the shiny man to Selig (8); and the play ends with Herald’s walking out the door. Loomis has found his song, his freedom, and his identity. He has understood his vision of the bone people. For Loomis, Joe Turner, and all he stands for, has finally come and gone. What Loomis has also done is lived up to his first name. He is the herald, the messenger who has brought the good news. He has become Bynum’s shiny man; and having found him, Bynum can now die in peace.

In all the decades of the Twentieth Century, Black people have struggled to survive in a hostile world; but as Wilson makes clear here and elsewhere, all we have to do, in the words of Barry White, is “Let the Music Play”; and in the words of Sylvester Stewart, “Dance to the Music.”