

Vinson Valega “Awake” Essay

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### **When we fall asleep, democracy suffers.**

Jazz music, America’s true art form, has always been about pursuing freedom through individual participation in a group setting. Within a shared framework, ideas made of sounds flow from one musician to another in a conversation that serves the greater good of the music, creating an atmosphere where the participants are free to express. But this freedom is only possible when each musician is committed to the democratic ideal, where the give and take among disparate voices makes the music blend. In this way, jazz is a direct by-product of the American ideal - founded upon individual expression and freedom, yet devoted through participation to the greater good.

### **Participation**

The great “Poet of Democracy,” Walt Whitman, was in many ways the first jazz poet. He spent most of the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century riffing on the outrageous and active splendor of an American population teeming with vitality. He was in awe of the incredible diversity he witnessed, and he was convinced that a participatory democracy was the only path that could realize an egalitarian society. Yet, that world Whitman described in *Leaves of Grass* appears obscured here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, it’s all too easy these days to forget Whitman’s world of focus, vitality, and enthusiasm, and to believe that we can’t make a difference. I wonder if we’ve fallen asleep and forgotten what it means to participate in the music of our society, of our communities, of our own lives.

### **Freedom**

Just as the music on this CD was only made possible through the intense participation of each musician, our society is only able to function when its citizens become involved - actively involved. I used to think that my voice was too meek to make an impact in my community, but I have found that by speaking up and engaging in the “push-back,” I have been able to effect change, if only on a small scale. If we don’t get involved, someone or some entity will, and that person or company very likely will not have our best interests in mind. In fact, I would go so far as to ask: if you’re not participating, and someone else is determining your future, how free are you?

When we fall asleep, our democracy suffers.

When we are awake, possibility and hope thrive.

Enjoy the music, and thanks for listening!

Vinson Valega

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