

REVIEW | Kansas City Jazz: A Little Evil Will Do You Good

Con Chapman

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Several years ago, I visited the American Jazz Museum while traveling through Kansas City, Missouri. The notable artifacts in the museum's collection include: Charlie Parker's alto saxophones, Benny Goodman's brown suede wingtip shoes, and a saxophone belonging to John Coltrane. Oddly, however, adjacent to John Coltrane's saxophone sat President Bill Clinton's. I was struck by the juxtaposition of Clinton's saxophone next to Coltrane's.

Con Chapman's book is similar in its scholarship. One can regard the text as mimicking the structure of many Kansas City jazz recordings—building layer upon layer from a series of repeating riffs, then off to a brief adventurous solo (or solos) with exciting background figures, and finally concluding with a slightly altered head arrangement. The book's overarching goal is to draw on "new research to delve deeper into the music of the American Midwest" and focus "on the broader themes and stories of the major personalities...whose talents came together to create the larger whole of Kansas City's distinctive brand of jazz." Two main questions guided my reading: who is this written for, and how do hegemonic methodologies of historiography limit scholastic creativity, reproduce harmful associations, and create conditions of erasure?

Indeed, these questions work dialectically and reinforce one another as the methodology indicates the type of audience that will read the text and vice versa. The book's scope remains to be clarified as Chapman could do better in demarcating the geographical boundaries at play in the conception of his desired object of knowledge, Kansas City jazz. As a result, Kansas City jazz is reduced to the figures of Count Basie and Bennie Moten, and it remains unclear if this was the author's intent. Those seeking a more critical text that considers the various social networks, ideological tendencies and monetary conditions that led to the creation

and proliferation of the music will not necessarily be satisfied by the material therein.

It is a shame too that this book does not engage with the recently acquired Count Basie collection located at the Institute of Jazz Studies (IJS) at Rutgers University-Newark, New Jersey. The archive includes Basie's pianos, Hammond organ, personal correspondence, concert programs, business records, housewares, press clippings, Grammy Awards, and honorary degrees. Moreover, as executive director of IJS, Wayne Winborne notes, the archive contains several boxes of materials related to the life of community leader, civil rights proponent, and wife of Count Basie, Catherine Basie. Alongside the text's oversight of Catherine Basie, there is a lack of female presence, save Mary Lou Williams as an exceptional female figure, a well-worn discursive trope examined at length by many scholars. The text's discourse presented numerous spaces to explore gender dynamics, such as when discussing blues singer Ma Rainey. Here, the narrative could draw on the insight provided by Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. Additionally, Ruben Santiago-Hudson's 2020 Screenplay *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* could serve as an interesting point of departure for considering the singer Rainey's cultural impact and legacy.

One area of great concern is the reproduction of minstrel imagery without critical reflection. The first chapter, "Roots: Ragtime, Minstrelsy and Tent Shows", offers no in-depth discussion on minstrelsy, and Eric Lott's work is never mentioned. Following Lott's 1993 paradigm shifting work on Black face minstrelsy, a consideration of Lott's work is almost *de rigueur*. Lott offers a dialectical, historically rooted, and contextualized analysis of this American phenomenon, its economic function, and its reverberating global implications. Chapman writes, "When Black Minstrels performed with a circus...they were relegated to...[a] smaller enclosure...referred to as the 'kid show top'" (5). Three problematic associations come to the fore here. First, the linkage between racialized bodies and the circus implies non-whiteness as "freakish"; second, the Black circus performer and implied white audience reduces Blackness to white entertainment; and third, the "small enclosure" known as the "kid show top" reinscribes the infantilizing relationship of Blackness as juvenility. This renders the socio-political function of the book as a logocentric landscape that upholds current power dynamics rather than utilizing knowledge production to generate counter-narratives. The crux of the issue lies not in the surface-level connection between Black aesthetic art forms and entertainment culture; such popularized forms of performativity can be quite productive and celebratory! Instead, the problem lies in the methodological container the book utilizes; the historical model seals off any possibility of critical inquiry from historical reproduction. This approach unconsciously naturalizes an oppressive symbolic order and subtextually reinforces problematic associations.

To counteract this arguably static and deterministic historical arrangement, one could turn to scholars such as Ingrid Monson, James Gordon Williams, Robin D. G. Kelley, Fumi Okiji, John Gennari, George E. Lewis, and Eric Porter to engage in more nuanced and complicated discussions of the themes present in the text. Alongside the list of scholars stated, there is no end to the recent development in theoretical and methodological insights consisting of various interdisciplinary and multi-modal approaches created to help descriptively, intertextually, and

dialectically approach social-aesthetic phenomena. Contributors of these theoretical innovations include the likes of Paul Taylor, Stuart Hall, Daphne Brooks, Gerald Horne, Sherrie Tucker, and Tammy L. Kernodle, to name only a few.

The book conforms to the mold of great-man, positivistic, empirical jazz scholarship à la Gunther Schuller. In addition to Schuller (1968), Hugues Panassié (1934), Madeleine Gautier (1956), Rudi Blesh (1948), Harriet Janis (1950), and André Hodeir (1956) frequently appear (or haunt) the text. Instead of uncritically praising these figures, the book could have used them to explore broader cultural issues. For instance, similar to David Strauss, Tom Perchard, Philippe Gumpłowicz, and Jeremy Lane, Chapman could have drawn on Panassié to examine his right-wing political affiliates and tendencies and explore how they might have affected his jazz writing. In the same vein, the tome could use Gautier as a springboard for delving into the institutional erasure of female jazz criticism, similar to the excellent work of Marie Buscatto, Mary Leontsini, and Delphine Naudier.

Of the more prominent issues shrouding great-man theory and the mythical individualism it promotes is that it creates methodological conditions for not engaging with recent publications in the field and others. While the volume offers fascinating vignettes of musicians' anecdotes in their own words, these could be further elaborated upon. The musicians' quotes paint vivid pictures that the chapter's only casts a cursory glance upon, leaving unexplored themes such as emotional labor and aesthetic practices, indigenous communities' relationships with Black jazz musicians, and record-centricity. Other missed opportunities include overlooking the topics of white benevolence and jazz patronage, ragtime and its many attending genres, military educators and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), jazz performance and labor organizing, Black entrepreneurship, territory bands and the discourse of manifest destiny, to name but a few. Additionally, Jim Crow segregationist practices shaped the material and social conditions of these artists' lives, yet the text remains silent on this topic entirely. Despite these significant strains of discourse that shape our contemporary geopolitical terrain, the book's historical approach squanders any historical intervention or paucity. *Silence* is the price paid for neatly organized grand narratives.

The monograph does not advance any discussion of methodology. By not self-reflexively outlining a methodology, the text is open to serious questioning, which remains a weakness of the work. This theoretical silence creates the impression that this is the "correct" and the only way of writing history. Through this silence, the text reproduces problematic conceptions of jazz historiography without hesitation. Perhaps something about the "convenience" of a neatly packaged history is suitable for a high school and early undergraduate classrooms but, given the recent pedagogical impulse towards critical inquiry, canon destabilization, and narrative de/reconstruction, the text remains a starting point.

References

Bibliography

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