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## **Eric Hobsbawm**

*Roger Fagge, University of Warwick*

Two days after Duke Ellington's death on 24 May 1974, the *Observer* newspaper published an obituary written by the historian Eric Hobsbawm. It was symptomatic of Hobsbawm's significance as a jazz writer that he was asked to write about such a significant musical figure, and the article paid tribute to 'The last and greatest of jazz musicians' who 'spanned the entire history of the music for which he invented a mode of collective composition'. Ellington was at his best, Hobsbawm suggested, when working with his band, and without this he would be remembered as at most as a 'composer of enchanting songs', 'an ironical and reticent jazz pianist' and 'perhaps as a dandy and viveur'. But 'with and through it he became as fine a composer as any who has come out of the USA', including inventing 'jazz composition and arrangement almost singlehanded'. Hobsbawm continued 'It is doubtful whether jazz as we have known it will survive his death.' In many ways this was a perceptive, scholarly account of Ellington, but the review then introduced a more personal note. After pointing out that critics and musicians would continue to work out his significance in the future, he suggested that the only thing 'gone forever' was the opportunity to see Ellington live, and here Hobsbawm became more emotional. Jazz fans he suggested have 'moments of unforgettable, vivid, dreamlike but lucid ecstasy, remembered in every detail'. And for Hobsbawm, 'None was quite like the great Ellington nights', recalling two occasions 'an all night breakfast dance in the improbable setting of the Streatham Astoria in 1933' and 'an extraordinary evening in a San Francisco nightclub in 1960'. (Hobsbawm 1974)

This obituary captured perfectly Hobsbawm's relationship with Jazz. On one hand he was an academic with a growing reputation as a historian, on the other he was a jazz critic and fan. This emotional connection with Jazz, including his involvement in the jazz scene, when balanced with his considered academic style, is what makes his jazz writing interesting and important. The 1933 Streatham Astoria breakfast dance was an important factor in encouraging Hobsbawm's interest in Jazz, and was recalled on various occasions in his writings. (Hobsbawm 2000) He had recently returned to Britain with his family, and under the influence of his cousin, Douglas Preston, developed an interest in jazz, not least through the latter's collection of records and the journal *Melody Maker*. The Astoria gig at which the 16 year-old Hobsbawm and his cousin nursed a single glass of beer each, and walked four miles home at dawn sealed his love of jazz. 'I was hooked for good' he later wrote. (Hobsbawm, 1993 128)

Hobsbawm began to take a professional interest in the music. Working for the Army Education Corp during the war, he arranged teaching sessions for young recruits on recent jazz releases. The records were provided by another serviceman, and friend, Charles Fox who later became a significant jazz critic and broadcaster. (Hobsbawm 2003 154, 169-70, Hobsbawm 1961, vii, Fagge 2017) After the war, when his academic career took him from Cambridge back to London, Hobsbawm became more involved in the jazz scene. As an academic, intellectual and communist, he sometimes stood out, but he became a regular in Soho and elsewhere, and became part of what he later called the 'avant-garde cultural Boheme in Britain.' He also became a tour guide for visiting academics and other visitors, and as the jazz and academic community

interacted, he became part of a global jazz community. (Hobsbawm 2010, 2003 224-5) And this had an influence on the way he approached and wrote history, ‘Jazz was the key that opened the door to most of what I know about the realities of the USA, and to a lesser extent of what was once Czechoslovakia, Italy, Japan, post war Austria, and not least, hitherto unknown parts of Britain.’ (ibid. 80-1)

It was almost inevitable that the historian Hobsbawm would write about jazz, and he began with a regular column for the *New Statesman* in the late 1950s. This soon led to a book contract from the trendy publisher McGibbon and Kee, for a fuller length consideration of the music and its social and cultural context. *The Jazz Scene* was published in 1959, significantly the same year as *Primitive Rebels*, which were Hobsbawm’s first monographs. This again underlines the significance of Jazz in Hobsbawm’s academic writings, although *The Jazz Scene* was published somewhat mischievously under the pseudonym, Francis Newton – the name of a communist trumpeter who had played with Billie Holiday. Hobsbawm gave several explanations for this, including keeping his academic and jazz life separate, but it was not much of a secret, as he talked openly about jazz during talks and lectures in this period. (Gott 2002)

*The Jazz Scene* wasn’t a big seller, but it made a significant contribution to the jazz criticism. It was also, as Bounds has suggested, a ‘transitional text’ which offered a more nuanced approach to popular culture than had been the case from much Marxist writing, and in the process anticipated the later cultural studies movement of later years. (Bounds 2012) *The Jazz Scene* drew on many of Hobsbawm’s contacts in the jazz world, and offered the opportunity to develop many of his ideas about jazz. It

was also a wide ranging study, offering sections on the history of the music, its contemporary significance, including its relationship with other arts, the jazz business, politics, audiences, and even appendices on the average British jazz fan, as well as the language of jazz. The overwhelming message of the book was that Jazz was now an important global cultural force. He argued jazz was not just a type of music, but a cultural form that had made ‘an extraordinary conquest’ and was a ‘remarkable aspect of the society we live in’. This was illustrated by the presence of jazz in most of the major cities of the world and moreover the fact that ‘British working-class boys in Newcastle play it is at least as interesting as and rather more surprising than the fact that it progressed through the frontier saloons of the Mississippi valley.’ (Hobsbawm 1961 1-6)

Hobsbawm argued that this was remarkable not least because jazz had developed and changed so quickly, but that it had grown from its folk roots and become a global force amidst commercialised culture as both a popular and art music. In the process it had never been overwhelmed by the ‘cultural standards of the upper class’.

(Hobsbawm 1961, 4-10, 33) In this reading, popular culture was not an undifferentiated mass, and jazz, unlike most other folk forms, could remain authentic, creative and periodically renew popular music. Jazz could also be participatory through watching, playing or talking about it, and it’s appeal rested on offering the originality and excitement that was lacking in other areas of popular culture. (Ibid 10-12)

Jazz’s position as a commercial music without subsidy meant that artists had to make a living, and Hobsbawm offered some interesting thoughts on the jazz business. Once

again this suggested a more flexible picture than might have been expected from a Marxist historian. He argued that in the 1950s jazz was ‘one of the last frontiers of private enterprise’, and open to enthusiastic young businessmen. Indeed fans sometimes influenced record companies through their knowledge of, and demand for, records, and even became involved in the business. Hobsbawm suggested that some of these jazz impresarios were notably left wing and opposed to racial discrimination, citing Norman Granz and John Hammond as examples. Hobsbawm wasn’t blind to the exploitative side of jazz, and pointed out that the Unions also played a big role in getting musicians a good deal. (Hobsbawm 1961 169-90)

*The Jazz Scene* had many other attributes, including a detailed history that illustrated Hobsbawm’s knowledge of jazz, and which brought in the role of race, class, and urbanism. The book also dealt with the role of politics, both what Hobsbawm saw as the left’s influence on jazz, particularly during the New Deal era, and the way in which jazz was political. He argued that this was often ‘vague’ and sometimes accidental. Politics came from jazz’s working class and essentially democratic nature. It broke down class lines, and also to some extent race lines, and it often appealed to a subcultural sense of being outside the mainstream, but didn’t always translate into an idea of what jazz was actually ‘for’. (Ibid. 252-69)

By the end of the 1950s the arguments between modern and traditionalist strands in jazz had calmed to some extent, and *The Jazz Scene* avoided stepping into the argument. That having been said, although Hobsbawm realised the social and political basis of bebop and the fact that modern jazz had become ‘less wild’ as time went by, he wrote about it without great enthusiasm. In particular he was concerned by the

different audiences modern jazz attracted, and their correspondingly different relationship with the performer. ‘The modern revolution – ‘bebop’- was a musician’s revolt, not a movement of the public’, he wrote, adding ‘Indeed it was a revolt directed against the public as well as against the submergence of the player in standardized floods of commercial noise.’ (Ibid. 76-7) If the essence of jazz could be found in the live performances of Ellington and others, then modern jazz was more ‘self-conscious’ and less about ‘fun’, and attracted amongst its audience, specialists, including white intellectuals and bohemians who were also ‘self-conscious’ and engaged with jazz in a different way. (Ibid. 63-79) There was a certain inevitability that Hobsbawm would find it more difficult to understand the music of the next generation, and this underlines his interest in jazz as a fan, as a solely academic approach might have allowed him to overcome this. Looking back Hobsbawm later reflected on the issue, noting that critics and players who had ‘developed an enthusiasm for the music in the 1930s and 1940s’ had a ‘notable gap in both taste and context’ with the ‘small corps’ of musicians ‘who played and formed the only real public for modern jazz before Miles Davis began to make his impact.’ Hobsbawm suggested that writing in the 1950s meant trying to understand bebop, but that he wasn’t sure ‘how far I succeeded, except for an admiration for Thelonious Monk and an immediate passion for the supremely talented and intelligent Dizzy Gillespie, the most dazzling trumpeter in the world.’ Charlie Parker also drew praise, but it was Miles Davis, who Hobsbawm believed was the key figure of the 1950s. (Hobsbawm 2010) As suggested above Davis was influential in Britain, and indeed Hobsbawm pointed out that along with Oscar Peterson and Ellington, the trumpeter was a best seller in Birmingham. (Hobsbawm 1961 2)<sup>1</sup> *The Jazz Scene* contained no less than 12 references to the trumpeter. The album *Milestones* was listed as a recommended

record in the list at the end of chapter two. It was summarised as ‘Characteristic and superb performances by the leading artist of the 1950s and excellent accompanists.’ (Ibid. 245)

*The Jazz Scene* drew generally good reviews. Benny Green in the *Observer* praised the book as ‘one of the most lucid and informative’ ever published on jazz, not least because of Hobsbawm’s willingness ‘to learn the mechanics of a musician’s life before passing judgement’ (Green, 1961). Fellow critic, the poet Philip Larkin noted that ‘it is a pleasure to read a jazz writer who can speak seriously without becoming stilted or absurd.’ (Larkin 1959a) Max Jones in *Melody Maker* said it was ‘a book to get your teeth into’ whilst Toronto’s *Daily Star* suggested that Hobsbawm ‘was a social critic in the tradition of George Orwell, and his ideas are sound and helpful’. (Jones 1959, *Toronto Daily Star*, 1959) There were also criticisms however, with Larkin in another review of the book suggesting that Hobsbawm ‘had little charm as a writer’ although his commendable love of the music ‘convinces the reader of his sincerity, even if some of his contentions start rather than settle arguments.’ (Larkin 1959b) The *Daily Worker* pointed out that ‘I get the feeling Mr. Newton is less at home when writing about modern trends’, which the historian would have agreed with, although maybe less with the suggestion of the *Times Literary Supplement* that the book got ‘out of its depth’ when considering politics. (Daily Worker 1959, *Times Literary Supplement* 1959) The significance of the *The Jazz Scene* was clearly appreciated by many at the time of publication, but its influence has increased over the years. It has been reprinted several times, and has remained an important jazz text, as noted in recent jazz writing. (Fagge 2016 2017, McKay 2005)



*The Jazz scene* raised Hobsbawm's profile within the jazz community and also underlined his intellectual adventurousness in academia, in the process helping opening up the study of jazz as a subject of serious academic research. Hobsbawm continued writing for the *New Statesman* until the mid 1960s, and for other journals including the *New York Review of Books*, *London Review of Books*, *Guardian*, as well as introductions to jazz volumes. He collected some of his best writing in a seven chapter section in *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (1998). These writings stayed largely true to the arguments of *The Jazz Scene*, although his later work was generally more overtly historical and concerned with the growing hegemony of pop and rock.

Hobsbawm was clear about how jazz critics and audiences helped shape an understanding of jazz, particularly in Britain and Europe. This awareness of a jazz writing and the creation of a 'canon' has become characteristic of the later 'New' Jazz studies. (Deveaux 1991, Tucker 2012) For example, In 'Jazz Comes to Europe', included in *Uncommon People* and one of his most significant articles, Hobsbawm argued that 'esoteric jazz scholars' helped shape the reception of jazz in Europe, with fans becoming 'familiar with elements in the black tradition which a purely commercial evolution' would not have achieved. In contrast the audience for jazz and wider black music was 'volatile' in the United States. This meant that, with regard to the blues, firstly the Rolling Stones were influenced by blues enthusiasts and performers including Alexis Korner, and by the mid 1950s 'typical teenagers in Birmingham were more likely to be familiar with Chicago blues-bar performers like Muddy Waters than typical teenagers in Indiana' (Hobsbawm 1998 268-9)

There were differences between Britain and continental Europe, within this, with jazz related music having a wider reach in Britain, due in large part to the fact that it had ‘already formed part of a linguistically and musically unified zone of popular culture with the USA’. Hobsbawm argued that the ‘uniquely large’ British working class gave jazz a popular base through dancing. He pointed out that the dance halls that emerged pre-1914 in the ‘proletarian seaside resorts like Blackpool, Margate, Moorgate, and Douglas, Isle of Man’ were followed in 1918 by larger dance venues, starting with the Hammersmith Palais. The *Original Dixieland Jazz Band* played the latter venue in 1919, and although Hobsbawm admits not everything played in these post war dance halls was jazz, and there was a move to ‘strict tempo’ dancing, “Nevertheless, jazz made its mark as a name, and idea, a novel and demotic sound’.

(ibid. 268-9)

Moreover many European jazz enthusiasts first experienced Jazz in Britain, or artists from the latter. For example, bandleader Jack Hylton was important in this regard, (and was ‘probably better known in Europe than’ many American performers). Hobsbawm estimated that the dance band musicians numbered as many as 30,000 in Britain by 1931, and that they, along with *Melody Maker* the trade journal from 1926, and ‘Rhythm Clubs’ (Hobsbawm estimated 98 of these were established between 1933 and 35 alone) made up the core of the new ‘jazz evangelists’. Although there were upper class jazz fans in Britain (including King Edward VII), the essentially popular nature of the music marked a contrast with the Europeans, where alongside the spread of jazz influenced popular music, there was more of an intellectual engagement with the modernist elements of jazz. As Hobsbawm put it, ‘The strong popular component in the British jazz public distinguished it from the continental

publics, which were overwhelmingly composed of members of the established middle classes or the college-going classes.’ Hobsbawm argued that this explained why modern jazz was more readily accepted on the continent, and was slower emerging in Britain, but that the educated classes in Britain became more interested in jazz after 1945. (ibid. 269-73)

Hobsbawm’s observations on the importance of the European jazz critics and fans was repeated elsewhere, and he later suggested that this illustrated how jazz was ‘taken more seriously in Europe earlier than in the US.’ (Hobsbawm, 1987) As he also noted this sometimes incurred the displeasure of jazz writers from across the Atlantic, which duly happened when James Lincoln Collier accused him of patronising ‘ignorance’ and Martin Williams made further allegations of Marxist bias. Hobsbawm quoted Collier back at himself about early European receptiveness of jazz, but underlined how he had not tried to downplay the importance of Jazz in the United States. (Fagge 2016)

Hobsbawm’s somewhat ambivalent approach to modern jazz was apparent in his later writing, but he was relatively careful in his use of sub genre and neat teleologies of jazz development – again something which was questioned in the later ‘New’ Jazz Studies. In particular, he came to see the late 1950s as significant period in the development of jazz when modern jazz was ‘exhausting itself’ but smaller groups were ‘flourishing.’ He made this point in a 1969 introduction to the *Jazz Scene*, continuing that this period was ‘a golden age of this kind of music’ similar in some ways to swing in the 1930s. Hobsbawm recalled that seeing jazz in New York or San Francisco ‘in, say 1960, was an exhilarating experience’. (Hobsbawm, 1969) He

repeated this argument again twenty years later, reiterating the notion of a 'golden age' in the 1950s, and that 'we knew it'. He continued, 'the years between 1955 and 61 were one of the rare periods when the old and the new coexisted in jazz and both prospered.' (Hobsbawm 1989 244) In fact there is a slight tension here with some of Hobsbawm's contemporaneous comments on this period, as in the *New Statesman* in January 1960 that the 1950s were actually a 'disappointing' period for Jazz, in part because it 'remained parasitic on the achievements of earlier years.' We catch some ambivalence towards Miles Davis here, as he was singled out as the most important artist, but 'an altogether lesser man' than Armstrong or even Parker. This was due to a loss of passion and attempt to intellectualise jazz. (Hobsbawm 1960)

It is clear that hindsight changed Hobsbawm's perspective somewhat, as from the later vantage point the jazz of the 1950s became more influential and 'In fact most of the developments of the 1960s and 70s were already being anticipated in 1960.' (Hobsbawm 1989 249-54) More damningly he argued 'Jazz has been a wasting art in the 1960s'. (Hobsbawm 1969) That having been said, Hobsbawm had some time for the free jazz of the 1950s and 60s both as a political force, as well as some of its musical achievements, as in the case of Ornette Coleman who maintained a 'deep, tearing feeling of the blues.' (Hobsbawm 1963a) His concern, however, was the march of jazz away from the popular and the way it had become marginalised and swamped by developments in popular music. As he put it 'Shortly after *The Jazz Scene* appeared, the golden age of the 1950s came to a sudden end' finished in by the explosion of rock music (Hobsbawm 1998 300, 1969) Hobsbawm had long been critical of popular music, and saw it in a very different light to jazz. Moreover he believed pop music had always been parasitical on more authentic jazz forms starting

with Tin Pan Alley commercialising ragtime. As he put it in *The Jazz Scene*, ‘Thus the perennial pattern of an original jazz style almost immediately absorbed and vulgarised by pop music, was established from the start.’ (Hobsbawm 34-6, 46-7)

Hobsbawm argued that the penetration of pop music from the 1950s was on a different scale altogether, and this was made somewhat ironic by the fact that the popular, democratic and in many ways youth based music of the jazz revival in Britain, and the popularity of the blues, in many ways prepared the ground for the ‘triumph of rock’. (Hobsbawm 1998 270-3, 1993 142-51) Popular music of the 1950s didn’t absorb but overwhelmed jazz. ‘Sometime in the 1950s American popular music committed patricide’ he wrote and ‘Rock killed jazz’. (Hobsbawm 1998 329, Basie 1987 246-8) In the *New Statesman* in January 1964, Hobsbawm reviewed pop and blues releases noting that the ‘Beat vogue’ was now dominant and that it ‘it marks a major breakthrough of mass culture’. As for jazz, it ‘remains where it has long been, scouring the bottom of the Parker barrel, or semi-quarantined in the avantest of avant-gardes.’ (Hobsbawm 1964a)

Timing was important for Hobsbawm as the success of the Beatles in particular came so soon after jazz’s 1950s ‘golden age was at its peak’. And he argued that unlike Jazz, rock was not a ‘minority music’ and didn’t offer the same balance of art and commercial characteristics. It was based upon the increasing importance of affluent teenagers, and the associated, commodified youth culture that was crossing social and geographical boundaries. Rock music drew on jazz and the blues, and offered some of what these offered, but with a much more commercialised ethos. Rock music also lacked an artistic cutting edge and preferred vague messages, even when dealing with

politics. Hobsbawm saw Woodstock as an example of this with very little political significance. (Hobsbawm 1998 285) Rock and pop were 'light music', even if some of it was good. Jazz, in contrast was 'heavy music' - "small, but made of uranium". Rock musicians could never have the impact of jazz stars like Billie Holiday or Bessie Smith, and he singled out a band that he particularly disliked - The Rolling Stones. (Hobsbawm 1969) Matters were made worse by the fact that rock music was strongest in the United States and UK, areas where jazz had been most popular, even though newer regions were now listening to jazz now. However rock would create a global hegemony. (Hobsbawm 2003 250-61, 1989 330-407)

Hobsbawm's role as a critic required contemporary comment and denied him the luxury of a longer view of events that informed his historical writing. This explained his somewhat dismissive review of the Beatles in the *New Statesman* in 1963. Jazz critic Hobsbawm suggested that unlike the Blues music of artists like Sonny Boy Williamson, which had a long history, the Beatles would be a short lived phenomenon, and that 'in 29 years nothing of them will survive'. (Hobsbawm 1963b) Hobsbawm later acknowledged his 'spectacular failure to recognise the potential of the Beatles'. (Hobsbawm 2010)<sup>2</sup> Indeed he later became more appreciative of the band, particularly as their music became more adventurous. By 1969 he was arguing that although there was hype in the way they were presented, he considered the production and musicality such that they were 'musically serious and popular'. He added though that 'we must not exaggerate.' (Hobsbawm 1969) Hobsbawm also had some time for Bob Dylan, including claiming that he proposed to his second wife Marlene at a concert by the latter. (Hobsbawm 2010) In 1964 he published a mixed review of Dylan, criticising his singing and comparing him adversely with blues

singers. However he also suggested that Dylan's songs had potential, and may well work if they were performed by other 'better' musicians. (Hobsbawm 1964b)

If Hobsbawm saw some value in certain forms of popular music he had little time for others, most notably hip-hop. In 1993 Hobsbawm discussed how jazz was in danger of becoming a 'form of pastiche or archaeology for the cultured public', with hip-hop being popular among black youths who no longer dream of singing the blues but 'of being in great rap groups'. This was something Hobsbawm had little time for, as it was 'a form of art which, in my opinion, is musically uninteresting and literary doggerel. In fact, it is the opposite of the great and profound art of the blues.'

(Hobsbawm 1993 219-14, 1998 390)

Eric Hobsbawm's dismissal of hip-hop, whilst in some ways explained by generational differences, ignored both the cultural vibrancy and variety of hip-hop, including its sometimes close relationship with jazz. After all Miles Davis' last album *Doo Bop* (1992) which was released posthumously, was a collaboration with Easy Mo Bee. Similarly, Max Roach, Branford Marsalis and others were also working with hip-hop artists at this time. (Cole, 2005 307-40) Hip-hop may have been unpopular with much of the jazz community, but it was popular with a larger public, and it was democratic and responded to the problems and experiences of black America. In many ways this reflected Hobsbawm's view of Jazz, as a working class music that was unsubsidised and both artistic but commercially successful. It is also, like jazz, resilient and had not been taken over by upper class values, as well as periodically refreshing mainstream pop music. (Rose 1994, Neal 1999, Dyson 2010)

Hobsbawm didn't see this side of hip-hop, nor did he see the complexity and occasional artistic value of the pop and rock that emerged from the 1950s, other than in one or two artists, and even her in a qualified way. In this respect, Francis Newton, the jazz fan who fell in love with the music at the Streatham Astoria in 1933, was more influential than Eric Hobsbawm, the historian. However most music critics and academics are fans as well as writers and this creates blind spots for certain types of music. There is much of value in Hobsbawm's jazz writings and they are an important contribution to jazz studies. This includes his considered, historical view of the development of jazz which provides an example of how historians can approach the subject. *The Jazz Scene* is the most obvious, but not the only, example of this, with its broad analysis of the music, avoiding a narrative of big stars, or a strict teleological account of jazz development. Hobsbawm placed jazz in its social, economic and cultural context, and helped establish its historical significance. His Jazz writings will be read for many years to come.



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