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Teaching to Critique: Implications for the Integration of New Jazz Studies in Jazz History Courses

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The traditional jazz canon has proven to be a useful tool in establishing definitions of jazz that are recognisable and meaningful to students, due to its simple and structured approach to the history of the music. The canon, having been established over the twentieth century by jazz historians such as Marshall Stearns and Frank Tirro, consists of a straight-forward narrative that follows the development of jazz from early genres such as ragtime to more modern styles like bebop and fusion. The canon also introduces legendary figures of jazz who contributed to the music, some of whom include Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis. This approach to the jazz story, although comprehensive, has been heavily criticised by jazz theorists such as Scott DeVeaux and Krin Gabbard who brought about the revisionist movement of the New Jazz Studies in the 1990s. These scholars believed that the traditional canon was restrictive in that it diminished the diversity and cultural value of the music. In light of this argument, there exists a tension between the need to inform students about the history of the music and the desire to challenge the limitations of that history. This essay provides solutions to bridging this gap in addition to presenting an overview of the formation of the jazz canon as well as the critique that follows. In addition, the essay shows how the traditional canon can be reused as a foundation upon which students can construct canons of their own, thus learning the process of canon-formation as well as contributing to the ongoing critique that concerns New Jazz Studies. In this way, students will learn the music's history while also becoming a part of it.

Old Jazz Studies: Finding Out What It's All About

Since New Jazz Studies began with the critique of the jazz canon, it follows that the formation of this canon would be the result of what might be termed "Old Jazz Studies." It is worth noting that during the

early stages of Old Jazz Studies, the music was just beginning to be developed and defined, so the infamous chronological approach could not be adopted just yet, not until some type of stylistic shift took place. In the meantime, academics who were interested in jazz took on the responsibility “explaining” the phenomenon (as well as the appeal) of jazz to an audience that was mainly exposed to Western Art Music. Henry Osgood, author of *So This Is Jazz* (1926), was one such academic, one who also worked as a composer and musical journal editor.¹ Daniel Hardie, a jazz historian who wrote the book *Jazz Historiography* (2013), places this work as the first of many within the historiographical timeframe, thus highlighting its significance despite its many flaws. While Osgood does acknowledge the origins of jazz being steeped in African musical idioms and inspired by spirituals and work songs, he attributes more credit to white bands and musicians to the ongoing development of the music. Intentionally or not, Osgood categorises African-American influence as a mark of the music’s past, whilst white musicians such as Paul Whiteman are described as paving the way for the music’s future (with, ironically, much the same reverence that later historians would convey towards the African-American “Greats”).² This temporal categorisation, however subtle, is just a foreshadowing of the approach that would be later taken by historians and jazz critics when describing the nature and history of jazz. Osgood knew that it was only a matter of time for the music to reveal itself: “In another ten... twenty years, we shall know its fate.”³ And so it was with the music’s history as well.

By the time of Marshall Stearns’ renowned 1956 contribution to the canon known as *The Story of Jazz*, the soundscape of jazz had dramatically transformed. Among the different styles that emerged from the melting-pot of this musical enigma was swing, a popular form of jazz in the 1930s which was largely defined by dance and big-band orchestras. Prolific figures such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington were part of what made this music such a commercial

¹ Daniel Hardie, *Jazz Historiography: The History of Jazz History Writing* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse LLC, 2013), 34.

² Hardie, *Jazz Historiography*, 40–41.

³ Henry Osgood, *So This is Jazz* (Boston: Little Brown, 1926): 250, quoted in Daniel Hardie, *Jazz Historiography* (Indiana, Bloomington: iUniverse LLC, 2013), 41.

success, although, as Scott DeVeaux notes, this “did not necessarily translate into appreciation for, or even awareness of, the jazz that stemmed from New Orleans.”⁴ Indeed, performers and jazz critics disputed over how swing continued the legacy of the “original” New Orleans style, also known as Dixieland jazz. This began what Bernard Gendron, in his essay “‘Mouldy Figs’ and Modernists,” identifies as “an aesthetic discourse for jazz,” one in which contrasting opinions about the artistic and commercial merit of jazz inevitably shaped the way it would be perceived.⁵ When bebop musicians (Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie) came into the scene in the late 1940s, this time with a faster, more challenging sound that was mainly played in small clubs, the same tension between past and present/future was revived as the “modernists” believed the commercial success of swing to be detrimental to the status of jazz as a serious art form.⁶ The ideology of this war, that jazz must be appreciated as a serious form of art music, is one upon which *The Story of Jazz* is founded.

Throughout this study, Stearns sought to portray jazz as a linear progression of styles and influences that would culminate in a narrative that contextualised the music in early twentieth century America. In this way, Stearns hoped to legitimise jazz as “a separate and distinct art” with “an ancient and honorable history,” thus making it equal to the Western musical hegemony.⁷ Stearns hoped to accomplish this all while emphasising the West African influence upon which jazz stood, which would introduce the popular jazz-as-synthesis model that explained away the simultaneous similarities between and subversions of European musical traditions. This is delegated to the “pre-history” section, with the true history beginning in New Orleans where the synthesis gave birth to the “Jazz Age” of the 1920s. Interestingly, he approaches the swing era as “a logical consolidation of what had gone before” rather than a new age, with bebop being framed as the obligatory revolution that jazz needed in

⁴ Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (1991): 533.

⁵ Bernard Gendron, “‘Mouldy Figs’ and Modernists: Jazz at War (1942–1946),” *Discourse* 15, no. 3 (1993): 133.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷ Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), xi–xii.

order to progress.⁸ In his conclusion, Stearns muses about the future of the music in much the same manner as Osgood did. He makes a uniquely insightful claim about how later developments of jazz would be dependent on the societal and musical role of black Americans, since there appeared to be a relationship between the progression of the music and the dismantling of the stereotypical “Negro” image.⁹ At the very end, Stearns makes a prophecy of sorts regarding the emergence of Jazz Studies, where jazz would be highly regarded in educational institutions, no longer being treated as “the stepchild of the arts.”¹⁰ The impact that Stearns’ research had on jazz academia, not only through *The Story of Jazz*, but also as the founder of the Institute of Jazz Studies, is a testament to his success in writing himself into the future he envisioned.

Now that the canon was established, the possibilities for how to engage with it in different ways were endless. Stearns had set the model for how a comprehensive jazz history could be written, and now it was the responsibility for future historians to find the gaps in his version and fill it with their own insights. Frank Tirro, a specialist in both Renaissance music and jazz, was one of the influential academics who took on this challenge. Kenneth Prouty, a professor of musicology who specialises in the study of jazz pedagogy, describes Tirro’s *Jazz: A History* (1977) as embodying the same musicological mindset as Donald Grout’s monumental work, *A History of Western Music* (1960).¹¹ As Tirro himself asserts in the preface, his goal is in portraying something more than just “a recounting of anecdotes [or]... musical events.” He hoped to convey a history that analyses both the music and the society that surrounds it, an endeavour which he believes has not been attempted in other histories. He emphasises the necessity of a chronological method in his study, claiming that there exists “a logical development scheme” within jazz history even though its styles cannot be categorised in a

⁸ Ibid., 198; 218.

⁹ Ibid., 308; 320–21.

¹⁰ Ibid., 327.

¹¹ Kenneth Prouty, “Toward Jazz’s ‘Official’ History: The Debates and Discourses of Jazz History Textbooks,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 1, no. 1 (2010), 24.

temporal manner.¹² Mark Gridley employed the same philosophy in *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis* (1978), intending his work to be “a historically organised introduction” to the styles that have been assigned to the jazz monolith.¹³ Both Gridley’s and Tirro’s works exhibit similarities in this sense, and also in the fact that they both based their research on the *Smithsonian Collection of Classical Jazz*, an anthology of recordings that proved to be very useful in the education context. However, as Prouty explains, both authors took very different approaches when presenting their narratives, particularly due to the difference in academic focus. Prouty shows how Tirro, being a traditional musicologist who was highly interested in jazz, hoped to reinforce the formal educational institutions with a history that could be comparable to Western music. Gridley on the other hand was a jazz musician as well as a jazz pedagogue, and his goal was to provide a guide for the casual jazz enthusiast who needed to be taken by the hand to show them what to listen for.¹⁴ Gridley’s reassurance that “no technical knowledge of music is required” to understand his history is proof of the fact that he desired to make jazz accessible, in a way that Tirro’s work could not.¹⁵ And yet, despite the contrast between their engagements with the canon, the *canon* itself was still maintained. The story remains the same with the same list of heroes (and the same heroines relegated to parentheses). New Orleans was still described as the hometown of jazz, with the same observation made about the combination of West African and European musical idioms.¹⁶ Swing, bebop, cool jazz, hard bop, etc. were still described as acting as musical revolutions that were built on certain elements of what came before and rejected others. The canon was immovable and rigid, despite efforts to portray it in a different light. This was the dilemma that sparked the movement of New Jazz Studies.

¹² Frank Tirro, *Jazz: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), xviii–xix.

¹³ Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978), x.

¹⁴ Prouty, “Toward Jazz’s ‘Official’ History,” 32.

¹⁵ Gridley, *Jazz Styles*, x.

¹⁶ Tirro, *Jazz: A History*, 4–5; Gridley, *Jazz Styles*, 38–39.

New Jazz Studies and the Trouble with Rejecting the Canon

It was during the 1990s, a time when jazz was beginning to be redefined, that the canon critique of New Jazz Studies was ushered in by the likes of Scott DeVeaux and Krin Gabbard. DeVeaux was a professor of jazz and contemporary American music, as well as the author of “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography” (1991), an essay instrumental in raising the urgency to criticise what he describes as “the inadequacy of existing historical frameworks to explain [the jazz scene].”¹⁷ This inadequacy, DeVeaux explains, stems from the stubborn preservation of a canonical narrative amidst all the critical debate that has arisen, all for the purpose of maintaining its hard-earned reputation within the academic world. He points in particular to the opposing forces of the neoclassicists and fusion artists, who had contrasting ideas of what the future of jazz entailed now that the progression of the jazz story was not as straightforward as it was in the days of swing and bebop. DeVeaux argues that this is ultimately a dispute over the “essence” of jazz, a dispute which strangely occurs without any effort to change the story.¹⁸ The purpose of DeVeaux’s essay is therefore to dispel the misplaced perception of the jazz narrative as an autonomous unstoppable creature that progresses through time of its own accord. He hopes to portray the narrative as merely a construction, one that “has crowded out other possible interpretations of the complicated... cultural phenomena” known as jazz.¹⁹ Through his historiographical analysis, DeVeaux identifies an unceasing urge to make connections between a variety of musical styles, and to classify all such styles as types of jazz, all while telling the same story with an evolutionary perspective. He concludes by calling for an updated historical method that is more in line with the constantly changing music, approaching it not as an isolated “aesthetic object” but rather as a pathway towards an interdisciplinary study of American culture.²⁰

This is the approach taken in *Jazz Among the Discourses* (1995), which features academics who specialise in subjects ranging from

¹⁷ DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 531.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 527–28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 531.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 553.

comparative literature to culture theory. Gabbard, the editor of the book, was himself interested in a wide variety of subjects which he taught as well, some of which included cinema studies, ancient Greek literature and, of course, jazz. From the very beginning, Gabbard appropriately sets the scene for the essays that follow by conducting an analysis of the institutionalisation of jazz and comparing it with film studies. He shows how both disciplines were beginning to gain more prominence within the education system, particularly due to the formation of a secure canon.²¹ Like DeVaux, Gabbard identifies the purpose of canon-formation as “a discourse of power, reinforcing the values of the canonizers.”²² He asserts that the future of jazz studies lies, not in this continuous struggle to contribute to a canon that “legitimised” jazz, but rather in the exploration of the “cultural forces” that propel the history of the music.²³ The essays that follow this introduction go on to examine these “cultural forces,” some of which included the aforementioned traditionalist-modernist debate of the 1940s explored by Bernard Gendron.²⁴

These scholars paved the foundation for a new school of thought, one that has continued on to this day. The jazz canon critique has opened up more avenues of discussion, particularly in regard to gender and female representation in the space of jazz studies. Sherrie Tucker, a notable scholar in the field of gender studies, explores this in her monumental study *Swing Shift* (2000), which brings to light the forgotten history of the all-girl swing bands that rose to prominence during the Second World War era. The push for more interdisciplinary narratives about jazz was realised once more in *Uptown Conversation* (2004), a collection of essays which expand the musical reaches of jazz to include other realms of art, such as painting, poetry, dance, film, etc.²⁵ Tony Whyton in his 2013 book *Beyond A Love Supreme* introduces a revisionist spirit to the study of

²¹ Krin Gabbard, “Introduction: The Jazz Canon and Its Consequences,” in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 4–7.

²² *Ibid.*, 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

²⁵ Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards and Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Introductory Notes,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, eds. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2–3.

the Greats of jazz, analysing the canonisation of John Coltrane and his monumental avant-garde album *A Love Supreme*. These and many other works have arisen in the last twenty years of research, with academics from various disciplines extending the boundaries of jazz history and introducing new topics of discussion into the spotlight. Whether this new way of thinking has any bearing on how jazz history can be *taught*, however, is another matter entirely.

It cannot be denied that the Old Jazz Studies possesses a “pedagogical utility” that even DeVaux himself acknowledged.²⁶ In his conclusion, he admits that the traditional jazz narrative has been useful for himself as a jazz educator who desires to tell a story of African-American struggle and victory over racial prejudice.²⁷ More than that, it also places jazz, a highly marginalised musical tradition, on the stage of academia as a subject worthy of being studied. This was the motivation of Stearns and the scholars who would come after him; they wanted to see jazz taken seriously and wanted it to be studied as a symbol of America’s cultural identity. Aside from the academic appeal, the traditional narrative could also cater to the interests of lay readers due to its accessibility. The canon is where the discourse begins for both the uninitiated and the musicologist, so it is easy to understand why it would be difficult to divorce the teaching from the history, as Prouty demonstrates in his essay.²⁸

Yet the limitations of this narrative have been brought to light, in particular the objectification of jazz and the disregard for the socio-political climate that often surrounds it. New Jazz Studies is needed to revitalise jazz pedagogy, but herein lies the paradox. How do jazz educators integrate New Jazz Studies into classrooms that uphold and are upheld by the pillars of Old Jazz Studies? How do jazz educators teach the history and its critique in the same breath? How do students of jazz learn not to fall into the mistake of replacing the “old canon” with an “updated” one that does not stray that far from the original, as Prouty (2012) fears New Jazz scholars are in the habit of doing?²⁹ This tension between the past and future exists within the music as well, and it is what prompted jazz musician Wynton Marsalis to ask in

²⁶ DeVaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 525–26.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 552.

²⁸ Prouty, “Toward Jazz’s ‘Official’ History,” 19–21.

²⁹ Kenneth Prouty, *Knowing Jazz: Community, Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012) 3–12.

1988, “How can something new and substantial... be developed when the meaning of what’s old is not known?”³⁰ This query encapsulates the dilemma that jazz education faces in light of the rise of New Jazz Studies. It is difficult to imagine that teaching jazz would mean teaching what Sherrie Tucker describes as a “subjectless subject,” in which there is no object really to teach if the objectification of jazz were to be considered taboo.³¹ There needs to be a way in which students of jazz history can be informed of the canon while also being equipped to critique it in an intelligent manner.

Relearning and Deconstructing the Canon

In order to achieve this, it is evident that a more engaging method of teaching jazz history is required. The jazz curriculum cannot merely consist of information (dates, influential musicians, musical styles) that is force-fed to students through textbooks. It needs to be taught self-consciously, in the same spirit as New Jazz Studies, asking the same questions that scholars continue to ask about the canon. It is only then that the canon can be exploited in a beneficial way, and can simply be used for the purpose of initiating the conversation for those who are unfamiliar with jazz. Prouty advocates for this perspective in *Knowing Jazz*, in which he embraces the canon, not as a restrictive narrative that must be upheld by academic institutions, but rather as a flexible story that means “different things to different people.”³² By redefining the canon, Prouty calls to attention the diverse range of perspectives that exist surrounding jazz. The traditional canon thus becomes an introduction to those perspectives, useful for educators because of its straightforward approach to the history of jazz. Through an analysis of the aforementioned history books of the Old Jazz Studies, students can be familiar with the popular styles that define the sound of jazz, as well as the musicians that became immortalised by the media and by educational institutions. While they are being informed of the trajectory of the

³⁰ Quoted in DeVaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 551.

³¹ Sherrie Tucker, “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The ‘Subjectless Subject’ of New Jazz Studies,” in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and its Boundaries*, eds. David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Ira Goldmark (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2012), 269.

³² Prouty, *Knowing Jazz*, 3–12.

traditional narrative, students should also learn the reasoning behind it, because it will not be enough for the “what” to be taught if the “why” is not mentioned. It is important to remind students to adopt a critical stance even whilst studying the canon so as to avoid the mindless acceptance of the canon as objective truth. A prime candidate for this critical approach can be found in Ken Burns’ 2001 documentary series *Jazz*, a controversial work that has sparked much conversation about the process of writing history. In his essay “Burns, Baby, Burns” (2004), Alan Stanbridge shows how, despite the criticism of the *Jazz* series being a highly romanticised and narrow-minded view of the history of the music (particularly in its failure to acknowledge the ongoing developments of jazz in other geographic regions besides America), the series does have some educational potential in the context of jazz history courses. He explains that his goal is to help students to avoid taking *Jazz* at face value and instead “consider the series... as a cultural text which is, *itself*, part of the discursive construction of jazz history.”³³ All jazz educators can take on this approach with their students; they can have students watch an episode of *Jazz* each week and write comments which can be shared on an online classroom forum. By encouraging students to actively engage with the canon as mere “text,” educators are paving the way for the next stage, which is to understand the process behind canon-formation.

In order to do this, jazz educators should provide the opportunity for students to create their own “alternative canons.” In this way, educators can encourage students to take the same critical mindset they have when looking at the “official” jazz history and apply it to their own canons. The plan is to instill in students a self-conscious awareness, not only of the stories of jazz that they include in their canon, but also of the stories they omit. Sherrie Tucker, in her aptly titled essay “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition,” provides some ideas of what a practical approach would look like. She gives a glimpse into her own classroom where she teaches “Gender, Race and Jazz,” an American Studies course where she introduces students to different representations of jazz and encourages them to analyse how gender and race interplay in those representations. One of her assigned

³³ Alan Stanbridge, “Burns, Baby, Burns: Jazz History as a Contested Cultural Site,” *The Source: Challenging Jazz Criticism* 1 (2004): 95.

projects is to have students listen to selected pieces of music and analyse why they may have been considered jazz in their time. Tucker states that her goal is to compel students to ask questions concerning “the elements that make something sound like jazz” as well as “the kinds of stories... [that] are being told about jazz, or through jazz.” Essentially, they are compelled to deconstruct their preconceived notions of the soundscape and narrative of jazz.³⁴ This exercise can be extended further by having students create their own lists of pieces that they consider to be important in jazz history. In order to encourage the kind of collaborative discussion that mirrors the nature of New Jazz Studies, students can also be asked to “Defend Your Discography,” a class presentation exercise where they are required to answer questions posed by their fellow peers about the pieces they chose. Educators could also push students to evaluate how much their choices are influenced by personal preference/prejudices, as well as cultural biases. A good introduction to these difficult questions can be found in Christopher Washburne’s analysis of the fiercely negative reception of Kenny G’s music within the jazz community. Washburne shows how, despite the sound of jazz having been continually influenced by popular music styles throughout history, Kenny G’s popularisation of smooth jazz is still considered to be the defilement of a sacred high art form because of its commercial success, according to performers and critics such as Fred Hersch and Neil Tesser.³⁵ Teachers can encourage students to explore similar styles of jazz or musicians who have been ostracised by the jazz community. In a final end-of-semester paper, students can present their findings and present reasons for the “bad jazz” label, particularly looking at the deep-rooted prejudices and cultural forces that lay behind such categorisations. The goal is not to have students create another canon which caters to the marginalised and lesser known. Rather, it is to give them an opportunity to be part of an ongoing conversation about the intricacies of jazz history, not only looking at its written past, but also contributing to its written present and future.

³⁴ Tucker, “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition,” 273.

³⁵ Christopher Washburne, “Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz?: A Case Study,” in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, eds. Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 125; 140–41.

Conclusion

The goal of the integration of New Jazz Studies in an educational context should ultimately be to empower students to contribute to the discourse in a meaningful way, thus revitalising the story of jazz. By learning to critique the canon, students learn to engage with the jazz tradition in a more fulfilling way, not just through the music, but also through the discussions that surround it. Prouty asserts that the significance of the written discourse, or rather the critique, of jazz canon is that it becomes integrated into the story of jazz.³⁶ New Jazz Studies lays out the path for students to take part in this story, a task that is both a privilege and a responsibility that they must not take lightly. It requires them to earnestly seek out the gaps that may exist within the narrative, as well as to develop an insight into how best those gaps could be filled. Although challenging, it is also motivating because it ensures validity for the different stories that students deem important enough to be included in the ongoing conversation about jazz. When students infuse their own thoughts and ideas into the canons they formulate, they uphold the spirit of New Jazz Studies in the space that needs it the most: the classroom.

ABSTRACT

Due to the formation of a traditional jazz canon, jazz has become a highly regarded topic of study in educational institutions. The evolutionary narrative of the canon, which ties together the early genres of ragtime and swing to the later styles of bebop and fusion, offers an easily accessible platform for students to learn about the music and to understand its historical and cultural significance. However, New Jazz Studies, beginning in the 1990s, has proven this canonical approach to be too limited and simplistic for the ongoing study of jazz. This revolutionary academic movement critiques the conventional canon for its restrictions on what is deemed important enough to be included in the pedagogy of jazz. Thus, the original method of teaching jazz is called into question, and a challenge emerges for educators to conceptualise the inclusion of New Jazz Studies in their history courses. The challenge lies in the need to familiarise students with the story of jazz whilst also encouraging

³⁶ See Prouty, *Knowing Jazz*, 78–114.

them to be critical in their interaction with that story. This article proposes a solution to this problem, suggesting practical methods in which students be taught how to appreciate the traditional canon, not as an impenetrable monument, but as an object of study in itself, one that can be evaluated and taken apart. Students can also learn how to offer their own alternative canons which feature sophisticated insights that they believe should be represented more within the conversation about jazz. In this way, students become active members in the discourse as they create new canons that revitalise jazz within the classroom.

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Hadassa Gitau is currently studying a BMus degree, majoring in Musicology. She is very interested in a variety of subjects, ranging from ethnomusicology to film music, all of which she has explored as part of her musicology degree. She is particularly interested in the study of music historiography and the canon phenomenon, and she hopes to extend this study further during her honours year.