
The transition from 'swing' to 'bebop' has often been described as a cultural and stylistic revolution. A revolution in which the American jazz musician turned from being an entertainer, such as Louis Armstrong or Cab Calloway, to the 1930s, lo becoming an avant-garde artist in the sense in which the 1940s New York action painters were once considered avant-garde. That is, pﬁcoimers who turned their backs on easy money and mass acceptance. With bebop, jazz had reisilied its of its tacky associations with entertainment packages sandwiching the inusnic between dance and coinented acts and had moved on to upmarket culture like opera and modern poety which cannot survive without grants, foundations, commissions, festivals, and so on.

The romantic view of the artist as rebel and 'social deviant' received a new lease of life in literature. In Mailer and the beat writers bebop was excess bordering on chaos and madness, the 'sent' you, and it was intimately associated with blackness. Race has always been the subtext in narratives of the history of jazz. DeVeaux quotes the doyen of American jazz criticism for many years, Martin Williams of the Smithsonian Institution, recalling his early exposure to Parker and Gillespie at Billy Berg's in Los Angeles. 'I'm a southern kid, I've still got all that latent stuff in me [about race] that I haven't dealt with. I'm living in this paradox. That [bebop] sounded arrogant, uppity. [When I] saw Bird's coinbo, what struck me even more than the music was the attitude coming off the bandstand — self-confident, aggressive. It was something I'd never seen from black musicians before.

There is a certain emotional satisfaction in narrating this apparent bandstand insolence of the beboppeis and their music as delibeate acts of defiance of the allegedly bland white big band dance music and, implicitly, of the iacism of the (all-white) American music industry. This happens repeatedly in the writings of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baiaaka. Recent black literary criticism, inspired by Ralph Ellisons and Albert Murray's writings on jazz, has also suggested that the bebop practice of 'composing' new melodies on the choid sequences of Broadway staidaiads was a form of 'signifying' on the sentimental dross of white American mass market music. Murray in particular has been very effective in debunking the myth that the jazz musician is an artist who has been toised by white racism to earn his money on the 'road' by doing 'commercial' dance dates while society despising hie folks he entitdined.

Because jazz now is predominantly an 'art' (i e, conceit), it has become difficult to remember that a jazz musician in the "swing era" was primarily a woker in a dance band. It is one of the many virtues of this excellent new study of the most crucial period in jazz history that DeVeaux so effectively emphasizes that black musicians like Ellington, Basie and Billy Eckstine were incrcitics of dance bands. For a black man in the 1930s, a professional dance band career looked like a 'middle class' profession; an alternative to being a lawyer, doctor or dentist. In contrast to a long and expensive college education liere

was the prospect of immediate, solid earnings. Then there was, too, the lucre of the extra-curricular glamour that seemed to go with the job. The latter aspect was manufactured by the publicity ‘machines’ of the music industry which began to make celebrities of band leaders in the movie or professional athletics model. This also helps explain why we now think of the music of this era in terms of individuals like Ellington, Basie and Charlie Barnet. DeVœaux argues that we must think of the Swing Era as a ‘system’ in which the integration of dance music with other forms of mass-market entertainment was carried out on a scale and with a degree of technological sophistication never seen before, including radio, recordings and film. In music the big money was in big band dance music.7

Some black swing bands managed quite well. Ellington was regularly on network radio (e.g. at the Cotton Club and elsewhere) as well as in films, but for many the swing era meant a gruelling regimen of one-night stands touring, particularly in the South. DeVœaux looks, however, at the interesting case of Coleman Hawkins who, although the first great saxophonist in jazz history, failed to make it as a leader of a dance band. Hawkins became a famous soloist in the Fletcher Hendeison band and was encouraged, indeed expected, to become a successful dance band leader as other virtuosos like Artie Shaw and Harry James had. However, in contrast to such white band leaders, DeVœaux makes clear how much it was expected of black ones to be vaudeville entertainers as well. Armstrong, Calloway, even Gillespie, understood they had to negotiate such expectations and yet project their professional dignity. Ellington, famously, adopted an elegantly suave stage mask. Hawkins, who turned out to be a musician a few years ahead of his time, would not, or could not, soften his daunting instrumental prowess by ingratiating clowning. In any case when Hawkins came back from Europe in 1939 it was too late for yet another black dance band to jump on the gravy train of the dance band business. With ‘Body and Soul’ of that year as his calling-card, DeVœaux convincingly portrays how Hawkins first had to play the less lucrative night clubs on 52nd St with smaller bands, and later on how he discovered a new career as concert artist when the ‘jazz concert’ emerged as a commercially viable form.

Dance bands were, in other words, central to the music industry. Dizzy Gillespie (the man who in _Time_ and _Life_ magazines with a beret, shades, goatee and the rest was made to incarnate the socially deviant bop hipster) tried repeatedly to get into the big time, first with Cab Calloway, then with Billy Eckstine, finally with his own big band. A famous film short shows Gillespie fronting a big band and doing a few bop and grind steps for the benefit of the camera. Clearly, Gillespie had learned from Calloway what it takes for a black dance band leader to become a commercial success (though Gillespie didn’t). DeVœaux here and elsewhere effectively demonstrates that it is anachronistic to think that black jazz musicians then saw themselves as ‘artists’ who turned up their noses at dance music. The story of Hawkins and Gillespie shows how black jazz musicians only gave up on the big dance bands when these bands offered only the dead ends of bad working conditions and no chances of (economic) advancement. War restrictions on road

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3 The huge cross-over success of Louis Jordan’s cool clowning with blues and ‘novelty’ songs is a further example. Jordan is essential to understanding the general acceptance of black dance music by white audiences in the 1950s, now sold as ‘rock’n’roll.’ C.f. C. Gillett, _The Sound of the City_ (1983).
transportation, the draft, and the racism of the music industry loiced most blacat bands to take the less lucrative jobs which entailed incessant touring, particularly in the much hated South. Tliere Eckstine and later Gillespie found audiences largely unresponsive to subtle progressive harmonic sequences and fast, virtuosic improvisation. Southern black working-class audiences wanted solid down-home cooking blues.

In music, race is often dealt with as discourse about the blues. LeRoi Jones made it the basis of his *Blues People* (1963), and many other writers have made it the litmus test of authenticity in African-American music. As familiar examples from James Baldwin through Baraka and Alice Walker to Gates show, (blacat) blues is used in a racial melodrama to expose the racism and inferiority of white American popular music in general. DeVaux’s discussion of blues playing in early bebop jazz asks for a more subtle, and also historically more interesting, consideration of black musicians’ attitude to the blues. DeVaux reminds us that ideas of ‘middle class’ respectability and progress were deeply embedded among African-Americans in this period. In the *Music Dial*, one of the very few black-run trade journals, one could read that musicians should act publicly as representatives of the race. And many young black northern musicians therefore thought that they should not just give their newly migrant urban audiences yam and grits blues but should try to educate them by elevating their musical tastes. It needs to be said explicitly that not all good black jazz musicians are good blues men. Gillespie, as DeVaux reminds the reader, is frank enough to admit that he is not a blues man in the sense that trumpeter Hot Lips Page and Charlie Parker were. DeVaux makes a good case that the reason Paikie’s music is so deeply satisfying in contrast to many other excellent jazz improvisers, is that his playing showed how deep black blues could be integrated with modern (as in ‘dissonant’), sophisticated jazz. His argument asks us to hear Parker’s blues playing not as a ‘signifiing’ on white jazz, but on the African-American blues tradition.

In DeVaux’s narrative, Coleman Hawkins showed the stylistic and commercial possibilities for the jazz player as virtuosic concert musician. It took war time draft and road transportation restrictions – fewer (lucrative) jobs for big dance bands with fewer first-rate musicians, as well as a musicians’ union ban on recording between 1942 and 1944 which broke the monopoly of recoding by Decca, Columbia and Victor – to make the small jazz coinbo and the jam session format the favoured one for young black musicians. During the war, night clubs and ‘all-stars’ jam concerts (such as those begun in 1946 by Norman Granz) and incessant recording for new small labels like Savoy and Blue Note became the ‘media’ of what came to count as the essence of jazz.

The Birth of Bebop is marvellous synthesis of the jazz monograph (its portraits of Hawkins and Gillespie, for example, are truly informative), oral jazz history and the sociology of economic conditions of professional black jazz musicians in the period between 1930 and 1950. The density of detail particularly as regards the latter is astounding. I can only think of Eric Hobsbawm’s great *The Jazz Scene* (1959) which tried to do something similar but with less data. In addition, DeVaux has a gift not often seen among jazz musicologists: namely that of intepretting a musician’s style through musical

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4 Dizzy Gillespie, *To Be or Not to Bop* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), p. 310. Both Page and Parker were from the Southwest.
examples (see, for example his comparisons of Hawluns’ playing with Lester Young’s; or Gillespie’s with Parker’s) By students of black culture, jazz is often used as an archive of incidental or anecdotal illustration, or an object of mythologizing. This book is strongly recommended as a sober, enlightening, well-written historical and stylistic study of a crucial period in African-American music.

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Correction

Due to an oversight during the publication process, the name and institutional affiliation of Erik Kjelland-Lund of the Department of British and American Studies, University of Oslo, were omitted from the end of his review of Sacvan Bicovich (ed), *The Cambridge History of American Literature, Vol. II Prose Writings, 1820-1865* (New York and Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), which appeared in the last issue of the journal. The editors would like to apologize for this omission.