

Scott DeVaux: *The Birth of BeBop: A Social and Musical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. 572 pp.; ISBN 0-520-20579-0; hardcover; \$35.00.

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 were in the 1930s, to becoming an avant-garde artist in the sense in which the 1940s New York action painters were once considered avant-garde. That is, performers who turned their backs on easy money and mass acceptance. With bebop, jazz had wised up of its tacky associations with entertainment packages sandwiching the music between dance and comedy acts and had moved on to upmarket culture like opera and modern poetry 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: it 'sent' you; and it was intimately associated with blackness. Race has always been the subtext in narratives of the history of jazz. DeVaux 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 combo, 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 beboppers and their music as deliberate acts of defiance of the allegedly bland white big band dance music and, implicitly, of the racism of the (all-white) American music industry. This happens repeatedly in the writings of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. Recent black literary criticism, inspired by Ralph Ellison's and Albert Murray's writings on jazz, has also suggested that the bebop practice of 'composing' new melodies on the chord sequences of Broadway standards was a form of 'signifying' on the sentimental dress of white American mass market music.¹ Murray in particular has been very effective in debunking the myth that the jazz musician is an artist who has been forced by white racism to earn his money on the 'road' by doing 'commercial' dance dates while secretly despising the folks he entertained.²

Because jazz now is predominantly an 'art' (i.e. conceived) music, it has become difficult to remember that a 'jazz' musician in the 'swing era' was primarily a worker 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 DeVaux so effectively emphasizes that black musicians like Ellington, Basie and Billy Eckstine were leaders 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 here

¹ Cf. Henry Louis Gates' comparison of Coltrane and Julie Andrews' versions of 'My Favourite Things' in Gates' *The Blackness of Blackness* (1984).

² Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (1976).

was the prospect of immediate, solid earnings. Then there was, too, the lure 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 on 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. DeVaux 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 bigband dance music.'

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. DeVaux 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 Henderson 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, DeVaux 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 preserve their professional dignity.³ 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, DeVaux 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 bigband. A famous film short shows Gillespie fronting a big band and doing a few bump 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). DeVaux 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

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.' Cf. C. Gillett, *The Sound of the City* (1983).

transportation, the draft, and the racism of the music industry loiced most blaect bands to talte the less lucrative jobs which entailed incessant touring, particularly in the much hated South. Thierc Eckstine and later Gillespie found audiences largely unresponsive to subtle progressive harmonic sequences and Fast, virtuosic improvisation. Southern blaect 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 writcis have inade it the litmus test of authenticity in African-American music. As familiar examples from James Baldwin through Baraka and Alice Walkei to Gates show, (blaect) blues is used in a racial melodrama to expose the racism and inferiority of white American popular music in general. DeVeaux' discussion of blues playing in early bebop jazz asks for a more subtle, and also historically more interesting, consideration of blaect inusicians' attitude to the blues. DeVeaux reminds us that ideas of 'middle class' icseptability and progress weie deeply embedded among African-Americans in this period. In the *Music Dial*, one of the veiy 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 elevatiing their musical tastes. It needs to be said explicitly that not all good black jazz inusicians are good blues incn. Gillespie, as DeVeaux 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 weie.⁴ DeVeaux makes a good case that the reason Paikci's music is so deeply satisfying in contrast to many other excellent jazz improvisers, is that his playing showed how deep blaect blues could be integrated with modern (as in 'dissonant'), sophisticated jazz. His argument aslts us to hear Parker's blues playing not as a 'signifiyiiiig' on white jazz, but on the African-American blues tiadition.

In DeVeaux's narrative Coleman Hawkins slowed 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 bloke the inonopoly of recoding by Decca, Columbia and Victoi – to malte the small jazz coinbo and the lam session format the favouied one for youiig blaect inusicians. During the war, night clubs and 'all-stars' jam concerts (such as those begun in 1946 by Norman Ganz) and incessant recoding 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 a marvellous synthesis of the jazz monographli (its porlraits of Hawkins and Gillespie, for example, are truly inforinative), oral jazz histoiiy and the sociology of economic conditionis of professional black jazz musicians in the period between 1930 and 1950. The density of detail particularly a5 regards the lattci is astounding. I can only think of Eric Hobsbawm's great *The Jazz Scene* (1959) which tied lo do somctliing similar but with less data. In addition, DeVeaux has a gift not often seen among jazz musicologists – namely that of inteipieting a musician's style through musical

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 Kielland-Lund of the Department of British and American Studies, University of Oslo, were omitted from the end of his review of Sacvan Bercovich (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 apologise for this omission.