

Why Jazz Still Matters

Gerald Early & Ingrid Monson

I'd rather play something that you can learn and like that you don't know. I don't want people to know what I am.

– Miles Davis, 1985¹

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Perhaps, like Miles Davis, jazz itself is a mystique wrapped in an enigma, an essential or inescapable unknowingness that makes this music attractive for its audience. But if jazz is partly – through its challenging demands as a musical form, through the various changes through which it has sustained itself over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, and through its aspirations to both embody and transform modernity – a music of clear and revealed intentions, it remains an art that many, even many of its devotees, do not fully understand. Even the word “jazz” itself is wrapped in mystery. How did the music come to be called this and what does this word mean? Jazz bassist Bill Crow points out that some have thought the word comes the French verb *jaser*, or to chatter. Others say that the word “arose from corruptions of the abbreviations of the first names of early musicians: ‘Charles’ (Chas.) or ‘James’ (Jas).” Some have thought it came from the slang word for semen or that it came from “jazzing,” a slang word for fornication.² Anthropologist Alan Merriam notes that there are also Hausa and Arabic words that may be related to the term: *jaiza*, the rumbling of distant drums, and *jazb*, allurements or attraction.³

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One of the reasons that the early music in New Orleans and after was so disapproved of by the bourgeoisie was because of the association with sex. The same reaction would occur roughly thirty-five or so years later with the advent of rock and roll, another rebellious form of music with a name associated with sex. Because jazz in its early days before World War I was performed in brothels, as well as at picnics and parades, an association with sex and the erotic is not surprising. As Gerald Early observed about Miles Davis, the black male body came to define a kind of black male existentialism functioning as “a symbol of engagement and detachment, of punishing discipline and plush pleasure that operated cooperatively, not in conflict, if rightly understood.” Furthermore, this new kind of sexuality, first associated with jazz and the margins, became, over time, idealized in mainstream culture.⁴

Many jazz musicians never liked the word “jazz,” among the most notable being Duke Ellington, drummer Max Roach, saxophonist Rashaan Roland Kirk, composer Muhal Richard Abrams, trumpeter Nicholas Payton, and Miles Davis, who said to his interlocutor in 1985: “You know I don’t like the word jazz, right? You’ve heard that? I hope that’s one of the things you’ve heard.”⁵ Many African American musicians viewed the word as a music industry label created by whites that demeaned, stereotyped, and limited them artistically. Bill Crow ends his meditation on the word jazz by noting: “As we enter the 1990s the sexual connotation of the word has almost completely faded away. ‘Jazz’ is now used to identify musical forms, as well as a style of Broadway theater dancing, a patented exercise regimen, a toilet water, a basketball team, a brand of computer software.”⁶ Within this metamorphosis lies a tale.

Jazz improvisation celebrates the heroic genius improviser, but, as musicians know, that brilliance often depends on the collective magic of the right band: individuals who compliment, anticipate, inspire, and upset each other into a communal whole greater than the sum of its parts. Indeed, two of the most influential heroes in jazz – Miles Davis and John Coltrane – are known by the brilliance of their quartets and quintets, which became the most revered models of group interplay. These collective musical relationships became generalized into idealized concepts of community that pervade our contemporary understanding of jazz. For Wynton Marsalis, the jazz ensemble is democracy in action: participatory, inclusive, challenging, competitive, and collective.⁷ For the interracial musical scene of the forties and fifties, jazz improvisation was often viewed as the ultimate integrated music, crossing the color line and social categories with aplomb.⁸ For others, black musicians created idealized and woke communities of color, which inspired the development of progressive black social and spiritual movements. Freedom links the musical aesthetics of jazz and its sociopolitical ambitions: associated with improvisation and desperately needed for racial justice and inclusion. For some, the political and cultural associations of jazz are primary, indeed, above the music itself, which can make jazz seem like a branch of social theory. Ralph Ellison criticized this tendency by wryly critiquing Amiri Baraka’s (LeRoi Jones) *Blues People* by noting that “the tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon this body of music is enough to give even the blues the blues.”⁹ For others, the music must be addressed to the exclusion of the social and cultural. Music theorists are more comfortable on this terrain, but the most interesting recent work on jazz has emphasized the sound of the music,

the embodied experience of listening and performing as the link between the musical and the social.¹⁰

Jazz is a complex, highly blended, sometimes contradictory music and, indeed, since its inception, it has been hotly debated exactly what forms or styles constitute this music. Is it music theory or a technique that is applied to music? Is it one music or several loosely grouped forms of music that deal with improvisation? Its roots are African and European, classical and popular, dance music and art music. It has been called both cool and hot, earthy and avant-garde, intellectual and primitive. It has been influenced by Latin American and Afro-Cuban music, by Middle Eastern, Indian, and other forms of Asian music, by African music, and by varieties of religious music including gospel and the Protestant hymnal. Jazz also has roots in the American popular song (which makes up a good deal of its repertoire), the blues, hokum and circus music, marching band music, and popular dance music. It is known for being improvised and touted for the freedom it permits its players, but jazz in its heyday of swing was largely composed and tightly arranged; although many jazz players have soloed, relatively few, as might be expected, were exceptional, memorial, or highly influential soloists. In any case, why did so-called free music generated on the spot by the player become more highly valued by jazz players and audiences than notated music that, by its very nature, is presumed to have a greater range of expressiveness? Improvised music goes back to Western classical composers like Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart, who were superb improvisers, but has also existed elsewhere around the world for millennia. What makes jazz improvisation different? Singers made jazz popular, but the music is mostly instrumental, and the great instrumentalists

are considered its most important innovators. Because most of the great singers were women – from Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, and Peggy Lee to Cassandra Wilson and Dianne Reeves – male bias on the part of both the musicians themselves and of critics (most of whom were and are male) likely skewed our sense of this music.¹¹

Jazz has always sought a popular audience with varying success but, since its earliest days, it has been a music that is often performed by musicians for musicians. This has made many listeners impatient with it, feeling that if one needs practically a degree in music theory to appreciate it, its practitioners should not expect untrained or casual audiences to be bothered with it. But on the other hand, its technical pretensions have made jazz a kind of status music with some audiences.

Early sound technology such as phonograph records and radio spread jazz around the world, and the speed with which it spread frightened many people in its early days, especially because the music in its inception appealed so powerfully to the young. Jazz emerged in the twentieth century, the Age of Music, when people not only heard more music than ever before but consumed it more voraciously than ever before in human history, largely attracted to music for its emotional and psychological effects. Jazz became the first, though not the last, popular music to be trapped by its intellectual pretensions, on the one hand, and its anti-intellectual appeal, on the other. Jazz has been condemned and promoted by various political ideologies and governments: Nazis called it “Nigger-Juden” music;¹² the Soviets thought of it as music of the workers and the dispossessed, on the one hand, and a sensationalized, bourgeois art, on the other; in the United States, it was once considered low-class,

dance hall music, on the one hand, and the music of democracy, the Only Original American Music, on the other. So powerful was the presence of jazz when it first emerged that it is the only music that has a social epoch named in its honor: the Jazz Age (1920s).

Jazz is, of course, about race in America not only because African American musicians were so central in its creation and African American audiences so important in their creative responses to it, but because whites played such a dominant role in its dissemination through records and performance venues and its ownership as intellectual and artistic property. (Whites also played jazz music from its earliest days and always constituted a major portion of its audience. Whites, both in the United States and in Europe, were leading critical interpreters of and writers about jazz as well.)¹³ It is a music that has always attracted intellectuals and artists, and thus the music's influence can be felt far from the bandstand or the dance floor or the recording studio. Jazz has spawned an influential, international lifestyle, an attitude toward life – the hot, the hip, and the cool – that is secular, obsessed with youth, fixated on the marginalized, and detached yet passionately self-centered, and that has attached itself to other forms of popular music, like rock and hip hop, as jazz has become, for many young music lovers, passé. This attitude of the cool and the hip has influenced literature, including the production of the so-called jazz novel and jazz poetry, as well as art, speech, dress, and antibourgeois habits of indulgence such as using illegal drugs like marijuana and heroin. Even interracial sex, considered rebellious by some and deviant by others, was associated with the demi-monde of jazz.

Every dimension of jazz outlined above is the subject of academic and critical study in a variety of fields including

English, history, American studies, musicology, African American studies, studies of the Americas, and culture studies. Indeed, jazz studies as an interdisciplinary field of research and pedagogy formally exists and has its own journal, *Jazz Perspectives*. What is this all about, anyway? And why should those with no interest in jazz care about any of this?

This issue of *Dædalus* gathers noted writers, artists, and scholars to explore the validity of three basic contentions about the “life” and “death” of jazz, which is, without question, the “deepest,” most technically difficult “popular music” ever created:¹⁴ first, that jazz was never simply a form of music or a congeries of musical styles, but was in fact a larger modernist artistic movement both in the United States and internationally that was a rebellious response against and, contrarily, a powerfully evocative intensification of the new mass consumer culture that signified twentieth-century urban life; second, that jazz's transformation from dance to art music, which occurred during and immediately after World War II, was one of the profoundly cataclysmic changes to occur in American popular culture that both reflected and affected larger social (race and gender), political (liberal reformism), and cultural (the impulse for liberation versus technical elitism) shifts that were swirling in the United States at the time; third, that jazz was, to a great extent, a pluralistic music during the years of its greatest popularity in the United States and that it has since become a vibrantly global art form, not only in Europe and Asia, but also in Panama, South Africa, and Ghana. Whether its future lies as a high-culture, transnational, privileged form of taste and practice or in a new synthesis joining jazz artistry with global hip hop and the popular is an open question. In either case, jazz today is

a form of cosmopolitanism. But perhaps that was always what it was striving to be. As *New York Times* jazz critic Ben Ratliff put it: “There is no American popular music so well miscegenated as jazz.”¹⁵

Whatever jazz today has lost in the size of its audience as compared with forms of popular music with bigger market shares, it has gained in the high esteem in which it is held in the business and art worlds as a sophisticated artistic expression (it is frequently used as mood music in upscale business establishments, in museums and galleries, and in commercials promoting upscale products) and in the institutionalization it has experienced as a formal course of study at many colleges and universities. Indeed, if it were not for colleges, universities, and high school jazz bands, and institutions such as Jazz at Lincoln Center and SF Jazz, it is quite possible that few young people in the United States would be playing or hearing jazz today.

As Ingrid Monson wrote, “The art music known variously as jazz, swing, bebop, America’s classical music, and creative music has been associated first and foremost with freedom. Freedom of expression, human freedom, freedom of thought, and the freedom that results from an ongoing pursuit of racial justice.” One has only to read, for instance, historian Michael H. Kater’s *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (1992) or author Josef Skvorecky’s extraordinary novella *The Bass Saxophone* (1977) to know how profoundly true Monson’s observation is – that jazz was a beacon, an act, a trope of freedom, an expression against repression that inspired many people around the world. But if jazz was, at one point in its history, about freeing oneself from artificial and arbitrary constraints in both popular and classical music, about freeing society from its restrictions and repressions, then, for many

of its fans and practitioners, it has now become about preserving and conserving a tradition, an ideology, a set of standards, a form of practice. Today, jazz is an art that can satisfy the compulsions of the liberationist and the conservative, of those who seek change and of those who prefer stasis.¹⁶

Is jazz still a relevant form of artistic expression, still a significant force in the world of popular music or the world of art music? In other words, is jazz so insufficiently hip that its pretensions and its conceit no longer matter as either a theory or a practice? Has it become, in many respects, like mainline Protestantism, a theory and a practice prized by its followers because of its limited and slowly declining appeal and its glorious history as something that once did matter? Is jazz simply a music trapped in the memory of itself, technically exhausted and imaginatively hampered, shadowed and sabotaged by its pop and R&B commercial doppelgänger, smooth jazz? Fifty or one hundred years from now will more accessible and commercial jazzers like saxophonist Kenny G and trumpeter Chris Botti be more remembered than trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and pianist Brad Mehldau? To be sure, for many of its fans and followers, jazz has gone from being an anti-establishment to an establishment art form, something that may have drained the art form of its purpose and its emotional correlatives. If jazz has acquired a new power, a new appeal, then what precisely is it and what is the relationship of this new power, this new appeal, to the power and appeal that jazz once had when it was the dominant music of the United States? Has jazz transcended the marketplace or is it a music that deserves to be protected from the desecrations of the market as we try to protect classical music? Protectionism, when it comes to the arts, has usually been a lost

cause. Jazz's advocates and supporters say that jazz is more popular, more listened to than ever despite its low market ratings, and this may be true: it certainly shows up in unexpected places such as, for instance, two unrelated Tom Cruise movies, 1996's *Jerry Maguire* (which features a long sequence with an avant-garde Charles Mingus tune) and 2004's *Collateral* (which features a trumpeter playing *Bitches Brew*-style Miles Davis jazz). And there continues to be art-house films about jazz, such as Don Cheadle's *Miles Ahead* (2016) about Miles Davis, Robert Budreau's *Born to Be Blue* (2016) about jazz trumpeter Chet Baker, and Cynthia Mort's *Nina* (2016) about jazz/folk singer Nina Simone.

There is no question that jazz is still *present* in the culture, but the larger question is: does jazz still *matter*? We think it does in ways that are rather astonishing in their implications. Jazz artists like Robert Glasper and Kamasi Washington and avant hip hop artists like Kendrick Lamar may forge a new synthesis of jazz, the avant-garde, and the popular that rivets new audiences or may provide a radically new relationship between art and the popular. The Black Lives Matter movement has inspired a florescence of socially engaged artistic expression in jazz (Terence Blanchard's *Breathless*), popular music (Beyoncé's *Lemonade*), and hip hop (Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*) that models itself on the artistic vision of jazz. We suggest that jazz improvisation remains a compelling metaphor for interrelationship, group creativity, and freedom that is both aesthetic and social. Improvisation transforms, one-ups, reinterprets, and synthesizes evolving human experience and its sonic signatures regardless of their classical, popular, or cultural origins. The most innovative popular musicians are returning to its acoustic power, representing the screams of Aunt

Hester, as Fred Moten has put it, with the unconventional timbres and tones of haunting jazz.¹⁷ Understanding what has happened to jazz can tell us a great deal about the nature and influence of popular music as both a national and international art form.

This issue of *Dædalus* explores both the legacies of jazz and its futures from the perspectives of artists and academics engaged in multiple fields of study. The interdisciplinarity of the contributors emphasizes the fact that jazz, as stated above, was never only a music but rather was a music that served as a muse for an arts movement, enchanting and bewitching other creative artists to make and to critically examine their art: from novelists like Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, Jack Kerouac, and John Clellon Holmes to poets like Amiri Baraka, Allen Ginsburg, and Michael Harper to painters like Romare Bearden and Jackson Pollock to dancers like Fred Astaire, Agnes de Mille, Norma Miller, and Savion Glover and to hip hop and spoken-word artists like the Roots, Kendrick Lamar, and Beyoncé. The essays in this issue critically examine the achievements of jazz as an artistic movement through historical case studies, engagement with contemporary jazz innovations, and projections of the art form's future. A mixture of historical reckoning and utopian possibility bracket the ever-changing character of jazz now.

This issue hopes to begin to answer for readers: What made and continues to make jazz different from other forms of music? Why did jazz happen? How did jazz, as popular music, gain and lose its popularity or, put another way, how did it lose its status as a music for the ordinary or casual musical palette? How did jazz's close association with the repertoire of the Broadway musical, a song form that itself ceased to dominate popular music with the rise of rock and roll,

affect its reception and reputation and its future? How did and how do musicians in other countries change jazz and how much did that change affect how Americans performed it? How have the changes that affect the selling of music affected jazz? Did jazz transcend social constructions of race or did it reinscribe them? How did jazz generate criticism of itself? Who constructs the official history of a

form of popular music like jazz? Can music without words, as most jazz is, contain any specific political meaning? Can a music fade away and not fade away at the same time?

In moving toward answering these questions, the issue's authors weave together a narrative about jazz then and now to approach an understanding of why, in its many ways and forms, jazz still *matters*.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Richard Cook, "Miles Davis: 'Coltrane was a Very Greedy Man. Bird was, Too. He was a Big Hog'—A Classic Interview from the Vaults," *The Guardian*, November 6, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/nov/06/miles-davis-interview-rocks-backpages>.
- ² Bill Crow, *Jazz Anecdotes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 19.
- ³ Alan Merriam and Fradley Garner, "Jazz—The Word," *Ethnomusicology* 12 (3) (1968): 382.
- ⁴ Gerald Early, *Miles Davis and American Culture* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2001), 7, 16.
- ⁵ Cook, "Miles Davis."
- ⁶ Crow, *Jazz Anecdotes*, 21–22. Most recently jazz has been lauded as a business strategy or as a model for group creativity and collaboration. Greg Satell, "How Jazz Can Transform Business," *Forbes*, October 25, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/gregsatell/2013/10/25/how-jazz-can-transform-business/>. See also Adrian Cho, *The Jazz Process: Collaboration, Innovation, and Agility* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2010); Penelope Tobin, *The Jazz of Business: Leadership in a New Groove* (United Kingdom: Dodgem, 2012); Frank J. Barrett, *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012); and Keith Sawyer, *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration* (New York: Basic Books, 2007). See also Stephen Alexander, *The Jazz of Physics: The Secret Link Between Music and the Structure of the Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 2016) for an exploration of jazz's implications as a creative art that can explain scientific theory.
- ⁷ *Let Freedom Swing: Conversations between Sandra Day O'Connor and Wynton Marsalis on Jazz and Democracy*, DVD, pr. Robe Imbriano (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010).
- ⁸ Gene Lees, *Cats of Any Color: Jazz Black and White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- ⁹ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 249.
- ¹⁰ Vijay Iyer, "Improvisation, Action Understanding, and Music Cognition with and without Bodies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, vol. 1, ed. George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 74–90; and Georgina Born, "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology, and Creativity," *Twentieth-Century Music* 2 (1) (2005): 7–36.
- ¹¹ Few jazz listeners are aware of the achievements of the most important female instrumentalists and composers: Mary Lou Williams, Melba Liston, Carla Bley, Maria Schneider, Geri Allen, Terri Lyne Carrington, and Nicole Mitchell.
- ¹² It should go without saying that Nazism intensified the racist inclinations of conservative German music and art critics and the N-word was frequently used. See Michael H. Kater, *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press,

1992), 19. But in American literary criticism, for instance, think how common the phrase “Nigger Jim” was in discussing the slave character from Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (The character’s name was simply Jim.) Critics ranging from T. S. Eliot to Ernest Hemingway used the expression. Indeed, despite how much he deplored the characterization, even Ralph Ellison used it. See Ralph Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 50, 58. This is only to point out how much the N-word, far from being just a lower-class obscenity, penetrated the reaches of high culture. This realization only underscores the impact of the word on the Western world and how powerful its stigmatizing reach. It is important to recognize this.

¹³ For an interesting discussion of race and jazz among contemporary jazz critics, see Yuval Taylor and Will Friedwald, eds., *The Future of Jazz* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2002), 23–41.

¹⁴ James Lincoln Collier, in his biography *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, referred to the music of his youth, swing, the most popular form that jazz ever took, as “better—more sophisticated, more genuinely musical—than virtually any popular music before or since.” James Lincoln Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5. In his book, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, Lawrence Kramer makes a point of saying that he was not aiming for his audience to “appreciate” classical music. As he writes, it is not his purpose to persuade his readers that “if people would only absorb some technical information, follow the instructions of an expert, and listen for some formal routines, they could come to understand this music and discover that it is not only ‘great’ but also good for them.” Lawrence Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 4. It is not our purpose here to do so either, although a certain amount of music appreciation is unavoidable in some of these essays because the writers love the music and inevitably wish for others to recognize its virtues as well as its importance. (Of course, Kramer, inadvertently, winds up doing his share of “music appreciation” outreach in his book.) But “music appreciation” is not a goal because it is, as Kramer notes, “condescending and authoritarian.” Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, 4. It bears all the earmarks of middlebrow school lessons and the quest for bourgeois respectability. And it is, in the end, not persuasive because it diminishes the art it is trying to promote. The true goal here with these essays is to remind readers that the culture we have and the society we live in owe a great many of its admirable aspects to the monumental achievement of jazz as both a music and an art movement. Langston Hughes, in responding to the question of why he was not a member of the Communist Party, defended the need for the artist to be independent and for art to be free of political coercion from the state. He said memorably, “I wouldn’t give up jazz for a world revolution.” Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 122. In some vital ways, the essays in this volume, as is this introduction, are arguing that jazz itself was a world revolution.

¹⁵ Taylor and Friedwald, eds., *The Future of Jazz*, 23.

¹⁶ Jazz critic and novelist Albert Murray often scoffed at the notion that jazz represented freedom, saying that Ellington, for instance, was not interested in musicians being free but playing his music in the way he wanted it played. This, he asserted, was true for any bandleader. In Ian Carr’s *Keith Jarrett: The Man and His Music*, the pianist talks about how difficult it was to write music for his 1970s American quartet of saxophonist Dewey Redman, bassist Charlie Haden, and drummer Paul Motian. “That group was the hardest group in the world to write for. I had to write in everybody’s attitudes and still write what I heard, and still play what I wanted to hear.” So, in jazz, as in all music, neither the players nor the composer are truly free to do whatever they want. Each is constrained by the other. Ian Carr, *Keith Jarrett: The Man and His Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 80. Murray’s comments were made at a consultants’ meeting for the Ken Burns’s documentary *Jazz* and at a conference on Ralph Ellison at New York University, both of which Gerald Early attended.

¹⁷ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 19, 22, 32.