# *State of the Art*

—With this issue we begin a series of surveys of recent work in aspects of American Studies.

## Jazz: the Betrayed Art

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The United States has given the world two aesthetic forms: the cinema and jazz. The first has from its earliest days saturated all aspects of American life: indeed, it has become one of the major symbols of that life. The second has in its own land met either with hostility or indifference.

Jazz has supposedly enjoyed two eras when it was fundamental to American experience: the "jazz age" of the 20s, and the "Swing" movement of the 30s, which briefly became the pop music of its day, provoking scenes of wild teenage enthusiasm that many commentators have seen as analogous to "Beatlemania." But such moments of apparent cultural significance were largely bogus. As Brian Priestley has pointed out, the "jazz age" had little to do with bona fide jazz;[1] and the "Swing" boom, for all that its major illuminary was the superb Benny Goodman Orchestra, mainly benefited white bands devoid of originality or any genuine relation to the roots and grammar of jazz.

These roots lie in the blues, which evolved out of the work-song and the spiritual; and that means that in a fundamental sense jazz is the cultural legacy of slavery. The gifted jazz saxophonist and composer Oliver Nelson made that perception the central platform of his last interview in 1975, further pointing out that while jazz is primarily a *black* music, it is even more decisively an *American* one.[2] For jazz took no root and has no observable tradition in neighbouring black nations such as the West Indies, Cuba, the Dominican Republic or those in northern South and Central America. During its astonishingly rapid musical genesis, jazz has made use of the musical conventions of those and other nations;

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[1] Ian Carr, Digby Fairweather and Brian Priestley, *Jazz: The Essential Companion* (London: Grafton, 1987), 482.

[2] William Fowler, "Oliver Nelson," *Downbeat*, 24 April, 1975, 10. Nelson died six months later at the age of 43.

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but such cross-fertilization has been strictly one-way. At bottom, jazz is a unique mélange of the inherited European culture of nineteenth-century U.S.A. and the raw gusto of African music, whose apparent naivety belies its astounding rhythmic sophistication.

That such a vibrant musical hybrid should evolve and flourish *solely* within the United States, leaving no mark even on bordering states, is at first sight puzzling; after all, the majority of black slaves were shipped to places other than the U.S. One important explanation lies in the relatively benign ethos of American slavery. In Brazil, the West Indies and elsewhere, it was standard policy to work slaves to death and simply replace them on demise. But in the United States, although there were incidences of such terminal cruelty and other harshnesses, slaves were viewed and thus treated in a different way. They were property; and Americans have always made a point of looking after property. Many were therefore treated well; moreover they were encouraged to reproduce and, their bondage notwithstanding, to adopt the structures and values of "civilization" – marriage, Christianity, and so forth. And of course once such an organic process is nurtured, some form of culture is bound to evolve. In jazz's case, the evolution was extraordinarily accelerated: in less than fifty years the primitive forms of the blues and the spiritual had engendered the joyous collective improvisation of King Oliver's band and the celestial trumpet of Louis Armstrong; and within another generation there germinated the first seedlings of Bop, arguably jazz's central expression and certainly its most sophisticated.

It is on this point of jazz's roots in slavery and what that means both in terms of its evolution and status that I take issue with Paul Oliver in *The New Grove Gospel, Blues and Jazz*. Oliver is an international authority on the blues, and hardly less cogent on the spiritual; and there is no denying the density and scholarship of his musical research. But I find his claim that "there is no surviving evidence to confirm that the blues existed before the Civil War or even in the second half of the nineteenth century"[3] uncomfortably literal minded, not to say tautologous, in its reliance on *phonographic* evidence. The phonograph was not invented until 1888; but there is enough evidence in *literary* sources to posit with confidence the presence of a rich sub-culture of work-songs and the like, whose ethos and structure are clearly analogous to the blues. Furthermore, neither Oliver nor Max Harrison, who wrote the Jazz section of *The New Grove*, gives anything like enough weight to jazz's uniqueness as a mélange of cultures or to the supple complexity of rhythmic approach that most distinguishes jazz music of all kinds. Indeed, Harrison is seriously at fault when he opines that "jazz's monolinear simplifications of African polyrhythms [and] devices of syncopation...are not very different from those found in European classical music."[4] Anyone who has listened to, say, the Count Basie Orchestra, Oscar Peterson or Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker in full flight will be instinctively aware that one will search the entire classical repertoire in vain for that *kind* of loose floating power and irresistible bounce. To put it another way: classical music does not "swing." There is no reason why it should; "swing" is unique to jazz, and its single most important characteristic. To conflate two separate traditions as Harrison does is to take no account of a fundamental matter. It is no accident that Harrison offers no definition of "swing," hardly deeming it worthy of a passing mention; he is (or should be) embarrassed by Brian Priestley's masterly entry on the subject.[5]

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[3] Paul Oliver, Max Harrison and William Bolcom, *The New Grove Gospel, Blues and Jazz* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 39.

[4] Ibid, 224.

Given my contention that jazz has almost from the outset suffered betrayal, its roots in slavery and its status as an authentic black American culture go a long way to explaining why this has been so. It hardly needs saying that for many Americans slavery and the Civil War – and all consequences therefrom – remain a source of colossal national guilt and/or trauma. Liberal sections of U.S. society have clearly found it difficult to celebrate jazz's remarkable musical development and achievement with any serenity: many would be shocked – as I suspect would more than a few blacks – by Oliver Nelson's remark, "Thank God for slavery; for without it, jazz would not have happened."[6] In addition, many other Americans find themselves hostile to jazz precisely because it is essentially a black music. Such a stance need not involve bigotry as such: after all, it was not until World War II that white academics were prepared to recognize that there was such a thing as "black culture." Nevertheless, bigotry and racial tension are relevant to jazz, especially in the era we now know as Bop.

In the excellent *Swing to Bop* Ira Gitler traces with thoroughness and insight not only the musical revolution that Bop evinced but its social characteristics and consequences as well. (For this reason his book can be as warmly recommended to the historian as to the musical aficionado.) By the 1930s a good many young musicians (mainly black) were becoming frustrated by what they saw as jazz's limitations – its simple harmonic structures, the frequent tweeness of its melodies, and above all the rigid, often leaden constraints of its rhythm sections. They recognized the exceptions: Art Tatum's awesome pianism anticipated and in some respects surpassed the innovations of Bop; and Duke Ellington's work was distinguished for its rhythmic fire and orchestral richness, not to mention Ellington's own increasing boldness and majesty as a composer. But by and large they saw jazz as in need of liberation, of a major change in direction and focus. And they also deeply resented the success of the derivative white commercial bands of the time, feeling that their music had been "stolen" by untalented ofays. Such a dawning of "black responsibility" was intriguingly reflected in their ambivalent attitude to Louis Armstrong, unquestionably jazz's greatest soloist thus far and already a national figure. While revering Armstrong's musicianship and achievement, they disliked aspects of his showmanship and stage persona, finding it little short of "Uncle Tomming," undignified and humiliating in its kow-towing to white stereotype images.

In addition to Tatum and Ellington, Bop had other important antecendents in tenor saxophonist Lester Young, who pioneered an entirely new way of playing the instrument – light, effortlessly swinging and loose, and far removed from the macho swagger associated with Coleman Hawkins, who had virtually "invented" the saxophone as a jazz instrument and had hitherto been the only model – and the Count Basie Orchestra, in which Young had a starring role. Pianist Basie and drummer Jo Jones radically re-cast ideas of how a rhythm section should sound:

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[5] *Jazz: The Essential Companion*, 481–82.

[6] Fowler, 11.

its light but pulsating elegance opened up a complete new territory which the boppers were able to explore with zest and momentousness. Within a few years such auguries were fully realised. Led by young experimenters Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, J. J. Johnson, Thelonious Monk and Kenny Clarke, and encouraged by established figures like Hawkins and Earl Hines, Bop blossomed into a major movement.

Initially it seemed chiefly characterized by angular melodies and deliberately difficult, "strange" harmonic intervals. Jazz had in a sense been founded on "blue notes" – flattened thirds and sevenths; but here were the boppers flattening (or sharpening) every note in the scale. In an overall musicological sense, this departure was far less radical than it might have seemed to ears accustomed only to popular music or the more anodyne 30s jazz: Ellington and Tatum had been using such devices for years, as of course had classical music from Debussy onwards. So Bop was doing no more (or, to be fair, no less) than enriching the main current of jazz with a vocabulary and imagination that had been implicit for some time. Such essential traditionalism amidst apparent revolution explains in part why Bop, despite occasioning considerable hostility at the outset, quickly became jazz's central medium, one that "has indelibly marked... every subsequent jazz style."[7] But as already hinted, an even weightier explanation of Bop's rapid primacy concerns its rhythmic impact. The melodic and harmonic advances were real enough, albeit parochial; but the fact that they were absorbed so quickly was due to the euphoric, liberating effect Bop's polyrhythmic elan exerted. If its performers were arguably jazz's first elitists, if their approach was at times unashamedly intellectual, Bop was finally most distinguished for its coruscating energy and sheer joy.

That "joy" is crucial. Bop flourished in the 1940s – arguably one of the happier, more optimistic decades in America's history, despite the seismic events of that time and the nations's eventual, dismal decline into "the Golfer's dull terror."[8] And although part of Bop's motivation was to "recapture" black music by creating a form of jazz that no white kibbitzer could rip off, it became in fact notable for its racial harmony. The bopper's ultimate prejudice was not against whites as such but people who couldn't really play yet (lucratively) pretended to do so. If you *could* play, it didn't matter who you were, where you came from, or what your colour was. In 1976 pianist Oscar Peterson, who grew up during the Bop era, declared:

> I've always said that talent of any kind comes in a variety of colours – black, white, brown, yellow; tall, short; fat, thin; monster-like or gentle.[9]

Peterson's words echo and codify the original boppers' attitudes. White tenor saxophonist Zoot Sims remembers that in the 40s prejudice in jazz was never a problem:

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[7] Jazz: *The Essential Companion*, 33.

[8] Gore Vidal, "Norman Mailer's Self-Advertisements," *On Our Own Now* (St Albans: Granada, 1976), 76. "The Golfer" refers to President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

[9] Mike Hennessey, "An Interview With Oscar Peterson," *Gallery*, June 1976, 39.

> I think I was fifteen years old...and if they saw you with a [saxophone] nobody bothered you – a kind of respect. Everything was fine.[10]

Gitler later quotes an even more positive diagnosis by saxophonist Sonny Rollins – although these trenchant remarks point also to the darker matter of jazz's deliberate betrayal:

> Jazz was not just a music: it was a social force in this country, and it was talking about freedom and people enjoying things for what they are and not having to worry about whether they were supposed to be black, white and all this stuff. Jazz has always been a music that had this kind of spirit. Now I believe that for that reason the people that *could* push jazz have not pushed jazz, because that's what jazz means. A lot of times, jazz means no barriers.[11]

This goes to the heart of things. From the outset, jazz has offended America's Puritan soul, both through its vibrant earthiness and such unfortunate ancillary characteristics as its eventual association with narcotics and down-beat squalor. But as Rollins implies, it has also provoked the bigots; for apart from a brief period in the 60s when a number of musicians identified wholeheartedly with the Black Power movement, jazz has been notable for the racial harmony pertaining on the bandstand. And even the most casual student of American History will recognize that there have always been plenty of its citizens who would find such affectionate tolerance an affront and a danger.

## II

The ignorance and hostility that characterize so many Americans' attitude to jazz over the generations is saddening, even disturbing. In addition, however, jazz has not been consistently well-served by its own enthusiasts and pundits. The jazz world can be maddeningly parochial – blinkered and arbitrary in its judgments, and far too fond of adolescent shibboleths. These vices mar both *The New Grove* and Martin Williams's otherwise impressive *Jazz Heritage*. Both he and Max Harrison evince an obsession with "innovation" within jazz that comes rapidly to look, in an overall musical context, just silly. I have already suggested that jazz's outstanding contribution to music as a whole has been essentially a rhythmic one; in terms of melody and harmony it has, for all its rich idiosyncracy in these areas, fed symbiotically off the European classical tradition. It is thus ultimately foolish to speak even of figures like Ellington and Parker as innovators in any denotative sense, since they drew so deeply upon the achievements of Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky and others.

The case becomes near-farcical when marginal figures like Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler (both "avant garde" saxophonists) and pianist Cecil Taylor come into focus. Taylor is an electrifying player whose remorselessly percussive style does not preclude passages of fiery rhapsodic beauty; but his music is a cul-de-sac as well as deeply indebted to Bartok and Schoenberg, and it is absurd for Harrison to devote almost as much space to him as he affords Tatum, who was a true original in pianistic style and an enormous influence upon every subsequent

[10] Ira Gitler, *Swing To Bop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 162.

[11] Ibid., 303.

jazz pianist of note. As for Shepp and Ayler, their music has proved similarly shut-ended. At times horribly ugly, it also ignored the primacy of swing, as did the latter work of the otherwise masterly and rewarding saxophonist John Coltrane. It is indeed a sad and devastating irony (to which neither Harrison nor Williams draws attention) that it was about at this time, and directly as a result of Shepp and his ilk's work, that black audiences finally ceased to regard jazz as "their" music, turning instead to the "soul music" of such as Otis Redding and the Tamla Motown stable. Shepp's highly vocal proselytizing of Black Power simply served to underline the doleful fact that "the brothers" just didn't want to know any more.

Not that this development necessarily displeased many jazz fans: they have a fondness for being the only ones in step. Such enthusiasts jealously guard the "mystique" of jazz, viewing any wider appeal by its practitioners with deep suspicion, even unto wholesale dismissal. That noble and comprehensively magnificent pianist Oscar Peterson has been derided for decades by many in the jazz-listening world because he can easily fill the Royal Festival Hall and sell records beyond the closed jazz coterie; typically, he does not even earn a mention in *The New Grove*. Similar fates have befallen saxophonist Stan Getz during the 60s, when his bossa nova records got him into the Top Ten on both sides of the Atlantic, and pianist Herbie Hancock, who pioneered "rockjazz" with great success and great musical intelligence. Too many jazz enthusiasts – and too much jazz writing – suffer from this kind of fatuous inverse snobbery, and also from a no less tawdry belief that the music must be harsh and/or difficult to be considered authentic and emotionally adult.

These and other Weltanschauung shortcomings tend to mar even the best books on jazz, although I must make an exception of *Jazz: The Essential Companion*, which strikes me as the finest single work extant on the subject. Neither Harrison nor (more forgivably, since his is not put forward as a "comprehensive" work) Williams can find anything to say about the important achievements of Norman Granz, both as a producer of hundreds of classic records and also as an impresario who insisted on the best terms for all his artists and who refused to play to segregated audiences. Neither writer so much as mentions "mainstream" jazz either – thus ignoring a host of durable, highly accomplished and (most significantly) popular musicians who have been and remain the music's life-blood.* Even Barry McRae's generally cogent and authoritative *The Jazz Handbook* contains oddities of this kind. He offers incisive portraits of 200 jazz musicians of all styles and eras, but can find no place for Milt Jackson, who is not only the best vibraphonist jazz has produced, but was a founder member of the Bop movement and probably amongst the most important and enduring artists jazz has seen.

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* "Mainstream jazz," in the sense I use it here, is unimprovably defined by Brian Priestley in *Jazz: The Essential Companion*, 39, as that played by "beboppers still active and bebop revivalists who, whether they realize it or not, play things that could not have been played 30 years ago, for the simple reason that they have absorbed influences from modal and free jazz. Nothing ever stays in the same place, but perhaps the main lesson of the mainstream concept is that the more jazz changes, the more it's the same thing."

One further way in which the jazz world seems positively to connive at its Cinderella status concerns the very word "jazz" and the utter lack of consensus about what constitutes "true jazz." For every couple of enthusiasts who think the music is in its healthiest state yet, there will be two others who consider it died with the advent of Bop, two more who reckon it lost its way with Ornette Coleman, Shepp and "free jazz," and another two who cannot see it surviving the eventual demise of its remaining great stars (Peterson, Getz, Rollins and Gillespie, for example). In view of this, it is perhaps scarcely surprising that when it comes to the prospect of "spreading the jazz word" to wider fields, many fans seem to prefer to gather in their little pure cliques, snarling at renegades and revisionists who hear a different drummer.

Such reductive compartmentalism makes Philip Larkin's writing on jazz both infuriating and a joy. It infuriates because Larkin, as he almost gleefully admits, is one of those who regarded the coming of Bop as the death of jazz; he does not even care for such pre-boppers as Tatum or Basie. It is a joy because – that prejudice notwithstanding – he is constantly illuminating as he discusses several hundred records and musicians. *All What Jazz* collects the Daily Telegraph columns he wrote between 1961 and 1971; they form a marvellous work of criticism, sending one back refreshed and invigorated to the source works themselves – which is the prime task of all good criticism, needless to say. In addition, there is the feline mastery of his prose: the writing is so good that it can be safely recommended to those whose interest in jazz is minimal.

## III

Some years ago Bernard Levin poured scorn on America's classical music tradition, relegating even Aaron Copland, whom he regarded as America's principal composer thus far, to "third division" status.[12] For what it's worth, I think Levin was right; but, although he went on to make a warm and cogent appraisal of Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Jerome Kern and other songwriters, he ignored jazz completely. That might be seen as evidence of Levin's ignorance and shortcomings; maybe it is. Much more important, I think, it what it reveals about the general public's consciousness when it comes to American music – both in the U.S.A. and abroad. Despite that brilliant and influential drummer Max Roach's telling assertion that "jazz is the U.S.A.'s true classical music,"[13] it seems that few are prepared to accept jazz either as serious music or as quintessentially American. Insofar as jazz remains an unnourished and betrayed art in its own land – and several musicians interviewed in Arthur Taylor's *Notes and Tones*, notably saxophonist Johnny Griffin, testify to this in forthright, even bitter terms[14] – it is because no one of stature has yet sought to codify and explore Roach's contention in extended form. Virtually all books published on jazz, no matter what their many felicities and insights, disappoint through their cultural tentativeness, parochialism or merely recondite charm: not even the majestic *Jazz: The Essential Companion* elevates the music to its true central national significance. For that, and for a properly fundamental recognition of the status of Ellington, Gillespie, Parker and others within twentieth-century music as a whole, it looks as if we shall have to wait until the next century, if not beyond.

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[12] Bernard Levin, "Odd, The American Sound of Music," *The Times*, 5 February 1981, 14.

[13] Nat Hentoff, "The Verve Story," *Dizzy Gillespie at Newport*, Verve Records Inc, 2304 348 (LP record).

[14] Arthur Taylor, *Notes and Tones* (London: Quartet, 1987), 66–75.

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