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In 1939, in response to a manuscript on jazz he was required to read, Frederic Ramsey Jr. wrote his own book on the genre, entitled Jazzmen, that became a landmark publication. Yet, scholars and critics have been relatively sceptical of the book, because the majority of the sources involved oral interviews with jazz players, perhaps most notably Bunk Johnson. It is widely known that many jazz musicians of the early 1900s would have exaggerated the truth in an attempt to make a name for themselves and earn money along the way. The result of Ramsey’s methods: many of the dates in his book do not line up and cause much ambiguity concerning the history of jazz’s timeline. Vic Hobson resolves many of the questions posed by Jazzmen through his book, Creating Jazz Counterpoint (2014). Hobson provides answers to many of Jazzmen’s inconsistencies, while also helping to prove the influence of barbershop harmony on the development of contrapuntal techniques in jazz. Hobson’s book is a must-read as it links the origin of jazz—stemming from the mysterious Buddy Bolden—to the creation of modern jazz harmony through a common source: barbershop, or barroom, singing.

Hobson’s book focuses on the history of early jazz in New Orleans and the development of jazz counterpoint alongside the influence of barbershop harmonies. The text first briefly discusses the strengths and weaknesses of Jazzmen and explains how Hobson intended to improve on the research and writing of Frederic Ramsey. Yet a major challenge for improving that work was to attempt to prove the Bolden legacy and
influence on early New Orleans jazz. Therefore Holden began by cementing the credibility of contemporaneous early jazz pioneer, William “Bunk” Johnson.

Delving into the history of Bunk’s life, Hobson encounters Willy Cornish, a trombonist who played with Bolden and Bunk. Hobson explains how Cornish provided the necessary evidence to conclude decisively that Bunk Johnson did in fact play with Buddy Bolden. This evidence then allows Hobson to surmise that Johnson’s recordings that imitated Bolden’s style of early New Orleans jazz were credible.

The book does not solely cover the life story and credibility of Bunk Johnson, however. It also delves deeply into the development of jazz counterpoint and how jazz harmonies came about. Hobson demonstrates how jazz harmony developed from African-American barbershop singing. He argues this by discussing the many different techniques associated with “Cracking up a Chord,” something many early barbershop singers did as they strove to discover new sonorities. The primary technique revolved around quartet singing in which the baritone and tenor part would change notes, creating a dissonant suspension while the lead and bass voices remained constant. Thus, new harmonies were found and new ways to resolve chords were discovered.

Hobson cites many jazz musicians who sang in barbershop quartets as examples of how jazz counterpoint was created. Many famous musicians such as Buddy Bolden, Bunk Johnson, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Johnny Dodds, Willy Cornish, and Kid Ory all claimed to have sung in such quartets. They believed that singing helped them to develop a better musical ear and thus to improvise more creatively. The suspension techniques common in barbershop appear often in jazz solos and in chords as shown in the recordings of Bunk Johnson, Jelly Roll Morton, and others.

Indeed, blues harmonies also contain certain notes that appear over chords giving the music a specific sound distinctly heard in barbershop music. These harmonic traits are prevalent in ragtime music, too. When barbershop countermelodies are sung in the tenor line they contain a mixture of major and minor thirds. This mixture of thirds creates a “blue-note” melody when heard as the lead line. When realized in performance, the most fundamental requirement of jazz is met: ragtime spiced with the tonality of the blues. These examples not only prove Hobson’s point through historic accounts but also through the music itself.

Understanding barbershop harmonies can also help explain why jazz musicians played the notes they did. Sigmund Spaeth published two books on barbershop harmony, explaining the common practices and tendencies of the music: Barber Shop Ballads: A Book of Close Harmony (1925), and Barber Shop Ballads and How to Sing Them (1940). Hobson took full advantage of Spaeth’s work, using it to visually show how jazz

harmonies work. Hobson’s approach makes it very easy for the reader to understand the theory behind jazz harmony and how soloists applied it to their music. Moreover, Hobson also draws directly from the words of the artists themselves, quoting, for example, Louis Armstrong, when he mentioned the influence barbershop singing had on his musical taste. When asked if singing in a quartet had affected the way he played, Armstrong replied: “I figure singing and playing is the same.” Hobson’s testimony helps to underline the connections between jazz harmony and counterpoint and barbershop harmony.

In Gage Averill’s book, *Four Parts, No Waiting: A Social History of American Barbershop Harmony*, he tells of the popularity of barbershop quartets in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth- centuries before the dawn of the Jazz Age in the 1920s. That said, at the onset of the Jazz Age barbershop quartets declined in popularity because they could not keep up with the new “dance music” of the time. As Louis Armstrong said, singing and playing were virtually the same, therefore, transferring barbershop harmonies to jazz counterpoint and improvisational solos was not difficult. Thus, the influence of barbershop harmony can be seen through the testimony of musicians such as Armstrong, who sang these harmonies in barroom or barbershop groups. Hobson concludes his book with the idea that barbershop played an extensive role in the development of jazz counterpoint.

Hobson proves his point through impressive research drawn from a variety of sources, including consultation of the Historic New Orleans Collection where he was able to research Frederic Ramsey’s papers. It was here Hobson discovered interviews with Willy Cornish excluded from the writing of *Jazzmen*. Hobson’s presentation is effective and compelling, validating his point beyond a shadow of a doubt. His work is tremendously valuable to the jazz history field. His confirmation that Bunk Johnson’s playing style could be imitative of Buddy Bolden’s playing provides new, unprecedented insights into how early New Orleans’ jazz truly sounded.

Hobson’s use of personal examples to unpack the nature of Barbershop Quartet singing helps to strengthen this second area of inquiry found in the text, a series of conclusions supported by the secondary literature as well. Lynn Abbott, author of *Play That Barber Shop Chord*, is responsible for ground-breaking realizations in the history of barbershop singing and its influence on jazz musicians. Abbott’s article discusses the development of barbershop harmony from African-American musical traditions rather than the white male heritage emphasized by barbershop quartets in today’s society.

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*Critical Voices: The University of Guelph Book Review Project* is part of the curriculum at the School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.
Abbott discusses how this genre was born in the fields and came from the “Negro dialect,” thus also emulating some of the characteristics of jazz music that stem from African-American traditions, including rhythmic techniques. Abbott’s article also connects call-and-response methods to the content of jazz music. The numerous overlaps between these two genres suggest a definite lineage.

Hobson’s use of and elaboration on Abbott’s article helps to link barbershop singing and the development of jazz, combining musical techniques with historical accounts of how early jazz developed. He accomplishes his goal of deciphering how jazz counterpoint functions by showing the involvement of barbershop harmonies and how they led to the development of improvisational solos. They also helped musicians mimic solos they heard and then elaborate on them. Hobson discusses this idea of developing a good musical ear in relation to different second-part players. Bunk Johnson, Louis Armstrong, and others were able to create harmonic lines to fit melodies through improvisation because they had developed such good musical ears from listening and singing in barroom quartets. When they sang, they followed the lead singer and adjusted to that line, just as they had to adjust and harmonize with lead melody players. This helped these musicians to find new harmonies and create and push jazz to new contrapuntal and improvisatory limits.

Yet Creating Jazz is not Hobson’s first time discussing jazz and its involvement with African-American culture. His article, “Plantation Song: Delius, Barbershop, and the Blues,” further proves the point that barbershop harmony originated from African-American culture rather than the European dialect in which it was previously. Hobson’s article delves into the specifics of barbershop harmonies, including seventh chords, and considers how voices move to create suspensions and sound as Spaeth demonstrated. Hobson’s article is relevant to his monograph because the voice leading and structure of barbershop harmonies not only describe plantation singing but also help support the reasoning behind the suggested influence of barbershop harmonies on blues and early jazz music.

In conclusion, Vic Hobson’s Creating Jazz Counterpoint is a definite must-read for anyone interested in the development of jazz harmony. The information and data dealing with Bunk Johnson and early pioneers of jazz open up new spaces for discussing and supporting this musician’s connection to Buddy Bolden. Through Hobson’s work, it may be possible to come closer to replicating the sound of those first hints of jazz music, and Hobson’s further development and discussion of barbershop

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4 Abbott, “Play That Barber Shop Chord.”

Harmony is intriguing for any reader interested in how new chords were formed. Hobson’s collection of information and layout are fantastic, allowing for an easy, approachable understanding of how jazz musicians learned from their participation in quartets. Vic Hobson skillfully assembled a book that helps extend scholarship on the history of jazz while also providing an interesting and compelling read about the structure and counterpoint of the idiom.

For Further Reading:


