Breaks, Creaks, and Dissonance: The Praxis of Jazz Studies

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In “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The ‘Subjectless Subject’ of New Jazz Studies” Sherrie Tucker argues that the body of jazz criticism, collectively labeled as ‘New Jazz Studies,’ has openly challenged the commonly accepted myths, narratives, and historiographies that have shaped the discourse, study, and dissemination of jazz. This new intellectual thrust produced two, often seemingly contradictory though actually complimentary, streams of thought. The direct questioning of the accepted “logical march from one style to the next” has led to a more open and inclusive narrative—one that grants place and agency to normally overlooked styles such as smooth jazz or female figures such as Mary Lou Williams.1 Paradoxically, New Jazz Studies has brought into question what jazz is, and more specifically what jazz scholars are studying. Borrowing from Ann Coucolbos, Tucker posits that the study of jazz is shifting from one of “knowable objects” to that of “subjects in the process of becoming.”2


2 Ibid., 269.
Those of us who work in fields at the intersection of history and black expressive culture often invoke Ralph Ellison’s notion that some figures and moments fall outside of the “grooves of history.” Critical work by Fred Moten, Nathaniel Mackey, and Ajay Heble highlight this shift from the passive object to the active subject. For Moten, “the break” is a temporal–spatial moment where action becomes possible. This ranges from the crack in Billie Holiday’s voice to cultural moments that resist categorization. Nathaniel Mackey contends that to counter the “axiomatic exclusions upon which posittings of identity and meaning depend” we must acknowledge the noise, or what he labels as the “creaks,” of society. These creaks are the moments that destabilize fixed notions of identity and knowing. They are the “rickety, imperfect fits between word and world.” Building upon Mackey and Moten’s work, Ajay Heble declares that the idea of dissonance is not solely regulated to the domain of music theory, but can be embraced as a way of describing cultural practices that disturb “naturalized orders of knowledge production.” In other words, the idea of dissonance allows us to understand how marginalized and oppressed an individual’s function is in a society that prioritizes adherence to narrow and homogenous identities and ideology. The reviews produced by the student’s of Dr. Travis Stimeling’s “History of Jazz” course successfully resonate with this cutting-edge work, bringing to the fore the breaks, creaks, and dissonance of jazz studies.

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Anne Stickley positions Lisa Davenport’s Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America in the Cold War in relation to Penny Von Eschen’s and Ingrid Monson’s work on jazz and post-World War II global politics. Stickley highlights that the relationship between jazz, political ideologies, and social justice movements frequently produces competing and conflicting internal and external messages. One such example is the State Department’s use of jazz to promulgate a political message of equality and opportunity during the last gasp of legally sanctioned Jim Crow laws in the US. Stickley also highlights Davenport’s

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3 Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Vintage), 335.

4 For more on “the break” please see Fred Moten, In the Breaks: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).


6 Ibid, 19.

7 Ajay Heble, Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice (New York: Routledge, 2000), 19.
use of archival sources, which range from newspaper clippings to unpublished government documents. Davenport’s integration of primary sources allows for the emergence of a more nuanced and robust narrative and provides insight from the musicians and observers that were there in the moment. Stickley should be commended for her addressing of Davenport’s shortchanging of Melba Liston. As the June 2014 issue of *Black Music Research Journal* demonstrates, Melba Liston’s life and work forms an important contribution to the building of a creaking, dissonant jazz history that many of us desire. Indeed, Stickley’s highlighting of areas in which Davenport’s work could be further extended might also be enhanced through an engagement with Robin Kelley’s recent *Africa Speaks: America Answers*. Kelley’s work shows how musicians engaged with the ideas and peoples of Africa outside of officially sanctioned bodies of power, and her work, brought into dialogue with Davenport’s research, enhances the discussion concerning “jazz diplomacy’s” relationship with African nations.

Brennan Wood’s review of Vic Hobson’s *Creating Jazz Counterpoint: New Orleans, Barbershop Harmony, and the Blues* also engages with the breaks of jazz history. Early accounts of the development and origins of jazz prove to be vexing for scholars because of numerous apocryphal stories. No figure looms larger in the mythology of jazz than Buddy Bolden. Wood takes great care to frame Hobson’s work as a direct engagement with Frederic Ramsey’s *Jazzmen*, which in turn was Ramsey’s response to an unnamed and presumably unpublished manuscript. While on the surface it would be easy to read Hobson’s work as an interrogation of the accuracy and legacy of the Buddy Bolden myth through encounters with other prominent, early New Orleans jazz musicians, Wood manages to steer us toward the most intriguing facet of Hobson’s work: the role of Barbershop quartet harmony in the formation and development of what became known as jazz. Wood also takes care to point out that Hobson discovers, and incorporates into his own book, critical sources that might have proved dissonant to Ramsey’s original efforts. Wood closes by dialoguing Hobson’s work with the extent literature on Barbershop harmony. Concerning New Orleans, this point could be further nuanced through the inclusion of Thomas Brothers’ text, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans*, or Charles Hersch’s *Subversive Sounds: Race and the Birth of Jazz in New Orleans*. Both of

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8 For more on Melba Liston please see articles within see Monica Hairston O’Connell, ed. “Melba Liston.” *Black Music Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (2014).


these texts reinforce Wood’s own criticisms while providing interesting points of congruence concerning this topic.

Zara Simon-Ogan’s examination of Stuart Nicholson’s Jazz and Culture in a Global Age provides insight into how jazz culture is not only disseminated but also received outside of the United States. Simon-Oban aptly notes that Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic has forced scholars and critics to consider the formation and experience of culture outside of national frameworks and instead to acknowledge trans-cultural and diasporic influences. Simon-Ogan also distills for us that the idea of “glocalization” is the core theme running throughout Nicholson’s work. Tension between the global and the local often exposes the cultural breaks elided in dominant narratives. Each chapter of Nicholson’s text highlights a moment where jazz culture —positioned as a global culture—influences or dialogues with local culture. Simon-Organ, it should be noted, takes issue with Nicholson’s prose. Indeed, the reviewer argues that jazz scholarship does not have to be overtly serious or intellectually endemic to make a point, an intriguing point of view. Also worthy of underlining is Simon-Ogan’s bringing to the fore of Nicholson’s placement of Paul Whiteman at the centre of his text. Michael Patrick Welch’s article on Nick LaRocca’s inclusion in an exhibition of a famous New Orleans jazz museum, like Nicholson’s work, also highlights that the accepted record of jazz often emphasizes essentialized notions of blackness, and in turn this has placed certain individuals in the breaks — whether they deserve to be or not.

Overall, these reviews emphasize that jazz scholarship in the twenty-first century is a discursive and dialogical process. Jazz scholars’ efforts to challenge, in Scott DeVeaux’s words, the “coherent whole” and “easily comprehended narrative” of jazz history expose the figures and moments that inhabit the breaks and creaks of time, but also reanimate dissonant moments in the canon. Anne Stickley, Brennan Woods, and Zara Simon-Ogan’s reviews underscore and resonate with critical thought found in recent publications. For instance, Lewis Watts and Eric Porter’s New Orleans Suite: Music and Culture in Transition compellingly argue that the cultural expectations of jazz, paralleled with audience and critical reception, is often not congruent. Indeed, the reception history of jazz is a point with which all three reviewers engage. Woods, with his survey of the place of Barbershop harmony barbershop in the development of what became known as jazz, supports arguments made in Daniel Goldmark, Charles Garrett

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and David Ake’s recent edited collection Jazz/ Not Jazz. Throughout this collection, contributors explore styles that and figures who do not fit within conventional definitions or histories of jazz, but in retrospect, prove to be crucially vital in helping us understand the field. Furthermore, Simon-Ogan’s discussion of the trans- and inter-cultural moments in jazz speaks to Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and Goerge Lipsitz’s 2013 volume The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Co-Creation. In this newer text, the authors probe how non-majority cultures and populations give voice to their community and construct identities within a broad framework that includes jazz.

In the “Introductory Notes” to Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies, the authors state “questions of definition, history, and form will always be a part of jazz studies.” The interrogation of the constituent parts of jazz history brings to the fore the breaks, creaks, and dissonances that mainstream chronicles have silenced. That said, as this edition of Critical Voices observes, highlighting these breaks only creates more—and in my estimation, a more pleasurable—noise.

For Further Reading:


Hairston O’Connell, Monica, ed. “Melba Liston.” Black Music Research Journal. 34, no. 1


