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Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography

Scott DeVeaux

I don't know where jazz is going. Maybe it's going to hell. You can't make anything go anywhere. It just happens.

—Thelonious Monk

I

To judge from textbooks aimed at the college market, something like an official history of jazz has taken hold in recent years. On these pages, for all its chaotic diversity of style and expression and for all the complexity of its social origins, jazz is presented as a coherent whole, and its history as a skillfully contrived and easily comprehended narrative. After an obligatory nod to African origins and ragtime antecedents, the music is shown to move through a succession of styles or periods, each with a conveniently distinctive label and time period: New Orleans jazz up through the 1920s, swing in the 1930s, bebop in the 1940s, cool jazz and hard bop in the 1950s, free jazz and fusion in the 1960s. Details of emphasis vary. But from textbook to textbook, there is substantive agreement on the defining features of each style, the pantheon of great innovators, and the canon of recorded masterpieces.

This official version of jazz history continues to gain ground through the burgeoning of jazz appreciation classes at universities and colleges. It is both symptom and cause of the gradual acceptance of jazz, within the academy and in the society at large, as an art music—"America's classical music," in a frequently invoked phrase.¹ Such acceptance, most advocates of

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jazz agree, is long overdue. If at one time jazz could be supported by the marketplace, or attributed to a nebulous (and idealized) vision of folk creativity, that time has long passed. Only by acquiring the prestige, the "cultural capital" (in Pierre Bourdieu's phrase) of an artistic tradition can the music hope to be heard, and its practitioners receive the support commensurate with their training and accomplishments. The accepted historical narrative for jazz serves this purpose. It is a pedigree, showing contemporary jazz to be not a fad or a mere popular music, subject to the whims of fashion, but an autonomous art of some substance, the culmination of a long process of maturation that has in its own way recapitulated the evolutionary progress of Western art.

The added twist is that this new American classical music openly acknowledges its debt not to Europe, but to Africa. There is a sense of triumphant reversal as the music of a formerly enslaved people is designated a "rare and valuable national American treasure" by the Congress, and beamed overseas as a weapon of the Cold War.² The story of jazz, therefore, has an important political dimension, one that unfolds naturally in its telling. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and John Coltrane provide powerful examples of black achievement and genius. Their exacting discipline cannot be easily marginalized, *pace* Adorno, as "mere" popular entertainment, or as the shadowy replication of European forms. The depth of tradition, reaching back in an unbroken continuum to the beginning of the century, belies attempts to portray African Americans as people without a past—hence the appeal of an unambiguous and convincing historical narrative: If the achievements that jazz represents are to be impressed on present and future generations, the story must be told, and told well.

For all its pedagogical utility, though, the conventional narrative of jazz history is a simplification that begs as many questions as it answers. For one thing, the story that moves so confidently at the outset from style to style falters as it approaches the present. From the origins of jazz to bebop there is a straight line; but after bebop, the evolutionary lineage begins to dissolve into the inconclusive coexistence of many different, and in some cases mutually hostile, styles. "At the century's halfway mark," complains one textbook, "the historical strand that linked contemporary jazz to its roots suddenly began to fray. The cohesive thread had been pulled apart in the '40s by the bebop musicians, and now every fiber was bent at a slightly different angle" (Tirro 291). Beginning with the 1950s and 1960s, the

student of jazz history is confronted with a morass of terms—*cool jazz*, *hard bop*, *modal jazz*, *Third Stream*, *New Thing*—, none of which convincingly represents a consensus.³ For the most recent decades, the most that writers of textbooks can manage is to sketch out the contrasting directions pointed to by free jazz and jazz/rock fusion, implying to the impressionable student that an informed view embraces both, as it embraces all preceding styles, and that the future of jazz is bound up with a pluralism that somehow reconciles these apparently irreconcilable trends.⁴ No one, apparently, has thought to ask whether the earlier “cohesive thread” of narrative might mask similarly conflicting interpretations.

At the same time that jazz educators have struggled to bring order to jazz history, a controversy over the current state and future direction of jazz has become noisily evident in the popular media. The terms of this debate pit so-called *neoclassicists*, who insist on the priority of tradition and draw their inspiration and identity from a sense of connectedness with the historical past, against both the continuous revolution of the *avant-garde* and the commercial orientation of *fusion*. At stake, if the rhetoric is taken at face value, is nothing less than the music’s survival. Some have argued, for example, that the neoclassicist movement, led by youthful celebrity Wynton Marsalis, has rescued jazz from extinction. “Largely under his influence,” proclaimed a *Time* author in a recent cover story,

a jazz renaissance is flowering on what was once barren soil. Straight-ahead jazz music almost died in the 1970s as record companies embraced the electronically enhanced jazz-pop amalgam known as fusion. Now a whole generation of prodigiously talented young musicians is going back to the roots, using acoustic instruments, playing recognizable tunes and studying the styles of earlier jazzmen. (Sancton 66)

Other critics counter that the triumph of a retrospective aesthetic is in fact all the evidence one might need that jazz is dead; all that is left to the current generation is the custodial function of preserving and periodically reviving glorious moments from the past.⁵

The neoclassicists’ nostalgia for a Golden Age located ambiguously somewhere between the swing era and 1960s hard bop resonates curiously with issues that go back to the earliest days of jazz historiography. Marsalis and his followers have been called “latter-day moldy figs” (Santoro, “Miles” 17), a term that links them to critics of the 1930s and ’40s who, by insisting on the priority of New Orleans-style jazz, earned themselves the reputation as defenders of an outdated and artificially static notion of what jazz is and can be. The countercharge that either (or

both) avant-garde or fusion constitutes a “wrong turn,” or a “dead end,” in the development of jazz represents the opposing argument, of the same vintage: Any change that fails to preserve the essence of the music is a corruption that no longer deserves to be considered jazz.⁶

The difference in tone between these assessments—the rancor of the journalistic debate, and the platitudinous certainty of the classroom—disguises the extent to which certain underlying assumptions are shared. With the possible exception of those in the fusion camp (who are more often the targets of the debate than active participants in it), no one disputes the official version of the history.⁷ Its basic narrative shape and its value for a music that is routinely denied respect and institutional support are accepted virtually without question. The struggle is over *possession* of that history, and the legitimacy that it confers. More precisely, the struggle is over the act of definition that is presumed to lie at the history’s core; for it is an article of faith that some central essence named *jazz* remains constant throughout all the dramatic transformations that have resulted in modern-day jazz.

That essence is ordinarily defined very vaguely; there is ample evidence from jazz folklore to suggest that musicians take a certain stubborn pride in the resistance of their art to critical exegesis. (To the question *What is jazz?* the apocryphal answer is: “If you have to ask, you’ll never know.”) But in the heat of debate, definition is a powerful weapon; and more often than not, such definitions define through exclusion. Much as the concept of purity is made more concrete by the threat of contamination, what jazz is *not* is far more vivid rhetorically than what it is. Thus fusion is “not jazz” because, in its pursuit of commercial success, it has embraced certain musical traits—the use of electric instruments, modern production techniques, and a rock- or funk-oriented rhythmic feeling—that violate the essential nature of jazz. The avant-garde, whatever its genetic connection to the modernism of 1940s bebop, is not jazz—or no longer jazz—because, in its pursuit of novelty, it has recklessly abandoned the basics of form and structure, even African-American principles like “swing.” And the neoclassicist stance is irrelevant, and potentially harmful, to the growth of jazz because it makes a fetish of the past, failing to recognize that the essence of jazz is the process of change itself.

Defining jazz is a notoriously difficult proposition, but the task is easier if one bypasses the usual inventory of musical qualities or techniques, like improvisation or swing (since the more spe-

cific or comprehensive such a list attempts to be, the more likely it is that exceptions will overwhelm the rule). More relevant are the boundaries within which historians, critics, and musicians have consistently situated the music. One such boundary, certainly, is ethnicity. Jazz is strongly identified with African-American culture, both in the narrow sense that its particular techniques ultimately derive from black American folk traditions, and in the broader sense that it is expressive of, and uniquely rooted in, the experience of black Americans. This raises important questions at the edges—e.g., how the contributions of white musicians are to be treated and, at the other end of the spectrum, where the boundary between jazz and other African-American genres (such as blues, gospel, and R & B) ought to be drawn. But on the whole, ethnicity provides a core, a center of gravity for the narrative of jazz, and is one element that unites the several different kinds of narratives in use today.

An equally pervasive, if divisive, theme is economics—specifically, the relationship of jazz to capitalism. Here, the definition is negative: Whether conceived of as art music or folk music, jazz is consistently seen as something separate from the popular music industry. The stigmatization of “commercialism” as a disruptive or corrupting influence, and in any case as something external to the tradition, has a long history in writings on jazz. In the words of Rudi Blesh (writing in 1946),

Commercialism [is] a cheapening and deteriorative force, a species of murder perpetrated on a wonderful music by whites and by those misguided negroes who, for one or another reason, choose to be accomplices to the deed. . . . Commercialism is a thing not only hostile, but fatal to [jazz]. (11-12)

Such language was particularly popular with defenders of New Orleans-style jazz who, like Blesh, narrowly identified the music with a romanticized notion of folk culture. But the same condemnatory fervor could be heard from proponents of bebop in the 1940s:

The story of bop, like that of swing before it, like the stories of jazz and ragtime before that, has been one of constant struggle against the restrictions imposed on all progressive thought in an art that has been commercialized to the point of prostitution. (Feather, *Inside* 45)

Bebop is the music of revolt: revolt against big bands, arrangers . . . Tin Pan Alley—against commercialized music in general. It reasserts the individuality of the jazz musician . . . (Russell 202)

These attitudes survive with undiminished force in recent attacks on fusion, which imply a conception of jazz as a music independent of commercial demands that is in continuous conflict with the economic imperatives of twentieth-century America.

Agoraphobia, fear of the marketplace, is problematic enough in artistic genres that have actually achieved, or inherited, some degree of economic autonomy. It is all the more remarkable for jazz—a music that has developed largely within the framework of modern mass market capitalism—to be construed within the inflexible dialectic of “commercial” versus “artistic,” with all virtue centered in the latter. The virulence with which these opinions are expressed gives a good idea how much energy was required to formulate this position in the first place, and how difficult it is to maintain. This is not to say that there is not an exploitative aspect to the relationship between capitalist institutions and jazz musicians, especially when the effects of racial discrimination on the ability of black musicians to compete fairly are factored in. But jazz is kept separate from the marketplace only by demonizing the economic system that allows musicians to survive—and from this demon there is no escape. Wynton Marsalis may pride himself on his refusal to “sell out,” but that aura of artistic purity is an indisputable component of his commercial appeal.

Issues of ethnicity and economics define jazz as an oppositional discourse: the music of an oppressed minority culture, tainted by its association with commercial entertainment in a society that reserves its greatest respect for art that is carefully removed from daily life. The escape from marginalization comes only from a self-definition that emphasizes its universality and its autonomy. The “jazz tradition” reifies the music, insisting that there is an overarching category called *jazz*, encompassing musics of divergent styles and sensibilities. These musics must be understood not as isolated expressions of particular times or places, but in an organic relationship, as branches of a tree to the trunk. The essence of jazz, in other words, lies not in any one style, or any one cultural or historical context, but in that which links all these things together into a seamless continuum. Jazz is what it is because it is a culmination of all that has come before. Without the sense of depth that only a narrative can provide, jazz would be literally rootless, indistinguishable from a variety of other “popular” genres that combine virtuosity and craftsmanship with dance rhythms. Its claim to being not only distinct, but elevated above other indigenous forms (“America’s classical music”), is in large part dependent on the idea of an evolutionary progression reaching back to the beginning of the century. Again and again, present-day musicians, whether neo-classicist or avant-garde, invoke the past, keeping before the public’s eye the idea that musics as diverse as those of King

Oliver and the Art Ensemble of Chicago are in some fundamental sense *the same music*.⁸

Those who subscribe to an essentialist notion of jazz history (and there are few who do not) take all of this for granted. But even a glance at jazz historiography makes it clear that the idea of the "jazz tradition" is a construction of relatively recent vintage, an overarching narrative that has crowded out other possible interpretations of the complicated and variegated cultural phenomena that we cluster under the umbrella *jazz*. Nor is this simply an academic complaint: The crisis of the current jazz scene is less a function of the state of the music (jazz has, in many ways, never been better supported or appreciated) than of an anxiety arising from the inadequacy of existing historical frameworks to explain it. The remainder of this essay will show how the concept of the jazz tradition came to be, what ideas it displaced along the way (and at what cost), what contradictions it contains, and its uses for describing and influencing the music of the present and future. In conclusion, I will try to indicate ways in which the narrative of the jazz tradition might be complemented by other kinds of research.

II

In the earliest writings on jazz, historical narrative only gradually emerged from criticism. The most important full-scale study of jazz, Hugues Panassié's 1934 *Le jazz hot* (translated and widely disseminated on this side of the Atlantic as *Hot Jazz* in 1936) was primarily critical in its approach. As befits a work written in Europe, it begins with a lengthy explication of the qualities that distinguish jazz from European music: swing, improvisation, repertory, and so forth. Just as important, however, was Panassié's choosing to distinguish between "hot jazz" and other kinds of music called jazz ("sweet," "symphonic") that occupied so much attention during the jazz age. In so doing, Panassié contributed to the process by which a catch phrase of considerable vagueness, indiscriminately applied to all kinds of popular song and dance music of the 1920s, came to be appropriated (some might say reclaimed) as a term for a music the aesthetic boundaries of which could be set with some precision. And indeed, the remainder of the book is primarily concerned with Panassié's notoriously fine, often supercilious distinctions (e.g., trumpeter Red Allen's "style is feverish, occasionally intemperate, and this is hardly acceptable" [76]), separating the "authentic" from the "false."

History per se plays a decidedly subsidiary role in Panassié's scheme. And his distance from the scene (Panassié's acquaintance with jazz came solely from recordings) forced him to fall back on a dubious secondary literature, some of which is bizarre in its remove from reality; it leads him, for example, to describe "St. Louis Blues" and "Memphis Blues" as work songs passed along by banjo-strumming fathers to their children, "a national repertory which all American Negroes know and respect just as we revere our old French songs" (26). Such distortions aside, a sense of historical development is nevertheless an indispensable framework for his aesthetics. According to Panassié, it is not until 1926 that jazz "attained its stable form, . . . ceased to falter and became a definite, balanced musical form" (38). Prior to that time, the music was characterized by an upward arc from the "chaos" of the ur-styles of New Orleans through the agency of musicians like Louis Armstrong, the "greatest of all hot musicians" who "brought hot style to a peak" (27). Not until this process had been fulfilled, not only for the music as a whole but also for musicians individually (Coleman Hawkins's style was "the culmination of a progressive evolution" [101]), could criticism proper begin.

For Panassié, the history of jazz was necessarily abstract, a narrative to be deduced from the evidence of recordings and supported by shadowy speculation. In America, by contrast, that history was more concrete. Although still remote, it could be traced in the urban topography of New Orleans and Chicago, in the memory of those who listened to it, and, above all, in the direct testimony of those who created it. The impetus for historical research, exemplified by the landmark 1939 book *Jazzmen*, was essentially biographical. In the preface to *Jazzmen*, the editors, Charles Edward Smith and Frederic Ramsey, Jr., define their position as something separate from, and complementary to, the critical orientation of Panassié:

It is the musicians, the creators of jazz, who have actually been most neglected while critical battles have been fought. . . . This book has attempted to fill the gaps left by the critics who, chiefly concerned with their appraisal of the music, have forgotten the musicians. (xii-xiii)

There is very little by way of explicit or formal argument in the highly anecdotal narrative of *Jazzmen*. But if, as Hayden White suggests, explanation in history may be conveyed through "emplotment"—the *kind* of story told (White 7-11)—, then these biographical accounts reveal a great deal about the attitudes of those who wrote them. Of White's archetypal "modes" of narrative, the one most consistently and vividly represented in *Jazz-*

men is the Tragic. And indeed, many of the life stories *are* tragic. Buddy Bolden, the charismatic, myth-enshrouded "first man of jazz," who spent the last twenty-four years of his life in a mental institution; King Oliver, reduced at the end to managing a seedy pool hall in Savannah; Bix Beiderbecke, the prototypical white jazz rebel, doomed by his association with "Negro" music and caught in a self-destructive cycle of alcohol and frustrated ambition—in *Jazzmen*, all share the experience (or the ideal) of New Orleans as a Golden Age, and fight a subsequent losing battle against the combined forces of racism, commercial exploitation, and the disdain of the cultural establishment. The shuttering of Storyville in 1917 figures as an expulsion from Paradise that sets the tragedy in motion, and the onset of the Depression is a final act that grinds our heroes under the heel of an uncaring society. "What's the use?" lamented the clarinetist Frank Teschemacher (whose own fate was to fall from a speeding car in New York City in 1932). "You knock yourself out making a great new music for people, and they treat you like some kind of plague or blight, like you were offering them leprosy instead of art" (qtd. in Mezzrow 110).

But not all stories could be configured this way. Some musicians, like Armstrong and Ellington, never suffered a decline and fall. Still others, like Benny Goodman, passed through the nadir of the Depression only to reemerge triumphant, successful, and admired beyond all expectation in the breakthrough of jazz-oriented dance orchestras into the popular mainstream during the "Swing Era" of the middle and late 1930s. The proper mode for such stories would seem to be not Tragedy but Romance: "the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness" (White 9). And indeed, this has become the dominant mode of storytelling for jazz, both for individuals and for the idiom as a whole.

Still, contemporary advocates for jazz were troubled by the transformation. On the one hand, the general enthusiasm for swing did not necessarily translate into appreciation for, or even awareness of, the jazz that stemmed from New Orleans. (Indeed, the very name *swing* emphasized its differences from the now old-fashioned *jazz* of the 1920s.) On the other hand, swing brought both a new musical language and a new economic basis for the music which threatened to make the earlier style obsolete. The former represented opportunity, a chance to proselytize on an unprecedented scale. The latter represented danger, the possibility of being seduced by commercial success into abandoning the essential qualities of the music.

Many were quick to assert that jazz and swing were essentially the same genre. Significantly, critics like Panassié had earlier embraced both small-combo jazz and the early “big bands” of Ellington and Henderson, seeing in the latter category the “hot concept” expressed through an orchestral medium (*Hot Jazz* 165). This enabled writers to strike a rhetorical stance welcoming the newcomers to the idiom and congratulating them on their good taste, while making it clear that a deeper, more mature appreciation of the music lay in an exploration of its past (and not incidentally, in the passage from popular white musicians to their more authentic black forebears). “The present interest in swing music, unfortunately, is a microscopic one,” wrote Paul Eduard Miller in 1937. “Not so for the initiate: he looks upon swing music as a fad, and prefers to take a telescopic, long-range view of hot jazz” (“Roots” 5). More than anything, this line of argument strengthened historical narrative as an avenue for understanding jazz.

But constructing a suitable narrative foundered on the question of whether the music had in fact changed. One view was presented forcefully by Winthrop Sargeant in *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid*. “There was nothing new about hot jazz in 1935,” he wrote in the first chapter. Its apparently novel features were “merely the result of changes in formula designed to create a public demand for dance bands, sheet music, phonograph records, or other products of the commercial music industry” (15-16). After the lengthy explication of technical features of jazz that comprises the bulk of the book, Sargeant concludes that jazz in fact lacks an historical dimension:

One of the most striking features of jazz as compared with art music is its lack of evolutionary development. Aside from a few minor changes of fashion, its history shows no technical evolution whatever. . . . Jazz today remains essentially the same kind of music it was in 1900. (259)

Sargeant attributes the lack of development in jazz to its roots in—indeed, virtual identity with—folk music, “the original primitive music of the American Negro.” But his is a flawed view of folk culture that anachronistically characterizes the increasingly urban black community of mid-century America as a “peasant proletariat” and considers the community’s cultural products to be primitive expressions incapable of further development. Folk elements, according to this view, do not change—*cannot* change. They may only be imitated and exploited by the popular music industry. Under pressure from society, however benignly intended, they may disappear altogether. Looking ahead, he notes: “It is not at all unlikely that the education of the mass of Ameri-

can Negroes will sound the death knell of the type of primitive jazz that the aesthetes most admire" (264).

This static, anti-developmental, anti-modernist view underlies much of the writing on jazz of the 1930s and 1940s. "You can't improve on the old boys," seconded George Avakian in a 1939 article entitled "Where is Jazz Going?" "Jazz is jazz; it can't be modernized or streamlined" (9). The continued presence on the jazz scene of such august figures as Armstrong and Sidney Bechet; the success of jazz researchers in uncovering so much of the historical context for the origins of the music; the startling public acceptance of such authentically and previously neglected "folk" idioms as boogie-woogie; the dramatic resurrection of Bunk Johnson, providing a Romantic story of triumph over adversity to equal the superficial triumphs of the swing stars—all reinforced a view in which the thrust of jazz history was to restore and strengthen the "original" music.⁹ Swing's purpose would be admirably fulfilled if, after leading the uninitiated to the "real jazz," it would simply wither away.

The most vociferous proponent of this view was Panassié, in his 1942 book *The Real Jazz*. In this volume, jazz is now specifically defined as "the spontaneous urge of a whole people" (7), a "primitive" African-American folk expression superior by virtue of its emotional directness to the tired intricacies of European art. Over this "natural, spontaneous song" (6) there is no possibility of improvement. Indeed, the very notion of progress is inherently destructive, seducing musicians from their true calling:

These musicians who had infallibly played in a perfect manner, and had never digressed for an instant from the pure tradition of their art as long as they blindly followed their instinct, now rejected their tradition and began to reason and to "improve" their music. Of course they fell into innumerable errors. (54)

Swing was, in a sense, "more dangerous" than earlier attempts to improve jazz, such as the symphonic jazz of Paul Whiteman, "because it came much closer to the real jazz and easily misled the uninitiated" (65).

Still, metaphors of growth and evolution underlie even the most conservative stances. Panassié, for instance, was guided by a deep-rooted inclination to view art as a growing, developing organism. Small-group jazz in Chicago "evolved little by little and developed in an excellent manner" (49); Armstrong's career is divided into several "periods," "for a musician who is also a creator never ceases to evolve during his musical career" (69-70). Most telling is Panassié's evaluation of the black swing bands, already included as "hot jazz" in his 1934 book. "The growth of

such orchestras as Jimmy [sic] Lunceford's, Count Basie's, and Duke Ellington's," he wrote eight years later, "is the most remarkable event in the recent history of jazz. These orchestras have contributed a great deal in maintaining jazz's vitality, and through them new blood has been infused into jazz" (235). His anti-progress stance represents not so much a disbelief in the possibility of development as a pessimistic feeling that development beyond a certain point inevitably leads to decay and decadence. Having once matured to a "balanced," "classic" state, jazz can no longer "progress." The best that one can hope is that the mature stage can be sustained and preserved for as long as possible. And this is made more difficult when black musicians "must submit to the corruption of an outrageous commercialism, as well as to the conventional musical notions of the white man and the current theories about necessary progress." The end result is that "jazz will be transformed little by little, until it becomes an entirely different kind of music" (236).

Even Rudi Blesh, who in his 1946 *Shining Trumpets* is contemptuous of the "illusion of progress" in the arts, and provides a chart to show the "deformations of Negro jazz" (to be used in identifying those "deceptive elements . . . which, borrowed from jazz, make the present-day commercial swing falsely seem another form of that music" [7]), showed himself to be a firm believer in evolution, less pessimistic in fact than Panassié about the prospects for growth and development. "The history of jazz has been a short one," Blesh writes, "a span of development and fruition remarkably compressed in time" (14); "pure jazz" emerges at "its highest point of evolution" (16). The obstacles to further development are, once again, external: misconceptions fostered by "commercial interests." Once these obstacles are removed, Blesh speculates hopefully, "can progress resume, undistorted and unvitiated, from that point?" (16).

The extent to which Blesh and Panassié already subscribed a dynamic view of jazz history made it difficult for them to hold a position against the advocates of swing in the debates that periodically flared up in the jazz press of the 1940s. Their opponents simply accepted swing as the natural, certainly desirable, and perhaps inevitable result of development. Whereas the New Orleans purists viewed the transformation with suspicion and misgiving, others were optimistic and openly enthusiastic. "The truth happens to be that countless musicians have used the groundwork laid by the Armstrongs and Beiderbeckes and have built up from those fine foundations," argued Leonard Feather on the pages of *Esquire* in 1944. "Never before has any branch of

music made such rapid progress" ("Jazz" 129). Moreover, as Feather delighted in demonstrating, the musicians themselves, more often than not, subscribed to this idea of progress, usually measured in increased technical and harmonic sophistication.¹⁰ In any case, such optimism and enthusiasm fit the mood of the country, which was inclined to expect progress in its popular arts as in any other national exercise of ingenuity and skill. "Surely there can be an improvement over a period of twenty years," Paul Eduard Miller asserted in 1945, "and if there isn't, then the future of jazz as an art form is precariously balanced" ("Rhythm" 86).

Nothing infuriated the conservatives more than this line of argument, for it carried the obvious implication that the music of the 1920s, far from representing the idiom in its "classic," mature stage, was in fact an awkward beginning, the first phase of a dynamic evolution that inevitably rendered the earliest jazz efforts obsolete. Indeed, in the heat of argument, the idea of progress could be turned quite pointedly against the "masterpieces" of early jazz:

The experienced and discerning jazz listener, whose ears are attuned to more advanced ideas in orchestration and improvisation, laughs at the attempts to deify the badly dated relics of the 1920s. . . . Today you can listen to each of the five trumpet players in Lionel Hampton's band, and every one of them will take a chorus which, had it been discovered on some obscure old record, would be hailed as genius by the Jelly Roll network. (Feather, "Jazz" 129)

One ought not to exaggerate the significance of this sectarian dispute, however. Both sides faced the same obstacles—the indifference and ignorance of the general public, the hostility of "commercial interests" and the cultural establishment—and knew at heart that what they had in common outweighed their differences. The concept of a jazz tradition with an honorable past and a hopeful future began to emerge as a useful compromise, with the term *jazz* now covering both the original "hot jazz" of the 1920s and the swing of the 1930s. In principle, it bound together enthusiasts of different persuasions and allowed them to make a common front against outsiders. Thus, *Jazzmen* included a chapter on "Hot Jazz Today" that spoke warmly of such modernists as Art Tatum, Chick Webb, and Andy Kirk. On the other side of the fence, *Down Beat*, a periodical aimed at the modern swing musician, carried articles providing historical perspective, and persuaded many to accept and even admire earlier styles.¹¹ In 1944 another trade periodical, *Metronome*, canvassed ten well-known musicians to support its conclusion that there was "absolutely no dividing line between swing and jazz" (Ulanov and Feather 22-23).

III

This hard-won truce was threatened almost immediately by the rise of bebop in the mid-1940s. The birth of the new style coincided with the peak of the revival of New Orleans jazz, prompting a frequently acrimonious, occasionally hysterical war of words that did much to polarize the jazz community into opposing sides: the progressives and the "moldy figs." Bebop's success in winning the loyalty of a younger generation of musicians and the admiration of a core of jazz enthusiasts was an especially bitter pill for many conservatives. Panassié simply refused to recognize the new style. He expressed qualified admiration for the music of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, but whatever it was, it wasn't jazz (*Real Jazz* rev. ed. 73-74). For their part, the young black musicians at the forefront of bebop often keenly resented what they perceived to be the patronizing tone of the New Orleans camp—the idealization of "primitive" jazz; the revival of literally toothless, aging black musicians as symbols of their people's art. They saw their own music as a logical expression of modernity. "Modern life is fast and complicated, and modern music should be fast and complicated," said the arranger Gil Fuller in 1948. "We're tired of that old New Orleans beat-beat, I-got-the-blues pap" (qtd. in Boyer 28). "That old stuff was like Mother Goose rhymes," Dizzy Gillespie added. "It was all right for its time, but it was a childish time" (qtd. in Boyer 29).

If this debate seems curiously irrelevant to the modern observer, it is largely because contemporary conceptions of the term *jazz* have been shaped in bebop's image. There is a certain logic, after all, to the argument that an idiom so thoroughly transformed ought perhaps to be considered a new genre and given a new name, as bebop was. And there is no doubt that the differences between bebop and the jazz that preceded it were far from trivial. Radical changes in the rhythmic foundation, in particular the more aggressive and polyrhythmic role of the drummer, make bebop distinct, much as genres in traditional West African music are differentiated by characteristic rhythmic relationships.¹² In many other essentials, both musical and extramusical (its relationship to dance and popular song, for example, and its claims to a kind of "chamber music" autonomy), bebop was such a departure that to consider it a new type of music, deriving from jazz but separate from it, was not out of the question.

This, needless to say, is not the way the narrative of jazz history goes. An equally logical case for considering bebop as a

subset of an overarching category, "jazz," can and has been built by underscoring continuity wherever possible: the influence of older musicians on younger ones (Lester Young on Charlie Parker, for example), or the essential qualities of improvisation and swing that all styles under the jazz umbrella share. Either interpretation—bebop as revolution and discontinuity, or as evolution and continuity—is possible, and the choice between them depends not on which one is right or wrong, but on the uses to which the interpretation is to be put. In emphasizing continuity over discontinuity, and the general (jazz) over the particular (bebop), the jazz community made a choice that determined how the music would henceforth be described and understood.¹³

Given the marginalized position of jazz in American society at mid-century, the choice is hardly surprising. For all the bravado of the "progressive" camp during its heyday in the late 1940s, when Dizzy Gillespie was profiled in *Life* and even Benny Goodman's swing band played bop-influenced arrangements, there was little advantage in a declaration of independence. In the long run, it proved as much in the interests of the modernists to have their music legitimated as the latest phase of a (now) long and distinguished tradition, as it was in the interests of the proponents of earlier jazz styles (whether New Orleans jazz or swing) not to be swept aside as merely antiquarian. Furthermore, it cost the modernists little to mute or even renounce their claims to progress, if that was required to make peace with their predecessors. Thus a new compromise was forged, and the term *jazz* further extended—its definition now more than ever dependent on ideas of continuous evolution and growth.

One of the earliest and most fully articulated formulations of this compromise appeared in 1948 in a series of articles by Ross Russell, owner of Dial Records, a small firm specializing in bebop. The articles (subsequently reprinted in *The Art of Jazz*) appeared in *The Record Changer*, a magazine begun as a newsletter for collectors of rare early jazz recordings. By the late 1940s, *The Record Changer* had expanded to carry feature articles, mostly about the older styles of jazz, but it became increasingly open to the discussion of new trends. Russell's approach—part polemic, part peace offering—was carefully tailored for his audience. He outlined bebop's innovations, arguing that in many respects bebop represented a decided advantage. At the same time, he defended the value of earlier jazz styles. "Those who cannot enjoy the music of [Jelly Roll] Morton and [Louis] Armstrong," he wrote in an obvious reference to bebop extremists, "are truly as poor as those who are unable to under-

stand the no less wonderful art of Lester Young and Charlie Parker" (196). Above all, Russell appealed to the image of a tradition that linked all styles in a transcendent process of evolution: "The real nature of jazz history is organic," he insisted; it is a "living cultural form" that "constantly extends, reaffirms, and replenishes itself. . . . From Jelly Roll Morton to Max Roach, our music is a whole art extended across the time and space of twentieth-century America, and back into the roots of African culture" (195-96).

This envisioning of jazz as an organic entity that periodically revitalizes itself through the upheaval of stylistic change while retaining its essential identity resolved one of the fundamental problems in the writing of its history: the stigma of inferiority or incompleteness that the notion of progress inevitably attached to earlier styles. In Russell's model, all jazz styles are equally valid, for all are authentic manifestations of its central essence. Of course, this requires a conscious decision to overlook the obvious discontinuity in musical language—to say nothing of the social and cultural contexts for the music—in favor of a transcendent principle of continuity. That so few objected to this project shows how powerfully attractive a unitary narrative was.

One who did object was the poet and jazz critic Philip Larkin, whose reservations about the wholesale incorporation of modernist trends into jazz recall Panassié's, but whose work as a record reviewer in the 1960s required a degree of accommodation that Panassié refused to give. Larkin was circumspect about contradicting, at least in print, "the party line that presents jazz as one golden chain stretching from Buddy Bolden to Sun Ra." But in his retrospective collection of essays *All What Jazz*, he pays ironic tribute to those whose unenviable job it is to defend what he finds logically indefensible: "And so they soldier on at their impossible task, as if trying to persuade us that a cold bath is in some metaphysical sense the same as a hot bath, instead of its exact opposite ('But don't you see the evolutionary development?')" (26).

For those with no particular animus against bebop, the kind of narrative that could now be written had an encouragingly clear sense of direction and unity of purpose. "At first the history [of jazz] seems disjointed and the styles contradictory," admitted Barry Ulanov at the beginning of his 1952 survey *A History of Jazz in America*:

One marks a confounding series of shifts in place, person, and style. One finds a music dominated by Negroes in New Orleans, by white musicians in Chicago, by important but apparently unrelated figures in

New York. One discovers a disastrous split in jazz inaugurated by the swing era and intensified during the days of bebop and so-called progressive jazz. But then one looks and listens more closely, and order and continuity appear. . . . The history of jazz is a curiously even one, chaotic at any instant, but always moving ahead in what is for an art form almost a straight line. (3-4)

But toward what goal is the "straight line" of development headed? This was not a question that historians of Ulanov's generation liked to answer—at least not directly. Having only recently renounced the temptation to equate evolution with progress (note the qualification "*so-called* progressive jazz"), they were left with the argument that the history of jazz is characterized by continuous stylistic change because it is in the nature of an art form to grow and develop. One can see in this the powerful metaphor of organicism, which suggests that the impulse to development is innate, irreversible, and (short of the demise of the organism) inevitable. Change is thus desirable in and of itself, evidence of the music's vitality. It is in this spirit that Russell cites the transformation of jazz from the New Orleans style to bebop as "the cleanest bill of health our native music could have" (188).

Most of the explanations routinely offered for the process of change in jazz derive from the metaphor of organicism. One pervasive form of argument treats the achievements of a handful of innovators as *potentials*—musical ideas that serve as the "seeds" for later development.¹⁴ Jazz historians are fond of charts and diagrams that amount to elaborate genealogies of style, with each new innovation flowing directly from those that precede it. On a more personal level, individual musicians are defined by a network of *influences*—the contemporaries and predecessors from whom they are presumed to derive a style. The most striking thing about these explanations is the assumption that the impetus for change in jazz is *internal*. Jazz evolves in certain directions because its inner logic demands it ("jazz extends, reaffirms, and replenishes *itself*"). No other explanation is necessary. While the social context for the music is rarely ignored entirely (if only for the human interest it adds to the narrative), it is generally treated as, at best, a secondary cause—the cultural static of political or social upheaval that may color the process of development but is ultimately external to it.

The most ambitious attempts to organize the history of jazz through detailed musical criticism or analysis, not surprisingly, rely primarily on such internal explanations. Gunther Schuller's massive two-volume historical and analytical study of jazz through the swing era, while drawing astutely on cultural con-

text where appropriate, is a monument to the ideal of jazz as an autonomous art. In the work of the most influential jazz critics, history is invoked as a means of framing and justifying aesthetic judgments—of establishing the boundaries within which evaluation may take place. Indeed, the more broadly those boundaries are conceived (“extended across the time and space of twentieth-century America”), the more inevitably historical relationships become embedded in the process of evaluation. A book like Martin Williams’s *The Jazz Tradition* takes the form of a series of independent essays, each assessing the contribution of an individual artist; but these essays, arranged chronologically, form a de facto history of the music.¹⁵ Similar collections of essays by Whitney Balliett, Gary Giddins, Francis Davis, and others delight in cross-references and the tracing of historical patterns. The “jazz tradition” in effect defines a discipline, and imparts to the critical enterprise a certain stature and dignity as well as coherence.

Nevertheless, it is curious how the concept of the jazz tradition tends to leach the social significance out of the music, leaving the impression that the history of jazz can be described satisfactorily only in aesthetic terms. In a recent review of *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945*, E. J. Hobsbawm applauds Schuller’s “monumental contribution to jazz literature,” but wonders how a purely stylistic framework can possibly claim to provide a complete account of “the development of jazz. . . . Mr. Schuller’s book,” he concludes, “is an implicit call for a social, economic, and cultural history of jazz in the New Deal years” (32). Nowhere is the disparity between the smoothness of the official narrative and the *noise* (to use Jacques Attali’s term) of social disruption clearer than in the treatment of bebop. If any movement within jazz can be said to reflect and embody the political tensions of its time—the aspirations, frustrations, and subversive sensibilities of an elite group of African-American artists during a time of upheaval and rapid change—, it is this musical revolution that took shape during and after the Second World War. “We were the first generation to rebel,” remembers pianist Hampton Hawes, “playing bebop, trying to be different, going through a lot of changes and getting strung out in the process. *What these crazy niggers doin’ playin’ that crazy music? Wild. Out of the jungle*” (8).

But as Eric Lott has noted, “Bebop has been claimed by other, mostly unhistorical narratives rather than articulated to its own social history” (597). Chief among these is the narrative of stylistic change that dispenses with external referents and recasts

bebop's rebelliousness in very different terms. According to this argument, the main cause of bebop is that the preceding style of jazz had reached an impasse. By the early 1940s, swing, once a vital part of the tradition, had become "threadbare" and "aging" (Russell 188); a "harmonic and melodic blind alley" incapable of further development (Feather, *Encyclopedia* 30); a formulaic popular music undergoing "death by entropy" (Shih 187); a "richly decked-out palace that was soon going to be a prison" (Hodeir 99); and a "billion-dollar rut" (Feather, *Inside* 4).

One may recognize in this something akin to what Leo Treitler has called the "crisis theory" of modern music, according to which a radically new style arises only in response to an impasse in the musical language, which has literally used itself up (124). Under normal circumstances, musicians would simply move on to the next step, extending the rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic language of jazz in the directions plainly indicated by the music itself. As the last few descriptions clearly imply, the failure for this to happen may be attributed at least in part to the malign external influence of commercialism, without which (presumably) the musicians of the swing era would not have been seduced into the unproductive pursuit of a worn-out style. Bebop thus takes on the character of revolt, not against the jazz tradition but against the circumstances that prevent jazz from following its natural course of development. Bebop comes to represent a way of breaking through this impasse, reaffirming tradition even as it rejects the ossified forms of the past. It becomes a "new branch of jazz . . . born of the desire for progress and evolution" (Feather, *Encyclopedia* 30), a "renewed musical language . . . with which the old practices could be replenished and continued" (Williams, *Jazz Tradition* 106).

But the transition from swing to bebop is more than the passage from one style to another. Bebop is the keystone in the grand historical arch, the crucial link between the early stage of jazz and modernity. Indeed, it is only with bebop that the essential nature of jazz is unmistakably revealed. There is an implicit entelechy in the progression from early jazz to bebop: the gradual shedding of utilitarian associations with dance music, popular song, and entertainment, as both musicians and public become aware of what jazz really is, or could be. With bebop, jazz finally became an *art music*. And this, in a sense, is the goal toward which the "straight line of development" in modern historical narratives, consciously or unconsciously, has always been aimed. In Hayden White's terms, it is a Romance: a triumph for black musicians and their liberal white colleagues and

supporters over adverse circumstances. Bebop allowed jazz to become "what its partisans had said it should have been all along" (Williams, *Jazz Tradition* 106): an autonomous art, transcending its sometimes squalid social and economic setting, and taking its place in American culture as a creative discipline of intrinsic integrity.

Once this goal is accepted, the whole narrative for jazz history must be adjusted accordingly. For if bebop is the juncture at which jazz becomes art music, then earlier styles are once again in a precarious position—unless it can be demonstrated that in some important sense they had *always been* art music, and that this status was simply unacknowledged. Unfortunately, much that must be counted as "early jazz" can be understood as an autonomous art music only in retrospect, and with some difficulty. This strategy therefore exaggerates the tendency to make artificial distinctions between the artistic and the commercial, and assumes that the association of this nascent art with less elevated social functions was either a mistake in judgment or a burden imposed by a less enlightened time. If early jazz was intertwined with the stereotype of black man as entertainer, the jovial stage persona of Louis Armstrong can be shown to transcend and even undermine that stereotype—or the entire context of entertainment can be ignored, and the focus narrowed to Armstrong as revolutionary instrumentalist.¹⁶ If much that went under the banner of swing is now judged as trivial, threadbare, or hopelessly commercial (not worthy, in other words, of being considered art), the best of Ellington, Basie, or Lunceford was not, and the term *swing* as a stylistic period may be reserved for them and a handful of their peers. In this way, "order and continuity appear," and the straight line of development is revealed.

The mode of historical explanation that emerged by the 1950s was increasingly conventional and academic in shape: a continuous artistic tradition encompassing several clearly differentiated "periods" or "styles," with an implied movement away from the naïveté of folk culture (more often ascribed to a putative pre-jazz phase than to jazz itself) toward the sophistication and complexity of art. For a music that had prided itself on its distinctiveness from "classical music," it is surprising how readily and unquestioningly a rough parallelism with the history of European music was accepted. But the fact that jazz could be configured so conventionally was taken by many as a reassuring sign that the tradition as a whole had attained a certain maturity and could now bear comparison with more established arts. "It is my con-

viction," asserts Joachim-Ernst Berendt in the introduction to *The Jazz Book*,

that the styles of jazz are genuine, and reflect their own particular times in the same sense that classicism, baroque, romanticism, and impressionism reflect their respective periods in European concert music. . . . The evolution of jazz shows the continuity, logic, unity, and inner necessity which characterize all true art. (4)

Of course, the "periods" in jazz in this model succeed one another not at the leisurely pace of centuries, or even generations, but roughly every ten years. (Even the swing "era" lasts only a decade.) We are far removed from the virtual identity of jazz with biography exemplified by *Jazzmen*—not surprisingly, since the music is now seen less as the idiosyncratic expression of individuals than as the outcome of abstract aesthetic forces.¹⁷ There is a certain heedlessness, even cruelty, with which the narrative of jazz history shunts its innovators from the vanguard to stylistic obsolescence before they even reach middle age. Jazz criticism continues to wrestle with the "problem" of musicians (Armstrong, Ellington, Roy Eldridge, Earl Hines) whose performing careers far outlasted their seminal moment of importance and influence. But this vertiginous speed of change was presumably the price that had to be paid for the ground jazz had to cover in its progress from the slums of New Orleans (past the temptations of commercialism) to its newly exalted status as art music. There is a certain tone of pride with which Leonard Feather and André Hodeir independently calculate that jazz has evolved at roughly twenty times the pace of European music.¹⁸

What remains unspoken in this formulation is a crucial social factor: race. The progress of jazz is mapped onto the social progress of its creators—black Americans who, as Ralph Ellison noted in 1948, had been "swept from slavery to the condition of industrial man in a space of time so telescoped (a bare eighty-five years) that it is possible literally for them to step from feudalism into the vortex of industrialism simply by moving across the Mason-Dixon line" (283-84). Assimilation as full citizens in an integrated (if white-controlled) society seemed the obvious and desired outcome of this remarkable cultural journey. The equally remarkable progress of the black man's music from rural folk music to the international concert hall, a social acceptance far in advance of what could be expected in other spheres, was often taken as an encouraging sign that this outcome was possible, perhaps inevitable.

By the 1950s, then, one ready answer to the question *Where is jazz headed?* lay in the convergent paths of jazz and classical music. "The increasing indications of a wedding, or at least a

flirtation, with modern classical music," wrote Leonard Feather in 1957, "mark a logical and desirable outcome of the jazzman's attempt to achieve musical maturity" (*Book of Jazz* 4). This probable outcome made the future of jazz as art music at once easier to envision and more problematic—easier to envision, because jazz had been appearing on the concert stage for several decades, and because classical music had already pervaded American society with images of what an art music should be: the frowning visages of Beethoven and Bach, a portentous mood of solemnity and dignity far removed from nightclubs and dance halls that might somehow be grafted onto jazz.¹⁹ Classical music seemed like an exclusive club that in an egalitarian spirit might be persuaded to integrate. The discreet, gently swinging tonal structures of the Modern Jazz Quartet, performed by black men in tuxedos in concert halls for respectful audiences, provided a comforting image of what membership in this club might look like.

But the entrance fee was high. To be accepted as a kind of classical music, jazz had to be understood as a music that had outgrown its origins in a particular ethnic subculture and could now be thought of as the abstract manipulation of style and technique. Jazz was now to be measured against the "absolute" standards of greatness of the European tradition. In this comparison, the qualities of spontaneity, informality, and rhythmic excitement that had originally marked jazz as distinctive—those qualities, in other words, that marked it as African-American—now seemed to be liabilities. Jazz was a music of promise, ripe for passage from adolescence to maturity; but it still had a long way to go, and the only way to get there was to acknowledge the priority of European music.

In the 1961 movie *Paris Blues*, Paul Newman plays an expatriate jazz trombonist named Ram Bowen who works in Paris nightclubs with an small interracial group. But his success as an improviser is not enough for Bowen. His secret ambition is to be a composer, and he has been working on an orchestral piece, *Paris Blues*. (The fragments of this piece that we hear are played by the Duke Ellington orchestra—as is, indeed, all the music in the film.) He submits his score to a gray eminence of French music, M. René Bernard—whether composer, conductor, or impresario is never made clear—in the hopes of having it performed in concert. Finally, he is admitted to the opulent offices of the great man. Bernard is warm and generous, and admits to being an admirer of Bowen's playing. But it quickly becomes evident to Bowen that all of Bernard's compliments ("You have a genuine gift for melody") are gentle put-downs. "Your improvisations are

highly personal," he tells Bowen. "They give you a stamp as a musician. But there is a great deal of difference between that and an important piece of serious music." "In other words, you're trying to tell me I'm just sort of a lightweight," Bowen replies. "I don't know what you are yet, Mr. Bowen," returns Bernard. He counsels Bowen to study composition, harmony, and counterpoint—*if* he wants to be a serious composer. Visibly dejected, Bowen leaves the office. But by the end of the movie, he decides to cancel his plans to return to America with his devoted fan and lover (Joanne Woodward) in order to "follow through with the music . . . see how far I can go." All the while, the music of Ellington plays in the background.

IV

This vision of jazz as an immature and imperfectly realized junior partner to European music did not long outlast the 1950s. Well before the appearance of *Paris Blues*, it had come under attack both from the upheavals of racial politics that made its implicit assimilationist agenda untenable and from the emergence of an avant-garde that pushed the boundaries of "modern classical music" far beyond the range of comfort.

The change in racial climate was particularly dramatic, for well into the 1950s, jazz was heralded as a sphere of racial cooperation, with the 1949-50 Miles Davis *Birth of the Cool* band as its most vibrant symbol.²⁰ But the remainder of the decade saw a forceful reassertion of ethnicity by black musicians that paralleled, and in a few celebrated examples (e.g., Charles Mingus's "Fables of Faubus") participated in, the growing Civil Rights Movement. The music that was the result of this renewed ethnic emphasis has entered the official progression of styles as *hard bop*—an unfortunate blanket term that strains to cover the gospel-influenced popular hits of Cannonball Adderley and Horace Silver, the "experimental" music of Mingus and Monk, as well as much that could more simply be called *bop*.²¹ Hard bop was vaguely defined as a musical movement, but it had a lasting effect on jazz historiography: It served to counter the notion that becoming an art music somehow required jazz to shed its "folk" (i.e., ethnic) roots. In the wake of hard bop came a new strain of historical writing, exemplified by *Blues People*, the 1963 book by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) that treated jazz as something intrinsically separate from the white "mainstream." As jazz entered the 1960s, authenticity was more than ever associated with ethnicity.

But the assertion of ethnicity in itself does not resolve the question of the nature and direction of the development of the jazz idiom. It simply suggests that whatever black Americans choose to do with their musical heritage is valid—or, more to the point, beyond the reach of white critics and historians. As always, the actual diversity of expression within the black community was masked by the tendency for any and every viewpoint within it to claim the collective history of the people as a source of legitimacy. Just as all sorts of music can flourish under the banner of ethnicity, so can all sorts of narratives about the history of jazz as black music.

The least dogmatic of these narratives is that which allows for the “fusion” of jazz with currents in popular music, especially black popular music. Fusion subverts from the outset the assumptions that *popular* and *art* are mutually exclusive categories, and that the progress from the latter to the former in jazz was irreversible. In the 1930s and early 1940s, jazz had been both artistic expression and entertainment for the black community; but by the 1950s, the earthier and less prestigious functions of the music had been passed on to rhythm and blues.²² At the same time that musicians and critics were struggling to make a case for jazz as art music, the more commercially minded hard bop musicians strove mightily to win back audiences alienated by bebop’s intellectual pretensions with hard-swinging grooves and a folksy sensibility that wore its ethnicity on its sleeve.

This transparent pseudo-populism (evident in titles such as “Dis Here” and “Watermelon Man”) was easy enough to dismiss: Baraka, for example, complained in 1963 of the “hideous . . . spectacle of an urban, college-trained Negro musician pretending, perhaps in all sincerity, that he has the same field of emotional reference as his great-grandfather, the Mississippi slave” (218). But for most jazz critics, the greatest sin of the “funky” hard bop style was its accessibility, its easy and self-serving simplicity, its eagerness to please. Dalliance with popular trends seemed to betray the movement of jazz as an art music toward complexity and intricacy.²³ Only at the end of the 1960s, when Miles Davis married elements from rock and soul with avant-garde textures and harmonies (at a time when rock itself had become a kind of avant-garde counterculture), did many critics decide that perhaps a new artistic phase was underway, requiring a new stylistic category, *fusion*, to explain it.²⁴ But few felt entirely comfortable about the category, and even those who

acknowledged fusion as a legitimate movement rarely let it stand unchallenged in the conventional progression of styles.

Fusion was inevitably counterpoised with *free jazz*, an avant-garde movement that could be traced back to the end of the 1950s. Free jazz is often associated with the black nationalist politics of the 1960s, but it hardly needed the militant rhetoric of ethnicity to be controversial. It simply carried the model of modernist experimentation (but without an explicit Eurocentric focus) to its logical, if unsettling, conclusion. If critics of the 1950s believed that jazz was in a race to catch up to classical music, their hopes were to be realized, albeit in a way they had never anticipated. By decade's end, the kind of European music jazz seemed most to resemble was not the standard repertory, or even the more accessible moderns (the Stravinsky and Hindemith admired by the beboppers), but an avant-garde bent on shattering all conventions. In 1956, Marshall Stearns could still write: "Jazz is traveling the same path as classical music—toward the stone wall of atonality—but there is still a long way to go" (229). Less than a decade later, that point of no return had been reached, and the critical reaction was predictably strident: Whatever it was, it wasn't jazz.

The crisis raised by free jazz was as inevitable as it was disquieting. Ever since bebop, the narrative of jazz history had been committed to the ideology of modernism, and the chain of continuous innovation that it entailed. Bebop itself was "steeped in the rhetoric of modernist avant-gardism" (Tucker 273); and as Ronald Radano has pointed out, the early efforts of vanguardists Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor were initially greeted with enthusiasm (even by critics who later excoriated them), precisely because they seemed to offer the next step on the path of development, extending the legacy of bebop in new and arguably necessary directions (Leonard Bernstein, for example, called Coleman "the greatest innovator in jazz since Charlie Parker" [qtd. in Radano 73]). The self-consciously modernist titles of Ornette Coleman albums (*The Shape of Jazz to Come*, *Tomorrow Is the Question*, *This Is Our Music*) made explicit the avant-gardists' argument that theirs was the music of the future, the "new thing." Much more quickly than the apologists for bebop, they openly claimed the whole of tradition as the source of their legitimacy.

The result was a new plot for the story of jazz. In what might be called the "Whig interpretation of jazz history," freedom—with all its rich social and political associations—became the inexorable goal²⁵:

The quest for freedom . . . appears at the very beginning of jazz and reappears at every growing point in the music's history. The earliest jazz musicians asserted their independence of melody, structure, rhythm, and expression from the turn-of-the-century musics that surrounded them; Louis Armstrong symbolized the liberation of the late twenties jazz soloist; the Count Basie band offered liberation of jazz rhythm; and Parker and Gillespie offered yet more new freedoms to jazz. (Litweiler 13-14)

In this narrative, bebop was only one step in the process that Trietler calls "the history of twentieth-century music as striptease" (137): the progressive removal of the encumbrances of tradition. Free jazz is the logical outcome, a new idealization of jazz's essential nature revealed only when musicians throw off the accretions of convention: popular song forms, instrumentation, tonality, Western intonation systems, the explicit stating of a dance beat. And it is hard to be against freedom, especially when freedom from musical convention becomes conflated (as it inevitably did in the turbulent 1960s) with freedom from oppressive political structures.²⁶

And yet freedom is a goal that can only be approached asymptotically. *Free jazz* is, in any case, an inadequate label to describe the ferment of activity within the jazz avant-garde, which has from the outset included the creation of new structures (i.e., composition) as well as free improvisation. In recent years, the one-way straightjacket of modernism has given way to a more eclectic postmodern sensibility in which "all of jazz history, up to and including the present, is grist for the mill" (F. Davis x). Even the taboo against commercialism has been broken, as avant-gardists such as Lester Bowie and Ornette Coleman have taken up (in irony and in earnest) elements from popular music. "Freedom" seems to be the freedom to escape accepted definitions of jazz—including the modernist definition of jazz-as-art-music that got jazz into the avant-garde in the first place.

Escape from modernism came from other directions as well. Critics wary of the narrative that presents the avant-garde as the legitimate jazz of the modern age began cautiously to adjust the evolutionary model, recasting concepts of innovation and development to avoid so disturbing an outcome as "total freedom." A favorite term was *mainstream*—first applied (retroactively) to swing, but quickly used to describe any body of music neither so conservative as to deny the possibility or desirability of further development, nor so radical as to send that development in uncontrollable directions.²⁷ Leroy Ostransky's definition in his 1977 *Understanding Jazz* captures the term's inherent vagueness: "Mainstream jazz . . . is simply the characteristic jazz of its

time, moving along with the current now smoothly, now roughly, occasionally listlessly but always with direction, however imperceptible it may be at the moment" (107).

Ostransky's image is, to put it generously, open to interpretation. It accepts the necessity of continuous development as something natural—the current in the stream. And yet the music itself is curiously passive, set drifting along by this unspecified outside force. The "characteristic jazz of its time" is presumably not that of the revolutionaries, the wave makers; but it is roused by them into overcoming its essential inertia, which derives from tradition. Some forward motion is always necessary to prevent jazz from succumbing to its own weight, and for that the avant-garde is given its due. But the concept of the mainstream insists that the essence of jazz is to be found not on the cutting edge, but well back within the tradition. It follows that the keepers of the flame are in the best position to pass judgment on the music's future. ". . . mainstream jazz . . . must inevitably be the point of departure for new styles," Ostransky continues, "and to understand the evolution of style one must stand in midstream, so to speak, and look both ways" (107).

Looking both ways is the favored stance of the neoclassicist: a careful balance between the modernist ideology of continuous innovation and an insistence on the priority of tradition. Wynton Marsalis asks, "How can something new and substantial, not eccentric and fraudulent, be developed when the meaning of what's old is not known?" (24). On this point, the neoclassicists and the avant-garde are on the same wavelength, for few would fail to invoke Ellington, Parker, or Monk as an ultimate source and inspiration. What distinguishes the neoclassicist attitude is not so much its habit of retrospection, but rather its heavy-handed attempt to regulate the music of the present through an idealized representation of the past. History is a roll call of past masters, from King Oliver to Thelonious Monk, and the responsibility of the modern musician is to create music that lives up to and extends this legacy. All else—free jazz and fusion alike—is falsity and charlatanism. Neoclassicism saves its most pointed barbs for the kind of easy pluralism that would embrace all potential definitions for jazz, and therefore all potential outcomes for the narrative of its history.²⁸ Only by returning to the point at which jazz began a series of wrong turns—back, in short, to the "mainstream"—can the narrative thread be reclaimed and continued.

Wynton Marsalis's remarkable visibility in the popular media as the spokesman for an entire generation of young musicians

suggests that this narrow, if principled, view of jazz history may yet have increasing influence, especially where jazz is offered—by stage bands, in appreciation classes, and on PBS specials—as an art music segregated from the flux of the marketplace. Marsalis is careful to present jazz as a cultural heritage and, in a sense, a political reality, entirely separate from the European tradition. But his celebrated feat of winning Grammy awards for both jazz and classical recordings underscores the extent to which jazz has become *another kind* of classical music—one indigenous to black culture and reflecting black values, but following the same pattern of institutionalization in conservatories and repertory groups, and demanding of its musicians an empathetic response to aesthetic sensibilities of the past. Historical narrative plays a crucial role in the formation of a canon, in the elevation of great musicians as objects of veneration, and in the development of a sense of tradition that casts a long shadow over the present. The goals of the neoclassicists will have been admirably fulfilled if and when busts of Armstrong and Parker stand alongside busts of Beethoven and Bach in practice rooms and music studios across America.

V

The question *Where is jazz going?* is usually asked with an anxious undertone—as if, in Monk’s words, “Maybe it’s going to hell.” And Monk’s dismissive response is on target. Whether jazz will “survive” depends not on what musicians choose to do. They will continue to make music, and whether that music is called jazz is a matter of relative inconsequence. The question is rather of the uses to which the jazz tradition is to be put: whether as an alternative conservatory style for the training of young musicians; as an artistic heritage to be held up as an exemplar of American or African-American culture; or as a convenient marketing tool for recording companies and concert promoters, a kind of brand name guaranteeing quality and a degree of homogeneity.

As an educator and scholar, I inevitably find myself allied with the first two of these projects, especially the second. My courses in jazz history are designed to inculcate a feeling of pride in a racially mixed university for an African-American musical tradition that manages, against all odds, to triumph over obstacles of racism and indifference. For this, the narrative of jazz history as Romance is a powerful tool, and I have invested a good deal into making it a reality in my students’ minds through all the eloquence and emotion I can muster.

And yet I am increasingly aware of this narrative's limitations, especially its tendency to impose a kind of deadening uniformity of cultural meaning on the music, and jazz history's patent inability to explain current trends in any cogent form. There is a revolution underway in jazz that lies not in any internal crisis of style, but in the debate over the looming new orthodoxy: jazz as "America's classical music." As jazz acquires degree programs, piano competitions, repertory ensembles, institutes, and archives, it inevitably becomes a different kind of music—gaining a certain solidity and political clout, but no longer participating in the ongoing formulation of meaning; no longer a *popular* music in the best sense of the word. The histories we construct for jazz also have this effect: Each new textbook dulls our sensibilities, "retells the stories as they have been told and written, . . . made neat and smooth, with all incomprehensible details vanished along with most of the wonder" (Ellison 200).

Meanwhile, music continues to change: the explosion in new technologies, the increased pace of global interaction, the continued erosion of European art music as the measure of all things. The narratives we have inherited to describe the history of jazz retain the patterns of outmoded forms of thought, especially the assumption that the progress of jazz as art necessitates increased distance from the popular. If we, as historians, critics, and educators, are to adapt to these new realities, we must be willing to construct new narratives to explain them. These alternative explanations need not displace the jazz tradition (it hardly seems fair, in any case, to deconstruct a narrative that has only recently been constructed, especially one that serves such important purposes). But the time has come for an approach that is less invested in the ideology of jazz as aesthetic object and more responsive to issues of historical particularity. Only in this way can the study of jazz break free from its self-imposed isolation, and participate with other disciplines in the exploration of meaning in American culture.

Notes

¹See, for example, Grover Sales's recent textbook *Jazz: America's Classical Music* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1984) and the address "Jazz—America's Classical Music" delivered by Billy Taylor to the Black American Music Symposium at the University of Michigan in 1985 and subsequently reprinted in *Black Perspective in Music* 14.1 (1986): 21-25.

²The language is that of House Concurrent Resolution 57, passed by the United States Senate on December 4, 1987.

³A sampling from recent jazz textbooks gives some of the flavor of this loss of direction. Tanner and Gerow's *A Study of Jazz* follows neatly defined chapters on "Early New Orleans Dixieland (1900-1920)," "Chicago Style

Dixieland (the 1920s)," "Swing (1932-1942)," "Bop (1940-1950)," "Cool (1949-1955)," and "Funky (c. 1954-1963)," with a "period" of over forty years called the "Eclectic Era," a "potpourri of some eighty years of continuous development" (119). The "Chronology of Jazz Styles Chart" in Mark Gridley's *Jazz Styles* begins with comfortably concise periods for "Early Jazz (1920s)," "Swing (1930s)," "Bop (1940s)," and "West Coast (1950s)," but soon degenerates into "Coexistence of Hard Bop, Free Jazz, and Modal Jazz (1960s)," "Transition to Jazz-Rock (late 1960s)," and "Coexistence of AACM, Jazz-Rock, and Modal Jazz (1970s)" (356-57). Billy Taylor's last chapter in *Piano Jazz* (after the terse chapters "Bebop" and "Cool") is entitled "Abstract Jazz, Mainstream Jazz, Modal Jazz, Electronic Jazz, Fusion" (187).

⁴This strategy is followed in textbooks by James McCalla, Donald Megill and Richard Demory, and James Lincoln Collier, among others. The persistence of earlier styles of jazz is sometimes counted as yet another direction. "If we cannot predict where jazz is going . . . we can at least discern certain trends," wrote Collier in 1978, identifying three such trends: jazz-rock, free jazz, and what he called (anticipating the "neoclassicism" of the 1980s) the "neo-bop movement" (494-96).

⁵See, for example, Henry Martin's recent textbook *Enjoying Jazz*. One of the basic hypotheses of the book is that contemporary jazz is facing a kind of stylistic dead end: "By the 1970s and early 1980s, jazz was unlikely to undergo any further significant evolution because it lacked the popularity necessary for continued vitality. At that time all of its previous styles became recognized as artistic vehicles for performance. Indications are, therefore, that jazz will not undergo any further significant evolution" (204). See also Kart.

⁶In a 1984 interview, Wynton Marsalis complained, "I don't think the music moved along in the '70s. I think it went astray. Everybody was trying to be pop stars, and imitated people that were supposed to be imitating them. . . . What we have to do now is reclaim . . ." (Mandel 18). Martin Williams, in an article entitled "How Long Has This Been Going On?", provides this summation of the fusion movement: "Wynton Marsalis . . . and some others seem to see the whole fusion thing as a kind of commercial opportunism and artistic blind alley, maybe even a betrayal of the music, on the part of everyone involved, on the part of record companies, record producers, and the artists themselves. . . . although it may have produced some good music, the fusion effort seems to me largely over and was even something of a mistake. (Well, look, there can be some very handsome houses on a dead-end street.)" (*Jazz in its Time* 46-47, 56).

⁷In interviews, fusion artists are typically invited, directly or indirectly, to comment on the disparity between their commercial success and the accusation by many critics that their music falls outside the boundaries of jazz. Their answers are usually bland pronouncements about pluralism and catholicity, obviously designed to deflect controversy, that rely on *jazz* as an umbrella term which can easily accommodate current tastes. Jay Beckenstein of Spyro Gyra observes that, "if you define fusion as a previously existing jazz form that combines with outside musical influences to come up with a hybrid, you are talking about the history of jazz from day one. . . . It's our music, we love to play it, and I think time will show it's in the mainstream of the '80s" (Santoro, "Spyro" 221). Saxophonist Kenny G says that "we've gotten terrible reviews from the purist critics who don't know anything about the style of contemporary jazz we play. I live that, I'm one of the creators of it. So is [Jeff] Lorber—we're the young players who have created something new and different that's still called jazz" (Stein 181). Drummer Jack DeJohnette, a musician by no means exclusively associated with fusion, describes

his music as “multi-directional, eclectic. . . . There are people who dig jazz and pop, and there are a lot of choices out there. Jazz runs the gamut from George Benson to Grover Washington to David Sanborn, Spyro Gyra, Weather Update, Ramsey Lewis, Wynton Marsalis, Art Blakey, Tony Williams, me—there’s a lot out there” (Beuttler 17-18).

Miles Davis is undoubtedly the most frequently criticized of the fusion musicians, in no small part because his stature within the conventional narrative has made his embrace of fusion seem apostasy. A recent survey of his career by Stanley Crouch, for example, calls Davis “the most brilliant sellout in the history of jazz,” and continues: “Desperate to maintain his position at the forefront of modern music, to sustain his financial position, to be admired for the hipness of his purported innovations, Davis turned butt to the beautiful in order to genuflect before the commercial” (“Play” 30). Davis’s response to such criticism is understandably more caustic than the responses of most fusion musicians. In his autobiography, he turns back on his attackers the modernist themes of continuous change and innovation embedded in the conventional narrative: “A lot of old jazz musicians are lazy motherfuckers, resisting change and holding on to the old ways because they are too lazy to try something different. They listen to the critics, who tell them to stay where they are because that’s what *they* like. . . . The old musicians stay where they are and become like museum pieces under glass, safe, easy to understand, playing that tired old shit over and over again. Then they run around talking about electronic instruments and electronic musical voicing fucking up the music and the tradition. Well, I’m not like that and neither was Bird or Trane or Sonny Rollins or Duke or anybody who wanted to keep on creating. Bebop was about change, about evolution. It wasn’t about standing still and becoming safe” (394).

⁸The Art Ensemble of Chicago makes a point of avoiding the term *jazz* as too limiting (although this deters no one from claiming them as part of a narrative of jazz). As their motto “Great Black Music—Ancient to Modern” makes clear, that is not because they are uninterested in issues of ethnicity and historical tradition, but because they wish to situate their music within an even more ambitious narrative.

⁹Bunk Johnson was the most spectacular rediscovery of the New Orleans revival. Born in the nineteenth century and a contemporary of ur-jazz trumpeter Buddy Bolden, Johnson epitomized the personal connection with the shadowy origins of jazz that was still possible in the 1930s and 1940s. Research on the book *Jazzmen* led William Russell to Johnson, who was then a toothless old man driving a truck on a sugar plantation. Equipped with a new trumpet and a new set of teeth, the trumpeter embarked on a brief second career, highlighted by recordings that purported to recreate the “prehistory” of New Orleans jazz. The story of Johnson’s unlikely career (and the cycle of self-destruction that ended it, undermining in the process the note of Romantic triumph) is recounted in Turner 32-60.

¹⁰See, for example, the chapter “New Orleans—Mainspring or Myth” in Leonard Feather’s *The Book of Jazz* (30-38), in which Feather juxtaposes critical adulation of the music of Jelly Roll Morton, Johnny Dodds, and Bunk Johnson with bemused and frequently contemptuous reactions of contemporary musicians.

¹¹On the occasion of its tenth anniversary issue (15 July 1944), *Down Beat* boasted in an editorial that the magazine had “dug into the history of jazz and swing, and into the personal background of the so-called immortals in these fields. It made such names as Bix Beiderbecke, Fate Marable, Frank Teschemacher, and Pine-Top Smith familiar to its readers. It helped spread the interest in and acceptance of hot music” (10).

¹²This would seem to be the context for understanding the controversial 1949 interview with Charlie Parker in which he was quoted as saying that "bop is something entirely separate and apart from jazz," that it "drew little from jazz [and] has no roots in it. . . . The beat in a bop band is with the music, against it, behind it. . . . [Bop] has no continuity of beat, no steady chug-chug. Jazz has, and that's why bop is more flexible" (Levin and Wilson 1).

¹³*Jazz community* in this sense is meant to include not only musicians, but also critics, aficionados, industry professionals—all those who constitute the close-knit social context in which the music is produced and received. The term was popularized by the landmark sociological study of Alan P. Merriam and Raymond W. Mack, "The Jazz Community" (*Social Forces* 38 [1960], 211-22).

¹⁴See, for example, *Modern Jazz* by Morgan and Horricks, which includes a discussion of the growth of bebop from the "logical evolutionary tree" of jazz that is ripe with organic metaphors. "In jazz every seed of evolution has been sown in the solo styles of a scattered handful of musicians, and only with the final co-ordination of their principles has the new school been wrought. . . . By 1939 the seeds were germinating" (20). These tender shoots sprang up while "swing . . . was a dying force," and had to compete against "the clinging tendrils of commercialism" (19) through the "age-old process known as 'the survival of the fittest' " (60). With the establishment of the bebop movement, "jazz was again a living music" (71).

¹⁵The same may be said of another Martin Williams production, the anthology of recordings called *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz* (1973, rev. 1987). The selections in the anthology were chosen judiciously by Williams for their intrinsic artistic merit, but they are also arranged chronologically to form a history of style. As virtually the only comprehensive anthology of jazz recordings available, the *Smithsonian Collection* has become a staple of the classroom, and its selections the "canon" for the teaching of jazz history.

¹⁶Gary Giddins's recent biography *Satchmo* is a brilliant attempt to rescue serious consideration of Armstrong from reductionist strategies that would isolate him from his popular context. Arguing that "a jazz aesthetics incapable of embracing Armstrong whole is unworthy of him," Giddins insists: "Armstrong was an artist who happened to be an entertainer, an entertainer who happened to be an artist—as much an original in one role as the other" (32).

¹⁷Leonard Feather's survey of bebop, for example, pointedly refuses to follow the habit of ascribing the creation of bebop to the fortuitous contribution of a handful of musicians. "There has been a tendency, in recalling the manner in which bop took shape, to focus on a few individuals, mainly Parker and Gillespie. . . . Yet over the years evidence has gradually come to light that bebop in its various manifestations, as a harmonic, melodic and rhythmic outgrowth of what had preceded it, was a logical and perhaps inevitable extension; possibly it would have happened along largely similar lines without the existence of either Parker or Gillespie" ("Bebop" 98).

¹⁸Beginning at the same point (popular and religious vocal music) and passing through the same stages (instrumental polyphony, accompanied melody, symphonic music, and so on)," writes Hodler, "jazz does indeed seem to have retraced in five decades the road that European music took ten centuries to cover" (35-36). Feather observes that ". . . we find that a period extending from 590, when Gregory became Pope, until 1918, when Debussy died, produced developments in music for which a corresponding degree of development in jazz was accomplished between about 1897 and 1957—a

ratio of more than 1300 years against 60, which means that jazz has been evolving more than 20 times as fast" (*Book of Jazz* 37).

¹⁹For an overview of the process by which jazz performances were adapted to the formality of the concert hall, see my article "The Emergence of the Jazz Concert, 1935-1945."

²⁰Officially known as the Miles Davis Nonet, this groundbreaking group included veteran black beboppers (Max Roach, John Lewis, J. J. Johnson), white musicians normally associated with the cool school (Lee Konitz and Gerry Mulligan), and Davis's longtime white collaborator, Canadian-born arranger Gil Evans.

²¹See Rosenthal for a discussion of the varieties of music included under the *hard bop* label.

²²It is interesting to note that Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues*, which treats jazz as a music indistinguishable from the "good-time" music of the blues, deals only glancingly with development in jazz after Charlie Parker. Of Ornette Coleman, Murray says: "Some of his most enthusiastic supporters regard his innovations as representing a radical break with all tradition and others hear in them a return to the deepest roots of the blues idiom; but as of 1976 . . . Coleman compositions . . . seem to be better known and better received by concert-goers and patrons of 'new thing' nightclubs than by traditional dance-hall, honky-tonk, night-club, and holiday revelers" (228).

²³Significantly, one adjective used by critics of the 1950s to describe hard bop was *regressive*. See, for example, Martin Williams's ironically titled article "The Funky-Hard Bop Regression," which defends hard bop as a progressive form. According to Williams, in purely stylistic terms hard bop "is taking up certain pressing problems where they were left in the middle 'forties and is working out the solution" (*Art* 234).

²⁴Karl Lippegaus offers a typical summation of the birth of fusion: "In 1970, [a year after the recording was made,] when trumpeter Miles Davis brought out a double LP album under the title *Bitches' Brew*, the jazz world saw in a flash that this music marked a turning point in the history of jazz. *Bitches' Brew* became the starting point for a new phase of development. With this recording the period after Free Jazz had begun—or rather, Free Jazz had been joined by a new trend in style which was indeed fundamentally different . . ." (156).

²⁵The reference is to the so-called "Whig interpretation of history," the title of a 1931 book by Herbert Butterfield that criticized the teleological tendency of liberal historians to view the history of mankind as leading inexorably toward an ideal of democratic freedom. "The whig historian can draw lines through certain events, some such line as that which leads to modern liberty. . . . The total result of this method is to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present—all demonstrating throughout the ages the working of an obvious principle of progress . . ." (Butterfield 12).

²⁶As Stanley Crouch commented mordantly (in a reference to the history of the Umbria Jazz Festival in Perugia, Italy), "Music with melody, harmony, and instrumental control was considered the art of repression and the symbol of the enslavement of black people, while the opportunists of the 'avant-garde' were celebrated as the voices of freedom" (*Notes* 248).

²⁷The term seems to have been used first by Stanley Dance, as in a 1961 reference to "the 'swing' or 'mainstream' idiom" (13). It is clear from the context that this swing "mainstream" is defined by its position between the reactionary music of the New Orleans revival and the radical bebop movement: "By the end of 1949 the small group was securely established as the

chief medium of jazz expression . . . whether playing blues, Dixieland, mainstream or modern jazz" (27).

²⁸Wynton Marsalis, for example, rails against "those who profess an openness to everything—an openness that in effect just shows contempt for the basic values of the music and of our society. . . . Their disdain for the specific knowledge that goes into jazz creation is their justification for saying that everything has its place. But their job should be to define that place—is it the toilet or the table?" (21).

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