TRANSNATIONAL STUDIES IN JAZZ

ROUTLEDGE

jews and jazz

IMPROVISING ETHNICITY

charles hersch

JEWS AND JAZZ

Jews and Jazz: Improvising Ethnicity explores the meaning of Jewish involvement in the world of American jazz. It focuses on the ways prominent jazz musicians like Stan Getz, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Lee Konitz, Dave Liebman, Michael Brecker, and Red Rodney have engaged with jazz in order to explore and construct ethnic identities.

The author looks at Jewish identity through jazz in the context of the surrounding American culture, believing that American Jews have used jazz to construct three kinds of identities: to become more American, to emphasize their minority outsider status, and to become more Jewish. From the beginning, Jewish musicians have used jazz for all three of these purposes, but the emphasis has shifted over time. In the 1920s and 1930s, when Jews were seen as foreign, Jews used jazz to make a more inclusive America, for themselves and for blacks, establishing their American identity. Beginning in the 1940s, as Jews became more accepted into the mainstream, they used jazz to "re-minoritize" and avoid overassimilation through identification with African Americans. Finally, starting in the 1960s as ethnic assertion became more predominant in America, Jews have used jazz to explore and advance their identities as Jews in a multicultural society.

Charles Hersch is Professor of Political Science at Cleveland State University. He is also the author of *Democratic Artworks: Politics and the Arts from Trilling to Dylan* and *Subversive Sounds: Race and the Birth of Jazz in New Orleans*.

Transnational Studies in Jazz

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JEWS AND JAZZ

Improvising Ethnicity

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SERIES FOREWORD: TRANSNATIONAL STUDIES IN JAZZ

Since the 1990s the study of jazz has changed dramatically as the field continues to open up to a variety of disciplinary perspectives and critical models. Today, as the music's meaning undergoes profound changes, there is a pressing need to situate jazz within an international research context and to develop theories and methods of investigation that open up new ways of understanding its cultural significance and its place within different historical and social settings.

The *Transnational Studies in Jazz* series presents the best research from this important and exciting area of scholarship and features interdisciplinary and international perspectives on the relationships between jazz, society, politics, and culture. The series provides authors with a platform for rethinking the methodologies and concepts used to analyze jazz and will seek to work across disciplinary boundaries, finding different ways of examining the practices, values, and meanings of the music. The series explores the complex cultural and musical exchanges that have shaped the global development and reception of jazz. Contributors will focus on studies of the music that find different ways of telling the story of jazz, with or without reference to the United States, and will investigate jazz as a medium for negotiating global identities.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter 1

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Tin Pan Alley composers like George Gershwin attempted to create musical versions of an inclusive America, incorporating genres from a multitude of American ethnic groups. Though they minimized expressions of their Jewish identity, in an era when Jews were not fully accepted as Americans, such "melting pot" compositions implicitly made the case for an America where Jews would be accepted. These composers saw their music as an embodiment of the American ideal of meritocracy without prejudice.

Chapter 2

Beginning in the mid-1930s, some Jewish Swing-Era musicians actively engaged with black musicians at a time when such interactions were taboo. Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, and others fought for integration in the music world, while others like concert promoter and record producer Norman Granz and "Café Society" owner Barney Josephson more forthrightly embraced a political activist role when breaking down barriers to integration in concerts, recordings, and nightclubs. In doing so they promoted Jewish values of social justice and strove to create an inclusive America.

Chapter 3

Jews have predominated the business of presenting jazz to the public as record producers, bookers, music publishers, managers, critics, concert promoters, and disc jockeys. Jewish businesspeople in the jazz music business worked closely with black musicians and spoke to an African American audience, raising issues central

to black-Jewish relations and spawning charges of Jewish exploitation of black musicians, sometimes driven by stereotypes. Jewish involvement in the jazz music business must be understood in the context of these stereotypes, actual financial practices, a variety of Jewish attitudes about the pursuit of financial gain, and the entrepreneurs' passionate love for the music.

Chapter 4

In the 1940s and 1950s, clarinetist "Mezz" Mezzrow, disc jockey "Symphony Sid" Torin, jazz trumpeter Red Rodney, and saxophonist Roz Cron played with black identity in various ways and to various degrees. These Jewish jazz musicians engaged with black music in order to avoid "melting" into an American mainstream they considered bland and intolerant and to "re-minoritize" Jewishness. However, even if they initially "became black," these musicians often came to blackness through Jewishness and ultimately struggled with a never fully buried Jewish identity.

Chapter 5

While "white Negroes" like Mezzrow flirted with black identification, a number of African American jazz musicians "played Jewish" by performing Jewish or Jewish-themed songs. Performances by Willie "The Lion" Smith, Cab Calloway, Slim Gaillard, and others drew parallels between Jewish and black music and, ultimately, Jewish and black identities, while clarinetist Don Byron's klezmer album of the 1990s raised issues of musical ownership and authenticity. Evoking the interethnic urban neighborhoods of New York, these performances created the possibility of playful hybridities, stretching ethnic identities in the face of rigid social boundaries.

Chapter 6

This chapter examines "Jewish jazz"—attempts to combine "Jewish music" and jazz into a new genre. With beginnings in 1930s "Yiddish Swing" and 1960s albums by Shelly Manne and Terry Gibbs, the movement blossomed in the 1990s. Albums by John Zorn, Steven Bernstein, Paul Shapiro, and others attempted to explore and expand modern American Jewish identity. At its best, Jewish jazz both affirmed Jewishness and revealed connections with African Americans, with whom Jews have shared a diasporic, urban American culture.

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INTRODUCTION

> When a Jew plays Jazz, what happens to Jewishness? What happens to the Jew? Does the Jew stop being a Jew and start becoming a jazz musician? Or does Jewishness get reinvented in stop-time and modal twists, or better, does Jewishness reinvent stop-time and modal twists?[1]
>
> Josh Kun

This book explores the meaning of Jewish involvement in the world of American jazz.[2] By way of introduction, consider the most famous Jewish jazz musician, Benny Goodman. Born in a Chicago ghetto to Russian immigrant parents, he went on to fame and fortune as "The King of Swing." Though American Jews were proud of his success, Goodman, like many in his generation, made little public acknowledgment of his ethnicity. But unlike most Jews of his generation, he took things one step further by marrying a gentile—and not just any gentile, but a blue-blooded descendant of the ultra-WASP Vanderbilts.

Yet Goodman's connections with ethnicity are more complicated than a narrative of assimilation might suggest. One of Goodman's biggest hits was "Bei Mir Bist Du Schön," originally written for the Yiddish theater by Shalom Secunda and then translated into English by the Tin Pan Alley Jewish songwriter Sammy Cahn. Though a hit by the non-Jewish Andrews Sisters, Goodman recorded it first in the studio and then in a famous version at the Carnegie Hall concert of 1938. The song became an "anthem" for American Jews, who saw in the song's success a sign of their growing acceptance by the majority.[3]

Yet this apparently "Jewish" jazz song has tangled ethnic roots. It is hybrid by its nature as a mixture of Yiddish melodies and jazz, a music with black roots. But its connections to African American music go beyond this surface level. Lyricist

Cahn had first heard it performed in Yiddish at the Apollo Theater by two African American musicians who had learned it from Jenny Grossinger, owner of a famous Jewish resort in the Catskills. Goodman's version was arranged by the African American Jimmy Mundy, and the studio recording featured two black musicians, Lionel Hampton (vibes) and Teddy Wilson (piano). Goodman was a pioneer in race relations by hiring the two men when white bandleaders did not employ black musicians. Yet the men at first played with Goodman only as part of a breakout small group and not with the big band, and the Carnegie Hall concert was no exception in this regard. Goodman's performance featured a klezmer-like interlude, a dance form called a *freilach*, indelibly connected with Jewishness.

Goodman's career thus encapsulates some of the connections this book explores: a Jewish jazz musician marries into the mainstream, hires African American arrangers and musicians, plays "Jewish music" that is equally "black music," and is celebrated by Jewish Americans for his ethnicity at birth. Encompassing Jewish ethnic identity, mainstream American culture, African American musicians, and hybrid musical forms, no simple narrative will suffice.

Of course Goodman is not the only Jewish jazz musician of note. A mere two percent of the American population, Jews have been highly overrepresented in jazz. In addition to Goodman one thinks of Stan Getz, Artie Shaw, Lee Konitz, Dave Liebman, Michael Brecker, Red Rodney, Al Cohn, Buddy Rich, Shelly Manne, Steve Lacy, and Victor Feldman, among others. A phenomenal number of Jews were also involved in the business of presenting jazz to the public, whether as record producers, bookers, music publishers, managers, critics, concert promoters, or disc jockeys. (Throughout I use the term "Jewish jazz musicians" as shorthand for all those in the jazz music business.) Jews in the industry were so predominant that one of the few major players who was not Jewish, John Hammond, a wealthy descendant of the Vanderbilts (and Goodman's brother-in-law), conducted an obsessive and ultimately fruitless search for Jewish ancestry and told people he was Jewish. As he put it, "I realized that many prominent people in show business, theater owners, agents, the stars themselves, were Jewish. I admired them as I admired the black artists on my favorite records. I wanted to be Jewish."[4]

Jews and Jazz highlights the ways American Jewish musicians' involvement in jazz shaped their ethnic identities and how those identities in turn influenced their lives and music as jazz musicians. Throughout I place Jewish jazz musicians' ethnic identities within the context of mainstream America's changing views of Jewishness. (In focusing on American musicians, I do not mean to deny the significance of Jewish jazz artists elsewhere, who deserve a comprehensive treatment beyond the scope of this book.)

Jewishness in my analysis is a construct rather than a fixed essence. In a sense all identities are constructed, and minority groups in particular need to delineate their own identities in order to prevent being defined exclusively by the majority. But Jews more than other groups need to construct identities, for Jewish identity is inherently ambiguous, encompassing religion, culture, and ancestry. Saying

someone is "very Jewish" could mean very religious or very ethnically Jewish (using a lot of Yiddish and so on). According to Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, "Jewishness disrupts the very categories of identity because it is not national, not genealogical, not religious, but all of these in dialectical tension with one another."[5] Jews need to decide what "being Jewish" means for them.

This identity construction is particularly imperative for American Jews. According to Arthur A. Goren, although the tension between "Jewish particularism" and "a higher cosmopolitan fellowship has . . . been one of the central themes in modern Jewish history," "the strain within the American Jewish group has been especially intense."[6] Jews thus have to decide to what extent they want to be mainstream Americans and to what extent they want to hold on to a sense of minority identity or outsiderness.[7]

In addition, most American Jews are simultaneously minorities and, as whites, members of the majority.[8] Jews in America were at first not seen as fully white, and a sense that Jews are both insiders and outsiders has remained. Most American Jews are white but not WASPs, minorities but not people of color and therefore not as subject to discrimination as other minorities. In 2009, African American jazz clarinetist Don Byron spoke about Jews as cultural "go-betweens" or mediators between blacks and whites, occupying a "swing position," "swinging between being an oppressed minority and not being an oppressed minority."[9] (The pun on "swinging" is no doubt unintended.) Although Jews are clearly not seen as outsiders by most Americans to the extent that people of color are, they have, in the words of Eric L. Goldstein, "*negotiated* their place in a complex racial world where Jewishness, whiteness, and blackness have all made significant claims on them," and these "competing identities . . . never disappeared."[10]

To put it another way, Jewishness has an affinity for hybridity. Ultimately all ethnicities are hybrid, for "the history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowing," but diasporic Jewish identities are particularly so, and the hybridity of Jewishness has at times made Jews racial shape-shifters.[11] Daniel Itzkovitz speaks of the "astonishing capacity of Jewishness to be the 'type O negative' of ethnoracial groups, able to enter the bloodstream of any group and exist there in culturally meaningful ways."[12]

Such hybridity has emboldened anti-Semites who saw Jews as a mixed or "mongrel race."[13] Anti-Semites feared that Jews could secretly pass as whites: Rudyard Kipling once wrote of "a young Jew trying to appear white." The term "white Jew" was used in the 1940s to describe those who chose to "pass" or assimilate.[14] But hybridity has also made possible creative cross-ethnic exchanges, particularly in urban centers; American Jewish culture has been a product of border zones, resulting in creations like Yiddish, a "fusion language."[15]

In particular, Jewishness's inherent hybridity has connected Jews with African Americans. As late as the 1950s, African American writer Ralph Ellison proclaimed that many blacks, himself included, "make a positive distinction between 'whites' and 'Jews.'"[16] Such views are not entirely a thing of the past; in his 2006

memoir *The Color of Water*, James McBride, raised by a mother of Jewish origin and a black father, says,

> It was a feeling every single one of us took into adulthood, that Jews were different from white people somehow. Later as an adult when I heard folks talk of the love/hate relationship between blacks and Jews I understood it to the bone. . . .[17]

In Danzy Senna's novel *Caucasia*, a mother who wishes for her mixed-race daughter to pass as white gives her a Jewish name and identity "because Jews weren't really white, more like an off-white. . . .They were the closest I was going to get to black and still stay white. 'Tragic history, kinky hair, good politics,' she explained. 'It's all there.'"[18]

The hybrid nature of American Jewish identity and its connection with other minority groups help explain why Jews were drawn to jazz, a diasporic music whose canonical figures and musical features are primarily African American.[19] Just as an urban cauldron of hybridity like New Orleans gave birth to jazz itself, Jewish-black interactions in America's urban centers shaped the music and identities of Jewish jazz musicians.[20] Many Jews engaged with jazz in order to play with their joint minority-majority status, sometimes to the point of identifying with African American culture as jazz musicians.[21]

Yet such identity construction did not take place in a vacuum. One's choice of ethnic identity is limited by outside assumptions and expectations and is inevitably shaped by them. Jews have been "racialized" (or ethnicized) by different groups and at different times in America, and the choices Jewish jazz musicians made about their ethnic identities have been shaped by the way mainstream America looked at them, whether as outsiders, full members, or some combination of the two.[22]

In this book I show how American Jews have used jazz to construct three kinds of identities: to become more American, to emphasize their minority outsiderness, and to become more Jewish. Around the time of jazz's beginnings (late 1910s to 1920s), Jews were still seen by many as foreigners rather than full Americans. Michael Rogin has argued that Jews performed blackface to exert their Americanness at the expense of African Americans, playing black to assert their whiteness, and some have extended Rogin's framework to Jews in the music business more generally. In contrast, I argue that in the 1920s and 1930s, Jews did engage with jazz to prove their Americanness but often in solidarity with blacks. Some, like George Gershwin, did this aesthetically, creating music they hoped would reflect America's people in all its diversity (Chapter 1). Others, like Benny Goodman, went further and actively supported racial integration in jazz by hiring black musicians at a time when such mixed groups were not accepted. Without emphasizing their Jewishness, Jewish musicians fought for the rights of African Americans as a way of creating a more inclusive America, one that would

include Jews (Chapter 2). Jews in the music business beginning in the 1930s and beyond also played important roles in advancing jazz. Their close involvement with African American musicians often drew on a sense of commonality between minority groups but also raised charges of exploitation, sometimes justified and sometimes based on anti-Semitic stereotypes, which had a variety of effects (Chapter 3).

Beginning in the 1940s, Jews were more accepted in America. But although a burden had been lifted, the promise of assimilation threatened Jews' sense of uniqueness. For some Jews, engaging with jazz was a way to re-minoritize, to reestablish a sense of outsiderness and therefore a critical or unique perspective.[23] Some of these Jews like clarinetist Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow became "white Negroes," identifying as black or even attempting to "pass" as such. But other Jews in jazz who did not try to "cross the color line" played with black identity in creative ways. These include influential disc jockey and promoter "Symphony Sid" Torin, bebop trumpeter Red Rodney, and saxophonist Roz Crohn (Chapter 4). Yet this interethnic exchange worked in more than one direction. Around the same time, African American jazz musicians like Willie "The Lion" Smith, Slim Gaillard, and Cab Calloway engaged with Jewish music and Jewish identities to connect with a fellow minority group and, in contrast to Jews who identified with blacks, to attempt to make inroads into the mainstream. In the 1990s, with the rise of multiculturalism, the African American clarinetist Don Byron also experimented with Jewish music as a way of investigating his own complex identity (Chapter 5).

With the increasing ethnic assertiveness of the 1960s, Jews became more comfortable publicly proclaiming a Jewish identity. This new attitude bore fruit in the performances of Jewish jazz musicians, from Shelly Manne and Terry Gibbs in the early Sixties to John Zorn, Steven Bernstein, and Paul Shapiro in the Nineties and beyond, who incorporated Jewish music into jazz to interrogate and explore their identity as both Jews and Americans (Chapter 6).

There is a rough chronological progression in the way Jews used jazz to take on first American, then black, and then Jewish identities, but all three ways of using jazz were present from the beginning and have continued to the present. Thus the structure of this book is thematic, with a section devoted to each use of jazz, rather than strictly chronological.

While no books have been devoted to the full scope of Jewish involvement in jazz, previous accounts have relied on two understandings I call the exploitation narrative and the affinity narrative. This book presents an alternative to these narratives.

The exploitation narrative sees Jews in jazz as cultural and financial parasites. One of the earliest versions was presented by Henry Ford in *The International Jew*, which portrayed jazz as a Jewish-controlled conspiracy to support only Jewish musicians ("racial collusion") and fleece the American public. Jews, according to Ford, practiced "art-destroying commercialism," feeding the public addicting,

debased music to become rich. Their partners in this enterprise were African Americans who, in concert with the "Yiddish trust," made "bestial" music. Ford "exposed" such "crimes" in the *Dearborn Independent* and promoted "old time" American music and dance as a healthy alternative.[24]

A more recent version turns Ford on his head by seeing instead of joint Jewish-black exploitation of Americans, Jewish financial and cultural exploitation of African American musicians. According to this account, Jews in the record industry made fortunes by selling black styles of music while the African American originators saw little of the profits. Spike Lee's 1990 film *Mo' Better Blues*, discussed in Chapter 3, enacts this narrative in full, stereotypical form.[25]

Alternatively, what I call the affinity narrative asserts blacks and Jews share a history of oppression, and this common experience of suffering can be heard in the music of both groups, from the blues to the wailing of Jews in prayer. As far back as the 1920s, Jewish newspapers and magazines examined the experiences of African Americans to make sense of the situation of American Jews, often making explicit comparisons between the two groups.[26] Intertitles in the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer* expressed a common sentiment by comparing Al Jolson's singing to cantorial wailing, while commentators on Gershwin in the Twenties and Thirties saw him connecting the blues and Jewish melodies. Decades later Irving Howe claimed the composer "blended Yiddish folk tunes and black melodies into a blue union," a claim for which (as I will show) there is little evidence. For Howe, blackface connected Jews and blacks, "one woe speaking through the voice of another."[27]

This narrative has been used to this day to explain Jewish musicians' attraction to black music.[28] Autobiographies of Jews in the postwar jazz world often begin their tales of a musical life with a synagogue scene in which they discover similarities between Jewish religious music and jazz. Critic Nat Hentoff describes discovering the shared "blues" in Jewish music and jazz, tracing this discovery to attending synagogue as a child.

> I heard the cantor's krechts (a catch in the voice, a sob, a cry summoning centuries of ghosts of Jews) . . . a thunderstorm of fierce yearning that reverberates throughout the shul [synagogue]. And then . . . a sadness so unbearably compressed that I wonder the chazzan [cantor] does not explode.

As he goes on to hear the music of clarinetist Artie Shaw and other jazz musicians, he hears in it "the soul-shaking power of the chazzan." Later in life, he speaks to jazz composer and bassist Charles Mingus about "Jewish blues."[29]

These musical connections are often traced to Jews' and blacks' shared history of suffering. Thus singer/pianist Ben Sidran recounts how he was drawn to jazz out of a sense of affinity with African American jazz musicians, who shared his