Volume 8. Occupation and the Emergence of Two States, 1945-1961
Pro and contra Jazz: Joachim-Ernst Behrendt and Theodor W. Adorno (1953)

In the fall of 1953, the cultural philosopher and music theorist Theodor W. Adorno, who had emigrated to the U.S. in 1938 and had returned to Frankfurt to join the Institute for Social Research in 1949, engaged in a controversial public exchange with music journalist Joachim-Ernst Berendt over the merits of jazz. Berendt saw American jazz as the most original musical achievement of the twentieth century and emphasized the demanding nature of its complex, improvisation-based structures. Adorno, on the other hand, tended to see jazz as a form of modern pop and accused it of being conventional and conformist. The two also disagreed on the nature of jazz's relationship to totalitarianism. Berendt believed that jazz represented a critique of totalitarianism, pointing to the persecution of jazz fans under the Nazi regime and in East Germany, whereas Adorno's argued that jazz promoted a kind of mass enthusiasm similar to that found in totalitarian systems.

CRITIQUE

Pro and contra JAZZ

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Jazz has always been music by the few for the few, while pop music probably has the largest audience of anything today. Adorno says that jazz is a thing "where there is nothing to understand but rules." Well, at least this much should be understood – that one should know what one is talking about if one says jazz. As for the rules, they exist in every art and especially in every musical style. If they did not exist in jazz, Adorno would be the first to accuse it of a "lack of order." There is a reason why the civilized languages have the same word for making music and playing: *jouer, play, spielen* . . .

The keyword of Adorno's criticism is found in line seven of his article, where he speaks of the "the most simple melodic, harmonic, metric, and formal structure" of jazz.

Let us begin with the harmonic structure. In the modern styles of jazz it corresponds to that of the symphonic music of a Stravinsky or Hindemith. The relationship among the chords in these jazz styles is explained by the same laws that Hindemith drew up in his "Craft of Composition." In both, the simultaneously normal and diminished third – in symphonic music as the "neutral third," in jazz as "blue notes" – and the diminished fifth – in Hindemith as tritonus, in jazz as

“flatted fifth” – play the same crucial role. The harmony characterized in this way is among the most complicated harmonic systems known to the history of music. The effect of the wrong-note-blaring clarinet (7 pages later) is then resolved by itself: in authentic, good jazz there is not a single note that could not be fully explained by either the old functional-harmonic or by Hindemith’s system.

As for the “most simple metric structure,” which Adorno addresses again and again with words like “stubborn” and “syncopation trick,” the most complicated rhythmicists of twentieth-century concert music have paid tribute to jazz precisely because of the virtuosity with which five or six or even more different rhythms are repeatedly overlaid in it. This kind of layering of various rhythms is largely unknown in Europe’s great symphonic music. It exists at most in the music of Africa and a few East Asian and Indonesian musical cultures, which are conceived from the standpoint of rhythm.

Jazz layers rhythm with the same virtuosity with which melodies were layered in Baroque or harmonies in the late Romantic period. Fritz Ursinger has said of these layerings: “What makes jazz into the rhythmically most fascinating contemporary music is the artistic combination – nothing short of brilliant – of constraint and freedom.“ Since Adorno has no explanation for this combination, he falls back on analytical psychology and the “sadomasochistic type.” We have better witnesses to what is real and what is sadomasochistic in the Negroes’ struggle for freedom and in their music: Faulkner on the side of the whites, Langston Hughes on the side of the Negroes. Has white civilization reached the point where a people whom the whites raised as servants, slaves, and serfs, and very deliberately kept at this social level, must then be accused of having a predisposition to the development of sadomasochistic types because of their “readiness to blind obedience”? Anyone who has ever had a black servant or has lived in a Negro family knows the difference between helpful service and “blind obedience.”

Summing up, what remains, then, of Adorno’s claim that jazz has “the simplest metrical structure”? There was already an era in which the tempo change was the very sin against the spirit of music: the Baroque. It has never occurred to me with any of Bach’s works that “the prohibition against altering the basic meter in a living manner as the piece progresses” constrained music-making. Adorno is applying the criteria of Romantic music to jazz. You cannot do this any more than you can apply the criteria of pop music to it. What you constantly find here are such confusions of criteria.

[. . .]

In music that is improvised and not composed, the themes must come from somewhere, after all. The question is: from where? If jazz musicians took them from concert music, Adorno would be the first to protest. And so the jazz musicians take them from pop songs. But lo and behold, here too he protests. At this point, the nature of his dialectic becomes apparent. We see it repeatedly: if jazz music is the expression of freedom, it becomes the “gesture of rebellion;” if it is the expression of fitting in, it becomes “blind obedience;” if it is both, the “sadomasochistic

type" is invoked, "who rebels against the father figure while at the same time secretly admiring him. . ."

Adorno, of course, denies the improvisational character of jazz outright. Does he not know that virtually no great jazz musician has played the same solo twice? There are recordings of Louis Armstrong from the twenties or Charlie Parker from the forties which had to be repeated several times in succession on the same day because of some technical problem and all of which were later released as records: we can see there that none of the musicians, in the various, successively recorded improvisations on the same theme, played the same thing even for a single measure. Where, in real jazz, does one find what he calls "carefully rehearsed with machine-like precision?" I would like to hear a single, specific example.

In fact: where are the examples? He accuses the jazz "fanatics" of being "hardly able" to "make their case in precise, technical-musical terms" – but where are these terms in Adorno's essay? The reference to the "clever adolescents in America" in a passage where one expects clear proof that there is no longer improvisation in jazz: "that is silliness".

Finally, the reference to the parallelism between jazz and dictatorship is downright Mephistophelian. For the second time in fifteen years, there are people in central Europe who live in constant fear for their lives simply because they like to hear or play jazz, and along comes Adorno and thinks he can turn this into the exact opposite, just because he claims as much? Is his musical "nerve" in such bad shape that he does not hear in every measure of jazz how absolutely this music "inoculates" against any totalitarianism? Has one ever seen a functionary or militarist who is simultaneously a jazz fan? Where does the military's deeply rooted dislike of jazz come from? It is found not only in Europe. It was already found in the early years of jazz, when America entered the First World War and the then-capital of jazz, New Orleans, was declared a military port of the American navy. In the face of such facts, the observation that "there is a good reason" why the jazz band "is derived from military music" is a cheap trick. The reason why the instruments in a jazz band are derived from those in a marching band is that the Negroes of North America did not see that "white music" had another kind of ensemble. For the bearers of white music have always regarded it as their noblest task to acquaint foreign people with their culture by way of military music.

Don't get me wrong: this is not supposed to be an homage to jazz. One can be for or against it. It's just that one should not speak of it as something "there is nothing to understand about . . ." For if that's the case, why are we talking in the first place?

Joachim-Ernst Berendt

[. . .]

He wants to stay away from my “philosophical and sociological conclusions,” even though statements like the one about jazz being “the most original and potent expression our century has produced” certainly come from the stock of cultural philosophy; in truth, I only wrote my essay to cut the musical ground out from under them. But where I go beyond the musical facts, Berendt plays dumb. I had emphasized what he holds against me as a devastating observation – namely, that in the European dictatorships of both stripes – jazz was proscribed as decadent, and had merely hinted at the anthropological prerequisites that allowed jazz to gain a footing as a mass phenomenon: the sadomasochistic ones. Independent of me, though very analogously, Sargeant wrote that jazz is “*a ‘get together’ art for ‘regular fellows.’ In fact it emphasizes their very ‘regularity’ by submerging individual consciousness in a sort of mass self-hypnotism ... In the social dimension of jazz, the individual will submits, and men become not only equal but virtually indistinguishable*.“ Berendt, who denies that I have “nerve,” does not sense that all moments of deviation in jazz serve conformism. I fear that in his cluelessness he understood the ritual as little as Parcival, for example, did the one at the end of the first act. *Isn’t it romantic?*

Since Berendt, when it comes to the Negroes, eventually argues *ad hominem*, he must allow me to speak for myself and point out to him that I am largely responsible for the most widely discussed American book about an understanding of race prejudice.[1)] He can believe me when I say that I don’t pride myself on this success, but to protect the Negroes against my white arrogance – that of someone driven out by Hitler, no less – is grotesque. I’d rather try, as much as my weak powers permit, to protect the Negroes against the humiliation they suffer when their expressive capacity is misused as the achievement of eccentric clowns. I know that there are honestly protesting people hungry for freedom among the *fans*: my essay mentions that what is “excessive, rebellious in jazz . . . is still being felt.” I am happy to count Berendt among those who respond precisely to this. But I think that their longing, perhaps as a result of the abominable level of musical education that prevails in the world, is being redirected into a false originality and guided in an authoritarian manner. Over the last few centuries, music has lost the traits of the services that previously kept it in shackles. Is it to be thrown back upon its heteronomous stage? Are we to accept its mere submissiveness as the bond of collective courtesy? Is it not an insult to the Negroes to psychologically mobilize their past slave existence to make them fit for such services? But that is being done also where people dance to jazz – and in the Savoy in Harlem, there is dancing. Jazz is bad because it enjoys the traces of what was done to the Negroes and against which Berendt rages. I have no prejudice against the Negroes, except that they differ from whites in nothing but color.

Theodor W. Adorno

[1)] T. W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sandord: *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, 1950). Published in the series “Studies in Prejudice,” edited by Max Horkheimer and Samuel Flowerman.

Source: *Merkur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken* [*Merkur. German Newspaper for European Thought*], Nr. 67, 7. Jahrgang, 9. Heft (Stuttgart, 1953), pp. 887-93.

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