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Comparing the shaming of jazz and rhythm and blues in music criticism

In the first half of the twentieth century, conservative music critics notoriously dismissed jazz on the grounds that it was primitive, vulgar, and achieved popularity by appealing to the lowest common denominator of public taste. Over time, a community of jazz critics emerged and produced numerous publications devoted to taking jazz seriously on its own terms. *Down Beat*, the most successful of the American jazz publications, had started out as a trade paper for dance band musicians, but by the 1950s was struggling to survive the end of the swing era by reinventing itself as a popular music publication for consumers. In addition to featuring regular jazz columns by name critics like Leonard Feather and Ralph Gleason, the editors of *Down Beat* experimented with an eclectic editorial policy that included coverage of other genres that were beginning to cross over into the pop charts, such as rhythm and blues.

This paper explores an explosive time in the history of *Down Beat*, where largely forgotten freelance music journalists such as Ruth Cage defended rhythm and blues from critical attacks, which were coming not only from the moral majority of America, but from established *Down Beat* writers and other members of the jazz community. I will consider how this affected the shaping of jazz and rhythm and blues as genres, and what it meant for jazz musicians and critics to dismiss rhythm and blues using the same arguments that were employed to shame jazz fans decades earlier.

EARLY SHAMING OF JAZZ AND THE BIRTH OF *DOWN BEAT*

It has been well documented that much of the mainstream press coverage of jazz was unfavourable during its early years at the beginning of the twentieth century. Similar to the point Jody Rosen made yesterday in his paper about ragtime, writers used the term “jazz” to apply to music and conventions that we wouldn’t think of as being jazz today. Bearing that in mind, in one of the earliest sociological studies on the reception of jazz writ large, Morroe Berger divided the negative criticism into primarily two categories. The first was a moral argument that identified jazz with “crime, vice and greater sexual freedom than is countenanced by the common rules of morality.” It was voiced primarily by white community leaders, church leaders, educators, and certain leaders from the African American community as well (1972: 11-12). The second was an aesthetic argument that identified jazz as primitive and lacking musical sophistication. Such arguments came primarily from “musicians (and those on the periphery of the profession) associated with ‘classical music’ and forms of popular music other than jazz ... [who opposed jazz because] it was produced by musicians who were not educated in the familiar tradition, and did not conform to rules of public conduct developed by centuries of the concert stage” (Ibid 12). As Elijah Wald pointed out yesterday, many important jazz figures were classically trained, but were generally written about as if they were not. And although criticism of jazz in its infancy was not universally negative, it was significant. Berger conducted a survey of jazz coverage in the *New York Times* from 1919

to 1944, and the vast majority of coverage was disparaging, generally falling into either of the two categories mentioned above.

For those who have tried to dismiss music criticism with the cliché “writing about music is like dancing about architecture,” (and I realize they’re in a minority in this room) looking at early American jazz criticism is a powerful reminder of how influential popular music discourse can be, what ideological work it can do, and how aesthetic judgments are often hinged on unspoken moral assumptions. In the case of early reactions to jazz, music criticism was frequently used to naturalize racist ideology. The *New York Times* would think twice about publishing an outright racist polemic, but it did publish articles which represented jazz music as primitive, unsophisticated, and morally suspect. Early critiques of jazz were therefore sometimes merely a thin veil concealing harmful racist stereotypes of the broader African-American culture with which jazz was associated.

It is in this context that we should understand the rise of jazz criticism that sought to understand the music on its own terms. And of all the jazz publications formed in America, none had greater influence than *Down Beat*, which began in 1934. According to historian David Stowe, “nowhere were the politics of swing better epitomized than in *Down Beat*, the journal that did the most to shape critical and popular opinion on jazz during the swing era” (1994: 74). It is also important to keep in mind that *Down Beat* was not primarily a jazz or swing publication, but a commercial music publication. It so happened that it was perfectly positioned to ride the momentum of the swing era and establish itself as an important periodical for jazz criticism, but from the beginning it covered records and artists from outside the hot jazz canon. This meant that by the 1940s, *Down Beat* featured columns by critics who heavily championed bebop and jazz as serious art music, but also covered performers like Louis Jordan and Joe Turner, who were later left out of the jazz canon only to be claimed by rock historians as important early influences on rhythm and blues and rock’n’roll.

DOWN BEAT IN CRISIS AT MID-CENTURY

By 1950, *Down Beat* was suffering a financial crisis. Its success was built on the popularity of big band culture, and the swing era had clearly past. The sounds of bebop had found favour with influential jazz critics, but had not caught on with a mass audience, and the market for big bands was dying. As John McDonough noted, “two of the top three big band winners in [*Down Beat*’s] 1949 poll ... disbanded before the results were announced. It was embarrassing and alarming” (1995: 12). *Down Beat*’s editor and owner, Glenn Burrs, found it increasingly difficult to keep the magazine afloat, and in May 1950 he sold it to the John Maher Printing Company (Ibid 13).

John Maher, *Down Beat*’s new owner, had no particular interest in jazz, but was determined to reinvigorate the magazine. In 1952, he lured Hal Webman and Norm Weiser from *Billboard* magazine to respectively become the new editor and publisher of *Down Beat*, in an effort to ensure that it would be directed by those in touch with the popular music of the time. Jack Tracy replaced Webman as editor in 1953, but continued

their program of incorporating new popular music coverage. As McDonough noted, there was a conscious effort at *Down Beat* to expand coverage outside the big band field, and over the next few years they would cover styles as diverse as jazz, country, rhythm and blues, pop, classical, and rock 'n' roll (1995: 13). Jazz coverage always predominated, especially in the columns of mainstays like Leonard Feather, Ralph Gleason, and Nat Hentoff, but the staff were also clearly attempting to somehow live up to the bold slogan which began appearing on the magazine's cover: "Everything in the World About the World of Music."

THE INTRODUCTION OF R&B COVERAGE

One of the editorial experiments at *Down Beat* was the introduction of a rhythm and blues column, which appeared sporadically in the early 1950s, before being taken over by a journalist named Ruth Cage in September of 1954. It would be a stretch to call Cage the world's first rock critic, but for me she is a unique and forgotten figure in what Robert Christgau has called the "pre-history of rock criticism"; she was certainly one of the earliest apologists for rhythm and blues writing for a predominantly white consumer audience. Although she was never a featured journalist in the magazine—there was maybe one page of R&B coverage for every 25 pages of jazz and tin pan alley—but what she *did* write now reads as a treasure trove of insights, as she apparently tried to make sense of the rhythm and blues phenomenon for *Down Beat*'s jazz-oriented readership.

There was certainly plenty of confusion. The term "rhythm and blues" gained currency in 1949 when *Billboard* used it to rename what had previously been their "race music" charts. But by the mid-1950s, new substitute labels were being volunteered as the industry began to perceive a change in the relationship between the music and its market, as R&B acquired a growing white youth audience. As Cage noted, several of the labels borrowed from the lexicon of jazz culture; one record label volunteered the term "cat music" (22 September 1954: 16), and for a period in 1955 interviewers and deejays referred to Elvis Presley as a bebop artist (Guralnick 1994: 186-187). Cage also acknowledged the deejay Alan Freed, of course, whom she reported had "decided that the kind of music he spins will have a new and broader connotation under a new name. On his shows it's 'rock and roll' not 'rhythm and blues.'" (9 February 1955: 4). Although rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues have since come to be seen as separate genres, at that moment the division was not nearly so clear. What is clear is that in the mid-1950s *Down Beat* tended to use the terms "rhythm and blues" and "rock 'n' roll" interchangeably.

Cage was not the only one to note a fluidity between genres. In the summer of 1955, before Presley had even signed a record contract with RCA, Duke Ellington had written an essay in the Newport Jazz Festival program demonstrating how jazz and rock 'n' roll shared the same historical roots. Ellington argued that rock 'n' roll was simply "the most raucous form of jazz." It is also clear that Ellington was experimenting with these new musical trends, and he explicitly mentioned he had come up with "a number of rock 'n' roll things" that he was "saving ... for possible use in a show" (Festival Program 1955).

Another interesting thing about Cage's writing is that she didn't write about R&B as if it was for kids. Presumably trying to bridge the gap between rhythm and blues and her jazz-oriented readership, Cage emphasized the overlap between jazz and rhythm and blues performers, noting that many R&B artists came from jazz and classical music backgrounds, and had received musical training in college. In a feature on Wild Bill Davis, for example, she pointed out that Davis had created an important new jazz sound with the Hammond organ while playing with Louis Jordan, created an arrangement for the Count Basie band, and played Birdland leading his own group, where he "killed the customers with everything from *Shake, Rattle, and Roll* to *April in Paris*" (1 Dec 1954: 17). R&B performers were sometimes accused by jazz players of having poor musicianship, relying on instinct and gimmicks instead of technical skill on their instrument. But Cage drew attention to acts that were formally trained, an emphasis that is still rare in writing about 50s R&B today. After attending a watershed R&B revue at Carnegie Hall, she wrote that she hoped that the prestige of the venue might be indicative of "a more respectful attitude toward this music with a beat and the artists who perform it with professional skill" (14 December 1955: 13).

THE SHAMING OF R&B IN *DOWN BEAT*

Meanwhile, the jazz critics at *Down Beat* largely ignored the rise of rhythm and blues, but when they did acknowledge it they often employed arguments and language similar to those which had been used to shame jazz fans earlier in the century. When Ruth Cage wrote an article in which she accused other critics of leading an unfounded moral campaign against R&B, Leonard Feather responded to her in the following issue, arguing that:

the entire r&b market today is dominated by three factors:

- Vocal groups that seem to have issued a challenge to one another boasting: "We can sing out-of-tuner than you can."
- Tortured, tortuous ballad singers who would lose all their appeal if they were fitted with spines.
- Instrumentalists who made names for themselves on personal appearances by playing a solo and simultaneously removing their jacket, pants, shirt, and teeth while suspended from a chandelier (4 May 1955: 6).

Ralph Gleason, who of course would later go on to found *Rolling Stone* magazine with Jann Wenner, was particularly disappointed with Elvis Presley's performances, calling them

the newest phenomenon in the strange, perverted taste of the American public ... His physical gyrations ... [are] frankly, sickening ... It's bad enough that he scratches himself when and where he itches and picks his nose, but it's really disgusting to watch the rest of it (11 July 1956: 34).

Barry Ulanov, another jazz critic, felt that R&B and rock 'n' roll threatened the very survival of jazz:

It's an attack from all sides on popular music of quality, on jazz ... No, it's not just Presley. It's a whole army of savages. And if we're not careful, we're going to lose a lot more than we ever have lost before under the pressure of these mass attacks (23 January 1957: 40).

All of the arguments in these quotes resonate strongly with negative jazz criticism earlier in the century. And it was not simply white jazz critics who dismissed rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll; many jazz musicians were also quick to criticize it. In a *Down Beat* article titled "Musicians Argue Values Of Rock and Roll," the pianist Billy Taylor argued that

It's a formula they've sold people on, and they make everything fit into the formula ... This r&b taste was created; it didn't come spontaneously from the teenagers. It grew out of the race records and since has been getting progressively worse musically. They took the worse parts of that music—monotonous rhythm, bad harmonies, double-meaning lyrics—and capitalized on them ... But remember, none of the things that are rhythm and blues hits or manufactured pop hits ever come back. They're dead in six weeks, and when they're dead, they're forever dead (30 May 1956: 12).

The bassist Milt Hinton was featured in the same article, and having played as a session musician on several rhythm and blues records, he felt that

We can put in some good things so that each session is a little better than the one before. We can gradually clean rhythm and blues up and improve them. In that way, we can salvage something out of this. The kids accept rhythm and blues as music, but actually it's a lower stage of music. Most of the guys playing it are good musicians ... [and] know it's not good music [sic]. But we can improve it ... we can bring [the kids] from their present tastes to listen to and appreciate better music (Ibid 12).

Several musicians also condemned R&B in *Down Beat's* famous blindfold tests, where musicians are blindfolded, played a selection of records and asked to comment on each one. The tests were all conducted by Leonard Feather, who would sometimes include an R&B side in the selections and allow the musician to respond. My favourite quote from these tests comes from the singer Carmen McRae, who upon hearing a track called "Ooky Ook" sung by Lola Dee, reflected "usually with rhythm and blues you can't understand anything they're doing, and that's one of the main reasons I'm against it" (18 May 1955: 25).

CONCLUSIONS

In *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams wrote that

The masses are always others, whom we don't know, and can't know. There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing peoples as masses. What we see, neutrally, is other people, many others, people unknown to us. In practice, we mass, and interpret them, according to some convenient formula. It is the formula, not the mass, which is our real business to examine (1958: 289).

Comparing the shaming of jazz and rhythm and blues in music criticism helps us to do exactly that. Having sampled some of the rhythm and blues coverage in *Down Beat* in the 1950s, a few key issues begin to emerge.

It's no secret that the moral majority of America publicly panicked over the rise of rhythm and blues and the birth of rock 'n' roll. But I'm fascinated that there was also such a strong reaction from members of the jazz community expressed in *Down Beat*, and that none of them except for Ruth Cage acknowledged that they were reproducing very similar arguments and language to those which were employed to shame jazz fans earlier in the century. What could that mean?

The first point one could make is that, as Scott DeVeaux and David Ake have argued, the 1940s marked a turning point in the history of jazz discourse, where it became reconceptualized as a serious, complex art music. Any jazz-oriented music that fit this model remained jazz, but anything that featured vocals and a strong dance beat, for instance, was cast away. This is why, despite embodying the standard hallmarks of jazz—blues roots, improvised solos, and swing feel—Louis Jordan occupies a marginal place in jazz history but a prominent one in rhythm and blues. The very development of a thing called jazz criticism, which claimed jazz on high art terms, perhaps made the denunciation of rhythm and blues inevitable, years before R&B even happened.

The second point is that this was not simply a case of white critics dismissing R&B and recycling a racist reading of music. As we've seen, there was another strand of the argument presented by jazz musicians like Billy Taylor and Milt Hinton, who recognized that even though R&B was clearly black music, it could also be interpreted as a commercialized exploitation of black music by white entrepreneurs, a corruption of taste by commercial interests. This was a complicated, multi-layered shaming of rhythm and blues, with specific differences from the early shaming of jazz that I discussed at the outset of this paper.

A final consideration is that the debate amongst jazz critics and musicians about rhythm and blues was set in a moment where R&B was not fully formed as a genre. What did it mean for Duke Ellington to argue that rock 'n' roll was a form of jazz? Or for musicians to play "April in Paris" alongside "Shake, Rattle and Roll" at Birdland? What matters is not whether these are anomalies, but that they did in fact happen, and have since been smoothed over and forgotten in history. What guides my research is a desire to see the world before genre distinctions that we now take for granted were fully in place. Rock didn't just arrive as rock, and jazz didn't just arrive as jazz, and I'm interested in the eras where the processes of genre formation happened. By revisiting these clashes and examining the debates, especially those that didn't make it into the accepted versions of history, we can hopefully come to a better understanding of how we make sense of the differences between, jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock in the present day.