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Josiah Boornazian University of Utah

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# Teaching Jazz History Out of Order

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# **Teaching Jazz History Out of Order**

The Benefits of Organizing Jazz History Curriculum by Topic Instead of Chronologically

# Josiah Boornazian, DMA

Assistant Professor and Director of Jazz Studies University of Utah josiah.boornazian@utah.edu Abstract: Jazz history unfolded chronologically, but chronology does not necessarily imply teleology or causality. In other words, the fact that certain jazz styles came after others does not unquestionably mean that jazz history followed a fixed course dictated by the perceived inevitability of artistic "progress." Although it is important for jazz history students to have a foundational understanding of jazz history in a chronological fashion, presenting history on a straightforward, simplistic timeline defined by distinct style periods is not the only way to teach the music of the past. There may be significant merit in reorganizing the way jazz history is sometimes presented. Musicians, albums, and style movements could be grouped together and studied according to thematically broad abstract topics to stimulate student engagement, independent thinking, and impassioned discussion. Examples include organizing jazz history curricula into nonsequential subjects such as jazz and politics, jazz and gender, jazz and racial identity, jazz and economics, jazz and the government, jazz and authenticity, and jazz and technology.

Keywords: jazz history, jazz pedagogy, historiography, jazz education

#### Teaching Jazz History: Challenges and the Influences of Classical Music Assumptions

Teaching history to adolescents and young adults can present challenges for educators. Evidence has emerged that, for history and social studies classes in public schools in the United States of America, traditionally structured teaching methods have led to students developing passive and unengaged perspectives in the classroom (Kozol, 2005; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2018). There is little reason to believe that these same trends do not also apply to the specific case of teaching of jazz history to young adults. However, by reorganizing jazz history curricula into topic-based lessons which engage students in intentionally controversial debate, teachers might better encourage student-centered teaching methods and project-based activities that provide students with opportunities to become active learners via solving problems and constructing arguments that prove their mastery of the material (Clark, 2018; Daniels and Steineke, 2004; Harvey and Daniels, 2009; Larmer and Mergendoller, 2010; Fisher and Frey, 2013; Jacobs, 2010; Martelli and Watson, 2016).

A brief survey of the most ubiquitous jazz history textbooks used in North American collegiate jazz programs provides insight into what appears to be a de facto consensus about jazz historiography which emerged in the past several decades, at least in the mainstream higher education jazz community (Bergeron, 2016; Prouty, 2005, 2010; Gabbard, 1995; Baker, 1985). Traditional chronological jazz history texts that have been historically significant to the development of jazz education include those penned by Marshal Stearns (1970), Frank Tirro (1993), Gunther Schuller (1968, 1989), Leonard Feather (1959), Mark Gridley (2007, 1988), Ted Gioia (2011), Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins (2009), Richard Demory and Donald Megill (2001), and Geoffrey Haydon and Gordon Vernick (2007) (ibid.). Though many jazz history textbooks present the past in chronological order, introducing jazz history and analysis through the lens of divisive issues (such as social issues, political protests, economics, racial identity, gender, geography, etc.) is also a recent trend in jazz scholarship. Jazz books and articles that have begun to analyze aspects of jazz history and culture through the lenses of politics, gender, racial identity, economics, government, authenticity, and technology include writings by scholars such as David Ake (1998), Linda Williams (2007), Martin Niederauer (2016), Nicole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (2008), Bob Bernotas (2000), Gayle Murchison (2017), Linda Dahl (1992), Monica Hairston (2008), Gerald Horne's (2019), Eric Porter (2002), and Tammy Kernodle (2014), to name only a few. The foundational ideas underlying these authors' works will be explored as models for reorganizing jazz history curricula. Firstly, however, the reasoning behind the current structure of canonical jazz history narratives needs to be elucidated, and the key to understanding the way jazz history has often been taught may be found in the relationship between jazz education and classical music.

Jazz has inherited many cultural, intellectual, and historical assumptions from classical music. For instance, due to efforts to legitimize jazz in higher education in the second half of the twentieth century, many jazz educators and scholars apparently (and perhaps self-consciously) used classical music as a model for constructing and teaching historical narratives. Their canon-based approach to teaching jazz history mirrors the paradigm of European classical music historiography (Durkin, 23–65; Ake, 2010, 4–6; Ake 2002, 11–28; Burke, 41–56; Bergeron, 18). In classical music culture, there is a tendency to judge musical works in relation to some historical trend they purported to represent (Doorman, 11; Dahlhaus, 14). The term teleological (or the phrase the teleology of music) is sometimes used to indicate the pervasive 19<sup>th</sup> and especially 20<sup>th</sup> century attitude based on the assumption that musical cultures are goal-driven and

focused on the purposeful development of musical vocabulary defined by an inevitable progression toward complexity and/or innovation (ibid.). The influential classical serialist composer and theorist Arnold Schoenberg represents perhaps the most obvious example of the teleological notions that have primarily dominated Western musical culture since at least the 19th century (Serravezza). Schoenberg apparently felt compelled to develop his twelve-tone compositional technique because he believed that tonal music had already been stretched to its limit by the early 1900s and thus a new system was necessary to facilitate continual musical innovation and progress (ibid.). This attitude of inevitable historical artistic progress pervaded much of the musical thinking of the past hundred years or so. For example, commentator Theodor Adorno also had an outsized influence on the intellectual climate of the twentieth century; his work helped solidify the notion that the development of musical styles followed a one-way path of "advancement" (Adorno, 1973; Paddison; Gur). Likewise, in his analysis of the influence of the ideology of progress in 20<sup>th</sup>-century art, Maarten Doorman argued: "When someone interprets a recent artistic achievement in terms of progress . . . [he] seems to stare into an ordered past, to see what has been created and to place the new achievement within the context of a historically advancing process" (Doorman, 63). Similar ideas had a profound influence on jazz criticism, especially in the post-World War II era (Burke, 41–56).

These assumptions and attitudes have contributed to the crystallization of a dominant narrative which focuses on explaining the history of jazz as a series of linear stylistic developments which were progressive, inevitable, and teleological (Hardie, 2013; Burke; Bergeron). Jazz history is often taught as a logical and nearly irreversible trajectory from the simplistic and primarily triadic and bluesy language of early New Orleans style artists such as Louis Armstrong to the increasing harmonic and melodic complexities of composers such as Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, and Charlie Parker, which then eventually culminated in the exceedingly complicated and difficult to understand music of the post-bop era, perhaps epitomized by mid- to late-career work of John Coltrane and Miles Davis (not to mention the work of avant-garde artists such as Cecil Taylor). However, recent scholars have challenged these assumptions and this intellectual model for conceptualizing jazz history, and it is suggested here that jazz curricula could be altered to reflect these recent developments in jazz scholarship.

#### An Alternative Model for Jazz History Curricula

Firstly, with any jazz history curriculum, educators should always bear in mind that historical narratives are constructed in such a way that political and social forces outside of the music can influence the perceived course of history, and so students ought to be instilled with a healthy skepticism toward all traditionally accepted narratives (Hardie, 2013). Productively controversial conversations might be initiated with students by introducing the intersection of jazz culture with perennial topics of interest from mainstream American society and culture, such as the crossroads of jazz and gender, politics, racial identity, government, authenticity, technology, and/or geography, for example. It is key to note that the suggestion here is that educators ought to facilitate challenging conversations about divisive topics from jazz and United States history without necessarily taking sides in order to encourage independent thinking among their jazz history lessons could be structured may be explored in order to give educators fresh ideas about how to re-organize jazz history curricula to maximize relevancy and student engagement.

#### Jazz and Gender

Analyzing jazz—both from a musical and a historiographical standpoint—explicitly through the lens of gender theory is a trend that has existed in scholarship for at least three decades. Just a few examples include the work of scholars such as David Ake (1998), Linda Williams (2007), Martin Niederauer (2016), Nicole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (2008), Bob Bernotas (2000), Gayle Murchison (2017), Linda Dahl (1992), Monica Hairston (2008), Gerald Horne, 2019), and Tammy Kernodle (2014). Students and educators could explore the impact of gender identity and gender power dynamics as they relate to jazz. A sample unit on this topic might include in-depth analysis of the careers and music of significant female jazz artists who simultaneously suffered from gender-based discrimination and overcame prejudices via the successes of their careers, focusing on diverse musicians including but not limited to artists such as Lil Hardin, Mary Lou Williams, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Melba Liston, Abbey Lincoln, Nina Simone, Maria Schneider, and Esperanza Spalding. Students could be encouraged to discuss the notions of gender as a binary construct versus gender as a spectrum while they explore the challenges women jazz musicians faced historically and the achievements women artists accomplished despite the barriers they faced.

### Jazz and Social/Political Issues

Jazz culture has often had a complicated and poorly understood relationship with the world of socio-political debate in the United States of America. Many jazz artists have taken overtly partisan stances on certain issues, thus directly entangling their music with social issues and politics. A short list of examples students could explore include the explicitly and/or implicitly political music of artists such as Louis Armstrong, ("Black and Blue"), Duke Ellington ("Black, Brown and Beige"), Charles Mingus ("Fables of Faubus" and "Haitian Fight Song"), Max Roach, "Triptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace") Abbey Lincoln ("Let Up"), Nina Simone ("Backlash Blues" and "Mississippi Goddam"), and Wynton Marsalis ("From the Plantation to the Penitentiary"). Furthermore, Eric Porter (2002) offers an analysis of the activism of African-American artists such as Wynton Marsalis, Louis Armstrong, Anthony Braxton, Marion Brown, Duke Ellington, W.C. Handy, Yusef Lateef, Abbey Lincoln, Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp, Wadada Leo Smith, Mary Lou Williams, and Reggie Workman, which may be useful to students and educators who wish to learn more about the intersection of jazz and the political world. Students could be challenged to interpret the relationship between the lyrical content of songs such as those cited above and the history of racial injustice in the United States. Additionally, when overtly political songs have few or no lyrics, educators can ask students if they are able to "hear" the social criticism in the musical sounds themselves, if this is possible. Difficulties and problems elucidating the "protest" elements of purely instrumental jazz will undoubtedly arise due to the inherently subjective nature of musical sounds, and this fact might serve as a point of departure for students and educators to discuss instances when jazz music has been taken to be political despite insufficient evidence for such a conclusion.

Without doubt, not all jazz has clear political overtones, even in situations in which some commentators have attempted to claim so. For example, jazz historian Mark Gridley (2007) has pointed out the erroneous arguments and common missteps involved in linking free jazz and/or avant-garde jazz with the Civil Rights movement in the writing and analysis of jazz history. Gridley points out the dangers of correlation-causation fallacies as well as the risks of allowing too many leaps of analysis to emerge unchallenged from commentators who have little or no

understanding of what musicians were striving to accomplish on a technical or theoretical level with their artistic experiments (ibid.). Gridley's work offers compelling examples of how ideologically motivated commentators can attempt to commandeer and utilize music for socio-political purposes that have little or nothing to do with the initial motivations or intentions of the music's creators. Still yet another avenue for discussing jazz and politics involves the frequent comparisons that have historically been made between jazz and democracy (DeVeaux, 2004). For example, in recent decades, influential jazz performer, composer, and educator Wynton Marsalis has often contended that jazz is a quintessentially "democratic" art form (Marsalis, 2008). Students again could be challenged to agree or disagree with this statement and to support their views with rational explanations and/or reference to what jazz artists have historically said about their own music as well allusions to the actual musical sounds in and of themselves. Productive lines of questioning that may naturally arise include: what does it mean for a style of music to be "democratic?" How, if at all possible, can systems of government be encoded in musical sounds?

### Jazz and Government

In a closely related yet potentially separate category from jazz and socio-political issues, there is the possibility of viewing jazz history through the lens of the music's interactions with the federal government of the United States of America. Three highly visible examples of the intersection of jazz and government are the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Jazz Masters Fellowship program, the State Department's Cold War-era Jazz Ambassadors program, and the various professional jazz ensembles associated with the Armed Forces. These programs all exemplify contrasting ways in which the US government has both supported and utilized jazz for political purposes. The NEA program focuses on increasing the cultural prestige of jazz as an art form by attempting to "nationally recognize outstanding jazz musicians for their lifelong achievements and mastery of jazz" because the "rigors of making a living in the jazz field are well documented" and jazz "is an art form to which the free market has not been kind" ("A Brief History of the NEA Jazz Masters Fellowships"). By contrast, the Jazz Ambassador program was a Cold War-era US State Department-sponsored "series of racially integrated 'Jazz Ambassador' tours in order to project proof of American talent and egalitarianism abroad" (Coyne). Nowadays, several branches of the United States Armed Forces maintain their own full-time jazz ensembles, including the United States Army Field Band's Jazz Ambassadors ("Jazz Ambassadors"), the United States Air Force's Airmen of Note ("Airmen of Note"), and the United States Navy's Commodores ("Commodores"). Each of these various programs represent contrasting ways in which the US government has both supported jazz musicians and utilized jazz for its own political purposes. Educators could involve students in discussions about the contradictions and positive and negative aspects of the Cold War-era program which used jazz musicians to try to present America as egalitarian (despite continual internal racially-motivated strife) as compared to the jobs and financial support offered by the NEA and the various fulltime touring bands supported by the US Armed Forces.

### Jazz and Notions of Authenticity

A concept that might bring together several different ideas—including racial identity, gender, socio-economic status, and geography—is the notion of musical authenticity. The perceived authenticity of musicians—sometimes expressed with words like "integrity," "honesty," "sincerity," "credibility," "genuineness," and "truthfulness"— is an important and

often unexamined idea that influences the way musicians and critics think about music and its history, classification, and development (Weisethaunet and Lindberg). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in musical styles such as rock, blues, and jazz, notions of what Hans Weisethaunet and Ulf Lindberg have termed "folkloric 'authenticity" have been particularly influential on popular and scholarly discourses (ibid.). The concept of folkloric authenticity privileges simple, humble, and oppressed "folk" artistic voices when evaluating authenticity in many styles of American music, including jazz (ibid.). In a similar construct to the folkloric authenticity paradigm, Patrick Lawrence Burke (1999) has documented how notions of the "primitive"-with the word's evocations of raw, unpolished, untrained, anti-modernistic, and uninhibited artistic expressionsrepresented another important factor in the jazz authenticity discourses in the 1930s–1940s. David Ake has challenged many traditional notions of jazz authenticity and introduced a compelling paradigm for the discussion of "real jazz" as it relates to the urban vs. rural cultural division in the United States (Ake, 2010, 77–111). Such complex and sometimes conflicting notions of authenticity can set up fascinating potential discussions about the role that musicians' wealthy vs. impoverished, urban vs. rural, black vs. white, and educated vs. uneducated backgrounds influence the perceived authenticity of jazz artists throughout the music's history. Further, Ake (2012) has written a book on the topic of the debates surrounding how and why jazz has been defined and delineated as a musical style historically. Students could engage in the challenging but illuminating work of examining how difficult it is to define any given artist as an "authentic" jazz musician using the various models and problems Ake discusses as a launching point. For example, students and educators could develop assignments and discussions built around provocative questions such as: does authentic jazz only come from artists of color (or Americans)? Does authentic jazz have to swing and/or incorporate improvisation? Does geography influence the authenticity of an artist (i.e., can authentic New Orleans-style jazz artists be born and/or operate outside of New Orleans)? Are styles such as fusion and smooth jazz truly "jazz?" And, of course: who gets to decide what "real jazz" is?

## Jazz and Technology

A final topic that will be put forth for consideration is the confluence of jazz and technology. Jazz culture has had, at times, a complex and fraught relationship with technology (Kenny and Deshpandé; Marsalis, 1988; Guilliatt; Ake, 2012, 80–83). Key figures in jazz history such as Wynton Marsalis have advocated for certain notions of "purity" in jazz which have strongly anti-technological implications (ibid.). However, jazz has always existed and developed while directly benefiting from new technologies. Throughout jazz history, musicians ranging from Louis Armstrong to Miles Davis and beyond integrated new technologies into their creative processes. Early jazz musicians embraced and utilized the latest developments in instrument manufacturing and audio recording (Chanan, 1–19; Katz; Baker, 1977). For example, Jelly Roll Morton, made several piano rolls in the 1920s, utilizing a relatively novel technology at the time (Morton and Wodehouse). Likewise, artists such as Duke Ellington took advantage of the thennew national radio network to disseminate his music and advance his career in the 1920s and 1930s (Jenkins). Decades later, Miles Davis was among the first jazz musicians to utilize tape splicing, electrified instruments, and other electronic tools such as early synthesizers and analog effects pedals (Gluck). Given the confluence of jazz and innovative technologies, educators could challenge students to think about the fascinating ways in which new inventions have influenced the creation and dissemination of jazz music. Additionally, given the strong tendencies toward musical conservatism, "purity," and acoustic aesthetics prevalent among some

communities within the broader jazz community, educators have powerful opportunities to engage students on the inherent contradictory attitudes towards technology and subsequent tensions within jazz culture.

#### Conclusion

Though certainly not an exhaustive or comprehensive list, the various paradigms for reorganizing jazz history into the contrasting topics outlined above is proposed in the spirit of encouraging jazz educators to take some calculated risks with jazz history curricula in the hopes of increasing student engagement by making clear the connections between the music of the past and today's relevant issues. Undoubtedly, an approach based on organizing jazz music around abstract topics might be too advanced or complex for some students; however, the suggestion here is that it might be effective with slightly older or more experienced students. Furthermore, there is nothing to stop jazz educators from incorporating a blended approach; jazz history could still be taught entirely or at least primarily chronologically while introducing topics such as the role of gender, racial identity, politics, and technology along the way to enhance students' understanding of and interest in the history of jazz.

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