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ALEXANDER J. BEISSENHIRTZ

**AFFIRMATION AND RESISTANCE**

THE POLITICS OF THE JAZZ LIFE IN THE SELF-NARRATIVES OF  
LOUIS ARMSTRONG, ART PEPPER, AND OSCAR PETERSON

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*»Anybody's music is made up of a lot of things that are not musical. Music is an attitude, a group of symbols of a way of life, whether you're conscious of it or not ...And of course, it naturally reflects the social and economic and educational attitudes of the players. And that's why the fools don't think I play jazz.«*

CECIL TAYLOR

## I. Introduction

Jazz Studies constitute a relatively new field of academic inquiry: In recent years, scholars have become increasingly interested in the non-sonic aspects of jazz, assuming that »jazz is not only a music to define, it is a *culture*.«<sup>1</sup> This new cultural-studies paradigm has brought into view what Krin Gabbard calls the »jazz apparatus,« that is, the cultural, social, and historical contexts of jazz music.<sup>2</sup> The heterogeneous field of jazz writing has been an important part of this apparatus since the early days of jazz. In terms of quantity and influence on jazz discourse, critics and music journalists form the most important group of jazz writers: Since Hugues Panassié's *Le Jazz Hot*, first published in Europe in 1934 and appearing two years later in the United States under the title *Hot Jazz*,<sup>3</sup> jazz critics have written extensively about the music and its practitioners and thus have decisively shaped the reception of the music. In the literary field, jazz has served as a conceptual and thematic resource for both novelists and poets: On a formal level, a musico-textual involvement is usually achieved through the musicalization of a text, that is, certain musical concepts of jazz,

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1 O'Meally, Robert G., Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, eds. *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. P. 2.

2 Gabbard, Krin. »Introduction: Writing the Other History.« *Representing Jazz*. Krin Gabbard, ed. Durham, NC and London: Duke UP, 1995. Pp. i–viii: i. As Gabbard points out, Lawrence Grossberg introduced the Foucaultian concept of the apparatus as a model for writing about rock and roll (ibid.). I will comment on the new cultural-studies approach to jazz in greater detail in Chapter IV.

3 Panassié, Hugues. *Le Jazz Hot*. Paris: Editions Corrêa, 1934 / *Hot Jazz. The Guide to Swing Music*. New York: M. Witmark and Sons, 1936.



for example, call-and-response patterns, rhythmic syncopation, or improvisation, are imitated in the medium of writing. Especially in African-American poetry, jazz provides an important aesthetic resource: In his influential introduction to the anthology *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic Reference*, Stephen Henderson argues that

»there is a Black poetic mechanism, much like the musical ones, which can transform a Shakespearean sonnet into a jazz poem, the basic conceptual model of Black poetry. The technique, the fundamental device, would be improvisation, lying as it does at the very heart of jazz music.«<sup>4</sup>

While such musico-literary approaches are typical of jazz poetry, jazz elements in novels usually appear on the level of content, for example, through a story taking place in a jazz setting or through fictional characters who are jazz musicians. Julio Cortázar's *The Pursuer* is an exemplary jazz novel in that sense: The story centers around the jazz life of the protagonist Johnny Carter, who strongly resembles alto saxophonist Charlie Parker.<sup>5</sup> In comparison, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* is a very different kind of jazz text: A humorous exploration of the cultural roots of black music is framed by a fictional narrative that is written in an idiosyncratic prose style that successfully transfers the aesthetics of jazz to the medium of literature.<sup>6</sup> These jazz-informed oral poetics are characteristic for Reed's work as a whole: Significantly, he recorded several of his poems with numerous well-known jazz

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4 Henderson, Stephen. *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic Reference*. New York: Morrow, 1973. Langston Hughes was among the first African-American poets who used elements and motives of black music in his poems to assert a genuine black cultural identity marked by difference toward the white cultural mainstream. Hughes's jazz-inspired poems are thus important intertexts in the jazz-related work of several poets associated with the Black Arts Movement, many of which are included in *Understanding the New Black Poetry*.

5 Cortázar's »The Pursuer« is included in the collection *End of the Game and Other Stories*. London: Lowe & Brydone, 1968. Pp. 182–247.

6 Reed, Ishmael. *Mumbo Jumbo*. New York: Scribner, 1996.

and blues musicians in the band project *Conjure*,<sup>7</sup> thereby signifying on the jazz and poetry movement that emerged during the 1950 when the cultural force of jazz in the post-war era inspired several poets, many of whom were associated with the Beat movement, to recite their texts to the accompaniment of improvising jazz musicians. As Feinstein and Komunyakaa comment:

»The short-lived success of the poetry & jazz movement in the 50s unfortunately colored the opinions of many critics with regard to jazz-related poetry. Even at the height of the poetry & jazz readings, there was significant criticism, much of it justified, that the cross-medium relationship seemed forced – that neither art form was allowed to breathe.«<sup>8</sup>

Although certain forms of jazz writing, like some (though not all) of the works produced in the context of the poetry and jazz movement as described by Feinstein and Komunyakaa, did not prove to be of lasting value because the differences between the two media were not always successfully bridged, numerous jazz-inspired poems and novels have gained canonical status.<sup>9</sup> This is not the case for the small

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7 *Conjure. Music for the Texts of Ishmael Reed*. American Clavé CD 1006, 1986; *Cab Calloway Stands In for the Moon*. American Clavé CD 1015, 1988; *Bad Mouth*. American Clavé amcl 1053/53, 2005.

8 Feinstein, Sascha and Yusef Komunyakaa. »Preface.« *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*. Feinstein and Komunyakaa, eds. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991. Pp. xvii–xx: xvii. As Daniel Belgrad explains: »[...] the jazz-poetry performances of the late 1950s were not so much true collaborations as poetry readings with musical accompaniment, in which the musical voices were subordinated to a prepared poetic text. [...] the dynamics of the voices tended to be those of an unequal conversation [...]«.« See: Belgrad, Daniel. *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998. P. 217.

9 Among the best-known poets whose work is, at least in part, inspired by jazz are Amiri Baraka, Sterling A. Brown, Gregory Corso, Michael S. Harper, Langston Hughes, Ted Joans, Bob Kaufman, Jack Kerouac, and Ishmael Reed. Although many commentators (including Feinstein and Komunyakaa) are critical of the poetry and jazz movement, there are some historical and contemporary documents that reveal that collaborations between poets and jazz musicians can be worthwhile; see, for example, Kerouac, Jack feat. Al Cohn and Zoot Sims. *Blues and Haikus*. Hanover LP 5006, 1959; Hughes, Langston/Charles Mingus. *The*