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Who Is Jazz? The Jazzfest Berlin at 60
George E. Lewis

Hello everyone. I'm George Lewis, speaking to you over video from the Columbia University Institute for Ideas and Imagination. I regret that I cannot be with you in person this evening, as we celebrate the 60th Anniversary of Jazzfest Berlin. It is a tremendous honor for me to present some opening remarks for the commemoration.

For the past year I have been part of the Jazzfest's project of documentation and critical reflection on this important festival. This visionary project of Nadin Deventer, the first female artistic director of the Jazzfest Berlin, is unprecedented among festivals of any musical genre, and has just resulted in an important new publication that includes my short essay on the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians and the Jazzfest Berlin.

In preparing this essay, I dove into 60 years of concert programs and commentary that the Jazzfest Berlin made available to a select group of researchers. I quickly realized that it was an aspect of my own history that I was confronting. I was an active performer in six Jazzfest Berlin concerts. The first was with the Anthony Braxton Quartet + and Gruppe Neue Musik Berlin in 1976.

I also performed with Duck and Cover in 1983, the Globe Unity Orchestra in both 1986 and 2006, the orchestra's 40th anniversary, The Now Orchestra from Vancouver, Canada (2002); and Splitter Orchester in 2015. I have both performed with and performed scholarship on many of the artists who have taken part in Jazzfest Berlin events. This was both historical and auto-ethnographic—for example, I am probably the only person who has both performed with the Art Ensemble of Chicago and published historical work on them.

Moreover, I was reviewing my own long-standing and fruitful history with Germany and German musical and intellectual culture, which began at the age of nine, when I first started learning the German language. Somehow this chance initial meeting with German as a child has led to a major part of my life, starting with my first visit to Europe in 1976 with Anthony Braxton at the Moers Festival of New Jazz. Over the years I have been privileged to perform with many of the most innovative musicians in the world, many of whom are German. The list is far too long to recount here, so I'd like to ask forgiveness for not including it in this short 15-minute talk. Rather, I'd just like to express my sense of honor at having been accepted by creative communities here.

The Jazzfest Berlin is one of the most ardently international festivals in the world, one whose curation often enough explicitly calls into question the borders of jazz. But rather than trying to police or even explode those borders, I'd like to explore the subjectivities of jazz. So the question I want to take up with you now is not "What is jazz," but "Who is jazz?"

Practically since its origins, jazz has been marked by an mobility and instability of identity – as Ottmar Ette described the philosophy of the 18th century Afro-German Anton Wilhelm Amo, "ohne festen Wohnsitz," without a fixed abode. A possibly apocryphal quote attributed to George Gershwin, dated around 1926, portrayed him as observing that the word jazz "was used for so many things that it has ceased to have any definite meanings." Now, like classical music, diverse forms of jazz continue to be disseminated on a global scale, and we can easily observe

that the impossibility of assigning a definite meaning to the word follows from its having been invoked in so many places, by so many diverse cultures.

At the end of the 1950s, European jazz was in the throes of an identity crisis, where European musicians were said to inhabit a landscape in which aesthetic, methodological and stylistic direction flowed for the overwhelming part from the metropole of America to the tributaries in their own lands. By the mid-1960s a kind of declaration of independence arose, a move toward aesthetic and historical self-determination that included extensions, ironic revisions and outright rejections of American jazz styles. Borrowing from a critically important event in 19th Century American history, the end of chattel slavery, the influential former Jazzfest Berlin artistic director Joachim Ernst Berendt called this "The Emancipation" (Berendt 1977, 222).

There is little question that Berendt's term "Emanzipation" references notions of blackness – except that in this case, one can imagine that a supposed domination of blackness was what European musicians were emancipating themselves from.

However, the reality is more complex. First of all, the first generation of European free jazz improvisors made no attempt to deny the Afrological influence upon their work. Rather, these musicians were heavily invested in notions of sonic personality that are based primarily in Afrological models – in particular, the imperative to create one's own sound as a marker of history, experience, memory and identity – in this case, European history, experience, memory and identity.
Thus, what Wolfram Knauer describes as a Selbstwerdung, a self-realization, can be viewed as connected with the Afrological notion of improvisation as a process of finding one's own sound.

As the great trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff, also a former Jazzfest Berlin director, put it, even as one admires American musicians, "... man sollte bei aller Bewunderung nicht vergessen, daß man in erster Linie seine eigene Persönlichkeit, seine eigene Konzeption des Jazz musikalisch ausdrücken sollte." (Knauer 1996, 150) [One should not forget, despite all the admiration, that one should primarily express one's own personality, one's own conception of jazz.]

But even in the midst of the move towards "emancipation" from US jazz models, which is now worldwide, African-American musical culture and its experiments still loom large in the background and development of jazz around the world--whether as revered predecessors, favored colleagues, objects of critique or ambivalence, or as foil for a negative aesthetic. Jazz is obviously a world music, like the classical music to which it is often compared, as well as hip hop, less often the Other of comparison.

In older narratives about world jazz, some sort of encounter with African American (or American) predecessor leads to a local variant, a practice of hybridity, or a new musical form. But now, and more crucially, jazz is a participant in the polyaspora, a post-diaspora in which the notion of a real or imagined "home" becomes supplanted by flows--intercultural, intermedial, and interdisciplinary; conscious, collaborative, creolized, and connected across borders of aesthetics, practices, gender, ethnicity, race, and transnational formations.

US jazz discourse valorizes the trope of storytelling as a metaphor for improvisation, but non-US jazz stories are very different from what US followers of the genre may be used to. For example, US chattel slavery is said to be embedded in the historical, aesthetic, and affective fabric of

jazz. But no one living in the US now remembers slavery, while an African jazz musician of today can speak of apartheid, or even contemporary forms of slavery itself, not to mention years-long occupations, military dictatorships, or martial law on their native soil.
A musician whose upbringing took place under European Communism can reference dealings with cultural commissars, while Argentinian, Chilean or Brazilian jazz stories can reference military rule and unexplained disappearances of family and friends.

Even scholars who normally and unproblematically invoke the word "jazz" are certainly aware of the contention, disapprobation, and downright denial that the term continues to provoke across generations of African American musicians. Thus, we have Max Roach, whose vehemence on this issue is worth considering at length:

> Let us first eliminate the term "jazz." It is not a term or a name that we, as black musicians, ever gave to the art which we created. It is a name which was given to the Afro-American's art form by white America, and which therefore inherits all the racist and prurient attitudes which have been directed to all other aspects of the black experience in this country ... What "jazz" means to me is the worst kind of working conditions, the worst in cultural prejudice ... small dingy places, the worst kinds of salaries and conditions that one can imagine. The term "jazz" has come to mean the abuse and exploitation of black musicians; it has come to mean cultural prejudice and condescension. It has come to mean all of these things, and that is why I am presently writing a book, I Hate Jazz. It's not my name and it means my oppression as a man and musician.[1]

Of course, the Jazzfest Berlin, since its inception, has never conformed to Max Roach's downbeat description. But many venues do, and in this light it seems somewhat surprising that so many non-US musicians, institutions, and festivals chose to dialogue with, identify with, and name themselves as "jazz." But we can also see that the work of understanding the effects of genre discourses comes with the territory of the jazz musician. For Roach, at the location of genre, the personal and political intersect with considerations of infrastructure, power, and symbolic capital.

Who wants to be a jazz musician? What are the benefits, the costs, the risks? Why do non-African American musicians embrace the term as their own when the history in African America before 1980 is one of contestation and even refusal? For one thing, jazz, with its ability to cross borders, is still recognized as an international symbol of freedom and mobility.

Jazz has already contributed to the ongoing project of the *Emanzipation* of European culture. But jazz remains on the edge of empire. Why? Because jazz embodies the acceptance of difference and the imperative of criticality – always inconvenient, even anathema, to the myth-making that attends nation-building. There goes jazz, the laughing outsider[2] even in its homeland, representing change, internationalism and diversification. Where other forms of popular music – even hip-hop, as with the billionaire entrepreneur Jay-Z – have eventually

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[1] Max Roach, "Beyond Categories", in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History,* ed. Robert Walser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 307.
[2] This variant on the outsider characterization of free improvisation comes from Patrik Landolt and Ruedi Wyss, ed. *Die Lachenden Aussenseiter* (Zürich: Rotpunktverlag, 1994).

managed to come to an accommodation with power, jazz still seems to act as a tack on the seat, a banana peel under the foot, a burr under the saddle.

Jazz in its various forms still serves as a medium of real-time sonic exchange of cultural values. This is due to improvisation, which is not only the common ground of jazz, but also the lifeblood of human experience itself. But improvisation is a dangerous, complex, and unstable hybrid, comprised of agency, indeterminacy, analysis of conditions, judgment, vulnerability, and the ineffability of choice – all of which, as we see with the dynamics of migration, can take place at any time scale, not just "in the moment."

So as we consider jazz's contribution to what decolonization might sound like, my concluding dialogue draws from the irony of a quote widely attributed to Louis Armstrong:

"Q.: What is jazz? Who is jazz?
A.: I know you have to ask – but really, you'll never know."

Happy Birthday Jazzfest Berlin!