

What bebop meant to jazz history

John Andrews
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Book review

The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History

By Scott DeVeaux, University of California Press, 1997, 664 pages, \$35.00

This century saw jazz develop from a folk music with New Orleans roots to an internationally recognized art form, in the process incorporating increasingly complex techniques and expressing a wider and more profound range of human emotion and experience. Jazz, although uniquely American in origin, is an art form combining many different cultural influences and musical traditions.

Excellent jazz players have come from different ethnic groups and, indeed, different nations. Most of the music's innovators and leading voices, however, have been black Americans, the descendants of slaves. This concurrence between the black population in the United States and jazz music has led to all sorts of political and sociological debate, most of it taking place on a very low level.

The essential lines of the dispute pit those who see jazz as an art form which transcends questions of race against those who contend jazz is a black product which, therefore, "belongs" to black people. The latter position has, not surprisingly, been enthusiastically embraced not only by black nationalists but also by the former Stalinists and radicals who constitute the middle-class left in the United States.

Recently, a number of books have been published examining the development of jazz music, and its relationship to social and cultural issues in the United States. This review of Scott DeVeaux's *The Birth of Bebop* is the first in a series of World Socialist Web Site articles on this subject.

"Bebop," as used in the title of DeVeaux's book refers to the modern jazz pioneered by alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, pianist Thelonius Monk and other young jazz musicians during the early 1940s. An onomatopoeic play on the quick staccato rhythms that sometimes appeared in its melodies, the name was meant derisively. It stuck, however, and is used respectfully by musicians and aficionados today, often in its shortened form--"bop."

When bebop exploded on the scene just as World War II was ending, the rhythmic intricacies, advanced harmonies and sometimes frantic tempos of its virtuoso improvisers, primarily within small combos, seemed an extreme and abrupt departure from the big dance bands that dominated popular music during the prewar years. Many established jazz musicians, including the progenitor Louis Armstrong, condemned the new music as noisy and unswinging. With 50 years of hindsight, however, the change appears much less dramatic. In fact, bebop's musical advances were firmly embedded in, and to a certain extent anticipated by, the best jazz players who preceded it.

Jazz and art

Bebop marks the stage at which jazz completed its transformation from

entertainment into art. Although there was certainly much in jazz music that qualified as art prior to bebop, during the 1930s swing music to a large extent played much the same role as rock music has since the 1950s--entertaining masses of youth. Jazz was usually tied to dancing or to backing entertainers who sang and danced. (There were exceptions, of course. For example, John Hammond promoted jazz "concerts," a novel conception at the time, in venues such as Carnegie Hall.)

Bop marked the point at which both the musicians and their audience became widely conscious that jazz was an art form. For the first time serious listening to the music, especially the improvised solos, became primary. The musicians concerned themselves, for the most part, more with developing the technical aspects of the music and increasing its aesthetic qualities, rather than just creating something that would enlarge their audience, and therefore their wallets.

Today, performances of earlier jazz forms such as swing and Dixieland tend to sound dated and nostalgic, but bebop remains fresh and modern. This follows from the fact that jazz music continued to develop technically up to the bebop era, but since that time has progressed principally by working through the advances of bebop or by grafting other musical traditions, such as bossa nova or rock, with modern jazz. As DeVeaux eloquently explains, "bebop is the point at which our contemporary ideas of jazz come into focus. It is both the source of the present--that great revolution in jazz which made all subsequent jazz modernisms possible--and the prism through which we absorb the past. To understand jazz, one must understand bebop."

DeVeaux, a music professor at the University of Virginia with a doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley, is one of the first academics holding a jazz music position with a major university to publish a book on the development of the music. Previous books on jazz have been the product of jazz critics, musicians or amateur enthusiasts. Precisely because he is a professor, his book is infected with the pretentious, roundabout and ponderous writing which seems mandatory these days at institutes of higher learning. Despite its limitations, including insufferable digressions into technical minutiae and a plethora of inadequately explained "musical examples," the book does contain considerable insight into the interplay between the music business and the creation of music in the largely segregated United States of the prewar and war years.

DeVeaux divides the traditional approaches to writing about the advent of bebop into the school of "evolution" versus that of "revolution." The former, he contends, "privileges continuity over discontinuity" where "the process of change that links these styles is seen as a gradual, linear evolution, conserving essential qualities even as it introduces innovations." The latter sees "bebop as a rejection of the status quo, a sharp break with the past that ushers in something genuinely new--in a word discontinuity."

"Characteristically," DeVeaux writes, "the revolutionary qualities of bop are situated not within but outside the jazz tradition, in the collision between jazz as an artistic endeavor and the social forces of commerce and race. Thus, bebop is often construed as a protest against commercialism: through an uncompromising complexity of their art, bop

musicians are said to have asserted their creative independence from the marketplace. Bebop is also frequently cast in explicitly racial terms: as a movement by young African-American musicians (Parker, Gillespie, Monk) seeking to create an idiom expressive of the black subculture, not the white mainstream. While separable, these themes of revolution tend to intertwine as a rebellion by black musicians against a white-controlled capitalist hegemony."

A third path?

DeVeaux attempts to explore a third path, one which incorporates elements of "evolution," and turns the objective of the bop "revolution" on its head. His central thesis: "As the Swing Era inevitably cooled off, competition stiffened and the underlying inequities of race were felt with renewed force. Entrenched patterns of segregation, both in the music industry and in society at large, automatically gave white musicians a nearly insuperable advantage in the mainstream market, blunting black ambition and forcing it into new channels. Bebop was a response to this impasse, an attempt to reconstitute jazz--or more precisely, the specialized idiom of the improvising virtuoso--in such a way as to give its black creators the greatest professional autonomy *within* the marketplace." (DeVeaux's italics)

In other words, DeVeaux argues that bebop was created by black musicians--squeezed out of regular music jobs by inferior white musicians--so that they would have something distinctive to market. Rather than protesting commercialism, the boppers were looking to create a technically impenetrable niche for their own commercial exploitation.

DeVeaux would have benefited from approaching his subject dialectically. The "discontinuity" which marked the change from swing to bop was very much a part of the "evolution" of jazz music. Late in the 1930s, more advanced musicians were seeking ways out of the strictures of the earlier style. The "leap" into bebop was a classic case of these quantitative changes transforming into a sudden qualitative change.

Moreover music, as with all forms of culture, develops within definite historical and material conditions. After all, the musician does not create unless he eats, and his output is limited in a very material way by the instruments and training to which he has access. To create at the highest levels, the musician must be a professional, dedicating all his energies to developing, refining and maintaining his skill. Since a professional musician must sell his creative product in order to survive, the eternal question for serious jazz musicians has always been whether to pursue an aesthetic goal, at the risk of alienating sections of the public, or to cash in on their skills by orienting to the popular music industry.

Despite the obvious gravitational pull of the market, musicians have been known to create music for its own sake. The bebop revolution of the 1940s provides an exemplary example. When a school of artists successfully finds a new way to communicate aesthetically, they not infrequently leave behind popular tastes and the financial rewards that flow from adapting to them. This is, generally, what happened to the boppers. The power of the emotions this new music tapped, combined with the alienation of its creators from the social mainstream, no doubt contributed to the high incidence of substance abuse, particularly deadly heroin addiction, which devastated their ranks.

Regardless of whatever suffering accompanies artistic endeavors, there is something especially fulfilling, a profound inner joy, that arises from communicating the creative, artistic experience itself. It is this experience, I believe, which motivated the bop greats far more than the immediate financial concerns on which DeVeaux places so much emphasis throughout his book. By seeking to reduce bop to nothing more than a

gimmick for black musicians to make money at the expense of their less gifted but more privileged white counterparts, DeVeaux unconsciously translates profound questions of art and society into the crude language of the 1990s--that the sole purpose of human activity is the accumulation of personal wealth and privileges, with various groups pitted against each other along racial and ethnic lines.

Coleman Hawkins

DeVeaux tells his story with an unwarranted focus on Coleman Hawkins, the superlative swing era virtuoso justifiably regarded as the father of all jazz tenor saxophonists, but not a bop musician. Hawkins emerged from the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra under the spell of its greatest improviser, Louis Armstrong, and in 1934 emigrated to Europe, where he was able to perform improvised solos for appreciative audiences outside the stifling structures of the dance bands. Upon his return to the United States in 1939, he recorded a stunningly beautiful solo masterpiece on the standard "Body and Soul," a huge seller which was later set to words by jazz singer Eddie Jefferson, and then again, in harmony, by the Manhattan Transfer.

Rather than rejecting bebop, as did most of his contemporaries, Hawkins fronted groups in 1944 that featured many of the new musicians, including Monk, Gillespie and the brilliant young drummer Max Roach (one of the few original bop musicians still active in music). Nevertheless, Hawkins's own playing did not successfully incorporate the innovations of his younger sidemen.

In placing such emphasis on the role played by Coleman Hawkins, DeVeaux overlooks the swing era tenor saxophonist generally credited as being the fount of the boppers' new musical ideas, Lester Young of the Count Basie Orchestra. Although he gives trumpeter Howard McGee a well-deserved spotlight, DeVeaux all but ignores such early bebop greats as trumpeters Fats Navarro and Miles Davis, pianist Bud Powell, and tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon.

DeVeaux seeks to prove his conclusion with a nuts and bolts examination of the economics of the music business. His starting point is the special attraction that careers in the dance bands held for black youth because music provided one of the few avenues in the 1920s and 30s through which they could advance socially. Although he points out that early in the century jazz musicians came disproportionately from the ranks of the black middle class, many aspiring black musicians lacked the resources for extensive formal training. As a result, there was an astounding development of instrumental individuality and imagination, which has contributed so much to the distinctive character and appeal of jazz over the years.

DeVeaux explains with great passion that despite the commercial success of the bands, the twin impact of the Depression and Jim Crow racism caused great hardships and a never-ending string of petty humiliations for these talented musicians. Excluded from extended engagements in major metropolitan hotels and on radio shows (which were dominated by white bands such as Goodman's and the Dorsey Brothers'), black jazz musicians spent endless months on uncomfortable buses performing one nighters, one after the other, especially in the South, where they could not even sleep in hotels or eat in restaurants.

The advent of World War II brought these relations to a crashing halt. Conscription decimated the ranks of the big bands and gas shortages halted the tours. A ban on recording declared by the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) in 1942 lasted two years. DeVeaux argues that due to racial discrimination, the few remaining jazz jobs went mostly to white musicians, but his evidence on this point is weak, and is inconsistent with

radio transcriptions and films of the period. In any event, the result of this process, he contends, was the sudden appearance of regular Harlem jam sessions at which the new musicians, including Charlie Christian (before his untimely death of tuberculosis in 1942), Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, and drummer Kenny Clarke, worked out the new musical vocabulary.

Harlem jam sessions

DeVeaux's tracing of this history, especially the details of the Harlem jam sessions and the early bebop groups and recording sessions, is admirable. His conclusion--that the purpose of these efforts was to work out music too complex for white imitators--is questionable, at best. There were parallel developments in modern classical music as well as in "progressive" white big bands, particularly those of Boyd Raeburn (with whom Dizzy Gillespie first recorded "Night in Tunisia"), Stan Kenton and Woody Herman. Moreover, most early bebop groups featured white musicians, including drummers Stan Levey and Shelley Manne, pianists George Wallington, Al Haig and Joe Albany, and trumpeter Red Rodney.

Moreover, DeVeaux's racialist thesis is contradicted by the statements of the bop pioneers themselves, who, despite the terrible impact segregation must have had on the musicians in the 1940s, did not respond with black nationalist and separatist views. The development of bebop, in the aftermath of World War II, signified a certain optimism and hope about the ability to break down racial barriers. Frankly, when appreciating recordings of this music, it doesn't matter one bit whether musicians like Charlie Parker were white or black.

I think Parker's words on the subject are much more persuasive than DeVeaux's arguments. During a 1954 interview, Parker claimed that in the early 1940s he had "no idea [bebop] was that much different" than the jazz which preceded it. "Ever since I've ever heard music," Parker explained, "I thought it should be very clean, very precise, as clean as possible anyway, and more or less to the people, something they could understand, something that was beautiful."

What is the content of this "something that was beautiful" to which Parker, perhaps the greatest of all jazz musicians, thinks should be directed "more or less to the people"? By fixating on race, DeVeaux avoids tackling this more fundamental question. Music is by its nature the most abstract of all art forms, yet its allure lies in its ability to concretize the most fundamental human emotions. As WSWS arts editor David Walsh explained, "Art is very much bound up with the struggle, as old as human consciousness, to shape the world, including human relations, in accordance with beauty and the requirements of freedom, with life as it ought to be." The gulf between the world as it is for the jazz virtuoso of the 1940s--dominated by war, gross social inequality, degrading racial discrimination, and, often, philistine ignorance, and how it ought to be--full of beauty and freedom, gives the resulting spontaneous improvisations of the jazz master of the 1940s an added passion.

But these strong emotions transcend the immediate circumstances that produced them, and pass into a far more universal sphere. That is why, virtually from its beginning, this wonderful music has found such a devoted following throughout the world.

See Also:

A letter to John Andrews: Two questions about jazz history





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