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Burns, Baby, Burns: jazz history as a contested cultural site

The controversial critical reception of Ken Burns's PBS documentary *Jazz* (2001) served to highlight the extent to which jazz history remains a highly contested cultural site. The debate over Burns's documentary played out in both the popular press and academic journals throughout late-2000 and 2001,¹ and still offers a lively discussion topic in jazz circles. Although the title of my paper might appear to hold out the promise of a review of the links between Ken Burns's work and 1970s disco music, these are avenues that I will leave unexplored. Rather, my concern is to examine the manner in which the controversy represented another ongoing skirmish on the discursive battlefield that is jazz history, suggesting the need for a considerably broader conceptualization of jazz – and jazz history – than that offered in Burns's documentary.

Having established these objectives, at this early stage I should clarify that, in framing my argument, I make no claims to sociological 'objectivity' – a concept which is somewhat spurious at the best of times. I count myself among Burns's critics, and remain disappointed that such a major undertaking – a \$14 million, 19-hour public television documentary – should have been informed by such an overly romanticized and narrowly partial vision of jazz history: as head scriptwriter Geoff Ward observed wryly, "There's something missing for everyone" (quoted in Edgerton, 2001: 216).

But leaving jazz history aside for a moment, there is little doubt, as Gary Edgerton (2001) has argued in his book-length study of Burns and his work, that *Jazz* fits readily into Burns's liberal, pluralistic – and highly romantic – vision of American cultural history, as expressed in his previous documentary series, including *The Civil War* (1990), *Baseball* (1994), and the biographies which comprised *American Lives: Thomas Jefferson* (1997), *Lewis & Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery* (1997), *Frank Lloyd Wright* (1998), and *Not For Ourselves Alone: The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony* (1999). In this sense, jazz can be understood, in Burns's own words, as "merely a delivery vehicle" for his ongoing project (quoted in Edgerton, 2001: 187), which Edgerton characterises in terms of its "consistency of vision" (2001: 195). Although such an understanding may serve to clarify the somewhat problematic role that jazz fulfils in the context of Burns's broader 'vision',² it does little to explain the biases and elisions of the series, which, in addition to the contributions of Geoff Ward, Wynton Marsalis (Senior Creative

¹ See, for example, Gabbard (2000), Ratliff (2001), Davis (2001), Santoro (2001), Radano (2001). See also the letter to the New York Times by the pianist Keith Jarrett (2001).

² By his own admission, Burns knew little about jazz before embarking on the series – in the Introduction to the book which accompanies the series, Burns writes: "When I began the project, I had perhaps two jazz records in my fairly large music collection" (Ward, 2000: x).

The Source

Consultant) and Dan Morgenstern (Senior Advisor), was aided and abetted by an advisory board more than 20-strong.³

Notwithstanding the notions of collaboration and community so often invoked in any characterisation of jazz practice, the controversy surrounding the documentary suggested that, rather than conforming to the comfortably linear history of 'Great Men' that Burns's film suggests, the history of jazz and improvised music needs to be understood in terms of a series of disparate, fragmented, and often highly divisive communities, whether, for example, those labelled as Dixieland, swing, bebop, free jazz, neo-traditional, or 'downtown'. To illustrate this point, I want to start with a quote from Bill Evans, the jazz pianist and composer: "The person who sees furthest into the future is likely to be the person who sees furthest into the past" (quoted in Harrison, 1976: 112). What I want to suggest here is that, over a number of years, Evans's evocative proposition has been interpreted – knowingly or unknowingly – in a variety of ways by a wide range of jazz musicians, critics, and scholars.

For some, it has served as a classicizing, canonizing statement of organicism and teleological progress, in which the various styles, schools, and genres of the music are understood to have been shaped by a cyclical process of artistic cause and effect, allowing them to be retrospectively ordered and categorized by the jazz equivalent of the periodizing, taxonomic discourses prevalent in historical musicology and traditional art history: the work of Joachim-Ernst Berendt (1975) springs readily to mind here. For others, it has represented a traditionalist mantra, invoking an ultimately conservative vision of the music, entirely beholden – indeed, held hostage – to its own 'authentic' history, resulting in an understanding of 'jazz' which is narrowly reductionist: I have in mind here Wynton Marsalis's confident claim to know "What Jazz Is – And Isn't" (1988) – a significant point, given that, as noted above, Marsalis served as Senior Creative Consultant on the Burns project. And for yet others, it has been read as a postmodern invitation to artistic engagement with what Umberto Eco characterizes as the "already said" (1985: 68), revisiting, reassessing, reworking – and sometimes ironically ransacking – the musical past in the forging of new forms of innovation and creativity: and my example in this case is the work of John Zorn and the New York downtown scene.

The perspectives outlined above are readily apparent in the increasingly contested contemporary terrain of jazz scholarship, in which narrowly discursive constructions of jazz history and reductively formalist interpretations of jazz texts have become the subject of considerable critique and debate.⁴ The revisionist reply to such confident, linear tropes has been to interrogate more closely the discursive construction of jazz history, examining the complex processes of canonic re-evaluation and reformulation which have influenced and mediated the formation of jazz and its canons. This has

³ The advisory board was comprised of Michael Chertok, James Lincoln Collier, Stanley Crouch, Michael Cuscuna, Dayton Duncan, Julie Dunfey, Gerald Early, Tom Evered, Gary Giddens, Matt Glaser, Joanna Groning, Eric Hobsbaum, Robin D.G. Kelley, Charlie Lourie, Allen Lowe, Albert Murray, Daniel Okrent, Bruce Boyd Raeburn, Loren Schoenberg, Gunter Schuller, and Margaret Washington.

⁴ See, for example, DeVeaux (1998), Gabbard (1995c, 1996), Tomlinson (1992), Radano (1993), and Lewis (1996). See also the range of essays in Gabbard (1995a, 1995b), especially Walser (1995), Kenney (1995), Gendron (1995), and Elworth (1995).

Burns, Baby, Burns

involved a focus on significant 'moments' in the development of jazz, addressing the range of factors that have contributed to debates over musical value and canonicity.⁵

A significant early 'moment' in the history of jazz was the period in the early decades of the twentieth century when the understanding of the music began to shift from that of popular entertainment to that of art music: a shift in which the discourses of jazz criticism played a major part.⁶ The debate here was between an essentialized notion of jazz as a 'primitive', 'authentic', 'folk' form of black expression – a view still being expressed much later in the century (e.g. Taylor, 1978) – and an understanding of the music which privileged musical form and individual creativity, with Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington featuring as key figures in this latter scenario.⁷

The debates between swing and bop – between the 'Moldy Figs' and the Modernists⁸ – in the 1940s intensified this discursive construction of jazz as an autonomous art form, representing not only a divisive conflict between the discourses of (predominantly white) populist entertainment and (primarily black) artistic innovation, but also serving, in distinctly non-divisive fashion, to legitimate jazz as an 'organic' tradition. As Scott DeVeaux has suggested:

In the long run, it proved as much in the interests of the modernists to have their music legitimated as the latest phase in a (now) long and distinguished tradition, as it was in the interests of the proponents of earlier jazz styles (whether New Orleans jazz or swing) not to be swept aside as merely antiquarian.
(DeVeaux, 1998: 494)

But the discursive shifts in the understanding of 'jazz' – from a 'folk' music to a 'popular' music to an 'art' music – have been neither linear nor categorical, and the discursive confusion of the 1930s and 1940s only intensified as jazz continued to expand its musical influences and resources throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, with the various discourses continuing to co-exist and clash in an often jarring and confusing manner.

Within the context of the mainstream of jazz scholarship, the discursive construction of jazz as an art form was accompanied by the employment of a range of analytical techniques that reflected the primarily modernist perspectives underlying such constructions. Indeed, as jazz began to be assimilated into the academy in the 1960s, it was most often on the basis of the familiar modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy and transcendence, focusing on formalist, decontextualized readings of musical texts, and the valorization of individual artists and their exemplary contributions (e.g. Schuller, 1968, 1989; Gioia, 1988).

⁵ For a useful summary of several of these 'moments', see Harvey (1991).

⁶ See Welburn (1986) and Frith (1988). See also Peretti (1992), and the early articles in Walser (1999).

⁷ It is worthwhile noting that both Armstrong and Ellington appear in each of the ten episodes of Burns's series. No other figures are offered such extensive coverage.

⁸ See Gendron (1995). See also Gabbard (1996) and DeVeaux (1997).

The Source

Hence, when jazz improvisations have been subjected to close musical analysis, it has tended to be at the expense of the specificities of the music, the very nature of the analytical tools resulting in a formalist self-fulfilling prophesy, privileging characteristics such as thematic unity and structural coherence over any alternative readings, and virtually ignoring broader questions of socio-historical context (e.g. Schuller, 1958).⁹ For many observers, such formalist emphasis on questions of aesthetic autonomy, musical structure, and individual creative genius has done nothing other than confirm the 'high art' status of jazz: a status which is explicitly asserted in those canonical characterizations of jazz which claim it as 'America's Classical Music' (Sales, 1984; Taylor, 1986).¹⁰

It is undoubtedly these kind of perspectives, coupled with Marsalis's neo-traditionalism, which served as the framework for Burns's documentary, resulting in a narrow interpretation of 'jazz', and offering a historical narrative which effectively stalls somewhere in the mid-1960s, extending to the 1970s simply to record the deaths of Armstrong and Ellington. By the mid-1970s, then, for Burns and his team, jazz is no longer regarded as a living music, and the innovations of free jazz, fusion, and a range of subsequent musical developments (the AACM, the loft scene, the downtown scene, and the music documented by several significant European record labels, including Black Saint, Hat Art, and ECM) are virtually disregarded. The final episode of the series, 'A Masterpiece by Midnight, 1960 to the Present', covers 40 years of jazz history in less than two hours, with the last quarter of the twentieth century receiving no more than 30 minutes of air-time.¹¹ The evaluative judgements encoded in this editorial decision are neatly summarised by Geoff Ward in the companion volume for the series:

No book, no shelf of books, could adequately map the course of jazz after 1960, let alone trace the meandering paths of its proliferating tributaries. No Great Man can be said to have towered over everyone else, as Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker could be said to have done in their time, but John Coltrane and Miles Davis were surely among the most influential of all post-bebop musicians, and their careers touched upon many of the most important developments in the music, both good and ill.

⁹ For critiques of this approach, see Gabbard (1995c) and (Walser, 1995). In sharp contrast to the formal, 'syntactical' tropes prevalent in traditional musicology (e.g. Meyer, 1956), Charles Keil's concept of 'participatory discrepancies' (1994a, 1994b) represents a singular – and singularly neglected – attempt to theorize the fundamental characteristics of jazz improvisation. See also George Lewis's (1996) discussion of the links between Cageian indeterminacy and jazz improvisation. On improvisation, see also Bailey (1993) and Berliner (1994).

¹⁰ Commentators such as these might do well to take heed of Duke Ellington's comments, written in 1944: "To attempt to elevate the status of the jazz musician by forcing the level of his best work into comparison with classical music is to deny him his rightful share of originality" (quoted in Clarke, 1998: 407).

¹¹ With the exception of the broad historical sweep of the opening instalment of the series, 'Gumbo, Beginnings to 1917', no single episode has such a truncated historical narrative: none of the eight middle episodes cover more than a decade, with the fifth and sixth episodes, 'Swing: Pure Pleasure, 1935-1937' and 'Swing: The Velocity of Celebration, 1937-1939', devoted to periods of only two or three years.

Burns, Baby, Burns

(Ward, 2000: 432)

The rhetorical construction of this paragraph – its finite historical time-line, its ‘meandering paths’, its reliance on the ‘Great Man’ theory, and, most significantly, its concluding clause, ‘both good and ill’ – leaves the critical reader in no doubt about the negative evaluation being offered of the later work of both Coltrane and Davis, whether based in the avant-garde or fusion. Such rhetoric, of course, is the stuff of ideology, not history, and the failure on the part of Burns and his team to address adequately the last 40 years of jazz development represents not only one of the great weaknesses of the series, but also one of its great missed opportunities, offering instead a narrowly delimited canon of jazz music and performers.¹²

The partiality of these evaluative judgements is no better illustrated than in the treatment afforded the pianist and composer Cecil Taylor in the final episode. In a remarkable change of tone from all the misty-eyed romanticism and hagiography that has gone before,¹³ Branford Marsalis informs the viewer that Taylor’s ideas are “total self-indulgent bullshit”.¹⁴ Marsalis was responding to Taylor’s view that since he prepared for his concerts, the audience should prepare too: a proposition that has much in common with James Joyce’s famous statement that if it took him 17 years to write *Finnegans Wake* then the reader might expect to take 17 years to read it. Although Joyce’s position might test the resolve of even the most committed of Joyceans, the opposing notion – that all modes of artistic creativity somehow communicate with an audience in an ‘unmediated’ fashion – is simply another of the spurious myths that Burns’s series perpetuates. As Paul Mattick has argued, it is “a feature of every work of art... that its readability depends on mastery of the cultural code utilized in its production” (2003: 128; my italics): an admonition that applies as much to the techniques of swing and bebop as to those of the avant-garde.

The problems inherent in the overall approach adopted by the series have already been addressed by several jazz scholars. For example, in his incisive critique of the processes of canon formation in jazz, Gary Tomlinson has suggested that:

the jazz canon has been forged and maintained according to old strategies – Eurocentric, hierarchical notions behind which the rules of aestheticism, transcendentalism, and formalism are apparent... Like the canon of European music, the jazz canon is a strategy for exclusion, a closed and elite collection of ‘classic’ works that together define what is and isn’t jazz.

¹² The concluding section of the final episode displays a fulsome and heavy-handed nepotism, focusing inordinately on Wynton Marsalis.

¹³ For example, in the second episode, ‘The Gift, 1917 – 1924’, the narrator opines that Louis Armstrong’s “extraordinary genius would seem like a gift from God”.

¹⁴ Although Marsalis’s view is ‘balanced’ by Gary Giddens’s more considered, and genuinely educative, comments (“You have to learn to listen to Cecil Taylor”), the overall tenor of the segment is highly negative, concluding with Gene Lees stating: “As I have said about Cecil Taylor – whom I respect, but do not listen to – that he has every right to do exactly what he’s doing, and exactly what he wants to do, and I have a right to listen to somebody else”. Highly relevant here is Lawrence Kramer’s response to readings of Charles Ives’s music that “sacrifice nuance and complexity in order to paint Ives as the devil in disguise” – as Kramer suggests, “Demonology... is just hagiography turned inside out” (1995: 176).

The Source

(Tomlinson, 1992: 75-76)

Noting the manner in which jazz textbooks present the 'classics' of jazz as "exemplars of timeless aesthetic value", Tomlinson suggests that "the jazz canon embodies the aestheticism that continues to circumscribe our teaching of European canons and that short-circuits our understanding of the conditions in which they are made and remade" (1992: 77). Hence, Tomlinson argues, "the jazz canon now shares all the misguided pretensions to transcendent value and meaning that characterize... [earlier European] canons" (1992: 78).

Similarly, in an article addressing the 'problems of jazz discourse', Bruce Johnson has suggested that there is "a radical incompatibility between twentieth-century Modernist aesthetics and jazz" (1993: 10), a point which is further elaborated by Mark Harvey when he argues that: "While jazz evolved simultaneously with modernism, and therefore may certainly be termed a 'modern' music owing to its historical situation, it has not always partaken of the modernist spirit. And even when doing so, the jazz tradition has selectively manifested various attributes of that movement" (Harvey, 1991: 131). Thus, as Harvey suggests, "although modernism elevated innovation to the level of a primary aesthetic principle and sought release from perceived limitations of tradition, jazz has always valued both its sources and its evolving tradition" (1991: 132).

Contrary to the more typically modernist *negation* of prior forms, even the free jazz of the 1960s – which Harvey characterizes as "perhaps the most truly 'modern' of all the developments in jazz" – must be understood in terms of specific notions of innovation *and* tradition, encompassing both "a radically new aesthetic and a radical *reclaiming* of the larger cultural tradition of which the jazz tradition was a part" (Harvey, 1991: 138; my italics).¹⁵ Such critiques of modernist aestheticism point towards an understanding of the musical specificities of jazz development, acknowledging the particular relationship of innovation and tradition that serves to characterize the music.

But if free jazz represented a discursive controversy within jazz development that refused to conform to the aesthetic dictates of modernism, there is little doubt that it served to further confirm the discursive understanding of jazz as 'art'. The controversy over free jazz, then, is perhaps best understood as an *intra*-discursive debate: i.e. as a debate *within* the discourse of 'art', in which an avant-garde, 'ultra-modernist' gesture served to challenge earlier modernist conceptualizations of jazz. Hence, although free jazz was, indeed, a controversial musical development – and one that was often accompanied by a radical black political agenda – it was not one which ultimately challenged the status of jazz as 'art'. On the contrary, for some critics, it simply served to confirm modernist aesthetic notions of avant-garde progress and change.¹⁶

¹⁵ See, for example, Jost (1981), Wilmer (1977), Kofsky (1970) and Thomas (1995). See also Budds (1990).

¹⁶ In more recent years, in a wide range of artistic fields, the notion of avant-garde innovation and experimentation has become somewhat problematic, perhaps highlighting the limits of a 'vanguardist' modernism. Often, it seems, the avant-garde slips into something of a self-

Burns, Baby, Burns

If, as I have suggested, free jazz represented an *intra*-discursive debate within the discourse of 'art', it was perhaps Miles Davis's fusion music of the late 1960s and early 1970s which generated one of the most significant contemporary *inter*-discursive debates within jazz, highlighting the manner in which questions of cultural value have been central to the construction and mediation of the jazz canon. In this case, in contrast to (and in a fascinating reversal of) earlier discursive debates – in which established constructions of jazz as either a 'folk' or 'popular' form were challenged by its claims as 'art' – the discursive point of issue was the challenge to the (by then, well-established) understanding of jazz as an 'art' form by the 'threat' of 'pop'. The most common criticisms of Davis in this period were that he had 'sold out' to commercialism, and that the 'bastardized' music he was playing was no longer 'jazz'.

Stanley Crouch, for example, characterizes Davis as "the most brilliant sellout in the history of jazz... Davis turned butt to the beautiful in order to genuflect before the commercial" (1990: 30); and, for Amiri Baraka, fusion was simply "dollar-sign music" or "new-style mood-music" (1987: 177-178). The entry on Miles Davis in *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Jazz* (Case and Britt, 1978) offers a fine example of the exclusionary nature of the jazz canon, and – notwithstanding the author's caveats to the contrary – emphasizes the highly *non*-arbitrary nature of generic labelling and categorization: "[In 1969], Miles cut what, from a jazz fan's viewpoint, was to be his last album (*In a Silent Way*). Although labels are arbitrary, Miles Davis' subsequent output is of little interest to the jazz record collector" (Case and Britt, 1978: 59). Hence, in turning to the commercial, 'commodified' world of rock as a musical influence, fusion was understood by many observers as an aberrant step in the evolution of a 'pure' or autonomous jazz.¹⁷

However, citing the work of Crouch (1990), Baraka (1987), John Litweiler (1984), and Martin Williams (1989), Tomlinson refutes the charges of 'selling-out' levelled at Davis by these authors, suggesting that such charges simply represent an "antipopulist chauvinism", amounting to "elitism pure and simple, to a snobbish distortion of history by jazz purists attempting to insulate their cherished classics from the messy marketplace in which culture has always been negotiated" (1992: 82). Thus, Tomlinson argues – in a proposition that has implications far beyond the world of fusion – "music created with an eye to eternal genius and blind to the marketplace is a myth of European Romanticism sustained by its chief offspring, modernism" (1992: 83).¹⁸

parody, remaining paradoxically static while new modes of innovation and creativity surpass and overtake it: as the French poet Paul Valéry once said, "everything changes but the avant-garde" (quoted in Epstein, 2003: 17). For an intriguing argument regarding the limits of the modernist avant-garde and the virtual inevitability of a postmodern engagement with the past, see Eco (1985).

¹⁷ Noting a similar – if perhaps less virulent – critical response to the 'funky' hard bop styles of the 1950s – characterized as "regressive" by the critic Martin Williams (quoted in DeVeaux, 1998: 509) – Scott DeVeaux suggests that "dalliance with popular trends seemed to betray the movement of jazz as an art music toward complexity and intricacy" (1998: 502).

¹⁸ Contrary to the narrow chauvinism of those critics identified by Tomlinson, it is worthwhile noting that Berendt's work (1975) is an interesting exception to the rule here, representing an

The Source

Moreover – and contrary to the notion of a populist ‘sell-out’ – it is worthwhile noting that many of Davis’s fusion experiments, particularly those of the early to mid-1970s, represented some of the most uncompromising music of his entire career.¹⁹ Furthermore, the emphasis on collective improvisation in Davis’s fusion music can be understood to suggest links not only with the radical innovations of free jazz, but also – in common with free jazz – to hearken back to an even older jazz tradition. In the liner notes to John Coltrane’s 1965 recording of *Ascension* – a paradigm of 1960s free jazz – the saxophonist Archie Shepp makes these links explicit: “The precedent for what John did here goes all the way back to New Orleans, where the voicings were certainly separate even though the group idea held. This is like a New Orleans concept, but with 1965 people” (quoted in Spellman, 1965). Here, then, is a clear statement of the avant-garde’s ‘reclaiming’ of the jazz tradition that Mark Harvey suggests, linking the collective improvisation of New Orleans jazz with the techniques of free jazz, both of which, in turn, can be understood to have influenced Davis’s early fusion experiments. This would, indeed, have been a fascinating story for Burns to tell, but the team’s antipathy towards both free jazz and fusion meant that these musical forms were barely on the agenda.

Notwithstanding its earlier renunciation, it is fascinating to observe the manner in which fusion has now been largely – if not necessarily comfortably – accommodated within the jazz canon: over the last few years virtually all of Miles Davis’s music from the 1970s (much of it previously unavailable, at least in North America and Europe) has been meticulously remastered and lavishly repackaged by Columbia/Legacy (a point which simply emphasizes the fact that academic scholars, jazz critics, and documentary film-makers have no monopoly on the processes of canon formation); similarly, most jazz textbooks now include – although still often somewhat unwillingly, it seems – a section on fusion or ‘jazz-rock’;²⁰ and, as a final point, it is interesting to note the more recent debate over Bill Laswell’s remixing of Davis’s fusion music,²¹

early inclusion of fusion in the jazz canon. See also Coryell and Friedman (1978). And see Nicholson (1998) for a contemporary history of the field.

¹⁹ Hear, for example, *Live-Evil* (1970; Columbia/Legacy 65135) or the recently issued *Live at the Fillmore East (March 7, 1970)* (1970; Columbia/Legacy 85191), neither of which is readily categorizable as ‘mood-music’. Indeed, further confounding the charge of ‘selling-out’, some critics have noted the explicit links between Miles’s music of this period – especially the 1972 album *On the Corner* (Columbia/Legacy 63980) – and the work of Stockhausen: see Bergstein (1992) and Carr (1982: 211-213).

²⁰ This is not to suggest that the canonic fences have been completely removed, however, and there remains a substantial discursive line between ‘classic’ fusion of the early Miles variety and its more recent ‘light’ manifestations, in the form of Spyro Gyra or Kenny G (see DeVeaux, 1998: 506-507).

²¹ On the 1998 CD *Panthalassa: The Music of Miles Davis 1969-1974; Reconstruction and Mix Translation by Bill Laswell* (Columbia 67909). Hear also *Panthalassa: The Remixes* (1999; Columbia 69897), on which a range of contemporary producers and DJs offer further remixes of these tapes. It is interesting to note that the CD booklet notes for *Panthalassa* include a brief essay by Amiri Baraka in which – illustrating his shifting position on Davis’s fusion music – he suggests that “fusion can be seen as a logical motion of Miles’s American pop-connected aesthetic” (Baraka, 1998).

Burns, Baby, Burns

the latter's now canonic status only being confirmed by the charges of 'blasphemy' levelled at the former.²²

The discursive debates I have highlighted above find their more recent manifestations in the musical tensions between the neo-traditionalist movement typified by the Jazz at Lincoln Center program and the New York downtown scene historically centred on the Knitting Factory. The March 2000 issue of *Jazz Times* dramatized this tension by pitting Wynton Marsalis against John Zorn on its cover, and featuring lengthy interviews with the two protagonists, under the heading "One Future; Two Views" (Milkowski, 2000). Implicit in the article's title is the notion that only one Great Man will emerge from this discursive face-off, the great leveller Time proving the other to have been merely a Pretender to the Throne.

Notwithstanding the problems inherent in any such approach (which runs the risk of simply replicating the 'Great Man' theory employed by Burns and Ward), the debate identified above does pose a significant question: namely, whether these musical tensions can be understood to have had the 'organicist' and legitimating effects which DeVeaux identifies as characteristic of the debates between swing and bebop in the 1940s, or whether, on the contrary, they serve to indicate a more profound discursive rift, suggesting not only an entrenchment and hardening of traditionalist notions of jazz history, but also a failure on the part of many theorists, critics, musicians, and arts managers to come to terms with the new modes of musical innovation and creativity inherent in the postmodern aesthetic techniques of eclecticism, self-reflexivity, and intertextuality which are so characteristic of the musical practices of the downtown scene.²³

The "chauvinism" and "elitism" which Gary Tomlinson (1992: 82) has identified in the fusion debate are also readily apparent in the neo-traditionalist approach evident in the involvement of Wynton Marsalis as Artistic Director of the Jazz at Lincoln Center program.²⁴ In this case, a highly restricted and sometimes racially-motivated understanding of the 'classical' jazz canon has been mobilized in support of a high-profile, publicly-funded jazz series within a major cultural institution.²⁵ The narrowness of vision is no better illustrated than in the program's abortive

²² See, for example, the discussions in Ouellette (1998) and Corbett (1998). The key point here, however, is that, other than in their finally released versions, there were no 'authentic' Davis performances for Laswell to commit blasphemy upon, since all of these performances were studio creations, assembled and edited by Davis and producer Teo Macero from hours of recordings. Furthermore, rather than being 'blasphemous', it could be argued that Laswell's remixes simply serve to confirm Davis's musical prescience, the remixed music, in my view, sounding considerably more 'contemporary' than much of the techno, drum 'n' bass, and jungle which it ultimately served to inspire.

²³ For a brief summary of the defining characteristics of postmodernism, see Stanbridge (2003)

²⁴ For wide-ranging, and generally critical, discussions of this phenomenon, see Lees (1994), Nisenson (1997), and Porter (1997). For cautiously alternative readings, see Gray (1997) and Porter (2002).

²⁵ In May 2000, Jazz at Lincoln Center announced plans for a new \$128 million, 100,000-square-foot performing facility designed specifically for jazz. Somewhat ominously, Marsalis was quoted as saying that "The whole space is going to be dedicated to the feeling of swing". (See the 'New Facility' page on the Jazz at Lincoln Center website: (<http://www.jazzatlincolncenter.org/jalc/facility/index.html>).

The Source

relationship with George Russell, a major figure in the history of jazz (whether as composer, performer, or theorist), unjustifiably neglected in Burns's documentary. Russell's big band, the Living Time Orchestra, employs a wide range of acoustic and electric instruments, drawing freely on jazz and rock techniques, and Eric Nisenson has noted that a commission to Russell from Jazz at Lincoln Center was withdrawn after the organizers discovered that Russell's band included electric instruments (Nisenson, 1997: 239).²⁶

Thus, as Scott DeVeaux has noted, "what distinguishes the neoclassicist attitude is... its heavy-handed attempt to regulate the music of the present through an idealized representation of the past" (1998: 504). In somewhat less circumspect fashion, Lee Brown has characterized Marsalis as a "blatant canonizing elitist" (1997: 328). But perhaps the most incisive contribution to the debate has come from Miles Davis – a 'non-traditional' but nonetheless canonical figure derided by both Crouch and Marsalis.²⁷ Commenting on a speech made by Marsalis at the 1984 Grammy Awards, Davis observed: "He sounded to me like he's supposed to be the savior of jazz. Sometimes people speak as though someone asked them a question. Well, nobody asked him a question" (quoted in Lees, 1994: 227).

In sharp contrast to Marsalis's musical and institutional centrality, John Zorn readily fits Francis Davis's characterisation of him as "the bad boy of new music" (Davis, 1991: 97), and he has been historically associated with a range of 'alternative' venues such as the Knitting Factory, Roulette, and Tonic.²⁸ The *Penguin Guide to Jazz* offers a typical – or, perhaps more accurately, stereotypical – description of Zorn's music: "Listening to John Zorn is like flicking through a stack of comic books or watching endless Hanna-Barbera and Fred Quimby re-runs on a TV set whose brightness and contrast have been jacked up to migraine level" (Cook and Morton, 1998: 1616).

For some observers, Zorn's work simply epitomises the depthless, chaotic triviality of the postmodern era, playing readily into the hands of Fredric Jameson's understanding of the manner in which the various forms of postmodernism "no longer simply 'quote'... but incorporate into their very substance" the "whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Readers' Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film... the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel" (Jameson, 1991: 2-3). After

²⁶ See also Lees (1994: 234).

²⁷ See Crouch's comments on Davis above. Despite the obvious influence, Marsalis has been quoted as saying "[Miles] was never my idol. I resent what he's doing because it gives the whole scene such a letdown... Then he sits up and talks about how he listens to Journey and Frank Sinatra. He's just co-signing white boys, just tommying". Responding to Marsalis's comments, and noting that "he's got a lot of technique, but that's about it", Davis remarked "Without me, [he'd] be all *Flight of the Bumble Bee*" (quoted in Lees, 1994: 227-228).

²⁸ Notwithstanding these 'alternative' connections, one should be cautious not to exaggerate Zorn's 'marginality': the now extensive catalogue (c. 250 releases) of his own record label, Tzadik, although far from the mainstream status of Marsalis's relationship with Sony/Columbia, has come to represent a significant element in the contemporary canon of jazz, improvised music, and new music.

Burns, Baby, Burns

listening to *Spillane* (1987)²⁹, one might think that Jameson's attention had been focused on Zorn's work. For Graham Lock, following Jameson's evaluative lead, *Spillane* is simply "high gloss muzak for trash-culture trendies" (1989: 37). And for Francis Davis, Zorn's re-working of the Ornette Coleman canon is "a feeling-less, monochromatic din... the concert amounted to heresy" (1991: 97).

But Zorn's work frustrates such easy criticism, and his response to an interviewer's observation that his work seems to blend 'high art' and 'low art' offers an interesting insight into his musical motivation:

This is something I react really strongly against, the idea of high art and low art. I mean, that distinction's a bunch of fucking *bullshit*... There's good music and great music and phoney music in every genre and all the genres are the fucking *same!*... People who grew up in the '60s listening to blues, rock, classical, avant-garde, ethnic music – I think we all share one common belief, that all this music is on equal grounds and there's no high art and low art.

(Strickland, 1991: 128-129; emphasis in original)

Rather than confirming 'postmodern' claims for a blurring of aesthetic and genre boundaries, I want to suggest that Zorn's denial of 'high art' and 'low art' serves instead to highlight the extent to which the categories of 'high' and 'low' have themselves been constructed through theoretical orthodoxy, academic and institutional traditionalism, and the hierarchical conservatism of cultural policy.

In his liner notes to a CD by Carl Stalling³⁰ – composer of the music for many Warner Brothers cartoons of the 1940s and 50s, and acknowledged by Zorn as a significant influence – Zorn observes of Stalling that: "no musical style seemed beyond his reach – and his willingness to include them, any and all, whenever necessary, implies an openness – a non-hierarchical overview – typical of today's younger composers" (1990). The 'non-hierarchical overview' which Zorn identifies is evident throughout his own work, and has led to the development of a unique compositional style in which the employment of parody, irony, and intertextual juxtaposition has served to articulate a coherent, if highly eclectic, aesthetic: one which draws freely on a wide range of musical styles and genres, employing modernist and postmodernist techniques in a similarly 'non-hierarchical' fashion.

But Zorn's radical eclecticism has done little to endear him to the gatekeepers of the jazz canon. For well over a decade, from its first publication in 1988 until the appearance of the revised Second Edition in 2002, *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* failed to find space for Zorn, or for many of his contemporaries such as Tim Berne or Wayne Horvitz, despite the fact that the New York downtown scene was already highly developed at the time of the encyclopedia's first printing (see Kernfeld, 1988, 2002). Similarly, it was only in 2003, in its Eighth Edition, that Mark Gridley's textbook, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis* (2003) first included any reference to

²⁹ On Elektra Nonesuch (979172-2).

³⁰ *The Carl Stalling Project: Music From Warner Bros. Cartoons 1936-1958* (1990; Warner Bros. 26027).

The Source

Zorn or the downtown scene. And, not surprisingly, given the cursory treatment afforded the last 40 years, Burn's documentary simply ignores Zorn or any of his downtown compatriots.

These omissions are routinely excused on the basis that the music is 'not really jazz', although such arguments not only serve to confirm the narrowness of the jazz canon, but also fail to acknowledge the extent to which much of this music remains firmly rooted in jazz (with downtown musicians such as Zorn, Horvitz, and Dave Douglas recording music by Sonny Clark, Kenny Dorham, Hank Mobley, Ornette Coleman, Booker Little, Wayne Shorter, and Mary Lou Williams, among others).

Zorn's quartet *Masada*³¹ further exemplifies his musical eclecticism, mixing Jewish klezmer music and Ornette Coleman-inspired jazz. The quote from the Jewish scholar Gershom Scholem reproduced on the band's CD covers offers an interesting perspective not only on Zorn's more recent politically-inspired work, but also on the nature of much postmodern cultural practice, whether Jewish or otherwise:

There is a life of tradition that does not merely consist of conservative preservation, the constant continuation of the spiritual and cultural possessions of a community. There is such a thing as a treasure hunt within tradition, which creates a living relationship to tradition and to which much of what is best in current Jewish consciousness is indebted, even where it was – and is – expressed outside the framework of orthodoxy.
(Scholem, 1994)

Scholem's evocative notion of a 'treasure hunt within tradition', has intriguing parallels with the suggestive Bill Evans quote with which I opened my paper – 'The person who sees furthest into the future is likely to be the person who sees furthest into the past' – and also serves to recall Eco's understanding of the ironic postmodern engagement with the 'already said': perspectives that serve to indicate the manner in which much contemporary practice is involved in a postmodernist revisiting, reappraisal, and reworking of the past, juxtaposing an eclectic range of styles, forms, and genres – and modernist and postmodernist techniques – in a manner which denies traditional notions of cultural value.

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of much revisionist jazz scholarship – especially given the strength of its critique of modernist aestheticism – is the extent to which the concept of postmodernism in much of this literature remains either unexplored, underdeveloped or subject to crude orthodoxies, suggesting the need for a considerably more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between contemporary jazz and the theory, techniques, and practices of postmodernism. And this, in turn, highlights the need for an understanding of jazz history that avoids the pitfalls of both reductionist classicism and narrow revisionism, focusing instead on the complex textual and contextual *interrelationship* of contrasting styles and genres.

However, despite the importunings of recent revisionist jazz scholarship – with its critique of the aesthetic formalism and 'classicizing' rhetoric of earlier work in the field

³¹ Hear, for example, *Alef* (1994; DIW-888)

Burns, Baby, Burns

– even the most cursory viewing of Burns’s documentary suggests that it is primarily the neo-traditionalists who are now safely ensconced as the gatekeepers of the jazz canon, at least in the context of the mainstream media. And if the cursory treatment of the last 40 years of jazz history represents the most significant weakness of the series – and the primary focus of this article – this should not distract attention from a further range of equally problematic shortcomings, which can only be addressed briefly here.

Firstly, although the coverage afforded early jazz is considerably more extensive than the treatment of the contemporary scene, it remains equally narrow in its focus and evaluative judgements, perpetuating, as Francis Davis notes, “the hoariest of creation myths: that New Orleans was the single birthplace of jazz” (2001: 76). Although not wishing to underplay the importance of New Orleans in early jazz history, such an approach inevitably overlooks alternative locations, developments, and schools which played important roles in the early formation of jazz, substituting narrative simplicity for the messy complexities of history.

Secondly, Burns’s application of the Great Man theory has two immediate consequences: the neglect of significant figures in jazz history; and the virtual invisibility of the involvement of women in jazz. In the case of the former, and in addition to the perfunctory treatment of contemporary musicians in the final episode, the series simply ignores – or damns with faint praise – a range of musicians who have been central to the ongoing development of jazz: from my own point of view, Lennie Tristano, Herbie Nichols, and Bill Evans represent only the most glaring of omissions.³² In the case of the latter, and with the almost singular exception of Mary Lou Williams, female instrumentalists are nowhere to be seen. As Sherrie Tucker has argued: “How is it that we can have a 19-hour documentary on the history of jazz where women are not musicians? There were women in Ken Burns’s *Jazz*, but they were... in the roles of bad wives, bad mothers, prostitutes and vocalists who were not so much musicians as tragic women” (quoted in Hale, 2002: J1).³³ Given the liberal pluralism that informs Burns’s overall project – the question of race is central to *Jazz*, and, as noted above, the *American Lives* series includes a film on Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, two of the pioneers of the American women’s movement – the virtual silence of the series on the role of women in jazz simply represents another of its great weaknesses.³⁴

³² Many critics have commented on this shortcoming of the series. For example, Francis Davis’s list of those excluded includes “Mildred Bailey, Benny Carter, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, Lennie Tristano, Erroll Garner, Art Pepper, any of Ellington’s sidemen, or any of the arrangers – except Fletcher Henderson – who gave the big bands of the 1940s their trademark sounds” (2001: 77). See also Gabbard (2000), Santoro (2001), and Miller (2001).

³³ See Hale (2002) for a review of the history of women in jazz, which highlights the continued neglect of key female figures. See also Tucker (2000), Placksin (1985), and Dahl (1984). And see also Blumenfeld (2000) and the related articles in the July 2000 issue of *Jazziz* magazine, which is devoted to women in jazz.

³⁴ Similarly – and again notwithstanding Burns’s otherwise pluralistic approach – the series is also silent on queer issues, failing to acknowledge, for example, the sexuality of out gays such as Billy Strayhorn, Cecil Taylor, Gary Burton and Fred Hersch, or to explore the question of sexuality in relation to figures such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. On Strayhorn, see Hajdu

The Source

And finally, in casting jazz in the singular role as 'America's Music' (Ward, 2000), Burns and his team betray not only a narrow vision of the full range of music that might be thought of as quintessentially American,³⁵ but also a lack of understanding (or an unwillingness to understand) the unique – and uniquely distinctive – contributions that have been made to the ongoing development of jazz by other countries and regions. For example, although Afro-Cuban jazz and Latin jazz are referred to briefly in the series (in the guise of Chano Pozo and bossa nova), the full significance of their influence remains unexplored.³⁶ But perhaps the most problematic result of the American jingoism of the series, is the failure (notwithstanding the obligatory reference to Django Reinhardt) to even acknowledge the indelible contribution of European jazz and free improvisation, especially in terms of the innovations of the last four decades. Hence, key figures from the British, Dutch, and German scenes – vital for a full understanding of the contemporary scope of the music – are completely ignored. The names spring readily to mind: Joe Harriott, John Stevens, Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, Misha Mengelberg, Han Bennink, Willem Breuker, Albert Mangelsdorff, Alexander von Schlippenbach, and Peter Brotzmann, to cite only a representative few.³⁷

As someone who teaches a course in jazz history, Ken Burns's *Jazz* represents a decidedly mixed blessing. There can be little doubt, as many of Burns's supporters claim, that the series was successful in introducing a new audience to the music and its history, and in raising the general level of public awareness of this musical form and its cultural significance. Such arguments, however, serve to elide the particular discursive and ideological framing of jazz history which the series offers. In my own teaching, I encourage students to consider the series not simply as an 'objective' resource, but rather as a cultural text which is, *itself*, part of the discursive construction of jazz history. From this perspective, the controversy surrounding the series represents an equally valid object of study, encouraging a critical scepticism with regard to narrowly restrictive definitions of jazz performance and practice. Such an approach, I would argue, is crucial to an understanding of the contested nature of jazz history, suggesting a conceptualization of jazz as a *living* music, just as vital and relevant in its eclectic 'postmodern' incarnations as it was in the days of the 'Great Men' chronicled in Burns's highly selective narrative.

(1996); on Rainey and Smith, see Davis (1999). See Gavin (2001) for a review of homophobia in jazz. See also Gill (1995) for a survey of homosexuality in twentieth century music.

³⁵ For a considerably broader interpretation of 'America's Musical Life', see Crawford (2001).

³⁶ On Afro-Cuban jazz and Latin jazz, see Leymarie (2002), Yanow (2000), and Roberts (1999).

³⁷ For an early review of the British scene, see Carr (1973). For histories of the British and Dutch scenes, see Wickes (1999) and Whitehead (1998). See also the relevant sections in Corbett (1994) and Nicholson (1990).

Burns, Baby, Burns

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Note

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