

Introduction

The quest for cultural legitimacy

I say this because jazz, the music I play most often, has never really been accepted as an art form by the people of my own country. . . I believe that the great mass of the American people still consider jazz as lowbrow music. . . To them, jazz is music for kids and dope addicts. Music to get high to. Music to take a fling to. Music to rub bodies to. Not “serious” music. Not concert hall material. Not music to listen to. Not music to study. Not music to enjoy purely for its listening kicks.

Dizzy Gillespie, “Jazz Is Too Good For Americans,” *Esquire*, June 1957: 55

In 1957 jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie criticized the continued lack of respect in America for jazz as more than a lowbrow entertainment. Gillespie’s criticism came surprisingly at a time when jazz was enjoying a resurgence in national recognition as well as a booming commercial market in recordings and live performances. It was in fact the peak of a renaissance in jazz music – a rebirth of jazz as a high art movement that over the two decades of the 1950s and 1960s transformed American music. Inspired in the 1940s by a new style of jazz called bebop, musicians during the renaissance explored various styles of jazz performance, composition, and improvisation. Their musical exploration generated a long list of stylistic nomenclatures: cool jazz, hard bop, soul jazz, west coast jazz, east coast jazz, mainstream jazz, free jazz, third stream jazz, black music, fusion jazz, bossa nova and others. This renaissance in jazz firmly secured this music as a major American art tradition that continues up to the present day.

Dizzy Gillespie, however, was not alone in feeling that jazz in the 1950s still did not garner the respect and rewards it deserved. This shared feeling among jazz artists reflected a long-standing ambiguity in the United States toward this music’s place in American culture: one that continued to haunt jazz even during the renaissance. Since the first jazz craze of 1917, this music confronted a variety of distinctions that positioned it as far less than legitimate. At the same time, however, this music also was quickly claimed by some as an authentic and legitimate American art form. Was jazz a lowbrow deviant form of entertainment or a complex and subtle art equal to the classical tradition in Western music? Who made these

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strangely polar opposite claims about jazz and why? Gillespie's and others' continued disappointment about the state of jazz at mid-century reflected a long history of struggle over the meaning and practice of jazz music.

Jazz as a cultural movement at mid-century, however, involved not only jazz artists. It also included record producers, concert producers, club owners, music critics, magazine publishers, and diverse audiences. All these various actors in jazz made up what sociologist Howard Becker (1982) calls an art world. So while artists brought their own meanings and practices to bear on jazz music, others joined them in fashioning the meaning, practice, and success of jazz as an art form. Of course, the rise of this jazz art world was a collective expression of a large number of individuals who did not necessarily all share a single purpose – individuals would pursue a variety of interests in jazz and hold a variety of views towards this music. Yet this collective coalescence around jazz music led to the eventual success of an art world that initiated a renaissance in jazz music during the 1950s and 1960s.

I will show how the rise of a jazz art world and the renaissance in jazz music at mid-century were expressions of a long struggle over the meaning and practice of music making in America reaching as far back as the nineteenth century. The distinctions and challenges that emerged in the 1950s cannot be fully understood without reference to the struggles which preceded them. The rise of a jazz art world involved more than a mere pretension to the status of serious high art on the part of musicians and others. The story of jazz in the twentieth century is far more complicated, and provides far more insight into the cultural distinctions that informed American culture during this period, than such a simple view might suggest. The social history of the jazz art world and jazz music reveals interactions and conflicts between a variety of cultural distinctions active in American music. As the historian Lawrence Levine (1989: 18) argues: “Jazz in fact is one of those forces that have helped to transform our sense of art and culture . . . a music that in fact bridged the gap between all of the categories that divided culture.” The rise of a jazz art world did indeed entail transformations in categories of art and culture in America, but it did so often in contradictory ways and certainly encountered resistance along the way. Such contradictions and obstacles were the products of the cultural, social, and institutional forces that supported the distinctions that divided American culture and society during the first half of the twentieth century.

The genealogy of the modern jazz renaissance

General histories of jazz usually locate its original home beginning at the turn of the century in the red-light district of Storyville in New Orleans.

They follow this folk music's outward migration from the American South beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century. In the Jazz Age of the 1920s, jazz histories focus on the classic jazz ensembles and early beginnings of big band jazz as this music became the nation's most popular music. Jazz continues as a popular music during the swing big band era of the 1930s and 1940s. Then a modernist turn to high art occurs after World War II with a small coterie of bebop musicians leading the way to the modern jazz period. Jazz histories present a musical evolution from folk art to popular art to high art. Ted Gioia's (1997) *The History of Jazz* is a recent example of this type of general history with Marshall Stearns' (1956) *The Story of Jazz* having defined the standard jazz history. These works aim at establishing the lineage of a jazz music tradition. They played an important role in the rise of a jazz art world and continue to play an important role today.

Most jazz histories, however, are implicated in the jazz art world's quest to create and maintain a distinct music tradition called jazz, and therefore, never move much beyond this narrative to address the broader contexts of music and culture in America. Further, since they focus on establishing the lineage of jazz practices in which improvisation became the predominant art, these histories follow this practice backwards to the original performers of jazz improvisation, usually ending at the turn of the century with the blaring cornet of Buddy Bolden in New Orleans. But my work is less interested in the cultural lineage of improvisation and early jazz, than in the genealogy of the *modern jazz* renaissance in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1920s, jazz was adopted by an artistic culture different from the one in which most Southern American musicians performed early jazz. This was the artistic culture of professional musicians, particularly musicians active in the popular society orchestras of the Jazz Age that later were transformed into "big bands" in the 1930s. The high art turn among jazz musicians that defined this music at mid-century should be traced backwards through this artistic culture in order to understand its cultural and social contexts.

A focus on jazz musicians as professional musicians is not a completely new approach to jazz. Following an early essay by Wen Shih Hsio (1959) which pointed to the significance of professional black musicians as part of an emerging black middle class in the 1920s, Thomas J. Hennessey (1994) and Scott DeVaux (1997) focus on the professionalism and middle class aspirations of black musicians. Hennessey emphasizes the middle class aspirations and professionalism of urban black musicians in the development of swing music, while DeVaux makes a similar emphasis in relation to the birth of the modern jazz style bebop. My work significantly expands on these works by first addressing both black and white professional musicians in understanding the quest for cultural legitimacy that

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both groups of artists shared. It also expands on these previous works by placing the performance and aesthetic strategies of these professional musicians in the context of fundamental transformations and conflicts in American music from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.

The ultimate course in the evolution in meaning and practice of jazz music in the twentieth century came from the actions of these professional musicians. The turn to high art during the modern jazz renaissance, in particular, could not have occurred without the willing consent of these musicians or their holding the dispositions necessary to make such a turn possible. Why did professional musicians have such aspirations and dispositions as artists who essentially performed for a popular music market? What was the context of these aspirations and dispositions in terms of the production and consumption of music in America since the late nineteenth century? And finally, why was “jazz” adopted as the name given to the music professional musicians performed in their quest towards high art legitimacy?

The jazz art world

While professional musicians were refashioning jazz music, a jazz art world of magazines, records, books, clubs, and concerts developed to support this music. This art world provided the organization, production, criticism and audiences to make jazz a distinct genre and specialized market in American music. The first developments of this art world appeared in the 1930s and continued to grow in the 1940s, but had few opportunities to move beyond the cognoscenti of the jazz scene. By the 1950s, however, changes in the music industry helped the jazz art world become the bedrock of a jazz renaissance. Throughout the period of this renaissance, the jazz art world remained essential to the success of jazz musicians and their music.

Howard Becker (1982) points to the important role non-artists in art worlds perform in the production and reception of an art form. Jazz producers were active in the production of jazz music both live and recorded. Jazz critics produced jazz criticism and jazz history, while also promoting jazz outside the jazz art world mostly in writing for magazines and newspapers. Jazz audiences obviously provided the patronage essential to the financial viability of this art world. Producers, critics and audiences, however, also were important in shaping the sound and meaning of jazz music. While professional musicians developed their own understanding of the significance of jazz music, producers, critics and audiences also actively formed their own understanding and appreciation of this music's significance as an art form.

In fact, the high art turn in jazz was only one aspect in this art world's quest to fashion and legitimate a new music tradition in America. In the broader scope of this art world, folk, popular, and modern styles of jazz would have a place in the development of jazz history, jazz criticism, jazz recordings, and live jazz performance. Not all participants in the jazz art world actually welcomed the high art turn in jazz among professional musicians. Jazz traditionalists who first lamented the commercialization of jazz during the Swing Era would become the "moldy figs" who saw modern jazz as a betrayal of the true roots of this music. Traditionalists versus modernists, however, was only one of many conflicts in the emerging jazz art world with the race question hovering like a dark storm cloud over the collective will to make jazz a unique American art. The jazz art world was at times quite a contentious community with enthusiasts and musicians battling each other over the meanings and practices associated with jazz.

The literature on jazz unfortunately barely addresses the history and significance of the jazz art world or the role of non-artists in the history of jazz. Only recently have works begun to broaden the historical purview on jazz. David W. Stowe (1994), Scott DeVeaux (1997), and Lewis A. Erenberg (1998), for example, have addressed certain aspects of this art world during the 1930s and 1940s, while DeVeaux (1991), John Gennari (1991), Steven B. Elsworth (1995) and Krin Gabbard (1995) have addressed jazz criticism. My work is the first to present a full history of the jazz art world during the crucial period of the 1930s to the end of the modern jazz renaissance. It looks not only at the impact of this art world on jazz music and jazz musicians, but the different meanings and associations non-artists brought to jazz as an art form during this period.

In integrating a history of the jazz art world with the history of professional musicians we can better understand the nature of the transformations jazz music underwent in the first half of the twentieth century. This approach to the social history of jazz broadens our understanding of the significance of jazz as both an American art form and as a major cultural movement in the twentieth century. What brought about such a coalescence of diverse individuals around jazz music? What different meanings and interests did they bring to jazz? How can we understand the various conflicts that emerged in this cultural movement? And finally, what future impact did this art world have on jazz music following the modern jazz renaissance?

High art and popular art in American music

The rise of a jazz art world and the transformations in jazz music up through the modern jazz renaissance direct us toward looking seriously

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at the *cultural politics* of American music. Changes in jazz as an art form during the twentieth century were expressions of the encounters of professional musicians and others with the various distinctions inscribed in the meanings and practices of American music, with artists also struggling simply to make a livelihood. Unique characteristics in music production and music consumption engendered their own expression of the more general cultural politics that defined both high art and popular art in America.

Scholars such as Paul DiMaggio (1991, 1992) and Lawrence Levine (1988) point to a significant transformation in the relation between high art and popular art beginning in the late nineteenth century. While the question of cultivated high art versus vernacular popular art had long been part of American culture, the clear delineation between two distinct *social worlds* of high art and popular art did not emerge until this period. DiMaggio and Levine see the key in the evolution of two distinct social worlds of art in the development of elite-supported high art organizations – symphony orchestras, opera companies, fine art museums, repertory theaters, and dance companies. The rise of these high art organizations also occurred in combination with the introduction of high art appreciation, scholarship, and training in universities and colleges. The relative autonomy from commercial markets enjoyed by the new high art world, which came to full fruition in the early part of the twentieth century, provided a greater control over high art in terms of art forms, artists, art appreciation, and audiences. The boundaries erected by this new elite art world set the general distinction in America between high art and popular art during the twentieth century. This distinction lay not only in the art forms themselves, but in the separation of cultural organizations, communities of artists, spaces for exhibition and performance, communities of consumers, and in distinct modes of art appreciation and art criticism. As a social world of high art developed, therefore, the general difference between the high and the popular became more clearly defined through each of these forms of division.

DiMaggio (1982) and Levine also show how the exclusive social world of high art in the United States originally functioned as a form of social distinction for a new urban elite who associated themselves with the patronage and consumption of high art. The wealth of an industrializing American economy in the last half of the nineteenth century created a growing urban elite at the same time it attracted large numbers of immigrants and migrants to major American cities. The urban elite envisioned a new American social hierarchy in which they formed a status community that rested comfortably above the popular classes. An exclusive social world of high art affirmed the legitimacy and facilitated

the reproduction of this social hierarchy. High art consumption signified the natural and moral foundations of social distinctions of class, race, or ethnicity inscribed in this social hierarchy. The contours between high art and popular art, therefore, were not simply objective borders of aesthetic quality, artistic talent, and sophisticated tastes, but products of a cultural politics of distinction designed to legitimate a specific culture and the social class associated with its consumption. While high art appreciation would eventually spread beyond this early urban elite status community, its social function of distinction would remain, and more importantly, the social world of high art production and consecration would remain unchanged into the middle of the twentieth century.

At the same time that an exclusive social world of high art emerged in the United States, popular art in this country also went through important transformations. Lewis A. Erenberg (1981) and David Nasaw (1993) show how the late nineteenth century witnessed the beginnings of a rapid expansion and diversity in commercial popular entertainment that continued until the Great Depression. Many in the social world of high art and other self-ordained defenders of American culture were not particularly pleased by this rapid growth in popular entertainment. Their ire only increased as popular entertainment distanced itself more and more from any relationship to the supposedly legitimate cultivated arts and relied more on such vernacular practices as ragtime and jazz. Producers and artists in popular entertainment also confronted an increasingly diverse audience, particularly a growing middle class ready to enjoy popular entertainment, but not necessarily in the manner and form enjoyed by working class audiences. Producers and artists, therefore, became important *mediators* of commercial popular entertainment. They refashioned numerous practices and meanings in popular art in order to serve diverse audiences as well as to deflect critics. Whether confronting the disdain of highbrow critics, the fear of moral crusaders, or the tastes of diverse audiences, artists and producers constantly negotiated various social distinctions – class, race, ethnic, gender, and moral – articulated in popular entertainment.

Popular entertainment went through another major transition in the 1930s. The Great Depression wreaked havoc on live popular performance. The vitality of popular art suffered considerably from the economic and social devastation of the depression. At this time, a new mass media system of radio, film, and records appeared, and to a large degree shifted popular performance and popular consumption. This system was dedicated to a mass market on a national scale and could not replicate the more diverse popular entertainment that preceded the 1930s.

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Decision-makers in this new system, therefore, conceived a much narrower aesthetic for popular entertainment. The same negotiation of social distinctions in popular art remained, but within a market dominated by a more centralized system of production and consumption. This transformation would have an effect on how artists, producers, and audiences understood their place in the world of popular entertainment as well as the nature of the commercial popular music market.

We will see in detail how professional musicians and others negotiated these various transformations and distinctions in American culture from the late nineteenth century into the mid-twentieth century. The professional class of musician was unique in American culture in being a large community of artists whose dispositions originally developed before the high-popular divide in America and yet continued as a major community of artists in popular entertainment once this distinction was established. It was further unique in the role of African American artists who had a presence in music far greater than in any other art form in America, significantly shaping its practices and professional culture. The key question is how jazz came to signify various contours of status, distinction and identity in American music confronted by professional musicians and others. How did the cultural politics around high art and popular art shape the evolution of jazz music and a jazz art world? And finally, where did jazz fit into this cultural politics during the modern jazz renaissance?

Transforming American culture

My book is not the first work to address jazz music in the context of high art and popular art in America. Other works addressing this subject, however, have focused specifically on the high art turn in jazz. Work by Amiri Baraka (1963), Richard A. Peterson (1972), Lewis Erenberg (1989), and Diana Crane (1992) attempt to explain the factors behind this turn to high art, while work by Andrew Ross (1986) and Nelson George (1988) simply focus on its elitist pretensions. From the perspective of these works, the high art turn in jazz was a post World War II movement of middle class, college or conservatory educated musicians who formed a new elite community of artists. This view, however, fails to recognize the complex transformations of jazz music in the first half of the twentieth century in the broader historical context of the high and the popular in American music. It also fails to acknowledge the diverse social class and race composition of the jazz art world and this art world's overall alternative vision of American art and society. As such, this previous view of modern jazz does not recognize how it was the end product of a long process that

challenged and transformed the reigning cultural hierarchy in twentieth-century America.

The evolution in the meanings and practices of jazz music over time traversed numerous boundaries of cultural distinction in America. This traversing of cultural boundaries forces us to understand why such boundaries existed in American culture and why musicians and others were compelled to transgress them. One needs to remain one step removed from the basic assumptions of the high-popular distinction in judging this cultural movement in order to recognize that the social and aesthetic distinctions embedded in this dichotomy were themselves constructed over time and how this movement attempted to transfigure these distinctions. The jazz art world was socially heterogeneous in terms of class, race, and education, although it remained a predominantly male preserve. This very social heterogeneity undermined the basic conventions and assumptions active in high art and popular art. Fundamental questions of what constituted American culture in terms of social status and social identity were significantly challenged by the jazz art world.

The greatest challenge in the evolution of jazz music in the twentieth century was in disturbing the racial hierarchy in American culture. One problem in focusing only on the high art turn in jazz is that such a narrow emphasis tends to revert to questions only of social class and aesthetics, although even here the complexity of this turn in jazz is usually lost. It ignores how a racial hierarchy was intertwined with the class dynamics in high art and popular art in America. From the beginning, the defining of American high art and American popular art always included the question of race with institutions carefully policing the segregation of African American culture. A two-dimensional cultural hierarchy, therefore, located social status and social identity along parallel racial and class distinctions. In this sense, the early development of high art and popular art involved the construction of an American identity along both class and racial lines.

The jazz art world certainly faced its own contradictions and its own elitist tendencies in attempting to lift jazz music and jazz musicians to some higher cultural status. The jazz art world, however, ultimately staked claim to a unique tradition in American music that bridged various cultural distinctions active in both high and popular art in the United States. This art world was a unique combination of both populism and elitism – a celebration of the artistry of popular culture and a striving of many for high art status. It revealed in many ways the conflict-ridden nature of American democratic culture that celebrated the “common man” yet was infused with race, class, aesthetic, and moral distinctions of status

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and identity in cultural production and cultural consumption. But this does not mean that it did not represent a significant challenge to the American cultural hierarchy at the time. This book explores how this art world and jazz musicians created a tradition in American music that contributed significantly to refashioning America's understanding of art and society.