

Jazz Journalism, Scenes, and History

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Jazz critics sometimes appear to be immensely powerful figures. Record labels rarely miss to print quotes from a favorable review on the cover of an artist's new CD, emerging artists post every little mention in the press on their website, and concert venues promote artists with quotes from reviews. Even if the press coverage does not reach a large enough audience to affect record sales or concert attendances in a major way, the approval of a critic can seem like a badge of honor for a new as well as for a more renowned artist. The more reputed a critic and a publication, the more a positive mention adds to the status and the market value of the artist. The status of the press, however, rests to a large degree on assumptions. It is hard to gauge the long term-impact of reviews and press portrayals on the jazz world and on what is being recorded as "jazz history."

This paper tries to describe the role of the jazz press in relation to other social processes that make jazz performance and jazz history possible. I specifically try to highlight the role of the press in the context of "jazz scenes." We have to deal with different types of criticism, different places where history is written, and a wide variety of relationships between artists, the business, the academic world and the press. Though it is clearly beyond the scope of this project to explore the issue in a comprehensive way, I try to arrive at an outline that could guide more specific research in particular scenes within the jazz world.

My opening example made clear that press coverage has the potential to frame the experience of jazz for listeners, musicians, researchers and music business protagonists. The effects of press coverage depend on the time frame and the space in which reports and reviews

circulate: Immediately after a review, an artist profile or an essay is published, a consumer of the music may be motivated to go see a show or buy a record, and an agent may use the press clip to promote the artist. If a series of similar press reports appeared over an extended period of time, many listeners may come to associate the musician with a certain group and a particular style of music, while other fans may reject that categorization. Years after an article has been written, a scholar may use the piece as a source for his own historical account or as an example for a particular ideology that prevailed in parts of the jazz establishment at a given time. At the same time, the writer himself (I use the masculine form in this essay to point to the fact that the overwhelming majority of jazz critics are male) may include the article in an anthology that gives his own version of “jazz history.”

To examine the interaction between journalists, artists, and audiences more closely, it is useful to break down the “jazz world” into smaller compartments. Here the concept of “scenes” comes into play. Journalism, as I would like to point out, is a shape-shifter in its relationship to scenes: Journalists are participants in music scenes, and they typically play a role in more scenes than just one. All participants shape the identity of a scene, but journalists define scenes through their writing, presumably assuming a detached viewpoint “outside” the scene. Yet as a highly specialized professional group, they are themselves part of a social framework that could be called a “scene.” To more exactly pinpoint the role of journalists in this context, we first have to define what exactly a “scene” is.

Definitions of “scene”

In his 1998 dissertation at Columbia University, Travis Jackson reviewed a number of scholarly approaches to the phenomenon of “music scenes” and “music communities.” Jackson brought his skepticism to the work of scholars such as Ingrid Monson, who in her 1991 study

“Musical Interaction in Modern Jazz” viewed scenes as “outsider communities” in which musicians were the main actors. Journalists, promoters, and record company executives performed only an “ancillary” function in this model.

Jackson countered this idea with sociologist Howard Becker’s concept of “art worlds.” In Becker’s conception of the social systems of art production, non-artistic actors and artists play equally important roles in the system (Jackson 1998: p36). While Jackson focused his analysis on “mainstream jazz performance,” I think that his general definition of the term “scene” is useful for other types of music as well. A scene, according to Jackson, is “a socially constructed world in which various actors and institutions (musicians, audience members, educational institutions, performance venues, the recording industry, and critics and the media) interact in complex and shifting ways to enable the public presentation of jazz” (Jackson 1998: Abstract, no page number).

One of the sources for Jackson’s definition was Will Straw’s 1991 essay “Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change.” In this article, Straw explicitly distinguished the notion of “scene” from that of an artistic “community.” Straw defined a musical scene as a “cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization.” In this sense, a scene is a more fluid and complex social system than a “community” of musicians: A community, according to Straw, is united primarily by a common musical heritage and the desire to render that heritage meaningful with contemporary musical practices. A scene, in contrast, negotiates its “sense of purpose” through “the forms of communication through which the building of musical alliances and the drawing of musical boundaries take place” (Straw 1991: pp84-85). Scenes provide a space in which artists can connect their own practice to other stylistic ideas and shape movements and trends in the

process. We have to ask whether the space of a scene needs a physical location, like a certain club in a certain city, or whether scenes rather exist in a mental space and are able to materialize wherever protagonists get together.

Taking the “global culture of alternative rock music” as an example, Straw noted that “localism” had been “reproduced, in relatively uniform ways, on a continental and international level” through the circulation of music in the form of recordings and live performances. Straw suggested that musicians were easily able to circulate from one local scene to another without having to adapt themselves to local circumstances (Straw 1991: p90).

Jackson questioned this point and said that Straw ruled out the possibility of a particular local scene having a significant effect on the nature or composition of other local scenes (Jackson 1998: p38). The relationship between global and local scenes may indeed vary depending on the style of music, the modes of the music’s dissemination, or the socio-economic background of a particular region.

To better conceptualize the cross-pollination of locally distant scenes, the authors Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson distinguished between “local,” “translocal,” and “virtual” scenes. Following the general conception as the scene as an “art world” in which a variety of participants interacted to make the production and presentation of art possible, the authors explained their sub-categorization as follows: “The first, local scene, corresponds most closely with the original notion of a scene as clustered around a specific regional focus. The second, translocal scene, refers to widely scattered local scenes drawn into regular communication around a distinct form of music or lifestyle. The third, virtual scene, is a newly emergent formation in which people scattered across great physical spaces create the sense of scene via fanzines and, increasingly through the Internet” (Bennett and Peterson 2004: p8).

The feeling of belonging is an important factor that guides the way musicians and other protagonists think of the social phenomenon of scenes. In his 2003 dissertation at the University of San Diego, Michael Dessen paid special attention to the colloquial use of the word among musicians (Dessen 2003: p18) and acknowledged that scenes are “inherently messy and fluid,” that they shift constantly and quickly, and overlap in multiple ways. Their boundaries are rarely articulated explicitly, and when they are, the definitions usually don’t reflect a consensus of all participants (Dessen 2003: p21). Jackson made a similar point and emphasized how members of a scene constantly negotiate their boundaries, form smaller groups and new alliances (Jackson 1998: p43).

Scenes as molecules and foam

The concept of “scenes” as social compounds that attract and repulse different elements, that swell, move, and split into multiple parts, conjures the image of molecules or cells. While I don’t want to simply equate social processes with chemical and biological ones, I think the analogy is useful because it clarifies how different elements cluster, form a wide variety of shapes, and take on a different character in the process. Some scenes may accumulate around a central core (a “master musician,” a strong stylistic model, a school). Others may be less centralized and form a chain of loosely related elements. Some scenes may grow from the accumulation of isolated elements, like single musicians with few prior affiliations or new entrepreneurs in the live music business. Other elements that connect to a cluster may already be large compounds with an established structure and power balance.

A somewhat different metaphor would imagine jazz scenes as a sort of foam - a cluster of little spheres which form an amorphous and fragile mass that cannot easily be grasped, but can exist in different sizes and adapt to different surfaces. The spheres that make up the foam vary in

size; they push against each other, they can merge or implode. The metaphor of foam has been explored in-depth by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2004). The foam's decentralized structure provides a compelling image on which to model social interaction, but the model is somewhat unsatisfying to explain the inner structure of the spheres that form a "scene." The spheres are not hollow bubbles: The relationship between different elements builds up the space of a sphere, and the inner forces will determine how the sphere reacts to interior pressures and influences from outside.

My thinking is influenced by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, who built his theory of "autopoietic" social systems on models developed by biologists such as Humberto Maturana (Luhmann 1995). Without fully adapting Luhmann's model, I want to think of "scenes" as clusters made up of autonomous elements. Each sub-system follows its own rules and develops its own strategies to deal with its environment. In order to more fully understand the scenes, we have to identify the forces that shape individual elements. We can then chart how these elements relate to each other and how their inner logic influences the interaction with other spheres.

Cohesive forces

Even if we acknowledge that all protagonists of a "scene" play an equally important role in the system, most accounts of jazz history tend to locate musicians at the center of a "scene." This reflects the self-understanding of many artists who see scenes as "networks of people and places" (Dessen 2003: p19). Some scenes, like the New York "Downtown Scene," are easily thought of as centralized structures because of a dominant figure or symbolically loaded urban environment. Tamar Barzel used the term "Downtown scene" in his 2004 dissertation at the University of Michigan to refer to composer and saxophonist John Zorn and his main circle of

collaborators, but acknowledged that the “wider circle” of the scene also encompassed more loosely affiliated musicians who were separated from the main players by two or three degrees of separation, or “two or three phone calls” (Barzel 2004: p25, 29). Barzel wrote that the “downtown musicians” had a “geographical locus and creative focus” in Downtown New York City, even though many artists were touring for multiple months every year.

People and places, however, are just sub-spheres and parts of a greater cluster. If we isolate socio-musical networks (“the artists”) and look at them as closed systems, we can distinguish a variety of inner forces: Friendships, a shared love for a specific kind of music, and shared educational and personal histories are some of the forces that keep people together. A commitment to an implicit or explicit artistic goal (Jackson mentions the idea of “taking the music to the next level”) can unite some people and exclude others.

Looking at the “Downtown scenes” of the 1970s and 1980s, Michael Dessen noted how musicians’ careers and collaborative networks also tended to be defined along racial lines. Some of this segregation could be linked to forces within the musicians’ networks: Generational differences, combined with those of class, race, and life opportunity were responsible for some barriers (Dessen 2003: p157). But it is important to note that segregation was also a result of outside forces – as Dessen tells in one anecdote, a group of musicians was encouraged by a critic to fire their white drummer (p68). In the press, racial taxonomies helped to shape an image of a white “Downtown” scene that largely excluded black “jazz” artists. Already-existing racial differences were reinforced by discrepancies in press treatment: White artists tended to be framed in terms of compositional rigor and structure, and black ones in terms of emotion and “swing” (Dessen 2003: p77-78, p160).

The defining power of the press

Journalists shape symbolic spaces with their descriptions, they influence “scenes” by inventing categories that musicians, labels and other parts of the art world either embrace or reject. This way, critics and reporters participate in a scene, yet it is hard to pin down the exact location of journalists in the metaphorical foam. As long as we conceive of a musician’s community as the center of a scene, journalists no doubt appear as “outside forces” who push against the boundaries of the community, move it in a certain direction, or blow up one socio-musical sphere like a balloon (this is the case when the press creates a “hype” around a particular artist or group). But if a scene is indeed structured like foam, it is hard to tell which bubble is at the center – the position of a particular sphere may shift from one moment to the other. Ultimately, defining a functional center in a de-centralized, amorphous structure is a matter of perspective, as observers themselves are immersed in foam.

Critics can be at the center of a scene in various ways. A couple of artists’ groups may gather around a certain category that members of the press have coined (such as “Downtown” or “Loft Jazz”) or may define themselves in opposition to it. Sub-groups of the music business (labels, club owners) may try to promote their products in ways that fit the perceived preferences of certain influential critics or publications. Academic observers of the jazz world may use a category defined by the press in their own work and thus solidify the perception of “a scene” as a distinct entity. The forces between spheres always work both ways, though some pull stronger in one direction than in the other. Instead of trying to establish a center, it is more useful to define and observe the different forces at work in the system. A historical description of a jazz scene could be a snapshot of the power structure of a scene at a particular time. A comprehensive account will have to explain how the forces within the scene changed over time. The narrative

could focus on musicians or on artists and explore who first coined a term, which background that person drew on, how the defining force affected other spheres and how it fed back into the sphere where it originated.

The defining power of the press is not limited to the terms critics use for scenes and styles. Critics may influence scenes in more subtle ways with their reviews, artists' profiles and reports. These products feed into the business sphere and into the socio-musical networks of the artists themselves. Reviews do reflect individual impressions, but it is important to note that writers act in a social space, and their writings are framed by their own reputation, the reach of their publication, and the writers' standing among peers. Simply put, the sub-sphere we call "the jazz press" is a "scene" in itself.

Forces at work within the press

I want to use "journalists" as an umbrella term for members of a sphere that encompasses "critics," "reporters" and "editors." The distinction between reporters and critics is that a critic makes value judgments and a reporter does not; however, one journalist can assume the role of a critic AND a reporter when he or she reviews a concert one day and writes a profile about an artist on the next. "Editors" work on a meta-level in the sense that they make judgments about other journalists' work. Editors shape the work of individuals they oversee; their preferences, their views of jazz history and jazz canons, and their ideas of "what makes a story" determine the reputation of their publication (clearly, what makes a story is often controversy – "uptown vs. downtown," "tradition vs. avant-garde" – and hype.)

The journalistic staff of a publication is already a complex system in itself. Even a small publication is under pressure from various outside forces, most notably from the industry that seeks to promote artists and controls advertising money. Journalists develop strategies to balance

pressure from outside – they develop some resentment towards promoters and PR people, insist that they merely write about what they feel and see, and fight against influence of the business department on their work. Many follow an ethics code that prohibits, among other things, the acceptance of payola-like favors. Whether ethics codes are written out and enforced varies from publication to publication, but in any case, a large part of the journalists’ conduct is directed by peers. Jazz critics know about each others’ preferences and paradigms, and writers – sometimes consciously, sometimes unwittingly – define themselves through their opposition to or their affiliation with a fellow writer’s view. For example, Stanley Crouch, once a devoted follower of Amiri Baraka, became an outspoken antagonist of the Baraka both in his literary work and in his music criticism (Gennari 2006: p339) . Both Baraka and Crouch came to represent schools of thought, and their dispute fed back into socio-musical networks and into academic discourses.

Journalists also write for an audience, but they rarely know their readers - writers draw inferences from letters and occasional reader surveys, but for the most part, they form their own image of their audience and shape their writing accordingly. Sometimes the peers become the assumed audience, and often an editor corrects the vision and adjusts the writing to what he or she thinks the readers’ expectations are.

Journalism on the scene

While the jazz press is a sub-scene itself, it nonetheless purports to somehow stand above particular scenes. The press names scenes and uses its own categories and narrative schemes to put events, places and artistic figure into order. As a system, “the press” exists in different places at the same time: Writers and publications interact with various sub-scenes in a more or less intense manner. Yet every relationship between a journalist and a scene feeds back into the larger sphere of “the jazz press,” where peers define peers by their preferences and their expertise in

certain areas of the field.

As Barzel and Dessen pointed out, the “Village Voice” had special significance in the construction of the New York “loft era” in the 1970s and the “Downtown scene” of the 1980s (Dessen 2003: p63-69). Some writers, Stanley Crouch and Gary Giddins being the most prominent among them, helped to build an audience for the music early on. Press accounts attached meaning to a number of performance spaces like the Kitchen or the Knitting Factory. The “Voice” also provided a perspective on other performance spaces and artists’ groups, but its defining power may have been different for scenes centered in Midtown or Harlem.

Down Beat Magazine defined jazz scenes in a different way. The magazine built a reputation as the voice of “the jazz establishment” over many decades and held on to its role as the “arbiter of musical and political acceptability within jazz” (Kofsky 1982: p20). As Frank Kofsky pointed out, the critics at the magazine were so powerful in the early 1960s that their reviews pushed the producer Bob Thiele and John Coltrane to pursue a more “critic-friendly” approach in their records. Down Beat also mounted a strong opposition to political in jazz and helped to cast protagonists like Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach as anti-white radicals (Kofsky 1982: p3, pp15-20).

Publications, as well as individual critics, could be mapped along different axes such as mainstream/alternative, eurocentric/afrocentric, traditional/avant-garde, but these categories themselves are of course constructs of a discourse some of these protagonists and publications helped shape. The position of a publication or a critic on certain subjects may change, but reputation moves much slower than a writer’s point of view or an editor’s focus. Peers and readers know where critics and publications stand.

The sphere of the “jazz press” is also shaped by local forces. Critics draw on experiences

in the city where they live and work, they know colleagues in the same town and relate to local papers. Yet their representation of the music travels and feeds into music-making and listener participation elsewhere. Fans, scholars and artists outside New York and the United States responded to press representations such as “downtown” and “mainstream” or to the image of “young lions” and “avant-gardists” just as strongly as musicians and listeners in the city, but press representations take on a different role in a translocal scene. While New York-based readers have the opportunity to balance an impression they get from the press with their own experience in local clubs and with local musicians, readers elsewhere connect the ideas conveyed by the press with their local experience and the prevalent press coverage in their own region. This dislocation of press accounts gives rise to myths about “legendary” clubs and scenes in New York and elsewhere, but it also reduces the complexity of the sphere of the press itself. The complex system of New-York-based critics and their publications easily translates into stereotypes such as “The U.S. jazz press.”

Taken as a whole, “the press” has to take a lot of the blame for various types of misrepresentation. In the 2003 edition of his book “Sozialgeschichte des Jazz” (A Social History of Jazz), German scholar Ekkehard Jost lamented that the “predominantly patriotically minded” American jazz press had done everything it could to ignore the fact that “the important creative impulses in jazz have emanated from Europe for a considerable time” (Jost 2003: p386, my translation). While some of Jost’s criticism may be justified, he simply ignored the fact that every critic acts within a local context and has strong incentives to focus on his own environment (most of the time, this is where the readers are.) Many jazz journalists may lack the awareness of their role in trans-local scenes, and Jost’s own Euro-centrism actually underscores the limited ability of a critic and scholar to transcend his own local cultural sphere.

Jazz critics and virtual scenes

With the proliferation of blogs and artists' MySpace pages, jazz scenes have become virtual, and the balance of power in the public sphere has changed. Some critics from an older generation are certainly able to capitalize on their reputation and influence: A well-known name like Nat Hentoff draws readers online and in print, and some of his writing – like the “Final Chorus” column in *JazzTimes* - is now more easily available to readers outside the U.S. because of the web. But every interested person can now draw from a variety of sources online, and Hentoff's columns now have to compete with the writing of other renowned jazz critics from Britain, Australia, or Germany. It is hard to determine on a general level how these shifts affect the formation of translocal scenes: While the net may open up the work of a particular critic to a wider and more dispersed readership, it may also dilute his importance in translocal scenes, especially if that critic remains committed to a local audience. Other media gain influence online because of the accessibility of their content: Though many jazz fans around the world are familiar with *DownBeat* or *JazzTimes*, they may end up reading the website of *AllAboutJazz.com*, which has no big-name critics like Hentoff or Gary Giddins on staff, but provides easy access to a wider variety of content online.

I do not believe that the multiplicity of online sources and the influence of blogs and MySpace pages invariably lead to the collapse of established power structures. But the shape of the sphere I have called “the jazz press” nevertheless changes as a new generation of critics and new means of communication enter the field. While I acknowledge the de-centralization and the specialization of media online, I hesitate to extend the notion of “the jazz press” to all sorts of blogs devoted to jazz. The “blogosphere” certainly interacts with the traditional press, but it has different priorities and a social dynamic of its own. Instead of including everything written about

jazz as part of “the jazz press,” I would like to ask which subdivisions of the larger sphere of “jazz publicity” are more vital to the formation of jazz scenes. The multiplicity of online sources also raises the question which publications do the best job of building a historical record of a jazz scene.

The “blogosphere” and the world of MySpace pages have certainly added a dimension to the formation of scenes. As far as reporting and criticism is concerned, writers of blogs and specialized online media may be closer to the scene and more directly reflect the viewpoint of a strongly committed audience or the musicians themselves, but they may not be as concerned as traditional critics with overarching ideas, intellectual challenges and the desire to place current events in a historical and cultural context. While online “micro-media” are an important part of the social fabric of a scene and do their part to keep scenes alive, few so far have developed narrative forms that preserve the stories of musicians and their relationships on the scene for posterity. Well-established print media still do the bulk of the work to provide a public record of what happens in the jazz world on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. Academic scholarship draws on its own research, but also makes heavy use of press records. So far, I have not heard of any research that would chronicle the formation of a scene over a certain time based primarily on online records such as blogs or MySpace networks. These records also tend to be ephemeral and hard to obtain over a longer period of time.

History & Journalism

In the foam model of the jazz world, only a few spheres are writing “history,” and these spheres have a long-established relationship to each other. Even if some new elements like a “blogosphere” have become part of scene, it may take some time for the history-writing protagonists to acknowledge change.

Journalists often write history according to their own experience and structure historical accounts according to their own, however well-informed, value judgments. At the same time, critics invoke “history” as a means of framing and invoking aesthetic judgments (DeVeaux 1991: p496). A critic’s history is both the result of and the prerequisite for value assessments.

Critic Gary Giddins freely acknowledged his subjectivity when he compiled a list of records that “defined” postwar jazz (Giddins 2004: p465-488). The article, in which Giddins chose one track for every year from 1945 to 2001, was reprinted in his book “Weather Bird – Jazz at the Dawn of its Second Century” (2004). The book was a follow-up to a volume called “Jazz: Its First Century” (1998). Both titles suggested an encyclopedic overview of jazz that the books did not provide.

Like other critics such as Whitney Balliett, Francis Davis, and Nat Hentoff, Gary Giddins compiled collections of articles and essays to form a quasi-historical account of the period he covered during his professional life. While all of the mentioned critics are well-respected intellectuals, their accounts largely stay within the sphere of “the press” – most texts were first published in magazines and newspapers and only later reframed books that claim to give a more comprehensive account of jazz history.

Critics may be aware how their environment, the expectation of peers, their own local horizon, and their position in the jazz and publishing world affects their perspective, but if journalism is published as history, these forces may not be obvious. In a similar fashion, musicians who write autobiographies or accounts of their experiences on the scene are likely to regard their own social and musical network as central. Academic researchers are guided by their methodology and draw on other scholarly work, on press accounts, oral histories, ethnographic observations and other documents. While the academic approach may seem to be the most

comprehensive of all, scholars also work within the boundaries of their social system, and their work is shaped by ongoing debates and peers' expectations.

In jazz history, the hierarchy of sources and accounts appears to be fairly flat compared to other areas of historical research. Journalistic, academic, and autobiographical accounts are often on a par, and the relationships between the systems that produce history are constantly in flux. Blurring boundaries between the spheres of observation and production often add to the sense of a scene in which everything is connected: In jazz, an extraordinary high number of critics and musicians double as historians, and many who record history are also engaged in shaping it: Stanley Crouch's and Albert Murray's ideology formed the basis for the vision of Jazz at Lincoln Center, Gary Giddins co-founded the American Jazz Orchestra, Nat Hentoff worked as a record producer.

The mechanisms that direct the sphere of jazz journalism may not produce an account that is superior to others, but they do include some practices that are valuable for a more comprehensive approach to jazz history. Journalist's interviews with artists, scholars, and scene veterans enable the exchange between spheres and shed a light on how protagonists relate to each other. Journalists who see themselves as being more than "consumer guides" can develop more profound ideas and reflect both on their own trade as well as on other spheres. The press can serve as a platform for confrontations between different spheres on the scene, as in the case with Eric Dolphy's and John Coltrane's "answer to the jazz critics" in *DownBeat* magazine in 1962. The 2002 book "The Future of Jazz" provided an example how the discourse among jazz critics can be made more transparent: The editor, Yuval Taylor, let ten critics write essays about the state of the art form and had each contributor respond to the others. This way, the book brought attention to the fact that every critic was engaged in a social structure and in a dialogue with peers. Set free from some of the restraints they faced in their publications (text length

requirements, editorial preferences), journalists could use their experience, their knowledge and their own research techniques to provide valuable ideas and perspectives. If the press can be such an open forum in which ideologies and preferences are openly debated, its methods to write history are quite effective and probably quite accurate – despite some negative examples that suggest the opposite.

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