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HIST 6010- Dr. Fialka
December 09, 2024

Historiography of Jazz as Part of The American Culture.

Jazz, often called "America's classical music," occupies a unique space in the nation's cultural history. As an art form born from African American communities, jazz reflects the complexities of American society, including its struggles with race, class, gender, and cultural identity[1]. The historiography of jazz-how its history has been studied, interpreted, and reinterpreted-offers a lens through which to examine not only the evolution of the music itself but also its relationship broader cultural dynamics in the United States.

Examining how jazz has been studied historically reveals a diverse field of scholarship. This includes perspectives from music theory, sociology, politics, and cultural studies. Early research often aimed to prove that jazz was a serious art form deserving of academic attention. Later studies explored how jazz connects to issues like race, social justice, and global movements. This essay follows the evolution of jazz studies, starting with foundational works like Gunther Schuller's "Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development" (1968) and continuing to contemporary works like Eric Avila's "American Cultural History: A Very Short Introduction" (2018). By analyzing these key texts, this essay will demonstrate the many ways jazz has been understood – both as a musical tradition and as a significant part of American culture.

The early historiography of jazz often focused on its cultural positioning within American society. At the time, jazz was viewed as a product of African American creativity but was also subject to significant marginalization. Gunther Schuller's *Early Jazz* is a key book in the history

[1] ARNOLD-FORSTER, TOM. "Dr. Billy Taylor, 'America's Classical Music,' and the Role of the Jazz Ambassador." *Journal of American Studies* 51, no. 1 (2017): 117–39. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815002662.

of jazz studies. Written in 1968, when jazz wasn't always taken seriously, Schuller aimed to show that jazz is as important as classical music. He carefully analyzed the music of early jazz, looking at its rhythms, how musicians improvise, and its roots in African music, blues, and ragtime. Schuller shows how these elements combined to create a uniquely American style of music. For example, he analyzes Louis Armstrong's famous 1928 recording 'West End Blues,' highlighting Armstrong's groundbreaking use of melody and rhythm, which set a new standard for jazz improvisation.[2]

Schuller not only analyzes the music but also places jazz within its broader social and cultural context. He connects the rise of jazz to the experiences of African Americans during the Great Migration, arguing that it was not merely a musical innovation but also a cultural response to the systemic racism and social changes of early 20th-century America.[3] While groundbreaking, Schuller's work has limitations. His primary focus on technical analysis leaves limited space for exploring the social and political dimensions of jazz in depth. While acknowledging the importance of race and identity, Schuller's analysis doesn't fully explore how these factors shaped jazz. Later scholars, like those who consider how race, class, and gender intersect, provide a more nuanced understanding. Moreover, Schuller tends to emphasize the contributions of individual musicians like Armstrong and Oliver, while giving less attention to the broader social and cultural forces that shaped jazz within African American communities. Despite these limitations, Schuller's *Early Jazz* laid the foundation for subsequent scholars to approach jazz with the same rigor as Western classical music. His emphasis on rigorous musical analysis influenced later works such as Ted Gioia's *The History of Jazz*.

[2] Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 132.
[3] Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 180

Building on this foundation, Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow* provides a pivotal framework for understanding how cultural hierarchies have shaped the reception and categorization of art forms, including jazz. Published in 1990, Levine's work examines the historical processes that divided culture into "highbrow" and "lowbrow," challenging the assumption that these distinctions are natural or universal. While not exclusively about jazz, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* offers critical insights into how the genre was redefined over time within these cultural hierarchies, emphasizing the social and cultural forces that shaped its evolution.

According to Lawrence Levine, the distinction between "high" (elite) and "low" (popular) culture emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a result of broader social and economic changes. He argues that jazz exemplifies this dynamic, tracing its evolution from a grassroots art form rooted in African American communities to a genre embraced and reinterpreted by the cultural elite. Levine points out that jazz performances shifted from informal settings like dance halls to more formal venues like concert halls during the Swing Era. This shift reflects attempts by cultural gatekeepers to elevate jazz's status as a legitimate art form while simultaneously distancing it from its origins in African American culture.[4]

A central argument in Levine's work is that the way audiences receive and interpret art significantly shapes how it is categorized and valued. He argues that jazz, initially embraced by a broad and diverse audience, was later rebranded by critics and institutions as "high art", a process that excluded certain styles and marginalized some communities.[5] While Levine offers a compelling analysis of these cultural hierarchies, his discussion of jazz is somewhat abstract. He doesn't delve deeply into the specific musical and social factors that shaped jazz's evolution,

[4] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 176
[5] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 180.

such as the role of improvisation or the contributions of individual musicians. Furthermore, his focus on class distinctions often overshadows other crucial dimensions of identity, such as race and gender, which are essential for understanding the full complexity of jazz history. Despite these limitations, his emphasis on the dynamics of cultural hierarchies resonates with Ted Gioia's work, which explores how jazz navigated the complexities of mass media and sought acceptance from the cultural elite.

Building on the work of scholars like Gunther Schuller and Lawrence Levine, Paul Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz* delves into the heart of jazz: improvisation. Published in 1994, Berliner shifts the focus from how jazz is perceived by society to how jazz musicians actually create it. He provides a detailed exploration of how jazz musicians learn, develop, and perform improvisational music. Berliner's approach combines ethnographic research (like observing musicians) with a deep technical analysis of jazz. He shows that improvisation is not just about talent, but also about learning through practice and community. He interviewed many musicians, from students to professionals, and discovered that jazz education often happens informally through jam sessions and mentorship. Musicians learn and share 'licks' (short musical phrases) and then adapt them to create their own unique styles during live performances.[6]

Berliner challenges the idea that jazz improvisation is purely spontaneous. He shows that musicians actually blend pre-learned musical patterns with on-the-spot decisions, navigating a complex interplay of structure and freedom. He analyzes Miles Davis's solos as an example, demonstrating how great jazz musicians balance careful preparation with creative spontaneity.[7] While focusing on the technical aspects of jazz, Berliner acknowledges its roots in African

[6] Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 102.
[7] Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 256

American cultural traditions, such as oral storytelling and community practices. His work builds upon Schuller's *Early Jazz* by going beyond the basic elements of jazz to explore how musicians actually use and develop these elements through improvisation. While Levine focuses on how external forces shaped jazz, Berliner shows how the creative process within jazz itself resisted attempts to rigidly define and categorize it, maintaining its dynamic and inclusive spirit. Despite Berliner valuable insights into the creative process of jazz musicians, his analysis may not fully account for the broader socio-political forces that shaped jazz. This contrasts with scholars like Charles Hersch, who connect jazz to the Civil Rights Movement and other social and political movements. Additionally, Berliner's focus primarily on male musicians leaves out important perspectives from female jazz musicians. This gap is addressed by scholars like Sherrie Tucker, whose book *Swing Shift* highlights the important contributions of women to jazz history.

While Berliner focuses on the creative core of jazz, Charles Hersch's work, "Let Freedom Ring!" (1995), shifts the focus to jazz's political dimensions. Hersch demonstrates how jazz served not only as an art form but also as a powerful tool for social resistance and a voice in the Civil Rights Movement. This highlights the multifaceted nature of jazz, which encompasses both artistic innovation and significant social and political engagement. Hersch's analysis complements the work of Lawrence Levine, who focuses on cultural hierarchies, and Paul Berliner, who examines the technical aspects of jazz improvisation. Hersch emphasizes the political messages embedded within jazz's innovative musical forms. He argues that free jazz, with its rejection of conventional harmony and rhythm, symbolized a broader resistance to

societal norms and constraints. Hersch examines John Coltrane's modal improvisation and spiritual themes in *A Love Supreme* as expressions of transcendence and liberation.[8]

Hersch highlights the intentionality of artists like Charles Mingus and Archie Shepp, who consciously used their music to critique racial inequality and advocate for social justice. As Archie Shepp stated, "music is a form of resistance, a way to push back against the forces of oppression".[9] By breaking away from Western musical traditions, free jazz challenged dominant cultural paradigms, asserting the validity of African American cultural expressions. Berliner primarily focuses on male musicians, leaving gaps in understanding how gender shaped the experiences of women in jazz activism. Sherrie Tucker's *Swing Shift* addresses these gaps by highlighting women's contributions to jazz during the same period. Additionally, while Hersch provides rich insights into free jazz, he does not explore other subgenres that also played significant roles in the Civil Rights Movement, such as bebop or soul jazz. Hersch's work bridges the artistic and political dimensions of jazz, influencing later studies like Eric Porter's *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, which examines how African American musicians used jazz as both an artistic medium and a platform for activism.

Building on Hersch's work on jazz as a political tool, Michael Kammen's *American Culture, American Tastes* examines how broader social and cultural forces shaped the perception of American art forms, including jazz, in the 20th century. Kammen explores how factors like mass media, technology, and social class influenced the way jazz was produced, consumed, and valued. Kammen examines how technological advancements, such as radio and phonographs, made jazz accessible to a national audience, breaking down some cultural barriers while

[8] Charles Hersch, "Let Freedom Ring!: Free Jazz and African-American Politics," *Cultural Critique* 32 (1995): 98
[9] Hersch, "Let Freedom Ring!," 102

reinforcing others. Kammen highlights how radio helped popularize jazz during the Swing Era, creating new opportunities for Black musicians while also contributing to the commercialization of their music.[10] He also examines how class distinctions shaped how jazz was perceived. Initially dismissed by the elite as 'lowbrow' entertainment, jazz was later rebranded as 'high art' by institutions like Carnegie Hall. Duke Ellington's performance at Carnegie Hall in 1943 symbolized this shift. However, this acceptance often overlooked jazz's roots in Black working-class communities.[11] Kammen highlights a paradox of jazz's popularity: while mass media made jazz more accessible, it also raised concerns about whether its authenticity was being compromised. As Kammen argues, "the widespread commercialization of jazz reflected a broader tension in American culture, where increased accessibility often came at the cost of cultural authenticity"[12]

Kammen's analysis complements Gerard's work by demonstrating how racial and economic hierarchies intersected to shape the perception and reception of jazz. Both scholars build on Levine's framework, with Kammen emphasizing how technological and social changes reinforced cultural hierarchies while also providing opportunities for greater accessibility. However, Kammen's analysis, while insightful, does not fully address the role of gender in jazz, a gap addressed by Sherrie Tucker's *Swing Shift*. His insights are particularly relevant to Ted Gioia's *The History of Jazz*, which traces jazz's evolution across different media and societal contexts, and Eric Avila's *American Cultural History,* which situates jazz within the larger story of American modernity. Kammen's emphasis on the social hierarchies within culture and its commercialization transitions naturally into Sherrie Tucker's Swing Shift (2000), which narrows

[10] Michael G. Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century* (New York: Knopf, 1999). 85
[11] Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes*, 126.
[12] Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes*, 145.

the focus to examine how women navigated the jazz world during the 1940s. Tucker addresses the intersections of gender, race, and class that Kammen only briefly touches, providing a much-needed perspective on the contributions and challenges faced by women in jazz.

Published in 2000, Tucker's work shines a spotlight on the women who participated in "all-girl" bands during the 1940s, revealing their contributions to jazz and the challenges they faced in a male-dominated industry. Her analysis addresses the intersections of gender, race, and class. Emphasizing the often-overlooked roles of women in jazz history, Tucker situates all-girl bands within the social and cultural context of World War II, when women temporarily gained greater visibility in industries traditionally dominated by men, including jazz. Tucker explores how wartime labor shortages created opportunities for women to perform in swing bands, yet these opportunities were often framed as temporary or "novelty." She discusses how advertisements for all-girl bands emphasized their femininity, often overshadowing their musical talent.[13] Additionally, Tucker highlights how race compounded the challenges faced by women in jazz, particularly for Black and Latina musicians who experienced both sexism and racism. For instance, integrated bands often struggled to secure gigs in segregated venues, underscoring the intersection of racial and gender discrimination.[14] Tucker critiques traditional jazz historiography for marginalizing women's contributions, arguing that their experiences are essential to understanding the full scope of jazz history. She writes, "All-girl bands were not anomalies but integral parts of the jazz world, navigating the same artistic and social challenges as their male counterparts"[15]

[13] Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). 4
[14] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 142
[15] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 205

Tucker critiques traditional jazz historiography for often overlooking or marginalizing the contributions of women, arguing that their experiences are essential for a comprehensive understanding of jazz history. Tucker's work has significantly influenced subsequent scholarship by encouraging a more inclusive and gender-conscious approach to jazz historiography. Her work aligns with Eric Porter's *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, which similarly challenges traditional narratives by emphasizing the intellectual and activist roles of African American musicians. Porter builds on Tucker's intersectional approach by incorporating themes of race, politics, and activism, expanding the discussion to include the voices of African American musicians as cultural critics and social advocates.

Porter emphasizes that African American musicians were not just performers but also thinkers and critics who used their art to address issues of race, identity, and justice. He examines works like Max Roach's *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* as politically charged compositions that directly engaged with the Civil Rights Movement and African liberation struggles.[16] Porter also highlights how African American musicians used jazz to assert their cultural identity and resist appropriation or dilution of their contributions. For example, he discusses Wynton Marsalis's advocacy for preserving the African American roots of jazz and his critiques of its commercialization.[17] Porter also shows how jazz improvisation and other musical techniques became powerful symbols of freedom and resistance for African Americans. These musical expressions aligned with their broader struggles for justice. As Porter points out, African American musicians used their art to challenge the status quo and envision a better future.[18] His

[16] Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). 159
[17] Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz*, 302.
[18] Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz*, 47.

work informs Ted Gioia's *The History of Jazz*, which contextualizes these themes within a broader historical narrative.

Gioia synthesizes decades of jazz scholarship into a comprehensive narrative that traces the genre's evolution from its African American roots to its global prominence. Published in 2011, this work serves as a pivotal reference point in jazz historiography, weaving together the cultural, political, and artistic dimensions explored by earlier scholars. Combining chronological storytelling with stylistic and biographical analysis, Gioia provides a detailed account of how jazz developed across time, geography, and culture. His approach complements and contextualizes the contributions of earlier historians while offering a cohesive overview for understanding jazz as an art form and cultural phenomenon.

Gioia organizes his book into a timeline that begins with jazz's roots in African musical traditions, spirituals, and blues, progressing through ragtime, swing, bebop, and modern jazz forms. He discusses how the Great Migration facilitated the spread of jazz from New Orleans to Chicago and New York, situating this movement within broader social and cultural changes.[19] Gioia delves into the defining characteristics of each jazz era, exploring the technical innovations that distinguished key figures and movements. For instance, he analyzes Miles Davis's contributions to modal jazz in *Kind of Blue*, highlighting how this album reshaped jazz improvisation and harmonics.[20] Additionally, by profiling seminal figures like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane, Gioia personalizes jazz history while illustrating its collective and collaborative nature. His discussion of Duke Ellington emphasizes

[19] Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). 43
[20] Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, 276

Ellington's ability to transcend cultural hierarchies, elevating jazz to an art form that rivaled classical music.[21]

Gioia's work synthesizes the insights of previous scholars, providing a broad overview of jazz history. It aligns with Levine's work by showing how jazz navigated tensions between high and low culture. Gioia also contextualizes the political engagement explored by Porter and Hersch within the broader history of jazz. While comprehensive, Gioia's work may not delve as deeply into specific areas like gender (as Tucker does) or the intricacies of improvisation (as Berliner does). Gioia's work provides a foundational framework for understanding jazz within American culture. This sets the stage for Eric Avila's *American Cultural History*, which explores how broader cultural forces shaped American art forms like jazz.

Avila's *American Cultural History* provides a broad framework for understanding how social and cultural forces, such as race, class, and urbanization, shaped American art forms, including jazz. He examines how jazz reflects the complexities of modern American society, including the rise of mass consumption. While not solely focused on jazz, Avila's work highlights the significant role jazz played in American culture during the 20th century. Avila situates jazz within the context of urbanization and migration, particularly the Great Migration, which brought African American traditions to urban centers like Chicago and New York. He discusses how jazz became synonymous with modernity during the Harlem Renaissance, serving as a cultural expression of both African American pride and urban sophistication.[22] Avila shows how the rise of mass media like radio and records made jazz more accessible but also turned it

[21] Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, 93
[22] Eric Avila, *American Cultural History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). 77

into a product for mass consumption.[23] This created a tension between jazz as a grassroots movement and its commercialization. Like Levine, Avila explores how jazz moved from being considered “lowbrow” to being accepted by the elite. Avila's work complements Gioia’s by providing the broader cultural context for jazz's development. He shows how factors like urbanization and migration shaped jazz and its role in American society.

In conclusion, the historiography of jazz reveals its multifaceted nature: a musical tradition and a significant cultural phenomenon. From Schuller's technical analysis to Avila's broader cultural context, scholars provide diverse perspectives. Key themes include race, gender, improvisation, and political activism. Future research should focus more on audiences, who played a crucial role in shaping jazz. Audiences influenced its style, popularity, and cultural identity. By understanding the dynamic interplay between artists and audiences, we can gain a deeper appreciation for jazz's enduring legacy.

[23] Avila,American Cultural History, 55

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