

Bruce Johnson challenges jazz doctrine



JAZZ DIASPORA: MUSIC AND GLOBALISATION

by Bruce Johnson

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Over its century of existence, jazz in the United States has produced a body of musical works of the highest quality; a canon which serves as a point of departure for most jazz enthusiasts around the world. The history of that music

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has been segmented into manageable and understandable periods, usually of a decade or so, where acknowledged masters, usually African American, are said to epitomize a particular era.

This model begins with ragtime (a pre-jazz form, dominated by Scott Joplin), and proceeds through New Orleans jazz of the 20s (Louis Armstrong), the swing era of the 30s (Count Basie), bebop of the 40s (Charlie Parker), hard-bop of the early 50s (Art Blakey), modal jazz of the late 50s (Miles Davis), the avant-garde of the 60s (John Coltrane) and so on into the second half of the 20th century.



The “US-centred jazz canon”, proceeds through New Orleans jazz of the 20s (epitomized by Louis Armstrong, left), the swing era of the 30s (Count Basie, below), and bebop of the 40s (Charlie Parker, far below, pictured with Dizzy Gillespie) ...PHOTOS COURTESY JAZZ A HISTORY OF AMERICA’S MUSIC



Jazz enthusiasts worldwide rarely had cause to question this convenient conceptual framework, until the late 20th century, when the so-called New Jazz Studies movement began chipping away at it. In his fascinating new book, *Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalisation*, the Australian cultural historian Professor Bruce Johnson now brings the matter to a head, arguing that accepting solely what he calls the “US-centred jazz canon”, is a trap. This model is misleading, and an oversimplification. It has led to many assumptions which have infected the jazz discourse, which now needs to be reinvigorated.



Bruce Johnson: he argues that accepting solely what he calls the “US-centred jazz canon”, is a trap. This model is misleading, and an oversimplification...

The ideological belief underpinning this model is that authentic jazz - the “real thing” as described by American critic Mike Zwerin - developed autonomously in the United States and was copied by musicians, with varied degrees of success, in other countries. Histories of jazz, invariably written by Americans, have taken this hegemony for granted. Jazz movements in other countries around the world - the global jazz diasporas – tend to be mere footnotes.

Those diasporas sprang up quickly, following the emergence of jazz in 1917. That year the Original Dixieland Jazz Band made the first jazz recordings and, performing in New York, “[converted] a puzzled crowd by declaring that jazz was for dancing”. Subsequently jazz spread around the world like a virus. By the early 20s – sometimes within two or three years, but certainly within a decade, described as the Jazz Age - jazz movements sprang up in virtually every Western country, including Australia.

Johnson contests the simple view that jazz was invented in the United States and then exported. The truth is more complicated. Jazz, he says, “was invented in the process of being disseminated”.

Even within the United States, musicians were constantly reinventing the music as it flowered in places other than New Orleans, its accepted place of origin. Jazz was dynamic, not static. Big band jazz in Kansas City in the 1930s was a reinvention by musicians surrounding Count Basie. Bebop, a reinvention emerging in New York in the mid-1940s, courtesy of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, was itself reinvented soon after by musicians on the other side of the US, culminating in West Coast jazz.

Johnson argues that, while the American model ordains that such reinventions occurred solely within the US, the phenomenon of reinventing jazz does not stop at the US border. While Johnson is not providing a history of the diasporas – that would be a monumental task - he provides abundant evidence that jazz of indisputable originality has emerged in the various diasporas around the world.

The obvious example is Belgian guitarist Django Reinhardt who, with French violinist Stephane Grappelli, formed the Hot Club of France group in 1934. Rather than simply reproduce American jazz, Reinhardt incorporated local traditions, creating a new genre now known as gypsy jazz or “Manouche jazz”. According to Johnson, this is a supreme example of music being reinvented in the course of its migration to Europe.



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Johnson gives many other examples of jazz styles or genres which have developed outside the US. “Free jazz”, while present in the US in the 60s, has since evolved in its most mature forms in European countries; “acid jazz”, a fusion of orthodox jazz and rock music, was mostly a UK phenomenon in the 70s; and “traditional jazz”, which has existed in many countries, has arguably evolved with most vibrancy and authenticity in Australia, as the international influence of Graeme Bell’s bands attest, not to mention its strain of “larrikinism” - a spirit in the music identified by UK critics to be unique to Australian jazz.



The Graeme Bell Band circa 1950-52: the international influence of Bell’s bands attest to the vibrancy and authenticity of “traditional jazz” in Australia...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Central to the US-centred canon is the view that African American musicians are primarily responsible for the major innovations throughout jazz history. Consequently this is widely believed internationally. In 1987 the US Congress passed a resolution, declaring jazz to be “America’s classical music”. It referred to jazz as “bringing to ... the world a uniquely American synthesis and culture through the African-American experience”.

According to Johnson, there are many problems with this expression of American exceptionalism.

The American model cannot explain, for example, the phenomenon of Frank Coughlan, the first Australian jazz musician of real significance. He emerged from the brass band movement in a regional area of New South Wales, arriving in Sydney circa 1922. He was first exposed to jazz through hearing recordings of the US group Original Memphis Five, and was inspired by their trombonist Miff Mole. The US-centric model would suggest that Coughlan simply copied the American trombonist.



The American model cannot explain the phenomenon of Frank Coughlan (above, pictured in 1962), the first Australian jazz musician of real significance... PHOTO COURTESY THE AUSTRALIAN

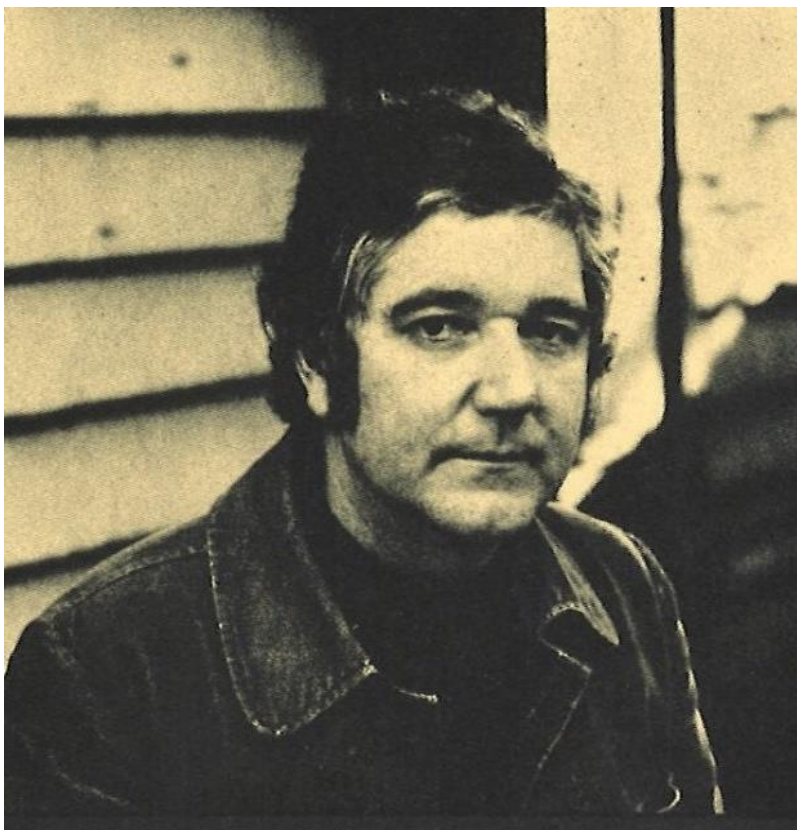
A number of facts from the diaspora, however, provide a different perspective. First, Mole was a white musician, not one of the black musicians who are said to be the most authentic expression of ‘the real thing’; and second, when Coughlan subsequently worked with the American band the Californians in Melbourne and Sydney, his solo work was, Johnson points out, “more supple and harmonically informed than some of the Americans”. In other words, Coughlan had in part superseded the American model.

Moreover Coughlan went on to great success in the late 20s in the UK, where bandleaders clamoured to hire him. There is evidence that he was influenced by

UK and European musicians. Where does this leave the exclusively US-centred model? Rather frazzled, it would seem.

Glorification of American jazz musicians in Australia has been widespread in Australia for a long time. This has been most obvious in the excessive adulation shown to visiting American artists. Also, anecdotal evidence indicates that, in some of the tertiary jazz education courses which have sprung up since the 70s, much deference has been shown to American models, at the expense of great Australian musicians whose works should have been regarded as worthy of study. Having said that, there is some evidence over recent years, that this is being rectified.

In Melbourne the late Brian Brown, head of improvisation studies at the Victorian College of the Arts, was for many years widely known, if not notorious, for encouraging his students to ignore American models, and find within themselves their own individual voices.



Melbourne's Brian Brown: he encouraged his students to ignore American models, and find within themselves their own individual voices...

It would be interesting to consider to what extent Brown's approach has been decisive in the extraordinary flowering of creativity in Melbourne jazz over the

last 30 years, while jazz in Sydney, in comparison, has appeared to be in the doldrums.

Bruce Johnson's critique of the US-centred model is timely food for thought.

Editor's note: Ted Nettelbeck's review of "Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalisation" can be read on this site at this link

<https://ericmyersjazz.com/book-reviews-17>