Book Review

Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion

Kevin Fellezs
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Reviewed by Rob Wallace

There is a commonly-repeated phrase in the Hindustani (North Indian classical) music world that sums up the critical and aesthetic attitude often directed towards the subject of Kevin Fellezs's book: "fusion is confusion." *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion* is the first relatively-comprehensive, scholarly, book-length study of a music that remains controversial in the annals of popular music. It is also, appropriately enough, the first book in Duke University Press's "Refiguring American Music" series, making the potential "confusion" of fusion a prime introduction to the complex aesthetic, political, and spiritual themes mixed up in American musical culture. Ultimately, Fellezs argues in favour of fusion's sometimes confusing sonic spaces, stating that "fusion musicians sounded out the possibilities of creating music from materials 'partially coalesced' and radically transforming those elements into new musical formations through idiosyncratic practices and aesthetics" (226). Originating in a time of both utopian idealism and destructive cynicism—most often epitomized by the Vietnam War—fusion was "not a matter of schizophrenia or duplicity," but rather a commitment to "maintaining the discrepancies between authenticity and idiosyncrasy, tradition and innovation, and the struggles between collective and individual interests in creative tension" (227). Existing between genres, between electric and acoustic instrumentation, between various ethnic, racial, and cultural essentialisms, fusion was not so much a blending of styles as an attempt to *stay* in between, to balance, to fly.

To some readers this argument may sound like a clever way of corralling fusion into the slightly absurd category of "non-idiomatic" music that Derek Bailey famously outlined in *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. Although I will return to the relationship between free jazz/free improvisation and fusion later in this review, I don't believe *Birds of Fire* has any direct link to Bailey's ideas (his book is never cited). Fellezs's notion of fusion, as well as his theoretical approach towards the music, is not so much non-idiomatic as it is multi-idiomatic: he draws on a variety of disciplines including musicology, ethnomusicology, and ethnic studies, among other fields, and takes his principle historical information from interviews and biographical writings (rather than ethnography or musical transcription). While this necessarily limits the depth and breadth of the book in some respects, it also allows Fellezs to focus more intensely on a historical period stretching roughly from 1967 (the year of what Fellezs and other commentators have called the first fusion album, Gary Burton's *Duster*)¹ to 1983 (the year of Herbie Hancock's *Future Shock* album, featuring the huge hit "Rockit"). As his title indicates, this was the period when fusion was being *created*, and it is the rich mixture of musical styles and socio-cultural attitudes—toward music, spirituality, and race, arguably less prominent in later emanations of fusion—which form the primary subjects for Fellezs's analysis.

Fellezs notes that he made a decision not to interview any musicians for the book and instead draw on archival material: "I did not want retrospective recollections spanning thirty-plus years. There was ample material in the musical journals, trade publications, recordings, and other accessible items from the 1970s to aid me in my attempt to capture the musicians and listeners, particularly the critics, in the heat of the moment" (12). In order to hone his argument even further, Fellezs concentrates mainly on four artists whom he rightly views as crucial participants in the creation of fusion: Tony Williams, John McLaughlin, Joni Mitchell, and Herbie Hancock. As this list implies, however—featuring three musicians who worked closely with, and one who was deeply influenced by, the trumpeter often credited with recording some of the first fusion albums—Miles Davis is also discussed at length during the first section of the book.

Chapters 1-3 develop Fellezs's central thesis regarding fusion (an idea borrowed from literary critic Isobel Armstrong): the notion that fusion represents a "broken middle," a space that refuses dialectical synthesis and instead represents "an overlapping yet liminal space of contested, and never settled, priorities between two or more musical traditions" (8). In this sense, Fellezs's use of the term "fusion" to describe the musical practices of the artists he discusses is almost the exact semantic *opposite* of fusion: a fission, an explosion, a constantly generative style of music at the gap between genres.² Much of the book's first half, in fact, is spent investigating how fusion destabilized conventional music genres at the end of the 1960s, particularly in terms of rock, jazz, and funk. Fellezs never really

takes us to the origin of the term “fusion,” but justifies his use of the word by stating that “it was used throughout the 1970s to differentiate the music discussed within these pages from other kinds of music [and] because it succinctly captures the eclectic aesthetic the young ‘ain’t jazz, ain’t rock’ musicians enacted” (17). Fellezs emphasizes how the categories denoted by “jazz,” “rock,” “funk,” and many other genres and styles important to the soundscape of fusion (especially western art music) were themselves aesthetically ambiguous, even as they retained an importance for record companies, musicians, and fans. Read against the backdrop of music industry shenanigans and the historically racist essentialisms connected to genres, “fusion” operated as a kind of sonic miscegenation, threatening capitalist specialization and notions of racial (and therefore musical) purity in the United States.

This argument represents an admirable and nuanced response to the typical claims that fusion artists were less political, less artistically “authentic,” more vain, and more greedy than their hippy rock or suave jazz brothers and sisters. To the charge that fusion was less political, Fellezs notes that “Fusion musicians [...] were actively involved with alternative spiritual beliefs and other socially transformative praxis—actions and beliefs that did not register as viable substitutes for direct political action or revolutionary rhetoric during the late 1960s” (42). As Fellezs emphasizes, fusion offered many remarkable examples of socially-progressive alliances, including the integrated bands of Tony Williams (Lifetime), John McLaughlin (Mahavishnu Orchestra and Shakti), Joni Mitchell (primarily after she began working with jazz musicians during the mid-70s), and Herbie Hancock (Mwandishi and Headhunters). These bands followed in the footsteps of jazz, rock, and funk groups such as Miles Davis’s electric ensembles and Sly and the Family Stone—further emphasizing that fusion was less a break from the past than a way of reigniting the already anti-essentialist elements present in much American popular music. However, these mixed-race bands (which also mixed the electrification of rock and roll with the primarily acoustic instruments of jazz) were a direct contradiction to the conventional racial connotations of “jazz” (black) and “rock” (white)—despite the fact that both of those genres had long featured a multiracial collection of artists.

Underlying the aesthetic arguments about fusion’s supposed vain commercialism and lack of sophistication, then, was a policing of boundaries that both erased rock’s blackness (not to mention its sophistication) and attempted to keep black jazz musicians (like Tony Williams) in the (black) jazz box. Meanwhile, it was assumed that white *and* black jazz musicians like John McLaughlin and Herbie Hancock were pandering to audiences with their fusion, reveling in both egotistical admiration and financial success. Fellezs convincingly argues that the desires for larger audiences and the subsequent unquestioned commercial success of some fusion bands (most notably the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Weather Report, and the Head Hunters) was not so much an example of popularity as *populism* (101). Ironically, earlier iterations of financial and cultural success in jazz had been integrated into the jazz canon by the 1970s: Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Dave Brubeck, for example, had achieved relative popularity and mass-audience appeal. Of course, the jazz world’s discomfort with fusion belied the fact that these early examples of success had, in fact, been the subject of debate on aesthetic, commercial, and political grounds—foreshadowing the same kinds of debates that would entangle fusion performers. Jazz, as Fellezs and many other critics have noted, has always been a hotly contested genre in terms of its meaning and its place in cultural and financial hierarchies. These earlier struggles aside, what fusion did more than any other previous music, according to Fellezs, was disrupt the very notion of hierarchy itself, the distinctions between political and personal, commercial and non-commercial, sacred and profane: it never decided where it wanted to rest, and in this respect may have succeeded in sustaining itself despite the fact that it never cohered into a commercial genre with its own pop chart or section in the record store. “[Fusion’s] success,” Fellezs states, “may in fact be registered in the central position aesthetic mixture now maintains in popular art and music practice” (224). Triumphant over the debate as to whether it was “jazz,” “rock,” or “funk,” fusion as an *idea* has now become the central element of much global popular culture.

In the preceding paragraphs, I’ve sketched out a very loose summary of some of Fellezs’s main arguments in *Birds of Fire*. The book itself offers a wealth of other information that I don’t have room to fully detail, and I have necessarily compressed some of Fellezs’s careful parsing of issues such as genre. Before concluding, however, I want to focus more specifically on a few issues in the book that I found compelling or frustrating.

First, the book’s format as part history and part detailed investigation of four musicians will potentially leave some readers wanting more in both regards: a more comprehensive history of fusion from the late 1960s to the present, and a more comprehensive biographical and ethnomusicological analysis of each of its four protagonists. I found this combination of breadth and depth to be useful, however, despite my own misgivings about some issues and musicians receiving less attention. The overarching feeling is that this book represents, finally, a serious introduction to a period of music that remains critically under-valued and under-researched. The door has been opened for further scholarship, both on the musicians Fellezs profiles and those he does not.

While some Canadian readers in particular may feel differently, the inspired and logical inclusion of Joni Mitchell is perhaps the highlight of the book, and Fellezs’s treatment of Mitchell as a necessarily liminal artist due to her gender

and nationality is insightful. The troubling aspects of Mitchell's attitudes towards race, most radically displayed in her gender-bending, pimp-minstrel alter-ego "Art Nouveau" (as featured on the cover of her 1977 album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*), are carefully considered by Fellezs, and the interactions he recounts between Mitchell and Charles Mingus are both surprising and humorous. Passages such as the following, where Fellezs expertly links his theoretical perspectives with the particular artists' biographical and musical context, demonstrate the strength of his overall argument: "Mitchell, in her attempt to fuse jazz to her own expanded vision of popular music aesthetics, and Mingus, in his desire to collaborate across racial, gender, and genre lines, together created a space for jazz to both anchor itself to its own tangled histories and reach out toward an unknown future" (182). In assessments such as these, Fellezs is never overly-optimistic about the social change that fusion enacted (or didn't) and always casts his positive readings and hearings of the music in realistic terms. He constantly emphasizes that the "unknown future" of the Mingus/Mitchell partnership or any of the other collaborations detailed in the book is both potentially positive and negative, befitting the "broken middle" that fusion helped to continually articulate.

If there is one criticism I'd make of *Birds of Fire*, it is that the structuring metaphor of the title—the ambiguity and "sounded liminality" of fusion represented by ephemeral birds—is borrowed from an artist (John McLaughlin) whose work gets the least nuanced reading. Here, it is what Fellezs has left out that leads to some missed opportunities for fully contextualizing both the historical material and the theoretical and aesthetic uniqueness of McLaughlin's career. For instance, the brevity of the section on McLaughlin's place in British jazz (found mostly in a footnote) discounts the importance of the late-60s London jazz and free improvisation scene that McLaughlin left in order to work with Miles Davis, Tony Williams, et. al. Unlike Dave Holland, for example, whom McLaughlin had collaborated with in England and who also played in Miles Davis's fusion bands, McLaughlin has never returned to the kinds of "fusion" that were arguably possible in free(er) improvisation. Projects like *Arcana*, organized in 1995 by bassist and producer Bill Laswell, and which featured Laswell in an "alternative Tony Williams Lifetime" along with Williams and British guitarist Derek Bailey, are a clear reminder of what McLaughlin's fusion might have sounded like had it taken a different path—in addition to being an obvious homage to the Lifetime band of which McLaughlin was a member.

And while I'm uninterested here in excoriating McLaughlin for not playing "out" enough, I do take issue with Fellezs for too abruptly separating the worlds of "fusion" and "free jazz" throughout *Birds of Fire*—particularly when many of the musicians he profiles were and are participants in both genres.³ Fellezs asserts that "unlike free jazz, fusion was not only accessing high art aesthetics but was explicitly engaging 'low' cultural forms and audiences" (89). Although some free jazz artists did indeed place their music in firm opposition to "low" cultural and commercial concerns, anyone who has listened to the James Brown-infused groove of Archie Shepp's "Mama Too Tight" (from the 1966 album of the same name), the carnivalesque, singable melodies of Sun Ra's "Space is the Place," or the "free funk" of Ornette Coleman's "Theme from a Symphony" might well wonder about the supposed lack of audience or attention to "low" music genres emphasized in stereotypical accounts of free jazz.

Given that fusion and free jazz remain the usual suspects for the supposed "death of jazz" during the 1970s, what if we recast the "broken middle" of fusion as a space equally-occupied by free jazz? Rather than positing a convenient divide between fusion and free jazz, would it not be more compelling to fully detail the constant oscillations between various sounds and styles which musicians played (sometimes in the context of a single performance) in order to circumvent aesthetic and socio-political categories? While such a scheme might tend to make McLaughlin the exception to the rule—in other words, he didn't play as "free" as some of his other fusion counterparts, nor has he ever collaborated with artists more closely associated with free jazz such as Anthony Braxton, Cecil Taylor, or Ornette Coleman—his continuing devotion to John Coltrane demonstrates something about freedom that transcends fusion or free jazz, less a "broken middle" than a "universal consciousness" (to borrow the title of one of *Alice Coltrane's* albums). And again, this scheme would not result in a Bailey-esque "non-idiom," but rather a music of *truly* free improvisation/composition where any sound source could be manipulated, fused, exploded, recycled, or otherwise used; a music forged not from some pre-existing "universal language," but rather from a conscious determination to develop a voice out of whatever seems practical and interesting—the consciousness of the personal *in* the universal, if you will.⁴

In respect to the "universal consciousness" that McLaughlin found in Indian music, when discussing the spiritual aspect of McLaughlin's music and the corollary "Indianness" of the Mahavishnu Orchestra and Shakti, Fellezs never fully engages with the longer history of East/West spiritual and musical fusions in the context of McLaughlin's career. My critique here is less about Fellezs than a general lack of knowledge regarding Indian music and culture in accounts of western musicians who have been influenced by India. These misunderstandings are sometimes exacerbated by the musicians themselves: for example, there is the often-cited example (as in McLaughlin's case) of Hazrat Inayat Khan as a model for the supposed universal power of music (Fellezs 134-5). What does not often get mentioned is that Khan's views on jazz were unambiguously negative and arguably racist. Ravi Shankar has also echoed some of the same kinds of critiques of jazz throughout his career, despite his early and significant

connections to the world of jazz. How jazz musicians and critics have reconciled these negative statements with their desire to see inclusiveness in Indian music is a fascinating example of the “confusion” of fusion.⁵

In closing, I want to highly recommend *Birds of Fire*. Overall, it lives up to the illumination of its title phrase and offers a strong introduction to the world of fusion from a well-articulated and convincing theoretical perspective. As Tony Williams sings in “Beyond Games” from *Emergency!*, “Just be aware / that there are people / who are trying to share [. . .] all of their fears / Just don’t be afraid now to stand up when it counts / give in sometimes, it’s nice.” Opening our ears to the ambiguity of fusion, Kevin Fellezs demonstrates, we might just share in the very complexity that sometimes makes life (and music) so scary and so exciting.

Notes

¹ Fellezs provides an astute, succinct analysis of the “fusion-esque” elements of this album, and argues that it more appropriately claims the mantle of the first fusion album than, for example, The Free Spirits’ 1967 record *Out of Sight and Sound*—which, like *Duster*, also featured Larry Coryell on electric guitar (Fellezs 76). However, Native American saxophonist Jim Pepper’s presence in the Free Spirits makes their work an important example of how various cultures usually thought to be anathema to jazz (and rock, or funk, for that matter) were also able to be “fused” into this new music of the late 1960s. Additionally, John McLaughlin, who had collaborated with Coryell in the 1970s, would later front a trio in the 90s called The Free Spirits.

² Lee Jeske uses the same metaphor when discussing the origins of fusion in the liner notes of The Tony Williams Lifetime reissue, *The Collection*: “Fusion, oddly enough, started with a fission [. . .] when the four young guys that Miles Davis hired for his quintet in the early ‘60s [. . .] took his acoustic music as far as they could take it” (5).

³ Another way to address this issue would be to investigate why Pat Metheny, and not John McLaughlin, would collaborate with Ornette Coleman, Derek Bailey, and other more “avant-garde” musicians. Were those collaborations any less of a “fusion” than some of Metheny’s other projects? For more background on McLaughlin and free jazz, see Daniel Fischlin’s interview with McLaughlin in *Critical Studies in Improvisation*. Most striking in that interview is McLaughlin’s claim that he “doesn’t know [about] the people you mention” when Fischlin asks him about the ICP (Instant Composers’ Pool) Orchestra, the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians), and William Parker and Hamid Drake. On the other hand, Richard Cook and Brian Morton place McLaughlin’s first solo album—*Extrapolation*, recorded in 1969 in England when McLaughlin’s music was arguably closer to that of free jazz and free improvisation artists—in their coveted “Crown” category, the highest rating of *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD*. For a more polemical take on McLaughlin in contrast to Derek Bailey, see Ben Watson’s *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*.

⁴ For an interesting theorization of this kind of “fusion,” see Mike Heffley’s epic, idiosyncratic survey of European (mainly German) jazz/free improvisation: *Northern Sun, Southern Moon: Europe’s Reinvention of Jazz*. Such a “universal music” is also potentially problematic, in that it can “fuse” musical and cultural elements together in an unwieldy manner—(implicitly or explicitly) appropriating sounds, styles, and instruments from various discrete and unrelated traditions; or ignoring tradition altogether in favour of Bailey’s “non-idiomatic” idiom. A model for how to make this kind of “fusion” music in what I think is an extremely compelling way is the band Codona, featuring Don Cherry, Nana Vasconcelos, and Collin Walcott. I would also include much of Bailey’s own music in this category.

⁵ Readers interested in this topic can consult Khan’s *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*, Gerry Farrell’s *Indian Music and the West* (which includes information on Khan, Shankar, and McLaughlin), the documentary film *Ravi Shankar: Between Two Worlds*, Peter Lavezzoli’s *Bhairavi: The Dawn of Indian Music in the West* (featuring chapters devoted to McLaughlin, Shankar, and many other important figures), and the documentary and concert DVD *Remember Shakti: The Way of Beauty*. Some of these materials were likely not available for Fellezs to consider in time for the publication of *Birds of Fire*.

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