Book Review

Jazzing: New York City's Unseen Scene

Thomas H. Greenland
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Reviewed by Yoko Suzuki

Jazzing: New York City's Unseen Scene by Thomas H. Greenland attempts to understand the New York City jazz scene in a holistic way through discussing people involved with jazz, without highlighting musicians. Drawing on Christopher Small's idea of musicking and Howard Becker's concept of "art worlds," Greenland shifts the focus of study from the musicians to the people who surround and support those musicians in the various jazz scenes in New York City. He suggests that the jazz scene is an "art world" in which performing musicians as well as the network of people surrounding them in the scene are also involved in the process of "musicking."

Greenland is a "New York City-based guitarist, pianist, vocalist, composer, arranger, journalist, photographer, and educator." While I do not know him personally, I have encountered his work at the annual and various chapter meetings of the Society for Ethnomusicology. Greenland received a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at UC Santa Barbara in 2007. Ethnographic fieldwork is the main methodology for this work and many of his references are theoretical works required in ethnomusicological research. Since I spent a decade from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s as an ethnomusicology student and a jazz musician in New York City, I am familiar with many of the people and venues Greenland discusses. This book draws on the author's fieldwork from 2002 to 2010, interviewing over one hundred people that include jazz musicians, fans, proprietors, critics, photographers, and producers. Perhaps 60% of the interviews included in the book were conducted in 2002 and 2003, and came directly out of his insightful dissertation research. While fieldwork data from over a decade ago might seem to be outdated, this is not an unusual circumstance in the academic field since publishing a book can often be a long process. This book represents the fruit borne out of the author's continuous academic and journalistic writing of over a decade.

The introduction of the book provides a theoretical framework and explains what the unseen scene is: the listening public and the offstage interactions between performers and non-performing participants. Greenland focuses on this normally "unseen scene" to challenge the distinction between artists and audiences and to "provide a realistic representation of jazz in New York City" (5). I could not agree more on his acknowledgement of the fact that "[t]he so-called New York jazz scene is not a single, unified community, but many separate and overlapping communities, a multitude of porously bordered, constantly changing micro-scenes and social circles" (16). While I admire his effort to cover a wide range of the micro-scenes—his attempt to illuminate broad-based patterns of jazz participation by examining small, specialized scenes is quite bold and ambitious—I cannot help but acknowledge the difficulty of illustrating a full picture of the New York jazz scene.

The body of the book consists of six chapters. The first chapter, "Listening to Jazz," explores some of the ways that listeners appreciate jazz performances, asserting that a listener, by

actively engaging in the perception of music, is also a performer. Chapter two, “Developing ‘Big Ears,’” focuses on how jazz fans develop musical tastes and how they view performers and performances through their private and public listening practices. Titled “Making the Scene,” chapter three illustrates how fan communities develop, particularly in the “avant-jazz” scene. Chapters four and five, titled “Providing a Place and Time” and “Jazz Jobbing” respectively, discuss jazz presenters and music professionals. The specific professions include owners and managers of jazz clubs and promoters, critics, journalists, publicists, tour guides, painters, and photographers, all of whom relate to different jazz scenes or communities in the largely mainstream styles. The final chapter, “Hear and Now,” investigates “communication between musicians and listeners during performances” (139).

While each chapter weaves together various aspects of “jazzing” in New York City, chapters four and five are slightly disconnected from the rest of the book because they mainly present materials largely related to the mainstream jazz scene. In other words, while the book’s main focus is on the voices of the “avant-jazz” fans, it is the venues, their owners, producers, and other music professionals of the mainstream, straight-ahead jazz scene that are featured in chapters four and five. Regardless, these chapters present valuable information that has not often been explored. For example, chapter four discusses the intricate details of jazz club business and the relationship between jazz presenters and musicians. As a jazz musician who once hustled to secure my own performing engagements in those venues, I can relate to the extremely competitive market to which Greenland refers. And I could not agree more with his stance on the importance and advantage of steady gigs for the performers even if they are less financially enticing than non-steady gigs. The highlight of chapter five for me is, though brief, the author’s first-hand account about being a jazz writer. He has been regularly publishing jazz articles in both academic and journalistic media such as the *Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology* and *AllAboutJazz: New York* since 2004. His experiences as a writer, especially his interactions with musicians, are significant and add a layer to this chapter. In fact, I would have greatly appreciated if he had written an entire chapter or a section about his work as a writer and a musician. Although the author mentions that he sat in at jam sessions in the introduction, he never fully explains the details, such as the instrument(s) and types of music he played. Such information would have helped readers to better understand Greenland’s perspectives and positionalities.

The rest of the book explores the author’s main argument, which involves the “avant-jazz” scene and its audience’s listening practices. Though it is not a completely new idea, I sympathize with the author’s intent to explain listeners’ active roles in the “avant-jazz” scene. Unlike Frankfurt School theorists and cultural studies scholars, the author considers audiences to be active participants of the musical events. One of the main theses Greenland presents throughout the book is that “[t]hese offstage participants are also ‘performing’ jazz” (34). This is both intriguing and problematic to me because “performing” is a loaded word that requires some unpacking. Perhaps, as explored in chapter six, the author uses “performing” to refer to listeners’ agency and active participation (156). I particularly like his inference that, “[w]hen listeners perform, and performers listen, the imaginary boundary between them dissolves, clearing the way for mutually mediated collective improvisations” (156). This single sentence is embedded with many thought-provoking ideas, each of which holds potential for further discussion.

At the end of chapter two, Greenland suggests that the active jazz fans value live performance over record-listening. Some of these jazz fans, however, disregard certain types of jazz performance that “cover classics from the jazz cannon [*sic*] in a traditional style, or repeat themselves night after night, and/or fail to ‘take you where you’ve never been before’ as ‘a trip to the museum’ (57). As a result, he suggests, the avid jazz fans, especially the more

adventurous of them, “typically gravitate to avant-jazz and experimental music concerts, where performers attempt to reinvent music every time they play” (58). This idea continues in the second half of chapter six, wherein Greenland discusses “spiritual synergy,” which arises “when artist-to-artist, artist-to-audience-to-artist, and audience-to-audience communication is synchronized in a dynamic feedback web that amplifies ambient ‘energy’” (167). Here, he relies on comments made by a group of devoted “avant-jazz” fans that he interviewed. For example, Yuko Otomo, whose statements appear throughout the book, describes the mutual exchange between musicians and listeners as such: “...when musicians give more than a hundred percent, we feel something true, for *real*, [and] we take the same amount” (167). Undoubtedly, there is communication between musicians and audience members at musical performance events, and audiences strongly influence how musicians perform. The author does an excellent job of explaining the spiritual and mystical quality of the interaction between musicians and audience as spiritual synergy. This is something many of us as musicians and audiences experience but cannot always verbalize so eloquently. Yet, readers may wonder whether spiritual synergy occurs only in “avant-jazz” performances. In my opinion, the type of communication exchange that the author discusses can happen in any live music performance. Indeed, as the author claims, the effect greatly depends on the listeners.

I applaud the author’s courage and persistence to tackle the broad themes surrounding musicking and “art worlds” in New York City. I also admire his effort not to overuse academic jargon. Therefore, this book can appeal to general readers as well as musicians and music professionals in jazz. In addition, researchers in jazz studies, ethnomusicology, sociology, and anthropology would find the methodology and theoretical framework of this book to be informative. The choices Greenland makes regarding the scale of his study, the extent to which he focuses on his own presence and practices, and the proper way to complete reception-centered research are valuable for other researchers to observe if they are considering their own voyages into the unseen.