Book Review

The Jazz Bubble: Neoclassical Jazz in Neoliberal Culture

Dale Chapman
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For jazz musicians who came of age in the 1990s, Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC) is a cultural touchstone as contested as the D.A.R.E. program or the Parental Advisory stickers that started appearing on album covers in the mid-1980s. As young jazz musicians grappling with the exacting pedagogy of the JALC organization, many of us sensed that there may have been something ideological behind its rigid dogmas, its conspicuous Brooks Brothers endorsement, its fancy dedicated building in midtown Manhattan, and—above all—its categorical rejection of some of the music we loved best. The polish and superhuman virtuosity of the JALC coterie simultaneously awed us, inspired us, and somehow rubbed us the wrong way. Dale Chapman's book is a serious and probing attempt to subject that intuition to scholarly scrutiny. It asks, in other words, whether the neotraditionalism that took such hold of the jazz world in the 1990s really was "jazz for the Reagan revolution," as David Hajdu notoriously characterized it in 2003. Readers already suspicious of the politics of neoclassical jazz will find some corroboration here, but Chapman's more profound contribution is to remind us that the study of aesthetics can be of real value for the humanities more broadly.

If neotraditional jazz does in fact sound the cultural logic of neoliberalism, then this book has the potential to change both the way we hear the music and the way we think about our recent history. It is a valuable endeavor, but a difficult one. What, for example, is neoliberalism? How do we best trace its aesthetic footprint? There are a multitude of ways to answer both questions. The fact that Chapman's book can only pursue a handful of them, and that his answers are not decisive in every way, does not detract from his overall achievement.

First, Chapman's successes. He takes as a putative endpoint for jazz neoclassicism the "homecoming" of Dexter Gordon to New York. Chapman situates Gordon's 1977 release (appropriately titled *Homecoming*) and the neotraditionalism it is widely believed to have inaugurated in the context of the 1970s fiscal crisis and the city's subsequent effort to revitalize its economy and image. It was a time of palpable crisis for the citizens of New York City. The city suffered the ravages of neoliberal austerity, frequent electrical blackouts, the incursions of the threatening aesthetics of punk and disco, and the increasingly militarized police tactics of the NYPD. In such an environment, the city's remarkably warm embrace of acoustic jazz music must be understood alongside the 1977 "I love NY" tourism campaign, the city's aggressive efforts to promote a favorable business climate, and the turn toward "broken windows" policing. Chapman casts Dexter Gordon's wry authenticity and personal (sexual) charisma as part of a cultural solution to the city's endemic structural problems, a source of nostalgic comfort in a time of precipitous moral decline.

Even more compelling is Chapman's inquiry into the relationship between aesthetic orientation and corporate structure at the Verve label. This exhaustive and fascinating account stretches over two chapters, narrating Verve's complex acquisition history and discussing the resulting changes in its artist roster from 1956 to 2005. We see Verve transform from a label defined by

its commitment to instrumental jazz as an art music (and even, under the helm of Norman Granz, a certain commitment to “social and economic justice” (114)) to a brand shaped by the logic of shareholder value—a brand, in other words, less inclined to take financial risks on uncertain ventures. And where does this trend land us? Among other places, in the “young lions” wave of jazz neotraditionalists nurtured so visibly by the JALC organization. In a corporation now saddled by the exigencies of financialization and shareholder value, it makes no sense to turn “outward,” as Verve had traditionally done under Norman Granz or Creed Taylor. Instead, Verve turned “inward,” releasing music of proven value and prestige. With its unambiguous benchmarks of virtuoso attainment and explicit canon of classics, the traditionalism of the young lions movement did indeed offer this value and prestige. Without knowing the history, you might suppose that the turn toward young lions emerged from the natural artistic ebbs and flows internal to the jazz world. Chapman shows us that this aesthetic turn may derive in part from the trend toward consolidation in corporate America.

A final pair of chapters investigates jazz music’s involvement with the neoliberal regime of “entrepreneurial speculative urbanism”—broadly, a set of urban development practices designed to renovate real estate in a manner “consistent with the priorities of neoliberal development” (165). In two case studies—the failures of the Fillmore Center redevelopment project in San Francisco and the short-lived San Francisco branch of the storied Oakland venue Yoshi’s—we see the ways in which jazz has been deployed in the top-down style of urban development in the neoliberal period. In both cases, poor neighborhoods are declared to be “blighted” and are replaced by high-end tourist attractions. Well-to-do outsiders rather than local communities end up as the principal stakeholders; thus, we see jazz implicated in the displacement of local use value in favor of investor profit. Equally distressing, in the case of Fillmore’s music community, jazz becomes part of a development project that did real damage to the livelihoods of working musicians.

So far, these are cases where jazz works as part of a broader historical (neoliberal) trend. In the Gordon example, his enthusiastic welcome is connected to the pitch of desperation which the city had been raised to at the dawn of the neoliberal era. In the Verve example, deregulation and financialization are shown to have impacted production and marketing decisions at an iconic jazz label. In the urban development examples, Chapman shows us the way jazz has been co-opted by various corporate interests in their effort to control and profit from the urban environment.

These are fascinating and valuable theses, but they are not (yet) arguments about musical content. Chapman is less convincing on questions of aesthetic form—questions, that is, that hinge on the nature of “neoclassical jazz” itself, apart from its concrete deployments in the various neoliberal formations outlined above. The claim that neoclassical jazz is on some level the sound of neoliberalism, that the choices we make on the aesthetic plane are shaped by the logic of deregulation, acquisition, or the free market, would be a much more ambitious claim. It is one that Chapman makes tentatively.

Take his most involved musical discussion, a comparison of Miles Davis and Wynton Marsalis. Chapman frames this discussion in an extended theoretical conceit, applying two economic terms of art—*uncertainty* and *risk*¹—to the music of Miles Davis’s second quintet and the Wynton Marsalis quintet of the 1980s, respectively. The idea seems to be, roughly, that the Davis quintet is “turbulent, multivalent and highly ambiguous”: it represents *uncertainty*. Wynton Marsalis, on the other hand, gives us a quantifiable flavor of ensemble virtuosity with clear measures of success and failure: *risk*. Chapman suggests that *risk*, as the conceptual touchstone for the neotraditionalists, should match the operations of capital in the neoliberal

period, and, in this respect, he does seem to discern the invisible hand of neoliberal capitalism in the music itself. It appears to be an argument about aesthetic form.

Arguments that link society and art in this way are rare and audacious. I applaud Chapman for making this one, but it has a crucial ambiguity: are we to understand *risk* and *uncertainty* as true musical properties or simply post-facto artifacts of the critical vocabulary? Are we talking about musical shifts or shifts in attitude, or both? Either one would have a legitimate place in this book, but I am never quite sure which idea Chapman has in mind. Yes, there is disorienting polyrhythm in Miles Davis's second quintet (*uncertainty?*); yes, Wynton Marsalis retrospectively characterizes his own work in a way that suggests unambiguous dos and don'ts (*risk?*). But I can easily imagine a reasonable analysis of the Miles Davis recording in question that posits a rubric as rigid as Marsalis's; this analysis would suggest *risk* rather than Chapman's *uncertainty*.² Chapman, in fact, quotes Herbie Hancock doing pretty much that: "He nodded his head, like a sign of approval—that I had gotten an A" (52). If Herbie can get an A in the Miles Davis quintet, does that not reverse the central premise Chapman is advancing? Nor is the aesthetic of *uncertainty*, such as Chapman characterizes it, new to the "post-bop" moment in which Chapman locates his argument. Have not risk and uncertainty, in various shifting and difficult-to-define ways, always been part of jazz culture, as much in Louis Armstrong's *Weather Bird* as in *Nefertiti*?

Even Marsalis's remarks on *Live at Blues Alley*, upon which much of Chapman's *risk* argument depends, might not be as compelling evidence as Chapman wants them to be. These remarks are, after all, made in pianist Ethan Iverson's blog "Do the Math," a publication by a musician for an audience of musicians. Should we be surprised, in this venue, to see Marsalis trying to explain exactly how things work ("doing the math")? Elsewhere, Marsalis takes a softer line on the "proveability" of music;³ his insistence on a vocabulary of success and failure here, in this one interview, just might not be enough to support the epochal significance Chapman has in mind. In the end, it is not the case that rigid, codified vocabulary always means aesthetic conservatism, any more than it is the case that neoclassicism always means a codified vocabulary.

Perhaps, then, we are talking about shifts in the music itself rather than simply in attitudes about it: *the music differs because of neoliberalism*. If so, the most obvious objection is to Chapman's rather broad characterization of jazz neoclassicism. Terence Blanchard, Wynton Marsalis, Christian McBride, Roy Hargrove, and Nicholas Payton are all cited as paragons of the neoclassical "young lions" movement, but on close examination, there are profound artistic differences among them. Even within the *Live at Blues Alley* band, there are aesthetic sensibilities different enough to trouble his treatment of them as a single, neoliberal revision on the musical practices of 1960s post-bop.

What, in other words, is the jazz that supposedly sounds the cultural logic of neoliberalism? Is it *Live at Blues Alley* or *Black Codes (From the Underground)*? Or *Citi Movement*, or the JALC big band? After *Black Codes*, Marsalis turned away from the post-bop style Chapman focuses on, and he has never really turned back. Was his Louis Armstrong-inflected playing of subsequent years equally an expression of *risk* and neoliberal logic? It might be, but if so, the argument about aesthetic form would need to show, first, what formal features are shared among his diverse output during the neoliberal period, and second, in what respect they are neoliberal.

One wonders, moreover, how Chapman would account for the aesthetic of the pianist Eric Lewis. This artist, once a young lion neotraditionalist *par excellence*, has subsequently gone on to found the wacky piano style Rockjazz under the stage name ELEW. The eccentricities of

Rockjazz were always part of his playing, even when he was giving concerts at the Time Warner Center clad in the obligatory Brooks Brothers. Alongside its sheer weirdness, there is a baldly entrepreneurial quality to Rockjazz, and if it has something in common with the regal traditionalism to which Marsalis has remained wedded over the years, it would be fascinating to see it teased out.

ELEW is an interesting corner case. A more basic issue I would have liked to see Chapman pursue is the intellectual legacy of Albert Murray. A mentor both to Marsalis and Stanley Crouch, Murray more than anyone else is the source of the ideology that permeates the JALC organization. He shares with Chapman an affinity for considering the ways in which jazz aesthetics can model a way of surviving a hostile cultural environment (or, as Chapman occasionally renders it, the way improvisation can be one of Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling"). He shares with Marsalis an abiding emphasis on formal elegance and refinement. But Murray's legacy is contested. His 1970 book, *The Omni-Americans*, attacks the invective of the black power movement, and for this reason many have seen him as politically neutral. In this reading (which Chapman seems to accept uncritically), Murray is not a counter-hegemonic author. According to Chapman, "this conception of jazz and African American culture would become a key point of reference for Wynton Marsalis's discursive interventions" (10). On the other hand, *The Omni-Americans* also makes the rather radical case that American culture is fundamentally black, that, as Henry Louis Gates puts it, "the truest Americans were black Americans." Read this way, Murray is anything but politically neutral, or as Gates said: "In a sense, Murray was the ultimate black nationalist" (27).

Is that a position amenable to the cultural logic of neoliberalism? Is JALC an institutional elaboration of this position or a departure from it? Is Murray's aesthetics merely an example of the tendency of American culture to subsume its radical currents under a palatable banner of patriotism (as decried in Sacvan Bercovitch's 1993 *The Rites of Assent*)? I don't know, but in a book about the relationship of neotraditional jazz to neoliberal culture, I think Chapman ought to have asked.

It is no accident that Chapman's argument is easiest to quarrel with where it touches aesthetic form. In matters of taste, there can be no dispute . . . but there is an undeniable difference between Wynton's and Miles's quintets, one that Chapman in many ways does capture. Wynton's does just seem to "line up" or "add up" in a regularized, systematic way, which somehow *belongs* in 1986. There is something new going on in Wynton Marsalis's music of this period, something that cannot fail to relate to the socio-cultural matrix that engendered it. My critiques above are intended less to diminish Chapman's accomplishment than simply to demonstrate just how ambitious it is. It is extraordinarily hard to specify the relationship of aesthetic form to social history in a way that stands up in print, though the relationship may seem abundantly clear when you hear the music. In its successes as much as in its shortcomings, this book stands as a valuable testament both to the difficulty and importance of this kind of project.

Notes

¹ Drawn from Knight, Frank. *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1921

² In fact, I don't have to imagine it—for example, Jeff Tain Watts's metric modulations from *Live at Blues Alley* are indeed often traced to Tony Williams's playing on the classic *Four and More*. And the selection from Miles Davis that Chapman selects as "tacitly suggesting a secondary

meter” in a way that supposedly communicates uncertainty might just as easily be a simple hemiola, an eminently analyzable musical feature common since the 19th century.

³ For example, in his Huffington Post interview with Vicky Karp: “Music is the art of all the invisible things that are real. Art, emotion, spiritual essence, consciousness—these things are hard to prove.”

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