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Andy Fry, *Paris Blues: African American Music and French Popular Culture, 1920-1960*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. 282 pp. Photographs, figures, notes, and index. \$30 US (pb) ISBN 978-0-226-13881-7; \$30 US (eb) ISBN 978-0-226-13895-4.

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In his Epilogue, Andy Fry states that his book has sought to provide “a more nuanced account of the French reception of black music from the 1920s to the 1960s by contextualizing it in ongoing debates about race, nation, and culture.” This, he explains, has involved challenging a “powerful myth” and some “untested assumptions” contained in existing accounts of these phenomena (p. 267). Broadly speaking, Fry identifies five such “untested assumptions” that feed in to what he terms the “powerful myth of French acceptance of jazz” (p. 267). The first, most clearly expressed by Jodie Blake in this context, is that the interest of French artists and intellectuals in the supposedly primitive sounds of black music ended in the late 1920s with the “Call to Order” that heralded a return to Classicism.[1] Secondly, Fry questions the tendency in existing accounts to understand the French reception of black music in terms of a linear process of “assimilation” with a clearly identifiable end point, a tendency he finds in the work of Ludovic Tournès, Jeffrey H. Jackson, and Matthew F. Jordan.[2] Thirdly, he questions the notion that contemporary celebrations of the hybrid nature of jazz and African-American performance necessarily equated to a progressive stance on questions of racial identity. Fourthly, he challenges the myth according to which listening to jazz in the Occupation years necessarily corresponded to a form of resistance to both the Vichy regime and the Nazi occupiers, a myth he sees as being perpetuated in recent accounts by Jordan, William A. Shack, and Colin Nettelbeck.[3] Finally, he questions the widespread notion that it was French intellectuals and critics who first paid serious attention to jazz as a musical form, affording it respect in a manner that the white citizens of an allegedly racist United States refused to do.

Each of the questions Fry raises seems wholly valid, whilst their ethical, political, and cultural implications surely do need to be given more profound consideration than has thus far been the case. In exploring these urgent questions, rather than seeking to provide a comprehensive history of the reception of black musical forms in France between the 1920s and the 1960s, Fry opts to undertake what he terms “a series of focused enquiries” or “case studies,” which concentrate “on particular cultural events” (p. 10). Thus, each of his five chapters engages with one of the five “untested assumptions” he has identified by means of a detailed historical enquiry into such cultural events. Further, Fry supplements his historical enquiries with some judiciously chosen examples of more recent cultural production. These last demonstrate that many of the more questionable assumptions concerning race, gender, and nation that he identifies in French discourses of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s have, regrettably, lived on to this day. The findings of each chapter resonate back and forth, so that, for example, Fry’s convincing excavation of the myths of national superiority lurking behind tales of the French critical “discovery” of Sidney Bechet complement his analyses in preceding chapters of the nationalism implicit both in claims as to the successful “assimilation” of jazz by the French and in recurrent accounts of the inherently French origins of the music.

In addition to questioning the “untested assumptions” he has identified, each of Fry’s five chapters or “case studies” casts light on important historical episodes that have not, as yet, been fully explored in existing studies of the French reception of early black musical forms. Thus, in his first chapter he focuses on the continuing popularity of *revues nègres* into the 1930s, long after both Josephine Baker’s breakthrough appearance in 1925 and the supposed rejection of primitivism inherent to the

“Call to Order.” This allows him to pay attention to French reactions to a series of African-American female performers, such as Florence Mills, Aida Ward, and Adelaide Hall, who have tended to be eclipsed by the almost exclusive focus on Josephine Baker. Detailed archival work, combined with some succinct analysis of the racial theories of the period, allow Fry to cast valuable light on the powerful mix of racial, gender, and national prejudices at work here (pp. 29-79).

In his second chapter, he turns to consider the almost forgotten figure of Jack Hylton. This British bandleader, Fry argues, played a central role in the history of jazz in France but this role has been overlooked because of the “focus on jazz as a site of primitivism” (p. 86). Fry goes on to show how hostile French reactions to this “Anglo-Saxon” bandleader, improbably figured as an incarnation of machine-age America, provoked the first sustained attempts to “naturalise” the music, notably by promoting Ray Ventura as the purveyor of a “properly French” jazz (pp. 80-122).

The questions of race, gender, and nation that Fry has explored in his first two chapters are taken up and re-inflected in his third, when he turns to look at Josephine Baker’s 1934 revival of Offenbach’s operetta *La Créole*. Again this allows him to focus on a performance that has received relatively little critical attention, whilst convincingly demonstrating the extent to which present-day celebrations of hybridity and creolization tend to overlook the origins of such notions in now discredited racial theories. The chapter sees Fry mobilise an impressive range of archival, historical, and theoretical material in support of his analyses (pp. 123-71).

In his fourth and fifth chapters, Fry focuses squarely on the vexed relationship between jazz’s popularity in 1940s and 1950s France and certain enduring myths of French national identity and cultural superiority. The fourth chapter challenges the myth of the straightforward correspondence between appreciating jazz and resisting Vichy or the Nazis. As Fry demonstrates, this myth struggles to account for the fact that the Occupation coincided with the very public rise to fame of France’s most celebrated jazz musician, Django Reinhardt, which apparently encountered no particular opposition from either occupying Germans or Vichy officialdom. Further, the myth depends in part on portraying André Coeuroy’s pro-Vichy *Histoire générale du jazz* (1942), in which the music was presented as being fundamentally French in origin, as a strange aberration in an otherwise essentially progressive field of French jazz criticism.^[4] As Fry shows, Coeuroy’s claims were by no means aberrant, harking back as they did to some of the discourses that surrounded the earlier promotion of Ray Ventura and being echoed, albeit in mitigated form, in the work of celebrated French jazz critics such as Hugues Panassié and Charles Delaunay (pp. 172-219).

In his fifth and final chapter, Fry finds elements of the myth of jazz’s French origins at work in the warm reception accorded Sidney Bechet in 1950s France. He also shows how Bechet himself cannily exploited elements of that myth to promote his own career. It is in this chapter that Fry also turns to the question of the role of French critics and intellectuals in supposedly first recognising jazz’s value as a musical form. In 1919 the Swiss-French conductor Eric Ansermet dedicated a very early article to Bechet’s performance style, an article that has since been lauded as evidence of this very phenomenon. However, as Fry shows, neither Ansermet’s article nor even Bechet himself elicited much attention when they first appeared in France in the interwar years. The elevation of Ansermet to the status of critical pioneer and Bechet’s lionization by the French were later phenomena, exploited retrospectively to substantiate myths of French exceptionalism as regards both racial tolerance and cultural sophistication. Further, as Fry points out, Ansermet’s article in fact relies on some profoundly ethnocentric assumptions (pp. 220-64).

There is much to admire in Fry’s analysis of Ansermet and Bechet, in terms of its originality, its historical exactitude, and the important insights it offers. However, it might be argued he risks conflating three discrete questions here: 1) Did French-speaking critics really play a pioneering role in establishing jazz as a valid musical form? 2) Were those early critics as free of racial prejudice as is sometimes assumed? 3) Has the role of French-speaking critics been exploited in pursuit of a nationalistic agenda? It is quite possible to maintain that French-speaking critics *did* indeed play a key role in establishing jazz as a serious musical form, whilst acknowledging both that such critics frequently manifested strong primitivist tendencies and that their role as critical pioneers has subsequently been exploited to nationalistic ends. For example, the immense respect paid by US jazz

critics to Hugues Panassié on his visits to New York in the 1930s—interviews in *Metronome* and *DownBeat*, a role as talking head in a 1937 *March of Time* documentary on the swing craze, the rapid English translation and US publication of his 1934 book *Le Jazz hot*—indicate that his seminal role in jazz criticism is not a pure myth. Moreover, African-American jazz musicians appear also to have acknowledged the role of both Panassié and his one-time collaborator Charles Delaunay, as evidenced in the homage paid to both men in, respectively, the Count Basie number “Panassié Stomp” and the Modern Jazz Quartet’s tune “Delaunay’s Dilemma.” So, it is perhaps important to distinguish more clearly between historical facts, on the one hand, and the ideological (mis)representation of such facts to serve nationalistic ends, on the other.

Overall, though, Fry’s analyses are convincing and well substantiated by detailed historical and archival research. There are times, notably in his discussion of jazz during the Occupation, when his analyses come so close to my own that a third party might be forgiven for assuming there had been some prior consultation or collaboration between the two of us.[5] Just for the record, then, such similarities are in fact a matter of pure coincidence, there having been no contact between the two of us prior to the publication of our respective books. Moreover, Fry gets several important factual details right that I get wrong—the fact that Stéphane Grappelli played no direct role in Reinhardt’s success during the Occupation since he was in exile in Britain; the precise details of the very limited restrictions placed on the playing of jazz and American music in France during those years; the fact that Fortunat Strowski first advanced his hypothesis regarding the French origins of jazz in a 1928 article and not in a personal conversation with André Coeuroy, as I had wrongly assumed. If such mistakes demand a certain modesty or critical circumspection on my part, there is nonetheless one significant reservation I should like to express as regards Fry’s book. This relates to his lack of attention to the reception of African-American music amongst France’s citizens and subjects of Antillean and African heritage.

Anticipating such objections in his Introduction, Fry states that he is not going to pay attention to questions of “transatlantic” culture and politics, “black internationalism and civil rights” since these fall “beyond the scope” of a study focused “on France and specifically Paris” (p. 10; p. 26). This justification is somewhat perplexing, given that the presence of African-American musicians and music in France was, by definition, a manifestation of transatlantic culture at work, and one that fed into the networks of “black internationalism and civil rights” in a variety of significant ways. Further, to oppose “France and specifically Paris” to the “transatlantic” in this way is to imply that France’s transatlantic Antillean colonies, later *départements*, were somehow not part of the French nation state and that the thousands of French Antilleans and Africans who lived and worked in Paris in the decades in question were somehow not really French. A small but significant number of these had original and insightful things to say about both African-American music and its reception amongst their white compatriots.

Moreover, France’s Antillean and African citizens and subjects keep straying onto Fry’s chosen domain of “France and specifically Paris,” despite his claims that their existence and their interests lie “beyond the scope” of that domain. Thus, in an account of his visit to a Parisian cinema to see Spike Lee’s film *Bamboozled*, Fry notes that the audience was composed of “primarily people of colour” (p. 29). Shortly after, he remarks of the performers of a 1926 *revue nègre* that they seem to “have been assembled among black entertainers already in Paris, some of whom may have been of French colonial origin” (p. 47). Shortly thereafter, he cites a reviewer of the *Blackbirds of 1936* lamenting the fact that many of the performers appeared not to be African Americans but “Negroes recruited in the working-class districts of Paris” (p. 76).

As these fleeting but significant examples indicate, the Paris of the interwar years, like the city today, was already the site of transatlantic exchange, an important hub in the transnational networks of black internationalism. Thus Fry’s account is inevitably haunted by these fleeting appearances of individuals of Franco-African heritage, whose existence he acknowledges, yet whose opinions on the cultural phenomena he analyses are neither sought nor recorded. It is a shame that Fry’s laudable determination to challenge some of the myths surrounding the French reception of African-American musical forms does not extend to questioning the most enduring of such myths,

namely that this is a history that concerns, exclusively, white people's reactions to those musical forms.[6]

NOTES

[1] Jodie Blake, *Le Tumulte noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900-1930* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

[2] Ludovic Tournès, *New Orleans sur Seine: histoire du jazz en France* (Paris: Fayard, 1999); Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French. Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003); Matthew F. Jordan, *Le Jazz. Jazz and French Cultural Identity* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 2010).

[3] William A. Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre. A Paris Jazz Story between the Great Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Colin Nettelbeck, *Dancing with De Beauvoir: Jazz and the French* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004).

[4] André Coeuroy, *Histoire générale du jazz: strette, hot, swing* (Paris: Denoël, 1942).

[5] See my *Jazz and Machine-Age Imperialism: Music, "Race," and Intellectuals in France, 1918-1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), pp.126-54.

[6] Of the studies of the French reception of jazz cited in this review, those authored by Tournès, Nettelbeck, Jackson, Blake, and Jordan make no mention of the reactions of French commentators of Antillean or African heritage to the music. In 2013, two new French-language studies of this reception history were published. Neither mentions the music's reception amongst French commentators of Antillean or African heritage. See Vincent Cotro, Laurent Cugny and Philippe Gumpłowicz, eds. *La Catastrophe apprivoisée: regards sur le jazz en France* (Paris: Outre Mesure, 2013) and Olivier Roueff, *Jazz, les échelles du plaisir: intermédiaires et culture lettrée en France au XXe siècle* (Paris: La Dispute, 2013).

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