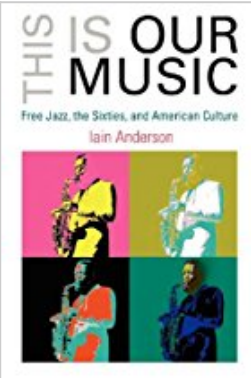

This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture (The Arts and Intellectual Life in Modern America)

By Iain Anderson

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By examining the production, presentation, and reception of experimental music by Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, and others, Iain Anderson traces the strange, unexpected, and at times deeply ironic intersections between free jazz, avant-garde artistic movements, Sixties politics, and patronage networks. Anderson emphasizes free improvisation's enormous impact on jazz music's institutional standing, despite ongoing resistance from some of its biggest beneficiaries. He concludes that attempts by African American artists and intellectuals to define a place for themselves in American life, structural changes in the music industry, and the rise of nonprofit sponsorship portended a significant transformation of established cultural standards. At the same time, free improvisation's growing prestige depended in part upon traditional highbrow criteria: increasingly esoteric styles, changing venues and audience behavior, European sanction, withdrawal from the marketplace, and the professionalization of criticism. Thus jazz music's performers and supporters—and potentially those in other arts—have both challenged and accommodated themselves to an ongoing process of cultural stratification.

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- Sales Rank: #1377229 in Books
- Brand: Brand: University of Pennsylvania Press
- Published on: 2007-06-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.02" h x .59" w x 5.98" l, .87 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 264 pages

Editorial Review

Review

"*This Is Our Music* takes us back to that moment between the fifties and the sixties when a new music called free jazz took root in the coffeehouses and nightclubs of New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In this rich and evocative book, Iain Anderson meets the challenge posed by the music and follows its lead into the complex political realignments, shifting racial dynamics, and redefinition of art and entertainment that characterized the subsequent decade."—John Szwed, author of *So What: The Life of Miles Davis*

"Anderson's evenhanded, archive-driven book is consistently instructive—a fine guide to the debates that raged around free jazz and to the music's unexpected current place in the American arts canon."—*Journal of American History*

"Historian Iain Anderson tracks the political and social meanings of jazz as the music changed hands around the world. . . . The crooked line Anderson draws from the maverick [Cecil] Taylor (a Guggenheim Fellowship recipient) to the conservative [Wynton] Marsalis (arbiter of "What Is—and Isn't—Jazz") is the real contribution of *This Is Our Music*."—*Bookforum*

"An excellent study of the heyday of one of the most problematic bodies of work in the history of jazz music. . . . Essential."—*Choice*

About the Author
Iain Anderson is Professor and Chair of History at Northeastern State University.

Introduction

In the summer of 1960, jazz composer and alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman, trumpeter Don Cherry, bassist Charlie Haden, and drummer Ed Blackwell recorded *This Is Our Music* for Atlantic records. The album captured an original musical vision that had polarized performers, critics, and fans since the quartet's New York City debut the previous year. Coleman reordered structural principles to afford the members of his group maximum melodic and rhythmic freedom. By allowing each musician to play inside or outside conventional chord, bar, pitch, and tempo guidelines, he pursued an expressive and collective approach to improvisation. On the session's one standard tune, "Embraceable You," Coleman's motivic development quickly departed from Gershwin's melody line, the chord sequence that anchored it, and the four-bar

constraints on each phrase. By placing these innovations at the center of his musical conception, rather than referring to them as passing embellishments, he changed the entire sound of jazz.

Individually, Coleman's temporary allegiance to tonal centers, and high-pitched bent notes, allowed him to approximate a wider range of human sounds on his horn than previous instrumentalists. Collectively, the absence of orthodox musical reference points forced other band members to contribute to the performance in new ways. Following the saxophone into—or propelling it toward—uncharted territory, the group sacrificed some of its cohesion for improvisational daring and range. Thus the unison introduction by Coleman and Cherry to "Embraceable You" sounded ragged or sloppy to some listeners, the perception of harmonic dissonance between the instruments occurred frequently, and the rhythm section rarely propelled the other players with any urgency. At the same time, the Quartet's spontaneity radically altered the emotional appeal of Gershwin's song, replacing the relaxed ballad interpretation favored by Nat Cole or Charlie Parker with a plaintive dirge-like quality. Later in the year, Coleman recorded an album that gave his music a name: *Free Jazz.*

The trade press quickly employed this title to describe the work of performers exploring similar musical territory, including Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, Sun Ra, and later Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Bill Dixon, Pharoah Sanders, Marion Brown, Muhal Richard Abrams, Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, and many others. Yet a musical analysis of Coleman's innovations cannot adequately define the movement to which he contributed so much. For a start, these instrumentalists used free approaches to improvisation in numerous contrasting ways, drawing upon some but not all of Coleman's practices and combining them with distinctive personal approaches to tone, melodic construction, rhythmic pulse, and just about every other stylistic trait. No wonder jazz writers used so many terms besides free jazz to try to encapsulate the music's essence: free form, abstract jazz, atonal jazz, anti-jazz, avant-garde, space music, and "the new thing," to name a few. I define the movement also by its cultural identity, by the meanings that listeners attached to it. Free improvisation included stylists as diverse as John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, and Ornette Coleman not only because they shared a commitment to experimental music but because they dominated a controversy over the ownership of jazz implicit in the title *This Is Our Music*. Whose music was it? At various times during the 1960s, musicians, critics, fans, politicians, and entrepreneurs claimed jazz as a national art form, an Afrocentric race music, an extension of modernist experimentation in other genres, a music of mass consciousness, and the preserve of a cultural elite. The debate over its meaning framed the reception of free improvisation and greatly influenced the standing of jazz in American culture.

Jazz music has traveled a long way toward respectability in a short period of time. Its access to the universities and arts foundations, after initial confinement to bordellos, speakeasies, and other disreputable spaces, confirms Lawrence Levine's premise that "the perimeters of our cultural divisions have been permeable and shifting rather than fixed and immutable." This book explores the question of who makes decisions about the value of a cultural form and on what basis, taking as its example the impact of 1960s free improvisation on the changing status of jazz. By examining a key transitional moment in the realignment of hierarchical categories, I synthesize issues of race, economics, politics, and aesthetics in an investigation of the competing definitions of American identity.

In order to account for the music's shifting fortunes, I draw upon and seek to extend recent literature on canon formation in jazz. The notion that jazz has a tradition, a history of styles linked by a common set of values that scholars can trace to its earliest days, has proved both a useful and a troubling concept for the music's champions. Critics, academics, disk jockeys, magazine poll participants, musicians, government agents, entrepreneurs, recording executives, and others win acceptance for key aesthetic and ideological traits by promoting representative artists, recordings, and performances. Their choices shape the canon, a repository of its founders' tastes that masquerades as a definitive pantheon of great works. In jazz, as in the disciplines of English literature, art history, and film studies, the canon—as the religious antecedents of the

word implies—acquires a sacralized aura by embodying supposedly timeless, universal qualities.

Despite the similarities among college texts in each of these fields, the content of artistic canons is far from inevitable. The critical war between "moldy figs" and modernists to define jazz during the 1940s, no less than conservative attacks on multicultural university curricula fifty years later, revealed that the perceived authority of canons can provoke fierce debate over their construction. The controversies demonstrated also that strategies of authenticating the past reflect a discourse of power, and, as Levine has argued passionately, canons are subject to repeated revision. Many theorists have questioned the very idea of a grand tradition, uncovering the subjective basis and exclusionary process of selecting artistic masterpieces. Guardians of the jazz heritage, including Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch at Lincoln Center, continued to battle over the music's identity even as academics and reporters exposed the agendas behind their tactics.

In recent years scholars have drawn attention to the role of canon formation in elevating jazz music's prestige, arguing that critics' ability to isolate and privilege characteristics such as improvisation, swing, and blues has established the basis for a historical honors list of best performers and performances. As Scott DeVeaux has explained, the tradition supports a view of jazz as an autonomous, organic art form that has evolved according to an inherent internal logic. It provides a framework for judging the legitimacy of past, present, and future achievements, a source of integrity that holds jazz accountable to a higher standard than commercial entertainment. Dividing jazz into distinct periods makes sense of growing stylistic fragmentation and offers its boosters a convenient method of explaining the music's past as a story of inevitable progress. In addition, an unambiguous historical narrative provides musicians—and African Americans in general—with a catalogue of achievement and heroes.

Those critics who shaped the intellectual culture of the postwar jazz world and laid the foundation for the emerging canon did not resemble their counterparts in art and literature on the surface. The champions of modern jazz during the 1940s and 1950s drew upon the prevailing standards of journalism—accuracy, objectivity, and efficiency—to separate themselves from the enthusiastic hobbyists who had previously dominated the jazz discourse in America. Writers such as Leonard Feather, Whitney Balliett, Ralph Gleason, John S. Wilson, and Dan Morgenstern supplemented their day jobs, often at mainstream newspapers, with a variety of jazz-related activities. They wrote album liner notes, penned criticism for jazz magazines, produced recording sessions, concerts, and radio shows, and even wrote, arranged, and performed music. Few participants in this unique world of ideas maintained strong academic affiliations. Marshall Stearns taught English at several colleges and universities, none of which allowed him to introduce jazz courses into the curriculum. Indeed Stearns established the Institute of Jazz Studies, the first scholarly archive dedicated to the music, at his Greenwich Village duplex in 1953. Jazz music's failure to make an impression on established thinkers, especially the New York Intellectuals, particularly frustrated a younger generation of writers such as Martin Williams, Nat Hentoff, and Amiri Baraka, who had absorbed the New Criticism and a commitment to modernist complexity from the *Partisan Review* and other journals of cultural and literary criticism. Though the circumstances of jazz music's production tested these critics' commitment to the autonomy of art in the coming years, their engagement with modernist innovations reinforced jazz music's respectability and its nascent pantheon.7

In this tale of dissolving cultural boundaries, writers usually assign experimental musicians of the late 1950s and 1960s a spoiling role. The innovations of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, and their followers appeared too avant-garde for the emerging jazz aesthetic and too militantly black to represent a national art form. Yet free improvisation had an important impact on the status of jazz besides temporarily stalling the conversation about who or what belonged in the canon. Asserting the limits of critical rhetoric, I argue that the music's unstable identity during the 1960s interacted with evolving aesthetic imperatives, the career choices of leading performers, promotional and technological developments in the music industry, expanding access to education, new directions in arts funding, and changes in the composition of jazz

audiences to produce unintended and unanticipated consequences for its institutional standing. My evaluation of jazz music's changing status derives, therefore, not only from debates over the canon and the construction of a historical tradition—a literature that places tremendous emphasis on the role of critics and intellectuals—but also from an attempt to understand the ways in which the context of the music's production and presentation influenced its reception.

My conception of the structural forces that have shaped jazz music's place in American culture has benefited greatly from Lawrence Levine's 1988 book *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. By uncovering a nineteenth-century past in which many classes and social groups shared a common public culture, including Shakespeare and opera, Levine demonstrated that recent paradigms of cultural value have not always prevailed. Drawing upon the work of Paul DiMaggio, Levine attributed the stratification of cultural categories at the turn of the century to a desire among traditional urban elites to insulate themselves as a class, avoid dependence on mass tastes, and maintain the authority of their cultural leadership at a time of declining social and political influence. Levine's premise of a fluid cultural hierarchy informs this project, and his study revealed some of the building blocks of a ranked order: the development of esoteric aesthetic styles, attempts to modify audience behavior through changing venues and standards of deportment, the importance of European sanction, the withdrawal of art from the marketplace into the realm of nonprofit sponsorship, and—yes—the professionalization of criticism and the expanding role of nonperformers as cultural custodians.

This book addresses the ways in which the cultural boundaries described by Levine and DiMaggio evolved in the twentieth century, particularly during the 1960s. It examines changes in form, such as the impact of modernism on the ordering of aesthetic value and the role of avant-garde movements in strengthening elitist sympathies. Above all, the relationship between free improvisation, jazz, and American culture highlights two issues that warrant extensive consideration. How have attitudes toward race—and particularly the efforts of African American artists and intellectuals to define a place for themselves in American life—transformed the cultural hierarchy? And in view of the broadening audience for the arts, brought about by a wider distribution of wealth and education since World War II, do the old distinctions between high and low still carry any significant meaning?

I have drawn upon the work of scholars who have attempted to answer some of these questions: David Hollinger and Matei Calinescu on modernism and the literary canon, Peter Bürger on the avant-garde, Pierre Bourdieu and Andrew Ross on the creation of taste and transmission of values in culture, and Joan Shelley Rubin on the dissemination of literary publications, to name a few. It is tempting to view the blurring of traditional boundaries, such as the simultaneous honoring of Mikhail Baryshnikov, Chuck Berry, Plácido Domingo, Clint Eastwood, and Angela Lansbury in 2000 by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, as a sign that the hierarchical model has little contemporary relevance. Levine himself has proposed that jazz music—by combining classical and vernacular techniques and by bringing the heritage of African Americans to national prominence—has done more than any other genre to revise contemporary definitions of art and culture. While I agree that the active choices of artists, audiences, and entrepreneurs have significantly reconfigured the ranked order of American culture, the fate of free improvisation during the 1960s holds out the possibility that jazz music's champions—and potentially supporters of other rising art forms too—have not only transformed but also accommodated themselves to an enduring process of stratification.

Although its musical components coalesced in New Orleans around the turn of the century, jazz emerged in the 1920s as the harbinger of a new cultural style. Urban, permissive, and spread by the new phonograph and radio technologies, it became a flashpoint in the war between traditional and modern values. Its association with racial and ethnic outsiders confirmed its marginal status, although as the decadent twenties gave way to the Great Depression a widespread celebration of the common man won new respect for the pluralist, collectivist swing orchestras of the day. The big bands were big tents. Their sophisticated blend of section work, virtuoso improvisation, and smooth 4/4 tempo appealed to dancers and listeners of all social

backgrounds.

For a decade after 1935 swing served as America's popular music, but few big bands survived wartime economic exigencies and the privatization of leisure endemic to the postwar suburban exodus. Neither urban nightlife nor the big bands disappeared, but they faced stiff competition that fractured the audience for jazz. Former swing vocalists such as Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee captured the public imagination and launched solo careers in increasing numbers. Pared down orchestras known as jump bands introduced a prototype rhythm and blues style to urban black neighborhoods, where Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five spoke to the experiences of recent arrivals from the rural South. The most inventive experimental performers of the war years developed an abstract, unpredictable music known in the press as bebop. Though its supporters in the critical establishment fought hard to win acceptance for the innovations of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie as the logical—and ultramodern—extension of more orthodox jazz styles, its reputation in respectable circles remained ambiguous. Much of the public viewed bebop as a complex but confrontational form, on account of its subculture as much as its musical style. This image of modern jazz as hip and transgressive, at odds with the worlds of art and commerce, confirmed it as a music for initiates and adventurers.

Chapter 1 accounts for jazz music's transformation into "America's art form" during the 1950s. Critics, politicians, businessmen, and performers bolstered its reputation by enshrining the principle of freedom as a core artistic and philosophical value. This legitimating construct served both the State Department's use of jazz as a diplomatic tool, to counter Soviet accusations of racism and cultural backwardness, and the desire of jazz promoters to extend the music's popularity within and beyond American borders. I demonstrate that its recognition as a national cultural symbol, at a time of heightened Cold War tension and increased domestic arts consumption, contributed to and benefited from changes in the music's production and presentation. Cool, West Coast, and Third Stream jazz cultivated a growing audience of high school teenagers, college students, and young professionals by reconciling complex and accessible musical devices. Entrepreneurs developed college, concert hall, and festival venues—which required modified behavior from these listeners—as alternatives to nightclubs. New formats such as Long Play recordings and television displayed the music's artistic potential. Yet I conclude that the growing respectability of jazz at home and abroad rested upon a fragile consensus. Although traveling ambassadors such as Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie helped extricate American foreign policy from an embarrassing dilemma, their tours highlighted issues of domestic discrimination that soon divided the jazz community and threatened the music's newfound status.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, two major challenges to jazz music's canonical values occurred in the realms of aesthetics and ideology. Chapter 2 examines the emergence of free improvisation in the music of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, and Cecil Taylor, and the subsequent controversy over modernism in the arts. Echoing the uproar over abstract expressionism in painting, supporters and detractors identified technical facets of each performer's style that appeared to strengthen or weaken the evolutionary link to jazz music's past. Yet developments in the jazz business soon engulfed this musical analysis in a broader debate over the industry's institutional structures. I show that poor working conditions and shrinking audiences exacerbated the discontent of a second wave of African American experimental musicians, including Archie Shepp, Bill Dixon, Pharoah Sanders, and Albert Ayler, who—more than any previous generation of performers—saw themselves as artists. The critical establishment's insensitivity to flaws in the industry's racial and economic framework led many innovative musicians to question the liberal principles at the core of jazz music's Cold War identity. Even before issues of ownership and membership polarized the civil rights movement, they undermined white commentators' prerogative to define jazz music's basic traits.

By mid-decade, a younger generation of musicians and critics began to forward devastating critiques of the music business that explicitly linked free improvisation to militant politics. In Chapter 3, I explore the

writing and activism of cultural nationalists such as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and A. B. Spellman, who interpreted "the new thing" as a reassertion of neglected elements of the African American musical tradition. Dismissing its compatibility with western genres, they drew jazz into the orbit of the Black Arts Movement and placed it at the center of an Afrocentric, separatist black aesthetic. Claiming that the innovations of Coleman, Coltrane, Taylor, and their followers spoke primarily to African Americans, the music's radical champions hoped to overcome its minority appeal and debt to classical modernism through a powerful combination of musical analysis, myth, and ritual. Their militancy and valorization of black artistic genius, if not their didactic philosophies, attracted many of the most maligned performers in jazz—free improvisers themselves.

The Black Arts Movement embraced experimental musicians as heroes, yet the controversy bitterly divided most fans. These listeners above all dictated the reach and influence of critical rhetoric over the next few years. Chapter 4 investigates the composition of jazz audiences during the 1960s, especially for free improvisation, and reveals a small, predominantly white, middle-class, educated, and often intellectual or bohemian listener profile. After assessing the explanations forwarded by historians and contemporaries, including the music's growing obscurity and the availability of radical and accessible alternatives such as soul and rock, I explore a number of strategies adopted by free improvisers to counter or compensate for the precarious existence of experimental jazz. I pay particular attention to the emergence of musicians' self-help collectives such as the Jazz Composers Guild in New York City, and Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. I argue that the terms of their existence underscored a growing stratification of the African American public sphere, the marginal position of free jazz in the music industry, and its peripheral relationship to black communities.

In Chapter 5, I propose that the music's difficulties in the marketplace, and simultaneous embrace by young African American intellectuals, had profound consequences for the status of jazz during the late 1960s and 1970s. The absence of a sizeable audience enabled trade writers to frame "the new thing" on the edges of the tradition. By consigning free improvisation to the avant-garde, opponents found a way to solidify the jazz canon by defining this music's place at its margins. Yet radical claims of black ownership combined with formal changes in the music to enhance the appeal of jazz to universities and foundations that faced pressure to recognize African Americans' heritage. At a time of expanding access to the arts and education, academia and philanthropic organizations offered valuable sponsorship and prestige as experimental performers demonstrated that the taint of commerce for one branch of the music had become very slight indeed. In an ironic paradox, the music many claimed as an expression of the black experience survived primarily through white custodianship. At the same time, free improvisers gave credence to a history of black ideas and accomplishments through their participation in college, endowment, and foundation programs. At many of these institutions, "outside" performers represented the first generation of African American musicians to challenge Eurocentric values and to inject a greater degree of plurality into elite-sanctioned culture. That many of the twenty-first century's most visible musicians and critics ignore the pioneering efforts of free improvisers, and continue to theorize them out of the "classic jazz" canon, speaks to more than personal taste. It illustrates the enormous stakes in the battle to define jazz during an era when it depends to a greater degree than ever on funding and status acquired outside the commercial music industry.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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David Saenz:

The book untitled This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture (The Arts and Intellectual Life in Modern America) contain a lot of information on this. The writer explains your girlfriend idea with easy technique. The language is very easy to understand all the people, so do certainly not worry, you can easy to read the idea. The book was compiled by famous author. The author gives you in the new period of literary works. It is possible to read this book because you can read on your smart phone, or model, so you can read the book inside anywhere and anytime. In a situation you wish to purchase the e-book, you can open their official web-site as well as order it. Have a nice go through.

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