

On Jazz

Theodor W. Adorno and Jamie Owen Daniel

Discourse

Vol. 12, No. 1, A Special Issue on Music (Fall-Winter 1989-90), pp. 45-69

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Theodor W. Adorno

Translated by Jamie Owen Daniel

The question of what is meant by “jazz” seems to mock the clear-cut definitive answer. Just as the historical origins of the form are disappearing into the fog of the recent past, so its range is disappearing within its ambivalent use at the present moment. For the purpose of providing a crude orientation, one could concede that it is that type of dance music — whether it be used in an unmediated or slightly stylized form — that has existed since the war and is distinguished from what preceded it by its decidedly modern character, a quality which itself, however, is sorely in need of analysis. This modernity is perhaps characterized most strikingly by those resistances — differing considerably according to region — which are encountered in jazz and polarized along the lines of either its quality of mechanical soullessness or a licentious decadence. Musically, this “modernity” refers primarily to sound and rhythm, without fundamentally breaking the harmonic-melodic convention of traditional dance music. Syncopation is its rhythmic principle. It occurs in a variety of modifications, in addition to its elemental form (as the “cake walk,” jazz’s precursor, uses it), modifications which remain constantly permeated by this elemental form. The most commonly used modifications are the displacement of basic rhythm through deletions (the Charleston) or slurring (Ragtime); “false” rhythm, more or less a treatment of a common time as a result of three & three & two eighth-notes, with the accent always on the first note of the group which stands out as a “false” beat (*Scheintakt*) from the principal rhythm; finally, the “break,” a cadence which is similar to an improvisation,

mostly at the end of the middle part two beats before the repetition of the principal part of the refrain. In all of these syncopations, which occasionally in virtuoso pieces yield an extraordinary complexity, the fundamental beat is rigorously maintained; it is marked over and over again by the bass drum. The rhythmic phenomena pertain to the accentuation and the phrasing, but not the timing of the piece, and even the accentuation consistently remains, related precisely through the bass drum and the continuo instruments which are subordinate to it, a fundamentally symmetrical one. Thus the principle of symmetry is fully respected, especially in the basic rhythmic structure (*Grossrhythmik*). The eight-beat measure, and even the four-beat half measure, are maintained, their authority unchallenged. Simple harmonic and melodic symmetrical relationships correspond to this as well, broken down in accordance with half and whole closures. The sound exhibits the same simultaneity of excess and rigidity. It combines objectively maintained expressive and continuo-like elements: the violin and the base drum are its extremes. But its vital component is the vibrato which causes a tone which is rigid and objective to tremble as if on its own; it ascribes to it subjective emotions without this being allowed to interrupt the fixedness of the basic sound-pattern, just as the syncopation is not allowed to interrupt the basic meter. In Europe the saxophone is considered representative of this sound, the instrument against which the resistance has concentrated its forces. In truth, the instrument to which so much modernistic infamy is attributed and which is supposed to perversely subject the over-stimulated Western nerves to the vitality of blacks, is old enough to command respect. It was already discussed in Berlioz's theory of instrumentation; it was invented during the nineteenth century when the emancipation of the art of orchestration stimulated the demand for more refined transitions between woodwinds and the brass instruments, and has been used — clearly not obligatorily — in pieces such as Bizet's *Arlesian Suite*, which has long since been considered a classic. In many countries it has been used for generations in military music, and therefore is no longer shocking to anyone. Its actual significance for the practice of jazz may be secondary to that of the trumpets to which a significantly greater diversity of playing methods is available than to the saxophone and which can therefore be inserted in a manner which is functionally more comfortable and much more dependent on the basic sound-pattern. The jazz-sound itself, however, is determined not through one specific conspicuous instrument, but functionally: it is deter-

mined by the possibility of letting the rigid vibrate, or more generally by the opportunity to produce interferences between the rigid and the excessive. The vibrato itself is an interference in the precise physical sense, and the physical model is well-suited for representing the historical and social phenomenon of jazz.

The mechanical constituent facts of the function may be understood as a symbol of a social fact; the form is dominated by the function and not by an autonomous formal law. It seems to have acknowledged itself as dance music. But at the same time it seems to be ardently attempting to proclaim its function one that is exclusively abstract, even within the formulae of dance music, so as to be able to practice it concretely, in secret, all the more unhindered. The unequivocal function of jazz therefore presents itself to the dialectician as a puzzle. The clear elements of the material which contribute to the solving of this puzzle are as few as the forms which jazz has cultivated. Much of what is accepted as jazz — at least by the public, if not by the practitioners of jazz itself — does not come up to the standards for the crudest characteristic of rhythmic and tonal interference. This is true above all for the tangos which, rhythmically very primitive, only draw on the elementary form of syncopation without ever making it a basic principle. This is also true for that hybrid form combining jazz and march music which, since *Valencia* appeared in 1925 as a “six-eight” piece and spread with uncommon rapidity, cultivated the march-like elements with increasing openness, and which inserted an unbroken, continuous rhythm in place of syncopation, and a homogeneous and “well-tempered” tutti-sound in place of the interference. It has never been sharply differentiated from jazz practice and is played by orchestras that alternate between it and thoroughly syncopated “hot music.” On the other hand, a great deal of music is perceived as being jazz or related to jazz only on the basis of its sound, without its being at all interested in the rhythmic principles of jazz. The wide public success of the songs of Kurt Weill was a success for jazz, although the rhythmic profiling of its melodies in accordance with the scansion of the composed verse lines is diametrically opposed to jazz practice — only the pervasive basic rhythm and the sound of the saxophone have anything to do with jazz in this case. Jazz is not what it “is”: its aesthetic articulation is sparing and can be understood at a glance. Rather, it is what it is used for, and this fact clearly brings up questions whose answers will require in-depth examination. Not questions like those pertaining to the autonomous work of art, but rather like those brought to mind by the detective novel,

with which jazz has in common the fact that it maintains an inexorably rigid stereotypology and at the same time does everything it can to let that stereotypology be forgotten by means of individualizing elements, which are again themselves ultimately determined by the stereotypology. Just as in the detective novel the question of the identity of the criminal is intersected with that which is implied by the whole, so in jazz the question of the alien subject, who both quivers and marches through it, is intersected by the question of what its purpose is, why it is there at all, while it asserts its existence (*Dasein*) as something self-evident which only conceals how difficult its own vindication for it must be.

If one attempts, as has been the case often enough, to consider the use value of jazz, its suitability as a mass commodity, as a corrective to the bourgeois isolation of autonomous art, as something which is dialectically advanced, and to accept its use value as a motive for the nullification (*Aufhebung*) of the object character (*Dingcharakter*) of music, one succumbs to the latest form of Romanticism which, because of its anxiety in the face of the fatal characteristics of capitalism, seeks a despairing way out, in order to affirm the feared thing itself as a sort of ghastly allegory of the coming liberation and to sanctify negativity — a curative in which, by the way, jazz itself would like to believe. No matter what the situation might be for art within the context of an approaching order of things; whether its autonomy and object quality (*Dinglichkeit*) will be retained or not — and economic considerations provide substantial grounds for the assertion that even the ideal (*richtig*) society will not be aiming to create pure immediacy — this much is in any case certain: the use value of jazz does not nullify (*aufheben*) alienation, but intensifies it. Jazz is a commodity in the strict sense: its suitability for use permeates its production in terms none other than its marketability, in the most extreme contradiction to the immediacy of its use not merely in addition to but also within the work process itself. It is subordinate to the laws and also to the arbitrary nature of the market, as well as the distribution of its competition or even its followers. The elements in jazz in which immediacy seems to be present, the seemingly improvisational moments — of which syncopation is designated as its elemental form — are added in their naked externality to the standardized commodity character in order to mask it — without, however, gaining power over it for a second. Through its intentions, whether that of appealing to an elevated “style,” individual taste, or even individual spontaneity, jazz wants to improve its marketability and veil its own

commodity character which, in keeping with one of the fundamental contradictions of the system, would jeopardize its own success if it were to appear on the market undisguised. However much jazz may act like a product of "New Objectivity" (*Neue Sachlichkeit*),¹ like something new, it is what any "objectivity" purports to attack most ferociously — an artistic product — and its "objectivity" is no more than a pasted-on ornament meant to deceive us about the extent to which it is merely an object.

Such deception is carried out above all in the interests of the bourgeoisie. If [the bourgeoisie] has really reserved for itself the privilege of taking pleasure in its own alienation,² then, in a situation which is antagonistically very advanced, this pleasure is no longer aided by the pathos of distance, a phenomenon which Nietzsche was still able to discuss in friendly terms. The more they [the bourgeoisie] decrease the distance for consciousness through community ideologies of the most varied forms, the more it grows inexorably within being.³ Similarly, that which is alienated is endurable to them only as long as it presents itself as unconscious and "vital": that which is most alienated is what is most familiar. The function of jazz is thus to be understood as above all one which is relative to the upper class, and its more consequential forms may still be reserved — at least insofar as it is a question of a more intimate reception than merely being delivered up to loudspeakers and the bands in clubs for the masses — for the well-trained upper class, which knows the right dance steps. To it, jazz represents, somewhat like the evening clothes of the gentlemen, the inexorability of the social authority which it itself is, but which is transfigured in jazz into something original and primitive, into "nature." With its individual or characteristic stylistic moments, jazz appeals to the "taste" of those whose sovereign freedom of choice is legitimated by their status. But the fact that jazz, because of its rigidity as well as its appeal to individualizing taste, is supposedly "not kitsch" allows those who consider themselves disciplined to come away from it with a good conscience. Yet the impact of jazz remains as little connected to the upper class as the latter's consciousness distinguishes itself in precise terms from that of the dominated; the mechanism of psychic mutilation upon which present conditions depend for their survival also holds sway over the mutilators themselves, and if these are similar enough to their victims in terms of drive structure, the victims thus can take some solace in the fact that they can also partake of the commodities of the dominant class to the extent that these are intended to appeal to a mutilated instinctual structure. As a surface effect and

diversion, even if not as a serious ritual for amusement, jazz permeates all levels of society, even the proletariat — in Europe, only some specifically agrarian groups can be excepted from its influence. Often, the dependent lower classes identify themselves with the upper class through their reception of jazz. To them, jazz is “urbane,” and, thanks to it, the white-collar employee can feel superior when he sits with his girlfriend in a beer hall. And yet in this only the “primitive” elements of jazz, the good danceable beat of the basic rhythm, are understood: the highly syncopated “hot music” is tolerated, without its penetrating more specifically into our consciousness — all the more so because the cheap dance clubs are unable to pay virtuoso orchestras, and the mediated reproduction of the music through the medium of radio is even less impressive in its effect than a live orchestra. It is, however, characteristic for jazz as a form of interference that its differentiated elements can be dispensed with without its being neutralized (*aufgehoben*) or ceasing to be recognizable as jazz. Jazz is pseudo-democratic in the sense that characterizes the consciousness of the epoch: its attitude of immediacy, which can be defined in terms of a rigid system of tricks, is deceptive when it comes down to class differences. As is the case in the current political sphere, so in the sphere of ideology, reaction is the bedfellow of such a democracy. The more deeply jazz penetrates society, the more reactionary elements it takes on, the more completely it is beholden to banality, and the less it will be able to tolerate freedom and the eruption of phantasy, until it finally glorifies repression itself as the incidental music to accompany the current collective. The more democratic jazz is, the worse it becomes.

The fact that its democratic attitude is merely an illusion can be brought to light by an analysis of its reception. There is nothing more incorrect than to think of this as a plebiscite phenomenon. The capital power of the publishers, its dissemination through radio, and above all the sound film have cultivated a tendency towards centralization which limits freedom of choice and barely allows for any real competition. Its overpowering propaganda apparatus hammers the hits into the masses for as long a period as it sees fit, although most of these are the worst examples [of jazz], until their weary memory (*Gedächtnis*) is defenselessly delivered up to them. And the weariness of their memory has in turn a retroactive effect on production. The pieces that play a decisive role in the broad social appeal of jazz are precisely not those which most purely express the idea of jazz as interference, but are, rather, technically

backward, boorish dances which only contain mere fragments of these elements. These are regarded as "commercial": after sufficient sales of the banal hits have been secured, the publishers consent to deliver a "modern" — i.e., a relatively up-to-date — "hot" piece free of charge. After all, mass consumption of "hot" music cannot be completely dispensed with — this is an expression of a certain excess of musical productive force which goes beyond the demands of the market. The orchestras clamor for "hot music," in part to highlight their virtuosity but also in part because the perpetual repetition of the simplest things bores them to a degree which they find unbearable. At the same time, however, artisanally produced "hot music," the relatively progressive jazz, is also necessary for the promotion of mass consumption. Just as the acceptance of "hot music" allows the upper class to maintain a clear conscience about its taste, the lack of understanding among the majority who are shocked by this music lends to those who do listen to it the vague satisfaction of being themselves "up-to-date," and perhaps even confirms a sense of having been erotically emancipated through that which is dangerously modern or "perverse." This is all mere decorum; the only melodies that find their way into the public memory are the melodies which are the most easily understood and the most rhythmically trivial. For their broad reception, the "hot" pieces perform at best the role of pseudo-modern painters like van Dongen, Foujita, Marie Laurencin, or, even better, of cubist advertisements.

There is one argument currently being used against this assertion. This argument would assert that this could not be a matter of centralism or of an illusory democracy because the propagandistic mechanism does not function sufficiently for this. Hits cannot be "made," and therefore the theoretical prerequisites necessary for their success could not be adequately specified. Thus *Capri*, one of the biggest hits of the recent past, was put out by a small producer after the more important ones had rejected it, and it supposedly made its way on its own. If one asks jazz specialists for the reasons behind the great success of a hit, they will respond — and the greater their business smarts, the more enthusiastic they will be in their response — with depraved magical formulations taken from the vocabulary of art: inspiration, the concept of genius, creativity, originality, mysterious forces, and other irrational justifications. However transparent the motives for this irrationalism may be, the moment of irrationality in the hit's success cannot be overlooked. Which pieces are successful and which are not can be predicted

with as little certainty as can the fate of stocks and bonds. But this irrationality represents not so much a suspension of social determination as something which is itself socially determined. For the present, theory can come up with numerous necessary, albeit also insufficient, conditions for "success," i.e., for a piece's social effect. Further analysis may then stumble on the "irrational" moments, onto the question of why, in the case of two pieces which are formally exactly alike and otherwise equivalent, one takes off and the other does not. But analysis may not assume a creative miracle where nothing has really been created. Provided that irrationality does not reduce itself to unequal chances for propaganda and distribution, its arbitrary nature is itself an expression of a total social system, whose constitutive elements include the tendency to tolerate and demand anarchistic coincidence in all concrete individual manifestations in the midst of the most precise tendentious determinacy. In the sphere of ideology as well, monopolization is in no way equivalent to a dissolution (*Aufhebung*) of anarchy. Just as the reality within which the hit song is heard is not ordered systematically; just as space and time are capable of exerting more control over the fate of the product form than does its own merit, so the consciousness of those who receive it is unsystematic, and its irrationality is *a priori* that of the listener. But this is not a creative irrationality; rather, it is destructive. It is not a generative force, but a recourse to false origins under the control of destruction. In an ideal society, a correlation between quality and success could perhaps be put forth, but in the false one, the absence of a correlative relationship is not so much proof of an occult quality as proof of the falseness of society.

If it is true that jazz is attempting a recourse to false origins, then the argument which revolves around the supposed irrationality of its effect loses its meaning, along with the talk about intrinsic, "archaic forces bursting forth within it," or whatever the phrases with which obliging intellectuals justify its production. The belief in jazz as an elementary force with which an ostensibly decadent European music could be regenerated is pure ideology. The extent to which jazz has anything at all to do with genuine black music is highly questionable; the fact that it is frequently performed by blacks and that the public clamors for "black jazz" as a sort of brand-name doesn't say much about it, even if folkloric research should confirm the African origin of many of its practices. Today, in any case, all of the formal elements of jazz have been completely abstractly pre-formed by the capitalist requirement that they be exchangeable as com-

modities (*tauschbar*). Even the much-invoked improvisations, the “hot” passages and breaks, are merely ornamental in their significance, and never part of the overall construction or determinant of the form. Not only is their placement, right down to the number of beats, assigned stereotypically; not only is their duration and harmonic structure as a dominant effect completely predetermined; even its melodic form and its potential for simultaneous combinations rely on a minimum of basic forms: they can be traced back to the paraphrasing of the cadence, the harmonically figurative counterpoint. The relationship between jazz and black people is similar to that between salon music and the wandering fiddle players whom it so firmly believes it has transcended — the gypsies. According to Bartók, the gypsies are supplied with this music by the cities; like commodity consumption itself, the manufacture (*Herstellung*) of jazz is also an urban phenomenon, and the skin of the black man functions as much as a coloristic effect as does the silver of the saxophone. In no way does a triumphant vitality make its entrance in these bright musical commodities; the European-American entertainment business has subsequently hired the [supposed] triumphant victors to appear as their flunkies and as figures in advertisements, and their triumph is merely a confusing parody of colonial imperialism. To the extent that we can speak of black elements in the beginnings of jazz, in Ragtime perhaps, it is still less archaic-primitive self-expression than the music of slaves; even in the autochthonal music of the African interior, syncopation within the example of a maintained measured time seems only to belong to the lower [social] level. Psychologically, the primal structure of jazz (*Ur-Jazz*) may most closely suggest the spontaneous singing of servant girls. Society has drawn its vital music — provided that it has not been made to order from the very beginning — not from the wild, but from the domesticated body in bondage. The sado-masochistic elements in jazz could be clearly connected to this. The archaic stance of jazz is as modern as the “primitives” who fabricate it. The improvisational immediacy which constitutes its partial success counts strictly among those attempts to break out of the fetishized commodity world which want to escape that world without ever changing it, thus moving ever deeper into its snare. He who wants to flee from a music which has become incomprehensible or from an alienating everyday situation into jazz happens upon a musical commodity system which for him is superior to the others only in that it is not so immediately transparent, but which, with its decisive, non-improvisational elements, suppresses precisely those human

claims which he laid to it. With jazz, a disenfranchised subjectivity plunges from the commodity world into the commodity world; the system does not allow for a way out. Whatever primordial instinct is recovered in this is not a longed-for freedom, but rather a regression through suppression; there is nothing archaic in jazz but that which is engendered out of modernity through the mechanism of suppression. It is not old and repressed instincts which are freed in the form of standardized rhythms and standardized explosive outbursts; it is new, repressed, and mutilated instincts which have stiffened into the masks of those in the distant past.

The modern archaic stance of jazz is nothing other than its commodity character. The evidence of originality in it is that which makes it a commodity: the fixed, almost timeless stasis within movement; the mask-like stereotypology; the combination of wild agitation as the illusion of a dynamic and the inexorability of the authority which dominates such agitation. Predominant, however, is the law which is that of the market as much as it is that of myths: the illusion must constantly remain the same while at the same time constantly simulating the "new." This becomes apparent in the paradoxical demand on the composer that his work always be "just like" and yet "original," a demand which cripples all productive power. He who could accomplish both simultaneously would realize the ideal of the "commercial." In the irreconcilability of the two demands, however, as they are made on all commodities, one of the most deep-seated contradictions of capitalism is revealed — it is a system which must simultaneously develop and enchain productive power. Within the practice of jazz, the habitual takes pains to see that it is reinforced. The cards of jazz seem to have played themselves out: since the tango and the foxtrot, nothing new has been added to its fundamental characteristics. There has only been a modification of that which already exists. Even the "invention," the concept of which is equally problematic socially and in terms of aesthetics, remains dependent on previously successful models; it is as thoroughly and conventionally pre-formed as the basic types themselves. The "new" penetrates only occasionally, appearing as individual nuance and seen from the point of view of the individual as chance whenever it specifically expresses (always almost unconsciously) objective social tendencies, i.e., when it is precisely not individual nuance. Sometimes, although this does not happen in the majority of cases, the element of the "new" brings the greatest success, as in the case of the first "six-eight" pieces, the *Valencia*, or the first rumba. Such pieces

are usually published against the will of the producers, since they always constitute a risk. The musical correlative of the demand for being both "just like" and "original" is, however, the fact that a successful jazz hit must unite an individual, characteristic element with utter banality on every other level. Here it is in no way a matter of the melodic shape alone; it is without exception astonishingly minor. One detail of any kind — in *Valencia* it is the slight irregularity in the meter of which the consumer is not aware — is enough. The publishers, just like any propagandists, are most concerned with the title, the beginning of the text, the first eight bars of the refrain, and the close of the refrain, which is usually anticipated as a motto in the introduction. They are indifferent to everything else, i.e., to the development of the music. The old principle of the rondo, which perhaps actually refers back to cult forms, is chosen by jazz for its ability to be memorized and thus for its marketability; throughout, the couplets or "verses" are deliberately kept two-dimensional in contrast to the refrain or the chorus.

The simultaneity of the characteristic and the banal which is marked out in jazz affects not only the jazz pieces in and of themselves. To a much greater extent, this simultaneity is realized in the relationship between production and reproduction to which jazz owes precisely its reputation for spontaneous immediacy. The piece as such — and here we may exaggerate — is banal; its reproduction is characteristic, exquisite, virtuoso, often disguising the piece to the point of unrecognizability. The composer must, oddly enough, answer for the conventional element in jazz. The one who modifies it is the arranger (*Arrangeur*), who is affiliated sometimes with the publishers and sometimes with the orchestra, but who is most closely in touch with those who reproduce the music. If one were to compare the performance of a good orchestra with the actual score of the piano version, for example, one would be likely to conclude that the qualified musicians are to be found among the arrangers and not the composers. It seems almost as if material which is completely indifferent is best suited to a jazz treatment. One of the best-known virtuoso pieces for jazz, the *Tiger Rag* that orchestras love to use to show off their talents, is extremely simple in terms of its composition. Thus, jazz seems to be progressive in two directions — both different with respect to the developmental tendency specific to music. One aspect is the reintroduction into the composition of those who are reproducing it. In "artistic" music, both [the composition and those who are reproducing it] are hopelessly alienated from one another; the instructions for play-

ing the "New Music" allow no room for freedom in the process of reproducing it — indeed, the "interpretation" disappears completely behind the mechanical reproduction. In jazz, it seems as if the reproducer has reclaimed his rights vis-à-vis the work of art — man has reclaimed his rights over the object. This is, in any case, how jazz is understood by the more conscientious among its apologists: the sentiment (*Gesinnung*) of Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf* is proof of this. This sentiment is romantic, however — and Krenek was only being consistent when he followed Jonny with the romantic one-act piece as an epilogue. The interjection of the interpreter or arranger in jazz does not permit, as the improvisations of the great stage actors still do, a real altering of the material in order to give rise to a subjective proclamation. The stimulation and the artistic piece, the new color and the new rhythm are merely inserted along with the banal — just as the jazz vibrato is inserted into the rigid sound, and syncopation in the basic meter. This element of interference in jazz is accomplished by the arrangement of the composition. But its contours remain the old ones. The schema can still be heard, even through the most digressive breaks in the arrangement. He who is reproducing the music is permitted to tug at the chains of his boredom, and even to clatter them, but he cannot break them. Freedom in reproduction is no more present here than in "artistic" music. Even if the composition were to allow it, the tradition of jazz, which is prepared to give the slightest subjective nuance its prescribed name, would not tolerate such freedom. If man is incapable of breaking through within the composition itself, then he certainly cannot do so within a reproduction which respectfully dresses up its bare walls in order to disguise its inhumanity, but which helps to prolong this inhumanity surreptitiously in doing so.

In addition, however, it seems as if one could consider the arrangement of the working process as progressive, which in jazz oscillates between production and reproduction. It presents itself as an obvious distribution of labor, which forms a "material" within a context of mechanical freedom and rationality without being dependent on its coincidental nature, the coincidental nature of the conditions of production or those of the performers. Somebody comes up with the "invention" or whatever is taken for one; another harmonizes it and elaborates on it; then a text develops and the rest of the music is written and seasoned with rhythm and harmony, perhaps already by the arranger at this point; finally, the whole is orchestrated by a specialist. Now, the intentionally exhibited division of labor does

not take place in a systematic way in the sense of rationalization — this is just as little the case here as it is, for example, in film production. The necessity of the producer is its reason; it is subsequently turned into the “virtue” of a collective which in reality does not exist. He who presumes a late-capitalist rationality of the process of production in jazz falls victim to an illusion similar to that which is produced by the glittering machinery which the jazz orchestra, with its metal instruments and its propped-up grand piano endeavors to imitate, and would like to romanticize the commodity “jazz” in the sense of a vague “avantgarde” quality, in the sense of the “tempo of the times.” The rationalization which is so eager to declare itself through the plural of authors’ names on the title pages of the piano scores functions in a highly defective manner; there can be no talk of systematic collective labor here, and the contradiction between the material and its techniques remains obvious throughout — wherein the technique itself is conspicuous as having miscarried. The division of labor originates in the fact that the “inventions” frequently stem from amateurs, from a great many outsiders to formal jazz practice, who cannot themselves orchestrate them for jazz and who often cannot even set them down or score them, while, on the other end of the process, there are the orchestras which are allied with the publishers and their particular interests. The arbitrary nature of the original material is thus in no sense the result of its technical mastery, but, instead, through it, anarchy intervenes in the process of production. It does not master the original material so much as remain independent of it and its arbitrary nature; this sets a limit for the rationality of the technique as well as for that of the result. Jazz specialists respond to the public and to its representative in the production process; the latter, however, opposes all technical consonance on principle. If this representative were an expert, the success [of jazz] would be endangered in its origins. The division of labor in jazz merely outlines the parody of a future collective process of composition.

The amateur represents the extreme case of the public representative in the production of jazz, which as such is alienated from individuals. He is the test case for social authority in its real effect on musical practices today. He is of exemplary importance even if one wants to keep the estimate of the number of “tuned in” jazz amateurs low. The significance of this is clearly not meant to be understood in the way that jazz ideology itself represents it. The amateur is not the uncompromised and un sullied person whose originality asserts itself against the routine of

the business; this idea is part of the mythic mystification of the black man. Neither does social reality, freed of image and illusion, intervene through him in the work of art. And neither is it true that through this intervention the work of art would itself become reality. As the representative of society in jazz, he is perhaps more the representative of its extremely illusory nature. Within the process of production he functions as a guarantor for the apperception of the product. His inventions are embodied within accumulated conventions. Somewhat like the businessman who, thinking he has been transformed into a poet on the occasion of a birthday celebration, will feature himself suddenly and compulsively (but not because of his literary innocence — instead he will offer an imitation of Heine or Scheffel or Wilhelm Busch), the amateur in like manner imitates the clichés of current jazz music and guarantees the commercial opportunity to underbid it wherever possible. What legitimates precisely him and not just anybody in bringing this imitation into the public sphere to which he owes it is not so much the individual qualification of his ideas as it is the fact that he has mustered the necessary hysterical lack of restraint to express that which he does not suffer. He invests in the production precisely that source of unconscious musical and extra-musical associations, expectations, categories, and slippages which is eradicated in professional musicians by their training or is elevated to a conscious level and, once lost, can never again be reconstructed, but which constitutes a substantial and perhaps the decisive prerequisite for exerting an effect on the public — an invaluable component in its commercial success. The helplessness of the person who is excluded from the specialized trade, who experiences the same fear in the face of music, evinces something akin to fear as if it were a social power and, because of his fear, aspires to adapt himself to it, without, however, succeeding at it — this helplessness is just as important an ingredient [in its success] as the educated mundane consciousness of the habitué. After all, the two belong together as the constitutive elements of jazz: helplessness (the whimpering vibrato) and the average consciousness (banality). The person of the amateur is the subjective correlative of an objective formal structure. His slippages belong as much to the a priori of jazz as, following Karl Kraus's thoroughly verified view, typographical errors belong to the a priori of the newspaper. Errors in musical orthography, grammar and syntax can be found in the piano scores — i.e., in the originals — of many of the most successful hits. They are continued in the finer breaks which are characteristic of high jazz

pieces for compelling reasons since, in principle, all jazz is inconsistent. If the surface has begun to close in the more recent, and especially the American writing; if there are fewer crass errors and the dilettantes are being shut out, this should not be understood as representing "progress" in jazz. While it is beginning to split off into its two extremes, "sweet music" and the march, the core of jazz, "hot music," is being stabilized into a middle-of-the-road line of artisanal scrupulousness and taste which restrains the improvisational elements of disruption which were sporadically present in the original conception of jazz into symphonic simplicity and grandeur. Stabilized jazz is that which presents itself as "symphonic," as autonomous art, but which thus conclusively abandons all the intentions which previously had contributed to its appearance of collective immediacy. It submits itself to the standards of "artistic" music; compared with it, however, jazz exposes itself as lagging far behind.

The tastefulness of jazz and the ferment of its modernity, antipole and corrective of the amateur, are artistically simple deception as much as its reverse, its immediacy. Educated taste, which tests and refines the conventional, has long since become conventional itself; modernity is based exclusively on the conventions of the music of the recent modern period. These are, roughly speaking, those of musical impressionism. The black artist Duke Ellington, who is a trained musician and the principal representative of today's "classical" stabilized jazz, has named Debussy and Delius as his favorite composers. With the exception of "hot" rhythm, all the more subtle characteristics of jazz refer back to this style, and it would hardly be exaggerated to observe that this style is making its way for the first time into the broader strata of society through jazz. In Parisian nightclubs, one can hear Debussy and Ravel in between the rumbas and charlestons. The influence of impressionism is most striking in the harmonies. Nine-note chords, *sixte ajoutée*, and other mixtures, such as the stereotypical blue chords, and whatever jazz has to offer in the way of vertical stimulation has been taken from Debussy. And even the treatment of melody, especially in the more serious pieces, is based on the impressionist model. The resolution into the smallest motif-formulae, which are not developed dynamically but rather statically repeated, and which are only rhythmically reinterpreted and appear to circle around an immovable center, is specifically impressionistic. But jazz deprives it of its formal sense; the impressionism which it appropriates is at the same time depraved. If, in Debussy, the melodic points form their coloration and temporal surfaces from out of themselves follow-

ing the constructive command of subjectivity, in jazz they are harnessed, like in the mock-beat of "hot music," into the metric-harmonic schema of the "standard" cadence of the eight-bar measure. The subjective-functional distribution of the melody remains impotent by being recalled, as it were, by the eight-bar condensation into a melodic soprano form which merely toys with its particulars rather than composing a new form from them; this is true in the case of the complex harmonies when they are caught again by the same cadence from which their floating resonances want to escape. Even yesterday's music must first be rendered harmless by jazz, must be released from its historical element, before it is ready for the market. Once on the market, these impressionistic trimmings function as a stimulant. Their effect, previously isolated in the concert hall and the studio, is modern: a fine nuance within a crass schema. For the broad public they are considered risqué and exciting in a way that is barely comprehensible any more; they abstractly feign progressiveness. But the individual element which is inserted into jazz through impressionism does not generate or have control over itself. It has become rigid, formulaic, spent — the individual elements are now in just the same position as social convention was previously. It is easy to rob it of its formal sense because that has already escaped of its own accord in post-Debussy epigone music; as a conventional element it can be fitted seamlessly into a convention. The individually modern element in jazz is as illusory as the collective archaic element.

The illusory character of the individual elements relates jazz to salon music, towards which impressionism itself tended in its lesser representatives. In its origins, jazz reaches deep down into the salon style. Its *expressivo* stems from this style; to put it drastically, everything in it wants to announce something soulful. The jazz vibrato was most likely taken over from the wandering fiddle player, who is then resurrected in the tango. Impressionist harmonics spill over everywhere into the sentimental harmonies of the salon. The characteristic style of the whispering jazz singers which is the most difficult to integrate into a norm is almost indistinguishable from that of the café concert. The subjective pole of jazz — subjectivity itself understood strictly in the sense of a social product and as something which has been reified into a commodity — is salon music; the subjective pole trembles from the impulses of salon music. If one wanted to describe the phenomenon of interference in jazz in terms of broad and solid concepts of style, one could claim it as the combination of salon music and march music. The former represents an individuality

which in truth is none at all, but merely the socially produced illusion of it; the latter is an equally fictive community which is formed from nothing other than the alignment (*Gleichrichtung*) of atoms under the force that is exerted upon them. The effectiveness of the principle of march music in jazz is evident. The basic rhythm of the continuo and the bass drum is completely in sync with march rhythm, and, since the introduction of six-eight time, jazz could be transformed effortlessly into a march. The connection here is historically grounded; one of the horns used in jazz is called the Sousaphone, after the march composer. Not only the saxophone has been borrowed from the military orchestra; the entire arrangement of the jazz orchestra, in terms of the melodic, bass, "obligatory," and mere filler instruments, is identical to that of a military band. Thus jazz can be easily adapted for use by fascism. In Italy it is especially well-liked, as is cubism and artisanry. The ban against it in Germany has to do with the surface tendency to reach back to pre-capitalist, feudal forms of immediacy and to call these socialism. But, characteristically enough, this ban is a powerless one. The struggle against the saxophone has been appeased by the musical organizations and the instrument industry; jazz itself continues vigorously, under other names, on the radio as well. Only the more advanced, newly objective⁴ "hot" jazz for the upper middle classes which the layman cannot understand has fallen victim to the ban. Not only is march-like jazz music tolerated, but the new marches, as they are sometimes introduced through sound films, have themselves sprung directly from jazz.

The relationship between the salon music and march music which are mixed together in jazz has its base in the demythologizing tendency of dance itself, in the transformation of the dance into the bourgeois gait carried out whenever possible by individuals from the salons. The formal precursors of jazz before the war were referred to as "taps" or "steps": the movement of accentuating a step in the process of walking gave it its name. The history of the social function of jazz, the tendency to disenchant the dance, has yet to be written, and to be transposed subsequently into its opposite, a new magic. The gait of the bourgeois individual which is no longer connected with magic can be transformed, by the command of rhythm, into a march. Insofar as dancing is synchronous movement, the tendency to march has been present in dance from the very beginning; thus jazz is connected in its origins with the march and its history lays bare this relationship. At first, the casual gait which accompanies jazz presents itself as the opposite of the march. It seems to

release the dancer from the imprisonment of exact gestures into the arbitrary nature of his everyday life, from which he no longer even escapes through dance, but which is playfully transfigured by dance as a latent order. With jazz, so it seems, the contingency of individual existence asserts itself against its social standard, with the claim that it is fraught with meaning. Jazz syncopation clearly wants to obliterate the ritualized measure; at times it sounds as if the music were sacrificing its distance and its aesthetic figurativeness and had stepped over into the physical empirical realm of regulated-arbitrary life. In film, jazz is best suited to accompany contingent actions which are prosaic in a double sense: people promenading and chatting along a beach, a woman busying herself with her shoe. In such moments, jazz is so appropriate to the situation that we are hardly conscious of it anymore. From this fact, too, stems the significance of the hits of contingency, where a chance word, as a scrap of the everyday, becomes a jacket for the music from which it spins forth: "bananas" and "cheese at the train station" and "Aunt Paula who eats tomatoes"⁵ have often enough knocked their erotic and geographic competition out of the field.

This contingency can only be trusted to a very minor degree. All too willingly, the hits give their contingency a sexual meaning which is by no means an unconscious one; they all tend toward the obscene gesture. The cheese then reminds us of anal regression; the bananas provide surrogate satisfaction for the woman, and the more absurd the nonsense, the more immediate its sex appeal. The pace of the gait itself — language bears witness to this — has an immediate reference to coitus; the rhythm of the gait is similar to the rhythm of sexual intercourse, and if the new dances have demystified the erotic magic of the old ones, they have also — and therein at least they are more advanced than one might expect — replaced it with the drastic innuendo of sexual consummation. This is expressed in the extreme in some so-called "dance academies," where "taxi girls" are available with whom one can perform dance steps which occasionally lead to male orgasm. Thus, the dance is a means for achieving sexual satisfaction and at the same time respects the ideal of virginity. The sexual moment in jazz is what has provoked the hatred of petit bourgeois ascetic groups.

This sexual moment is, however, deliberately emphasized in all jazz. In contrast to the practice of psychoanalysis but using its terminology, one would like to designate the symbolic representation of sexual union as the manifest dream content of jazz, which is intensified rather than censored by the innuendo of the

text and the music. One cannot free oneself of the suspicion that the crude and easily transparent sexual secretiveness of jazz conceals a secondary, deeper, and more dangerous secret. The first instance would not differentiate itself at all from what provided the material for older operettas like the *Walzertraum* (*Waltz Dream*); the character of modernity which is inherent in jazz would not be affected by it. The second secret, however, may be assumed to be a social one. In order to expose the latent dream structure, one may insist on the interrelatedness of jazz and contingency. Its social significance does not merge into the sexual meaning; the social must be forced from the sexual. Even socially, jazz has at first a simple solution in store. This is its *rondo* component, that of the couplet and refrain which it shares with traditional simple vocal music. The *couplet* and *refrain* are called in English the "verse" and the "chorus," and the name and subject matter betray the old relationship between the single lead singer or principal dancer and the collective. In the verse, the individual speaks as if in isolation, precisely out of the contingency of his individuality; he is modest, reporting unobtrusively, not in the tone of the communal hymn, in order then to be confirmed and socially objectified in the chorus, which responds to the question expressed musically by the partial closure. This ritual is addressed to individuals as its public. The intended, unconscious process which the public performs is thus one of establishing identification. The individual in the audience experiences himself primarily as a couplet-ego, and then feels himself transformed (*aufgehoben*) in the refrain; he identifies himself with the collective of the refrain, merges with it in the dance, and thus finds sexual fulfillment. So much for the well-known dream content of jazz; it resembles that of film, which has been treated as with fantasy again and again with all due trivial esprit. Like the films which correspond to it, it illustrates the primacy of society vis-à-vis the individual, who nonetheless experiences himself as the measure in the process. The production process is significant; it realizes the primacy of the refrain over the couplet in that it is always written first and as the principal component; the couplet is found later, only subsequently; the individual, the "hero" of the verse, is an indifferent element in its production. The verse often tells a simple-minded history of the development of the refrain just to provide a point of connection for the refrain. In orchestral arrangements, the verse retreats altogether; the piece begins with the refrain and the couplet is used only once in the rondo — only the chorus is permitted to take part in the repetition and variations. Only it is

sung. Contrary to this, the piano scores which are aimed more at the private sphere contain the complete text and musically give the couplet as well as the refrain.

If theory wants to go beyond such findings to penetrate the center of the social function of jazz, or, to put it in psychological terms, its latent dream content — that is, to point out the concrete historically determined constellation of social identification and sexual energy for which it is an arena — it must formulate the problem of contingency with regard to “hot music,” even though this music, at least in Europe, has reached only a fraction of the general public. “Hot music” can be contrasted to the minimum of march and salon music as the achievable maximum; the “idea” of jazz can be construed from it if it is to be construed at all. The scope of the “hot” elements extends from the artfully executed improvisation via the “break” and mock beats to the elemental component, the syncopation which seems to stumble out of the basic rhythm. The maintained beat is contrasted to it as the normative standard. These can lay a greater claim to being the subject of jazz than does its archaic rudiment, the couplet; individual contingency is embodied in their excess departures from the norm. This jazz subject is inept and yet is inclined toward improvisation; it is contrasted as Self against the abstract superimposed authority and yet can be exchanged arbitrarily. It lends this authority expression without softening it by this expression — in this way it is paradoxical. The fact that it is itself preformed conventionally and only appears to be self-sufficient forces one to conclude, as does the musical expression of “hot” passages, that this subject is not a “free,” lyrical subject which is then elevated into the collective, but rather one which is not originally free — a victim of the collective. Here the sense of jazz’s original refrain/couplet relationship reappears in its own time, for the lead singer or principal dancer is nothing other than a — perhaps superseded — human sacrifice. In this context, it may be decisively illuminating that the only important composer who is at all close to jazz is Stravinsky, whose principal work, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, famous for its artful syncopation, makes the subject of the work a human sacrifice, that of the principal dancer — a sacrifice which the music not so much interprets as ritualistically accompanies. The sacrificial meaning of the jazz subject is now clearly mitigated under the pressure of dream censorship. It falls out of the collective just as syncopation does from the regular beat; it does not want to be engulfed in the prescribed majority, which existed before the subject and is independent of it, whether out of

protest or ineptitude or both at once — until it finally is received into, or, better, subordinated to the collective as it was predestined to do; until the music indicates, in a subsequently ironic manner as the measures grow rounder, that it was a part of it from the very beginning; that, itself a part of this society, it can never really break away from it; indeed, that its seeming ineptitude is really a virtuosity of adaptation; that its “not-being-able-to” (and this is clearly tied in with the sexual meaning here) really indicates an “ability to,” an “also-being-able-to,” indeed, an “ability to do it better.”

The most precise precursor of this jazz subject took shape on the pre-war variety stage — therefore the question of the extent to which the first tap-dances stem from the variety theatre is factually of the utmost importance for a comprehensive theory of jazz. The eccentric may be taken as a model for the jazz subject — one of the oldest and most famous pieces of artistic music which is similar to jazz bears the title *General Lavine, Eccentric*, with the subtitle, *dans le mouvement et le style d'un cake-walk* (“following the movement and style of a cakewalk”). The eccentric can first of all be understood as the strict antithesis of the clown. If the clown is the one whose anarchistic and archaic immediacy cannot be adapted to the reified bourgeois life, and becomes ridiculous before it — fragmentary, but at the same time allowing it to appear ridiculous — the eccentric certainly is just as much excluded from instrumental regulation, from the “rhythm” of bourgeois life. He is, like the clown, the crank and outsider and may well verge on the ridiculous. But his exclusion manifests itself immediately — not as powerlessness (*Ohnmacht*), but rather as superiority, or the appearance of it; laughter greets the eccentric only to die away in shock, and, with his ridiculousness, that of society also elegantly drops out of sight. The rhythm of his arbitrariness is subordinated without a rupture to a greater, more lawful rhythm; and his failure is located not below, but above the standard: to obey the law and yet be different. This type of behavior is taken over, bound up with the gradual abandonment of the traces of playful superiority and liberal difference, by the “hot” subject. Even externally, the jazz practice of the best orchestras always maintains eccentric elements. The juggling acts of the drummers, the lightning-fast switch from one instrument to another, improvisations which sound ridiculously off-beat at first and sound right only once the last beat has sounded, a systematic stumbling over and turning around one another which is both ingenious and futile — the more virtuoso jazz practice has all this in common with the practice of the

eccentric. The rhythmic categories of "hot" music are themselves eccentric categories. The syncopation is not, like its counterpart, that of Beethoven, the expression of an accumulated subjective force which directed itself against authority until it had produced a new law out of itself. It is purposeless; it leads nowhere and is arbitrarily withdrawn by an undialectical, mathematical incorporation into the beat. It is plainly a "coming-too-early," just as anxiety leads to premature orgasm, just as impotence expresses itself through premature and incomplete orgasm. The syncopation is completely relativized by the basic rhythm, which is maintained steadfastly from the very beginning, rigidly in accordance with the beat, and modified only in terms of emphasis — or, more precisely, the basic meter and, once again as in the case of impotence, jeered at: it expresses the derision and the suffering from it likewise in a murky ambiguity. As a clown, the "hot" ego begins to follow too weakly the standard of the collective which has been unproblematically set, reeling with uncertainty like many of the figures of the American film grotesque genre, such as Harold Lloyd and occasionally Chaplin himself. The decisive intervention of jazz lies in the fact that this subject of weakness takes pleasure precisely in its own weakness, almost as if it should be rewarded for this, for adapting itself into the collective that made it so weak, whose standard its weakness cannot satisfy. In psychological terms, jazz succeeds in squaring the circle. The contingent ego as a member of the bourgeois class is blindly abandoned on principle to social law. By learning to fear social authority and experiencing it as a threat of castration — and immediately as fear of impotence — it identifies itself with precisely this authority of which it is afraid. In exchange, however, it now suddenly belongs to it and can "dance along." The "sex appeal" of jazz is a command: obey, and then you will be allowed to take part. And the dream-thought, as contradictory as reality, in which it is dreamt: I will only be potent once I have allowed myself to be castrated. The relationship between the jazz subject represented by "hot" jazz elements and social authority, the prescribed metric law, is ambivalent from a material-musical perspective as well as from a social-psychological one. Anxiety causes the subject to drop out and go into opposition, but opposition by an isolated individual, who represents himself in his isolation as purely socially determined, is an illusion. Out of anxiety, individuality, like syncopation, is once again relinquished, which is itself pure anxiety; it sacrifices an individuality which it does not really possess, feels itself, as a mutilated subject, at one with the mutilating authority,

and transfers this authority onto itself in such a way that it now believes itself to be "able." The opposing ego remains a part of the total society, it is only concealed from itself at first, and the performance of jazz is not so much its dialectical modification and "transformation," properly speaking, as it is the rigid ritual of the exposure of its social character. The elements of its weakness are inscribed in the "parodic" or comic elements which are peculiar to the "hot" sections — without, however, anyone knowing what exactly is being parodied. They represent at the same time, and still in the sense of eccentricity, the playful superiority of the individual over society, which precisely because of its exact knowledge of the rules of its game can dare not to strictly maintain them. Only this ironic excess is suspect in jazz, and this is indicated by its hatred for squeaks and dissonance — but not the adaptation of syncopation; only it is eliminated within fascism, but not the model of its rhythmic development. For the specification of the individual in jazz never was and never will be that of a thriving productive power, but always that of a neurotic weakness, just as the basic models of the "excessive" "hot" subject remain musically completely banal and conventional. For this reason, perhaps, oppressed peoples could be said to be especially well-prepared for jazz. To some extent, they demonstrate for the not yet adequately mutilated liberals the mechanism of identification with their own oppression.

Jazz, the amalgam of the march and salon music, is a false amalgam: the amalgam of a destroyed subjectivity and of the social power which produces it, eliminates it, and objectifies it through this elimination. This is also true in coloristic terms of the unity of the pseudo-liberated and pseudo-immediate and of the march-like collective basic meter; the subjective-expressive sound; a subjective tone which dissolves itself by revealing its mechanical aspect. Of all the instruments, this coloration is most genuinely recognizable in the unbearable Wurlitzer organ. In it, the character of the jazz vibrato comes definitively to the fore. The other sound characteristics of jazz — the muted distortions of the horns, the chirping and vibrating tonal repetitions of the plucked instruments, the banjo and the ukulele, and even the harmonica — are functionally equivalent to it in so far as they all modify an "objective" sound, but still only to the extent that this sound remains inevitably manifest; it is perhaps ironicized, but mostly it ironicizes the whimpering which is helplessly testing itself within it. The objective sound is embellished by a subjective expression, which is unable to dominate it and therefore exerts a fundamentally ridiculous and heart-rending effect. The ele-

ments of the comical, the grotesque, and the anal which are inherent in jazz can therefore never be separated from the sentimental elements. They characterize a subjectivity which revolts against a collective power which it itself *is*; for this reason its revolt seems ridiculous and is beaten down by the drum just as syncopation is by the beat. Only those positions which are characterized by irony, when it is directed against just anyone, and which suspects the expression of subjectivity when it doesn't matter whose it is, are unable to tolerate this sound. Then there appears in its place the militaristically noble, demonically harmonious elements of the symphonic jazz marches, whose sheer compactness will no longer concede even the semblance of humanity its gap. At this point, jazz will have split off along the two poles of its origins, while, in the middle, "hot" music, too soon condemned to classical status, will continue its meager specialized existence. Once this happens, jazz will be beyond redemption.

— 1936

Notes

*From Theodor W. Adorno, *Moments Musicaux*, © Suhrkamp Verlag Frankfurt am Main 1964, 1982.

¹ Adorno here makes a dismissive reference to the artistic and literary movement known as "New Objectivity," fashionable during the Weimar period of which he was critical. As John Willet has pointed out in his excellent study of the period, the translation of "*Sachlichkeit*" as "objectivity" must be qualified: "[A] '*Sache*' is a fact, a matter, a 'thing' in the more abstract sense. Its quality of '*Sachlichkeit*' then implies objectivity in the sense of a neutral, sober, matter-of-fact approach, thus coming to embrace functionalism, utility, absence of decorative frills." John Willet, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 112.

² The reference here is to a much-cited passage from Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," written during the same period: "Its [mankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order." Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 242. For the importance of Benjamin's essay to the present essay, which Adorno had hoped to see published as a companion piece to it, see my introduction to "On Jazz" in this issue.

³ This "being" is meant in the sense of everyday reality, and not in the sense of a transcendent Heideggerian "Being."

⁴ Another reference to "New Objectivity" then very much in vogue. See Footnote 1 above.

⁵ The reference is to lines from popular commercial hits of the period.