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**Review**

# Patrick Burke, *Come in and Hear the Truth: Jazz and Race on 52nd Street*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008 (hbk). xiv + 314pp. $35.00. ISBN 978-0-226-08071-0.

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Ever since Philip Bohlman and Ronald Radano published their groundbreaking collection of essays, *Music and the Racial Imagination*, there has been a steady stream of studies exploring and extending the questions it raised about how musical practice relates to racial categories and racist discourse. Patrick Burke's study of the racial politics of jazz on 52nd Street in New York City explicitly takes its cue from this research. Beginning in the 1930s, when the famous Onyx Club emerged as a kind of unofficial 'workingmen's club' for studio musicians, and following the rise of 52nd Street as a major commercial centre in the 1940s, Burke develops a subtle and detailed analysis of the racial dynamics of jazz production and reception. His focus is on 'the mutual influence between musical style and racial representation' (p. 5) as these took shape within and around the area of 52nd Street.

Clubs such as the Onyx, the Spotlight, the Three Deuces, Jimmy Ryan's and many others are etched into jazz mythology, not the least by William Gottlieb's famous photograph of 52nd Street, which he took in July 1948. The neon signs above the clubs proclaim the myth as powerfully as do the many stories and images we have of what was going on inside. They announced to musicians and audiences alike not only the growing popularity of jazz, but also the new conception of jazz performance that was taking shape there, encapsulated in the after-hours jam sessions and small-group swing bands. The regular appearance of performers such as Coleman Hawkins, Billie Holiday, Art Tatum and Dizzy Gillespie in the clubs, along with the musicians' emphasis on spontaneity and virtuosity as essential features, reinforces the claim that it was there, on 52nd Street, that jazz underwent a transformation from popular entertainment into a modernist art form, a change that was mirrored in the stylistic movement from swing to bebop.

Broadly speaking, *Come in and Hear the Truth* is about the problem of conceptualizing this transformation. Most accounts of jazz history explain key moments of change in terms of a succession of styles, usually embodied in the work of a 'canon' of great (sometimes even heroic) performers and composers and measured against a set of core musical conventions. Taken together, these conventions form what is meant when performers and critics refer to the 'jazz tradition'. The transition from one style to the next involves artists in a thorough-going revision of this tradition, mostly by reconstituting those conventions that have become worn out, clichéd or no longer meaningful. The really great players or composers are those individuals who are able to do this, to reinvent the music's language and gestures without destroying jazz in the process. An exemplary text in this regard is Martin Williams's *The Jazz Tradition*, in which the shift from swing to bebop is understood in terms of the individuals who made it possible. In Williams's study, 52nd Street exists only as a colourful backdrop to a story that is ostensibly about the individual artist's capacity to transform the musical materials they find in the work of their predecessors and, thus, to find new ways of rediscovering and, ultimately, overcoming the essential problems the jazz tradition presents them with.

By focusing our attention on 52nd Street—'the street that never slept', in Arnold Shaw's famous phrase—Burke moves the question of change in an entirely different direction. Jazz styles appear in conjunction with each other, jostling for attention, their identity emerging from a complex cross-fertilization of ideas and methods, personnel and practices, rather than as successive stages of an evolutionary movement. Individual performers certainly shape what is happening, but not independently of the groups and clubs and recording studios within which they lived and worked. So, instead of studying the movement from one jazz style to the next in terms of an implicit set of musical problems, Burke proposes to work through the many and often contradictory meanings identified with making jazz and the complicated processes by which performers came to understand themselves as modern artists.

The co-existence of several clubs featuring Dixieland, bebop and swing provides Burke with the basis for his challenge to the notion of a 'jazz tradition' that is inherently progressive. For him, such a narrative necessarily 'obscures the ways in which the music now seen as part of the jazz canon both influenced and reflected other styles of music and popular entertainment' (p. 4). In essence, Burke argues that the actions of individual musicians or groups make sense only if we understand how the social and

institutional circumstances in which they performed established both the possibilities and limitations of their art. The nightly exchange of musical ideas on 52nd Street thus became the means by which jazz musicians developed their ideas of what counted and what did not count as jazz.

This is where the concept of 'race' comes in. According to Burke, the jazz performers who frequented the 52nd Street clubs were involved in a complicated relationship to racial and racist discourse and practices. Images of 'untutored, spontaneous black performers' were both reinforced and challenged, on and off the stage, by the predominantly white musicians and patrons who frequented 52nd Street in the late-1930s. At the same time, the opening up of the 52nd Street clubs to African-American performers and patrons in the mid-1940s produced a counter-movement in which African-American performers began developing musical practices based on asserting a conception of jazz as a modernist art form. The emergence of bebop thus stands in Burke's narrative as a critical moment, in which not only jazz style, but the racial discourse and practices on which it relied for meaning, underwent a significant realignment.

The last two chapters of his book explore the many and, again, complicated cross-currents that both divided the bebop musicians and their audiences from their predecessors, and also united them in unexpected ways. Stories of Dizzy Gillespie crossing the street to hear Wild Bill Davison are not just anecdotal but symbolize the larger problem of writing jazz history. As always, Burke wants us to question the assumption that jazz history developed in neat, sequential stages: that different generations of musicians had no interest in one another's music and that changes in jazz style are, by definition, progressive. Through his emphasis, not just on the big stars, but on performers such as Maxine Sullivan, Stuff Smith, Louis Prima, Les Watson, or on Joe Helbrook, the proprietor of the Onyx Club, or Milt Gabler, owner of the Commodore music shop—most of whom figure as footnotes in jazz history—he challenges the reader to see and hear the emergence of a jazz tradition more as a collective process; an endless, noisy and messy argument taking place between artists, audiences, club owners, managers, promoters, record executives, journalists and, after the event, scholars, about what it meant to play and listen to jazz.

The remainder of the analysis reflects on the decline of 52nd Street as a jazz centre and the legacy of this period for rethinking jazz history. In many ways this is the most interesting section of the book. Drawing on various studies of nostalgia, Burke highlights the degree to which the jazz scene on 52nd Street emerged from successive and, often contradictory, attempts by

musicians to recreate a mythic past that might liberate performers from an 'artificial, inauthentic present' dominated by the corporate music industry. For most jazz musicians, 'blackness' consistently symbolized this promise of liberation in that it represented an authentic mode of jazz expression as well as a form of resistance. The paradox of such a narrative is that even as African-American performers contended with the day-to-day realities of making a living as a jazz performer, they also had to negotiate the essentialist stereotypes which determined their reception as artists in the first place. That so many collaborations occurred amongst jazz players from such diverse backgrounds and differing styles amounts in Burke's view to some sort of minor miracle, testimony not just to the tenacity of the performers, to their belief in jazz as a medium for art, but also proof of a history that is 'as dynamic, unpredictable and rich as the music itself' (p. 205).

By shifting his emphasis to the problem of how musicians occupied their working spaces, the interactions of different social groups within an artistic field and the social complexity of any artistic event, Burke opens up our understanding in novel and exciting ways. His description of the founding of the Onyx Club is compelling, especially the analysis of the ongoing tensions between commerce and art as they were mediated through racial (and sexual) assumptions; likewise, his discussion of the changing position of the New Orleans revivalists within a broader shift in the racial dynamics of jazz indicates the richness of race as a category of analysis in this context. The overall result is a nuanced study of how musical interactions on 52nd Street led to new conceptions of race through 'a long process of negotiation in which racial boundaries were sometimes reinforced, sometimes tested, and sometimes rearranged' (p. 205). As such, Burke's fine study reminds us that it is not sufficient to just relate events *as they happened*, but to interpret them; to relate the key events and discourses of jazz history to the assumptions that found and explain them.