

6-1-2008

# This is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture

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## Recommended Citation

Peretti, Burton Dr., "This is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture" (2008). *History Faculty Papers*. Paper 7.  
<http://repository.wcsu.edu/historypaper/7>

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markable achievement and as such deserves a wide readership.

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IAIN ANDERSON. *This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture*. (The Arts and Intellectual Life in Modern America.) Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2007. Pp. 254. \$39.95.

*This Is Our Music* is the title of an album released in 1960 by the Ornette Coleman Quartet. Coleman, an African American alto saxophonist, had endured years of ridicule by musicians and audiences for improvising on a plastic toy instrument, producing rough-edged tones, and using unconventional chord changes. In 1960, though, Coleman became the toast of Manhattan's jazz scene. Sympathetic critics called him the prophet of free jazz, music's "new thing."

Borrowing its title from the album, Iain Anderson's study uses Coleman's story to begin an exploration of free jazz in American culture. Before 1945 jazz was commercially popular, and enthusiastic young critics emerged from the ranks of its fans, but it won little praise from the critical establishment or support from arts organizations. Before World War II jazz signified pride and even social protest to urban African Americans, but whites rarely ascribed social importance to the music. After the war, though, as Anderson shows, sophisticated new styles such as bebop and "cool" jazz inspired more elaborate critical discourse and won followings among the growing population of college students. Critics, especially, likened new jazz innovations to European-style artistic modernism. Waging the Cold War, government officials increasingly viewed jazz as a "secret sonic weapon," a cultural ambassador exhibiting allegedly American traits such as group improvisation and free expression within self-imposed limits. Simultaneously, in the era of colonial independence movements and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), African American musicians considered jazz to be an expression of the struggle for civil rights and economic improvement.

Anderson shows how these conflicting interpretations of 1950s jazz set the stage for Ornette Coleman's popularity and imminent troubles. Coleman was preceded to New York nightclubs by the pianist Cecil Taylor, whose intense performances bristled with classical avant-garde influences and who suffered from critical derision and neglect, and by John Coltrane, whose spiritual odyssey after 1957 caused him to experiment daringly on his saxophone. Coleman's vogue in Manhattan café society suffered a quick demise. Jazz critics at *Down Beat* magazine and elsewhere excoriated free jazz. Like most other black musicians Coleman resented his inferior pay, and in 1962 he began a three-year boycott of club performances. Anderson sees Coleman's ordeal as a prelude to the main 1960s story: "The critical establishment's insensitivity to flaws in the

[music] 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" (p. 7). Successive chapters examine the involvement of musicians such as Taylor, Coltrane, and Charles Mingus and the influential critic Amiri Baraka in the Black Arts movement, the efforts of free jazz advocates to meet the needs and win the support of urban African American audiences, and the ironic dependency of many free jazz musicians after 1970 on grants from public and private endowments and university teaching positions.

Anderson's book benefits from his extensive research into jazz periodicals and archives and government and foundation repositories. The study places free jazz within rich historical contexts. Building upon Penny M. Von Eschen's *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (2004), he provides a nuanced overview of 1950s jazz's cultural import. The chapters on jazz and black nationalism, focusing on the 1960 alternative Newport Jazz Festival (launched by Mingus) and Baraka's activism, cover much the same ground as Scott Saul's *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (2003). Neither Anderson nor Saul covers the late 1960s as fully as they survey the preceding half-decade, and Anderson slights such important locales as Los Angeles and St. Louis. Readers thus should also consult John Litweiler's *The Freedom Principle: Jazz after 1958* (1984), Eckhart Jost's *Free Jazz* (1981), and Clora Bryant et al.'s *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (1998). Anderson's most novel contribution is to explore free jazz's ironic fate within the American tradition of the sacralization of high culture, culminating in the musicians' reception of college and university teaching positions and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and private foundations. Anderson both draws upon Lawrence W. Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988) and defends it from its critics, who argue that American elites failed to empower "high art" and to abase popular culture.

Anderson's interpretation of free jazz is hobbled somewhat by his book's structure. The chapters are relatively disconnected essays on the main subtopics, and the study lacks a conclusion that might make it a comprehensive interpretation of jazz since 1960. Nevertheless, it is difficult to fault Anderson's research and the wide range of his provocative insights. And it is quite appropriate that the book appeared in the same year that Ornette Coleman, at age seventy-seven, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for music.

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Laurie B. Green. *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*. (The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture.) Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2007. Pp. 415. Cloth \$65.00, paper \$24.95.

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