

## Book Review

### ***Jazz Modernism, From Ellington and Armstrong to Matisse and Joyce***

Alfred Appel Jr.  
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#### **Appel, Ellington, and the Modernist Canon**

In *Jazz Modernism*, Alfred Appel Jr. examines what he terms “classic jazz” as a series of modernist texts. He discusses the music of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Billie Holiday, and Charlie Parker in relation to works by Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and James Joyce, among other European high modernists. Appel is clearly engaged in a canon-expanding project. “This book seeks to establish the place of classic jazz (1920-1950)” he writes “in the great modernist tradition in the arts” (7). The book is gorgeous to look at, richly illustrated and well produced. I wish I could like it more than I do!

Throughout *Jazz Modernism*, Appel assumes that the formalist standards used to measure the aesthetic value of canonical European modernist works of art can and should be applied to the work of Armstrong, Ellington, Parker, *et al.* To his credit, Appel supports his thesis with a series of readings of musical performances, compositions, and recordings. He also points out numerous thought-provoking parallels between “classic jazz” and works by European modernists. However, Appel’s arguments expose a major problem with such canon-expanding enterprises: they tend to mask what is aesthetically and culturally distinctive about the works in question. Moreover, Appel’s analysis adopts a set of value-laden aesthetic principles that are themselves cultural constructs replete with numerous assumptions and biases. The following critique focuses largely on Appel’s analysis of Duke Ellington’s music, an analysis that can be viewed as representative of *Jazz Modernism’s* methodological approach in general. My critique also gestures towards an alternative mode of analysis, one that considers the specific social, cultural, and aesthetic orientation(s) of Ellington and his peers as distinct from those of their European high modernist counterparts.

Appel sees the history of jazz as a grand multicultural experiment that is in keeping with what he describes as the multicultural aspects of modernism. However, Appel takes “academic multiculturalists” to task, since they “discourage the idea of jazz as multicultural” (42). “To discover whether a critic or cultural historian is concerned primarily with art or racial politics,” he continues, “see what they say about Bix Beiderbecke’s influence [. . .] the first major white soloist to develop independent of black sources” (42, 48). Appel here presents a rather odd view of multiculturalism and cross-cultural influence for it seems to flow in only one direction. In this view, the great black artists were influenced by white European modernists, yet the first great white jazz musician (who, according to Appel, was a primary influence on several celebrated black musicians including Lester Young and Miles Davis) developed independent of black sources. I cannot help but wonder what Beiderbecke was doing in the south-side Chicago jazz clubs where he reportedly spent as much time as he could if he was not absorbing influences from his African American musical peers. My point here is not to minimize the influence of European musical practices on the development of jazz, but rather to point out the need for such claims to be properly contextualized and to acknowledge that musical influence across racial boundaries has rarely (if ever) flowed in one direction.

Appel’s discussion of primitivism in the arts is similarly problematic. For Appel, primitivism—whether that of Matisse or Josephine Baker—draws on the “Romantic/racial idea of the vitalism of the black person” (37). This may well be true; however, Appel does not address the important issue of *why* white and black artists drew upon the stereotype of black vitalism. Although European artists such as Matisse, Brancusi, and Picasso tended to be enamoured by a primitivist vision of African diasporic cultures, the work of many African American performers, including Josephine Baker’s dance numbers and Duke Ellington’s “jungle music,” should perhaps be understood, at least in part, as a parody of this “Romantic/racial idea.” Appel comes close to such a reading of the European modernists when he claims that they “submitted themselves to the spell of Oceanic and African tribal art” (37). Whether Baker, Ellington and their African American contemporaries were equally enchanted is not addressed.

Appel is aware, however, that the manner in which European artists created “primitive” works differs from that employed by the so-called “primitives” themselves. The production of Africanesque wood sculptures by Brancusi, for example, “was the product of educated, independent, ego-driven ‘red weather’ artistic choice rather than a selfless village artisan’s efforts to meet the religious/ceremonial needs of his tribal community” (37-8). We may well agree that some distinction between the African and the Africanesque is called for, but the distinction Appel presents seems itself to smack of the “Romantic/racial idea of the vitalism of the black person.” Do we know that those who produced African totemic art were artistically uneducated? In what sense are “authentic” African artisans “dependent” and un-compelled by issues of ego? Appel may be correct in situating the difference between the African and the Africanesque partially in the divergent functions of such objects, but he surrounds this claim with numerous others that support—without evidence or interrogation—the notion that “authentic” black persons are like those of the Romantic/racial imagination.

Curiously, Appel goes on to jettison the distinction that he draws between the African and the Africanesque in his account of Brancusi’s creation of a sculpture entitled “King of Kings.” Appel acknowledges that this work, along with many others by Brancusi, is clearly indebted to African sources. However, “King of Kings” is said to have been created “with no self-consciousness” (51).<sup>1</sup> According to Appel, it is the result of Brancusi having “finally internalized it all, ha[ving] become an African, if you will [. . .] a tribe of one, free to improvise a generalized, almost source-proof work that looks thoroughly African” (52). What now of the educated, independent European modernist? Is Brancusi’s creation without self-consciousness meant to deny intentionality, resulting in the pure vitality of the racial black? The claim that a lack of self-consciousness allows Brancusi to improvise suggests that Appel assumes a manifestly false conception of improvisation as an un-premeditated spontaneous phenomenon, a conception which itself feeds into, and is fed by, racial stereotypes of the African as impulsive and unreflexive.

Even if we believe that “King of Kings” looks “thoroughly African,” I am inclined to raise questions about the formalist/structuralist criteria behind such a claim. Is it enough—or even necessary—for a work to look or sound African in order for it to be African? If one fixes artistic genera merely by their formal qualities and ignores all contextual issues, then I suppose the answer is yes. But Appel himself suggests that authentic African art is functional—it serves a purpose. And what precisely had Brancusi internalized? The actual aesthetic ideals and world view that are brought to bear upon the creation of African art works or just a good helping of the Romantic/racial idea of African culture? It is perhaps worth noting that there is evidence to suggest that Brancusi destroyed some of his early Africanesque sculptures because he and others found them to be “too African” (Geist 346). Even more damning is a 1923 publication that reports Brancusi as saying that “Christian primitives and negro savages [!?!] proceeded only by faith and instinct. The modern artist proceeds by instinct guided by reason” (M.M. 17). It is difficult to imagine a statement by a European Modernist that displays more clearly the Romantic/racial (read *racist*) conception of African culture. Clearly, there are many problems with Appel’s championing of Brancusi as an honorary African, even if he was “a tribe of one.”

Appel’s analysis of Duke Ellington similarly relies on numerous flawed assumptions. Appel locates Ellington’s “primitivism” in the assorted mute effects for which Ellington’s brass players were famous (the so-called “jungle” techniques that first came to prominence during Ellington’s tenure at the Cotton Club). Appel describes Ellington’s “jungle” style “as calculated an artistic construct as the self-conscious modernist primitivism of Brancusi...and the Africanesque paintings of Picasso, Derain and Matisse” (204). He goes on to suggest that “the only strange gods they [Ellington and the modernists] jointly serve is the West’s persistent notion that the possibility of a better, elemental, passionate life is passing us by and may exist somewhere else—in art environments like Brancusi’s *Newborn*, perhaps, but not in life” (204). On this view, Ellington and the European modernists protest the same set of circumstances—the dehumanization and alienation brought about by modern society—and they gesture towards an alternative, more elemental or authentic existence. Leaving alone problems of assuming that a work by a highly privileged European modernist sculptor (Brancusi) could offer a utopic vision that is relevant to both European and African American communities, I am inclined to raise several questions that go unanswered (and unasked) in *Jazz Modernism*. Are there no differences between the causes and functions of Ellington’s so-called primitivism when compared to those of European modernists? Might not differences of race and class influence the ways in which creative practitioners conceive of a better life? Is it not crucial to recognize that while the European modernists appealed to a Romantic vision of Africa as a possible site of redemption, many of the hardships that Ellington and his sidemen faced in *this* life were products of that very Romantic/racial idea?

For Appel, the widespread use of quotation is one of the things that connects “classic jazz” to modernism. Earlier in the book, Appel suggests that the use of musical quotation by be-boppers posited “a thoroughly American, pan-racial utopia or alternate universe where it’s all music, there’s room for every sound” (59). He notes that towards the end of his life, Charlie Parker expressed interest in studying with Edgar Varèse, “the French-American composer of aleatory music, whose *Ionisation* (1931) is a sonata for percussion instruments and sirens” (59).<sup>2</sup> Presumably, Varèse saw the equality of all sounds before Parker and the other be-boppers who came late to the modernist table. Appel isn’t interested in what musicians choose to quote or in the ways in which they deploy such musical quotations, since jazz players (being good modernists) quote in order to demonstrate the democratic equality of all sounds. This ignores the rich and well-documented tradition of African American Signifyin(g), a tradition in which careful attention is paid not only to the sources that one signifies upon, but also to the ways in which one signifies.<sup>3</sup>

Take, for instance, Appel’s reading of the Ellington band’s performance of “St. Louis Blues” that capped the famous 1940 concert in Fargo, North Dakota. For all its interest and ingenuity, Appel’s analysis is colored by a liberal optimism that sees a salute to American democracy where contradictory readings are equally possible. Tricky Sam Nanton includes in his solo on “St. Louis Blues” a musical quotation from “Whistle While You Work,” the theme associated with the seven dwarves in the 1938 Disney film *Snow White*. “St. Louis Blues” also includes quotations from Ellington’s own “Black and Tan Fantasy” and George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” before concluding with a rendition of “God Bless America.” According to Appel, this performance (which came on the heels of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s re-election just the day before) is a celebration of “the full democratic potential” (207) of America, an example of jazz multiculturalism in action.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps. But another reading seems equally plausible.

In *Snow White*, the dwarves who “whistle while they work” are portrayed as innocent, irrational, and overly emotional beings. Several of them are even named after emotive states. Their kindness to Snow White is unconditional, flowing directly from their emotional personae. In short, the dwarves are the primitives of the film. One can easily imagine that Walt Disney would have made them black were it not for the fact that the thought of a white woman living with seven melanin-dominant men would have severely offended many white audiences of the time, regardless of the dwarves’ diminutive stature. In this light, Nanton’s statement of the “Whistle While You Work” theme might be seen as a sardonic comment on the stereotype of the happy black servant working for his white master (the audience in Fargo would have been predominantly, if not entirely, white). The conflation of “Black and Tan Fantasy” with Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” in the final section of the piece can be read as a signifyin(g) riff on the appalling state of racial integration and equality in American society: it takes George Gershwin, a white composer, to popularize the blues! In this reading, the reference to “God Bless America” in the final coda can be seen as an example of deep parody, an instance of African American Signifyin(g) *par excellence*. However, as Appel would have it: “‘God Bless America’ proclaimed by African-Americans straight-forwardly, without irony, bespeaks the bracing equanimity shared by Armstrong, Waller, and Ellington” (208). I offer an alternative interpretation of Ellington’s performance of “St. Louis Blues” not to advance it as the correct reading, but rather to demonstrate the range of interpretations that are plausible and to highlight the degree to which Appel defaults to an interpretation which supports his overall Neo-Liberal philosophy.

Appel connects the assorted musical allusions in Ellington’s music to the “‘intertextual’ modernist manner of Eliot, Joyce and Pound, which helps to define ‘Black and Tan Fantasy’ as the first work of black modernism, however academic the designation” (209). Yet Appel, who concedes that many of Ellington’s works have a literary aspect, seems unwilling or unable to attribute cognizance of this to Ellington himself. “[Ellington’s] career-long involvement with language,” Appel goes on to write, “is more interesting than he himself would have realized” (209). It is as if Appel’s Ellington, being a primitive modernist, employs modernist tropes unknowingly, perhaps as a result of pure intuition or emotion.

All of this is part and parcel of Appel’s attempt to read Ellington from within a European aesthetic theory through which modernism can be both articulated and understood. Yet by such standards, Ellington comes out as a second-class citizen (sadly not for the first time—consider, for example, the fiasco surrounding Ellington not being awarded the 1965 Pulitzer prize). Appel goes on to criticize Ellington’s use of actual discursive speech, while championing his brass section’s vocal-inflected mute work, something that Appel equates with the “jungle” style. According to Appel, it is when Ellington does not speak that he is most communicative:

But the shortcomings of Ellington’s verbal narratives for *My People* and the *Second Sacred Concert* (1968) demonstrate that his 1928 instincts were sounder and that bigger is not necessarily better.

The toilet plunger, as vernacular and democratic as an object gets, is the source of the most popular incarnation of avant-garde aleatory music. Ellington's jungle style is Varèse for the people by way of the plumber. (214)

What are we to make of Appel's claim that Ellington's music is aleatoric (aside from the fact that Appel doesn't appear to know what aleatory actually means)? There is nothing random or chance in Ellington's compositions or in the solos of his band members. As far as I know, Cootie Williams was never seen consulting the *I Ching* or tossing dice prior to a solo in order to determine the structure of his music. Appel must know this. However, he chooses to use an appellation drawn from the world of European and Euro-American concert music to describe complex African American musical practices. In so doing, Appel implies, consciously or not, that the sound structures produced by Ellington and band are not intentional—they are the products of chance, accident, and intuition. In other words, the primitive "jungle" musicians make music that is irrational and unintentional; it is only the supremely rational Europeans who create artificial methods to free their music from intentionality. For jungle types—musicians who aren't even aware of the significance of their own utterances—there is no intentionality to begin with! Appel's inability to situate Ellington's music in any context other than that of European modernism forces him to conceive of "jungle" solos—seeing as they are not composed (although this wasn't always true either)—as aleatory. This "Europeanizing" of Ellington prevents us from seeing what is truly distinctive and important about his art.

The problems with Appel's analysis of Duke Ellington run throughout *Jazz Modernism*. Although I admire Appel's attempts to move beyond a narrow sense of disciplinarity and to view jazz in relation to broader aesthetic and historical trends, I ultimately find his analysis and his book to be fundamentally flawed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this passage, Appel also describes a white musician, Benny Goodman, as having transcended non-white influences. According to Appel, Goodman "play[ed] the blues as he felt them, thickening his liquid tone, smearing and slurring notes at will—*his* notes, *his* tone, rather than anything he'd heard on a recording by some Negro player" (51, emphasis in original). Goodman, like Brancusi, is *sui generis*, while black players, we must assume, are basically imitative.

<sup>2</sup> Appel apparently has a different understanding of musical aleatorism than do I, for Varèse most certainly does not qualify, from my perspective, as a composer of "aleatory music" which I take to mean music determined by chance operations.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Signifyin', see Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifyin' Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. For discussions of Signifyin' in relation to music see Floyd, Tomlinson, and Walser. I find it odd that there is no mention of Gates's hugely influential work in Appel given the considerable overlap between their areas of research.

<sup>4</sup> Here again, Appel offers a rather strange view of multiculturalism, equating it with artistic/aesthetic pastiche. I would suggest that the inclusion or representation of multiple cultures is not necessarily "multicultural."

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