

Book Review

Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties

Scott Saul
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In the opening pages of *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't*, Scott Saul presents a detailed reading of Charles Mingus's "Haitian Fight Song" and makes the case that interdisciplinary study of innovative musical practices that emerged from jazz in the post-World War II and Cold War years can have a wide impact in a number of discourses. The dual process of looking at specific musical texts and situating the artistic practices that they represent in a larger social and cultural milieu is the general aim of the book. As Saul states, "hard bop" is "music of cultural burial and cultural awakening" (2). Indeed, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't* is centrally focused on the historical formation of hard bop and the overlapping imperatives of larger social, cultural, and political struggles:

I consider hard bop to be a musical facet of the freedom movement—an extension particularly of the idea of direct action into the realm of structurally improvised music. The hard bop group, with its loose, spontaneous interplay and its firm sense of a collective groove, modeled a dynamic community that was democratic in ways that took exception to the supposedly benign normalcy of 1950s America. (6)

Saul's expansive study draws its name from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, from a sermon delivered by a preacher that uses the rhetorical ideas of "black is" and "black ain't" to problematize assumptions about racial identity. Saul borrows this notion, arguing that "jazz of the 1950s and 1960s was marked by an Ellisonian recognition of both the strength of African-American culture and the futility of race-hardened thinking, and was energized by an Ellisonian desire to marry virtuosity and community involvement" (xiii-xiv).

Saul's project rests within an interdisciplinary discourse which calls upon jazz praxis to help illuminate processes of transformation in African American cultural and racial identity. Two studies that are closely related to Saul's work include Eric Porter's *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* and Frank Kofsky's *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s*. Saul's frequent reference to the genre of hard bop in the historical development of the jazz tradition owes much to David H. Rosenthal's *Hard Bop: Jazz & Black Music 1955-1965*. Saul's title also inevitably places his work in the context of John Litweiler's 1984 book *The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958*, which explores the notion of "freedom" in jazz and casts a wider net than Saul's text does.

Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't is divided into five major sections and, as Saul states in his preface, strives to be two books in one: "a history of one strand of jazz in the decade between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, and a history of its uses" (ix). Part One is titled "A New Intellectual Vernacular" and traces the emergence of the "hipster" figure in jazz. Beginning with a discussion of Oscar Brown, Jr.'s piece "But I Was Cool" that satirizes the 1950s and 60s hipster, Saul takes on a wide historical palette that includes Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie, and Mezz Mezzrow. This section ends with analyses of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Miles Davis's 1949 *Birth of the Cool* recording, which is seen in light of self-determined redefinitions of "cool" that fused various musical tributaries (Lester Young, symphonic arranging and sound palettes, and bebop) with an "upending of racial expectations" (58).

Part Two is titled "Redefining Youth Culture" and is perhaps the strongest section in the book. Saul uses the riot that occurred at the 1960 Newport Jazz Festival as its centerpiece, discussing the role of jazz in the prevailing white youth culture of the United States in the 1950s and 60s and showing how Langston Hughes's poem "Ask Your Mama" questions the racialized context of the festival and the fetishization of black culture and music. By situating the Alternative Newport Jazz Festival—the concurrent 1960 counter-festival organized by Charles Mingus and Max Roach—within this problematic racial environment, Saul shows how jazz musicians were seeking new modes of self-determination and empowerment.

Parts Three and Four focus directly on the eminent careers of Charles Mingus and John Coltrane during the late 1950s and early 1960s and in several places provide interesting and unique perspectives on these often-discussed

innovators. Especially of interest is the study of Mingus's attempts at entrepreneurship and the acrimonious verbal displays that he would aim at his audiences. Detailed readings of several Mingus recordings from 1956 to 1963 help ground this section in specific musical texts. The section on Coltrane, titled "Freedom's Saint," concentrates on the saxophonist's music in the early and mid-1960s and begins with a contextual examination of the symbolic role of Africa in bebop and post-bebop jazz. The vision of Tunisia imagined in Charlie Parker's famous solo break in "A Night in Tunisia" is contrasted with Coltrane's later recording of "Liberia." Saul also introduces what he calls the "New Jazz Criticism," evidenced in the writing of Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) and A.B. Spellman, and outlines the "anti-jazz" argument that became a key criticism against the emergent jazz avant-garde of the period in music magazines like *Down Beat*. The latter chapters in this section use "Afro Blue" and *A Love Supreme* as points of departure for various discussions.

The final section, "In and Out of the Whirlwind," takes on perhaps the widest scope of the book, focusing at first on the evolution of large-scale music festivals modeled after the Newport Jazz Festival and then examining the work of playwright Sam Shepard and poet John Sinclair. The development of these two counterculture literary figures is seen in light of the influence of Mingus and Coltrane. The final chapter of the book, titled "The Road to 'Soul Power': The Many Ends of Hard Bop," touches upon an expansive array of topics, histories, and figures, including Horace Tapscott and the Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension, Jackie McLean, Betty Carter, the development of "soul jazz," the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, discussions of black music in *Liberator* magazine during the 1960s, the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School, the Jazz Composers Guild, Cannonball Adderley and Operation Breadbasket, and several other key developments in African American music and art during the 1960s. Saul proposes that jazz artists "joined jazz to a 'soul' aesthetic in a way that was willfully open-minded, eclectic in its reclamation and reinvention of jazz history—a kind of fusion of postmodernism's playful skepticism with the Black Arts imperative to give the community a liberating image of itself." He goes on to suggest that this final chapter "hints at the repertoire of responses that jazz musicians made to these twin crises—in the market for their music and in the communities that they hoped to rebuild" (304).

Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't makes several contributions to a greater understanding of the ways jazz musicians have challenged prevailing notions of racial identity, artistic expression, and community empowerment. Saul's detailed readings of specific recordings, performances, written texts, and events provide tangible and persuasive examples of the larger themes throughout the book. I am particularly drawn to his interpretation of the riotous 1960 Newport Jazz Festival, which eloquently brings to light the assumption-laden racial politics of that historical moment. The problematics of race and class are central to this discussion and help to unravel common assumptions about jazz, black identity, and the role of audiences in sustaining these assumptions. Saul's study is an indispensable addition to standard jazz histories that strive to understand the heterogeneous and fractured jazz tradition(s) evolving in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the end, however, several questions emerge that are left unanswered. While the term "hard bop" is commonly used to describe directions in jazz that began in the 1950s, I am somewhat skeptical about its absolute value. Its currency has grown since the 1950s as a way of constructing a fixed linear history of jazz and that has become the primary term to signify developments that occurred after bebop. Although its standard usage is widespread, it marginalizes other parallel developments, various continued innovations from earlier periods, and allows little room for the shape-shifting tendencies of its most representative artists. As a genre signification, it is riddled with contradictory examples, confining musical attributes, and, in its hegemonic role of characterizing certain musicians and sounds, seems to counter the notion of "freedom" that bolsters the strongest elements in *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't*.

If we bracket the semantic problem of "hard bop," and the issue of defining jazz for that matter, then the artistic and social practices evidenced in the work of Coltrane and Mingus are representative of larger processes of musical and cultural hybridization, innovation, and broader philosophical stances on the relationship between art and society, between aesthetics and ethics. Indeed, this larger field continually emerges throughout Saul's study, but is often muddied by recourse to narrow visions of jazz as a linear musical and historical phenomenon.

Perhaps a wider and more sustained focus beyond Mingus and Coltrane would help lead to a better understanding of the larger artistic field(s) represented in the intersection of jazz and cultural politics in the 1960s. Opportunities are abundant to move in this direction, especially in the final chapter. For example, Saul's discussion of organizations like the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and the Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension (UGMAA) touches upon oft-neglected histories of African American musical collectivity, but the aims of these groups are confused by statements like this:

Perhaps more than any other jazz collective UGMAA led the way for a jazz that aspired to be singularly community-minded and that would respond to the crisis in the jazz market by declaring independence from its pressures and trading the usual professional ambitions for others. (319-20)

This description of UGMAA accurately illustrates the organization's interest in community-oriented artistic practices, but misunderstands UGMAA as a "jazz collective." In Tapscott's autobiography, *Songs of the Unsung*, the pianist and community activist gives a clear explanation of the initial development of the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, a precursor to UGMAA, articulating a broad vision of black music and culture that extends beyond standard definitions of jazz:

[. . .] we'd play only music by black composers, unknown mostly [. . .]. That's what I had in mind in starting the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra: 'Pan Afrikan,' because the music would be drawn from African people around the world, and 'Arkestra,' building off the word ark and Noah using it to save different parts of the world, as told in the Bible. We would preserve the music on our ark, the mothership, and it will be around for people to listen to and enjoy. We would preserve all this music, show the differences within it, and even go into the small details, as educators and scholars would do. (83)

Taken as a whole, UGMAA, AACM, Black Artists Group, Jazz Composers Guild, Collective Black Artists, and other African American collectives that emerged in the 1960s and early 70s specifically challenged the assumption that black musical identity was synonymous with a narrowly defined vision of jazz—a vision that was intimately bound to the recording industry and to the commodification of black music. Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Coltrane's music after 1964, Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, and many other examples associated with the "new black music" (to borrow from Amiri Baraka) similarly demonstrate a strategic reconceptualization of African American musical identity, even if they were rooted in a broadly defined tradition of jazz and blues. Their musical, social, and political aims represent "freedom from" restrictive linear historical narratives about jazz.

Nonetheless, Saul's book makes a valuable contribution to a more detailed understanding of the music of Mingus, Coltrane, and other African American artists that sought new modes of expression and social engagement. *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't* will surely become a key companion to standard histories of jazz in the 1950s and 60s, helping to explain the relationship between musical practices and social, cultural, and political ambitions during a particularly tumultuous time in the history of the United States and the development of improvised music.

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