Toward Jazz’s “Official” History: The Debates and Discourses of Jazz History Textbooks

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Abstract

In the late 1970s, jazz studies in American higher education had grown to the point that jazz history courses were becoming an increasingly important part of the curriculum. This article critically examines the emergence of textbooks intended to meet the needs of jazz history teachers, from the late 1970s to the present. Of particular importance is the manner in which such works position themselves in relation to the prevailing canonical frameworks of jazz history, which was largely the result of the pioneering historical work of Marshall Stearns in the 1950s. I suggest that authors of textbooks have positioned themselves in relation to the canons of jazz history in various ways. While almost every text ultimately presents a canonically-based narrative, authors frequently express varying degrees of unease with those same frameworks. The result is a body of work which simultaneously reflects an attraction to and repulsion from the canon. Of central importance in this article will be an assessment of major jazz history texts published over the course of the last three decades, beginning with Frank Tirro’s Jazz: A History, and ending with the recently published Jazz by Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins. These texts are examined both with respect to their own individual narratives and structures, as well as their reception within the scholarly community.

Author Biography

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Kenneth E. Prouty is an Assistant Professor of musicology and jazz studies in the College of Music at Michigan State University. He holds a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from the University of Pittsburgh, and an M.M. in jazz studies from the University of North Texas. His forthcoming book from the University Press of Mississippi is entitled Knowing Jazz: Canon, Pedagogy and Community in the Information Age.
Throughout its history, jazz has straddled the worlds of popular music and art music, and it has expanded to a point where its styles are so varied that one artist may sound completely unrelated to another. First performed in bars, jazz can now be heard in clubs, concert halls, universities, and large festivals all over the world. The Birth of Jazz. New Orleans, Louisiana, around the turn of the 20th century was a melting pot of cultures. A major port city, people from all over the world come together there, and as a result, musicians are exposed to a variety of music. European classical music

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