

A. Linsenmann u.a. (Hrsg.): Hobsbawm, Newton und Jazz

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Titel

Hobsbawm, Newton und Jazz. Zum Verhältnis von Musik und Geschichtsschreibung

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This volume is the fruit of a project initiated by scholars from the Musicology and History departments at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz.[1] It assembles a range of academics from each discipline and contributes to a growing academic interest in the links between music and history that is concerned with more than simply writing the history of a particular musical genre, or glossing the artistic output of a particular composer, but rather is interested in bringing social and cultural history into closer proximity to music, or in using music as a more fruitful historical source. The volume does this by returning to the jazz writings of the iconic British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012), who published an important text, *The Jazz Scene*, in 1959 under the pseudonym Francis Newton; a text that he revised several times and which was republished and translated into the 1990s. Hobsbawm's death in 2012 offered the impetus to re-examine his jazz work. One of the key chapters in *The Jazz Scene* relates to jazz as a site of social protest. In returning to Hobsbawm and his book, the volume's contributors not only plumb the continuing validity of his findings and his approach, including towards the nexus between jazz and protest; they also evaluate his texts as those of an important *Zeitzeuge*, and examine his overall contributions to jazz historiography and cultural history.

The editors set the scene by providing succinct overviews of Hobsbawm's activities as a jazz critic and writer and of *The Jazz Scene* and its publication history. They delineate how musicology considered itself, from the beginning, to be a discipline concerned with music history, but outline how that discipline has sometimes had trouble drawing adequately from social and cultural history, an area where *The Jazz Scene*

was a pioneering achievement, albeit one received primarily within the jazz world, rather than in academic history. From another perspective, they point out how historians have been slow to draw on music in fully adequate ways. The co-editors end by offering several sites at which Hobsbawm's writings prefigured more recent historiographical interest in music and subcultures, including in his use of the key term "scene."

Peter Burke was an important voice to identify the (overlooked) significance of Hobsbawm's book to cultural history. His own short contribution to the present volume takes as its starting point Hobsbawm's widely-debated use of a pseudonym (not publically removed until the 1970s) and Burke elaborates on the ways Hobsbawm's other key historiographical works developed (or not) themes that "Newton's" book also did, concluding that there is an inner consistency between *The Jazz Scene* and Hobsbawm's wider oeuvre. Anton Pelinka is a critic of Hobsbawm's, and he is concerned with the latter's continued faith in the October revolution and the selectivity that his analyses therefore exhibited. Pelinka asks how it was that Hobsbawm could be a Marxist and at the same time be attracted to a quintessentially American art form, finding the answer in Hobsbawm's attraction to the idea of the social rebel (jazz as protest), and his distance from both the "vulgar" Anti-Americanism (and anti-Jazzism) that many a Marxist displayed in the 1950s, as well as from the *Bildungsbürger* habitus that underlay Adorno's well-known rejection of jazz, for example.

Viola Rühse's excellent contribution develops the theme of "Hobsbawm contra Adorno" by conducting a very useful and thorough comparative analysis of both men's jazz writings, and an examination of Hobsbawm's recently released MI5 files. Rühse offers a compelling reason why Hobsbawm was so late to publically engage with Adorno's ideas, essentially showing how his inductive social-historical reflections were more democratically oriented and driven by a "humanist optimism" ("humanistische[r] Optimismus") that was closer to the Walter Benjamin position on popular culture than Adorno's more anxious socio-psychological approach (p. 105). Jazz scholar Wolfram Knauer surveys different stages in the developments in jazz in the United States, taking care to delineate the fluctuating links between the music and the socio-political context of the day, identifying for example how and why jazz, today, is far less embedded in political and aesthetic protest than it was during the 1950s and 1960s, when Hobsbawm was most active as a writer on jazz topics. In passing, Knauer also reminds us that Hobsbawm was not alone in the approach he took. Knauer usefully places Hobsbawm amongst his predecessors and peers in jazz writing, that is next to social history-informed writers from Charles Edward Smith and Frederic Ramsey Jr through to Sidney Finkelstein and Marshall Stearns. In his chapter, Martin Niederauer advances the motif of Hobsbawm as a "reflective fan." Niederauer elaborates on Hobsbawm's insights on jazz as a site for freedom, in a socio-political sense, showing how the reflective fan did not completely idealize jazz's potential; how he perceptively elaborated jazz's subversiveness but was also open to how it could co-exist with aspects like exoticism, where hegemony continued to operate. Niederauer identifies that Hobsbawm paid relatively little attention to musical aesthetics however, and he therefore updates him by proffering an analysis of how the group interactions in jazz improvisation suggest freedom in a different sense.

Jazz writer Christian Broecking also gives an update to Hobsbawm by profiling a series of interviews he conducted as a journalist between 1992 and 2007 amongst African-American musicians, where he was particularly interested in the impact upon the African-American jazz scene of the trumpeter and jazz figurehead Wynton Marsalis, who established a neo-traditionalist conception of jazz via "Jazz at the Lincoln Centre." Broecking reveals a current-day heterogeneity of attitudes towards politics and protest amongst the scene, including amongst those from the avant-garde, where political intent was often strongly present in the past. In doing so, Broecking picks up some of Hobsbawm's later (1989) comments, where he discussed the breakdown of some of the networks within the jazz community that he had discerned in his first edition of *The Jazz Scene*. Finally the Swiss historian and musician Daniel Schläppi rounds out the suite of scholars who are interested in updating (or what he calls "reloading") Hobsbawm, while also identifying his blind spots of one sort or another. Schläppi's extensive contribution – at fifty pages it is a full quarter of the book – is at risk of collapsing under the weight of its footnotes, but it offers a series of highly critical sidelights on to a present-day European jazz scene in which the notion of protest is no longer operative. (In fact, Schläppi disputes that it ever was as prominent as some have imagined.) Instead, he delineates how the scene is driven by an academicisation, embourgeoisment and proliferation of actors and institutions, in which a large number of emerging artists battle through, often to the point of self-exploitation. In this setting, the community that Hobsbawm had once identified in jazz has taken on quite a different complexion.

Overall, the contributions to *Hobsbawm, Newton und Jazz* not only explicate Hobsbawm's jazz writings in personal and societal contexts, they also reveal the validity of his early approach to a particular music scene. As several of the chapters identify, one can see "Francis Newton" as an important contributor to cultural and social history, and as a predecessor of the interdisciplinary New Jazz Studies. In this book, he is now being given his due. Whilst Hobsbawm's conclusions about jazz as protest may no longer hold to the extent that they did when first formulated, his approach and the questions that he asked, remain fruitful ones.

Note:

[1] See also the conference report by Andreas Linsenmann, in: H-Soz-Kult, 17 May 2014, <http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-5373> (29 April 2017).

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