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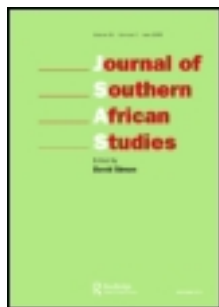
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Thinking in Jazz

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Book Review

Thinking in Jazz

C.A. Muller and S.B. Benjamin, *Musical Echoes: South African Women Thinking in Jazz* (Durham, NC and London, Duke University Press, 2011), xxi + 348 pp., \$25.95 paperback, ISBN 978-0-8223-4914-3.

Born in Johannesburg in 1936, jazz singer and composer Sathima Bea Benjamin has been based in New York since the 1970s. Although she owns a record label and has performed and recorded a dozen albums with leading American and South African jazz artists, including Duke Ellington and her husband Abdullah Ibrahim, she remains relatively unknown outside a small circle of jazz cognoscenti. *Musical Echoes* begins to address this unfortunate situation by chronicling Benjamin's extraordinary life, and exploring the pertinence of her stories to larger scholarly discussions about race, gender, exile, and jazz historiography.

Muller is the primary author. She addresses the book's biographical and empirical project in five 'call' sections that introduce chapters two to seven. The first call – 'Recollecting a Musical Past' (pp. 11–33) – details the domestic and socio-cultural circumstances that shaped Benjamin's early personal and musical development. The reader learns of Benjamin's Anglophone upbringing as 'St Helenian Coloured', her secret teenage fascination with the popular songs that aired on LM Radio, and the boisterous conviviality of Cape Town's Coloured movie theatres in the 1950s. The 'response' section that follows then frames Benjamin's story in terms of recent South African scholarship on Coloured identities and interracial entanglement.

The second call – 'Cape Jazz' (pp. 53–95) – provides vivid descriptions of Cape Town's jazz and popular music scenes in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and considers Benjamin's participation in these vibrant, cosmopolitan spaces. At once biographic, ethnographic and historical, the writing deftly evokes both the increasing pervasiveness of state repression and the artistic creativity that managed to survive despite its suffocating effects. The ensuing 'response' (pp. 95–127) develops notions of 'musical lineage' in order to theorize Benjamin's and other Cape musicians' affinity for the music of African-American jazz artists. To me, the argument here felt forced, and I think that Gayatri Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism' might have furnished a more convincing theoretical explanation for Benjamin's deep identification with the music of Billie Holiday and Duke Ellington, rather than concepts of musical lineage.

Chapter four (pp. 128–88) describes and then theorises Benjamin's and Ibrahim's experiences of the 'new African Diaspora' between the early 1960s and the mid-1970s by tracking the couple's sojourns in Switzerland, Denmark, England, the United States, and South Africa during that time. For Muller, 'the new African diaspora articulates a more recent, often modern, urbanized, cosmopolitan past that is continually animated in the present, rather than the less specific forms of "cultural memory" or signs of precolonial musical style valued as sacred in some contemporary African American communities and scholarship' (p. 187).

Chapters five through seven afford the reader increased closeness to 'the texture and feel of Sathima's own creative process, musicality and aesthetic sensibility' (p. 189) by featuring Benjamin's voice much more than in the earlier chapters. Benjamin's utterances contain some fascinating contradictions, but Muller does not contextualise or interrogate these, and I missed the reflexivity that pervaded the first half of the book. Benjamin's comments on her song about Winnie Mandela (p. 204) are a case in point:

Compositionally, the 'Song for Winnie' just arrested me. It woke me up from my sleep and I had to call Don Sickler, the jazz arranger and trumpeter, and say, 'Please write this down'. Then I had to get [bass player] Buster [Williams]. I just had this song for Winnie. I didn't have the first part... so I went and did that other part. I had Buster Williams write it down. Recently he said to me,

‘I wrote that song’ and I said, ‘Are you crazy, Buster? Sing it to me.’ And he couldn’t. ‘You didn’t write it, but you did help me. You wrote it down Buster.’

Because Benjamin is not formally trained in music and because she refuses to work with female musicians (pp. 229–30) her creativity depends on male mediation for its expression. However, this contradiction is left hanging and is not explored further. More troublingly – for a chapter that strives to express a gynocentric alternative to Berliner’s¹ ‘monumental’ (p. 217) but androcentric account of jazz performance and composition – Benjamin’s comments often echo patriarchal stereotypes, and sometimes even reflect a rather patronising attitude towards her musical collaborators (p. 237):

The point is I am working with three men, and I am letting them touch their feminine side, and they do it in spite of themselves. Men are just naturally macho, and I say I am the one who has to stand out in front, you are behind me; you are going to embrace this song just like I do.

Despite such ‘out-of-tune’ moments, the book remains a vital intervention in the fields of South African music studies and jazz studies. Jazz is overwhelmingly represented as male and American, and Muller and Benjamin’s carefully researched and beautifully written account of female and South African experiences of jazz represents a vital corrective.

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1 P. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1994).