

Book Review

Charles B. Hersch, *Jews and Jazz Improvising Ethnicity*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

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In *Jews and Jazz*, Charles Hersch has written an informative and penetrating history of Jews in American jazz music, which should become a first stop for those wishing to have some understanding of the complicated subject. Indeed, nearly everything about the history of Jews and jazz music is difficult to categorize, analyze, or even begin to parse. For instance, take the following wonderful moment from Hersch's book, in which the great stride pianist Willie "The Lion" Smith, an African-American, starts an enthusiastic conversation with bandleader Artie Shaw about Judaism. Although Shaw was a white Ashkenazi Jew, through most of his career he hid his ancestry, and so in this instance he also did not to reveal it to Smith. Smith, on the other hand, spoke forcefully about his own Jewish religious faith and practices, including his own bar mitzvah at age thirteen. Even his nickname "The Lion" trumpeted the people of Judah.

So who in this situation should be considered a Jew? Whose music should be considered a "Jewish" contribution to jazz? Either, both, or neither? These are not trivial questions. Upon just scratching the surface for answers, one is immediately confronted with the problematic – yet normative – category of race. Straight away, one sees that the only means of authenticating Artie Shaw as Jewish, and Willie "The Lion" Smith as not Jewish, would be through racial criteria. In every respect except the racial one, Smith seems to have been the Jew in this remarkable conversation, and Shaw perhaps only marginally so. Later in his life Smith would serve as cantor in a Black Jewish synagogue in New York.

In an unfortunate turn, Hersch's strict adherence to the normative racial categories in defining Jewry leads him to exclude Willie "The Lion" Smith from the status of Jewish jazz musician. Rather Hersch chooses to discuss the career of Smith mostly in a chapter about the African-American appropriation of Jewish songs and themes, as though Smith had not been a Jew. If not for his race, would Smith's Jewish authenticity have been dismissed? One can't help but think the problem lies not with Smith or other Jews of color, but with an analysis that utilizes race as a defining factor in determining the members of Jewry.

Virtually the same problem also plagues the history of jazz. Defining racial conceits also skew jazz history, especially when the normative criterion of race determines who performs jazz "authentically" (Black people) and who performs by imitation and appropriation (white Jews and others). Therefore, in the very same exchange between Smith and Shaw (to my mind, the both of them equally American Jews as they were both equally jazz musicians) we can glimpse once again the normative and deeply problematic race assumptions at work, both as they exclude Shaw from playing authentic jazz, and Smith from being an authentic Jew.

Basic racial assumptions surrounding identity complicate the telling of nearly every facet of the jazz story, which Hersch tries admirably to untangle in his study. Nevertheless, by utilizing the normative racial borders defining both Jewry and jazz (authentic Jews are white; authentic jazz musicians are Black), Hersch ends up sometimes repeating the common racial narratives he sets out to question. For instance, what he calls “the affinity narrative” (that Jews felt a special affinity for African-Americans and their cultural forms due to shared experiences of oppression) and “the exploitation narrative” (that Jews involved in the music industry routinely exploited African-American musicians and their music with little care about either) are commonplace assumptions of the oral histories as well as the professional historiography, and Hersch is right to seek to dislodge them, if not to totally discredit them in all cases. Both narratives, however, are utterly shot through with racial assumptions about who is real Jew and who an authentic jazz musician – which is to say, who is stealing from whom. Perhaps in questioning these very basic racial assumptions about both Jewry and jazz music, Hersch’s other troubling narratives about authenticity and appropriation might be clarified as well.

Racial assumptions about who gets to play jazz “authentically” muddies the history of jazz especially as it pertains to white Jewish practitioners. White Ashkenazic Jews such as George Gershwin and Benny Goodman, who in any telling must be considered founders of American jazz, are not permitted to play jazz music as themselves, but are required to forgo their Jewish heritage to broach the music “authentically.” Amazingly, that troublesome storyline of Jewish appropriation of jazz, and the necessary “giving up” of Jewish identity in the process, is nearly as old as jazz itself. Already in the early 1920s, white Jews had begun to consider jazz an “essentially” African-American art – even as white Jews from the first had contributed mightily to that art as players, composers, producers, and distributors. In great public expressions of this strange Jewish self-exclusion (such as the famous plot of *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson of 1927) white Jews told themselves that they could only be admirers and perhaps incompetent imitators of jazz so long as they remained Jews. Jazz was “American” music, specifically African-American music. It certainly was not *Jewish* music – no matter how many white Jews were involved in its composition and playing.

This contortion of self-exclusion was canonized by Gershwin himself when he reconfigured his final masterpiece. Initially he wished an adaptation of *The Dybbuk* (a Yiddish play by S. Ansky) to be the vehicle for the first jazz opera, but something persuaded him to change the subject to African Americans of South Carolina in what became *Porgy and Bess* (1935). Why did Gershwin and much of his generation finally decide that white Jews could only participate in jazz insofar as they portrayed it as the music of a people other than themselves? What a strange and counterfactual conceit. Looking over the enormous roster of white Jews in both the art and industry of jazz, nothing could have been further from the truth.

Some white Jewish musicians felt this imperative to be “other than themselves” so strongly that they proposed they had actually undergone conversions to Blackness. This is famously the strange case of clarinetist and saxophonist Mezz Mezzrow, a white Ashkenazic Jew who finally declared himself Black. Norman Mailer most certainly had Mezzrow in mind when he coined the term “The White Negro.” The Mezzrow episode is brilliantly discussed by Hirsch. Hirsch describes several other similar and fascinating cases of which I was not aware. His

strong description of this profound and improbable self-identification of white Jews with African Americans (well beyond any position of mere “affinity”) is a real strength of the book, even if Hersch does not acknowledge the problematic normative racial categories that made such strange identity contortions and self-exclusions necessary in the first place.

The book is organized chronologically and by theme into three parts. Part I, “Becoming American”, discusses the roots of jazz composition as it emerged from some of the Jewish songwriters of Tin Pan Alley and vaudeville, most notably from George Gershwin. In those very early years, composers wrote “ethnic” songs for ethnic stage characters to perform, including Jewish, Italian, Irish, and also Black characters. Gershwin’s first hit, for instance, was “Swanee” of 1919, written for Al Jolson’s minstrel character Gus. Shortly thereafter came the Swing Era, with no shortage of white Jewish bandleaders, including Benny Goodman, who had the most popular band in America throughout the 1930s (and who also integrated the music industry). By the 1940s many white Jews had entered the recording business in all levels of art and administration. A good deal of Hirsch’s discussion of this phenomenon is made to temper what he calls the “exploitation narrative,” and given the number of jazz labels run by Jews that provided essential production and distribution services for artists of all colors (often explicitly for the purpose of promoting civil rights), he is right to salvage this part of the history from the exploitation view still shared by so many. (Hersch spends some time discussing Winton Marsalis’s recent statement that the jazz business is dominated by “people who read the Torah and stuff”).

Part II, “Becoming Black”, discusses the fascinating cases of white Jews who either attempted to “pass” as Black, including Mezz Mezzrow, Red Rodney, and Roz Cron, or those who simply aped “African American” linguistic tropes and mannerisms, such as jazz disc jockey “Symphony Sid” Torin. This part also includes those African-American artists who crossed over the identity line in the other direction, taking on “Jewish” music and mannerisms as part of their acts and behaviors. Part III, “Becoming Jewish”, is a single chapter regarding the recent revival of Jewish identity in jazz music, as more performers have carved spaces within jazz to include both Jewish music and Jewish identity. That important innovation has been a long time in coming. Unfortunately, judging by the very categories of race and appropriation that still preside over the telling of the story of jazz, the fairly recent insertion of Jewish identity into jazz history cannot be considered an entirely successful campaign. Similar racial prejudices also continue to pervade and delimit the historiography of world Jewry, to the exclusion of Jews of color such as Willie “The Lion” Smith.

Perhaps the greatest lesson offered by the jazz musician is in the attitude toward mistakes. When an error occurs on the bandstand, a great jazz improviser finds the groove and keeps moving forward. With Hersch’s important book, we can better see some of the problematic racial ideas that have distorted both the histories of jazz and of Jews. With those mistakes recognized, perhaps we can find the groove and move forward together.