

THE INAUDIBLE MUSIC: Jazz, Gender and Australian Modernity, by Bruce Johnson. Foreword by Simon Frith. Published by Currency Press, New South Wales, 2000. ISBN 086819 601 0, 244 pp.

Reviewed by Adam Havas*

The *Inaudible Music* is one of the books whose subject matter is so complex and so rich with social connotations that it offers the reader the opportunity of grasping broader social and cultural processes through the prism of the cultural practice announced in the ambitious title.

Johnson's work also tells a lot about the contemporary strength of Australian scholarship, as one of its most important aims is to lodge Australian jazz and popular culture scholarship into the center of international scientific discourses dominated by European and North American voices. In doing so, the author undertakes the challenge of telling the narrative of Australian modernity through the lenses of this modern cultural practice *par excellence* that bears the gendered emancipatory tendencies of modernity, which "more durably than any other music, jazz reflected the complex dynamics of the history of mass mediations of the 20th century".

Johnson claims that the development of the most important popular music of the 20th century is strongly interrelated with social, cultural and technological processes as outlined through the seven chapters of the book. Therefore his work is not to be read as a narrative history of Australian jazz, but as a careful selection of case studies that examine certain aspects of the relationship between jazz music and Australian modernity.

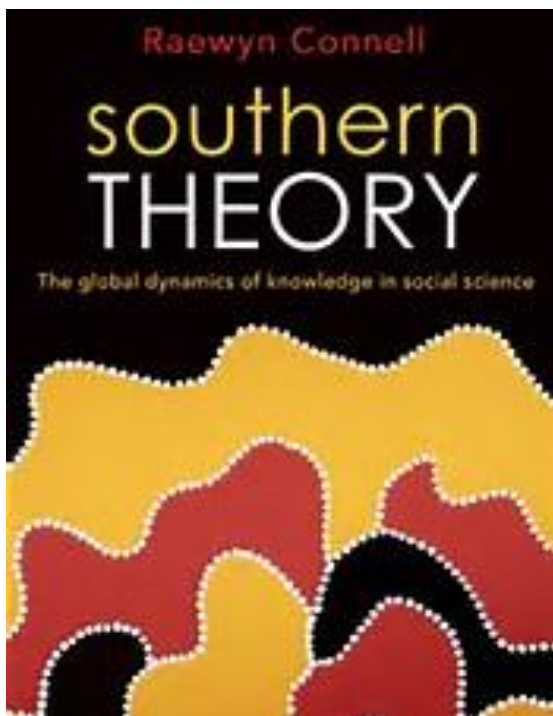
The author is not alone with his attempt in the Australian scholarly arena. The sociologist Raewyn Connell sets herself the objective of placing Australian sociology within the global canon by presenting the same discourse of modernity as leading Western scholars, but using examples of Australian scholarship instead of working from the European founding fathers and their legacy. Her book, *Southern Theory* (2007) for example, criticizes the "Northern bias" of mainstream social science and the colonial structures of knowledge. I find this parallel important in understanding

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The Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell has set herself the objective of placing Australian sociology within the global canon...

Johnson's project, as one of its desirable effects would be giving the deserved attention and status to "inaudible" (Australian) jazz music and to strengthen the academic legitimacy of scholarship on such a "marginal" topic.



The cover of Raewyn Connell's 2007 book Southern Theory...

At the very beginning, Johnson allows the readers to gain an insight into his research alchemy in his attempt at grasping Australian modernity through the "hidden" narrative of jazz, whose genesis is embedded within the power-relations of the period under study, from the end of WWI until the late 1950s. From this perspective, the author takes the kind of metahistorical position which is also emphasized in De Veaux's seminal article *The construction of Jazz Tradition: the jazz historiography* in which the essentialist, linear narrative of jazz (scholarship) is challenged by

pointing out that the construction of jazz history involves struggles for sole ownership of the 'legitimate' narrative. By metahistorical in this case, I refer to a self-reflexive scientific approach which consciously takes into account the forces underlying the creation of the canon, as does Johnson. Through the chapters which I shall briefly review, Johnson deconstructs the heteronormative, masculinist and conservative institutionally 'consecrated' cultural canon created by agents who are often unreflective of the position they occupy in the field of cultural production, to use Bourdieu's terms.

The reader's progress through the chapters is interspersed with brief "breaks" where Johnson, as a jazz musician himself, talks in a personal tone of ethnographic sensitivity and literary quality about reflections on "behind the scenes" interview situations and performance experiences. These ethnographic thick descriptions of the subtleties of musical and scientific practices make the "material" more vivid and counterbalances the style of scientific inquiry carried out along the chapters.



The author Bruce Johnson, a jazz musician himself: "behind the scenes" interview situations and performance experiences...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

The first two chapters, "Jazz and Modernity in Australia" and "Modernity and Modernism" are well defined units in which Johnson provides the historical contextualization of his topic. The first chapter summarizes the cornerstones of the development of Australian jazz and describes the cultural political climate by which it was framed. This functions as a road map on which to situate areas explored more in detail throughout the subsequent chapters. It is argued that the development of jazz in Australia cannot be understood by "imagining a passive reflection" of the story of jazz in the USA. Rather, it incorporates the characteristics of the country's social-cultural features and the structure of the field of music production dominated by Anglo-Celtic traditions and conservative, overwhelmingly masculine institutional

structures. The feminization of popular cultural practices can be understood in the cultural/political context of the era too, as music production was “controlled by conservative imperial minded anti-modern patriarchy”. The integration of jazz into Australian culture involved struggles with the orthodoxy of cultural institutions and the competition of other local non-jazz musicians. The emancipation of jazz was part of a larger structural change in Australia’s popular music: the cultural reorientation from England to the USA.



Pierre Bourdieu: the institutionalization of anomy...

Studying the emancipation of jazz in this period of early modernity is crucial because the institutional positions and aesthetic trends emerging at that time defined the framework of the repertoire of possibilities for contemporary jazz musicians. In Johnson’s words: “the whole apparatus of production, distribution and consumption which still dominates Australian jazz today is a legacy of these circumstances”. With the creation of journals and institutions, emerges what Bourdieu calls the institutionalization of anomy, the permanent symbolic struggle for the imposition and monopoly of the legitimate definition of jazz, or again, as Johnson puts it: “the politics as well as the sound of jazz in post-war Australia were largely shaped by debates over what the word meant and who owned that image”.

Chapter 3, “Jazz, Mass Culture and Gender in Australia” further discusses the relation between the emancipation of popular music and the existing cultural hierarchy. The focus is shifted towards the cultural meanings of fundamental oppositions characterizing the field, such as the creation and significance of the dance hall as opposed to the concert hall and the – by now outdated – low-high art dichotomy. By concentrating on the role of women in the historical development of Australian jazz, Johnson counterbalances the effects of the subsequent masculinization of jazz: writing women out from the cultural canon. The chapter ends with the thick description of earliest surviving movie footage of Australian jazz. In the movie *Greenhide* the character of Margery becomes the metaphor of modern women entering into spaces hitherto exclusive to males.

In Chapter 4 “The Microphone” the distinction between art music and popular music is explored by studying the influence of the mike on performance practices both live and recorded. The use of electric amplification is related to the appearance of permanent – in most cases women – vocalists in the ‘30s. By analyzing the cultural meanings attached to the microphone (“inferior”, “vocal impotence” “inadequate”) Johnson concludes that its use feminized music and made possible the diffusion of

new vocal techniques such as the “speech-like voice production” which went against the dominant vocal aesthetics of that time.

The fifth chapter “Barbara James and Microphone Singing” tells the story of musical modernism through an illustrative career path which allows the reader to understand more in depth the puzzling aspects of 20th century music influencing the articulation of modernity through popular song. Popular and jazz music performances in which women were active signified the breakout from the salon, the domestic places to which the gender politics of the conservative, masculinist and ideological state apparatus had consigned them. The analysis of nine recordings of James from 1933 to the late 1950s shows empirical evidence for lowering her working register which resulted in serious changes in voice quality.

Johnson continues to apply the relational approach when outlining Barbara James’ position in the structure of the field of popular music. Compared to more conventional vocalizing represented by Trocadero singer Llewellyn, one really understands the oppositions between progressive and traditional, a dichotomy that manifested itself in the popular music art world. The chapter concludes that in the 30s and 40s women were primary channels for the infiltration of Anglo – American musical culture.

Chapter 6 “Australian Jazz Abroad” places Australian jazz in the global landscape by taking stock of its contribution at an international level. The author provides a detailed list of Australian jazz musicians who were active internationally, playing with the greatest US musicians or functioning as supporting personnel, teachers (Clarrie Collins) or arrangers (Julian Lee). It is especially interesting for an Eastern-European social scientist such as myself how Johnson relates the effect of Australian jazz in the postwar Czechoslovakia, where the Graeme Bell band “virtually started the jazz movement”. This is a crucial point of the book as Australian jazz appears with a level of cultural authority that influences both national and local levels outside Australia. “The father of the Czech jazz movement” shows an interesting contrast to the Hungarian case, being also the member of the socialist bloc where the role models were/are mostly North American mainstream jazz musicians.



The Australian jazz musician Graeme Bell: the father of the Czech jazz movement...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ REAL BOOK...

The conclusion contains comments and reflections on the place of jazz in Australian culture and also throws light on the role of funding by bringing data of Johnson's earlier analysis of the Australia Council. Based on the distribution of money which is a good measure of official recognition, Johnson concludes that jazz is relatively neglected, its small share of arts funding incommensurate with its cultural significance.

Such an ambitious title of a book that is less than three hundred pages leaves space for arguments of course. However, instead of entering into criticism regarding the lack of in-depth-analysis of some topics touched but not scrutinized by the author, I would like to remark why it is relevant from a "field analysis" viewpoint. The cultural distinctions and symbolic struggles inscribed in the development of Australian jazz provide interesting empirical material for analyzing the dynamics of canon-construction from a "field-perspective". The conscious use of the theoretical apparatus of Pierre Bourdieu's field theory in my view would be an exciting addition to the scholarly literature on the historical genesis and structure of the jazz art world.