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# Adorno, Jazz, and the Aesthetics of Popular Music

Theodore A. Gracyk

When academics analyze popular art, they usually subsume it under the rubric of “popular culture.” Unfortunately, this approach assumes that “aesthetics is naked cultural hegemony, and popular discrimination properly rejects it.”<sup>1</sup> Although it is accepted that jazz is particularly rich as a mass-culture artform, its status as popular music—something distinct from the Western tradition of “serious” composed music—taints it as distinctly less valuable. In an attempt to undercut this prevailing disregard for the aesthetic value of popular music, I shall focus on the special case of jazz as treated in the seminal writings of Theodor W. Adorno. His theories have supported the tendency to approach popular art in terms of a sociological critique that downplays its aesthetic dimension; I will argue that Adorno’s writings actually support the appraisal of jazz (and, by extension, other popular music) on its own terms.

## I

A pivotal figure in the Frankfurt School, Adorno’s sustained *Kulturkritik* of popular music proposes that social context, including both the means of production and of access to music, is the major factor determining both the music’s import and the audience’s response.<sup>2</sup> He illustrates his position with frequent, sustained analyses of jazz as the exemplar of all popular music. Although his jargon and style pose formidable difficulties, his views highlight the assumptions that denigrate the aesthetic value of jazz and other types of popular music.

Adorno wrote frequently on jazz. He formulated many of his views in the 1930s and restated many of them in his later writings, particularly the *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*.<sup>3</sup> Over time, his analysis of popular music, including jazz, gained theoretical support from his comparison of Schoenberg and Stravinsky in the *Philosophy of*

*Modern Music* (1948).<sup>4</sup> Surveying his scattered writings on music and art, I find that Adorno critiques jazz on two distinct levels, one local (criticisms generated by specific cases) and one global (criticisms arising from his general aesthetic theory). Both are required to support his contention that jazz is always “bad,” even if some of it is “good bad music.” By exploring the relationship between the two levels, we are in a position to appreciate their problematic connection in Adorno’s thought. Ironically, his theory contains features that suggest that jazz is a distinct art, as “true” as the music of the Schoenberg school.

From the outset, readers should note Adorno’s frequently unconventional and ambiguous use of the term “jazz.” If we go into any record store, we will find the merchandise divided into several categories, popular hits in one place, classical music in another, and jazz in yet another. (Radio programming is similarly segmented, as Adorno notes.) There may be further distinctions, but imagine our surprise if Miles Davis were filed in the same section as Debussy, and Charlie Parker with Puccini. Adorno rejects such a grouping of jazz and classical, but not because jazz deserves its very own category. For Adorno, Davis and Parker belong with all the *other* “jazz.” In other words, Miles Davis should be filed alongside Mac Davis, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Danny Davis & The Nashville Brass. Charlie Parker belongs beside the British rocker Graham Parker in the popular, or “light,” music section. Better yet, none of the above should be sold in the same store as Beethoven because this sort of merchandising only creates the illusion that, as music, it is all just different types of the same thing, reducing Beethoven to the same vulgar level.<sup>5</sup>

Adorno challenges the accepted view that jazz is stylistically distinct from and is aesthetically superior to other entertainment music and popular culture. Adorno thinks that approval of jazz reflects a false consciousness created by the “totalitarianism” of a profit-oriented “culture industry.” To emphasize his disagreement, Adorno frequently classifies *all* nonclassical music as jazz, evidently based on the dubious belief that jazz was the dominant and paradigmatic form of popular music during his lifetime. (Perhaps it did not occur to him that jazz was never synonymous with popular music and that with the emergence of bebop and later rock and roll, jazz became decidedly less popular.) In what follows, I use jazz in its normal sense—Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, etc.—and widen the discussion to entertainment and popular music when Adorno’s position requires it.

For Adorno, the assumption that there are qualitative differences within the corpus of popular music is an allowable but ultimately pointless differentiation among levels of junk. Adorno is stingy with

examples, but he apparently admits that Charlie Parker made better music than Ernest Tubb; he grants that there is “some good bad music . . . along with all the bad good music,” but this only proves that qualified musicians are willing to sell out to market forces.<sup>6</sup> From a broader perspective, however, his sociologically informed critique holds that all entertainment music is a “filthy tide,” and has been for more than a century.<sup>7</sup> Those who champion jazz as great art are already making discriminations among “drivel” and so have “already capitulated to barbarism.”<sup>8</sup> For Adorno, jazz is the exemplar of music debased as commercial commodity, and music that fails utterly as art.

Viewing jazz itself, apart from a broader position on music as an aspect of culture, Adorno introduces several crucial premises about it and consequently about popular culture. His primary premise is his repeated insistence, even in the 1960s, that the music itself “has remained essentially unchanged” since its first commercial success in 1914. (He probably means 1917, when jazz was first recorded.) Although college courses trace the evolution of jazz from ragtime through swing through bebop and beyond, “none of this alters the fact that jazz has in its essence remained static.”<sup>9</sup> Whether we focus on its rhythmic vitality, improvisation, or experiments in tonality, Adorno insists that “the most striking traits in jazz were all independently produced, developed and surpassed by serious music since Brahms”;<sup>10</sup> jazz and pop music are “the dregs of musical history.”<sup>11</sup> They contain no genuine musical innovation, so any educational theory that creates an appreciation of jazz masks its “prescribed ever-sameness” of “standard devices.” Those who become “addicted” to the music are no different from an addict of alcohol or tobacco.<sup>12</sup>

Because it fails as music, Adorno introduces my basic assumption, one crucial to his argument. Jazz and other pop music must be given a sociological analysis to account for their appeal; popular music cannot be popular because of its aesthetic value, so what else accounts for its domination in this century? Having posited such a static and repetitive essence for jazz, he turns to a nonaesthetic account of its enigmatic success.<sup>13</sup> In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno claims that the structure of artworks always mirrors that of “the social process surrounding them.”<sup>14</sup> But now his concern with social factors does double duty, explaining both the work’s structure and its appeal.

At times, Adorno offers an odd psychoanalytic explanation: the audience unconsciously responds to a “castration symbolism” within entertainment music.<sup>15</sup> I find this unpersuasive and unintelligible. His other argument fares better: “Jazz, however directed, would hardly be so appealing if it did not respond to some social need; but that in turn

is created by technological progress.”<sup>16</sup> Progress creates leisure time for the masses, but the emptiness of this free time must be masked by those who are in control. The masses are free, but powerless, so modern society develops a “culture industry” whose products are “the decoration of empty time.” By its very monotony, the simple “beating” of time in popular music generates an “ersatz sphere of physical motion” to cover up the boredom and angst of people’s purposeless existence.<sup>17</sup> And because hearing is so passive, music is the ideal background for all daily activity, and so has ample opportunity to train “the unconscious for conditioned reflex.” The result, Adorno claims, is a false consciousness; it delights in the process of killing time, which is a substitute for confronting our social reality.

The same technological progress that controls our time and destroys our individuality is also responsible for the directed production of popular music. Adorno contends that “the jazz monopoly rests on the exclusiveness of the supply and the economic power behind it.”<sup>18</sup> He introduces the phrase “culture industry” to indicate the monopoly of those who centralize and direct the production of entertainment music. But the pop music industry must appeal to a false consciousness that cannot accept musical quality and produce music that “must not go beyond what audiences are used to, lest it repel them.” Yet the goal is to sell a product, which requires an endless stream of music that is seemingly new, diverse, and original. Adorno resolves this contradiction by an appeal to “pseudo-individualization,” in which very minor tonal and rhythmical modifications entice the consumer.<sup>19</sup> He compares the calculated process of rearranging various “frills” and “ornaments” with the factory customizing of automobiles; consumers make purchases based on minor differences, but everyone drives away in essentially the same vehicle.<sup>20</sup>

In short, Adorno regards even the most improvisational and progressive jazz as prefabricated product.

Pseudo-individualization is what fools us. . . . Extremes of it are the improvisations in commercial jazz, which jazz journalism feeds upon. They stress instantaneous invention even though the metric and harmonic schema keeps them in such narrow bounds that they in turn might be reduced to a minimum of basic forms. In fact, the chances are that most of what is served up as improvisation outside the innermost circles of jazz experts will have been rehearsed.<sup>21</sup>

Despite differences that allow swing buffs to distinguish swing from bebop (and, perhaps, from heavy metal), Adorno contends that this is a mere reshuffling of musically stale and “pre-digested” elements onto

the skeleton of the thirty-two measure popular song, which serves as the “standard schema” underlying all forms of entertainment music.<sup>22</sup>

While Adorno grants that jazz is generally less despicable than pop music, it is a failure when viewed from the perspective of a broader critique. Jazz fails in the same way that all entertainment music fails: it does not fulfill the necessary social role of art in contemporary society. This shift to a broader, global perspective of social critique is crucial to Adorno’s evaluation of jazz because it underlies his sweeping dismissal of music that he may never even have heard. Actually, I am not satisfied that Adorno has a genuinely coherent theory about art.<sup>23</sup> What I offer is one very prominent thread found in his *Aesthetic Theory* and writings on music.

The key point for Adorno is that art’s “spiritual essence” involves the “illusion” of its coherence and meaning.<sup>24</sup> Artworks are essentially dialectical, driven by the paradox that they “pretend” to achieve a total unity among their contributing elements, yet no such unity can be achieved.<sup>25</sup> Every work of art fails to some degree; the failure of jazz and popular music is simply more radical. In the case of music, the homophonic tradition that arose with the adoption of diatonic scales and equal temperament guaranteed conflict because “harmony is never fully attainable. . . . Dissonance is the truth about harmony. Harmony is unattainable, given the strict criteria of what harmony is supposed to be.”<sup>26</sup> Adorno believes that Western harmony is one of the restrictive basic elements of popular music; tonality is *imposed* on music. Yet the history of music reveals an ongoing attempt to break free of this imposed constraint.<sup>27</sup>

Having identified tonality as a major illusion of most Western music (including popular music), Adorno champions Schoenberg’s Viennese school as the most progressive music of our century. Atonal composition succeeds not merely as progress for music, but for society as well: “No music has the slightest aesthetic worth if it is not socially true, if only as a negation of untruth.”<sup>28</sup> Adorno blurs any difference between aesthetic progress and social truth by insisting that the objective solution to internal conflict of artworks is the “truth content” of the successful work. Truth content must not be confused with mimesis or any intention of the artist, and remains negative unless completed by a philosophical critique of art.<sup>29</sup> We can now appreciate the relevance of Adorno’s charge that jazz merely recycles established conventions. By responding only to tonal structures that were developed in earlier times and under different cultural conditions, the mass audience resists challenging its own current *social* condition. Mass taste can only be exploited by avoiding and not discussing or understanding

social truth; thus, jazz is of low aesthetic worth. In contrast, Adorno proposes that the "highest productions actually *negate*" the prevailing social norms.<sup>30</sup>

The barbarism of jazz is accentuated by the success of its alternative. Schoenberg's best work follows no prior model and avoids adopting any structures or fixed method of composing that replaces the discarded old ways. "Only from twelve-tone technique alone can music learn to remain responsible for itself; this can be done, however, only if music does not become victim of the technique."<sup>31</sup> Only twelve-tone music provides a dialectical resolution of the problems of Western music by its complete *negation* of prevailing conventions of production and consumption. Accepting Schoenberg means rejecting the social oppression of the culture industry and the conditions that make it possible.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the magnitude of the failure of jazz becomes clear. It is boring and repetitive and can only appeal to passive listeners; this passivity makes its very consumption "contradict the objective interest of those who consume it."<sup>33</sup> As a segment of the entertainment industry, jazz *cannot* reject all that has come before. It can only enact a charade of being avant-garde by pretending to be a constant agent of change. Unlike Schoenberg and his school, jazz cannot "assert itself against the ubiquity of commercialism." Only a complete rejection of its hedonic appeal can provide the requisite "definitive negation" that provides the truth content of music in the twentieth century; it must oppose and reveal the oppressive standardization of the culture industry.<sup>34</sup> Those who accept atonality know that jazz is enjoyed only as a conditioned reflex.<sup>35</sup>

Adorno's dismissal of jazz (and of any other entertainment music) presupposes an adequate identification of its true character. Without that, he is on shaky ground in claiming that its sole appeal is due to aggressive marketing of the entertainment industry.

## II

What are we to make of Adorno's charges? We need not share his basic assumptions about dialectical critique to accept many of his claims about popular music.<sup>36</sup> But whether or not we share those assumptions, it does not follow that we must subscribe to Adorno's position regarding jazz or, more generally, agree that only "definitive negation" through atonality provides value to music today. In support

of my argument, I shall mention some obvious examples drawn from jazz before discussing more strictly philosophical issues.

Adorno's critique of jazz assumes that, "in its essence," jazz involves pseudo-individualization of its "sole material," the popular song. This sweeping claim can be challenged even if we restrict our example to that jazz created before Adorno's death in 1969. First, jazz musicians often dispense with popular song, or subvert them when they do employ them. Near the apex of his development, Louis Armstrong extended the New Orleans tradition with his Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings (1925–27). Yet at that time, Armstrong had little exposure to popular mainstream standards and did not write thirty-two measure tunes. In fact, his weakest recordings of this period are frequently of music composed by others, and Armstrong's strongest originals are head arrangements that draw upon blues progressions. The masterful "Potato Head Blues" is neither the standard twelve- nor thirty-two measure tune, and the highly admired "Weather Bird" (1928) is based on King Oliver's sixteen-measure tune. In fact, Armstrong's breakthrough as a jazz soloist did not derive from the popular, standard tunes of his day.<sup>37</sup>

Next, let us consider jazz that is based on popular song, but not "pre-digested" as a result. Although Charlie Parker's "Warming Up a Riff" and "Ko Ko" are based on the chord changes of "Cherokee," they are not a mere ornamentation of the original song. "Red Cross," "Thriving On a Riff," "Chasin' the Bird," "Ah-Leu-Cha," and "Constellation" are based on Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm," but here again, Parker's transformation cannot be regarded as mere frill of the original.<sup>38</sup> A bedrock of popular songs may support some of Parker's improvisations, but those songs are no more restrictive of his art than the use of the sonata-allegro form in Beethoven's symphonies. As critic Len Lyons observes about Parker's use of a handful of songs as source material, "Parker's compositions are like snowflakes—similar in structure outwardly but intricately unique within."<sup>39</sup> The effect is the very antithesis of entertainment; regarding Parker's assault on "Cherokee," another critic notes that "'Ko Ko' is not the kind of music one wishes to hear often. It is disturbing, in the way that some of Schoenberg is disturbing."<sup>40</sup>

Parker's achievement is sufficient to show that a basis in popular song is not inherently restrictive, but we can also find many instances of jazz musicians who consciously abandon popular song material and its standard chord progressions.<sup>41</sup> Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* (1959) and Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* (1960) both avoid popular song composition<sup>42</sup> and abandon standard tonality. *Kind of Blue* consists of five



group improvisations on themes of varying lengths, employing modal sequences that allow melodic invention independent of the harmonic bases of preset chord changes and diatonic scales. Although Davis did not originate jazz improvisation on modes in lieu of chord progressions, these sessions were the first to exploit fully the increased improvisational freedom afforded by the modal approach. Free of the harmonic straitjacket that Adorno regards as a basic “illusion” of popular music, *Kind of Blue* avoids all the trappings of popular songs. Instead, Davis’s musicians improvise on initial themes with little or no group practice; the first, full run-through of each piece is its final take.

Coleman’s group in *Free Jazz* also rejects all the predetermined chord progressions of popular songs and improvises on a few short original themes. But where Davis places trumpet, saxophone, and piano in the foreground as individual soloists, Coleman downplays the convention of the foreground solo and offers thirty-six minutes of collective improvisation among as many as eight players at a time. In addition, in many pieces by Charles Mingus and several by Ornette Coleman, varying tempos and unpredictable rhythmic fluctuations replace a steady beat. Adorno could have known in 1960 that jazz has no essential reliance on composed songs and that it does not require diatonic tonality. With these and many other works available to him, Adorno is wrong to say that “the metric and harmonic schema keeps them in such narrow bounds” that improvisation is mere ornamentation. He does correctly emphasize that improvisation requires a stable structured schema, but he does not agree that these schemata must exclude true import in music of today’s consumer culture.

Adorno formulated his views on jazz between, roughly, 1933 and 1941, the heyday of swing, which may explain his bias. Most of my examples are drawn from post-swing jazz and emphasize the improvisational freedom that was downplayed by the commercial success of the big bands. But Armstrong’s success predates Adorno’s writings on jazz, and other relevant examples can be drawn from the swing era (e.g., Billie Holiday, Coleman Hawkins’s 1939 “Body and Soul” improvisation, etc.), even though at that time the most popular bands relied on stock arrangements and downplayed genuine improvisation. Nonetheless, Adorno’s writings suggest that he was not interested in any empirical evidence that might be brought against him. He claims to have a “qualitative insight” into the real essence of Western music, and any other different kinds of music are really only more subtle cases of oppression by the commercial culture monopoly. He seals his case by claiming that we presently lack the “extraordinary subtlety” required to verify or refute empirically his position.<sup>43</sup> (Yet, for

Adorno, the essence of jazz, its oppressive standardization, can be derived from "acquaintance with the text of a single hit song."<sup>44</sup>) Presumably, anyone who gives in to the barbarism of jazz and finds value in it and other popular music lacks the requisite qualitative insight to discern the true ideological effect of such vulgar trash.

To avoid the unanswerable question of how Adorno found the "static" essence of jazz, he retreated to his more plausible claim that anything of value in popular music and jazz has been "independently produced, developed and surpassed by serious music since Brahms." For Adorno, when jazz avoids popular song forms, diatonic scales, and a monotonous beat, its "innovations" are merely a recycle of styles that were made before and are now unchallenged conventions.<sup>45</sup> In this way, all jazz is "pre-digested" and so will not challenge or repel its audience; like Stravinsky's neoclassicism, jazz reinforces rather than negates the conditions that oppress consciousness.

In his typology of music listening, Adorno contends that only a few professional musicians grasp all of the "formal components" of a piece and its architectonic interrelation shifts; thus, only they achieve a fully adequate appreciation of the music.<sup>46</sup> To me, this supposition is Adorno's Achilles heel. When Adorno says that jazz only presents the dregs of the past, he means that he and others with a similar background in music theory and history will find that jazz is constructed entirely of familiar elements and presented in an arbitrary sequence with no principle of integration. But given that there are relevant differences between the jazz and the Western compositional traditions, the mere familiarity of these elements need not count against jazz.

### III

His discussions of Bach, Schoenberg, and other composers reveal that Adorno evaluates their music in terms of *composition*. Unfortunately, he extends this approach to jazz and popular music in general, and most academic textbooks suggest that this approach is all too prevalent in thinking about popular music. But these assumptions are no more appropriate for an aesthetics of jazz than an understanding of Aristotle's *Poetics* is for the films of Buster Keaton.

Of course, a knowledge of Western music theory is necessary to appreciate Schoenberg fully, and his significance is relative to that musical tradition and its compositional techniques. But when Adorno praises Schoenberg as having "resisted *all* conventions within the

sphere of music," he is equating music with "the masters since Bach."<sup>47</sup> What of music that does not derive primarily from this tradition? And what of audiences who know little about it? Adorno's own distinction between adequate and regressive listening undercuts his own remarks on jazz. As Adorno says, any aesthetic education certainly facilitates an adequate interpretation and evaluation of a work or an artist by providing it with a context and a historical dimension. Intelligent listening occurs when an audience relates the music to past accomplishments and hears it in terms of both its original and current social context.<sup>48</sup> But the past is fixed; its *history* is not. History is in a constant state of flux. Adorno stresses the importance of economic and other social factors, but he shows little sensitivity to the ways in which each generation rewrites history, emphasizing different features of the past in light of the present. What seemed to be highly relevant about jazz in 1940 or even 1960 seems less central to us now. Placing Schoenberg among the "masters since Bach" evaluates his music in terms of one static history; it does not locate his achievement in terms of all the music written within that period of time, much less all the music of other times. For this reason, informed listening to jazz differs from informed listening to concert music.

When Adorno champions Schoenberg's music, he implicitly identifies "music" with the compositional developments of tonality; Schoenberg's school reflects the negation of such music because it has exhausted its possibilities. This selective history focuses on composers, the scores they left us, and the theories they developed—but other facts are discarded in the process. The fact that Bach and Beethoven were admired in their day as superlative improvisers finds no place in Adorno's appraisal of Schoenberg. The "technology" of early classical music left us a body of scored compositions, and Adorno was of a generation that thought of all music in those terms. Therefore, he disparages the psychologically "regressive" listening of a mass audience; they are unable to understand the significance of such a composition, and, Adorno claims, their inability can be measured objectively because they cannot analyze the *score* of a Beethoven symphony. Those who know only a broadcast and a recording of the score can be evaluated by playing it for them and noting their failure to identify the formal relationships established by analyzing the score.<sup>49</sup>

Adorno would never be as blunt, but his position is that aesthetic properties and values are culturally emergent.<sup>50</sup> Although known through radio, recordings, or live performances, a work's properties and values are not apparent to everyone; many crucial properties are known only to those who understand its social and historical

milieu. According to Adorno's typology of listeners, only a minority can recognize the architectonic structure of a Beethoven symphony or a Bach fugue, much less grasp Schoenberg. A mass audience lacks the requisite knowledge of history and theory to recognize what is really valuable in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. As Adorno complains, most listeners hear the Fifth as a set of quotations from the Fifth; that is, they hear it as they hear popular music, unaware that the themes and melodies are only the bare material for its development and complex integration, which constitutes its true value.<sup>51</sup> However, the complex formal achievements of Beethoven and other "serious" composers of a compositional tradition are irrelevant to the appreciation of jazz.

Adorno regards all music as richly patterned sound, performed to reveal "all the characteristics and interrelations which have been recognized through intensive study of the score."<sup>52</sup> He even dismisses the goal of historically accurate performances of Bach, contending that neither the performance nor the score is "the work." Modern arrangements of Bach by Schoenberg and Webern are superior to historically informed performances on period instruments, because only "the most advanced composition . . . corresponds to the stage of his truth," revealing the otherwise "hidden" work to modern audiences.<sup>53</sup> The truth of the work is not revealed by simply playing the score, however accurately, for a mass audience has not adopted a set of listening conventions necessary for perception of such properties. And to make matters worse, the commercial practices of the entertainment industry manipulate popular taste by focusing attention on its less relevant features—its pseudo-individualism. Complaining that a mass audience hears everything as "radio music," Adorno acknowledges the degree to which listening conventions are socially and historically conditioned.

For all his insight, Adorno will not admit that other conventions might allow other listeners to perceive culturally emergent properties he does not perceive. He hears popular music exclusively in terms of the conventions appropriate to Western classical music. He ignores the formative contribution of African musical tradition to jazz and thus, indirectly, the contributions of other cultures to recent popular music. He also downplays the way jazz exploits the advances of technology in the use of recording techniques as a basis for new creation and development.

In short, because Adorno never learned to listen to jazz, he does not grasp its conventions and misidentifies its distinct character and possibilities. To say that Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis were contemporaries of Adorno and Schoenberg is not to say that they were peers musically. The modification of Western tonality

is only one among several elements of the jazz tradition, and one that is independent of the quality of the composition as such. The element of individual performance counts no less—and in fact improvisation, if not always to the extremes taken in Davis's *Kind of Blue*, is the *sine qua non* of jazz.<sup>54</sup> Any performance of a work by Beethoven or even Schoenberg, however, depends on the correct interpretation of the written score.<sup>55</sup> The relationship of Parker's "Chasin' the Bird" and "Constellation" to "I Got Rhythm" illustrates that most jazz musicians conceive of their music in terms of individual performances, inviting individualized development of musical motives, rather than being fixed compositions. When successful, each jazz performance, recorded or live, is an independent musical work. As Sonny Rollins recently observed, "Jazz is the only music that happens while you're hearing it. . . . We don't want to make jazz too written . . . because that is what can kill it."<sup>56</sup>

In his later years, Duke Ellington came to believe that "jazz" could not be defined, and he stopped using the term because too many styles were contained under a single heading.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, when pressed to explain jazz, Ellington said that "the story of jazz is a long list of great names," a list "of highly influential musicians, each with popular imitators."<sup>58</sup> (He predominantly named instrumentalists, not composers.) Critics and musicologists tend to agree. And John Norris and others have argued that jazz is so intimately connected to the process of mentoring by and imitation of specific working musicians that the recent shift to academic schooling and music training has effectively killed jazz. With the dissolution of the old "apprenticeship system," most of the jazz played today "sounds like jazz but really isn't it."<sup>59</sup> This may not be the whole story, but it does correctly emphasize that jazz is a *performer's* art, for the assessment of jazz is not static, but historically grounded in the music performed by specific performers.

At its best, a jazz performance is a distinct, original, individual exploration of a musical idea, whether a popular song or simple riff. Adorno is bound to the idea that a performance is a token of some further work, with the work itself the locus of value. Jazz challenges this division between the musical work and its performance.<sup>60</sup> Of course, even the loosest jam session or improvisation requires an organizing schema, but the performance is tailored to the players' individualities and their interaction. Good jazz requires both autonomy and cooperative production from its players, a combination that Adorno does not admit as possible within the culture industry. He is consequently blind to the possibility that jazz may even challenge prevailing social conventions. Beginning with the New Orleans tradition that

nurtured Louis Armstrong, jazz has challenged musical convention with its “defiance of Western music’s traditional distinction between composition and performance, in fact, its persistent disdain for any musical division of labor, the jazz musician being both creator and interpreter, soloist and accompanist, artist and entertainer.”<sup>61</sup>

For these reasons, we should reject Adorno’s *Kulturkritik* as it applies to jazz. What he identifies as jazz is a caricature with limited basis in fact. Let me briefly sketch the ramifications of allowing that jazz is misunderstood when viewed only as a composition and that its emphasis is on individuality and individual performance. First, it negates the conventions developed by the tradition of classical music from Bach to Schoenberg. Second, Adorno’s insistence on the commodity character of jazz is no longer necessary to explain the appeal of this (supposedly) deficient music. Jazz as a commodity is not its sole appeal; jazz is also capable of challenging a broad range of social conventions.<sup>62</sup> The social function of this music within African-American society made no impression upon Adorno; by focusing only on its commercial success, he was unaware of its potential significance in a racially segregated American culture. Although Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* proposes that only a combination of sociological insight and philosophical critique can uncover the hidden essence of any artwork, his ignorance about the jazz tradition leaves him unqualified to criticize it; he was not qualified to appreciate anything outside the Western “serious” tradition.

In sum, Adorno’s aesthetic theory does not prove that good jazz is “good bad music,” and his writings do not persuade us that only its commercial character explains its appeal. Yet accepting jazz as a distinct musical tradition is compatible with Adorno’s premise that there are degrees of awareness in listening to music. Coleman’s *Free Jazz* requires no less of listeners than Beethoven or Schoenberg, but such listening presupposes a different tradition. And rather than explain the appeal of jazz, the “culture industry” may be as great a barrier to a real understanding of jazz as Adorno thinks it is for Western art music.

## Notes

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1. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 130.

2. This account of Theodor W. Adorno's views is based on his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1976); *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982); *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981); "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 270–99; "On Popular Music" (1941), in *On Record*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 301–14; "On the Social Situation of Music," *Musical Aesthetics: A Historical Reader*, vol. 3., *The Twentieth Century*, ed. Edward A. Lippman (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1985), 221–70; and *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Seabury Press, 1973). A generally uncritical summary of Adorno's overall position on music is given by Donald Kuspit, "Critical Notes on Adorno's Sociology of Music and Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33 (1975): 321–27. Kuspit says little about Adorno on popular music and jazz. The most comprehensive discussion is Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 185–93.
3. The first two chapters of Adorno's *Sociology of Music* deal most directly with jazz and popular music. They draw extensively from material written in 1932–41, particularly "On the Fetish-Character in Music," originally published in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (1938), and "On the Social Situation of Music," originally published in the same journal in 1932. "Perennial Fashion—Jazz" (in *Prisms*, 121–32) recycles some material from "Über Jazz," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (1936), under the pseudonym "Hektor Rottweiler."
4. Many of its ideas appeared in a more organized form in Adorno's posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). Those who wish to avoid its 498 dense pages might prefer the summary in Anthony Savile, "Beauty and Truth: The Apotheosis of an Idea," *Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 123–46.
5. "The differences in the reception of official 'classical' music and light music no longer have any real significance. They are only still manipulated for reasons of marketability." Adorno, "Fetish-Character in Music," 276. Adorno compares Beethoven and jazz in *Aesthetic Theory*, 170.
6. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 32.
7. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 22.
8. Adorno, "Perennial Fashion," 127. Adorno's language in these and other passages demonstrates that he is *evaluating* popular music and not simply presenting an objective cultural critique.
9. Adorno, "Perennial Fashion," 121.
10. Adorno, "Perennial Fashion," 123. Adorno includes syncopation; see "Fetish-Character in Music," 296.
11. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 29.
12. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 15.
13. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 29; and "Perennial Fashion," 121–22.
14. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 335–37.

15. Adorno, "Perennial Fashion," 129.
16. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 203.
17. Music for entertainment "inhabits the pockets of silence that develop between people molded by anxiety, work and undemanding docility." Adorno, "Fetish-Character in Music," 271. See also "On Popular Music," 309–11.
18. Adorno, "Perennial Fashion," 129.
19. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 31. See also "On Popular Music," 311.
20. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 25. Another comparison of entertainment music and "the auto religion" is presented in "Fetish-Character in Music," 279–80.
21. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 31. See also "Perennial Fashion," 123; and "On Popular Music," 308.
22. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 25. Adorno repeats his claim that popular songs are the basis of all jazz in "Perennial Fashion," 123. He never acknowledges the importance of the twelve-measure blues form for jazz.
23. For a recent summary of his general theory, see Andrew Edgar, "An Introduction to Adorno's Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30 (1990): 46–56.
24. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 148–72. See also Thomas Huhn, "Adorno's Aesthetics of Illusion," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (1985): 181–83.
25. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 154.
26. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 160–61. In this passage, Adorno seems to mean harmony in all arts, not merely music, but the contrast of "harmony" and "dissonance" suggests that he is generalizing from his views about music.
27. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 221.
28. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 197. Notice that aesthetic worth is totally distinct from beauty. See also "Cultural Criticism and Society," *Prisms*, 32.
29. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 186; 191–93. At the end of *Sociology of Music*, Adorno summarizes his view in this way: "The esthetic quality of works, their truth content, has little to do with any truth that can be empirically pictured, not even with the life of the soul. But it converges with social truth" (215).
30. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 215.
31. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 115.
32. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 9.
33. Adorno, "Fetish-Character in Music," 275.
34. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 17–18.
35. Adorno claims that to reject atonal music also involves an understanding of its significance. "Fetish Character," 298.
36. Many of Adorno's complaints about music are repeated by Ernst Krenek, "On the Ageing and Obsolescence of Music," *Exploring Music*, trans. Margaret Shenfield and Geoffrey Skelton (New York: October House, 1956; 1966), 221–29. Adorno's influence is very strong in Joseph Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); and Alan Durant, *Conditions of Music* (Albany:



State University of New York Press, 1984). Ironically, Adorno's charges have found their way into the lyrics of rock music, including such hit songs as The Byrds' "So You Want To Be A Rock 'N' Roll Star" (1967), and punk/new wave songs of The Sex Pistols, "EMI" (1977), The Clash, "White Man in Hammersmith Palais" (1978), and Elvis Costello (Declan McManus), "Radio Radio" (1978).

37. For more details about the Hot Five and Hot Seven material, see Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 89–127.

38. All recordings 1945–48, on *Bird/The Savoy Recordings* (Savoy LP 2201). See also Gary Giddins, *Riding on a Blue Note* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 116.

39. Len Lyons, *The 101 Best Jazz Albums* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1980), 174.

40. Ross Russell, as quoted by Ira Gitler, liner notes to *Bird/The Savoy Recordings*. A similar comparison between Schoenberg and earlier jazz is noted by Simon Frith, *Music for Pleasure* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 59.

41. I cannot find any evidence that Adorno ever heard Charlie Parker, live or on record, but he occasionally mentions bebop. His writings do not indicate any knowledge of Miles Davis or free jazz.

42. Those who are not familiar with these recordings will find a lengthier discussion in Lyons, 258–63; 376–79; 387–91. A detailed analysis of Davis's *Kind of Blue* is provided in Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 216–23.

43. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 324; and *Sociology of Music*, 27.

44. Adorno, "Fetish-Character in Music," 275.

45. Adorno says as much in *Aesthetic Theory*, 309.

46. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 4–5. See also "Bach Defended Against His Devotees," *Prisms*, 142–46.

47. Adorno, "Arnold Schoenberg, 1874–1951," *Prisms*, 170, emphasis added.

48. Adorno would seem to agree since he says that Schoenberg's and Webern's re-scoring of Bach are "truer" in today's world than are supposedly "objective" performances ("Bach Defended," 146).

49. Adorno, "A Social Critique of Radio Music," *Kenyon Review* 7 (1945): 217.

50. The phrase and idea are from Joseph Margolis, *Art and Philosophy: Conceptual Issues in Aesthetics* (Atlantic Heights, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1980), 27–49.

51. Adorno, "Social Critique of Radio Music," 213–14.

52. Adorno, "Bach Defended," 144. Here, Adorno echoes views that Schoenberg directed against Ferruccio Busoni; see Andy Hamilton, "The Aesthetics of Imperfection," *Philosophy* 65 (1990): 323–31.

53. Adorno, "Bach Defended," 146.

54. See Ted Gioia, *The Imperfect Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

55. Adorno does not say much about music as performance; when he does, it is mainly in the context of attacking Toscanini as a conductor whose radio performances of Beethoven reduce the music to the level of commodity. See Horowitz, 229–43.

56. Quoted in Scott Spencer, "The Titan of Jazz," *Rolling Stone*, 13–27 Dec. 1990, 230.
57. Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 452–53.
58. Ellington, 415. In 1962, critic Nat Hentoff could name only Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, and Thelonious Monk as "major indigenous jazz composers." See Hentoff, *The Jazz Life* (London: Peter Davies, 1962), 224.
59. John Norris, "The Aesthetic Values of Jazz," *Coda Magazine*, 1 Dec. 1984, 9. Norris contends that jazz "was created and nurtured by several hundred performers. . . . They *alone* made it great—unlike classical music where the composition is the most important ingredient." Sonny Rollins expresses similar sentiments in Spencer, 230.
60. See Hamilton, 323–40.
61. Gioia, 15–16.
62. John Coltrane certainly thought that it did. See C. O. Simpkins, *Coltrane: A Biography* (New York: Herndon House Publishers, 1975), 160. See also Lyons, 257–58; 376–77. Herbert Marcuse was considerably more open than Adorno to the possibilities for popular music, proposing that blues, jazz, and rock 'n' roll were capable of negating "affirmative" culture. See Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 36–38.