

Dualism in Jazz

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Abstract

Jazz is not merely art, it is a kind of philosophy developing dialectically. Dialecticism of jazz means constant presence of a certain dualism: throughout its history its African elements co-existed and interrelated with its European elements. This dichotomy penetrates jazz from the end of the 19th century to 1960s, as jazz split into different genres and styles. The work shows the peculiarity of jazz dualism, what jazz dichotomy means, and how it can be understood taken through the prism of its African and European components.

Keywords: jazz, dualism, dichotomy, African-American, European, blues, ragtime

From ancient times philosophers agreed that the world, the universe, our being is bi-polar. The law of unity and struggle of oppositions became a universally known law of dialectics. Heraclitus introduced the concept of Logos, which was analogous to Chinese notion of Dao, whereas Hegel developed the dialectic method, developed further by XIX century materialists, who asserted that the world develops dialectically by the interplay of opposites (Lacey, 1996). The earliest mentioning of the interplay of opposites goes back to pre-Christian times, to China, where the great philosopher Laozi introduced the terms “yin” and “yang” to denote two foundations of natural world, opposite to each other, which at the same time have each other’s embryo inside themselves (Laozi, 1992). Just like Heraclitus’s Logos exists through interplay and interpenetration of opposites, Laozi’s Dao exists through interplay and interpenetration of yin and yang, which is revealed in all spheres of life, being and existence.

It is not occasional that we refer to such authorities as Hegel and Laozi. Jazz is not merely music. And not even mere art. It is a form of musical philosophy, in which those who confess this philosophy express themselves each and every in their own individual manner. Jazz philosophy resembles the development of literature, art, and philosophy itself. The development of jazz is dialectical, in other words, it develops under certain laws, which, although peculiar to jazz, resemble the laws of development of art, society, and being.

One of the most interesting aspects of development of jazz is the dichotomy, or dualism, present in this form of art, and penetrating it throughout its whole course of development. We take it for granted that jazz is considered as “Afro-American” form of music. This definition assumes that jazz is African-rooted art, which flourished on the American soil. However, this definition is not fully correct. More exactly, it is “Afro-Euro-American” form

of music because of the following: according to Mehegan (2001) the music itself is based on European harmony and African rhythm. However, we can assume this definition not full either, as such an authority as Mehegan surprisingly neglects the African musical roots of jazz. African roots of this music are represented by blue notes once present on African continent, which later formed themselves on American soil into the musical art called the blues, which, in its own turn, grew out parallel to such unique styles as spirituals and work songs (Коллиер, 1984). Thus, jazz is a synthetic musical art, which combines European and African elements (Кочен, 1977). American component of the art is rather social, than musical: it is represented by such facilities necessary for the development of the art as Broadway, Tin Pan Alley, night clubs (Minton’s, Birdland, etc.) and geography (New Orleans, Mississippi, etc.). Thus, although jazz flourished on the North American continent, in terms of musical harmony we can with assurance speak of two distinct elements of jazz music, symbolically dividing them into “black” and “white” elements: African and European, since the music of white America grew up from its European elements. It is not a mere coincidence that jazz has black and white components: otherwise the development of the art through philosophical law of unity and struggle of opposites would not have been ensured.

Nineteen zero two (1902) is symbolically considered as the date of the birth of jazz, when Jelly Roll Morton was the first to combine the two above mentioned elements into one single. The point why Morton’s interpretation proved to be the milestone in jazz history deserves careful attention.

Before Morton, and, generally, before musicians started playing while combining different harmonies, there were two most distinctive forms associated with jazz music: blues and ragtime. The most common pattern of the blues represents three lines of lyrics, which are accompa-

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nied by twelve musical bars. Finkelstein (1948) calls the blues as “a language of jazz”. Collier (1984) calls the blues “the little miracle of jazz”, which later would resurrect in rock music just like Biblical Lazarus did. Karumidze (2009) calls the blues “the mother of jazz” and ragtime “the father of jazz”. The reason for this symbolic gender division becomes clearer if we consider the essential differences lying in these two forms of musical performance. They are diametrically opposite to each other in all ways. The music of the blues is never (or almost never) written as notation, it is rather designated to be performed spontaneously, while improvised line is an indispensable part of the genre. The blues improvised line is much simpler than improvised lines of jazz compositions we hear nowadays, but, nevertheless, it does not change the fact, which is that the blues contain improvisation. Improvisation is one of the features of jazz, hence the definition of the blues as the father of jazz. Contrary to this ragtime is never designated to be performed spontaneously. It is always written in notation, and its forte, piano, or allegro is scrupulously identified. “Never play ragtime fast”, Scott Joplin used to say, as if trying to illustrate the strict limits of the art: written melodic and harmonic patterns; strict increase or decrease of volume; no improvisation altogether. In all senses, ragtime is an antipode to the blues. Blues is emotionally unreserved with its call-and-response, delivering the despair of a player or singer, derived from the work song; ragtime is less emotional – its emotions are governed by a score, from which a performer plays. Blues is flexible and mobile with its improvisation and hollers, which originate in performer’s soul; ragtime is rigid and static with its steadfast affiliation to what is written on a paper. Finally, blues is sad, depicting misery and despair of soul, while ragtime is mostly cheerful, designated to cheer up a listener sitting in a movie hall or just beside a bar counter. Considering the blues as the main root of jazz origin, Collier (1984) dedicates the whole chapter to ragtime as its another source. Although ragtime originated in African American communities at the beginning of the XIX century, this birth was largely promoted by musical literacy of Black Creoles, who were very good at European classical music, eagerly played European classical pieces and tunes, and despised the blues, as some vulgar music distorting the very essence of the art. All this makes ragtime rather a child of European culture, than of African one, as it contains all the elements peculiar to European performing art. What musical criticism available so far has failed to mention is that jazz has been developing in a dialectic way. Using the classical formula of Hegel (thesis-antithesis-synthesis), and recalling the contribution of Jelly Roll Morton, we can produce the following logical expression: blues (thesis) – ragtime (antithesis) – stride (synthesis).

The 1920s are called “the Jazz Age”. At the same time this is the decade of so-called classic jazz, followed

by the swing in the 1930s. However, from the very beginning there emerged two trends of classical jazz: New Orleans style and Dixieland. New Orleans style was music performed by such stars as King Oliver, Sidney Bechet, and, later, Louis Armstrong. Dixieland was the invention of white musicians, who were, firstly, cautious with the term “jazz” itself because of disregard of the public, and who, secondly, enriched black jazz by European chord progressions (Original Dixieland Jazz Band and Bix Beiderbecke belong to the last). To illustrate the last sentence, let me bring the example of the twelve-bar blues. The New Orleans style musician would play it like:

C – F – C – C – F – F – C – C – G – F – C – C

The same piece performed by a Dixieland musician looks as follows:

C – F – C – C – F – F – C – A7 – Dm – G – C – C

The 1920s bore two greatest jazz musicians of the Era: Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke. The fact that the first was African American and the second Caucasian may not look just symbolic, however, if we consider them in the context of jazz dichotomy. These two masters represented two distinctive streams of jazz – its “yin” and “yang”, the first rooted in African soul, and the second drawn out of European reason. At the same time, as every “yin” contains a particle of “yang”, and every “yang” does that of “yin”, the African soul component of jazz has the element of musical reason peculiar to European tradition, whereas European musical tradition of reason is kind of wrapped in emotion, which especially fascinates us as far as African art is concerned.

This dualism, first expressed through the blues and ragtime, and later through New Orleans style, and Dixieland, revealed itself in the 1930s in such two distinctively opposite jazz trends as stride piano and boogie-woogie. Collier writes that Harlem style of stride, originated from ragtime and created by one wave of musicians was the main, but not the only style of piano jazz of the 1920s and 1930s. Parallel to it existed another school, grown up from other roots and developing in other direction. This music originated in African American folk tradition, and by the beginning of the 20th century these pianists played mainly the blues. Thus, piano replaced guitar or banjo in the accompaniment of blues singing. Collier writes:

“Here again, we face the old controversy in jazz: the break between its European and African component elements. On the one hand – the pianists of stride piano, using European harmony and traditional dance and song forms, sounding in the ragtime of [Scott] Joplin and his followers. On the other hand – amateur blues piano players with primitive understanding of harmony and form, for whom piano was replacing drums. <...>Such stride pianists as Smith and, especially, Johnson... came into jazz

already after it was born. As for the primitive pianists, they played the blues even before its birth. <...>There is the real dissimilarity of traditions. The first of those – European, filled with African rhythms; the second – rhythmical by spirit, but containing only the embryo of harmonic and formal elements, peculiar to European tradition.” (Коллиер, 1984, p. 165-166)

Famous French jazz critic Hugues Panassie was so much in love with the African root of jazz that he failed to understand the importance of its European foundations, especially when these two came in harmony in such an exotic and original style of jazz as bebop. “Negroes in the School of the Whites”, “Bebop: not Jazz” – so entitled Panassie two of his chapters devoted to bebop (Panassie, 1942). Panassie’s tragedy was that he failed to notice that in bebop jazz dualism was brought together, African soul got merged with European reason and thus jazz was given the new, now modern, space. However, even Panassie acknowledges that Charlie Parker and Dizzie Gillespie combined the old tradition with the new one, whereas their followers preferred exclusively the new manner of performance (Panassie, 1942).

Finally, the jazz dualism, joined together in the bebop era, stuck its road again in the 1950s, when jazz split into two diametrically opposite styles. The first one was called “hard bop”, while the second, which came slightly later, was christened as “cool jazz”. Both of these trends originated in the subsoil of bebop.

Hard bop has many features of bebop, being, however, slower in tempo and simpler harmonically. It is more blues-oriented, the compositions Straight, No Chaser or Well, You Needn’t are perhaps the best examples of this exciting and dramatic style, which has acquired so many followers all over the world since coming to jazz arena of Sonny Rollins, Clifford Brown, Art Blackey, or Lou Donaldson. It is not by chance that the logical continuation of hard bop was the style called soul jazz, i.e. jazz founded on the harmonic patterns of gospel song, the vocalized nature of instrumental play of which is perhaps the most striking feature. Pianos were replaced by electric organs, and trumpets were less likely to be used than saxophones. The album Boogaloo by John Patton can serve as an example of this style. Steady, heavy rhythm, dominance of organ, and abundance of blue notes make this piece as a clear sample of soul in jazz. Finally, soul jazz resulted in funky jazz, and what comes first to one’s mind is Watermelon Man or Chameleon by Herbie Hancock. The very name of the style – funky – makes us think that we deal with extremely emotional and in literal sense of this word exciting branch of music, which is so indeed.

As for cool jazz, it became kind of an antithesis of hard bop. Cool jazz incorporated complex harmonies acceptable in European classical music. It is preoccupied with the form and reason, pattern and intellect. Miles Da-

vis, Modern Jazz Quartet, Jerry Mulligan, Chet Baker, and Bill Evans are the creators and stars of this style. Hard bop and soul jazz is a logical consequence of development of the direction started by King Oliver and Louis Armstrong, while cool jazz is that begun by Bix Beiderbecke and Lester Young. Cool jazz had tremendous success for a short period of time followed by overall preoccupation and obsession by jazz rock and fusion music.

Thus, as we can see, jazz music is of strong dichotomy nature of the encounter of its African versus European elements. This dualism started at the end of the 19th century (blues vs. ragtime), went through 1920s (New Orleans style vs. Dixieland), then 1920s and 30s (boogie-woogie piano vs. stride piano), climaxing in the 1950s (hard bop vs. cool jazz). Musicians may argue that this dualism is the struggle between two manners of performance; musical critics may argue that this is the competition between two musical schools; philosophers may say that here is another proof of dialectic nature of development of the art with its Logos balancing between two extremes. Either way one thing is evident: jazz is not of uniform nature. It is dual in terms of performance manner, in terms of incorporation of musical harmonies, in terms of spiritual approaches to musical material. It is bi-polar in its essence. And that is what makes it one of the mysteries of modern culture.

However, focusing only on the dualism of jazz cannot explain us what is the driving force of its development. Why is it important to know that jazz is dualistic, or, in fact, derived from many different sources? Answering this question would mean explaining the common critical arguments about the origin of jazz and explaining how our vision adds something new to the scholarly conversation about jazz. This point will be dealt with in our following essay about this unique genre.

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