



The Cold War and American Music 1945-2000. Munich: German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C.; Center for Advanced Studies LMU Munich; The Catholic University of America; Lasky Center for Transatlantic Studies, 22.06.2012-23.06.2012.

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The Cold War and American Music 1945-2000

The Center for Advanced Studies of the LMU Munich hosted the international conference “The Cold War and American Music”. Initiated by the historians MICHAEL KIMMAGE (Washington, D.C.), CHRISTOF MAUCH (Munich), and BRITTA WALDSCHMIDT-NELSON (Washington, D.C.), the conference aimed to explore the effects of the Cold War’s climate and sensibilities on American music from a transatlantic perspective across a geographic and historical continuum. Throughout the conference, music was negotiated as a cultural commodity in various spaces, defined by geography, policy, as well as emotion and technology. Acknowledging the fact that music was a pivotal aspect of American cultural diplomacy during the Cold War, the panelists charted the ways in which American music was produced, received, mediated and assimilated in Europe, including the Soviet Union, with a focus on Germany.

The presentations revolved around a set of core questions. The role of intermediaries responsible for the distribution of jazz was repeatedly discussed. Furthermore the participants reflected on the various possibilities of narrating the Cold War within the realm of popular culture. Music was debated as a vehicle for political agitation, satire and cultural critique. Race, ethnicity and authenticity were at the core of the considerations.

After a brief introduction by the conveners, HARTMUT BERGHOFF (Washington, D.C.), the director of the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., highlighted the importance of transatlantic intellectual exchange.

Cultural and social historian BERNDT OSTENDORF (Munich) set the tone for the conference with his opening paper on Willis Conover’s *Jazz Hour* at the *Voice of America*: Using jazz musician Thelonious Monk’s assumption that jazz and freedom are intertwined, as a point of departure, Ostendorf went on to explore the soft power of jazz in the Cold War context. In sync with historian RÜDIGER RITTER (Bremen), who analyzed the broadcasting of jazz into the Eastern Bloc, Ostendorf raised questions about the symbolic and political capital of jazz: Did jazz have the potential to serve as a sonic weapon and was it effective as political propaganda or was the jazz craze just a side effect of modernization? Both Ostendorf and Ritter reached the conclusion that much less than a political weapon, jazz was a means of peaceful exchange that enabled cultural communication, even across language barriers. The strong focus on jazz throughout the conference suggests that most participants shared Ostendorf’s assumption, that this musical genre was a dominant force in shaping American intellectual culture and therefore political culture in the 20th century.

Historian UTA POIGER (Boston) expanded on this idea by analyzing American jazz and its ramifications in Eastern and Western Germany. Poiger illustrated the complicated role race played in criticisms of jazz in the GDR by using the example of Reginald Rudolf, an outspoken promoter of jazz music in Eastern Germany and SED-member. Hailing blacks as both the greatest traitors of and the greatest hope for jazz, Rudolf assigned them an ambiguous role within the process of cultural exchange.

duction: He heavily criticized bebop artists while he celebrated musicians who played spirituals and blues. However, as Poiger pointed out, by categorizing certain forms of jazz as “degenerate”, Rudolf made use of terminology that evoked a racial logic and ultimately re-asserted racial hierarchies between black Americans who allegedly lacked responsibility and white Germans. Similarly, Poiger deconstructed the myth that jazz was successfully employed by German officials in East and West as a means to overcome Germany’s racist past. She asserted that jazz promoters often used strategies of “de-racializing” and “whitening” jazz in order for it to be acceptable.

Historian DEAN VULETIC (Florence) further examined the role of jazz in Cold War politics by discussing the changing attitudes of Yugoslavia’s Communist Party and their correspondence with developments in international relations. After initial hesitation, the party soon came to appropriate jazz as a means to demonstrate openness towards the West, establish distinctiveness from Eastern Europe and show solidarity with African states. Yugoslavia’s cultural diplomacy with regard to jazz shows that communist states also appropriated jazz as a soft power and that it was a floating signifier defined more by the nationality of its artists than by the genre’s American origins. Vuletic hence invited the participants to reconceptualize the relationship between Americanization and jazz in postwar Europe by paying special attention to the fact that Yugoslavia functioned as an agent of musical Americanization in Eastern Europe.

Michael Kimmage assumed that the Cold War can be narrated in at least three genres: the epic, the tragedy, and the comedy. Kimmage chose comedy and, more precisely, the songs of Jewish entertainer and intellectual Tom Lehrer as his vantage point. Lehrer’s “comedy of inversion” with its unsettling character becomes the appropriate means of transporting and playing with a Cold War mindset in Kimmage’s tale. Comedy and satire help us to understand Cold-War complexities. The assumed dichotomy of good and evil, black and white, the United States and the Soviet Union is dissolved in popular culture, which raises awareness of the fact that nothing is as palpable as it seems.

American Studies scholar GEORGE BLAUSTEIN (Amsterdam) shared Kimmage’s suppositions in his analysis of the novel “*Slumberland*” written by African-American poet and anthologist Paul Beatty. Even though published in 2008, the *bildungsroman* is set in a Cold-War world, more precisely Cold-War Berlin. Blaustein

investigated the novel’s dealings with historical questions about jazz and the text’s use of satire in the process. He reached the conclusion that “*Slumberland*” deals with the uncertainties of a complex reality by using farce as a stylistic device. Both Kimmage and Blaustein saw humorous forms of expression as highly suitable for discussing and understanding the Cold War, either in its own time or in retrospect.

In her paper historian PENNY VON ESCHEN (Ann Arbor) elaborated on the means of circulating music during the Cold War. Von Eschen highlighted the importance of technologies, such as the cassette and the portable radio recorder. While the talks by Ostendorf, Ritter and historian CELESTE DAY MOORE (Chicago) reflected on the role broadcasters and radio personalities played in the circulation of jazz. In her account, von Eschen emphasized that mix tapes and the boom box were sensible tools for distributing and sharing musical materials. The transgression of national boundaries, not just via airwaves, was her focus. Von Eschen’s narrative spanned the globe: from the adaptation of popular American songs in India to the struggle for recognition of Jamaican-born musician Linton Kwesi Johnson in the UK. She ended on the note that music and poetry do not necessarily have the power to change the ways of the world, however, they can serve as a common denominator within society and therefore facilitate reform.

Musicologist MARTIN LÜCKE (Munich) chose a rather traditional set-up for his talk on the Cold War’s representation in music during the 1980s. He started out with a brief description of the world’s political climate and perceived threats before venturing into his examination on the role of Cold War topics within the realm of popular music. By analyzing songs as The Clash’s “*London Calling*” (1979), Ultravox’s “*Dancing with Tears in My Eyes*” (1984) and Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s “*Two Tribes*” (1984) with regard to the lyrics as well as to their visual representation in the form of music videos, Lücke illustrated how Cold-War *befindlichkeiten* were absorbed in and criticized by popular music. He demonstrated how songs which were simple and appealing and therefore part of a “global mainstream” emitted opinions, protest and cultural critique. However, Lücke did not overestimate the power of popular songs; on the contrary, he voiced the concern that music may have a mass appeal, but that its (mass) audience often lacks the ability to extract meaning.

Over the course of the conference, the participants ventured into extensive discussions on the ramifications

of race, class, gender and space in their explorations of the complex issues at the intersection of politics and (popular) culture. Even though they disagreed on a number of points – all discussants subscribed to author Ralph Ellison’s famous suggestion: American culture is “jazz-shaped” and hence has a global appeal. The liberating potential of popular music – in heavy opposition to restrictive ideologies inherent in high culture – provides an opportunity for an improved global cultural understanding, as Ostendorf asserted: “It is the promise of individual liberation from the straitjacket of fundamentalist world views and education programs on either side of the Iron Curtain”.

Conference Overview:

Introduction

Places I: Western Europe

Berndt Ostendorf (LMU): “Willis Conover’s Jazz Hour at the Voice of America, 1955-1996: From the Cold War to the Cool War”

Celeste Day Moore (University of Chicago): “Le jazz ouvre toutes les portes”: Sim Copans and the U.S. Information Service in France, 1954-1964”

George Blaustein (University of Amsterdam): “Jazz, Transatlantic Satire, and the Cold War”

Places II: Germany

Uta Poiger (Northeastern University): “American Jazz and Race in Cold War Germany”

Amy Beal (University of California, Santa Cruz): “Carla Bley’s German Jazz Trophy: Reflections on the Legacy of Joachim Ernst Berendt and American Free Jazz”

Martin Lücke (Makromedia Hochschule für Medien und Kommunikation): “The Cold War in Music: The Soundtrack of the 80s”

Places III: Eastern Europe

Christian Schmidt-Rost (Free University of Berlin): “Raising the Curtain: Jazz Festivals as Translational Spaces of Communication in the Cold War Era”

Dean Vuletic (European University Institute): “Jazz Diplomacy in Yugoslavia”

Rüdiger Ritter (University of Bremen): “Broadcasting Jazz into the Eastern Bloc - Cold War Weapon or Cultural Exchange? The Example of Willis Conover”

Keynote: Informance:

“Jazz - the Classical Music of Globalization”
Reinhold Wagnleitner (University of Salzburg)

Piano: Günter Wagnleitner (Salzburg)

Places IV: The United States

David Monod (Wilfrid Laurier University): “Wool Sweater Blues: Rumaging in the Delete Bin of Cold War American History”

Michelle Engert (LMU): “Red Stripes on the American Flag! Bob Dylan and the Cold War”

Ernest Suarez (The Catholic University of America): “Myth-Making, Personae and Performance: The Poetry of Rock during the Cold War”

Narratives

Penny von Eschen (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor): “Di Eagle and Di Bear: Periodizing the Cold War through Music”

Michael Kimmage (The Catholic University of America): “Tom Lehrer and the Power of Cold War (Musical) Comedy”

Matthias Tischer (University of Neu Brandenburg): “What Was the Cold War Musically”

Concluding Discussion

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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