

Uta G. Poiger. *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. xiii, 333 pp.

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Over the last several years, cultural historians have looked to jazz music as a way of talking about national identity. For historians of the United States, the logic is easy to understand. Jazz is, unquestionably, an integral part of the American story. But more importantly, as historians continue to rework the narrative of U.S. history to incorporate the issue of race more completely, jazz must be discussed as a crucial point of connection between whites and blacks in this country. To exclude jazz—not just as a musical form, but as a cultural phenomenon—would be historically inaccurate, and it would give a skewed view of how American national identity has evolved in the twentieth century.¹

Understanding how jazz fits into definitions of European national identity, however, is a bit trickier. In the U.S., the early popularity of jazz challenged views of America as a country with distinctly “white” and “black” or “high” and “low” cultures that rarely ever met, and the music quickly came to be seen as an essential part of American life (Leonard 1962; Levine 1993). In Europe, however, the consequences of jazz’s popularity were more complicated for critics and cultural commentators—for Europeans, jazz was a “foreign” music. Therefore, it not only evoked conflicts about race and the boundaries between “high” and “low” culture (which were already subject to debate by the 1920s), it also raised questions about “Americanization” and the invasion of foreigners at a time when discussions of national identity had been energized by war and propaganda that saw “others” as enemies. Jazz quickly became a part of the “culture wars” of many countries in the 1920s and 1930s as they tried to renegotiate their sense of nationhood. At that moment, war, Depression, changes in international diplomacy, immigration, and the expansion of a global economy where goods and ideas easily crossed borders, all called older definitions of the nation into question. Jazz did not help to make things clearer. As in the U.S., the early debates about jazz in Europe were rarely only about the music itself. Rather, they doubled as complex attempts to reimagine national identity.

Uta G. Poiger’s book *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels* continues the story of jazz, specifically in the two Germanys, into the post–World War II era. In doing so, she not only gives us an excellent study of German youth culture in the 1950s and 1960s, but she also offers a good example of the ways in which

many cultural historians use music—especially jazz—to talk about the larger issues of the moment. Poiger's central argument concerns the different reactions by West and East Germans—everyone from officials in the government to middle-class families—to the American popular culture that was in such high demand after the war. Both Germanys began the postwar era with an animosity towards American imports because U.S. music, films, and fashions threatened to erode gender, racial, class, and cultural hierarchies that many people believed would restore order to German society after 1945—on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Furthermore, both the East and West wanted to be the bearer of the German nation's culture and identity. Negotiating between the Nazi past that had corrupted conceptions of "Germanness" and the influence of the superpowers, Easterners and Westerners hoped to hold onto what was uniquely German. But they did not believe they could do so when throngs of young people started to wear blue jeans, dance to jazz and rock 'n' roll, and watch dangerous films like *Rebel Without a Cause*, all of which seemed to promote youth rebellion and cultural turmoil.

But, as Poiger tells us convincingly, over time the attitudes of East and West Germans changed in relationship to these imports. Hoping to use the promise of mass consumption and increased leisure as a way of demonstrating the values of liberal democracy and capitalism, West German officials eventually embraced the cultural products of their American ally. Liberal social scientists argued that the youth "rebellions" associated with jazz, rock, and other American cultural forms in the 1950s were not really political—and therefore not dangerous—but rather part of normal, adolescent psychological development. Meanwhile, in the East, officials gradually moved farther away from American culture, claiming that it was a threat to building a socialist society—even though they sometimes tried to use it as a way of attracting recruits to Communist party youth groups.

By discussing the two Germanys in tandem, Poiger offers a rare and valuable picture of the step-by-step divergence between the two sides in the Cold War. However, her use of music—both jazz and rock 'n' roll—is less innovative than instructive about how cultural historians approach music. Here, one must point out the fact that Poiger does not analyze music or its performance. She offers no significant argument about changes in musical style. She gives no technical analysis of what is performed, nor does she utilize a particularly musical vocabulary in talking about jazz, whose styles are described in the most general of terms—"hot," "swing," etc.—with little sensibility to the internal developments within the jazz idiom.

However, none of these sorts of musical discussions fall within the scope of what Poiger has set out to do. The focus of her analysis is on

German culture and its transformations in the early Cold War years as reflected in debates about jazz, something she does well. Where music is concerned, Poiger's attention is drawn to audiences and to how they reacted to what they heard. Consumption and listenership are not necessarily what Poiger looks at; she does not describe in detail the sorts of places in which jazz or rock performances took place, for example, nor does she dwell on changes in how or when people heard music. Instead, the interpretation of jazz and rock is Poiger's point of departure—the interpretations of the young audiences who reveled in jazz and rock, of government officials who hoped to regulate it, and of social scientists who tried to understand it. She does a very good job of getting inside the heads of those who heard this music and describing the ways in which it moved them—both to love and to fear.

A book like Poiger's raises, both for European historians and for jazz scholars, the question of why jazz is a fruitful subject for approaching the question of national identity. Perhaps one reason is precisely because of jazz's "foreignness." Current historical literature about jazz in Europe often centers around the debates that its arrival and popularity provoked among cultural critics, many of whom went far beyond musical issues in their analyses. One of the best examples, of course, is the Nazi response to jazz and their subsequent labeling of it as "degenerate art," along with most other modern artistic creation. As William Kater has shown, the Nazis reviled jazz as much for its connection with particular racial groups—Jews and black Americans—as for its shocking sounds. The music would erode the foundations of German culture, the Nazis feared, and one important part of that culture was German art (Kater 1992). But if the Nazi reaction was extreme, it was not unique. French critics also feared that jazz, precisely because it was a foreign import, threatened music and art that was native (Jackson 1999 and forthcoming).

This larger connection between artistic production and national identity is another important reason why an imported music like jazz is useful to European historians. Europeans are not the only ones to connect art and identity, but it has long been an important way of defining national cultures (Brubaker 1992; Lebovics 1999; de Grazia 1989). Benedict Anderson's influential definition of nations as "imagined communities" suggests—even in the phrase itself—the important role of creative, imaginative activity in shaping national consciousness (Anderson 1991). Although he writes about the ability of the printed word to link people as a nation across time and space, one can just as easily imagine images and songs performing the same task—or, in the case of a foreign music like jazz, threatening such affiliations.² In countries such as Germany, France, and Italy, which have prided themselves on traditions of artistic and musical

production, the popularity of a foreign music like jazz suggests a threat to an integral part of what makes the nation.

One might also ask whether the ways in which Europeans dealt with jazz suggests something else about their national identities. In my own work on France in the 1920s and 1930s, I argue that many musicians and fans began to “make jazz French” by redefining it as something that French musicians, not just Americans, could play. In doing so, I suggest that they lived a definition of the French nation as one that, following in the Enlightenment and Revolutionary traditions, was open to new influences from abroad; national identity was not only inward-looking. Others, too, have looked at European responses to jazz as stories about how those people put jazz to good use as a tool for crafting national identity (Rearick 1997; Tournès 1999).

Poiger’s book also employs this strategy of examining Europeans’ creative responses to the conflict between jazz and national identity. Mirroring an important part of the story of jazz that historians like Neil Leonard and Kathy Ogren have charted in the U.S., Poiger describes how jazz became increasingly “respectable” in West Germany throughout the 1950s and 1960s. “The increasing respectability of jazz,” Poiger writes, “was linked to narrowing definitions of jazz and to redefining the meaning of individual jazz styles—from Dixieland to bebop” (137). As jazz became more commercial and more “refined,” West German critics and parents found less to attack about it. But, she argues, the “taming” of jazz was also linked to the ways in which audiences’ perceptions of jazz were modified, and many of these responses were powerful given the German situation and the anxieties of the day. For example, the critic Joachim Ernst Berendt began to redefine jazz as, at least in part, a “white” music by emphasizing the contributions of Bix Beiderbecke—and by stressing his German heritage. Berendt acknowledged the African American roots of jazz, but talked about the music as a “universalizing experience,” as Poiger puts it (141). Jazz clubs also began to present jazz as an “intellectual” music to be discussed and appreciated by informed listeners, not just danced to in an unthinking, emotional, erotic frenzy. Stripping jazz of its associations with race, sexuality, and juvenile delinquency made it more socially acceptable. And, more importantly, these changing perceptions removed the early fears of Germans that jazz was a force of continuing upheaval at a time when people desired to return to a “normal” life after two World Wars, a crippling Depression, and the horrors of Nazism. Even the early associations between jazz and working-class culture were attenuated, and middle- and upper-class West Germans began to count themselves among its fans. The story of jazz’s acceptability in East Germany was more complicated, moving from doubt to tentative acceptance, to rejection with the hardening of

Cold War animosities. In the East, jazz came to be seen as an American invasion, while in the West, it was “perfect for the new pluralist, postfascist West German society” (165).

Poiger’s prose is, at times, a bit thick, and her analytical framework—centered around numerous interlocking themes all superimposed on the Cold War context—is sometimes hard to follow. Jazz scholars may find this book less interesting since the focus is on Germany, not on jazz, and only one chapter really treats jazz itself in detail. But her contribution to the study of Germany during the Cold War is noteworthy, and those interested in the interplay between music and European national identity will find it rich and rewarding.

Notes

1. Many American historians have been working on the interplay between American culture and jazz, and I can only mention a few here. See, for example, Peretti (1992), Levine (1993), Stowe (1994), Ogren (1989), and Douglas (1995).

2. The link between music and national identity in Europe is growing. See, among other work, Applegate (1998), Weber (1992), Johnson (1995), Mason (1996), Potter (1998), and Jackson (1999).

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