THE COLD WAR AND AMERICAN MUSIC, 1945-2000

Conference at the Center for Advanced Studies, Ludwig Maximilian University (LMU) Munich, June 22-23, 2012. Conveners: Michael Kimmage (Catholic University of America), Ernest Suarez (CUA), Berndt Ostendorf (LMU), Christof Mauch (LMU), Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI). Co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute Washington; Center for Advanced Studies, LMU Munich; Catholic University of America; Lasky Center for Transatlantic Studies. Participants: Amy Beal (University of California, Santa Cruz), Hartmut Berghoff (GHI), George Blaustein (University of Amsterdam), Michelle Engert (University of Munich), Penny von Eschen (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Petra Goedde (Temple University), Martin Lücke (University for Media and Communication, Munich), David Monod (University of Ontario, Canada), Celeste Day Moore (University of Chicago), Uta Poiger (Northeastern University), Helle Porsdam (University of Copenhagen), Wolfgang Rathert (University of Munich), Rüdiger Ritter (University of Bremen), Christian Schmidt-Rost (Free University of Berlin), Matthias Tischer (University of New Brandenburg), Dean Vuletic (European University Institute, Florence), Günter Wagnleitner (Salzburg), Reinhold Wagnleitner (University of Salzburg).

The Cold War and its impact on American music, at home and abroad, were the organizing motifs of this conference, which focused on three separate, though inter-related, questions. The first was narrative: How should one write the history of this period and which continuities, turning points, and contradictions deserve the greatest attention? The second question concerned place and genre. How should one understand the proliferating genres and their respective fusions within American music — from jazz to R&B, to rock-and-roll, to folk and classical music — across a geographic and historical continuum? What is the relationship between regionalism and urbanism, on the one hand, and genre hierarchies, on the other? And, given that music was a pivotal aspect of American Cold War diplomacy, in what way was American music produced, received, and assimilated in Europe generally, including the Soviet Union, and in Germany in particular? The third question dealt with the political and cultural dimension: How did Cold War politics shape, or fail to shape, the music history of the postwar era? To what extent did official attempts to promote American culture and foreign policy, though music, succeed beyond American borders? And to what extent is the history of politics and music, in the Cold War, a history of unintended consequences and cultural-political ironies?
By bringing together an international group of scholars from a variety of disciplines, whose expertise encompasses the history of multiple nation states, this conference created a unique opportunity for an interdisciplinary discussion and exchange of ideas. Music was debated as a vehicle for political agitation, satire and cultural critique, and a special emphasis was given to questions of race, ethnicity and authenticity. After a brief introduction by the conveners, Hartmut Berghoff, the director of the German Historical Institute Washington, highlighted the importance of transatlantic intellectual exchange. Cultural and social historian Berndt Ostendorf 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, 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 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 Rudorf, 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, Rudorf assigned them an ambiguous role within the process of cultural production: 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”, Rudorf made use of terminology that evoked a racial logic and ultimately reasserted 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 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 re-conceptualize 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 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 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 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 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”.

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