

RECENT BOOKS

ANATOMY OF JAZZ

WINTHROP SARGEANT's *Jazz, Hot and Hybrid* (Arrow Editions 1938) covers a lot of ground. Most of this is new, and he ploughs it up thoroughly, indicating, however, on every hand whole areas of still virgin territory. The book has a way of convincing the reader by making him feel that he himself is carrying out the explorations and discoveries. Warily Sargeant accustoms one to the idea that notation is essentially inadequate to express musical ideas completely. Then patiently he takes our contemporary folk-music to pieces so that we see what makes it go. He analyzes the component parts, and then establishes beyond a doubt that the controversy over jazz arises from the fact that its most salient features are wholly foreign to Western music.

Theories as to the White or Negro authorship of any particular melody do not concern him since much cross-pollination has of necessity occurred between the two idioms, and responsibility even for a given phrase cannot be determined. What he wants to show is that the Negro race in this country, through tradition and atavism, has added completely new elements to American music, and that these elements can be isolated and catalogued. The best means to settle the widely debated White or Black question, he says, is to listen to the actual performance rather than to read the written versions. Even the most careful notation by a trained musicologist will contain but a few of the elements present in the playing of jazz by Negroes or Whites (through imitation and tradition.) One conclusion here is that polyrhythm or "secondary rag" where the accents of the superimposed rhythm are spaced differently from those of the basic rhythm, (as opposed to simple syncopation, where they are spaced similarly,) existed long before the emergence of jazz or rag-time. This is not even specifically Negro; it is common to Western music. Not the presence of polyrhythm, but the kind it is, namely, three-over-four, stamps a phrase as Negroid. Many examples of Negro

melody are quoted and even some "White" tunes where the three-over-four device figures. This has become such an integral part of our national musical expression that we are likely to accuse the writer of seeing Negro influence even where it is absent. But actually the results of the marriage between the two cultures are everywhere and inescapable. It is important to recognize them: "The characteristic rhythmic patterns of hot jazz melody . . . depend for their effect upon a single rhythmic principle: the interruption of an established regular alternation of strong and weak rhythmic pulses. The interruption is accomplished by the shifting of recognizable, repeated melodic elements from strong to weak positions and vice versa. The elements so shifted in repetition may be dynamic accents, notes, groups of notes, phrases, rhythmic patterns, patterns of melodic movement, particular types of harmonic ornamentation; even tone-colors."

In the actual melodies very little remains of the purely Negro. The early substitution of English for the native languages and the constant exposure to Western harmony have combined to recast the general contours of melody in a Western form. In vocal music there is undoubtedly more left of the African melodic line than in the instrumental passages, but even here in certain cases, as in "breaks" (where for an instant, there is no harmonic background) or when the accompanying chords are held so long that improvisation may go ahead without regard to harmony, one may distinguish melody of purely Negroid inspiration. (Sargeant finds a distinct resemblance between the intonations of a hot trumpet solo and those of Negro speech in general.)

The material on the scalar structure is good, except that no mention appears of what might be called the "blue fifth," a surprising omission, since the tone is sprinkled plentifully through blues recordings where the more "primitive" scales are used. It is generally sung to begin a downward-moving phrase accompanied by chords on the tonic or sub-dominant. And when the true fifth is used in contradistinction later, the accompanying chord is on the dominant.

"Progressional harmony, a principle of purely European origin, has been influenced in a very peculiar manner by the American Negro," says Sargeant. A kind of harmony exists in

present-day West African music. Parallel thirds, for instance, are very common. More noteworthy are dominant seventh and ninth chords, which seem to be preferred to the simple triad. But these can scarcely be considered harmony in our sense, since for us the word implies harmonic progression, whereas in African music it is a static thing, used for effects of contrast with passages in unison.

Once transplanted to America, these seventh and ninth chords become part of a new and relatively involved chordal language which is harmony of the truest kind. The surprising progressions that make up "barbershop" harmony, by which term one can loosely designate jazz harmony, were evolved through banjo fingering, Sargeant suggests. And there seems to be no other explanation to account for the strange chromatic progressions of seventh chords in the music of hillbillies and other rural musicians. The advent of "barbershop" harmony on the printed page, he says, rather than the accredited rhythmical distinctions marks the end of ragtime and the beginning of the jazz age.

As to the form of jazz, that is simple. It is determined by its one psychological purpose—to create a feeling of unrest followed by a sensation of relief. Since the duration of sections where the crucial elements fall on weak accents (thus effecting the first part of the purpose,) can be prolonged almost indefinitely, it is obvious that the element of syncopation invades the field of musical form. This intertwining of psychological effect and rhythmical structure, according to the author, is the main characteristic that separates jazz from Western music. "The situation during the silent pulses is one that challenges the listener to hold his bearings. If he has any sort of rhythmic sense he will not be content to lose himself. If he does not feel the challenge, then he is one of those who will never understand the appeal of jazz." "When the players, dancers and audience alike are hanging desperately to their sense of rhythmic orientation on one hand and are violently disturbing it (or listening to it being disturbed) on the other, the result is jazz in its purest form." To Sargeant jazz is akin to the architecture of the skyscraper. It has a beginning, but its end is something determined not by any system of esthetics or logic, only by practical limitations. It is not created with any

thought of permanence, but rather to fit the needs of the moment. He compares the jazz musician to the Hindu *ustad*, who would surely consider his powers of musical imagination insulted if asked to learn to play a *gath* two times in exactly the same way.

Jazz, Hot and Hybrid is exciting to read. It should be the spark to touch off a whole series of books on subjects briefly indicated therein—Negro vocalization, West Indian and Caribbean Negro music, detailed analyses of the Negro rhythms and prosody of West Africa as compared to those of Negro music of the Western hemisphere. Sargeant himself points out that we need a comprehensive analysis of the collections of African tribal music already available in recordings here in the United States. His own volume is a masterful anatomy of jazz music. To those who may regard so painstaking a work as out of proportion to the value of its subject-matter, Sargeant says: "Jazz does not attempt to sound the profounder depths of human emotion, but it gives a meaningful account of some of its shallows."

■

Wilder Hobson's *American Jazz Music* (W. W. Norton, 1939) could have been pared down to half its size and inserted at the end of Sargeant's book as an appendix. The non-historical material is superficial and inadequate because Hobson attempts to explain jazz without actually showing that he knows what it is himself. His selective list of thirty records is satisfactory enough, but the enthusiastic descriptions are pretty dull. The larger part of the book is given over to a spirited and very readable history of the growth of jazz. Jazz musicians seem to be a strange nomadic tribe of talented and musically undisciplined people destined to produce at most times below their best capacity. As Hobson says there will be good music only if those making it "feel well." The reader may wonder that there is any good swing music at all. That is one of the exciting things about folk-music—it is never guaranteed.

As a reference volume for those who need one, the *Yearbook of Swing*, by Paul Eduard Miller, (Down Beat Publishing Company 1939) can doubtless be of service. It also contains a history of jazz (but only from 1900 on,) a list of the instrumental groups of the past four decades, an extensive biographical section including

most of the important vocal and instrumental performers, a list of records with the personnel of each recording; a rather frightening list of collector's items with prices—often exaggerated, one hopes—that will scare away all but the true devotee (a good many of the records are quoted at \$25); and finally an amusing glossary of contemporary swing terms, wherein the reader may learn that a "spook" is a white performer, a "warden" the secretary of the union, and a "woodpile" a xylophone. Anyone who wants a Grove's Dictionary of Twentieth Century American Folk Music will find it fairly complete right here.

Paul Bowles

THE SOCIAL APPROACH

THE tendency to base the development of art on the economic foundation of society is, though comparatively new, no longer strange to modern science. Since the appearance of the historical materialists in the middle of the last century, many followers have extended their method to philosophy and art. But so far no one has given us a general survey of this complex subject and a really scientific book still remains an unfulfilled need. Franz Mehring's outstanding essays on German writers and his *Die Lessinglegende*, a few very brief essays by Lunatscharsky, and Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*, in spite of new, interesting ideas, have not revealed the essential heart of the matter. This goes also for Russian authors like Pilnjak and Rjazanoff who always deal with the individual artist (Pushkin, Tolstoi), but have never even outlined a method of research. The only study showing an awareness of this problem, is the remarkable and almost unknown book of Lu Maerten, *Wesen und Veränderungen der Formen-Künste*. Here for the first time we have a survey of the content and progress of art according to the development of society.

Music, even more than the other arts has received little sociological consideration. Restricted to a few essays published in Europe and America (by Haba, Eisler, Tchemodanoff, Slonimsky, Seeger), such research needs further and profound study