

## Book Review

– *Tropical Riffs: Latin America and the Politics of Jazz*, by Jason Borge. Duke University Press, 2019

Many a good book begins with a compelling hook, and the one that Jason Borge deploys is the Ken Burns’s documentary, *Jazz* (PBS, 2001), the epic ten-episode, self-styled tribute to “America’s classical music” that, as Borge rightly points out, all but omits the contributions of Latin American musicians to the genre’s development. Even as Borge adds his voice to the chorus of viewers critical of the documentary’s various omissions, his book, focused as it is on the musings of jazz commentators rather than the activities of musicians, does little to set *that* particular record straight. But, as the reader soon figures out, locating and crediting the contributions of Latin American musicians to the evolution of jazz, is not really the task that Borge sets for himself.

What Borge does offer the reader in *Tropical Riffs* is an exceptional opportunity to view the rise of jazz in Latin America primarily through the rarified lens of jazz critics who were active from the 1920s through the 1960s. This “lettered minority,” we learn, regarded jazz with profound ambivalence. On one hand, these critics viewed the rapid proliferation of identifiably Black American syncopated dance music as imbued with great emancipatory potential, offering a chance to break with the past even as it threatened to erode the moral standards and, especially, racial hierarchies of the day. Borge’s study of jazz discourse within the Latin American context, on the other hand, reveals a further layer of complexity in which the music’s perceived association with the United States imperialist adventures of that epoch had a significant impact on the way it came to be understood, appreciated, and in some cases rejected, all of which, this reviewer would suggest, points to a decidedly Latin American response to the jazz craze of the 1920s and thereafter. To develop these arguments, Borge brings his considerable talent and experience in literature and film studies to set out the viewpoints (and often bitter debates) of this very special class of literati whose body of writings, were they examined by a less-capable scholar might well come across as trite, petty, and pretentious.

Writing in a style generally free of academese while bolstering the book’s music criticism-driven analysis with his own criticism of an assortment of jazz-

inspired films, iconography, poetry, novels, and song lyrics, Borge provides a rich and nuanced portrait of the cultural importance and social and political meaning given to jazz during the tumultuous decades of pre- and post-War Latin America, a time in which populist nationalism and predominantly right-wing governments and military dictatorships were on the rise.

Organized largely by geography rather than chronology, the book begins with a useful introduction of some of its more salient themes. Jumping back and forth between France, Mexico, and New York, the first chapter shows how jazz was celebrated as a vehicle of modernity at the same time that it was viewed as source of racial tension, if not “contamination,” as well as yet another form of “yanqui cultural invasion” (29). Moving southward to Argentina in the second chapter, Borge shows that for jazz-loving Argentine commentators, the music’s association with Black American musicians was fundamental to its perceived aesthetic power and authenticity. In this context, some Argentine jazz musicians adopted African American-inspired personas – singer “Blackie” (Paloma Efron) being a case in point – even as jazz, the United States, and musical fusions in general provided a refuge for some of the country’s more adventurous and internationally acclaimed musicians, such as Lalo Schiffrin, Gato Barbieri, and Astor Piazzolla.

In Chapter 3 we encounter Brazil during the surge of populist nationalism where anti-American sentiment was widespread and intense. Here, Borge deftly draws the reader into a series of debates with unexpected consequences, perhaps none more surprising than the case of jazz commentator, José Sanz’s impassioned advocacy of jazz as a squarely black American – never-to-be Brazilian – musical production. For a Brazil that was then in the throes of a rightwing populist dictatorship, the circumscribed love for jazz expressed by Sanz, it would seem, could be as effective a deterrent to the national embrace of a music as would be unbridled proscription.

With the northward expansion of *danzón*, mambo, and an assortment of exciting and endlessly protean dance music that would form the foundation of “Latin jazz,” Cuba became the Latin American country with the most persuasive claim to have played an early and sustained role in the development of jazz. Yet, as we see in Borge’s fourth chapter, the rise of Cuban music as a cultural force was inextricably connected to cultural and economic currents centered in Mexico and New York. Moreover, this development was crucial to the way Cuban and American jazz critics viewed and debated and went on to embrace or reject Latin jazz before and during Cuba’s revolutionary period.

The book concludes with Borge proposing that even during the years of the genre’s inevitable decline in popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, it was jazz’s more esoteric offshoots – free jazz, notably – that, in fact, found favour among critics writing in pockets of Latin America where the music’s association with American black militancy resonated more generally with local discourses of resistance.

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Borge's focus on discourse rather than music often leads him to group into one overriding generic category, "jazz," a host of variegated musical practices with innumerable subgenres, individual styles, and aesthetic preferences. For this reason, the reader would benefit from a description of what passed for "jazz" in the various historical junctures and sites Borge examines, the better to understand the responses it provoked. Similarly, the musically-focused among his readers – ethnomusicologists, historical musicologists, and jazz connoisseurs among them – would certainly wish to know to what extent the musings, debates, and stated likes and dislikes of the jazz critics, poets, and authors Borge examines actually impacted the performance choices of jazz musicians or influenced the consumption habits of contemporary audiences. These, however, are minor critiques of what is otherwise a very well-researched and well-written study of jazz discourse as it was developed by what is today, a frequently overlooked group of a passionately opinionated and politically engaged Latin American public intellectuals.

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