Textualization, Simultaneity, and Everyday Life in West German Jazz, 1945-1955

Michael Schmidt

This paper outlines the advent of a public “jazz art world” in West Germany during the 1950s and the cultural-economic transformations that accompanied it. After the end of the Second World War, an ardent group of German “hot” clubs devoted themselves to the transformation of the definition of jazz. The ideas of these groups, largely limited to private gatherings in the late 1940s, broke out into the wider West German public during the 1950s and, by the early 1960s, had become the cultural dominant. Hot clubs remolded jazz not just through the force of their arguments, but by building an interconnected network of discourse, media, and institutions. Over the course of ten years, they constructed an extensive web of concerts, radio programs, clubs, journals, and festivals from Frankfurt to West Berlin.

As the jazz world grew in West Germany, there was also an explosion of textual material on jazz. Jazz texts by “hot” club advocates, once relatively rare, became ubiquitous. West German writers propagating this new jazz idea churned out articles, biographies, and histories and local publishing houses printed new translations of English, French, and American jazz literature. In consequence, jazz became increasingly textualized.

During the same period, the West German jazz market achieved a type of simultaneity with the American jazz world. During the “hunger years” of the late 1940s, East and West Germans had little access to the contemporary sound of the American jazz scene. Their sonic universe was caught in a time lag and they continued to listen to records produced in the 1920s and 1930s at a moment when Charlie Parker and Lennie Tristano were poignantly altering the language of improvisation. As more and more recent American recordings became available after 1953, the sound of jazz in Germany became increasingly synchronized with what was happening on 52nd street in New York and Central Avenue in Los Angeles.

Together, these two developments endowed jazz with new perceptual characteristics in the mid-1950s. The way that sound and text combined during this period formed a new transatlantic temporality in popular music. As such, jazz bears witness to the shifting aesthetics of the growing West German consumer economy during its “miracle” years.