

DEFINING JAZZ REVISITED – TAKING A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO THE CHARACTERISATION OF JAZZ

ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders the definition of jazz as a case study in relation to how a musical genre is constituted through narratives of culture and identity in musical culture. Rethinking the definition of jazz as a way of characterisation through a social constructionist approach, this article will provide a discussion of the academic literature of jazz and how jazz has been characterised throughout history in an American context. The discussion presented is divided into three sections. First, a short outline of the term 'jazz' and its origin. Second, providing a historiography of how literature has defined jazz through time with a thematization on different aspects of the nature of jazz and genre. Here jazz culture is discussed in relation to American cultural heritage, setting the focus on the relationship between multiple discourses of jazz through history. Finally, this article discusses the concept of jazz from a social constructionist perspective and examines how constructions of a genre formation of jazz are characterised by ideas about the social. It is argued that 'characterisations of jazz' are central to such genre-definitions and are as tightly bound to social context as they are to attributes of music.

INTRODUCTION

Jazz is a multi-faceted phenomenon. As noted by Gridley, Maxham and Hoff (1989), jazz has many definitions, which is a view shared by Johnson (1993, 2002b), Stokes (2000), and Gabbard (2002). Regardless of this lack of consensus about what jazz is, there is a substantial body of knowledge that can be applied to understanding jazz and how certain characterisations¹ of jazz are perceived. Also in the case of studying such perceptions of jazz, the literature on jazz and its history has

¹ I prefer to apply the term 'characterisations' throughout this article. I would argue that the term 'definitions' refers to the 'exact meaning' of jazz or aims at specifying distinctly, what jazz is. Since this article argues from a constructionist perspective that jazz is in constant flux, such a definition is not possible. Instead, the term 'characterisations' refers to descriptions or portrayals of the characteristics or the qualities that construct what jazz is.

helped shape the music itself and the manner in which it is perceived, as well as its place in particularly American culture.

While it could be argued that disagreements about how jazz ought to be defined are now largely an academic concern, musicians, critics, and members of the music industry were the principal actors throughout the twentieth century in trying to formulate what defines jazz. In addition, jazz has been examined for the purpose of understanding its musical elements and constructions (Chilton, 1979; Berliner, 1994; Monson, 1996) as well as to authenticate it as an American cultural practice (Herskovits, 1941; Goffin, 1944; Finkelstein, 1948, Feather, 1949; Mellers, 1965; Southern, 1971; Jost, 1982). Some have sought to explore jazz as a source of liberation (Bernhard, 1927; Newton, 1959 et al.), while others have studied jazz history (Ramsey & Smith, 1939; Hobson, 1939; Blesh & Grossman, 1950; Ulanov, 1950; Hodier, 1956, 1962; Stearns, 1956; Schuller, 1968, 1989; Collier, 1978; Shipton, 2001). Still others have described jazz and its values and dimensions through biographies and autobiographies (Mezzrow & Wolfe, 1946; Condon, 1946, Armstrong, 1955; Shapiro & Hentoff, 1955; Holiday, 1956; Bechet, 1960; Foster, 1971; Murray, 1976; Gitler, 1985, et al.) and jazz has also been reviewed in the context of its blues roots (Charters, 1959; Oliver, 1969; Jones, 1963, 1967).

As this article argues, defining jazz is an impossible task, especially if a typological musicologist approach is adopted (see also Krogh 2006 for a discussion of musical genre) as is mostly the case. Firstly, since jazz is constantly in flux, it has no definitive form or character. Secondly, as jazz reaches beyond the boundaries of musical definition, the determination of what should and should not be defined as jazz would require problematic or impossible distinctions. To avoid these pitfalls, this article will not discuss what *defines* jazz. Instead, it addresses the reliance of characterisations of jazz on both musical and social categories. It argues that this is a more useful approach to the subject of the genre of jazz. However, first a short account of the term 'jazz' is necessary to understand the construct itself.

JAZZ?

According to some historians, the term 'jazz' was borrowed from the game of baseball and referred to the way in which the ball was thrown by the pitcher (Zimmer 2012). Later on, it was transferred to a state of mind induced by music. When author F. Scott Fitzgerald introduced 'the jazz age' in the 1920s (Fitzgerald, 1922), his use of the term 'jazz' was a reflection of a lifestyle or attitude. In other words, one did not have to know anything about the music in order to understand the meaning of 'jazz'. His writings were about a perception of the 1920s as a period of large and significant changes when the public were on their way towards freedom after the end of the First World War. Just three years before the 1920s commenced, a 'white' band called The Original Dixieland Jazz Band applied the term 'jazz' to their first recording in 1917. With their compositions 'Livery Stable Blues' and 'Original Dixieland One-Step', they became the first artists in history to make a 'jazz' recording, and with one million copies of this recording sold, the word 'jazz' became known in many parts of the world. As Fordham notes (1993), The Original Dixieland Jazz Band did not invent jazz; they had been listening to musicians emerging from Storyville in New Orleans. However, the point is that jazz was not a term used by the public, the critics or the musicians until The Original Dixieland Jazz Band had their breakthrough in 1917 (Fordham, 1993). Before that, no one had shown a particular interest in that kind of music, which, at the time, probably resembled a mixture of military music, religious hymns, blues, and music hall-songs. Fordham further argues that jazz was perhaps best described as the work songs of railroad workers, cotton pickers, or dock labours. It might have derived from European music exposed to ragtime; even travelling minstrel shows could have been a part of what created jazz and formed its origins (Fordham, 1993). Most of these characteristics of jazz in terms of its origin emphasized that it was a product of West African culture, which had then been brought together with a European culture that suppressed African civilisation. Such conflicts were also reflected in jazz as a hybrid of two old civilisations that were combined in the creation of a new world order (Shipton 2001).

To give another example, Krin Gabbard's (2002), comments in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz* regarding the term 'jazz' are illustrative of the ways in which characterisations of jazz are informed by a diversity of discourses. He states that "the term is routinely applied to music that has as little

in common as an improvisation by Marilyn Crispell² and a 1923 recording by King Oliver³ and his Creole Jazz Band” (p. 1). He also points out that if we refer to something as jazz, it may have much more to do with the utterances of critics, journalists, record companies, and club owners than with the music itself (2002).

What these contradictory perceptions of jazz illustrate is that from early on, the characterisation of jazz was a site for the contestation of meaning, genre, and definition as constituted within and infused by various discourses of jazz. As will be discussed throughout this article, despite the established history of jazz and its musically recognisable periods, such as New Orleans jazz, the swing era, bebop and cool, west coast influences etc. (for a full description of the history of jazz see also Shipton 2001, DeVeaux & Giddens 2015) critics, scholars, and musicians still argue about what constitutes jazz.

To provide a further depiction of the versatile constructions of jazz throughout its history, this article moves forward by reviewing existing jazz literature on how jazz have been characterised, also to highlight some of the problematics of jazz and how it is defined, which this article seeks to avoid.

CHARACTERISATIONS OF JAZZ THROUGH TIME - A LITERARY REVIEW

Despite the overall agreement that jazz is associated with American culture as mentioned in the previous part, jazz has been characterised from many different perspectives and using many different approaches. Most of these approaches have been musical. This article would argue that the question of *what jazz is* has been one of the most significant influences on jazz music and culture. In the process of identifying jazz, much of the literature has tried to state what jazz is.

One of the first examples, dating back to the early years of jazz, is Henry O. Osgood's *So This Is Jazz* (1926). The very beginning of the book features a full-page portrait of Paul Whiteman to go along

² Marilyn Crispell (1977- present) is an American jazz pianist and composer inspired by the experimental music (avant-garde) of John Coltrane and Cecil Taylor et. al.

³ Joe 'King' Oliver (1881 – 1938) was a Chicago based American cornet player in the early days of jazz. Leading his own 'Creole Jazz Band', and most famous for having mentored Louis Armstrong.

with the title, so initially the reader is presented with a certain categorisation of what jazz is before reading the book, which favours 'white' jazz as opposed to the African American jazz. In his concluding comments, Osgood addresses the future of jazz and asks "Will there arise a super-Gershwin to develop it (jazz red.) far, far away from its faults?" (1926, p. 250). Thus, *this is jazz* refers to its Western European influences. Lillian Erlich's book *What Jazz Is All About* (1963) gives another characterisation of jazz. This historical account touches upon the 'deep roots' of jazz, being 'born in slavery', 'The Blues story', 'New Orleans', and the 'Bob revolution'. Again, the first pages feature a portrait, but here it is of blues legends Leadbelly and Big Bill Broonzy, from which we might infer that there is a pattern connecting authors' statements about the definition of jazz and the photos they choose as illustrations. Nat Hentoff is more all-inclusive in his book *Jazz Is* (1976), although he still mainly deals with the world of jazz of the Americans, primarily 'black' Americans. By way of contrast, in Johnny King's book *What Jazz is* (1997), contemporary jazz bass player Christian McBride states:

Make no mistake, this music is for everyone! Black, white, young, and old. Jazz is not an exclusive, elite club. You can listen to your Snoop Doggy Dog, your Pearl Jam, your Garth Brooks, and your Mozart, but add a little Ellington, Basie, or Coltrane to your life. I promise you will re-discover yourself! (McBride in King, 1997, p. x)

Even though McBride remains very non-racial in his articulations about jazz and *what jazz is*, it could still be claimed that jazz is highly characterised by 'colour' as his choice of exemplary jazz musicians for all 'races' to listen to are all African Americans.

As previously presented, Osgood (1926) and Erlich (1963) characterise jazz as 'black' or 'white'. Another book that includes such categorisations of jazz is Panish's *The Colour Of Jazz* (1997), which deals with race and representation in post-war American Culture. Here the dispute regarding jazz as a 'black' or 'white' genre reads:

Like the figure of Charlie Parker, jazz performance is a significant site of conflict between African and Euro American literary representations. Because of its indisputable importance to jazz, "live performance" – that is, musicians working in front of an audience on the street, in a club or theater, at a celebration, or anywhere else – figures prominently in the literary uses and depictions of jazz and

jazz musicians by both African and Euro Americans. A comparison of these uses and depictions, however, reveals significant differences between the two kinds of texts...of two aspects of jazz performance: the relationship between the musicians and the audience, and relationships among the players themselves (1997, p. 79).

This illustrates how literary representations of jazz highlight the distinction between African American and Western European jazz. So far in this section, only literature about jazz which set out to include such 'distinctions of characterisation' in the actual title has been discussed. But as this article argues, the issue of how jazz should be defined has to some extent always been dealt with in what literature has said about jazz through history - but mostly in terms of the *music*.

Eddie Condon's book *We Called It Music* (1948) is just one example. It is a collection of his memories and a recollection of his many friendships with the who's who of jazz, discussing 'jazz' in musical terms. Since a significant part of jazz literature is based on musical biographical work such as Condon's, characterisations of jazz seem to naturally dwell on such foundations. Although Dom Cerulli, Burt Korall and Mort Nasatir's book is called *The Jazz Word* (1960), it also dwells on the musical foundations of jazz, mostly discussing writings about the music and mentioning Condon as an example. However, literary categories of 'fiction', 'poetry' and 'humor' also become attached to the word 'jazz', somehow beginning to expand the meaning of jazz beyond the musical categories. Cerulli, Korall and Nasatir state:

AS LONG [sic] as jazz is played, words will be written about it. The music itself resists easy definition. Jazz writing, like the playing of the music, can be heated, complex, simple, imaginative, stolid, narrow, ungrammatical, even dull. It is almost invariably writing of the moment. For in jazz, the music is here-and-now; the performance is one-time-only. The writer constantly strives to record the personality of the men, the essence of their music. (1960, p. 9)

This adds other aspects to the previously discussed literature. Apparently jazz is not just to be considered a musical category; it is also about the personality of people. Wilber & Webster (1987) has taken this even further in *Music Was Not Enough*, where they indicate that jazz as a genre relates to both musical and social categories: jazz is not just about a musical essence but also about the lives of those who played it.

Travelling cross-country to seek out and interview jazz musicians of various strands and origin and getting them to tell their own life stories is a well-known method employed by authors of jazz literature. Such jazz biographical work also includes titles that invoke jazz as something other than music. Valerie Wilmer's book *Jazz People* (1970) and Graham Collier's *Inside Jazz* (1973) try to get to grips with the "inside of the jazz musician" (p. 95). Joachim E. Berendt's and William Claxton's *Jazz Life* (2006) describes their journey across America in 1960. In these works, jazz is about the people playing jazz and living 'a jazz life'.

Jazz has also been studied as a reflection of the social, for example, as a representation of African American social reality (Jones, 1963, 1967; Kofsky, 1970, Sidran, 1971). Jones (1963, 1967) insists that jazz is more than music: it is an expression of culture translated into music. This perspective is also shared by Collier's (1993) study of jazz as an African American musical expression (Collier, 1993). According to Collier, jazz is an American music that could only have originated in America. Relatedly, it is also worth mentioning Erik Porter's *What Is this Thing called Jazz* (2002), which includes a rich analysis of the African American music tradition and its history in America.

There have also been a number of specialized studies of jazz history. Stowe (1994) suggested that swing music and American society could be perceived as a unison during the 1930s and 1940s. Bebop was described by Thomas Owens' *Bebop* (1995) and Scott DeVeaux's *The Birth of Bebop* (1997): Owens provides a musicologist's analysis of the music, whereas DeVeaux provides a more cultural and social historical account. Ted Gioia (1992) and David H. Rosenthal (1992) have written about west coast jazz and hard bop, while other important contributions also include Lewis Porter's and Michael Ullman's *Jazz: From its Origin to the Present* (1993) and Gioia's *The History of Jazz* (1997).

Still, what these different historical and personal accounts of jazz have in common is the search for a fixed definition, no matter whether jazz is attributed musical or social categories. However, as both stated in the very beginning of this article and through various literary examples, jazz is a multi-faceted phenomenon and is therefore very elusive of a clear and fixed definition. Thus, there

is a need to move beyond such typological musicologist approaches when trying to characterise what jazz is. The underlying contention of this article is that jazz is more than a musical genre. Jazz also relates to the social, and this can be analysed through new theories and frameworks of understanding.

TAKING A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO JAZZ

In the 1928 July issue of *The Forum*, George Antheil wrote an article headlined 'Jazz Is Music'. In the following August 1928 issue, Sigmund Spaeth wrote in response that 'Jazz is Not Music'. He stated that jazz was not so much a musical form as a way of making music. Henry Osgood's *So This Is Jazz* (1926), which has already been mentioned, similarly talked about jazz as something more than a musical form. He stated that "it is the spirit of the music, not the mechanics of its frame or the characteristics of the superstructure built upon that frame, that determines whether or not it is jazz" (pp. 26). These early examples indicate the difficult 'nature' of jazz and its characterisation(s). Max Harrison's description of the notion of jazz in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980) seems to support this: "Attempts at a concise – even coherent definition of jazz have invariably failed" (pp. 561). In addition to Harrison's point, it might be concluded that the term 'jazz' may draw on an extensive repertoire of past experiences in order to understand situations and develop possibilities for effective action, which again would make it impossible to define jazz simply as music.

In part, theories of jazz and genre can be interpreted in terms of people's cognitive interests, where cognitive interest determines what individuals accept as knowledge and ways of collecting knowledge. In the article at hand, this translates into how we characterise jazz. Gridley, Maxham and Hoff (1989) used the construct of definition to explain these 'theories of jazz'. Concerned with how jazz should be defined, their article *Three Approaches to Defining Jazz* is one of the only examples of authors directly engaging in such categorisation work regarding the term 'jazz'. They propose three different approaches to defining jazz, admitting that "none of them is entirely satisfactory, but each has virtues that the others lack" (pp. 513). *Strict Definition* requires improvisation to be present. The "*Family Resemblance*" Approach argues that because no common element is shared by all styles of jazz, a certain style of jazz should be defined by the

other styles of jazz it resembles and differs from. That is, jazz is categorised according to resemblance to previous known styles of music that have been defined as jazz. Gridley et al's final category is *Approaching Jazz as a Dimension*, which states that the more the criteria of the previous two approaches are fulfilled, the more a particular performance qualifies as jazz. A point of criticism would be that none of these three approaches considers jazz as anything other than a musical genre⁴, which could also explain why none of these ways of defining jazz appears to fit the music which has been labelled jazz in the existing literature. However, Maxham, Gridley and Hoff do account for which musical categories they see as a yardstick for 'defining' jazz, which is more than could be said of most literature on jazz.

In general, when people have applied the term jazz to hundreds of different situations, they do not necessarily articulate categories to define circumstances of what and how to understand jazz. Instead, writers, scholars, critics, journalists and musicians define jazz within the situations they enter. This would also seem to explain how the categories people often choose to define jazz are conceived and provide a script for their actions. However this proves problematic in the sense that it becomes highly subjective - and thus no singular definition will ever be able to capture what jazz is, which in addition could also be argued is a good thing. Gridley, Maxham and Hoff (1989) attempt to avoid this defining paradox of jazz:

The term "jazz" has always been particularly problematic. Even its origins are in dispute, and it has been used in widely disparate ways. This has caused endless controversy, much of which is probably needless. Numerous books on the subject do not even offer a definition of the term. When a definition has been attempted, the results have often been confusing. (pp. 513)

Gridley, Maxham and Hoff not only note that defining jazz is problematic but also that the literature on defining jazz is diverse and draws on a range of different positions, which this article has previously shown examples of. This adds to the 'confusion'. Gridley, Maxham and Hoff suggest that common to the 'defining' approach to jazz is the view that people become trapped into 'single definition thinking'; they seek unity of definition and this limits their ability to respond to

⁴ More recent studies have argued that improvisation is often understood as a collective and social practice (see Berliner, 1994; Monson 1996), however Gridley, Maxham and Hoff, identifies the term 'improvisation' only as a musical category.

these problems of jazz and jazz understanding in novel and creative ways. They claim that “lay use of the term [jazz] have been so confused and inconsistent that [...] popular issues remain unresolved, pending a clear and consistently applied definition for jazz” (pp. 515). It could be claimed that the authors themselves unfortunately become victims of the very same pitfalls of single definitions which they argue against: jazz will not fit into a single definition. Even though Gridley, Maxham and Hoff raise some of these issues, the problems of defining jazz also becomes apparent in their conclusion, in which they suggest that each approach to defining jazz applies to different ‘receivers’. This means that to scholars, the public and jazz fans, any single definition of jazz is inadequate. Hence, the versatility of jazz, of which, now returning to Krin Gabbard (2002) has also argued:

Jazz is a construct. Nothing can be called jazz simply because of its ‘nature’. Musical genres such as the military march, opera and reggae are relatively homogeneous and easy to identify. By contrast the term jazz is routinely applied to musics that have as little in common as an improvisation by Mary Crispell and a 1923 recording by King Oliver and his Creole Jazz Band. (pp. 1)

Such issues indicate that the concept of jazz and its construction/definition is problematic, since the concept of jazz is underpinned by a belief in idealism with regards to the connection between thought and action. At the heart of constructions of jazz lies an almost ‘schizophrenic’ condition: first, it is believed that it is possible to stand outside jazz and describe it objectively; second, it is assumed that there is a single ‘real’ phenomenon called jazz of which there are many differing and competing views; and third, no one yet has got it right. A subjectivist position would have it that those who have postulated definitions of jazz before have not really understood what jazz is about.

The position taken in the article at hand is that characterisations of jazz based on social rather than musical characteristics may offer a way of avoiding some of the problems related to the ways we define jazz. Johnson (1993; 2002a, 2002b), Kernodle (1997), Bennett (2001), and Behling (2010) have described ways in which jazz is characterised by other aspects than just musical categories. This has helped in the exploration of new approaches to the study of jazz through the development of frameworks that revolve around the social and around the processes of

respecifying jazz and its characterisation. In the article at hand, the focus on jazz as a social category and identity is taken a step further through a social constructionist approach. This framework provides an understanding of how people accept certain knowledge and the means for forming knowledge about what characterises jazz. It is argued that talk about jazz is highly rich in characterisation work: characterisations of what jazz is; characterisations of what jazz is for; characterisations of how to be a jazz musician; characterisations of others; and, characterisations of the self. A central contention of this article is that beliefs about the 'nature of jazz' influence the identity of those engaged with jazz. Characterisations of jazz through history as shown in this article, for example, affect the way authenticity in jazz is perceived, conducted, and assessed according to individual identity. These are understandings of what jazz is. It is also held that the process of characterising jazz is paramount in constructing beliefs about jazz (and identity) in social structures, making it constitutive.

In building an understanding of the genre of jazz as a social phenomenon, and thus of what people/speakers see as appropriate ways of defining jazz, it is important to give consideration to the context of jazz. The importance of a social context in the study of the jazz genre is also argued by a number of scholars (Knauer, 1993; Johnson, 1993, 2002b; Gabbard, 1995, 2002). In addition, Ulanov (1979) makes an important statement:

In jazz identity is everything. The marks by which we recognize a player or a singer are the form or content of the music. As in almost no other art, individual identity shapes the structure of jazz. It obsesses the player or singer and haunts his or her audience (pp. 245)

These scholars emphasise the importance of making connections between characterisations of jazz and understandings of its social context. The social context relates to the situation, background, or environment in which jazz 'is happening', and also in which, as is argued here, jazz is renegotiated. In particular, it is the people that are involved in jazz (members/players/musicians) who define jazz in relation to their own social context. This encourages a fresh perspective in examining jazz and how it is characterised; it also allows innovative understandings of jazz to emerge.

CONCLUSIONS

It could be argued that there is a need to move beyond the musical/stylistic definitions which have been the focus of much earlier work and to recognize to a greater extent the social nature of jazz. This perspective entails an investigation of the contested nature of jazz, and it is argued that this problem is better examined from a qualitative social constructionist perspective than from that of a (traditional) pragmatic formalist approach to musicology. Consequently, in this article it is chosen to apply a discursive approach that does not view 'jazz' as characterised purely in terms of its musical characteristics, but as constructed in terms of social identity.

Positioning this perspective in relation to existing work allows for the identification of weaknesses in the literature which the approach in this article attempts to avoid. As previously mentioned, 'Three Approaches to Defining Jazz' by Mark Gridley, Robert Maxham, and Robert Hoff (1989) may be seen as one of the only articles that has directly addressed how we should characterise jazz. Each of the three authors described a framework that they saw as definitional for what should and should not be categorised as jazz. This, in turn, led to characterisations that were only concerned with musical stylistic essence, disregarding any social context which might have had consequences for the ways in which jazz was portrayed. However, the article does take the individual into consideration. For example, Gridley's 'strict definition' stipulates that 'a musician's playing needs to elicit swing feeling from his listeners in order to qualify the player as a jazz musician' (1989, p. 517). Such examples also illustrate that the figure of the individual and the validity of his claim to be an 'authentic' jazz musician are both positioned through language in which jazz is characterised.

This article is meant to illustrate a social constructionist approach to jazz and genre and how writings about jazz have constructed certain 'meanings' of jazz that have enabled people to achieve a common understanding of jazz. It could be claimed that the objective of every jazz writer is to define a reality of jazz (a 'definition') in a way that becomes meaningful to others. If this effort succeeds, their contributions affect the cognitive structures of others. This sort of shared conceptualisation of jazz guides how jazz should be defined, or as this article argues, plays an important role in how jazz is characterised. It is this kind of reciprocal process that enable people in a jazz community to construct meanings that lead toward a common understanding of

jazz.

Johnson (1993, pp. 1) has suggested that “appropriate ways of talking about jazz” may in fact reshape how jazz is negotiated. He writes:

To a greater extent than other forms of popular or folk music, jazz (which has been called both), has proven difficult to situate in a cultural cartography, a point acknowledged by, inter alia, Simon Frith: 'At first glance the distinction between...high and popular culture, seems sharper, but even here there are problems- how should post-war jazz be classified? (Frith, 1986, p. 54). The problem as expressed by Roger Taylor is that jazz 'lies on the borders of art music (Taylor, 1978, p. 93). The attempt to find appropriate discursive models therefore takes its writers across the whole spectrum of critical commentary, from street argot and the breathlessness of the gossip column, to the academic language of high Modernism. In the process it is frequently falsified, deformed out of recognition (pp. 1)

In this view, it is stated that jazz is not easy to situate. Jazz builds on multiple understandings that every 'writer' of jazz constructs: a personal position on the term jazz that either contributes clarity to the characterisation of jazz - or muddies the waters.

Within characterisations of jazz it is still necessary for this article to bring together such diverging positions on jazz so that a holistic identity, a shared vision and a set of values can be discussed. According to much of the literature presented here, jazz can be conceptualized as both musical and social. Thus, there is more to jazz than its musical and genre dimensions. Some researchers have studied these individual differences between the musical and the social dimensions, but not as characterisations of jazz *per se*, even though the notion of developing this perspective on jazz as a personal/social identity is frequently evident in research on jazz (Jones, 1963, 1967; Kofsky, 1970; Sidran, 1971; Taylor, 1986). Instead, jazz is expressed in the form of 'standards' or as lists of musical categories, such as swing, improvisation etc. (Gridley, Maxham and Hoff, 1989 et al.) On the other hand, the impact that a social construct has on jazz is evident in writings such as Collier's (Collier, 1993), in which jazz can only be African American; here, the objective is for jazz to achieve the clearly identified 'attributes' that are related to the social/cultural practices of the African American.

Also, statements such as Ulanov's (1979): "In jazz identity is everything..." (pp. 245), encourage the reader to view jazz and definitions of jazz from the perspective of identity and the social. This perspective has also led to the development of this article's point of departure. A discursive social constructionist view of jazz has been adopted in that it emphasises how people in general generate and come to accept knowledge about their world. This adoption of a constructionist view of jazz requires the belief that jazz translates into a social meaning-making process that occurs in groups of people who are engaged in some activity together. Here, characterisations of jazz can be seen as something that speakers use interactively to make sense, to construct meaning. However, while it is accepted in this article that jazz is often characterised by a shared meaning, such as its African American roots, the way in which jazz collectives choose to position themselves within such discourses of jazz *also* becomes a way of constructing an individual and group identity. Jazz most evidently becomes more than a collective musical genre. Instead, it becomes a way for collectives to 'define' themselves through a discourse of jazz as an identity and as a social practice.

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