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Jason Borge, *Tropical Riffs: Latin America and the Politics of Jazz*

Durham (North Carolina), Duke University Press, 2018

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Jason Borge, *Tropical Riffs: Latin America and the Politics of Jazz*, Durham (North Carolina), Duke University Press, 2018, 266 p.

- 1 Jazz is considered by many to be *the* quintessential form of American music. Some may even go as far as to call it “America’s classical music.”¹ However, the black and white binary that pervades race relations in the United States has obscured the role of Latin American interpreters of jazz within its nationalist rhetoric. Ken Burns’ *Jazz*, the ten-part PBS documentary series released in 2001, was a major cultural turning point in the United States. A moving tribute to the triumph of African Americans over adversity, it positioned jazz as a symbol of a true American democratic ethos. But for all of its technical brilliance and beautifully woven narrative, *Jazz* was really a nostalgic, politically simplistic rendering of an artform that was much more complex and transnational in scope than its producers were willing to admit. In order to distinguish jazz as a legitimately American music, its connections with Latin America had to be severed from jazz’s grand narrative, despite clear geographical and cultural proximities. When Latin musicians do receive recognition for their contributions, their music is diminutively labeled as *Latin Jazz*. This severance had an equal but opposite reaction in Latin America. Because of its association with the United States, jazz has received an ambivalent, and at times rather contentious, reception in Latin American critical analyses. *Tropical Riffs: Latin America & the Politics of Jazz* by Jason Borge is an exploration of Latin American cultural discourses surrounding jazz during the early to mid-twentieth century.

- 2 Jazz has had a profound effect upon the construction of emerging modern identities and (trans)national imaginaries in Latin America over the course of the twentieth century. Borge argues that jazz in Latin America has functioned “as a vital touchstone, bearing the risks and benefits of modernization, hemispheric geopolitics, and transnational cultural production” (p. 9) and that it has played the role of a ‘kindred foil’: “an object of strange familiarity at odds with [nationalist] ideological goals yet deeply resonant with local populations at social and affective levels.” (p. 5) On one hand, jazz represented the encroachment of American imperialist dominance over the region, and with it the vulgarity of consumer capitalism and the loosening of moral values and sexual prohibitions. But on the other, it was recognized for its emancipatory potential to renegotiate complex racial and ethnic alterities, to breakdown longstanding sexual taboos, and to rectify vast material inequities. Jazz appealed to the Aristotelian notion of the “Good Life,” the promise of modernity, and the acquisition of global citizenship. These tensions are illustrated within the case studies of Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba, with special attention to the dominant role the Mexican film industry. Latin American intellectuals, politicians, fans, and musicians championed local jazz musicians, while at the same time, they also disqualified them from being within the bounds of authentic jazz.
- 3 In *Tropical Riffs*, Borge is theorizing through jazz as much as he is theorizing about jazz. Noting the parallels and interconnections between jazz and Latin American forms such as tango in Argentina; choro, maxixe, and samba in Brazil; and son, rumba, and mambo in Cuba, Borge suggests that the word jazz may be characterized as an umbrella term to describe a range of musical practices emerging across the hemisphere in the early twentieth century. These genres share many of the same Afro-diasporic roots and characteristic musical tendencies, such as call and response, duple and triple meter ambivalence, and improvisation. However, musicological analysis is not the focus of this study (although it would have been quite productive to do so). In many cases, Jazz reached Latin America first in visual and discursive form before it was heard. Jazz records and performers were scarce in the 1920s, newspaper editorials and films often shaped Latin American impressions of jazz before they even knew what it sounded like. Throughout the book, Borge attends to audio, visual and literary culture, including film and television, but also narrative fiction, music criticism, radio broadcasts, live performances, and the circulation of records and linear notes.
- 4 This book provides a comprehensive account of jazz’s political implications in Latin America. Borge’s discussions of Josephine Baker; Oscar Alemán, Lalo Schiffrin, Astor Piazzolla, and Gato Barbieri in Argentina; Pixinguinha, Ary Barroso, and Bossa Nova musicians in Brazil; and Chano Pozo and Pérez Prado in Cuba provide fascinating accounts of the ways musicians have complicated and subverted nationalist discourses in both the United States and their home countries. However, I believe that the book could have benefited from a survey, or at least the mention, of jazz musicians from Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere. This study’s focus on Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico reinforces an existing hierarchy within the canonization of Latin music. However, Borge’s broad scope of geopolitical analysis makes up for this lacuna. I recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about jazz, Latin music, and transhemispheric American culture in general.

NOTES

1. SALES Grover, *Jazz: America's Classical Music*, Englewood Cliffs (NJ), Prentice-Hall, 1984, and TAYLOR Billy, "Jazz: America's Classical Music", *The Black Perspective in Music*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1986, pp. 21-25.

AUTHORS

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John Bimbiras is a Ph.D. student in Ethnomusicology at the University of Texas at Austin. His research focuses on political economy, transnationalism, and the music of the Dominican Republic. He holds a B.M. in guitar performance from Towson University (2011), as well as an M.A. in music theory and composition from The City College of New York (2016) where he studied with David Del Tredici. After graduating from CCNY, Bimbiras became a Research Associate at the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute. During his time at CUNY DSI, he helped secure a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to create an interactive website entitled *A History of Dominican Music in the U.S.* In addition, he transcribed and arranged an entire collection of original manuscripts from the composer and bandleader Rafael Petitón Guzmán. Bimbiras performs regularly in Austin on guitar and Puerto Rican cuatro.