
Book Review: *Jazz Italian Style: From its Origins in New Orleans to Fascist Italy and Sinatra*

Jazz Italian Style: From its Origins in New Orleans to Fascist Italy and Sinatra, by Anna Harwell Celenza. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 255 pp.

Jazz's international history began at the same time that it emerged in 1917 as the new fad in popular music in the United States. In the waning days of the Romanov dynasty, for example, young Russian aristocrats tootled on saxophones along with the pioneering Victor recordings of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB) from New Orleans. The global dissemination of the ODJB's disks fostered imitations; created a craze for jazz dances; led to foreign bookings for American bands; and inspired the widespread adoption of the word jazz as a designation for an irreverent and anti-rational way of behaving and perceiving the world. As in America, internationally jazz was considered a novelty music and as an antidote to civilization's wartime agonies and woes. Serious appreciation of the music's African American characteristics and artistic potential would flourish only after 1930.

Anna Harwell Celenza's *Jazz Italian Style*, at its core, is a study of jazz's reception in Italy and the unique transmutation the genre underwent at the hands of Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. This compelling story is bookended with examinations of the involvement in jazz of Americans of Italian descent in pre-1917 New Orleans and in 1930s New Jersey, where the young Frank Sinatra adapted Italian styles to commercial ballad singing and launched his legendary career. Celenza's study brilliantly explores and analyzes the Italian scene but pays only limited attention to Italian-Americans' interactions with jazz in the United States.

Celenza bases her work on a concept of dynamic transatlantic cultural exchange. "Even when Italy and the United States found themselves on opposite sides during World War II, jazz remained an important element in the Italian consciousness on both sides of the Atlantic" (4). The concept of an "Italian consciousness" enables the author to connect three distant milieus: the "cradle of jazz" of New Orleans in the 1910s; Italy in the 1920s and 1930s; and Sinatra's hometown of Hoboken, New Jersey. As Celenza relates, Nick La Rocca and the other Italian-American members of ODJB enjoyed a residency in Great Britain (but not in Italy) as a result of their recording successes; some Italian musicians made pilgrimages to New York; and many members of Sinatra's family and early neighbors were recent immigrants from Italy. Her study, though, does not describe a regular and substantial cultural exchange that might foster a true transatlantic consciousness. Celenza

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thus gives this central concept only a sketchy delineation. As a result, the book succeeds mostly as a contrasting portrait of jazz in the United States and in Italy, in which the relative influences of Italian and African American culture varied significantly.

Celenza shows that Italian immigrants were an important social and musical presence in early twentieth-century New Orleans. Jazz studies that preceded hers, such as H. O. Brunn's *Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band* (Baton Rouge, 1960) and Thomas Brothers's *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans* (New York, 2006), traced the movement of young Italian-American musicians in the 1900s and 1910s into jazz, just as mixed-race Creoles and African Americans were concocting the music. They noted that Italian opera and possibly Sicilian street song contributed to the musical gumbo that resulted in the Dixieland sound. Celenza alludes to Alan Lomax's observation that Sicilian folk song contained North African musical attributes, but it does not verify this claim through any close analysis. The New Orleans discussion is undermined by Celenza's unsupported claim that the Caucasian makeup of the ODJB is "an inconvenient truth" that has bred "the lack of enthusiasm behind the scholarly world's acceptance" of their pioneering musical contribution (3). Anyone familiar with jazz scholarship can disprove this; the ODJB's uncertain legacy derives not from its racial identity, but from the likelihood that the band's music did not really fall within generally accepted definitions of jazz. Celenza's first chapter posits some tenuous geographical connections in an effort to chart a nationwide Italian-American consciousness in the early years of jazz. It moves from New Orleans to California, where in 1912 the word jazz first appeared in print in an American newspaper (in a non-musical context). According to Celenza, the presence of numerous Italian immigrants in San Francisco, where the term jazz had caught on, and a city reporter's linking of the word to the Italian Futurist movement connected Italian culture to jazz at its genesis. (At the time, however, the word possessed non-musical connotations, such as life, vigor, energy, and effervescence of spirit) (29). The book's tracing of words and music from New Orleans and San Francisco to Chicago, New York, and beyond illustrates a certain common mindset among young Italian-Americans, and some overlapping in the discourses about jazz and Futurism, but the linkages are vague.

Celenza's survey of Futurism is excellent, though, and foreshadows the rich and convincing survey of jazz in Italy in the 1920s and 1930s found in the subsequent chapters. Visits to Italy by African American army bands (the counterparts of James Reese Europe's Hellfighters, who came to France) and commercial ensembles, along with recordings, introduced Italians to the new music. Futurism and the turmoil of war made many Italians receptive to daring cultural novelties. Reporting in 1919 on jazz in New Orleans for a magazine, an Italian diplomat displayed an interest in the class and racial aspects of the music that his compatriots would come to share. Cakewalks and fox trots predominated in live performances, replicating the ODJB-style comic music that ruled in the 1920s before the swinging "hot" jazz of King Oliver and Louis Armstrong captivated wider appreciation. With Futurism often guiding them, many Italian jazz lovers endorsed a "modernist primitivism," as Celenza calls it, in which anti-rational music heralded a new consciousness (50). As the theorist Alfredo Casella argued in 1924, "the bold and necessary persistence of

[jazz] rhythms forms the basis of Futurist music.” (59) Italian jazz bands formed and began to record for the Fonit label and perform on the URI radio network.

Meanwhile, Mussolini’s Fascist Party took control of the government, and jazz began an unusual fifteen-year reign as the unofficial music of his regime. Songs such as “Giovinezza” were central to brown-shirt culture, and by the late 1920s, party gatherings and party expressions had embraced a jazz sound. To Mussolini and company, “jazz equaled modernization, technological innovation and a rejection of the past.” (70) *Il Duce*, his jazz-loving children, and Fascist cultural officials had no qualms about promoting vigorous syncopated dance music as the theme song of Italy’s new technocratic state. In doing so, Celenza shows, the Fascists consciously rejected the celebration of folk music traditions and — in the latest parry in an old sectional rivalry — endorsed the industrialized mass culture of northern Italy over the more agricultural and traditional ways of the South. For more than a decade, African-American contributions to jazz, as well as cultural mixing of all kinds, became a celebrated part of official pronouncements.

In the end, though, jazz was required to assume a whitewashed Italian identity. The invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 intensified racism in Italian policy and society, and jazz felt its effects. Books by jazz critics appearing in 1937 and 1938 debated the value of African Americans’ contributions. In those years, Fascist Italy moved toward an alliance with Nazi Germany, formed a Ministry of Popular Culture, and began to codify racial discrimination in the mass media. Making explicit an earlier trend, Fonit, URI, and Mussolini’s phonograph company, Cetra, and movie studio, Cinecittà, cultivated the notion of *musica leggera* (smooth or light music), dance music that subordinated jazz rhythms and harmonies to Italian popular music tropes. The bandleaders Cinico Angelini, Pippo Barzizza, and Gorni Kramer and the singers Alberto Rabagliati, Natalino Otto, and Trio Lescano (a female group) adapted their styles to official dictates and even toured Germany.

The coming of war to Italy in 1940 put inevitable strains on the music industry, and the collapse of the Fascist regime and the onset of civil war in 1943 pitted Mussolini’s culture warriors against Allied radio propaganda, based in southern Italy, and broadcasts from the German martial government that controlled the North. World War II led to the annihilation of Mussolini and his regime, but *musica leggera* survived. In 1941 the critic Francesco Saporì had predicted, in a curiously casual employment of Futurist language, that Italian popular music would help soldiers endure the war: “[I]t awakens dormant abilities within us, whets one’s courage, inspires defiant adversity, enlivens our capabilities, increases them, makes them light and ready . . . [Melodies] are crammed with domestic nostalgia, military hopes, distant promises, serene faith, stars and kisses” (154). (It is difficult to conceive of a German, British, or even American writer envisioning such a rosy scenario at that time.) Like the Italian cinema, Italy’s mainstream popular music survived and even gained an international cachet in the postwar era. Romano Mussolini, the late dictator’s youngest son, enjoyed a successful career as a jazz pianist.

Celenza’s meticulous survey of jazz under Fascism makes little mention of the political Left’s perceptions of the music. She quotes Antonio Gramsci’s highly negative view of jazz, expressed in his prison notebooks, which echoes the grim analysis of Theodor W. Adorno and other theorists of the Frankfurt School, who associated most mass-produced popular

music with the propagandist forces of capital and fascism. A brief mention also is made of the savage postwar political and ideological battles in Italy, but Celenza does not explore popular jazz's fate in the crossfire.

The epilogue instead turns to Frank Sinatra, who — despite his presence in the book's title — receives a disappointingly brief treatment. Celenza argues that Sinatra's influential mother, Dolly — the daughter of immigrants from Genoa — “was well aware of Italian jazz” and “likely would have been especially drawn to the performances of Natalino Otto” (188). By 1939, when the leading bandleader Harry James hired Sinatra, the twenty-four-year-old clearly had imbibed the styles and techniques of Italian popular singing. He may have been deeply influenced by vocalizations in *musica leggera*, which was popular in Italian-American communities such as Hoboken, by recordings and radio, but Celenza offers no proof.

Even more than the description of early jazz in New Orleans, the discussion of Sinatra and his Italian-American heirs, such as Tony Bennett and Dean Martin, is fragmentary and suggestive, lacking the cohesion and detail of the analysis of jazz in Fascist Italy. For this reason, it is difficult to conclude that this study succeeds in delineating a transatlantic “Italian consciousness” that found a special medium or language in jazz music. A thorough consultation of histories of cultural transmission through immigration, such as John E. Bodnar's *The Transplanted* (Bloomington, IN, 1985), and of Italian cultural survivals in America, such as Robert A. Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street* (3rd ed., New Haven, 2010), would be a starting point for a true, full analysis of musical and cultural exchange in these decades. We can look forward to a future study on this topic, which would benefit from Celenza's rich work on jazz under Mussolini.

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