



Jews and Jazz: Improvising Ethnicity

Charles B Hersch

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Jews and Jazz: Improvising Ethnicity explores the meaning of Jewish involvement in the world of American jazz. It focuses on the ways prominent jazz musicians like Stan Getz, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Lee Konitz, Dave Liebman, Michael Brecker, and Red Rodney have engaged with jazz in order to explore and construct ethnic identities.

The author looks at Jewish identity through jazz in the context of the surrounding American culture, believing that American Jews have used jazz to construct three kinds of identities: to become more American, to emphasize their minority outsider status, and to become more Jewish. From the beginning, Jewish musicians have used jazz for all three of these purposes, but the emphasis has shifted over time. In the 1920s and 1930s, when Jews were seen as foreign, Jews used jazz to make a more inclusive America, for themselves and for blacks, establishing their American identity. Beginning in the 1940s, as Jews became more accepted into the mainstream, they used jazz to "re-minoritize" and avoid over-assimilation through identification with African Americans. Finally, starting in the 1960s as ethnic assertion became more predominant in America, Jews have used jazz to explore and advance their identities as Jews in a multicultural society.

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