

Dan Morgenstern and Teaching the Early History of Jazz

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One of Dan Morgenstern's most important contributions to jazz scholarship has been his work as director of the Institute of Jazz Studies (IJS), housed at Rutgers University—in particular through guiding its constant acquisition of books, periodicals, and historic artifacts. Morgenstern has recently retired from this post after thirty-five years, and I believe we can attribute to him the IJS's open-minded definition of its remit, from pre-jazz beginnings to the most contemporary developments, and its user-friendly attitude to researchers, as evidenced by the frequent and fulsome gratitude expressed in the introduction section of almost every serious book published on our music.

What has not been sufficiently emphasized, perhaps, is the example set by Morgenstern himself, as a journalist and editor (successively, of the periodicals *Metronome*, *Jazz*, and *DownBeat*). His own writing is not only a joy to read, but a mine of information, as well as enthusiastic opinion, and many of his more extensive articles were anthologized in the collection *Living With Jazz*.¹ In particular, he has been one of the few writers on jazz to have retained a comprehensive overview of the music's history, and to have covered with authority the period preceding the arrival of bebop. As an editor too, he encouraged a new generation of critics such as Gary Giddins and technical commentators such as educator David Baker, who continue to share his wide interests.

While Baker recently criticized “the treadmill of [jazz] students who become teachers who teach other students to become teachers,”² Morgenstern has gone even further in lamenting the fact that several generations of such teachers have only been interested in jazz from bebop onwards, and that their students therefore have had their own lack of interest in pre-bebop reinforced. (Rather than sully the open-minded reputation of IJS by airing his

1. Dan Morgenstern, *Living With Jazz* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

2. Quoted in Monica Herzig, *David Baker: A Legacy in Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 323.

complaints publicly, he has confined them to private correspondence, for instance commenting about the lack of research into the use of jazz on radio in the early days that “Some doctoral candidates might well consider this largely unplowed furrow.”)

The consequence of the narrowly focussed backgrounds of most educators is that we now have whole faculties ostensibly teaching jazz, who may have some knowledge of earlier achievements (possibly even some personal listening favorites) but no real grasp of the scope and sounds of early jazz. If the head of the jazz department sees some value in teaching the history of the music, then the individual teacher with least resistance to the role (and perhaps a broader collection of records and/or transcriptions than their colleagues) will be assigned the task of developing and delivering the jazz history module, with a minimum of involvement from other faculty members.

This, of course, is just as unsatisfactory as the situation described above by David Baker. It should be mandatory for every member of a jazz faculty to be intimate with the works of not only Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington but, for instance, Chu Berry and James Reese Europe. This is necessary not merely because of the cliché that “In order to know where we’re going, we have to understand where we’ve been.” It should be a simple requirement that, if we wish our subject to be worthy of academic status, our instructors should at least be educated about the history of the subject. My perception is that this is presently not the case in most institutions, to an extent that, in any other academic subject area, would be viewed as scandalous.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that, in the average three- or four-year undergraduate jazz course, a history component should be a core (in other words, not optional) element throughout each year of the course. It is perfectly understandable that, as in other subject disciplines, youngsters of average student age will not initially be motivated to learn about the history of their subject (unless their major is History, perhaps). I recall that, when I was a student at the university of this very city, Leeds, the French department regarded French political and religious history as being just as important as French language and literature—and rightly so. That did not make it any more palatable to me at that time to study French history, but it was an essential part of the undergraduate degree course and occupied an important part of our course load in each of the three years of the course.

The challenge is to make the study of jazz history meaningful, and not just a painful labor, for students who will, in the majority of cases, have initially no interest at all in hearing about the antecedents of their current heroes. If this challenge is met and solved, the intelligent teaching of the history can only benefit the learning and the maturing of the individual students’ own performance. As teachers in this day and age, we need to remember the influence of the internet, and the fact that one-off performances by historical figures (for

instance, from 1950s American television) are now available on YouTube at the click of a search button. Unless we are able to provide students with a sufficiently wide contextual base from which to understand them, such random discoveries will go to waste.

As it happens, I have just been completing an article for a Dan Morgenstern festschrift to be published in the online journal *Current Research in Jazz*.³ Because of my own interest, but also as a tribute to Morgenstern's contribution to our knowledge, it concentrates (although not exclusively) on jazz of the pre-bebop period and in particular its interaction with the blues and gospel performance techniques of the same period. It concludes with the (I hope) resounding words, "I am certainly not moralizing in a prescriptive way as to how the performance of jazz 'ought to' develop, whether more or less blues-oriented. But I am saying that jazz scholarship has been seriously deficient, not merely failing to address some of the factors I have raised but remaining blissfully unaware of them."⁴

3. <http://www.crj-online.org/v4/index.php>.

4. "Just Scratchin(g) the Surface: The Unacknowledged Commonality of Jazz, Blues, and Gospel," *Current Research in Jazz*, 4 (2012); <http://www.crj-online.org/v4/CRJ-JazzBluesGospel.php>.