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BOOK REVIEW

Jazz á la Creole: French Creole Music & The Birth of Jazz. By Caroline Vézina. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022. 248pp. $99.00 hardcover / $30.00 paperback.

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Problematic metaphors about New Orleans jazz occur rampantly in jazz history. Comparing the music to a melting pot, mosaic, and even gumbo attempts to capture its multicultural influences. Caroline Vézina challenges these romanticized ideas by demonstrating the profound impact of Creole culture on jazz's formation. In *Jazz À La Creole: French Creole Music & The Birth of Jazz*, Vézina dispels the myth that only Creole habaneras and quadrilles shaped jazz's development. Rather this culture's contributions span over a century beginning with the first enslaved Africans in Louisiana. Drawing extensively on primary sources, this book is divided into two sections, "The Precursors of Jazz," which include folk, religious, and dance music, and "Early Jazz." With these, Vézina provides a necessary, if imperfect, revision to the narrative surrounding the music of a complex ethnic group in New Orleans.

First, Vézina explores the meaning of the word "creole," taking the reader through its Portuguese and Spanish origins during the seventeenth century to its use in Louisiana to describe both white and Black people born in the New World during the nineteenth century. Vézina uses creolization, despite the theory's complicated history, to describe jazz's creation, "for it better represents the intricate multilayered, and dynamic aspect of the process during which various elements of diverse cultures get intertwined as people adapt to new or changing environments in which creolized products or practices can themselves be part of a new process of creolization" (9).[1] Vézina elaborates on creolization's complex history and its prior uses in a section in the appendix, but commits to the theory anyway because of its ability to represent cultural interactions. In her work, creolization is combined with Mark Slobin's work on micromusics and those musics' involvement with subcultures. The chapter closes with insight from firsthand accounts of white and Black creoles to explain their experience

[1] Anthropologist Richard Price has warned scholars about the implications of using such theories because of its entanglement with *créolisation* and globalization. Richard Price, "Créolisation, Creolization, and Créolité," *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 52 (2017): 214.

with early Creole music-making on plantations to support her use of these theories.

Chapters 2 and 3 challenge the assumption that vernacular Creole songs, such as work songs, street cries, "voodoo songs," and Catholic church music were not contributors of "Black American folk music that led to the development of jazz" (27). Vézina focuses on Congo Square in Chapter 2 as the origin place for the blending of African cultures of newly arrived enslaved people.[2] In Chapter 3, Vézina demonstrates how the *cantiques* were "fertile ground for creolization" in which she finds the ability for Creole individuals to take melodies that were taught by white priests and alter them by adding African elements (54).[3] By claiming that Creole folk and religious musics are a part of Black American folk music, Vézina is complicating the definition of Black American as it relates to the New Orleanian population. Analyzing the Black American and Creole populations as one group aligns with the work of more recent scholars, such as Travis Jackson and Christi Jay Wells.

Chapter 4 details European influences on Creole music, such as dance music in ballrooms, concert music performed and composed by Creole musicians and military music adapted from Creole songs. She relies on firsthand accounts from nineteenth-century sources to elaborate on the repertoire of music found at tri-colored, quadroon, and masked balls. Several scholars, however, have explored the misconceptions surrounding practices of interracial relationships as they relate to the mythologized quadroon balls, including Christi Jay Wells' recent book.[4] Wells warns scholars about the potential pitfalls of using these spaces to substantiate Creole involvement in jazz's history.[5] Vézina uplifts the pieces of

[2] While scholars Henry Kmen and Matt Sakakeeny have argued that early primary sources depicting Congo Square were actually eyewitness accounts from the Caribbean and/or fabricated by journalists. Henry A. Kmen, "The Roots of Jazz and the Dance in Place Congo: A Re-Appraisal," *Anuario Interacmericano de Investigacion Musical* 8 (1972): 12-15; Matt Sakakeeny, "New Orleans Music as a Circulatory System," *Black Music Research Journal* 31, no. 2 (2011): 292.

[3] I did not find as many mentions of musicking in Catholic churches in my own research based on oral histories. Perhaps this reflects a gendered aspect of music-making in Creole communities cultivated by women over men, because Vézina is focusing on the oral histories of women for these early histories.

[4] Kenneth Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-Plaçage' Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon," *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 3 (2012): 710; Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 148; Christi Jay Wells, *Between Beats: The Jazz Tradition and Black Vernacular Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 49-50.

[5] Wells, *Between Beats*, 41.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk because of his use of African rhythms and Creole folk songs, arguing that Gottschalk is predicting the future sounds of Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton. However, I am skeptical of using a white man's adoption of Black music in Western art music to foreshadow the work of Black composers. Together, these disparate moments of musicking reflect a reliance and revision of European music in Creole contexts.

Chapters 5 and 6 advocate for the influence of Creole songs on jazz through short biographies of jazz musicians and analyses of Creole songs performed by them. In Chapter 5, she outlines the biographies of five Creole musicians/families, who made essential contributions to the jazz and blues in New Orleans. Specifically, these musicians struggled with the re-definition of their identity as "Black." In the words of Vézina, "the Creoles' cultural identity was forcibly redefined as Black American in a world where White supremacists were fighting hard, and succeeding, to disenfranchise Black people—an intercultural phenomenon that affected the strata of the population" (73). Chapter 6 focuses on Creole songs used in these musicians' performances. Again, Vézina cites primary sources, such as oral histories, sheet music collections, and recordings. These recordings were made during the Early Jazz revival, but she historicizes them by comparing the lyrics to previous versions and analyzing the musical arrangements to account for "Spanish tinges," an appealing but flawed methodology given Lawrence Gushee's conclusion that the "Spanish tinge" was only specific to Morton's music.[6] To close, she reminds the reader that this music is still being recorded and played today by other Creole musicians not involved in jazz scenes.

Vézina's major contribution to the field is her reliance on primary sources over secondary sources to describe the music making of the Creole community dating back to the eighteenth century. The appendix is rich with primary resources, such as lyric and musical transcriptions of Creole songs and *cantiques*. While I agree that Creole musicians deserve to be differentiated in texts centered on the history of jazz, I disagree with Vézina's uncritical repetition of several myths about jazz's creation. As seen in the examples above, this occurs in Chapter 2 with Congo Square, in Chapter 4 with quadroon balls, and in Chapter 6 with Morton's "Spanish Tinge." Her potential oversight is likely due to her heavy and perhaps uncritical reliance on primary sources, which cannot necessarily encompass the entire historical and social context of New Orleans uncovered more rigorously in secondary analyses. Overall, this book is an excellent resource for scholars seeking to understand the music of the Creole community through

[6] Lawrence Gushee, "The Nineteenth Century Origins of Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (1994): 7.

their own words and sounds, but it needs to be read with the knowledge that many of the spaces for Creole music-making are complicated—filled with myths, misinformation, and misconceptions.

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