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BOOK REVIEW

Brassroots Democracy: Maroon Ecologies and the Jazz Commons. By Benjamon Barson. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2024. 424pp. $40.00.

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From its opening lines, *Brassroots Democracy: Maroon Ecologies and the Jazz Commons* invokes a spirit of protest and resistance against centuries of anti-Black violence. This ongoing political struggle, in parallel with the continued racial violence it must respond to, is both ever-changing and yet ever present. For Benjamin Barson, among many historians, the "specter of plantation hierarchy" is still felt in contemporary forms of brutality against Black people (1). And yet, despite this common throughline in critical studies of racial inequality, Barson identifies a significant disconnect between histories of radical resistance and retellings of the early jazz era. Answering the call to intervention initiated by abolitionist and anticolonial scholars such as Angela Davis and Franz Fanon, *Brassroots Democracy* problematizes this misunderstanding of jazz history and the Black radical tradition, which characterizes the music of turn-of-the-century New Orleans as largely "apolitical" (7).[1] Rather, this text weaves a rich and complex narrative of the "birthplace" (or perhaps *places*) of jazz, one which refuses to ignore the immense "ideological stakes" of the genre (2).

The book's driving political impetus is elucidated by its core framing device: Barson's titular neologism, "brassroots democracy." A portmanteau of "grassroots" activist practices and the historic brass band tradition that New Orleans in particular has become famous for, brassroots democracy is "the practice of performative assembly that laid the foundation for the simultaneous and syncretic expansion of public and musical spheres" (214). Barson focuses on the "performative assembly" of Black and Afro-Creole musicians up to and immediately following emancipation, through the periods of Black Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era, and against the political and ecological backdrop of the U.S. American south as well as the neighboring Caribbean and Mexico. This expanded geographic milieu laid out in *Brassroots Democracy* opens a newly invigorated examination into the role of cross-Caribbean migration and

[1] See Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

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creolization in early jazz histories. Drawing from historian Julius Scott, Barson also notes how Afro-American maroon (an individual who escaped slavery) and urban free Black communities exchanged cultural knowledge through the communication network known as the "common wind."[2] Transmitted largely through Afro-Atlantic song, the common wind became an audible signifier of a "fugitive ideoscape" shaped by nineteenth-century revolutionary anticolonial and counter-plantation movements from Saint-Domingue, Haiti to Veracruz, Mexico to New Orleans (55).

Key to Barson's theoretical intervention is the "bottom-up" sociopolitical emphasis of grassroots activism, an orientation which he further underlines in his construction of what he refers to as a "music history from below," borrowing from Marcus Rediker (13).[3] As such, *Brassroots Democracy* is a historiographic endeavor, as concerned with music's entanglements with labor histories as with marronage and abolition. This is exemplified in the discussion of Sidney Bechet's depiction of his metaphoric grandfather Omar, a Haitian descended maroon and musician who escaped plantation slavery.[4] Here, as in the many other scenes illuminated throughout the text, Barson demonstrates how a transhistorical jazz commons constituted maroon ecologies—a site theorized by Justin Hoseby and J. T. Roane "where the enslaved formed a fleeting Black commons, [and] whereby they used their unique knowledge of the landscapes and waterscapes to extend a fugitive and transient freedom."[5] In this way, *Brassroots Democracy* connects musical praxis explicitly to the counter-plantation, not only through aesthetic or philosophical means, but through the physical environments and labor conditions which musicians both lived through and shaped.[6]

In accordance with this ambitious and sprawling political and theoretical purview, this text takes each of its case studies equally seriously, equally broadly in their scope. As Barson states, *Brassroots Democracy* is "necessarily dissonant in its construction," and the chapters tend to follow the omnidirectional flow of the

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[2] Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York City: Verso Books, 2018), 16, 87, and 96.

[3] Marcus Rediker, "A Motley Crew for Our Times? Multiracial Mobs, History from Below and the Memory of Struggle," *Radical Philosophy* 2.07 (Spring 2020): 93-100.

[4] Sidney Bechet, *Treat It Gentle: An Autobiography* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1960).

[5] Justin Hoseby and J. T. Roane, "A Totally Different Form of Living: On the Legacies of Displacement and Marronage as Black Ecologies," *Southern Cultures* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 68-73.

[6] Jean Casimir, "On the Origins of the Counter-plantation System," in *The Haiti Reader: History, Culture, Politics,* edited by Laurent Dubois, Kaiama L. Glover, Nadève Ménard, Millery Polyné, and Chantalle F. Verna (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 61-66.

common wind and its full chorus of voices (31). The first two chapters turn our ears towards the archival echoes of the Desdunes family: Haitian Louisianan activist Rodolphe Desdunes, his son, cornetist and violinist Daniel, and daughter, pianist and singer Mamie. In chapter one, Barson explores the unique joint activist and musical efforts of Rodolphe and Daniel Desdunes in order to investigate the deeper history of New Orleans's revolutionary political culture and its roots, particularly in Haiti. By tracing Daniel's use of Haitian-Cuban rhythms such as the *habanera* and *tresillo,* as well as the "cinquillo complex"[7] in his only surviving composition, "Happy Feeling Rag" (1912), Barson draws attention not only to the distinct musical creolization present in this early development of "swing," but the extent to which Daniel's swing might also be understood as a sonic manifestation of the trans-Caribbean counter-plantation movement. Following from this, chapter two focuses on the simultaneous sexual politics of the neo-plantation economy in Black Reconstruction era New Orleans from the vantage point of Mamie Desdunes, composer of the blues anthem, "Mamie's Blues." This chapter not only "challenges a male-centric reading of early jazz" (116); it also applies an anti-patriarchal perspective to the working-class conditions which the genre emerged from.

From here, chapter three shifts its primary geographic focus temporarily away from the U.S. and towards the oft under-acknowledged site of jazz incubation: Veracruz, Mexico. Highlighting the work of clarinetists Lorenzo and Louis Tio who later emigrated to New Orleans, Barson considers in great detail how Mexican-born creoles of color contributed significantly to jazz pedagogical traditions. However, in bringing attention to this musical borderland—"*la frontera sónica*"—he also draws deeper parallels between the working-class conditions and maroon ecologies in Mexico, emphasized not only by the Tio's employment as cigar rollers but also through lengthy discussion of the short-lived Eureka colony, a multiracial communal society which existed in Veracruz, Mexico from around 1859 to 1861. Through this cross-cultural comparison between not only musical forms but also sociopolitical ideas, Barson identifies how Mexico contributed significantly to the establishment of a geographically widespread jazz commons.

The last three chapters follow in loose chronological order, focusing once again on New Orleans as a major site of multivalent cultural exchange and fugitivity. Centering more explicitly around plantation and counter-plantation ecologies, chapter four focuses on the immediate chronological transition from chattel slavery to wage labor. In this chapter, Barson reflects on the direct

[7] Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., "Black Music in the Circum-Caribbean," *American Music* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 1-38.

influence between Afro-Atlantic gardening and musical aesthetics, particularly in contrast to the strict monocrop practice of the sugar plantation. Chapter five then focuses on the era of Black Reconstruction and the sounds of jubilee and revolution post-emancipation. This chapter perhaps takes the "brass" of brassroots democracy most literally, as the loudness and mobility of Black brass bands (often with roots in military music traditions) signified liberation and the reclamation of a new public sphere. Finally, chapter six extends the temporal landscape of the text through the Jim Crow era, as Barson attends to the direct affiliation between many early 20th century jazz musicians, including Willie Parker, Jelly Roll Morton, and Buddy Bolden and the New Orleans Black dockworkers union. By tying together threads from early chapters regarding the direct influence of labor organizing on musical practices (and vice versa), this chapter illustrates the clear symbiosis between the union and musicians as on-the-ground activists.

Brassroots Democracy is informed not only by Barson's engagement with a wide array of archival sources—including both "dissonant readings of state archives… as well as those generated by a Black counterpublic," but also by a deeply relational commitment to an ongoing revolutionary musical-political tradition (8). Barson's own work as a jazz musician is of course not the main focus of this text, and yet this work is clearly indebted to his relationships with living activist musicians and those since past, such as saxophonist Fred Ho. Although brief mentions are largely left to the concluding chapter, embodied musical-activist endeavors, such as Barson's involvement in the Afro Yaqui Music Collective, a musical organization dedicated to "imagin[ing] a world beyond mass incarceration and ecocide," are key in demonstrating the ways in which marronage, liberation, and brassroots democracy might live on into our contemporary moment.[8] As it stands, this sprawling and pioneering text is perhaps only the beginning of not just a new outlook on jazz scholarship, but an invigorated musicology which might engage with its site of research literally from the ground up.

[8] "Afro Yaqui Music Collective," Afro Yaqui Music Collective, accessed September 27, 2024, https://afroyaquimusic.com/.