Book Review: *Loft Jazz*


In his engaging new book, *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s*, Michael C. Heller explores jazz communities in 1970s New York and simultaneously questions concepts of history, memory, truth, and scholarly authority related to the telling of jazz’s past. *Loft Jazz* is a reflexive ethnography that foregrounds the culling and framing entailed in constructing an historical narrative. Such transparency is the book’s primary strength, lending it a refreshing honesty and humility that contrasts deeply with the “first wave” of jazz scholarship and its often insufferable know-it-all-ism. Jazz scholarship has improved greatly from those early days, and this book is a welcome contrast to—and (one can wish) permanent break from—the omniscient “jazz expert.”

Drummer Juma Sultan and his archive are central characters in Heller’s narrative of music and community. While Sultan is best known for performing with Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock, he was also a central musician and organizer in the New York loft jazz scene. Like many jazz musicians of this era, Sultan opened a performance space—Studio We. He also maintained an archive of rehearsal and performance recordings, fliers, photographs, meeting memoranda, notes, contracts, budgets, and other materials related to the era that becomes central to Heller’s research.

Although some sections of the book are thin, Heller’s work gives us the first comprehensive treatment of the loft jazz era with fine writing, thoughtful analysis, and intriguing photographs. In Heller’s framing, loft jazz arose and sustained itself as a force of musical community, aesthetic activism, and self-empowerment. Within this overarching narrative, the book offers enticing fragments of story lines and individual lives that I hope other scholars will be inspired to investigate further.

Early on Heller unpacks his decision to stake his argument around the phrase and concept, “loft jazz.” He recognizes that many musicians rejected this term in the 1970s (and beyond) as simplistic, if not insulting. Acknowledging the various pitfalls, Heller ultimately chooses the term for several reasons. For him, loft jazz is a lens through which to investigate certain processes and movements at a given time and place, not a descriptor of a particular aesthetic, genre or ideology. Taking loft jazz as a basis can deepen a jazz history over-represented by formalist considerations, delineations of linear development deduced from commercial records, and devotion to a select cabal of “masters.” For Heller,
“The lofts were not well suited to the tidiness of linear narratives; they instead provided an artistic village in which music was folded into the fabric of the everyday. [The loft archive] did not offer a sequence of legendary moments, but a neighborhood of nurturing spaces. By eluding and eliding the forced chronology of commercial discography, the loft archive sheds light on a richer canvas” (160). By focusing on the processes of musicking as well as the process of engaging with an archive, Loft Jazz suggests a way to reconceive jazz history that breaks from the one-genre-per-decade model and its inevitable crash upon the shoals of jazz’s “fracturing” in the 1970s.

The book is divided into two parts: “Histories” and “Trajectories.” Two chapters detailing the history of loft jazz from its beginnings in vacant factory buildings in Lower Manhattan to the eventual repurposing of the area as high-end residential and commercial space comprise Part One. Heller traces the history of community fighting over the fate of these buildings in the 1960s and 1970s, with historic preservationists keeping the buildings standing even as landlords could not repurpose them. This left a great vacuum for artists and musicians to fill. Simultaneously, George Wein’s Newport Jazz Festival moved to New York for its 1972 concert, and more experimentalist, New York musicians felt sidelined. They organized an alternative festival (The New York Musician’s Jazz Festival) in a manner of DIY self-empowerment that would continue throughout the 1970s. Part One ends with the decline of loft jazz around 1980, when the longstanding stalemate over old factory buildings was resolved and the structures were repurposed into expensive, and fetishized, “loft spaces” for residential and commercial use.

Part Two, “Trajectories,” consists of chapters titled, “Freedom,” “Community,” “Space,” and “Archive.” Each chapter offers a particular lens through which to consider loft jazz. The insights in chapter 4, Freedom, feel superficial and unexplored, especially compared with Heller’s previous historical chapters and with scholarship on improvisation and freedom, such as Kelley 2002, Goldman 2010, and Brown 2010. Heller offers interesting insights via the lenses of community, space, and archive, however, although some of these insights did have me pining for more.

Understanding the jazz loft scene as a community space highlights how music performance in all its aspects (rehearsing, finding venues, advertising, putting on the event, etc.) is part of a larger community enterprise and involves many more people than just the musicians. Heller writes, “The cultivation of a warm, welcoming ambience was common in many venues, and it was often lauded as a meaningful part of the loft experience” (136). A contemporary newspaper described one loft as “a cozy roost” with “divans, pillows, carpeting . . . a crackling fireplace” (135–6). Children were common in these communal spaces, which contrasted with the adult-only space of nightclubs (138). Food was “given away or sold cheaply at some loft venues,” (84) and this “welcoming loft atmosphere created porous boundaries between . . . professional and personal relationships, allowing for a continuous flow of musical life” (137). Heller also made space for contradictory views of this welcoming community vibe, citing multi-instrumentalist Cooper-Moore, who emphasized the isolation of Lower Manhattan in the 1970s. It was not a residential neighborhood or even a functioning business district but a run-down and abandoned area without amenities.
In relation to contrary views and to the mention of the domestic ambience, I found myself yearning for knowledge of the women in these communities. Did others beyond Cooper-Moore, and for other reasons, not feel a part of the community? Further, without assuming that women are necessarily the food-preparers or child-minders, clearly such roles bring up questions of women’s participation. There were so many activities around creating these spaces that I wondered more about these non-musician support roles. Indeed, Juma’s wife, Mariyah, makes a strong appearance at the beginning of the penultimate chapter, “Archive,” confirming my suspicion that women felt an equal commitment to fostering these spaces and wielded a strong influence. Mariyah Sultan asks Heller tough questions about his relationship to Juma and how the research will be used. Heller presumes her concern relates to important Hendrix memorabilia, but I imagined also a concern about how the memory of her husband and the scene might be appropriated. We know that Bea Rivers played a role in the performance space she ran with her husband, but do we know this significantly because she and Sam Rivers had the foresight to put her name in the title, Rivbea Studios? Even as name-dropping occurs by male musicians—“We had Val Wilmer there,” proclaims pianist Dave Burrell (33)—Heller offers no meaningful follow-up. Women are not embedded in Heller’s narrative, but like the mention of Mariyah Sultan, we get rare and brief side stories about women who clearly cared deeply about the music and the community.

After the scrawls on my book’s margins had reached a fever pitch (WHAT ABOUT THE WOMEN????!!!!!!), gender is addressed directly in chapter six. Here Heller cites the ideas of black feminist theorists Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks to illuminate the patriarchy embedded within many black liberation movements. He references Val Wilmer’s chapter “Woman’s Role” in her 1977 book As Serious as Your Life for a brief discussion of how women are often left out of the artist’s spaces, but also how the blurring of the private/public line in lofts could have opened up more space for women. Heller does not follow up on that idea, however. Rather than resorting to other scholars, I wish Heller had done his own research and analysis on this topic. He writes that women in important support roles are often overlooked, but they were also overlooked in this book (164). By almost exclusively examining male artists with exceptions that prove the rule, there is a strong sense of a one-sided picture that has only men creating nurturing spaces, an interesting, yet surely inaccurate, story.

Fortunately, Heller acknowledges that it all depends on how you look at the archive. The questions the researcher asks and the frame that he or she brings to the archive produces the knowledge that purportedly stems from the archive. Clearly, I would have read the archives with more of an eye toward women’s participation. I would have pursued clues in the archive that would have lodged women’s participation more firmly within the narrative, rather than as separate asides. But at least Heller’s reflexivity makes omissions of that sort more apparent to students. Heller does not claim omniscience. He writes, “The archive is a storehouse, but it is also a mechanism. A mine, but also a pickaxe” (178). Critically and complexly, the archive is a tool and the material upon which we work. We must be aware of how we are using it and what path we are carving through it.

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I have some further quibbles with the book. As found especially in chapter 4, there is a tendency to support a broad claim with only one quote or one example. Heller cites one musician who asserts his Muslim name affected his ability to secure gigs as evidence for the general practice (73). In another instance he entices the reader with a forthcoming examination of instrument builders and then mentions only one, Cooper-Moore, without detailing his efforts. This can give a sense that the book is skidding on the surface of the material without digging deep. Failing to correctly identify Soka Gakkai International and calling it instead the “Buddhist practice of nam-myoho-renge-kyo” (the common mantra associated with the organization) is a further example of this skidding (87). Moreover, many jazz readers may be disappointed by the absence of musical analysis. I don’t have a significant problem with this, primarily because so many readers still assume that “the music,” that is, musical analysis, is the “real history” and miss how the social and the cultural are fully contained within “the music.” This is precisely how issues of race and gender are taken as ancillary information and not the “real story.” While I wish Heller had delved deeper into issues of gender and race (for example, examining how his subject position as a white man affected how participants, such as Mariyah Sultan, viewed him), he nonetheless made visible the problematic reality of scholarship and ethnography. There was not a seamless history to uncover. Choices were made and they were necessarily imperfect. Thus, with some caveats, I would use this book in my jazz classroom again. While I may give Heller a C for the Trees, I give him an A for the Forest. He offers a fine model of reflexive, intelligent scholarship and does so while breaking new ground in an understudied area of jazz history. He concludes his book by comparing his research efforts to Juma Sultan’s description of improvisation: “constantly reinterpreting and communicating . . . and respecting one another” (190). We can reinterpret and thus communicate (dialogue) with Heller’s book, respecting what he has contributed and pursuing our own lines of investigation and thought. As Heller reminds us: “there are always other perspectives to explore, other avenues to meander down. This book has followed a few, but countless others remain” (189).

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Works Cited

