

Jazzocracy: Jazz, Democracy, and the Creation of a New American Mythology

by Kabir Sehgal, Better World, 2008, 224 pp.

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If one idea crosses partisan lines in America, it is respect for jazz as a great indigenous art form. Jazz musicians played a key role as cultural ambassadors during the Cold War, under Democratic and Republican presidents. Richard Nixon, a pianist, had Duke Ellington perform at the White House in 1969. Saxophonist Bill Clinton joined Wynton Marsalis, Charlie Rose and others in 2003 for a high-minded discussion about jazz and its relevance to American democracy. [1] ‘The story of jazz mirrors the story of our nation,’ declared George W. Bush during an official White House celebration of jazz this past June. Barack Obama told *Rolling Stone* magazine that he keeps music by Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and John Coltrane on his iPod.

Clearly, the view of jazz as a national treasure – ‘its spontaneity and energy and innovation ... express[ing] the best of America’s character,’ according to Bush – is not controversial. [2] Writing on the jazz-democracy nexus by Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, Cornel West and others is so rich as to constitute a subgenre of American letters. First-time author Kabir Sehgal is well aware of this body of work. Yet there’s a breathless quality to the early sections of his book *Jazzocracy*, as if he must prove a well-trodden point, ‘jazz is democracy in sound’ (p. xxi), through endless repetition.

A first-generation Indian-American, Sehgal grew up in Atlanta and is currently based in San Francisco. He’s that rare jazz bassist with degrees from Dartmouth and the London School of Economics. He has toured with Wynton Marsalis and worked for Senator Max Cleland on the 2004 presidential campaign of John Kerry. And he’s gained admirers in high places: Professor and public intellectual Douglas Brinkley wrote the foreword to *Jazzocracy*; Jimmy Carter provided a quote for the front cover. In light of the plaudits and the author’s obvious qualifications, the book is surprisingly weak, conceptually and grammatically.

Before delving into the hows and whys, Sehgal’s thesis requires elaboration. Jazz and democracy, he contends, share a focus on ‘making,’ a word he italicises throughout

the text. In both spheres, individual liberty and communal structure find an ideal balance: jazz empowers the improvising soloist while prescribing the 'grid' of chord changes and meter, just as democracy guarantees freedom while providing law and order. The 'jam session character' of America, its invitational, 'self-amending' spirit, allows the populace to fulfill its 'sweet yearning for the mechanics of maybe' (p. 47).

Sehgal takes the jazz-as-democracy metaphor and runs with it, talking of 'jazz legislators,' describing rhythm as a 'Bill of Rights that must be respected,' explaining how 'the power of the grooves is vested in the four equal beats, just as a democracy vests power among its constituent people' (p. 30). He imagines 'the shout section of a big band ensemble as the final days of a political campaign, or the call and response of a trading four session as a reasoned debate within the electorate' (p. 169). Sticking with the big band trope, he envisions 'the reeds as the judiciary,' noting how 'their middle range pitch keeps the executive trumpets locked in harmony and pushes the legislative rhythm section when it's dragging' (p. 35). This is fun, evocative stuff, straight from the Ellison-Murray-Crouch school.

There's more to the book than descriptive whimsy, however. Jazzocracy is Sehgal's term for a utopian state, a 'jazz-inflected society.' At bottom, this is social criticism intending nothing less than 'to foment an artistic and cultural renaissance' (p. 130). Following Walt Whitman, Sehgal wants to renew America's 'native expression-spirit,' the unique artistic voice that Whitman hoped would emerge and render the U.S. a beacon to the world. That voice, argues Sehgal, is jazz, which Whitman didn't live to hear.

Today, Sehgal elaborates, 'There is a loss of splendour and meaning in America's culture' (p. xxv). Taking aim at hollow celebrity-chasing, nihilistic hip-hop and other forms of putative degradation, Sehgal writes that 'America is wandering without a meaningful map of oral tradition' (p. 105). He proposes ways to repair 'the rupture of America's mythology,' insisting that 'jazz can help direct and guide Americans' and 'press America onto the flowerbed of beauty' (p. xxix).

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'I receive no pleasure in criticising other types of art,' writes Sehgal, and likewise, I receive no pleasure in criticising this young, ambitious, passionate thinker. But there's no excuse for syntax this badly mangled:

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The musical incarnation of democracy, evidenced with jazz, deposited democracy into aesthetic action. (p. 8)

It is an activist spirit that is to be resilient and self-amends, plays another chord, or redrafts stalled legislation. (p. 10)

The free jazz movement and musical experimentalism of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) certainly are known for experimental music. (p. 32)

America can be free and responsible, democratic and capitalistic, and red states with blue states. (p. 149)

The cultural democracy imbued within the jam session of jazz instructed political democracy to integrate and melt with its era. (p. 174)

When I put on the Count Basie Orchestra's rendition of 'Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me,' even my jazz-avoiding friends start to tap their foots. (p. 170)

The main text fills only 178 pages; it is laborious to get through. But the problems run even deeper. Sehgal is consistently awkward and overzealous in his citation of sources. We don't need Rudyard Kipling introduced as an 'author,' or Jean-Paul Sartre as a 'French writer.' Befuddling non-sequiturs clog the prose as well. One passage leaps from General Pershing to Napoleon to Racine. Another veers from novelist Rafi Zabor to James Joyce to Vico to Sonny Rollins and Coltrane. Drawing bold, eclectic comparisons is well and good, but even Sehgal refers self-effacingly to his 'novice pen.' There are too many inelegant transitions, not enough narrative tissue, to bring his admirably interdisciplinary outlook into true and sustained focus.

Sehgal's stabs at wit and irony can be just as opaque, if not cringe-inducing. There's an unexplained reference to the Dreyfus Affair as 'the Peter Pan of French politics' (p. 89). He terms bandleader Paul Whiteman's opinion that whites served to legitimise jazz 'a *baguette* of contention' (p. 99). Recounting jazz's rise in popularity overseas, he writes: '*Veni, Vedi* [sic], *Velcro: the music came, saw, and stuck around*' (p. 55). These are examples of Sehgal 'jazzing the text,' as he explains it, tossing in

italicised quips and ‘making this work *my* solo.’ Humour can be indispensable to good writing, but it needs to be humorous.

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Sehgal is right to press the case for jazz not just as a timeless art, but a locus of civic meaning and community building. He’s right to find vacuity, vulgarity, casual violence and rampant materialism in American pop culture. But his diagnoses end up maddeningly one-dimensional. ‘I struggled with how to treat rap music and popular entertainment,’ he confesses. ‘It is the height of elitism to justify a preference by insulting someone else’s preference’ (p. xxix), he adds, but this is precisely his tactic in regard to hip-hop and other non-jazz idioms. And to simplify hip-hop as Sehgal does is ultimately to simplify jazz as well. ‘Jazz music stands on its own,’ he asserts, and yet it doesn’t. From the outset, it has interacted with other musical languages in the U.S. and around the globe.

‘It is not my intention to wade into the confusing jazz wars: what is or what isn’t jazz music’ (p. xxviii), Sehgal writes, and fair enough. But at this stage it is untenable to treat jazz and hip-hop as though they are walled off and forever antagonistic. Rapper Mos Def and his big band performed at the 2008 JVC Jazz Festival, with star Blue Note pianist Robert Glasper as musical director. Guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel had his 2003 album *Heartcore* produced by rapper Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest. Jazz heavyweights Uri Caine and Christian McBride recorded *The Philadelphia Experiment* in 2001 with Ahmir ‘?uestlove’ Thompson, drummer for the rap group The Roots. Pianist Vijay Iyer co-conceived two multimedia performance projects with hip-hop poet Mike Ladd. As I reported for Slate.com in 2005, some of today’s most advanced jazz composers draw on hip-hop aesthetics – distinct approaches to form, rhythm and sonic texture – even in largely acoustic environments. [3] Sehgal does not begin to address these realities, apart from a fleeting reference to clarinetist Don Byron, who hasn’t made a rap-influenced record in some years.

‘How will our culture be remembered?’ Sehgal wonders – admittedly, an urgent question. He imagines an absurdist future when school kids visit the National Gallery of Art, step into the Early 21st Century Music and Art exhibit and hear lyrics by rapper 50 Cent: ‘My black G-Unit hoodie just reek of marijuana/cocaine comin’ out my pores in the sauna.’ As it happens, plans for a hip-hop museum in

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the Bronx were first reported in 2006, and the New York City Council members supporting the project are among gangsta rap's staunchest critics. [4]

Indeed, the most intense backlash against misogyny, materialism and gratuitous violence in mainstream rap has emanated from the hip-hop community itself. The rap emcee N.Y. Oil has produced a series of online video commentaries that, according to his record label Babygrande, further 'the ceaseless crusade to recover hip-hop from the misguided priorities and perspectives that have come to publicly define the art form and culture.' Hip-hop activist Rosa Clemente, the Green Party's 2008 vice presidential candidate, may subscribe to dubious politics (more about that in a moment), but she got this much right during her acceptance speech at the June party convention in Chicago:

Hip-hop is so much more than music. If hip-hop to you is 50 Cent – those are rappers, those are recording artists who get paid to perform. Hip-hop is so much more than videos and bling and commercials and women being used as objects. ... [It is] a movement created by black and brown youth that now speaks to youth all over the world.

Sehgal is stubbornly incurious about this movement, the history of which has been explored at length by Jeff Chang and other scholars. [5] Instead, we get sarcasm and semi-coherent mockery:

[Rappers] glorify bourgeoisie [sic] disaffection with the world. Why do people with so much wealth sound so angry? One can leap into the 'bling bling,' but one's temperance remains frozen. (p. 151)

In the end, the loss is Sehgal's. The annual Hip-Hop Theater Festival has brought to light such staggering talents as Danny Hoch and Will Power. Dance companies such as Philadanco and Rennie Harris Puremovement are writing a new chapter in the annals of hip-hop choreography. Returning to Sehgal's concept of a new American mythology, it would seem that both jazz and hip-hop have a great deal to offer. But to Sehgal, the latter is 'all set to the beat of an IBM ThinkPad.' His ignorance of hip-hop production, and outright contempt for non-acoustic musical methods, would make many young jazz musicians wince.

Another facet in the overlapping history of jazz and hip-hop is the articulation of dissent. Here again, Sehgal is oddly inflexible. Examining the State Department's

use of jazz as a 'soft power' weapon in the Cold War, he rightly notes how jazz artists were able to keep their art from devolving into propaganda. But from this he draws some rather sweeping conclusions: 'The artist who overtly politicises his art degrades his work, turning it into an advertising program. The artist who politicises his work eschews personal integrity' (p. 52). Certainly it's true in some cases – consider the embrace of Maoism by Jean-Luc Godard and classical composer Cornelius Cardew. But John Lennon? Bruce Springsteen? Stevie Wonder? No integrity? Sehgal also fails to account for the substantial trove of jazz protest music, mostly around civil rights, pioneered by Charles Mingus, Max Roach and others. 'Jazz was able to escape overt politicization because it emphasised instrumentals over vocals,' writes Sehgal, but what of Nina Simone's 'Mississippi Goddamn' or Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit?' 'Popular music today emphasises vocal lyrics, which makes it more susceptible to explicit didactical politicization,' Sehgal continues, missing the historical precedent of Woody Guthrie and suggesting, strangely, that early popular music featured no lyrics.

The problem is not politicisation, but rather the content of the politics being espoused. And in that regard, jazz and hip-hop have mixed records in the post-9/11 era. Jazz musicians rose up against the Iraq war but were too willing to play fundraising benefits for loony-left sects like International A.N.S.W.E.R. and The World Can't Wait. Hip-hoppers have rightly condemned such outrages as the police shooting of Sean Bell, but Rosa Clemente, in her nomination speech, offered unequivocal praise for the Weather Underground and other left extremist forebears (in clear violation of her party's plank on non-violence). The recourse to revolutionary posturing, all too common in hip-hop activism, distorts the agenda of events like the National Hip-Hop Political Convention, in which Clemente is intimately involved. But the potential for hip-hop constituencies to form strong progressive voting blocs cannot be denied – hence the emergence of the Hip-Hop Team Vote campaign and other officially nonpartisan initiatives. At this writing, there is a growing split in the hip-hop world between Obama voters and backers of Green presidential candidate (and 9/11 conspiracy theorist) Cynthia McKinney.

Sehgal sees a prominent role for jazz in the renewal of American democracy, but he might have noted that hip-hop, his main bogeyman, is well ahead of jazz as a catalyst of political engagement. The snag is that socially conscious hip-hop, in answering the excesses of commercial rap, has generated its own set of problems. But these are political matters, not musical ones. They reflect the bitter divide between a left that promotes unwavering principles of democratic pluralism and human rights, and

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what Alan Johnson calls ‘the post-left,’ the Chavista and Chomskyite left, which ‘luxuriates ... in anti-Americanism, anti-westernism, anti-Zionism, anti-capitalism, and anti-liberalism.’ [6] Guess which of these is sexier when set to hard-hitting alternative beats.

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In a recent interview, master pianist Keith Jarrett said to me: ‘There’s something you can only get from art, and there’s something you can only get from music within the arts, and there’s something you can only get from jazz within the art of music.’ *Jazzocracy* is an earnest attempt to identify what that something is. The ineffable power of swing, the genius of the improvised solo against the ‘central grid’ of rhythm, ‘the romantic lyricism of the blues ballad’ (p. 104): Jazz is inexhaustible, symbolising and recapitulating the African-American triumph over centuries of oppression. But jazz also has a displacement complex. It lost out to rock, then rap, in the marketplace of sound. We can bristle all we want at the defensive, us-against-them stance of Stanley Crouch, Wynton Marsalis and Kabir Sehgal, but there’s a reason these attitudes have developed.

Sehgal’s commitment to the music is profound, and the more jazz advocates there are, the better. ‘Music is audible and aural literature,’ he writes, ‘[a]nd just as American schools teach the works of America’s greatest writers, so too should schools educate about America’s classical art, the music of Armstrong, Ellington, and Gillespie’ (p. 170). Let us stand shoulder to shoulder with Sehgal in making that happen.

There’s also something to be said for Sehgal’s take on edifying myths in the third and final section of *Jazzocracy*, ‘Rhythm Saves the World.’ Drawing on insights from Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, Gurdjieff, Joseph Campbell and others, Sehgal conceives mythology as ‘pedantic lore, instructive legend,’ and proposes a set of ‘cohesive agents’ to push back against ‘America the bootylicious’ (p. 119). This section, although riddled with the flaws I’ve outlined above, has something novel at its core in terms of pedagogy and public advocacy. ‘The archetype that I propose we emulate and re-introduce to American society is that of the rugged jazz musician’ (p. 113). Why not? The irony, as Sehgal notes in passing but doesn’t internalise, is that the jazz musician used to be viewed very much like the rapper.

Sehgal also borrows terminology from legal scholar Lawrence Lessig to talk about jazz as a ‘commons’ and a ‘nonrivalrous resource’ (p. 145), and this is the author at his best, seizing upon the big picture in an original way. His epilogue, adapted from an essay in *Issues & Concerns* magazine, is a learned and persuasive look at the creative economy of New Orleans and the halting post-Katrina recovery. As a policy wonk, Sehgal attains a whole other level of poise and authority.

But for all his focus on the communal, activist dimensions of jazz, Sehgal doesn’t illuminate the standpoint of the current generation of players, who tend to see upholding jazz tradition and respecting popular music as non-contradictory. These artists, in the words of bandleader and blogger Darcy James Argue, are ‘forging ahead with smart, visceral music that is reaching a new audience – our grounding in jazz fundamentals actually makes it easier for us to reach across genre barriers and engage with the wider musical culture, as jazz musicians have been doing throughout the music’s history.’ [7] This sort of broadminded orientation can only help jazz secure a place at America’s table, for the next hundred years and beyond.

David R. Adler writes about music, politics and culture for publications including *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Philadelphia Weekly* and *Jazz Times*. He also blogs at *Lerterland*.

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Notes

- [1]Ratliff 2003.
- [2]Daniels 2008.

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[3] Adler 2005.

[4] Berman 2006.

[5] Chang 2005.

[6] Johnson 2008.

[7] Argue 2008.