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ABOUT ZWORD

Z Word is an online journal focusing on the contemporary debate over Zionism, anti-Zionism, antisemitism and related areas. Editorially independent, Z Word identifies and challenges anti-Zionist orthodoxies in mainstream political exchange.

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ESSAY

## Jazz and Protest: A Reappraisal

By David R. Adler

April 2009



IN EARLY NOVEMBER 2006, near a Chicago exit ramp during rush hour, an avant-garde jazz devotee named Malachi Ritscher set himself on fire to protest the war in Iraq. In an online suicide note he wrote: “Our so-called leaders are the real terrorists in the world today, responsible for more deaths than Osama bin Laden.” He also expressed regret for not slashing Donald Rumsfeld’s throat during a chance encounter in 2002. His wrath toward the Bush administration was valid in some respects (“torturing and trampling human rights inside and outside our own borders”), even prescient (“our economy is a house of cards”). Otherwise, Ritscher’s note was a dubious ultra-left polemic, revealing signs of mental instability. His death was a tragedy.

When Peter Margasak, a Chicago jazz journalist, posted an account of Ritscher’s death on his blog, readers began leaving comments—many expressing shock and dismay, others glorifying the man’s self-destruction. “Sensitivity to injustice is NOT mental illness,” wrote one person. “True spiritual conviction is rare,” wrote another. “Enlightment [*sic*] I call it,” wrote another. Some held that the lack of national media coverage indicated a conspiracy to quash Ritscher’s message.

In his note Ritscher declared: “I would prefer to be thought of as a ‘spiritual warrior.’” The irony is that by late 2006, seas of innocent Iraqi blood were on the hands of Islamist “spiritual warriors” who believed in the nobility of incinerating themselves for a cause. Romanticizing Ritscher’s act, and his obvious personal pain and anguish, was not just unseemly; it also pointed to a widespread moral confusion among an antiwar left utterly convinced of its virtue. As a microcosm of that left, the jazz and improvised music world—long associated with struggles for social justice—could not but reproduce these flaws.

Writing just before the 2006 midterm elections, Ritscher disdained the

two-party system (not without reason) and scoffed at hopes for liberal reform. Had he stayed alive, he would have witnessed an unstoppable wave of support for a professed jazz fan named Barack Obama—a development that once again raises the question, after decades of agitation for a better world: Will jazz and the creative arts be a force for strident revolutionary dogma, or for principled democratic advocacy and human rights? There’s a difference, and as we move from the manifold disasters of the Bush era to the substantial promise of the Obama administration, it’s never been more important.

“Jazz as ‘freedom music’ is an idea with a long and indelible history”

**Jazz and Cultural Tensions**

Jazz as “freedom music” is an idea with a long and indelible history. Percussionist and writer Jesse Stewart holds that in the decades following the Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, African-Americans developed a “new collective mindset,” which “may have played a crucial role in the proliferation of new cultural forms, including jazz, in the 1890s.” But the black freedom struggle, much like the music itself, was just beginning.

Segregation, lynching, the systematic negation of equality: this was the environment that turned jazz into “a hothouse of fractious politics and warring stylistic ideologies going back to the 1930s,” to quote University of Vermont professor John Gennari. As the century progressed, the protest messages grew more overt: *We Insist! Max Roach’s Freedom Now Suite*, Charles Mingus’s “Fables of Faubus,” Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam,” Archie Shepp’s “Malcolm, Malcolm, Semper Malcolm” ... the list goes on. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his opening address to the Berlin Jazz Festival in 1964, said: “Much of the power of our Freedom Movement in the United States has come from this music.” The point wasn’t lost on J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, which maintained dossiers on Roach and other jazz greats, as Andrew W. Lehren reports in the April 2009 issue of *JazzTimes*.

Indeed, jazz artists, along with rockers, folkies, soul and R&B bands, did much to define the culture of civil rights and antiwar activism, bringing about what Gennari calls “a zenith in black communal expression.” Even Joe Henderson, the generally nonpolitical tenor sax master, reflected the turn toward black nationalism with album titles like *Power to the People* (1969) and *In Pursuit of Blackness* (1970).

A lot has changed from post-Vietnam to post-9/11, and some fault the current generation—a markedly interracial, international, multistylistic crop—for failing to live up to the legacy of political engagement in jazz, whether out of apathy or fear. But this accusation doesn’t square with the glut of politically themed albums and song titles, not to mention verbal statements of outrage at live gigs and even recommended reading lists in liner notes and websites, that became a commonplace in the jazz community during the Bush years. On the contrary, we can now look back on a decade—9/11, war in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina, economic meltdown, the Obama ascendancy—that saw a considerable spike in jazz protest, perhaps the most quantitatively significant since the civil rights era.

With the advent of the blogosphere, musicians were freer than ever to share their political views with the public. Even when the statements weren’t issue-specific, they could advance the idea of jazz as countercultural, part of a generalized “protest and resistance against the seemingly irresistible pressures to conform, be silent, go along and get along,” as one concert presenter put it in an email. In this respect, jazz has much in common with other underground music. Ian Mackaye of the innovative hardcore band Fugazi once said: “To exist independent of the mainstream is a political feat, in my opinion.”

Which brings us to a central paradox of jazz history. While some view the music as officially anti-establishment, in perpetual tension with American society and even Western norms as a whole, others believe it to embody, in Gennari’s words, “African American culture as a vital stream of Western civilization.” For figures such as Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), jazz is integral to the revolutionary leftist, Third Worldist program he’s espoused for years. For other authors, such as Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray and Stanley Crouch (Baraka’s nemesis), jazz actually “vindicat[es] the most hallowed American values—freedom, democracy, individualism—against the country’s equally entrenched traditions of bigotry, philistinism, and commercialism.” This is how

jazz could become a diplomatic “soft power” weapon, a means of cultural outreach, for the U.S. State Department during the Cold War, even as some in the jazz world voiced sympathy with international communism. The music has always mirrored tensions between the official political culture, the liberal democratic left, the absolutist radical left and shades of grey in between.

### “The Jews Knew”

As I write this, Jazz at Lincoln Center is preparing to host a New York panel on “Jews, Blacks and Jazz,” featuring Stanley Crouch among others. Jews have indeed played a role in the music, certainly as players, perhaps most significantly as journalists and critics. And needless to say, the jazz world was never immune from growing splits in the civil rights coalition. Jewish critics tended to voice discomfort with rising black nationalist sentiment. Nat Hentoff, now 83, the esteemed jazz writer and outspoken civil libertarian who produced Roach’s *Freedom Now Suite*, addressed his white colleagues in 1962 as follows: “[It is] unrealistic not to expect a period of catharsis for the American Negro—a period where all the rage and bitterness and anger and torment has to get out.” But for a critic like the late Leonard Feather, the exclusivist tone of LeRoi Jones’s influential 1963 book *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* was hard to swallow. According to Gennari:

### “Baraka went a step further and recycled a pernicious conspiracy theory: The Jews knew”

*What gave Feather’s experience resonance and a certain pathos was his perspective as a Jew who had emigrated to the United States and into the jazz life during the ascendancy of European fascism in the late 1930s and early 1940s. [...] When Feather ... sounded an alarm “that black nationalist leaders and the American Nazi Party had a relationship of mutual respect” and “that both had expressed similarly antagonistic views on the Jews,” he was expressing a deeply personal sense of horror at the twentieth century’s most chillingly consequential racial ideology.*

One sees a similar frame of reference in the writings of Dan Morgenstern, who turns 80 this year, and who witnessed a Nazi demonstration outside his window in Austria as a young boy (“one of the ugliest and most unmusical sounds I’d yet heard”).

Imagine Leonard Feather’s view of the present-day Jones, now Baraka, whose poem “Somebody Blew Up America,” written one month after 9/11, makes clear what an astute humanist endeavor *Blues People* was in comparison. Reciting a litany of American sins, and saying little or nothing about the 9/11 perpetrators, was typical enough of the far left at the time (e.g., Ani DiFranco’s poem “Self Evident,” which she read at Carnegie Hall in April 2002). Baraka went a step further and recycled a pernicious conspiracy theory: The Jews knew.

*Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed  
Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers  
To stay home that day  
Why did Sharon stay away?*

The standard version, begat by the likes of Hezbollah and eagerly picked up by American fantasists, is that 4000 Jews stayed home—in other words, conspired to save their own skins and kept quiet, allowing their non-Jewish colleagues to die in the flames and debris. By recasting the culprits as Israelis instead of Jews, and by invoking the reviled Ariel Sharon, Baraka was able to take cover behind Middle East politics, claiming, as anti-Zionists will do, that he was simply attacking the state of Israel, not Jews as a people.

When I commented briefly on the matter in *JazzTimes*, a letter writer complained that I was disallowing criticism of a nation-state. Another reader, in an unpublished email, urged me to learn about Israeli foreknowledge of 9/11 by consulting the *American Free Press*—a weekly paper with extensive white supremacist ties. Leonard Feather might have predicted it: At least one defender of Baraka, a Black Power advocate, was citing White Power propaganda as a factual source.

The poem sparked an outcry. The government of New Jersey tried to revoke Baraka’s status as the state poet laureate, a move widely condemned as punishment of free speech. During the controversy, Baraka stuck to the nonsensical “4000 Israelis” theory as truth and argued that he couldn’t be anti-Semitic—after all, his poem explicitly condemned the Holocaust:

*Who put the Jews in ovens,  
and who helped them do it  
Who said “America First”  
and ok’d the yellow stars*

Note, however, that Baraka cited the Holocaust as simply another example of American perfidy, bringing to mind a climactic scene in the 1961 film *Judgment at Nuremberg*. Maximilian Schell, in the role of defense attorney Hans Rolfe, makes his case for the fictional Nazi war criminal Ernst Janning (Burt Lancaster) by citing the Soviet non-aggression pact of 1939, the complicity of American industrialists in the German war machine and so forth. He concludes: “Ernst Janning said he is guilty. If he is, Ernst Janning’s guilt is the world’s guilt—no more and no less.” In short, Baraka’s attempt at moral equivalence—“Who helped them do it?”—is not what one says to convict the Nazis. It’s what one says to acquit them.

Baraka married a Jew, Hettie Cohen, during his bohemian period in Greenwich Village in the 1950s, but his subsequent Black Power stance brought that relationship to an end. In today’s jazz world it is largely unthinkable to question him—although Stanley Crouch, long ago an admirer, has no qualms: “Failing at one evolution after another, Jones/Baraka now remains in the pasture a garden

### “Baraka cited the Holocaust as simply another example of American perfidy”

variety Marxist and neutered intellectual whose work convinces no one of anything other than his lack of importance and an unusual ability to write the very same thing over and over without losing addled heat.” It is Crouch, however, not Baraka, who comes in for regular drubbing from jazz enthusiasts. (Admittedly, this has far more to do with Crouch’s aesthetic traditionalism than his politics.)

Baraka performs frequently with his wife, Amina, in the ensemble Blue Ark. He is a featured guest on saxophonist Billy Harper’s 2008 release *Blueprints of Jazz Vol. 2*, reciting a text called “Where Dat Stuff Come From?” In 2002 he appeared on *Phrenology* by The Roots,

a superior hip-hop group with many well-deserved jazz allies (and a new gig as the house band for *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*). “Something in the Way of Things (In Town),” the track in question, places eerie, abstract music under Baraka’s oddly compelling spoken-word delivery. The liner note describes him as “the voice watching death that New Jersey Governor James E. McGreevey would love to silence ... but never could.”

### The Reactionary as Resistor

There have been worse cases. Gilad Atzmon, the Israeli-born, UK-based saxophonist, also hides behind the cause of Palestinian human rights, not to mention the verbiage of High Theory, as he promotes open antisemitism. In a 2004 column for *The Guardian* he positioned himself as an upholder of the “resistance” tradition in jazz, but he represents that tradition gone horribly awry.

He has endorsed the anti-Jewish writings of Richard Wagner: “...Wagner may be banned in Israel, yet, the conditions that led Marx, Weininger and Wagner to say what they had to say remain unchanged.” He has declared: “We have to admit that Israel is the ultimate evil rather than Nazi Germany.” He has even argued that the Nazis weren’t so bad after all: “Carpet bombing and total erasure of populated areas that is so trendy amongst Israeli military and politicians (as well as Anglo-Americans) has never been a Nazi tactic or strategy.”

Unlike Baraka, Atzmon devotes nearly all his political energies to dogging the Jews, and he cannot rest on any laurels as a groundbreaking 20<sup>th</sup>-century author and jazz scholar. David Duke, the notorious white supremacist, has hailed Atzmon as “one of the most famous Jewish musicians in the world,” which would put him in the league of Itzhak Perlman and Barbra Streisand. In fact he is little known in the States, though his CDs with the Orient House Ensemble have garnered some favorable reviews in jazz publications. In Britain, however, Atzmon’s active promotion of bigotry and Holocaust denial, and his receptive audience among some on the extreme left, has generated a firestorm of commentary from progressive bloggers and activists.

The latest contretemps came at the end of January in Davos, when Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, lashing out at Israel’s Shimon Peres during a panel, cited Atzmon as a worthy source on the topic of

Israeli misdeeds. It isn't every opinionated saxophonist who manages to get himself quoted by a NATO head of state. And yet thanks to Atzmon's very obscurity, the bulk of the reporting on Erdogan's outburst did not mention Atzmon at all. The one detail that made the affair so strangely significant was altogether missed.

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### “Some culture reporters, even as they stare Atzmon’s hatemongering in the face, choose to call it something else”

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Some culture reporters, even as they stare Atzmon's hatemongering in the face, choose to call it something else. In a recent profile for *The Guardian*, John Lewis referred in congratulatory terms to Atzmon's "furious attacks on Israel" and "blunt anti-Zionism." (The term "antisemitism" appeared nowhere in the piece.) To be fair, Lewis noted that some Palestinian activists want nothing to do with Atzmon and his "provocatively anti-Jewish rhetoric." Yet with that vaguely laudatory description, Lewis seemed to stop just short of siding with Atzmon in the matter.

In another adulatory interview for New Zealand's *Gisborne Herald*, published in January 2009 by Martin Gibson, Atzmon declared: "One of the things that happened to us was that stupidly we interpreted the Nazi defeat as a vindication of the Jewish ideology and the Jewish people." He also said: "I think Jewish ideology is driving our planet into a catastrophe and we must stop." Not only did Gibson fail to challenge this unambiguous racism. In a striking display of gullibility and incompetence, he wrote: "There have been numerous attempts to silence Mr Atzmon, including inevitable charges that he is anti-Semitic, although he is Jewish himself."

Profiting from shrill anti-Zionist sentiment that has gone increasingly mainstream, Atzmon has found it easy to string along a growing number of music journalists, and apparently editors too. But what of his music—an intricate hybrid involving oud, various reeds and percussion, Middle Eastern vocals and conventional jazz instruments? Admittedly, it is worth hearing. It speaks to jazz's long-standing ability to absorb influences from around the globe

—something all the more pronounced as gifted players are emerging from West Africa, South and Central America, East Asia and, yes, Israel (Anat Cohen, Omer Avital, Reut Regev, Gilad Hekselman, more). Children of immigrants from Iraq (Amir ElSaffar), Iran (Hafez Modirzadeh), India (Vijay Iyer), Pakistan (Rez Abbasi) and elsewhere are also bringing diasporic elements to bear on jazz's core language. Thus we see that Atzmon's concept, though skillful, is not unique. His political agenda is what sets him apart. Some recognize it for the poison it is; others give the benefit of the doubt to anyone spewing venom at Israel.

### The Nightmare of “Relevance”

After years as a guitarist, editor and activist, I began writing about jazz in 1999. Since then my taste in music has grown steadily more radical, my politics the reverse. I believe this is largely a coincidence, though I still wonder if something lies behind it. As a Nader-for-President volunteer in the mid '90s I was invested primarily in the bebop and postbop tradition, commonly grouped under the heading "mainstream jazz." Today that is still my home, although I've come to understand and love sounds that are far more extreme, that even some jazz players wouldn't consider music. In part, I hear this work as refreshingly apart from the hyper-capitalist, commoditized, fluff-obsessed world around it. And yet even as a staunch liberal and social democrat, I'm increasingly turned off by what Ian McEwan has called the "cloying self-regard" of today's antiwar street-protest left, the very place on the political spectrum where adventurous, experimental musicians and fans tend to gather.

Daniel Fischlin of the University of Guelph has written of "sound as dissident practice, commentary, critique." His colleague Ajay Heble, writing in support of the jazz avant-garde, has suggested that "the 'return to the tonic' structure of diatonic music [i.e., mainstream jazz] is ... an ideological convention, a way of reinforcing the status quo." But artists' intentions are too varied, the experience of listening too subjective, for Heble's paradigm to be airtight. And much of modern jazz falls *between* the poles of consonance and dissonance, "inside" and "outside." As Heble admits, "...the connections between dissonant musics and oppositional politics are not always readily sustainable."

I do take seriously Robin Balliger's claim that "music and representations of music are contextualized activities that have social and political meaning." But this

shouldn't close off the idea of music as a sphere unto itself. I have to laugh when Fischlin conjures "a nightmare world in which sound is pure and essential, divorced from its social and political contexts, meaningful in its abstract and metaphysical potential but irrelevant in what it has to say to the *here and now* of daily life." Of all the actual nightmares transpiring on the planet, Fischlin's scenario seems rather mild, even attractive.

In fact, social systems that demand art be "relevant" are precisely the ones that have ushered in nightmares. Cornelius Cardew, the British classical composer (1936-1981), denounced his mentors and flushed his talent in order to spread the gospel of Mao Zedong: "There is no such thing as Art for Art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics." Even if one agrees, it's quite a leap to conclude, as Mao and Cardew did, that the vanguard party has the right and the duty to declare war on individual expression.

Sadly, radicals tend to ignore these issues or worse, even as they bash liberals for falling short in the quest for justice. Baraka told *JazzTimes* in 2001 that he still reads Lenin and Mao every day. His Facebook fan page lists the Cuban Revolution as one of his key inspirations. The remarkable thing is not a celebrated poet supporting a regime that has locked up its share of poets. It's that on today's radical left, this is not remarkable at all.

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A democratic vision of the arts needn't involve fetishizing the private or the public, and most of us know this intuitively. In any case, thank goodness New Orleans musicians such as Terence Blanchard and Donald Harrison, not to mention Larry Blumenfeld and other journalist colleagues, have used their skills to register disgust at the aftermath of Katrina and push for the rebirth of a vibrant and historic community. Darcy James Argue has composed pieces such as "Habeas Corpus" and spoken from the stage about the shame of torture and rendition

and the abuses of Blackwater. There are many more individual examples, none as stirring as when jazz enthusiasts of all stripes came together in a flood of support for Democratic nominee and now President Barack Obama.

Recently on *Meet The Press*, Obama invoked jazz as part of "the diversity of our culture" and "the incredible tapestry that's America." During his first post-election press conference, when he described himself as a "mutt," he could have been talking about the music, an art of African lineage that has always thrived and even depended on cultural and ethnic mixing. Jazz advocates sense that gut-level connection. They're also encouraged by ideas floated by Obama's Arts Policy Committee during the campaign: stepped-up global cultural exchange, more federal arts funding, greater commitment to arts education, affordable health care for the self-employed. *Americans for the Arts*, an advocacy group, is lobbying hard for arts funding as key to any economic renewal package, and the Obama administration's response thus far has been encouraging.

Surely, Obama's presidency will be met with protests from various quarters. Politicians must always be answerable to the public, and this one is no exception. But as the Bush era illustrated so starkly, there is more to upholding the right to dissent than naively applauding every dissenter. Z

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