Lexicon of Jazz Invective: Hurling Insults Across a Century with Big Data

Maristella Feustle

Texas Music Library Association

University of North Texas

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Long ago, in a university far, far away, several years before I realized I was a librarian waiting to happen, I had the privilege of taking an "intro to music research" class with Dr. Bonna Boettcher. Eleven years later, had I somehow still not discovered librarianship, the three things I would remember from that class at Bowling Green State University in my first semester of grad school would be: the name *Duckles*, the word *siglum*, and Nicholas Slonimsky's *Lexicon of Musical Invective*. Aside from the *Chicago Manual of Style*, the *Lexicon* was the only title I felt moved to buy as a result of the class. They both have their own strong suits: One is more entertaining; the other makes you taller when you sit on it.

I have long thought that there needed to be a jazz counterpart to the *Lexicon of Musical Invective*, in which Slonimsky collects some of the most over-the-top criticism, with the most creative choice of words, against composers who are now respected pillars of "classical" music. At the time, they were misfits and oddballs, at least to some, and the same holds true for jazz musicians across the twentieth century.

The general idea that jazz encountered resistance in every commonly accepted stylistic period is not new, but primary sources have been missing from the reception history. Textbooks tend to repeat the same few examples, or speak in general terms. In order to hold up to questioning, a historical narrative needs evidence, and depth. The criticism often says more about the critic than about the music it targets, and information about the social climate for reception of jazz is essential to understanding how it was received.
This research is possible because of the mass digitization of historical newspapers, and institutions which are committed to providing the widest access possible. It is an example of the phenomenon of "Big Data," and the new opportunities and types of research it has brought about. Gartner Research's interdisciplinary definition of Big Data as "high-volume, high-velocity and high-variety information assets that demand cost-effective, innovative forms of information processing for enhanced insight and decision making" is certainly appropriate. While not perfect, the ability to search through Optical Character Recognition allows the targeted exploration of decades of documents in a matter of seconds, and the identification of trends and patterns that can only emerge in large aggregations of data.

(SLIDE 3) And so, it has become possible in recent years to begin to extend Slonimsky's Schimpflexicon into jazz without prohibitive costs of time and travel to chase needles in haystacks with print or microfilmed copies of old newspapers. (SLIDE 4) The New York Times' online archive, the Library of Congress' Chronicling America project, and Google Historical Newspapers have yielded a voluminous bouquet of spleen from music critics discussing jazz. In a moment of weakness, I also signed up for a free seven-day trial of Newspapers.com for coverage in areas I could not get on the open Internet.

One of the main challenges of this phase of the project was finding a manageable scope of research, amid so many potential tangents inviting further exploration. For now, I limited my searches to "jazz," and the early variant spelling, "jass." The results are complicated by false positives in the OCR, and with a few notable exceptions, meaningful results commence around 1916. The upper boundary is more arbitrary, and not connected to events in jazz history (SLIDE 5).
Based on prior knowledge, I expected to find more puritanical and racist screeds against jazz, and initially expected to turn up critiques of specific, well-known artists along the way. Some are bound to exist, but here, what I did not find is more revealing than what I did find. Granted, jazz was young in those years, but surely the local papers would have covered what are now household names to jazz fans: Bunk Johnson? Louis Armstrong? Freddie Keppard? Jimmie Noone? Jelly Roll Morton? Maybe even Buddy Bolden?

What emerged as search after search came up empty, whether unrestricted, or targeted to New York, Chicago, and New Orleans, was a general blind spot to African-American music and musicians. Even in New Orleans, no mention of Storyville came up between 1907 and 1961 in Chronicling America! One might also reasonably wonder about the representation of African-American newspapers in digitization projects and how much of a gap awaits resolution.

Across the board, there were very few familiar names: Sophie Tucker, Ted Lewis, Fanny Brice, and eventually W.C. Handy, Mamie Smith, and Ethel Waters. There was also a general lack of emphasis on instrumental soloists in favor of ensemble names, matching the standard narrative of jazz history with respect to the impact of players like King Joe Oliver on making jazz a soloist's art (but with no mention of Oliver found in this time frame). The ensembles were often those of white musicians, especially in Chicago. And while there was plenty of invective leveled at jazz as a genre, it did not get as specific as particular performers or bands.
(SLIDE 9) But yes, there was pay dirt. There was plenty of racism and xenophobia to go around, with the creepy pseudo-scientific hubris that accompanied such discussions in the early 20th century. Some theories got quite creative in their detraction of the “other,” implicating far-flung ethnic groups. And there were high hopes that more elegant dance trends would soon send jazz packing. (QUOTATIONS, SLIDES 10-13).

The quotes are amusing, but something is missing outside of the original presentation:

(SLIDE 14) Here, the diagnosis of “jangled souls” followed a steelworkers’ strike--

(SLIDE 15) -- A condition that may be co-morbid with “shattered nerves.”

(SLIDE 16) Anecdotal evidence means never having to say you’re grasping at straws.

(SLIDE 17) And can 50 million “leaders of French thought” be wrong?

(SLIDE 18) Add “busted hearts” to the list of maladies.

(SLIDE 19) Dancing “hellward by the jazz route.”

(SLIDE 20) Thankfully, this is all just a phase, and we should be out of the woods well before anyone does anything crazy like starting a university jazz studies program.

(SLIDE 21) What we clearly need here is legislation…

(SLIDE 22) … and policewomen.

(SLIDE 23) More than once, “jazz” was also used as a byword for modern chaos and half-baked ideas. Here, Einstein’s “jazz science” is blamed on Bolshevism.
(SLIDE 25) With the central aim of the research accomplished, there were other surprises. One was the extent to which the First World War and military bands advanced the acceptance of jazz, at least in New York City. Of the bands named in New York newspaper articles that mentioned jazz bands, many were military bands: The 305th Infantry Band, the 350th Field Artillery Jazz Band, the 367th "Colored" Infantry, the Battleship Mississippi Jazz Band on Fleet Day at Victory Way, the Brooklyn Navy Yard Jazz Band, the United States Navy Jazz Band from Charlestown Navy Yard, and James Reese Europe's 369th Infantry Band. The New Orleans papers also showed a prominent contingent of Navy and Marine jazz bands. As it is sometimes said of Benny Goodman and swing, perhaps the military bands made it “safe” – or provided a socially acceptable setting – for larger audiences to enjoy jazz.

Another point of interest, from a modern listener's perspective, was how inextricably the music and dancing were linked, which clearly served to amplify the moral panic, giving the most visible behavioral dimension to what Slonimsky termed "non-acceptance of the unfamiliar." The dancing could not have existed without the music.

Still another surprise was exactly how suddenly usage of the term “jazz” skyrocketed in the late 1910s. Grove’s entry on jazz notes that one of the earliest uses of the word came in a San Francisco sports column in 1913. There is evidence to support the idea that such usage was a San Francisco Bay Area phenomenon, via an August, 1913 article in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on trends in slang, and a cluster of sports articles in
the Oakland Tribune in 1914 and 1915 which also used it to mean “energy” or “pep.” The earliest mention my own research has uncovered was in the Winnipeg Tribune on June 28, 1913, quoting the Bulletin of San Francisco: “And the chorus: They must have put the ‘J’ to ‘Jazz,’ for they teemed with pepper and ginger.”

It is also possible to track the preference of the spelling "jazz" over "jass." The latter term is skewed slightly higher by false positives in the OCR and "Jass" as a surname, but is never the favorite by a wide margin. In fact, the New York Times did not use "jass" in its reporting unless it was in a band's name. The curve for the two aggregation services, Chronicling America and Newspapers.com, is notably similar (SLIDES 26, 27, 28).

(SLIDE 29) Obviously, there is much more research to be done, with respect to both the interval of time, and the resources consulted. Magazines and trade publications will become more important into the later 1920s, ‘30s, and so on, and as with any “big data” project, keeping the scope large enough to be meaningful, but small enough to be manageable will be an ongoing issue. The goal in the back of my mind has always been a Slonimsky-style, book-length Schimpflexicon; there’s certainly the material for it. There will surely be more surprises along the way: New types of resources generate new types of research.

(SLIDE 30) If there are conclusions which one may draw from this “pilot project” of sorts, one is how vastly a story can change based on whose story gets told, and who has access to the means to tell their story. If someone on a desert island attempted to reconstruct the history of jazz through this lens of predominantly white news media, the
result would be absurd. These results are also a study in how far removed in time and space the crafting of a historical narrative may be from the events, carrying with it the risk of oversimplifying and romanticizing the story through a few major events and prominent people, flattening a three-dimensional picture which more primary sources help to reconstitute. Names like Buddy Bolden show up surprisingly late in these resources, and often as virtual islands unto themselves -- not because they did not play an important role, but in the necessarily imperfect attempt to correct a blind spot after the fact with incomplete data through the lens of hindsight. From that, one may also appreciate the urgency to find and include minority publications in mass digitization projects.

In addition, these projects demonstrate the vital role which libraries play in ensuring free and open access to information, with librarians as advocates whose highest goal is access, not profit. It is all too common for those given to clueless pontificating to suggest that libraries will soon disappear because all of the information in the world is being put on the Internet. Even if that were the case, individuals left to their own devices would be paying out the nose for it.

(SLIDE 31) There are other observations one gains from attempting to reconstruct the story of people who were a really big deal a really long time ago: First, the fact that something or someone is popular now is no guarantee that they can stand the test of time, and the fact that something is ridiculed now does not mean someone will not see its value in the future.
Secondly, short of being Leonardo da Vinci or Vlad the Impaler, most everyone will be all but forgotten in a few hundred years. Even the passage of one century has left so many artists and performers in obscurity. Therefore, being true to oneself as an artist is far more important than what anyone may or may not think of the art.