Jewish Influences in Jazz

By Adrian Cho. Reproduced from the programme notes for the Impressions in Jazz Orchestra concert, *Benny Goodman @ Carnegie Hall, December 4, 2008, Dominion-Chalmers United Church.*

While the role of African-Americans in the development of jazz has been well-documented, not nearly as much attention has been given to the role of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who migrated to America in the early 20th century. The 1917 musical, “Robinson Crusoe, Jr.,” featured a blackface performance by a young Al Jolson. His stage performance inspired “The Jazz Singer,” a 1927 film that was the first of the “talkies” – feature-length motion pictures with synchronized dialogue sequences. In “The Jazz Singer,” Jolson portrayed a young Jakie Rabinowitz who defyed the traditions of his devout Jewish family by singing popular tunes in a beer hall and eventually becoming Jack Robin, a talented jazz singer. Jolson would become one of America’s first widely known Jewish entertainment stars. Other famous early Jewish singer-entertainers included Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor and Fanny Brice who all became household names with the help of Broadway impresario Florenz Ziegfeld and his Ziegfeld Follies.

While many of the first Jewish jazz artists were singers, it was the composers and the instrumentalists who would make the most significant contributions, helping jazz evolve both as an art-form and as popular music. Jerome Kern, George and Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Oscar Hammerstein, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Alan Lerner, Frederick Loewe, Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg were some of the great songwriters and lyricists who put Tin Pan Alley on the virtual musical map. Jewish influence in Tin Pan Alley was so strong that Cole Porter reportedly attributed his success to the fact that he wrote “Jewish music,” although he was not Jewish himself.

Jewish bandleaders and virtuosi played key roles in popularizing the swing style of jazz. Among the better known were orchestra leader Paul Whiteman, clarinetists Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw (Arthur Jacob Arshawsky), and trumpeters Harry James and Ziggy Elman (Harry Aaron Finkelman). James and Elman both played in Goodman’s band and in the famous 1938 Carnegie Hall Concert. In later years, Jewish saxophonists would figure significantly in the creation of new jazz styles with Lee Konitz in the cool jazz movement, Al Cohn in bebop and Stan Getz in the Brazilian bossa nova trend.

It was Goodman, Shaw and Elman who most visibly expressed their Jewish klezmer roots in jazz. However the first steps in this direction were taken by clarinetist, Harry Kandel, a pioneer of contemporary klezmer music. Kandel’s 1926 Yiddish standard “Der Shiffer Bulgar” (“The Quiet Bulgar”) was later recorded by Elman as “Fralich in Swing” and then given words by Johnny Mercer. Benny Goodman recorded “Fralich in Swing” as “And the Angels Sing,” a number one hit in 1939.

After the Great Depression, the klezmer scene virtually disappeared due to reduced immigration quotas and the assimilation of second generation immigrants into American society, often at the expense of their cultural traditions. The music of swing was a cure for the ills of the Depression and it’s not surprising that klezmer frailach would surface somewhere in jazz. Literally “happy” in Yiddish, a frailach is a joyous tune often danced to at weddings and other special occasions. Elman in particular was fond of jumping into a full-blown frailach improvisation session right in the middle of a swing tune. Live performances of this music would drive audiences wild. The Goodman versions of “And the Angels Sing” and “Bei Mir Bist Du Schön” contain textbook examples of Elman’s frailach blowing. It should be noted that while klezmer was part of Goodman’s musical lineage and he had received his first musical training at a synagogue, he quickly gravitated towards classical music and early jazz. Elman on the other hand, played in klezmer music ensembles all his life, even while he was enjoying great success in jazz. It is not surprising that Goodman let Elman take the lead in his own klezmer-jazz efforts.

“Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn” (“You Are Beautiful To Me”) was composed by Sholom Secunda for a 1932 Yiddish musical. It became a huge hit for the Andrews Sisters in 1937 but not before taking on English lyrics and the Germanized title of “Bei Mir Bist Du Schön.” The song was soon being sung by other artists all around the world. The Andrew Sisters rode its wave of popularity by performing other Yiddish songs for Jewish audiences, giving rise to the rumour that they were Jewish. The sisters were not Jewish although their manager Lou Levy was, as was Decca Records founder Jack Kapp, who signed the trio. “Bei Mir Bist Du Schön” was even a hit in Hitler’s Germany until the Nazi Party found out that the song’s original title was Yiddish and its composer was a Jew. The song launched the movement of Yiddish Swing, a fusion of jazz and klezmer, and in turn nurtured the careers of the Jewish vocal duo, the Barry (nee Bagelman) Sisters who were featured on the New York radio show *Yiddish Melodies in Swing* which began airing in 1938. The Yiddish Swing movement was important not only for popularizing Jewish music traditions with non-Jews but for enabling a younger generation of American Jews to rediscover their musical heritage. Yiddish Swing was clearly more than just a fad. *Yiddish Melodies in Swing* aired for 17 years until 1955, surviving even the swing era in which it was born.
The Nonet (1948-50)
By Adrian Cho. Reproduced from the programme notes from the Impressions in Jazz Concert, The Magic of Miles Davis, February 12, 2005, National Arts Centre.

The Nonet was conceived in a NYC West 55th Street basement apartment that Gil Evans moved into in the summer of 1946. The single room of about 14’x 25’ had been used as storage by Gil’s old employer and friend, Claude Thornhill, before the war. Gil never locked the door, and as the apartment was on the way to 52nd Street where all the clubs were, he had a constant stream of visitors. These visitors would become good friends and collaborators. Among them were Gerry Mulligan (the baritone player and composer who had done some writing for Gene Krupa as well as for Thornhill), George Russell, Johnny Carisi (a trumpet player who had played with Glenn Miller and had arranged for Thornhill), John Lewis (who played and wrote for Dizzy Gillespie and would later co-found the Modern Jazz Quartet), alto player Lee Konitz, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, drummer Max Roach, trombonist J.J. Johnson, and Charlie Parker, who would crash there from time to time. And let’s not forget Miles.

Miles first met Gil when Evans would go and listen to Charlie Parker. Miles wrote, “Here was this tall, thin, white guy from Canada who was hipper than hip. I mean, I didn’t know any white people like him.” Miles eventually became a part of the meetings at Evans’ basement. The group would soon imbue the music of bebop with the sound that Thornhill had originated in his band before the war. Thornhill had incorporated French horns, clarinets, bass clarinets, flutes, and tuba, and had all of the horns playing without vibrato. This was a unique concept at a time when the “sweet” bands, such as those of Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller, employed copious vibrato. Thornhill also employed mixed voicings that blended the various instruments to achieve a range of different textures. The unique sounds were also obtained by having the instruments play at the extremes of their ranges. Sometimes this would be done in counter-intuitive fashion with the bass instruments playing up higher than the treble instruments. Thornhill used soloists in the same way Ellington did, in short passages that were fully integrated into the music and sound of the band.

Both Thornhill and Evans, as an arranger for Thornhill and with his own bands, were significantly influenced by symphonic music. Carisi recalls that Evans was always playing the latest recordings of contemporary classical composers such as Bartok, Ravel, and Stravinsky. He also wrote many arrangements of music by Moussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, and other classical composers. Evans and Thornhill expected the same sensitivity and virtuosity in their bands as was expected in symphonic groups: precise intonation, which was harder to achieve when one played without vibrato, and the ability to handle dynamics from a whisper to a roar.

Miles, Evans, Mulligan, Carisi, Lewis, and Russell talked of an arranger’s “dream band” that would have the palette of the Thornhill band but would be more agile and more flexible. Big bands were on the way out and Miles considered Thornhill’s band to be unnecessarily large. He said, “Gil can use four instruments where other arrangers need eight.” As the Thornhill band had eighteen members, it is not surprising that they settled on a group with exactly half that number. Evans had actually been thinking along these lines months before these discussions began. He had already sketched some pieces for an eleven-piece group. At one point the proposed band had an additional trumpet, an idea later abandoned due to the difficulty of blending the second instrument with Miles’ unique, individual sound.

The nine-piece group consisted of a rhythm section and six horns. Evans said, “this was the smallest number of instruments that could get the sound and still express all the harmonies that Thornhill had used.” The six horns consisted of three pairs with each pair composed of a treble and bass instrument. The saxophones (alto and baritone), brass (trumpet and trombone), and symphonic brass (French horn and tuba), were each represented. As with Thornhill’s band, combinations of these six instruments could produce a variety of textures. Evans differed from Thornhill, however, in his use of the tuba. Thornhill utilized the tuba in a more traditional way with long sustained notes to fill out the bottom. Evans wanted a lighter sound that would have the tuba playing all kinds of demanding runs and scalar passages.

The aspiring arrangers began to write for their new band. Initially they had no intentions of performing or recording but simply wanted to rehearse their new works. Miles said, “That whole thing started out just as an experiment.” They began by filling some of the band’s chairs themselves with Lewis on piano, Mulligan playing baritone saxophone, and of course, Miles. Johnson was the logical choice to play trombone. The temporary disbanding of the Thornhill band in the summer of 1948 proved fortuitous for the newly formed Nonet. They gained bassist Joe Shulman, French hornist Sandy Siegelstein, and tuba player Bill Barber. Barber was exactly what Evans had in mind for his tuba parts. Mulligan said of Barber, “He used to transcribe Lester Young tenor choruses and play them on tuba.” Miles recruited Max Roach on drums and initially wanted Sonny Stitt on alto. With beboppers Lewis and Roach, the addition of Stitt might well have resulted in a much more bop-oriented sound. Mulligan, however, convinced that Konitz’ lighter sound would be more suitable for the Nonet, persuaded Miles to use him instead.
The Nonet was an important turning point for Miles as both a composer and a bandleader. He had already penned a handful of tunes including “Donna Lee”, “Little Willie Leaps”, and “Half Nelson.” He had also been the leader of the band that had recorded some of those tunes and others at a 1947 session with Parker, Lewis, Roach, and Nelson Boyd on bass. Now, however, he was a member of a collective of composers possessed of considerable talent and ability. In addition, the band was larger and played in a very different style than the bop quintet to which he was accustomed. Miles said, as if dismissing his earlier efforts, “I didn’t start writing until I met Gil Evans.”

Although the group was big and the clubs were only booking trios, quartets, and quintets, Miles managed to get gigs for the band at the Royal Roost where he had played with Parker. The Nonet performed there for two weeks in September 1948. The initial public reaction was mixed. The style was new and initially the playing was far from perfect even though some of the musicians were New York’s best. There are many mistakes in the bootlegged recordings of the Royal Roost gigs, and the style of both the ensemble playing and improvisation is very bop-oriented. In these recordings, Junior Collins plays French horn, Al McKibbon is on bass, and Mike Zwerin plays trombone.

Despite this poor initial showing, Capitol Records took a chance and signed Miles to record twelve titles with the Nonet. The group had disbanded by the time of the first recording session in January 1949. Reassembling it required some changes in personnel. Kai Winding replaced Zwerin on trombone. Charlie Parker’s pianist Al Haig and bassist Shulman filled in for Lewis and McKibbon who were touring with Dizzy. They recorded another session in April with Johnson on trombone, Siegelstein on French horn, Lewis on piano, Boyd on bass, and Kenny Clarke on drums. A final session was recorded in March of 1950. At this session Gunther Schuller played French horn and Roach drums. It is worth noting that in the racially segregated society of its time, the Nonet was composed of both black and white musicians under the direction of a black band leader. When criticized, Miles responded that he hired musicians based on their ability, and not on the colour of their skin.

The recordings were initially released piecemeal and record sales were poor. Even so, the Nonet’s legacy was admired by some musicians and older fans for whom bebop had not held much appeal. For Miles, the project was especially important because it represented his first significant body of work. It would eventually prove to be the first of many efforts by which he would strongly influence the way others would play and write jazz. In 1950 Miles was still only twenty-four years of age!

In 1957 Capitol released all the tracks on a 12” album entitled *The Birth of the Cool* and from that point on the recordings were a huge success. The influence of this short-lived group went on to be heard in the West Coast “Cool Jazz” movement led by Mulligan, Konitz, and others. The arranging styles, especially of Evans, would find their way into jazz, popular music, and television and film scoring. Although Miles never returned to the music or the instrumentation of the Nonet, its role in developing and establishing his particular style is clearly evident in later works, including *Kind of Blue*. 