

Megan Roy Will

Jazz: A Celebration of Freedom

Introduction

Jazz has long been a symbol of freedom in the United States. Born out of racial strife and ethnic tension, this art form provided an escape and opportunity for those living in a post-Civil War America. Developed around the turn of the 20th century in New Orleans, jazz gained popularity and began to change, adjusting to the current cultural climate while maintaining its meaning of freedom and personal independence. A message like this could not be contained, and soon spread around the globe across radio airwaves and by means of traveling musicians. Many nations welcomed this music that bore the mark of freedom, but few embraced it as exuberantly as Poland.

After the fallout from the Second World War, the Polish nation was thrown into the dark ages of communism. It was during this time that jazz was clung to as a symbol of freedom, and a means of individual expression. Adopted and fostered by Polish musicians, jazz began to take on new and different sounds, eventually leading to the invention of a uniquely Polish style. The purpose of this article is to investigate why jazz stands as a symbol of freedom in both the American and Polish cultures, and how the ideas of freedom and independence are expressed through this music in each country.

Historical and Cultural Context

Jazz is considered a truly American invention, one that emerged in the late nineteenth century largely due to the mixing of various peoples and the tension that resulted from the American Civil War. The cultural climate of the southern United States after the turmoil of war was defined by several characteristics: free people living in a restrictive society, racism, rebuilding, land redistribution, poor economy, and strikes.

Though the practice of slavery in America was abolished after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, African Americans were still often viewed as lesser, and many fell back into the cycle of the "slavery mentality," especially when sharecropping became a predominant form of employment [Lawson]. Racism was a driving force behind slavery, but even after slaves were freed the issues of

prejudice and inequality on the basis of social, political, and basic human rights persisted. These issues remained prevalent until they were brought to the public forefront during the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s and continue to remain relevant today [Foner and Mahoney].

Rebuilding the American South after the Civil War was complicated and riddled with violence and upheaval. The loss of approximately 650 thousand lives during the war, paired with economic strife and essential erasure of the Mason-Dixon line, which divided the country between North and South, left Americans distressed and confused in their adjustment to a unified state with common beliefs and goals. The Great Migration, marked by African Americans moving north in search of jobs and a better life, contributed to the blurring of the national divisions even further [Foner and Mahoney]. In addition to these changes, the failing economy spurred the Railroad Strikes of 1877, placing workers at odds with the government [Mintz and McNeil].

When compared with post-Civil War Southern America, the cultural climate of post-war Poland shows startling similarities. In the years following World War II, Poland faced over forty years of communist rule under the hand of the Soviets; a quarter of Poland's pre-war population was either killed or expatriated, transforming Poland from a multi-religious and diverse country into a relatively homogeneous one [Prażmowska 160]. This included the loss of six million lives, three million of which were Jews [Pietraszewski 48]. This change in Poland's demographics is particularly staggering as it had previously been home to the largest population of Jews in Europe before the start of the war ["Introduction to the Holocaust"]. Where Poles had once lived and worked side by side with Jews and other immigrants, the population became more nationalistic, with the majority identifying as Catholic and Polish. In turn, this disrupted a delicate balance of diversity and stoked ethnic tensions within Poland.

As a country, Poland suffered the brunt of the war. The capital, Warsaw, was razed to the ground and the country's borders were redrawn; a third of the country was given to the Russians under the terms of the Yalta Conference, and Germany returned land from its east, shifting the country westward. This caused a rift by the ceding of two highly regarded cultural cities, Wilno (Vilnius) and Lwów (Lvov), to Russia. The new government was haphazard and powerless to serve Polish needs, and existed only as a mere puppet of a greater Soviet power [Prażmowska 158]. Rebuilding had to occur from economic, demographic, and cultural ruin amounting to \$675 billion in modern currency [Pietraszewski 48]. Art, architecture, and other institutions of culture suffered much destruction as well. As a result of the poor economy during the communist regime, protests erupted and led to the formation of trade unions and the Solidarity movement, which culminated in the return of democracy in 1989 [Prażmowska 225].

Poland and the United States experienced similar struggles in both culture and society during their reconstruction from post-war turmoil. The parallels found in the reorganization of both nations shows that the jazz idiom has a function and significant meaning to a culture in recovery. Tension and hardship create a need for expression and a yearning for freedom, and it is the shared love of freedom and independence that connects the histories and cultures of the United States and Poland through the music of jazz.

A Symbol of Freedom

Adam Makowicz, a Polish jazz musician, claimed that “[Jazz] is connected with freedom because improvisation is something that depends on feeling, a mood. It’s free, and you can express yourself – everything is open.” [Ripmaster 54] In order to establish the cultural implications of jazz, it is important to understand why this music symbolizes freedom. Its focus on improvisation and other contributing musical elements like melodic expression, reharmonization, and flexibility in structure allow it to be one of the freest of the musical arts. In terms of society, jazz music brings with it opportunities for the performer to communicate, travel, and share personal moral values and ideas.

In the United States

The roots of American jazz can be traced back to New Orleans around the turn of the 20th century. This musical invention came from the intermingling of African, Caribbean, European, and American folk traditions, resulting in a rhythmically and harmonically complex language [“What is Jazz?”]. Significant musical contributions were made by the slaves of that time in the form of work songs, field hollers, and spirituals. It is from these songs that the “blue” notes and the pervasive emotional subtext of yearning for freedom originate. Spirituals often expressed a longing for returning home and a freedom from current circumstances. “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” is a popular spiritual that reflects these sentiments clearly:

Swing low, sweet chariot
 Coming for to carry me home
 Swing low, sweet chariot
 Coming for to carry me home...
 If you get there before I do
 Coming for to carry me home
 Tell all my friends I’m coming too
 Coming for to carry me home.
 [Tuskegee Institute Singers]

So it is from the very inception of jazz music that the establishment of the emotional context was one of longing for home and for freedom. As the music

developed from African American songs to ragtime, Dixieland, swing, and beyond, it maintained its function as an emotional outlet [“African American Spirituals”]. Though the audiences varied in terms of race and class, all Americans became able to celebrate their cultural heritage and express themselves through their very own art form.

Racial tensions continued to grow in America, and jazz began to play an active role in the Civil Rights Movement. “Black Power” became a widely recognized slogan as the beginning of the 1960s marked “several programmatic attempts to align jazz with the freedom movement...” [Saul 5] This was the time of Charles Mingus’s Jazz Workshop, Miles Davis’s quintet with John Coltrane, and Max Roach’s *Freedom Now Suite* [Saul 5]. African American musicians like John Coltrane and Charles Mingus composed pieces that reflected their personal beliefs and called for an end to inequality and injustice. Record producer Norman Granz promoted equality between the white and black populations by encouraging non-segregated seating for audiences [Wright-Mendoza]. Even in America’s democratic society, there was a call and an urgency for freedom. Jazz became “a musical facet of the freedom movement – an extension particularly of the idea of direct action into the realm of structurally improvised music.” [Saul 5] The plea for freedom in America was not only made through music, but became the music itself. From its origins in New Orleans, the idea of freedom had played a crucial role in the development of jazz – and by that time had become an inextricable part of it.

In Poland

Jazz made its way to Europe during World War I, brought along by American soldiers as their entertainment and antidote for homesickness [Pietraszewski 37]. After this initial exposure, jazz proved to be popular in Europe, and the locals began to adopt and copy the music. But World War II put a hold on most artistic development, especially in Poland. Countries like Germany and Russia had some opportunity to either secretly cultivate or outright exploit this music for war propaganda [Zwerin], but Poland was occupied territory, and unless they emigrated to

foreign countries, the dreams of many musicians were suspended.

The interwoven relationship between Polish culture and jazz became most apparent after World War II, during Poland's communist era. In its early years, jazz was firmly rooted in the underground, providing citizens, regardless of age or profession, a coping mechanism to recover from the emotional trauma of the war. It was during what is known as the "Catacomb Era" that jazz was largely performed in clandestine venues for the safety of practice and self-preservation [Lerski], for at that time, "American Jazz was the biggest crime under Stalin's regime." [Andrzej Wajda qtd. in Buthenhoff-Duffy 00:04:04-00:04:10] There were privately hosted jam sessions, which provided musicians opportunities to learn and master jazz styles [Nicholson]. The increasing popularity of jazz soon caught the attention of government officials, who stopped issuing licenses to clubs and began incarcerating musicians.

After Stalin's death in 1953, Poland went through what is described as a "thaw." Without the heavy-handed dictator, and being located a considerable distance from Moscow, the harsh ruling of the government softened and jazz was able to reemerge in Polish society [Pietraszewski 97]. The earliest access the general population of Poland had to jazz was through Willis Conover's *Voice of America Jazz Hour* radio program in the mid-1950s. Poles would tune in daily to hear American jazz and experience the freedom they sensed in this music. Tomasz Stańko, world-renowned jazz trumpeter, emphasizes this when he comments on the *Jazz Hour*: "It was the sound of freedom for us, the opposite of communism." [Nicholson] Adam Makowicz, a noteworthy Polish pianist, echoes this remark: "I don't think that even politicians understand how much Willis did to assist us." [Ripmaster 54] Though Conover never talked politics on air, his presence helped Poles to rebel in two ways: by listening to jazz and by learning English. His slow and careful speech was easy to understand, and many Poles began to develop a basic understanding of the English language through the radio show [Ripmaster 54].

There are several accounts of Polish jazz musicians studying and learning jazz from Conover's radio show as well. Makowicz explains, "Remember, we didn't

have any jazz studies in our conservatories. I had to learn by listening to Willis and practicing how jazz is done. It was very exciting." [qtd. in Ripmaster 54] Krzysztof Komeda, a Polish composer and pianist, was said to have transcribed full pieces from the live broadcasts with members of his group, each one taking down one measure at a time until the tune was finished [Pietraszewski 60]. This rote learning resembles the original, aural and repetition-based learning practiced by the originators of jazz in New Orleans almost a century earlier.

In 1959, the first ever State Department Tour took place in Poland. Dave Brubeck toured the country, stopping to perform twelve concerts along the way – most of which were held at underground concert and meeting venues. The warmth of the Polish people astounded Brubeck, especially considering they could have been punished by the government for attending these jazz concerts [Gerlach]. Brubeck states in an interview that Poles considered his group to be "from heaven sent to them" and comments that, "we didn't understand how we could be that important. We had no clue that we were helping people break away from communism." [qtd. in Gerlach] Several musicians, including Komeda, followed the Dave Brubeck Quartet from city to city during this tour, absorbing and reveling in this American jazz music [Nicholson]. After the group's final concert, the president of an underground club gave his thanks and assured Brubeck that, "We Poles love freedom as much as you Americans." [qtd. in Gerlach] This tour was a true example of cultural exchange, in that it was not just the Polish people who were affected by these concerts. Dave Brubeck was so moved by this tour that he composed a song entitled "Dziękuję" which, in Polish, means "Thank You." [Pierce]

In the years to follow, the reemergence of jazz in popular society was celebrated enthusiastically. From its humble origins in Sopot, the Jazz Jamboree festival, now staged in Warsaw, remains one of the largest and oldest jazz festivals in Europe [Nicholson]. 1969 brought the opening of the first collegiate program for the study of jazz and popular music at the Katowice State Academy of Music. This turning point marked the acceptance of jazz as an established art form in the country. After several years of riots and the implementation of martial law in the early 1980s, Poland gained

its freedom and became a democratic state in 1989. The victory meant that jazz would maintain a place of celebratory prominence for years to come [Pietraszewski 75].

Black Americans and Poles both fought for their civil rights under systems of oppression. Jazz became socially associated with freedom and independence in both countries as it provided the opportunity for interpersonal communication and individual expression. It was a means by which the people could exercise their rights and liberties that their governments would not allow them. Jazz was the idea of independence, the flavor of freedom in musical form.

An Expression of Freedom

Both American and Polish musicians used jazz to express their ideas of freedom and independence, which was often communicated through the oral tradition. Though Polish jazz musicians adopted this American art form, they harnessed the devices used by American musicians to effectively communicate while continuing to develop the idiom and make it their own. Two of the most influential jazz musicians from America and Poland respectively are Miles Davis and Krzysztof Komeda. It is through their oft-used mechanisms of improvisation, motivic development, form, and tone that the elements of freedom can be clearly heard and interpreted from the voices of each country.

Igor Pietraszewski, author and jazz musician, stated, “[Jazz] is after all an epitome of freedom, as improvisation is right at its center.” [9] Improvisation is one of the defining factors of the jazz idiom and one that can be artfully used to express freedom. When musicians improvise, they are allowed to interpret the harmonies and the mood of the song as they like, then express themselves by inventing a unique melody. This melody can be smooth and lyrical, like the many solos of Miles Davis, or they can be brash, abrupt, and intense like the soloing of John Coltrane. Krzysztof Komeda’s piano solos are more reminiscent of the cool jazz that Davis popularized, while Zbigniew Namysłowski’s soloistic approach is unmistakably marked by Coltrane’s influence [Roy]. The open-endedness of improvisation gives a limitless variety of options for the musician, providing them with complete freedom in the moment of soloing. This coveted freedom that may not be available to a musician based on his or her current circumstances is made available by jazz. It is in this way that improvisation is an expression of freedom.

Miles Davis was famous for employing the method of motivic development, from his repetitive melodies to his improvisational style. A musical motif is a brief idea or phrase that is repeated and expanded upon throughout a melody. Krzysztof Komeda was an admirer of Davis, and enjoyed writing motifs into his compositions. Komeda is credited as being one of the seminal musicians who developed the Polish jazz style. One way he took Davis’s American style of basing a melody on motifs and developed it into a different idea was by taking one motif and repeating it over and over, transposing it here or there, but relying on the repetition more than creating a sense of melody. Komeda does this throughout his album, *Astigmatic* [Roy]. This clear and driving repetition conjures up a sense of unease and anticipation in the listener, showing an effective transmission of the emotions that Komeda was experiencing. In this way, jazz allowed for a means of free expression in a contained and safe environment.

Like other American jazz musicians, Davis often experimented with form. His “Flamenco Sketches” from his album, *Kind of Blue*, has no distinct melody and the length of each solo chorus was dictated by “expanding or contracting the periods on the various modes within one chorus.” [Jost 21-22] However, the form of this tune is not thematic – the change from one mode, or scale, to another and from soloist to soloist is purely textural. In contrast, Komeda uses a thematic structure to organize an otherwise free form on his album *Astigmatic*, specifically in the movements “Astigmatic” and “Svantetic.” This thematic structure means there is a variation of sound and excitement that signal a change [Roy]. It is yet another way to add emotional context and relate one’s sentiments to the listener.

Perhaps the most important device in imparting the notion of freedom to an audience is tone. Jazz is a wide genre, spanning generations of different experiences and stylistic preferences. The music of those under oppression, however, shares a specific aspect of tone regardless of time. In Polish, this tone is described as “żal.” Manfred Eicher, head of ECM, describes it as “a certain kind of melancholy that cries out, and certain kinds of intonations and colors.” [qtd. in Williams] Jan Kopinski, a British-born Pole and jazz saxophonist adds to this statement by saying: “It means longing for something that’s disappeared. ...You can feel that in Coltrane, just as you can feel it in Chopin. They both make romantic music, in a sense.” [qtd. in Williams] “Żal” is the feeling of longing, and for those living in post-war and restrictive societies, the longing was for freedom. Musically, this longing is expressed through different tones and intonation. “Blue” notes create the sound of “żal,” just as minor tonalities and modes, along with slides and lethargic articulations, assist in the communication of weight and heaviness. The African Americans longed for their homeland, the Poles longed for the restoration of their nation. “Żal” was present in the music of both countries as jazz became an outlet to express the sorrow and determined perseverance that was present in the souls of these people.

A Celebration of Freedom

Today, in both the United States and Poland, jazz continues to represent freedom of expression and independent thought. It has grown beyond a mere symbol of freedom and has become a celebration of it. The impression of freedom resonates in both the American heart of jazz and the Polish soul of the music. It reveals a depth of meaning and significance to both cultures and demonstrates the oneness in spirit and value of freedom that these two countries share.

The continued practice and celebration of jazz has a way of helping us to remember the hardships of the past and turn them into something artful, some form of improvement that we can take on into our future. As long as jazz survives, so too will the post-war memories of these countries and with this remembrance comes gratitude, appreciation, and a charge to guard this freedom for which those before us have fought so dearly.

 WORKS CITED

- "African American Spirituals." *Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/.
- Buthenhoff-Duffy, Claudia., director. "Komeda: A soundtrack for a life." *Vimeo*, uploaded by Claudia Buthenhoff-Duffy, 5 Oct. 2013, www.vimeo.com/76231948.
- Davis, Miles. *Kind of Blue*, Columbia Records, 1959.
- Foner, Eric, and Olivia Mahoney. *America's reconstruction: People and politics after the Civil War*. Louisiana State University Press, 2003, www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/exhibits/reconstruction/credits.html.
- Gerlach, David. "Dave Brubeck on Fighting Communism with Jazz." *YouTube*, uploaded by Blank on Blank, 10 Jan. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVfVTQmiRJs&index=42&list=PLL-trnf4MEFp4-cXQFJs_gHGt56-saZKF.
- "Introduction to the Holocaust." *United States Holocaust memorial museum*, www.encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust.
- Lawson, R. A. *Jim Crow's counterculture: The blues and black southerners, 1890-1945*. Kindle ed., Louisiana State University Press, 2013.
- Jost, Ekkehard. *Free jazz*. Da Capo Press, 1981.
- Komeda, Krzysztof. *Astigmatic*. MUZA Polskie Nagrania, 1966.
- Lerski, Cezary. "Polish jazz-freedom at last." *Culture.pl*, www.culture.pl/en/article/polish-jazz-freedom-at-last#2.
- Mintz, Steven, and Sara McNeil. "The Great Railroad Strike." *Digital history*, www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3189.
- Nicholson, Stuart. "Krzysztof Komeda: The lost leader." *Jazz Forum*, no. 4-5, 2009, www.jazzforum.com.pl/main/arttykul/krzysztof-komeda-the-lost-leader.
- Pierce, Wendell. "Dave Brubeck and Ramsey Lewis: Jazz and fame." *Jazz at Lincoln Center radio*, 7 Feb. 2009, www.jazz.org/media/radio-shows/jalc-radio-ramsey-lewis-and-dave-brubeck-jazz-fame/.
- Pietraszewski, Igor. *Improvised Freedom: Jazz under State Socialism*. Peter Lang, 2014.
- Prażmowska, Anita. *Poland: A Modern History*. I.B. Tauris, 2010.
- Ripmaster, Terence. *Willis Conover: Broadcasting Jazz To The World*. iUniverse, 2007.
- Roy, Megan. "Polish Jazz: An Analysis of Style and Meaning in Krzysztof Komeda's *Astigmatic*." Order No. 10119296 *The William Paterson University of New Jersey*, 2016. Ann Arbor: ProQuest. Web. 21 Dec. 2018.
- Saul, Scott. *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*. Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Tuskegee Institute Singers, et al. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Victor, Camden, New Jersey, 1916. Audio. *Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/item/jukebox.4076/.
- "What is Jazz?" *Smithsonian*, 5 Dec. 2018, www.americanhistory.si.edu/smithsonian-jazz/education/what-jazz.
- Williams, Richard. "From bop to ǰal: how jazz became the voice of freedom in Poland." *The Guardian*, 7 Nov. 2014, www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/07/how-jazz-became-voice-of-freedom-in-poland.
- Wright-Mendoza, Jessie. "How Jazz and the Civil Rights Movement Came Together in the 1960." *Blank on Blank*, 20 Dec. 2018, www.blankonblank.org/2015/05/jazz-civil-rights-movement/.
- Zwerin, Mike. *Swing under the Nazis: Jazz as a Metaphor for Freedom*. Kindle ed., Cooper Square Press, 2000.

 ABSTRACT

Megan Roy Will
Jazz: A Celebration of Freedom

This article explores the idea of jazz as a symbol of freedom, both in the United States and in Poland. In examining the historical and cultural contexts of both countries when jazz first appeared and gained prominence, the function of jazz as a proponent of the ideology of freedom becomes clear. Through musical analysis, the development of both American and Polish jazz is broken down into devices and related to specific emotions and values that these musical elements suggest. It is through the introduction, growth, and development of the jazz idiom in each nation that it has become an essential musical genre within each culture and continues to stand for and symbolize freedom today.

Keywords: jazz, freedom, independence, Krzysztof Komeda, Miles Davis