

The Relevance of Jazz History in the Twenty-First Century: Jazz Practice and Pedagogy in Canada

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Jazz history in Canada is the story of a people and their relationship to a jazz identity; however, jazz in Canada has always been greatly influenced by its proximity to the United States. As Duke Ellington put it:

I am well aware that a problem of communication exists between Canada with its twenty-one million people and us, the big neighbor to the south, with our two hundred and three million. Canada has a character and a spirit of its own, which we should recognize and never take for granted.¹

Despite living in the shadow of the US, Canada has produced a number of major jazz innovators. Many jazz aficionados are often surprised to hear that some of the great names in jazz—including artists such as Oscar Peterson, Gil Evans, Kenny Wheeler, Maynard Ferguson, and Paul Bley—are in fact Canadians.² Our jazz heritage must be preserved and taught so that our music students become aware of the significant contributions made by Canadians.

As jazz emerged from New Orleans and began to move north in the early twentieth century, large Canadian cities located close to the border became stops for American touring ensembles. The first known jazz concert in Canada took place when the Creole Band from New Orleans performed in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1914, as part of a Pantages Theatre tour. By the 1930s, jazz broadcasts from strong American radio signals and the new recordings flowing north from the United States, lifted jazz to new heights of musical popularity in Canada. The people were exposed to jazz and enthusiasm was building for this new rhythmic and improvised music.³

1. Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), 138.

2. Terry Martin, “Jazz in Canada and Australia,” in *The Oxford Companion to Jazz*, ed. Bill Kirchner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 575–82 and Mark Miller, “Jazz in Canada,” *Jazz Education Journal* 35, no. 4 (2003): C10–C12.

3. Mark Miller, *Such Melodious Racket: The Lost History of Jazz in Canada, 1914–1949* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1997).

Many Canadian jazz artists have since created unique identities as jazz improvisers. Oscar Peterson is said to have been able to develop his style precisely because he was Canadian:

Oscar Peterson's nationality is crucial to any assessment of his career Even more significant, perhaps, is that it explains why Oscar's formative years as a musician went unremarked, so that when he finally appeared in the United States, he burst upon the American jazz scene with the impact of a new planet.⁴

Moe Koffman, a flautist from Toronto, furthered the notion of a Canadian jazz identity. He wrote and recorded a song entitled "The Swinging Shepherd Blues," an international hit in 1958 making it to #28 on the Billboard charts. The song went on to be recorded over 300 times by many jazz artists including Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald,⁵ and by 1980, Koffman was recognized as the leader of a unique movement in jazz emanating from Canada:

But it is in large part through Koffman's example and influence that modern jazz has in recent years become an undeniable and attractive element in Canada's culture, ranking on a level with the fiction of writers like Richard Wright or the art of painters like Christopher Pratt, not large and cosmic but small scaled and accomplished. There is even, thanks to Koffman and his fellow musicians, something now recognizable as a distinctively *Canadian* brand of jazz.⁶

Canada is a bilingual country with two distinct cultures, English and French, and as a member of the British Commonwealth, has strong ties to England. The Francophone population, centered predominantly in Quebec, holds strong cultural ties to France. Thus as a nation Canada, may stand at the crossroads of twenty-first century jazz history. Stuart Nicholson, writing about the future of jazz, has suggested that the globalization of jazz has placed European musicians in the lead regarding innovative jazz practices while Americans have remained focused on past jazz traditions like New Orleans style and swing.⁷ This notion of Europe as the new creative jazz center and America holding a more traditional and historical practice and perspective is controversial; however, it should be noted that there is a distinct difference between these two perspectives and Canada, with a foot in each world, may have the opportunity to be a leader in jazz innovation by bridging the American and European approaches.

4. Richard Palmer, *Oscar Peterson* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1984), 15.

5. Betty Nygaard King, "Swining Shepherd Blues," <http://thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/emc/swinging-shepherd-blues> (accessed February 8, 20113).

6. Jack Batten, "Jazz Boss," *Toronto Globe and Mail Saturday Night*, October, 1980.

7. Stuart Nicholson, *Is Jazz Dead?: Or Has It Moved to a New Address* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

Vancouver International Jazz Festival organizers have created opportunities to bring significant Canadian and European musicians together to compose, rehearse and to perform new works at their annual festival. Such progressive programming and partnerships also serve to demonstrate yet another need for the preservation of Canadian jazz history in the twenty-first century. As globalization links artists across the world, the documentation of Canada's jazz legacy will help illuminate its contributions to the international scene.

With its role in the early movements of jazz dating back to 1914, and its current support of the European jazz movement as evidenced with the festival collaborations, Canada is situated to become a key player on the twenty-first century world stage. Teaching of jazz history is relevant and vital, and will be the foundation of Canada's developing identity.