Before Willem de Kooning left Holland for New York in 1930, he conjured up an America of "broad clean streets in a glare of white light and everywhere the sound of Louis Armstrong’s trumpet" (Blesh 357). Jimmy Ernst, the only child of the Surrealist Max Ernst, also thought of America as a country of African American music and Native American art as he fled Europe for the States [interview]. The accounts of these two artists suggest how Abstract Expressionism can be opened up to noncanonical figures and "low art" influences such as jazz.¹ And the artists’ fascination with jazz provides yet another context for understanding Abstract Expressionism in a richer, post-Greenbergian framework.²

In the light of its impact on Abstract Expressionism, jazz itself might also be conceptualized in a broader framework, especially since the painters who claimed jazz as an influence did not always listen to precisely the same artists subsequently canonized by many jazz writers.³ For example, the unlikely group of musicians who performed at the opening of Stuart Davis’s 1943 exhibition included W. C. Handy, Mildred Bailey, Red Norvo, George Wettling, Duke Ellington, and Pete Johnson, among others (Davis 186). Or, consider the sculptor Seymour Lipton’s inclusion of the Johnson Singers with Louis Armstrong and Scott Joplin in his list of favorites [interview]. Finally, we must come to terms with the inspiration that the Surrealist poet Philippe Soupault derived from the music of Paul Whiteman.⁴

The era of the 1940s and 1950s when artists in New York ardently listened to jazz was bracketed on one end by Piet Mondrian, the prime advocate of jazz in New York, and on the other by Larry Rivers,
musician-artist. Satirical murals, including one by Ad Reinhardt, decor-
ated the walls of Barney Josephson's jazz club, Café Society [interview],
and Roy de Carava's camera expressed the intensity of the moment.
Romare Bearden has testified to the enthusiasm that greeted Samuel
Koetz's suggestion of organizing the show "Homage to Jazz" in 1946
[interview]. In addition to Bearden, the participants included William
Baziotes, Byron Browne, Adolph Gottlieb, Carl Holty, and Robert Mother-
erwell. In describing her husband Jackson Pollock's love of the music, the
artist Lee Krasner has said that Pollock "would get into grooves of listen-
ing to his jazz records—not just for days—day and night, day and night for
three days running until you thought you would climb the roof! ... Jazz?
He thought it was the only other really creative thing happening in this
country" [Du Plessis and Gray 51].

Among the other New York School artists, Franz Kline's paintings on
the theme ranged from a more realistic canvas of 1940 entitled Hot Jazz
to the 1958 abstraction King Oliver, named after the musician. Accord-
ing to Peyton Boswell, Philip Guston possessed an immense collection of
swing records [Boswell 3]. Likewise, members of the Beat Generation
of poets, who stressed the spontaneous in their writings, were jazz de-
votees. Jack Kerouac began his 1959 volume of poems Mexico City Blues,
"I want to be considered as a jazz poet, blowing a long blues in the
afternoon jam session on Sunday." Some artists such as Larry Rivers did
just that, beginning his career as a jazz musician, with Charlie Parker and
Lester Young as his heroes [O'Hara 109].

The most apparent connection between jazz musicians and the artists
of the Abstract Expressionist generation is their shared commitment to
an improvisational process. There was in fact a reciprocity between the
artists and musicians in this regard. Ornette Coleman, an originator of
free-form jazz or free improvisation, has compared himself to Pollock,
stating that Pollock was "in the same state I was in and doing what I was
doing" [Mandel 140]. When Coleman's Atlantic LP Free Jazz was
released in 1961, it bore a reproduction of a Pollock—by then famous—
inside its gatefold cover.

Critics of the period often responded to the appearance of spontaneity
in Abstract Expressionism with an existential tone, one that reflected
Jean-Paul Sartre's own reception of jazz. Sartre expressed his appreciation
for the feeling of active participation in a live performance in his 1947
essay, "Nick's Bar": "There's a big man blowing his lungs out trying to
follow the gyrations of his trombone. ... They speak to the best part of
you, the most unfeeling and the most free. ... They make demands on
you. ... The rhythm grabs you and rocks you. You jump to the beat ..." [195].

Jimmy Ernst, who first heard American jazz at the age of ten while
visiting his father in Paris [Harrison 39], was similarly drawn to the
music for its improvisatory quality. Undoubtedly aware of the battles
raging in the press between supporters of swing and New Orleans re-
vivalists, Ernst remembered being unfamiliar with the more orchestrated
sounds of big bands in Europe, but here he came to favor New Orleans
and Kansas City jazz because of what he perceived as its greater sense of
freedom [interview]. Judging from the titles of his jazz paintings, Ernst's
taste was more eclectic. Works of 1946 bear titles such as See See Rider
and Mahogany Hall Stomp, inspired by pianist Montana Taylor's boogie-
woogie recordings of the tune.

In addition to serving as an important witness to the moment, Ernst
formed a major link between the Surrealists and Americans in New York
in the forties. One would expect the Surrealists with their emphasis on
instinct and automatism to be drawn to the music, but the situation was
more complex. On one level, the response to jazz was gestural, with
younger figures such as Ernst and the Chilean Surrealist Matta appreciat-
ing the music, and older figures such as Max Ernst and André Breton
rejecting it. But even in the original Surrealist group, responses varied.
Although Breton was reported to have been hostile to the music, some
Surrealists were more positive. Not only were poets Robert Desnos, Paul
Eluard, and Philippe Soupault admirers of jazz, Soupault apparently com-
posed his 1926 poem "Georgia" while listening to a recording of Paul
Whiteman [Goffin 63].

Breton recanted somewhat in the forties [Breton 265], even attending
jazz concerts while he was in New York. However, an incident remem-
bered by Jimmy Ernst is provocative. At dinner with Breton in an Italian
restaurant in New York, Ernst played a Glenn Miller recording on the
jukebox. Breton became furious and "screamed" that "the music was the
Germans" [interview]. Breton's reaction raises several questions. Was he
returning to his earlier rejection of jazz? Did he understand and oppose
the lack of spontaneity in Miller's orchestrated sound? Did he know of
Miller's military orchestra at that time? The answers cannot be known,
but the many implications of the story are tantalizing. Yet it is only when
one fleshes out the canon to include both Ernst and Miller that a wider
play of cultural forces can emerge. Indeed, by examining Breton's antip-
thy to Miller, Ernst's choice of the music, and Soupault's receptivity to
Whiteman, we can avoid what Bernard Gendron has called the "exclu-
The improvisational component of jazz appealed to Jimmy Ernst because of the primary role that automatism played in his art in the early forties. He clearly expressed the conjunction of jazz and automatism in paintings of 1944 such as Blues From Chicago and Echo-Plasm (figure 1). Ernst began Echo-Plasm and many other paintings of the period by using an automatic technique he called "sillage," which involved blowing on thin oil paint until it spread in weblike patterns on the canvas. In essence, we can call it "blowing the blues."

Ernst wrote in 1944, "Sounds and voices, bearing witness to multi-million epochs are encased within the crevices of Echo-Plasm. A given pitch will release all sounds, re-echoing history from the thunder of the falling walls of Jericho to the wail of Benny Goodman’s swing" (Janis 103). Like Matta’s paintings, which influenced Ernst at this time, the shapes in Echo-Plasm suggest the germinations of organic forms. Ernst, like other artists in the forties, evokes a metaphor of growth from the beginnings of the painting—automatism—to the beginning of life—plasm.

In his statement he suggests that sounds, too—for him the sounds of jazz—can trigger associations and "re-echo history" to the primordial beginnings of time.

Similarly, Seymour Lipton, a sculptor from the period whose works include Blues Player of 1942 (figure 2), inspired by Louis Armstrong, has

Figure 1. Jimmy Ernst, Echo-Plasm (1944), oil on canvas, 34" x 34", whereabouts unknown.

Figure 2. Seymour Lipton, Blues Player (1942), walnut, 34", estate of the artist.
called jazz "ancestral voices" and says he has been drawn to it on a "subliminal level," as he is drawn to primitive art for its "ancestral rhythms," its relationship to "voodoo drums, magic and the unconscious"—for its roots in African music and ritual (interview). Lipton here is placing jazz in an anthropological and Jungian context typical of the forties—a discourse on the "primitive" as representing the ancestral nature of humanity accessible to the artist through an instinctual process (Polkari 37). In Jung's words, "To our subconscious mind contact with primitives recalls not only our childhood, but also our prehistory..." (1960). Jazz, in essence, stirs up ancestral memories. As Togównick, among many others, has pointed out (99), the danger in this discourse is its construction of an evolutionary model that positions the "primitive" as earlier or lower than Western man. Nevertheless, this view was extremely attractive to a group of artists who relished jazz as something quite unlike the art music that much of it has since become.

Lipton's attitude must also be seen in the context of the modern artist's wide-ranging fascination with the so-called primitive. Jazz of course retains its West African elements even today, and there are atavistic qualities in jazz pieces such as Ellington's "jungle" dances, even though Ellington was surely using the term with a degree of irony. Yet the music can hardly be called "primitive." In fact, with its combination of African and European elements, jazz, in this sense, is comparable to the work of contemporary painters such as Picasso (Hadler, "Jazz and the Visual Arts" 91–93). On the other hand, jazz flourished in urban centers and came to be associated with advanced technology and the dynamism of the modern city. Hence it attracted artists such as Mondrian and Léger, just as "noise music" appealed to the Futurists. With its complex dissonant sounds and dynamic energy, jazz impressed some painters as a fitting analogue for modern life. Count Harry Kessler, whose diaries form a major document of Germany in the twenties, expressed these ideas clearly when he recorded his impressions of the "negro revue" performing in Berlin: "All of these shows are a mixture of jungle and skyscraper elements. The same holds good for the tone and rhythm of their music, jazz. Ultramodern and ultra-primitive" (183).

The oscillating perception of jazz as an image of twentieth-century modernity on the one hand, or as a facet of an outmoded pastoral myth on the other, was a subject of particular importance to intellectuals in the forties. With the growing number of African Americans fighting in the war, a new discourse on race was emerging that critiqued the vestigial folkloric tradition of the 1930s in part for its simplified rural typecasting.

In 1942 the NAACP attacked Hollywood, calling for an end to the plantation stereotypes with which American films consistently portrayed black people. A tension existed in configuring blackness as urban or primitive. In essence, de Kooning's image of an America of broad, clean streets with the sound of Armstrong's trumpet countered Lipton's ancestral voices. Lipton, in fact, had come from the folkloric tradition of the thirties that often identified the image of African Americans with progressive social causes. Indeed, three of his 1942 sculptures, Blues Player, Spiritual, and Swing Low, grew out of the culture of the thirties and, in his own words, out of "a humanism related to the times" (unpublished statement).

Jazz, in Kessler's words, bridged extremes. Not the least of these extremes, for the Abstract Expressionists, was the urban and the primitive. In this context, jazz played a major role in the reconfiguring of Abstract Expressionism as a more complex and less "purer" movement. Abstract Expressionism should also be rethought to include more urban references along with the well-known de Kooning "glimpse" and his T-zone mouths cut from advertisements. We should also consider Abstract Expressionism in relation to film noir (Leja 109–18) and to the love of an artist such as Baziotes for Raymond Chandler and boxing—"life in a squared ring" (Baziotes, Hunter College Teaching Notes). In this reappraisal, jazz becomes more than an anomaly or another source but a key element. In spite of its naïveté, Surrealist Philippe Soupault's 1930 assessment of American influence in France is provocative:

European music for several centuries has been divided into two branches, popular music (songs, marches, operettas), and highbrow music, that is to say, concert music. American music, on the other hand, is of a single sort. Neither popular nor purely artistic (hermetic, one might say), it belongs utterly to life. And one need not fear to emphasize always this characteristic in whatever comes from the United States. One of the most definite qualities of the American influence resides in the close relationship between art and life. (Soupault 20)

The reception of jazz in the United States is a complex story in its own right. Jimmy Ernst, recently arrived from Europe as a refugee from Hitler (his mother was Jewish), had a particular empathy for the uneasy place that jazz and its musicians inhabited at that time. In recalling the historic 1938 "Spirituals to Swing" concert at Carnegie Hall organized by John Hammond, Ernst wrote,
Until this particular evening the histories of lynchings and segregation that I had been all too familiar with before coming here had existed only as exaggerated European notions of some dim post-colonial past. There was something in that music that was trying to reach my sensibilities. There was the fleeting thought, at some point in the night, that, hidden in the intricate structures of boogie-woogie, Kansas City, New Orleans and, yes, the blues, was the image of an architecture. I recall fantasizing the picture of a man, both hands tied, trying to build a house with his voice while sitting on a cot in his jail cell. I felt deep empathy with the only white face onstage, that of the organizer of the concert, John Hammond, who seemed awed by the artists around him, obviously honored to call them his friends.

I had come so far from the green soccer fields of my recent youth because there were genes in me that made me an outcast. And suddenly, on this new island of refuge, I had come face to face with the pain of the rejected expressed through a new music that I had heretofore associated with dancing.3c

The notion of jazz as architecture rather than automatic process grew on Ernst and informed the bulk of his paintings on jazz from the mid-forties such as Riff of 1946 (figure 3). His ideas countered the "primitivist myth" of jazz as pure inspiration, produced in a trance, and devoid of intellectual content—a widespread attitude in Surrealist circles (Gioia 30–31). To be sure, improvisation was an important aspect of jazz, but the history of the music also includes the carefully arranged music of the big bands not to mention small groups such as the Modern Jazz Quartet, the John Kirby Sextet, and the septets and octets organized by Duke Ellington. Moreover, in listening to the twelve-bar blues and thirty-two-bar song forms that prevailed in jazz during that period, artists of the New York School possibly were awakened to the idea that jazz was a combination of improvisation and structure. This in itself was important for many artists and made jazz analogous to their own work. Ernst was not alone in appreciating the architecture of jazz, but in this regard he can be classed with artists such as Stuart Davis, Bearden, and Mondrian.

All three of these artists were inspired by structural aspects of the music. For Mondrian, the rhythms of the boogie-woogie pianists were analogous to the formal innovations of his late paintings such as Broadway Boogie Woogie (1942–43). Bearden, too, whose involvement with the music predated his artistic career (Fats Waller and other celebrated musicians were friends of his family), was encouraged by the then senior artist, Stuart Davis, to study the formal elements of the music to further his understanding of avant-garde painting. Davis entreated him to seek out visual analogies for Earl Hines's piano improvisations. Bearden ultimately "developed his style of working with the separations between colors and the different values of a given color by studying the expressive use of intervals in the piano style of Earl Hines" (Murray 18). Bearden has recalled that Davis criticized one of his watercolors for having equal spacing on both sides and told him to listen again to the variety in Hines (interview).

Ernst's own movement from process to structure, or a greater combination of the two elements, is evidenced in his shift from Echo-Plasm (figure 1) to Riff of 1946 (figure 3) and Dallas Blues (figure 4) of 1947. He ultimately aimed "to capture the structure of riffs" in his works (interview). Echo-Plasm maintains a crusty surface and amorphous space resulting from the automatic process "siftage" reminiscent of his father's "frottages," or rubbings. The fluid background and organic shapes suggest the interconnectedness of life forms. The artist, as conduit of the
flow of imagery, "re-echoes history." In *Dallas Blues* the free application of paint, visible is quick touches of red paint at the top right, is countered by the more prismatic geometric structure of the whole. *Riff*, above all, conjures up architectonic elements of jazz in the vertical lines that repeat and vary throughout the top section of the painting. Indeed, the entire abstract language of the painting is one of repetition and variety within a theme, what Ernst called "a progression of riffs" [interview].

For all of Ernst's structural vocabulary, we must remember that when he saw the blues as an image of an architecture, he fantasized an African American man sitting on a cot in his jail cell trying to build his house with his hands tied. And Ernst identified with this man as he himself was as an outsider in America and had suffered racial persecution in his native Germany. It is in these complex relationships that we can see the multiplicity of jazz's meaning, which, like so much else, shifts, mutates, and avoids fixity. As many of the essays in this collection and its companion volume demonstrate, jazz is crucial to the various discourses on multiculturalism, primitivism, mass culture, race, gender, and the body. For the same reasons, it is one key to a new understanding of Abstract Expressionism as well. How the painters actually experienced the music may even help forge a better understanding of jazz at a time when it had not yet been defined as an art music with a canon.

**Notes**

1. This essay expands on work begun in my earlier article, "Jazz and the Visual Arts." The term Abstract Expressionism will be used interchangeably here with New York School to include artists working in New York in the 1940s and 1950s.
2. Perhaps the most prominent examples of canonizing tendencies in jazz writing can be found in the work of Martin Williams. In addition to selecting the recordings for the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, Williams lavishly praised the artistry of a select group of jazz musicians in his *The Jazz Tradition*. Kris Gabbard has discussed the formation of a jazz canon in his introduction to *Jazz Among the Discourses*.
3. See Goffin 65. Soupault's interest in Whiteman is provocative, notwithstanding his limited access to a greater variety of jazz musicians.
4. Also see Jones 334.
5. Also see Jones 334.
6. For more on Sartre and the artists of this era, see Hadler 199–200.
7. For a thorough account of the schism among jazz writers in the 1940s, sec Gendron.
Works Cited


--- Interview with Jimmy Ernst. 1 Dec. 1984.

--- Interview with Romare Bearden. 3 Nov. 1982.

--- Interviews with Seymour Lipton. 2 and 16 Nov. 1982.