Journal of Jazz Studies vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 184–188 (2024)

BOOK REVIEW

Queer Arrangements: Billy Strayhorn and Midcentury Jazz Collaboration. By Lisa Barg. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2023. 288pp. $95.00 hardcover / $24.95 paperback.

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"Seldom seen but always heard," Duke Ellington famously remarked about Billy Strayhorn. As an openly gay Black man and a somewhat anonymous arranger shaping the sound of modern jazz, Billy Strayhorn's lived experience reveals a paradox of queer (in)visibility that is central to Lisa Barg's *Queer Arrangements: Billy Strayhorn and Midcentury Jazz Collaboration.* Building on two foundational biographical and musicological books on Billy Strayhorn by David Hajdu and Walter van de Leur, *Queer Arrangements* contributes to the ongoing reparative project of dismantling invisibility myths surrounding Strayhorn's legacy. Barg tracks Strayhorn's collaborative networks in New York and Los Angeles, the *caves* and recording studios of Paris, and the many places in-between, while expanding the scope of jazz studies to include two overlooked areas: queerness as sexual identity and arranging in jazz historiography.

Queer Arrangements brings fascinating archival and biographical details about Strayhorn's life into dialogue with queer studies by making visible connections that, following Farrah Jasmine Griffin, Robert G. O'Meally, and Brent Hayes Edwards, enlarges our understating of the immeasurably complex worlds in which jazz musicians move. Rather that attempting to discover a "queer jazz past" which Barg argues can reproduce the heteronormative logic of dividing jazz into queer and straight artists with their own histories, she aims to highlight the cohabitation of queerness and straightness in jazz history. Drawing from Georgina Born's analysis of music's sociality, Barg grounds her book in the concept of "queer collaboration"—the social and historical networks of Strayhorn's affective relationships and aesthetic practices. "Queer affiliation" is another term that appears often to describe a web of queer socialites that span a transnational landscape and horizon of past and present. Although her approach is fundamentally historicist, the process of "queering" jazz history requires speculative methods of interpretation. Barg engages with queer, feminist, and Black studies to guide us through a reorientation of Strayhorn's career by bringing his relationships into focus (notably, Ellington makes only a brief appearance) to explore the social and aesthetic entanglements of artistic

interactions. By "looking around" Ellington, Barg sees beyond the "great man" narrative to include musical practices that have heretofore been considered to exist "in the shadows."

The framework of queer collaboration also contributes to the important project of attending to the shadowy status of arranging in jazz history. As Barg notes, arranging has historically been devalued as nonessential, derivative, or ornamental in contrast to "the composition" which is valued as original and authentic. Through the feminist framework of paying attention to "the details" Barg counters the gendered logics of these narratives by listening closely to how the aesthetics of Strayhorn's arrangements attune to his collaborators, many of whom were also marginalized. By relating Strayhorn's work to midcentury entertainments such as theatre, dance, television, and film, Barg brings attention to the commercial sphere of jazz—an area that has also been historically devalued and in which the contributions of women in jazz (especially singers) have been sidelined.

The book is organized in three thematic parts with paired chapters. Part one, "Working Behind the Scenes: Gender, Sexuality, and Collaboration in Strayhorn Vocal Arrangements," follows Strayhorn's collaborative relationships with singers and his aesthetic practices as a vocal arranger. In the first chapter, "Arriving by 'Flamingo,'" Barg listens to the sonic world of Strayhorn's Latin-tinged, sophisticated orchestral arrangement of "Flamingo" (1941) for singer Herb Jeffries through the framework of what Matthew Tinkcom has called the "differentiated style" of gay male artists working behind the scenes in the U.S. film industry. Although Strayhorn's aesthetic choices for "Flamingo" can be read as a kind of "camp sensibility" in the context of the glamorous milieu of 1940s Hollywood, this framework fails to account for Strayhorn's particular experience as a Black man living and working in the period of Jim Crow. Barg digs into archival materials to add meaningful personal context to Strayhorn's arranging choices and relationship with Jeffries, a fellow Francophile and a partner with whom he would converse together publicly in French. Barg shows that their affinity for French modernism and cosmopolitanism held particular significance for the two men because it deliberately challenged the racist "Amos 'n' Andy" stereotype of Black performers circulating during that period. Through this type of wide gaze, Barg demonstrates that Strayhorn's arrangement of "Flamingo" captures a moment of queer history from multiple directions and perspectives.

Chapter two, "Difficult Beauty" unveils the intimate interactions behind Strayhorn's vocal arrangements for three 1950s' LP projects featuring female jazz singers: Lena Horne's *It's Love* (1955), Rosemary Clooney's *Blue Rose* (1956) and Ella Fitzgerald's *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Duke Ellington Song Book* (1958). Each case study offers a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at musical

collaborations with these famous singers. In one example, Barg draws from Rosemary Clooney's recollections of having a difficult pregnancy during the recording of *Blue Rose*. As Clooney recalled, Strayhorn lived at her Los Angeles home for almost a week during the recording and was not only a creative collaborator, but a supportive ally as she suffered from morning sickness. Barg carefully attends to the racialized and sexualized legacies of the subservient Black domestic worker this memory elicits, while reorienting Strayhorn's collaboration with Clooney as a practice rooted in an ethics of care. In her analysis of the song "Grievin,'" Barg shows how Strayhorn comfortably "fit" Clooney's vocal persona into his arrangement. Taken together, the case studies in this chapter demonstrate how Strayhorn's arrangements for vocalists merged the personal and musical, private and professional, across scripts of race, gender, and sexuality within the patriarchal spaces of midcentury jazz.

In part two, "Strayhorn's Queer Music," Barg moves away from vocal arrangements to programmatic works that have strong queer associations: a set of four pieces Strayhorn composed in 1953 for an Off-Broadway production of Federico García Lorca's *The Love of Don Perlimplín for Belisa in Their Garden*, and several movements from the Strayhorn-Ellington adaptation of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*. Barg's concept of queer collaboration in these chapters makes visible the networks of "queer affiliation" that exists between Strayhorn's aesthetic works and contemporaneous Black queer artistic networks, as well as gay artists of the past (Lorca and Tchaikovsky). In chapter three, "Strayhorn's Lorcian Encounter" Barg details the empowering alliances Strayhorn developed with a largely Black gay artistic community during the compositional process and production of *Don Perlimplín*. Because there were no recordings made, Barg employs a close reading of the original manuscript scores against the background of Black queer spaces and salons Strayhorn frequented. Barg's deep archival work coupled with speculative methods offer an analysis of "queer topics" found in the Lorca text such as "failed or impossible love, masking, and stylized exotica" which she argues afforded a way to express Black gay identity for Strayhorn.

Chapter four, "Black Queer Moves in the Strayhorn-Ellington *Nutcracker Suite,*" builds on the previous chapter to draw out connections between Strayhorn's interpretation of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* (1960) and Black queer identity and history. Barg begins by examining how Strayhorn may have been drawn to Tchaikovsky through their shared homosexuality, his interest in dance and classical music, and the connection of the ballet to North American Christmas traditions. Audiences of the 1950s would have been familiar with choreographer George Balanchine's popular televised production of the ballet and its broad association with heteronormative Anglo American family values.

Because of this, Barg argues that the *Nutcracker Suite* offered Strayhorn a rich cultural text for queer modernist experimentation. In one example, the Sugar Plum Fairy is reimagined as Sugar Rum Cherry—a tenor and baritone saxophone duet which conjures, Barg writes, a hefty, bluesy apparition who struts around amidst low register and intoxicated growls. But rather than simply "jazzing the classics" (a popular mid-century genre) she draws from Shane Vogel to theorize how Sugar Rum Cherry afforded Strayhorn (and Ellington) a kind of queer temporal "return" to the Cotton Club and the queer blues culture and sociality of the 1920s and 1930s.

In Part three, "Strayhorn Performing/Arranging Strayhorn," Barg offers two different instances of jazz collaboration in which Strayhorn strove to evoke an affective atmosphere of place in postwar Paris: Strayhorn's participation on the film music for *Paris Blues* (1961) and his solo LP project *The Peaceful Side* (1963). Strayhorn and Ellington were drawn to *Paris Blues* because it centered Black artists living freely in Paris, interracial relationships, and social protest. Strayhorn was not given credit for his work on the film score, and in the final version studio executives removed the complex racial dynamics and sexual politics by emphasizing the jazz-as-art narrative arch. Nevertheless, Barg argues that the film score archives the interracial networks and queer collaborative energies of Strayhorn's lived experiences in postwar Parisian jazz culture. Strayhorn's solo LP *The Peaceful Side* (1963) offers a critical counterpoint to the Hollywood framing of jazz culture and collaboration through the lens of the small Parisian recording studio. Barg details the circumstances of the recording such as location, nocturnal environment, and the moody pop sound of the "string quartet with wordless chorus" as constituting an assemblage of interrelated pop, jazz, and classical networks each with their own histories and links to queer affiliations.

In one final example, Barg asks us to reflect again on the recording as archive. In this case, a moment from Strayhorn's oral history archive—a widely cited transcribed 1962 interview with Bill Cross published in *DownBeat*. She listens to the audio recording alongside the edited transcript to tease out how the "sounds of the vocal inflections, timbre, and modulations allow us to tune into the teasing theatrically" captured in this public moment between Ellington and Strayhorn. This practice of deep listening and methodically paying attention to the social and historical details under which Strayhorn's arrangements and recordings were made widens not only our knowledge about the mid-century period, but the methodological lens of how to do jazz history. Rather than regarding the gaps in Strayhorn's archive as a negative, Barg engages queer and Black studies methodologies to show how these gaps can become generative. Another of the many strengths of this book is the attention to the diverse *places*

and *spaces* of Strayhorn's personal and professional life. Barg's analysis of the unique space of the recording studio as an "instrument" is put in dialogue with the private spaces of Black gay salons and private social gatherings. By highlighting the significance of the socialities of place in Black musical practices, the book leans into works by Black studies scholars such as Brent Hayes Edwards, James Gordon Williams, Daphne Brooks, Elleza Kelley and others that see Black artists as *space creators*, and who show how Black spatial knowledges appear in literature, art, and music. Because of Barg's inclusive and thoughtful methodologies, *Queer Arrangements* enables us to see—and hear—jazz history queerly and differently.