

BOOK REVIEW

Hearing Double: Jazz, Ontology, Auditory Culture. By Brian Kane. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 303 pp. \$49.99.

VARUN CHANDRASEKHAR

Brian Kane's *Hearing Double* offers a thought-provoking argument about the socio-cultural ontology and mediation of jazz. Throughout his monograph, Kane combines a deft knowledge of philosophy, an evident love for jazz standards, and insightful musical analysis to answer one of the central questions about jazz: what is a tune? Jazz's intertextual nature makes this an incredibly difficult question to answer. In classical music, where the ontology of the work is heavily tethered to the composer's intent, the concept of "the work" is relatively fixed and stable. In contrast, "the work" in jazz culture is forever mutable and never fully set.¹ "Culture" is the key word here. Kane's work allows for us to think of how the formal properties of any jazz utterance are inherently tied to its cultural zeitgeist. By framing the ontology of jazz as a cultural expression, Kane is able to map the formal musical properties of jazz onto the various strands of political, musical, and social discourses attached to the genre.

Kane portrays the jazz standard as an *emergent* ontological entity (79). Building on the work of anthropologist Alfred Gell, philosopher Georgina Born, and musicologist José Bowen, Kane argues that when a jazz musician chooses to play a particular tune, they decide what aspects of the tune to keep the same and what to change. Consider the various ways that musicians play the standard "All the Things You Are." I know that Grant Green changes from a swing to a Latin feel during the B section in his 1979 recording. When I call this tune, I have a choice: do I change rhythmic feels like Grant Green? Or perhaps I play a version more similar to Charlie Parker or Brad Mehldau? Each new performance of the tune adds a new ontological dimension. Although the original tune was written in 3/4, most jazz musicians play it in 4/4 whereas Mehldau changes meters throughout. Instead of arguing that a musical property such as meter (e.g., 3/4) defines what the tune "is," Kane helps us to consider how such formal properties emerge from a historical backdrop of previous performances. Through embracing the social and networked nature of

¹ For a musical theoretical approach to this question, see Steve Larson, "Composition versus Improvisation?," *Journal of Music Theory* 49, no. 2 (2005): 241–75.

performance, we realize that “All the Things You Are” can be in 3, 4, 5, or 7; it can be a Latin tune, played as straight-ahead swing, or a combination of these elements. These properties are not predetermined but emergent. Kane demonstrates the emergent nature of standards through network diagrams that track the historical trajectory of a single tune, such as his analysis of the riff from “In the Mood” (40–52).

After outlining his methodology in the book’s first four chapters, the final two chapters turn towards the social significance of standards. “The Soundscape of Standards” (chapter 5) places the nature of the ever-changing standard at the center of the aesthetics of Black musical modernism. Kane argues that the ability to replicate tunes allowed bebop and avant-garde jazz musicians to signal their social critique. “The Aesthetics of Standards, or Hearing Double” (chapter 6) then applies Kane’s ontological networks to model how we aesthetically judge a performance of a jazz tune. Through his networks, Kane presents a theory of “hearing double”: the process of hearing the performance of a tune against the backdrop of other performances. When hearing, listeners use their expectations and previous understandings of a tune to judge the new performance of that same tune. In both chapters, Kane offers a compelling rationale for why we should think of jazz ontology as a reflection of the social context of music.

While I find Kane’s methodological approach fruitful, his analytic apparatus is occasionally limited. He focuses on properties that can be clearly captured in a score or transcription (i.e., melody, harmony, or rhythm). Critically, discussions of timbre are mostly absent. For instance, Sun Ra’s version of “Someday My Prince Will Come” (1989) clearly refers to Miles’s rendition of the tune (1961). Sun Ra does not do this just through its (surprisingly) typical performance of the tune but also through his reference to Miles’s muted trumpet sound. When trumpet players use a Harmon mute, are they referring to Miles? If I heard a trumpet player use a Harmon mute to perform “When You Wish Upon a Star,” another Disney ballad popular amongst jazz musicians, I would certainly assume they are; thus, I would be hearing double even if the performances share no harmonic or melodic similarities. Referring to another musician’s timbre is one of the many ways we can hear double more nuancedly. Many drummers learn to lay back or play ahead of the beat by listening to specific recordings. One of the distinctive aspects of Charles Mingus’s bass playing is that he often plays sharp. Kane’s system presents a general framework for dealing with these issues, but they cannot be treated in the same manner as harmonies or melodies. It would be useful to explore how Kane’s parameters of reproduction might be expanded.

That said, I find that Kane's work easily inspires further analysis of jazz. Kane ends his book with an epitaph of a bygone era of jazz. While musicians still play standards, performers are more likely to play their own tunes. He states:

I cannot leave it there. I feel compelled to acknowledge and to marvel at those performances of standards that snap into crisp focus the insistent previousness of the performances that came before, and that solicit us to recognize jazz's twinned exigency: The necessity to grapple with the past in a deliberate and explicit way *and* to demonstrate one's style, voice, or distinctness from that tradition (243).

I think there is a deep relationship between the lost soundscape of the standard and the precarity of modern neoliberal society. For example, Mark Fisher might argue that modern jazz recordings suffer from a late-capitalist haunting. Fisher, borrowing from Jacques Derrida, describes the conditions of the haunted nature of the future as such: "The future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production. What hauntological music mourns is less the failure of a future to transpire—the future as actuality—than the disappearance of this effective virtuality."² In a post-standard jazz community, musicians produce compositions with little expectation that the ontological object will expand or emerge. The individual musician-composer remains the dominant node in the modern ontological network, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Roy Hargrove's "Strasbourg/St. Denis"). Given the alienating, isolating, and individualistic excess that defines neoliberalism, there is an economic basis for the loss of the expectation of reproduction. Streaming, the decline of public funding of the arts, the monopolization of the live music industries (at the expense of local club circuits), and the waning popularity of jazz in the broader cultural imagination all lead jazz musicians to champion notions of "genius" that are expressed through the ontologically closed nature of original compositions. The social reality of Kane's ontological networks asks us to think deeply about how aesthetics, ontology, and material conditions all shape the meaning of all jazz compositions.

In other words, Kane's argument has implications that extend beyond jazz studies. This work asks us to question how replication, nomination—"the communal act of naming a tune in reference to similar previous versions" (102-3), intertextuality, and cultural memory shape our musical interactions. For instance, Kane notes in passing that he views "The Star-Spangled Banner" as a

² Mark Fisher, "What Is Hauntology?," *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 12. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16>.

standard (even though it is rarely played by jazz musicians), before quickly alluding to Jimi Hendrix's iconic performance of it (235). Although Kane does not enumerate a network of performances of "The Star-Spangled Banner," it is clear that Hendrix's radical version invents a new branch of performances, each of which signals an allegiance to a counter-cultural ideology. Hendrix's critique of American imperialism rejects the original intent of Francis Scott Key, who adapted an English drinking song to express patriotic feelings during the War of 1812 (which itself is a form of "nomination"). To do justice to the social significance of musical transformation, we have to be sensitive to the cultural conditions that they respond to. In this sense, Kane's book is not just for jazz studies and philosophy scholars, but rather a broadly significant work that will speak to anyone interested in musical intertextuality.