

Philip Larkin and jazz: from journalism to poetry

Pierpaolo Martino

Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro

1. Jazz and Writing

British bass player and eminent critic Alyn Shipton, in his introduction to *A New History of Jazz*, focuses on jazz centrality within Twentieth century and on its capacity of generating a powerful response from people of different ethnicities, genders and social backgrounds:

Of all the musical forms to emerge during the twentieth century, jazz was by far the most significant. In the early years of the century, it spread first throughout the United States of America, and then quickly to the rest of the world, where its combination of syncopation, unusual pitching, vocal tones, and raw energy touched the hearts and minds of people across the entire spectrum of social and racial backgrounds. Its message was universal, and it stood for something new, something revolutionary, something risqué that overturned the old orders of art music and folk music alike. (1)

Jazz music is mostly about “improvisation” (Bailey *ix*), interplay and interaction in this sense, it is mainly, even though unintentionally, concerned with the redefinition of the self in dialogical terms (Derrida, Coleman); it is an art-form which, being strongly rooted in concepts such as enunciation and performance, confers centrality to listening. In jazz very often there is no score to read or respond to, what the musician is asked to do is to listen to his body and to the body of others in order to

read and translate sounds in other sounds, in a horizontal, democratic dimension, which conceives no verticality, no authority. Jazz becomes in this sense a model for a free and freed social interaction, and for the construction of a polyphonic self within this very social dialogue; jazz is a language capable of speaking *across* cultures, it is about stepping “across” lines (Rushdie *Step Across this Line*, 407) and borders, it is a language which refuses to “sit still” (Gioia 474) and which very often coincides with the idea of “migration” itself (Zenni 15). As Watson observes “jazz has always been a generous and a malleable music [...] it has always reached out beyond race, culture and nation, and beyond doctrine and dogma. Jazz has always been a hybrid music as complex as its history” (290).

According to Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite – author of *The Arrivants* trilogy (1973) – jazz represents the perfect expression for the rootless, cultureless truly expatriate Negro¹. It has been from the beginning a cry from the heart of the hurt man, the lonely one, something which can also be heard in the saxophone and trumpet of many performers, from John Coltrane to Don Cherry. But its meaning comes not just from this, jazz is a collective music, the affirmation of the life and rhythm of a group. The affirmation of such a genre does not come from the individual voice, but from the ensemble, the merging of the various instruments; something which is particularly relevant in free jazz ensembles such as The Liberation Music Orchestra by bass player and activist Charlie Haden. This explains Brathwaite’s commitment to jazz as a central concern in his work: “I was seeking for a musical form which allowed me to hear the speaking voice, which allowed me to see the individual within the community, and which allowed me free improvisation within a tradition and jazz does it” (Martino 121).

But jazz can also go beyond itself; most importantly jazz was and still is also able to address and be addressed by other art forms such as “literature” (Locatelli 9-10), painting² and cinema³. Besides, all these art forms are forms of *writing*, modelling systems through which we approach and confer meaning to reality. As Art Lange affirms in the opening note of *Moment’s notice*, a jazz inspired collection of poetry and prose, edited by Lange himself and Nathaniel Mackey:

The reception jazz has garnered and the influence it has exercised have extended not only far beyond the geographic boundaries of its country of origin but far beyond

the boundaries of music itself. Jazz is at the same time a musicians' music [...] and a music which, much more than most is more than music. Jazz has become iconic, its own often iconoclastic impulse notwithstanding. [...] It is particularly unsurprising that a music which so frequently and characteristically aspires to the condition of speech, reflecting critically it seems upon the limits of the sayable, should have provoked and proved of enormous interest to practitioners of the art of the word. (i)

Lange's words allow us to investigate jazz in a different space from the one of its origins; jazz indeed had a major impact in post-war Britain, as it emerges from the journalism, poetry and novels of some of the most relevant literary voices of the period.

In a recent interview Canadian author Michael Ondaatje focuses on his involvement with jazz as a teenager in London – when he used to dance in Jazz Clubs thrice a week – and affirms:

The rhythms of music in some ways has been the biggest influence on my writing. It's not Wordsworth it's Ray Charles. When I'm writing the pace of a paragraph, a long long sentence is closer to music than any other thing. [...]. Listening before you write, influences how you "think" (Louisiana Channel)

Jazz, most importantly, perfectly translates the sense and meaning of the social energies which were transforming and redefining, in a multicultural and youth-oriented sense, British society in the Fifties.

MacInnes's iconic novel *Absolute Beginners* is interestingly set in Soho, which, besides being associated with ethnic diversity, also stands as the stage where teenagers perform their exciting dramas. Here we find the jazz clubs loved by the protagonist and his girlfriend Suzette, who is particularly fond of dancing. The protagonist is, like his black friend Mr Cool, a jazz addict:

The great thing about the jazz world, and all the *kids* that enter into it, is that no one, not a soul cares what your class is, or what your *race* is, or what your income, or if you're boy, or girl, or bent or versatile, or what you are - so long as you dig the scene and can behave yourself, and have left all that *crap* behind you, too, when you come in the jazz club door. The result of all this is that, in the jazz world, you meet all kinds of *cats* on absolutely equal terms, who can clue you up in all kinds of directions—in social directions, in culture directions, in sexual directions, and in *racial* directions [...] in fact, almost anywhere, really, you want to go to learn. (MacInnes *Absolute*, 61)

In jazz, as we have seen, musicians with different backgrounds speak to each other about a given theme, trying to rewrite it from different and yet simultaneous perspectives. In this sense in the novel jazz stands as a space of freedom, as a language capable of confounding differences, providing teenagers with a concrete possibility of multicultural dialogue. Interestingly, in the passage above the protagonist is able to speak about jazz in a kind of jazzy style rich in syncopations and blue-notes.

Even in his essays and in his journalism MacInnes makes reference to jazz, writing about iconic singers and performers such as Ella Fitzgerald:

She's so good you only have to listen, it is the voice that acts. Nor, unless you see her, does her voice sound particularly 'coloured' – just as she seems any age between sixteen and forty (which is close on what she really is), so does her voice sound as if it might belong to either race. [...]. To hear her is to be given, in the most telling and pleasurable form, that particular lift of the spirits that is the great gift of jazz, in its more positive moods, to our frowning cross-patch age. (MacInnes *Ella*, 134)

Ella's voice with its very peculiar "grain" (Barthes 179) becomes in this sense a dialogical space of encounter and mixture in which whites and blacks, young people and adults can re-define themselves.

In post-war Britain, another writer beside MacInnes wrote about jazz, at times in contradictory terms, but with a passion and devotion which probably has no equals, and which conveys the sense of richness and the very excitement and pleasure which come with this music; we are referring, of course, to Philip Larkin. In the next section, we will read Larkin's poetic achievements and in particular two of his jazz-related poems showing how, in their *dialogical* complexity and polyphony, they present features that allow us to rethink and rearticulate the artist's relationship with jazz, exceeding conventional readings which consider the poet exclusively interested in and influenced by traditional jazz to investigate similarities between his literary style and modern jazz.

2. Philip Larkin's jazz: from journalism to poetry

In his Introduction to *All What Jazz* – the collected edition of the reviews originally published in *The Telegraph*, where he was jazz critic from 1961 to 1968 – Philip Larkin writes:

Few things have given me more pleasure in life than listening to jazz. I don't claim to be original in this: for the generations that came to adolescence between the wars jazz was that unique private excitement that youth seemed to demand. (15)

Larkin's private excitement was the result of hours of listening to what was by the time contemporary jazz: Armstrong, early Ellington, Count Basie. He even remembers his love for "a classic 'hot' number" entitled 'Tiger Rag', which dance band used to perform "at the local Hippodrome". The young Larkin was particularly attracted by the rhythm of jazz and his favourite instrument was the drums; his parents bought him "an elementary drum kit" and he spent a lot of time "improvising an accompaniment to records" (16). At Oxford, Larkin met people who were, like him, jazz enthusiasts and knew even more than him about the music and the artists and for whom "jazz became part of the private joke of existence" (17). In particular, he shared his enthusiasm with Kingsley Amis and they were both insistent about their rigidly traditional tastes⁴. At the time indeed jazz had already bifurcated into *trad* and *mod*, hot and cool.

As it is known, Larkin was intolerant of all Modernist forms, and his attacks were targeted at the art of Picasso, the poetry of Pound and, as we will see, Charlie Parker's *Be Bop*⁵. For the poet the term "modern, when applied to art, has a more than a chronological meaning: it denotes a quality of irresponsibility peculiar to this century, known sometimes as Modernism" (23). On the contrary, Larkin's poetry was to be marked by a strong sense of responsibility, by an interest for everyday experiences and for a direct, accessible style which he shared with the other members of The Movement. If in one sense poetry belonged to "the reader", the very physiognomy of his readership was, however, to prove problematic, as this group of academics, who spoke the same language and wrote for each other, often addressed a readership which resembled themselves⁶.

Regan notes how, when Larkin died in 1984, his reputation was unblemished and secure and he was identified with a reassuring idea of Englishness. In this sense:

The formal achievements of his verse – its colloquial tenor, its ironic humour and its clear-sighted realism – were construed as civic virtues. Even those aspects of the poetry that some critics found wanting – its wry circumspection and parochial outlook – seemed to encapsulate the authentic experience of a drab and disillusioned

England. Larkin's wistful, lyrical grasp of life shortcomings was considered in keeping with the quietistic mood of the post-war years. (Regan 1)

Nevertheless, the publication of his *Collected Poems* in 1988 and of the *Selected Letters* in 1992 completely changed the reception of the poet both at home and abroad. The early unpublished poems revealed a young man whose very idea of sexuality proved problematic, to the extent that the writer betrayed a sense of guilt and fear in relation to sex which he saw as something destructive. These early poems, also, lack that sense of ironic detachment we find in his more mature efforts. The *Selected Letters*, on the other side, revealed, in Germaine Greer's words, a man whose attitudes were "racist and sexist and rotten with class-consciousness" (Greer 27).

These remarks, however, even though projecting a different light on the poet, cannot make us ignore Larkin's poetic achievement which presents features that allow us to rethink and rearticulate the artist's relationship with jazz.

Larkin's esteem rests on four concise volumes of poetry: *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). While the first collection was heavily influenced by Yeats and did not present a fully formed artistic voice, *The Less Deceived*, which included poems written in a long span of time, echoed Hardy and presented the style of the detached, sometimes lugubrious, sometimes tender observer of ordinary people doing ordinary things. This style was fully accomplished in the third collection *The Whitsun Weddings* which includes a poem – completed in January 1954 – representing Larkin's most direct tribute to jazz, namely "For Sidney Bechet"⁷:

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes
Like New Orleans reflected on the water,
And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,

Building for some a legendary Quarter
Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles,
Everyone making love and going shares--

Oh, play that thing! Mute glorious Storyvilles
Others may license, grouping around their chairs
Sporting-house girls like circus tigers (priced

Far above rubies) to pretend their fads,
While scholars *manqués* nod around unnoticed
Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids. (*Collected Poems*, 87)

In an article entitled “A Real Musicianer” published in *The Guardian* in (8 April 1960) Larkin wrote: “there are not many perfect things in jazz, but Bechet playing the blues could be one of them”. We do not know if Larkin had any specific track in mind but in 1961 he nominated Bechet’s 1944 recording of *Blue Horizon* as one of his four Daily Telegraph Records of the Year and it was performed at his memorial service in Westminster Abbey in 1985.

Martin Williams points to the relevance of Bechet in Twentieth century culture when he affirms:

Bechet was recognized as a major jazz musician outside his own city by the teens of this century. He was the subject of the first serious appreciation ever written about a jazzman, conductor Ernest Ansermet’s tribute of 1919. Ansermet saw in Bechet’s work the beginnings of a new style and he conjectured that tomorrow perhaps the whole world would be following his path. We also learn from Stravinsky’s letters that he wrote three early clarinet pieces under the spell of Bechet. During subsequent developments in jazz, Bechet was admired by musicians of all styles and schools; he was one of Charlie Parker’s favorite players, and one of his last recordings—an excellent one—was done with the respected modernist French pianist, Martial Solal. (3-4)

“For Sidney Bechet” is set in New Orleans, which Larkin never visited, but of whose jazz associations he was well aware. Interestingly, the poem opens with a reference to Bechet’s sound “That note you hold”. There are quite a few long-held notes in Bechet’s recordings which he sustains inimitably⁸. Larkin adds: “narrowing and rising”, which refers to the fact that Bechet used plenty of vibrato⁹. “Reflected on the water” seems to refer to the maritime location of New Orleans, while the phrase “Oh, play that thing!” was sometimes called out by jazz players and can be heard on several historical recorded tracks; moreover, it is also a quotation from the Afro-American poet Langston Hughes who uses this same expression in *Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret*. In this sense, this poem assumes a particular intertextual quality, which is quite unusual for Larkin.

The poet goes on to describe the mixed clientele in the French Quarter where there are expensive “Sporting-house girls” alongside scholars

manqués (that is, merely enthusiasts) who are immersed in “personnels”, the discographical details that show who played what where and when. The mythical New Orleans is also referred to as Storyville and Crescent City. Everything about it and its music is seen as positive, through such expressions as “an enormous yes” and “the natural noise of good”:

On me your voice falls as they say love should,
Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City
Is where your speech alone is understood,

And greeted as the natural noise of good,
Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity (*Collected Poems* 87).

In the very closing line, Larkin refers to classical music;¹⁰ the poet, however, seems not to pay attention to the fact that Bechet, like many early jazz musicians, could not read music. In this sense, the “long-hairs” should refer to the serious musicians and “scored” presumably means notated music as opposed to jazz and improvisation, which had been addressed through the expression, “noise for good”. The very association of jazz with noise becomes here of paramount importance, indeed early jazz was condemned when it first appeared in similar terms to the ones Larkin uses to dismiss modern jazz as “jerky”, “unnatural”, “fevered”, “cacophonous”.

One of the poems included in Larkin’s second collection, *The Less Deceived* is entitled “Reasons for Attendance” and – even if it is not as direct in its reference to music as the previous poem – is particularly illuminating in relation to the function of jazz in Larkin’s poetry. The poem records a rich, theatrical soundscape, where the sound of a trumpet seems to interact with the rising tone of the protagonist’s questions:

The trumpet’s voice, loud and authoritative,
Draws me a moment to the lighted glass
To watch the dancers - all under twenty-five –
Shifting intently, face to flushed face,
Solemnly on the beat of happiness.

- Or so I fancy, sensing the smoke and sweat,
The wonderful feel of girls. Why be out there?
But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what

Is sex ? Surely to think the lion's share
Of happiness is found by couples - sheer

Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned. [...] (*Collected Poems* 48).

The poem stages two different and contrasting approaches to jazz, the first is the one which associates this kind of music with sex (the very term jazz has such semantic implications) and is exemplified by the couple dancing at the "beat of happiness". The other, voiced by the protagonist himself, sees jazz as a religious form and as an artistic commitment¹¹:

What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell
(Art, if you like) whose individual sound
Insists I too am individual.
It speaks; I hear; others may hear as well,

But not for me, nor I for them; and so
With happiness. Therefore I stay outside,
Believing this, and they maul to and fro,
Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied. (*Ibid.*)

The beat becomes something deep, and the easy, danceable rhythm of the music is broken by the drummer, that is by Larkin's irregular pulsation in the very last verse and in particular by the syncopated rhythms of his final remarks.

A problem might arise in relation to which trumpet's sound the poet and the reader might have in mind; if the context of the two young dancers makes us think of swing, hot or danceable jazz, the very year of the poem's publication – 1955 – locates the reader's perception of that sound in more problematic terms. Those were, indeed, the years of Dizzy Gillespie – Charlie Parker's Be Bop alter ego – and Miles Davis, who moved from Be Bop to Hard Bop and Cool. Their sound could be loud and authoritative, but also smooth and contemplative, perfectly translating, in this sense, the mood voiced by the protagonist in stanzas II to IV, conveyed by the image of the "rough-tongued bell" (that is, Art) he hears and that he hopes "others" may "hear as well".

In a sense, here jazz becomes an independent, resistant discourse – moving freely between past and present, *trad* and *mod* forms – that the poet

probably does not want to take control of. In short, Larkin's poetry tells us a different, but complementary, story in relation to the poet's relationship with that music. Jazz often works unconsciously, and Larkin's mature poetry paradoxically reflects some of the moods, elegance and clarity of late 1950s Miles Davis¹². The poet in a review published in 1966 praises Davis's maturity and richness;¹³ commenting on a reissue of his 1957 album *Birth of the Cool* he writes: "the music has a relaxed, mature quality, a richness of voicing, that speaks of experience rather than youth" (*All that Jazz* 163)¹⁴. In truth as Magee observes: "accounts of Miles Davis's career tend to emphasize change and contrast, because his musical path illuminates almost every major movement in modern jazz: from bebop, to cool jazz, to hard bop, to modal jazz, to a controlled version of free jazz, to jazz-rock fusion, and, finally, to hip-hop hybrids at the end of his life" (Magee 6), and yet one is tempted to read Larkin's most intense poems to Davis's iconic ballad 'Blue'n'Green' from his 1959 masterpiece *Kind Of Blue*, by many critics considered the most important album in the history of jazz.

In his monographic study dedicated to Davis' iconic work, jazz critic Ashley Kahn approaches *Kind of Blue* in terms of "the premier album of its era, jazz or otherwise," and he insists on how "Its vapory piano-and-bass introduction is universally recognized. Classical buffs and rage rockers alike praise its subtlety, simplicity and emotional depth" (16); the album is, in other words, defined by a sense of directness, beauty and condensation which perfectly captures, in our view, the essence of much of Larkin's writing. Focusing on 'Blue'n'Green,' – which as the third of the seven tracks included in the album, is also the *central* piece in Davis's narrative – Kahn notes how the tune stands as a "quiet miniature on an album of more extended meditations, five and-a-half minutes of quiet, rippling solos over a ring of chords;" its circularity is indeed its most defining aspect¹⁵, the tune's "ten-bar structure – breaking the standard thirty-two or twelve-bar mold for jazz composition – and steadily flowing tempo amplify its perpetual cycle effect" (117-118). 'Blue'n'Green' is, in this sense, "about placid mood and suspended feel" and not "apparent melody" (118). Kahn tries to verbally *respond* to Davis' iconic piece through a series of keywords which again, we think, might perfectly de-fine Larkin's poetry and in particular "Reasons for Attendance."

We can conclude pointing, in this sense, to how in Larkin's narrative not only we have a quiet, meditative protagonist; the poem itself stands

indeed as a circular space, in which the reader, sharing the protagonist's stance, can experience a suspended feel, listening to the other(ness) inhabiting his identity and having, at the same time, the powerful sensation of being *there* – in the place in which the dancers shift “intently on the beat of happiness” – only to move *somewhere else*, in that mobile dimension *art-jazz* and *jazz-poetry* can create in their precious combination. In short, in ‘Blue’n’Green’, one has music as colour, sadness and hope, that is, *blue and green*, as well as that irony and clever detachment from easy emotions which have made Larkin’s poetry one of the most interesting and important achievements of twentieth-century English literature.



- 1 Brathwaite focuses on jazz in his essay “Jazz and the West Indian Novel” (1993, first published in 1968) in which – starting from the reading of the novel *Brother Man* (1954) by Roger Mais – he creates an alternative Caribbean aesthetics, based on polyphony and polyrhythms that enabled him to experiment with alternatives to Eurocentric culture. In addition to the supremacy of sound, Brathwaite identified three fundamental features for a novel to be considered a jazz novel: first, it had to be rooted in an African presence; second, it had to express protest; and third, it had to manifest the communality of West Indian societies. Brathwaite focuses on this particular kind of music, because – unlike the ballad, which is a mostly pastoral expression – jazz is an urban folk form, “that has wider and more overt connections and correspondences with the increasingly cosmopolitan world in which we live, than the purely West Indian folk forms [...]. Most importantly, jazz, in several quarters, is already *seen* to be, or to represent, an alternative to the “European” tradition” (Brathwaite *Jazz*, 107). In considering jazz simultaneously urban, folk and cosmopolitan, Brathwaite was evidently erasing the division between high and popular culture. Brathwaite defines it in contrast with the earlier blues of slave culture; jazz, in the poet’s view, is not “slave” music; it is the sound, the voice and the music of the emancipated Negro: hence its brush colouring, the bravado, its parade of syncopation, its emphasis on improvisations, its *swing*. It is, in short, the music of slaves freed from their subjugation; it became a vital language for a man forced to erase his own culture.
- 2 Interestingly, American artist Jackson Pollock listened to jazz as inspiration to become one with his canvas. He submerged himself in the music in order to reach a higher state of mental clarity where he could not be distracted from his unconscious relationship with the paint that dripped from his brush.
- 3 Beside the constant use of jazz in many movies’ soundtracks, there have been a multiplicity of films in the history of Hollywood and European cinema which have focused on jazz as subject: from Clint Eastwood’s *Bird* (1988) which reconstructs the life of Be Bop hero and alto saxophone player Charlie Parker, to Bertrand Tavernier’s *Round Midnight* (1986), which features tenor saxophone player Dexter Gordon, to Pupi Avati’s *Bix* (1990) which offers a biography of ragtime-era trumpet player Bix Beiderbecke.

- 4 In his seminal study entitled *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*, Blake Morrison – speaking about the friendship between Larkin and Amis, and making reference to Larkin’s introduction to his novel *Jill* (1946) – notes how both “shared an interest in jazz” (12), to the extent of using their money to buy “some hundred records” instead of employing them to buy works from more established arts. Morrison, however, also points to the shift from consolidation to defense, in the posture of many members of the Movement, especially in their later years. In this sense, the critic refers to their “defense of traditional jazz over against modern jazz and rock music” (260).
- 5 A severe criticism of Larkin’s position is voiced by Tolley in his essay “On First Looking into Larkin’s *The Less Deceived*” (2002) when he writes: “As time went by he strained his position to the point of being unquestionably wrong when he ventures into a field where he is not well informed [...] and he refers to the diatonic as natural in contrast to the chromatic in his attempt to see the music of Charlie Parker as arcane. He speaks out against art that requires special knowledge to understand it; and one might say that this was true of Joyce and Pound as Larkin contends; but it is not true of the music of Charlie Parker, whose records are bought in the tens of thousands by uncultured fans. The trouble with Charlie Parker was not that you needed special knowledge: it was just the trouble that Larkin’s readers had when his mature poetry first appeared - one had to know how to take it. Similarly, Larkin could not imagine someone going into a room full of Picassos and gasping - not with mystified shock, but amazed delight”. In short, Tolley notes how Larkin failed to acknowledge that sensibilities change and consequently art forms change with them.
- 6 On this aspect see also Enrichetta Soccio. *Philip Larkin. Immaginazione poetica e percorsi del quotidiano*, Roma, Carocci, 2008.
- 7 Sidney Bechet was born in New Orleans in 1897 and played clarinet and soprano saxophone. He was a key figure in the early Harlem scene but moved to Chicago in 1917. He toured Europe with Will Marion Cook’s band the Southern Syncopators in 1919 and from then on was recognised as one of the most influential figures in jazz. He travelled widely in Europe and the USA, where he worked with Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, and finally lived in France from 1951 until his death in 1959. On Bechet see John Chilton. *Sidney Bechet. The Wizard of Jazz*, London, Palgrave-MacMillan, 1997.
- 8 London-based pianist and composer Steve Beresford, in a recent book on him by Andy Hamilton reports about British saxophonist Evan Parker having a great story about “Numar Lubin, the Russian opera singer who ran the Nimbus label, famous for their very high quality classical records. Numar had lived in Paris in the same block as Sidney Bechet, so he would hear him play

everyday. Finally Numar, who got very well with hm asked “Sidney, do you mind me asking about your practicing routine? I’ve noticed you play scales and arpeggios, and you play well-known tunes, and then you play some stuff at the end that I can’t identify”. And Sidney Bechet said, “I’m trying to play birdsong; for me this is the highest form of music” (Hamilton 81).

- 9 In his biography of Bechet, Chilton notes how “the biggest obstacle to his achieving universal acclaim was unquestionably his vibrato. Detractors were well aware that Bechet was a consummate artist, whose harmonic knowledge and technique were exceptionally fine, but the fierce throbbing that marked his sound touched a nerve within them and they could not listen with pleasure to his music”; and yet as the critic insists “Bechet was a giant of traditional jazz, an originator who could be inventive within any musical line-up. His thrilling playing ‘swung’ before that descriptive word had ever been applied to music, and throughout a long career he remained a supremely gifted melodist. His interpretation of the blues is timeless, and all of his work contains a passion that should never be absent from jazz” (Chilton 293).
- 10 Beside jazz, classical music represents a fascinating lens to approach and de-fine some very peculiar features of Larkin’s aesthetics and in particular the sense of economy defining his work; indeed, according to Booth: “the economy of Larkin’s forms and genres, the predominance in his oeuvre of the hapax principle (‘its own sole freshly created universe’) is difficult to parallel elsewhere in literature. In music, however, Maurice Ravel shows a similar scrupulosity, composing one opera for adults and one for children, one brooding single-movement piano concerto for left hand, one extrovert three-movement piano concerto for two hands, one triptych of solo piano pieces, one quartet, one piano trio, one mature violin sonata, one work for the unprecedented combination of harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet, a unique bolero, a single archaic pavane. In each case the artist transforms the ‘given’ genre with his own original touch, then moves on to another. Larkin is this kind of writer. His mature volumes contain, it has been said, ‘a remarkable percentage of the definitive poems of his time. This is, largely, because he consciously aimed to make his version of any genre he touched ‘definitive’”. (Booth 15-16).
- 11 Commenting on the poem, Booth notes how in ‘Reasons for Attendance’ (1953) “his aestheticism is impatient of its own preciousness. [...] Like the church bell of religion this bell of secular aestheticism proclaims his higher calling. He refuses to ‘attend’ the party and ‘attends’ instead to the bell of art”. Ivi, 152.
- 12 Tolley sees Larkin’s poetry in relation to more radical and avant-garde music: “Reading *the Less Deceived* [...] showed me new possibilities for poetry. As T. S. Eliot contended, truly new poetry not only makes us see the poetry of

the past in a different light but also expands our sense of what poetry might be. The experience of this is not easy to communicate. It was not merely that someone was doing something new. It was analogous to the experience I had on first listening to a recording of the post-modern jazz pianist, Cecil Taylor. I was hearing something in an idiom that I had always wanted to hear yet could not have imagined myself.” A.T. Tolley, “On first Looking into Larkin’s *The Less Deceived*”, cit. On Larkin’s poetic style see also John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*. London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016.

- 13 Interestingly, in *The Black Atlantic* Paul Gilroy focuses on the irreconcilable views on jazz of the two of the most relevant trumpet players and composers of the Twentieth century, namely Wynton Marsalis – for whom “jazz provides an essential repository for wider black cultural values” – and Miles Davis who prioritises “the restless creative energies that could keep the corrosive process of reification and commodification at bay” (1993, 97); in particular, Gilroy refers to Davis’s work of the late Sixties and early Seventies in terms of a space of “displacements and transformations” which, with its crossing of geographical and musical borders, problematizes any attempt to define the very notion of jazz’s *authenticity* in the postmodern (and postcolonial age).
- 14 In a fascinating study entitled *Such Deliberate Disguises: The Art of Philip Larkin*, R. H. Palmer focuses on Larkin’s jazz writings brilliantly deconstructing some of the stereotypes usually associated with Larkin’s approach to jazz. Palmer notes how Larkin’s “voice is predicated in jazz: its rhythms, its ambiguities and paradoxes, its humor and its sheer common humanity” (3). All these aspects relate, to some extent, to both traditional and modern jazz experiences; in this sense, Larkin’s voice stands as a bridge between past and present, consonance and dissonance, if its criticism looks backwards, his poetry is projected towards the future, in a fascinating and unpredictable dialectics, in which the invention and inventiveness of both Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis speak to each other.
- 15 On this aspect see Keith Waters, Henry Martin, Steve Larson, Steven Strunk, “Circular Thinking—A Roundtable on ‘Blue in Green’ and ‘Nefertiti’”, *Journal of Jazz Studies*, 11, 1, 2016, 105-120.



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