



Further thoughts, and a ManiFESTo, on jazz (festivals) and the decolonisation of music

pre-publication final draft of article published in special issue on Diversity and Inclusion at Jazz Festivals of Jazz Research Journal 14(2): 215-223.

George McKay
Film, Television & Media Studies
University of East Anglia
Norwich, NR4 7TJ
UK

Abstract

This short critical-creative piece originates in an EU-funded project on heritage in improvised music festivals (CHIME). It is a supplement to other recently-published research by the author exploring the relation between the touristic offer of certain British jazz festivals and their lack of engagement with the significance of their own civic setting and heritage, focused on festivals held in Georgian or Regency locations (i.e. ones with strong links to the transatlantic slave trade). It explores and metaphorises the double bass and its transatlantic resonances. There is a manifesto.

Keywords

festivals; slavery; heritage; history; musical instruments; materiality; manifesto; double bass

[O]ther arts festivals [located in transatlantic slave trade heritage sites across Britain] now speak of the *impossibility of disengagement* from their locations. However, broadly speaking, the [UK] festival of jazz, despite the music's own transatlantic formation, its Black Atlantic resonances, its liberatory claims around improvisation, its proud radical history, its innovative impulses, remains ... behind the beat. That is surprising. (McKay 2020, 584; emphasis and ellipses original)

In recent research for an EU-funded project on heritage in improvised music festivals (CHIME website), I explored the relation between the touristic offer of certain British

jazz festivals and their engagement or lack of with the significance of their own civic setting and heritage. I was interested in festivals held in Georgian or Regency locations, and ones with strong links to the transatlantic slave trade (sometimes, TAST), and in the extent to which the historic connections with the slave trade were addressed or elided in the jazz festival's programming, promotional materials, and its general thinking and cultural practice. I found that there has been remarkably little engagement, and this surprised me. While other cultural sectors were beginning to undertake deliberation and even conscious acts of decolonisation, laying bare the problematic pasts in their present touristic heritage and pleasure offers, I observed critically that, at the UK jazz festival, the transatlantic social music of jazz is 'diminished at the very time—during its own festival—when it ought to be bursting with righteous life, energetic questioning, joyful or sombre criticality. *Jazz becomes the sound of suppress*' (McKay 2020, 582; emphasis original). Perhaps unlike many readers of *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, in which the article appeared, readers of *Jazz Research Journal* will recognise in the tentative accusation the reference to Whitney Balliett's famous definition or crystallisation of jazz as 'the sound of surprise'.

There were other avenues I wanted to explore in the research and writing that the CHIME project made possible for me. I made various starts, and even tried to include these in the original drafts of the published work (McKay 2020), but it became clear (and the reviewers made it clearer) that they did not really fit the focus of the piece nor, being more creative, its critical-theoretical approach. Yet I did not want entirely to lose them, even in their embryonic state, for they seemed to me suggestive, even generative fragmentary openings for criticality. There is a certain woody unity also to what follows: mahogany, ebony, pernambuco.

Playing at the Gillow, Lancaster: decolonising the venue

I lived in the northern English city of Lancaster, 'a city whose major Georgian buildings and commercial success in the eighteenth century was built on the slave and West Indian trades' (Rice and Kardux 2012, 250) for two decades. I play double bass, mostly modern jazz and improvised music in a semi-professional capacity. I played gigs in several Lancaster Jazz Festivals in the early 2010s, including as a member of the trio below featuring as the house band for the festival jam session late on the Saturday night. (The year I didn't play, the headline act came for a blow after his main gig.) For 18-24 months or so round then I was also part of a fortnightly jazz residency in a local pub on Monday nights. The pub was then a well-known live music venue in the city, and I used to visit regularly to meet friends and see other bands playing there, too. It was called The Robert Gillow, and sited in an 18th century property. I knew about Waring and Gillow furniture makers, and about mahogany and its link with the transatlantic slave trade, and about Lancaster's role in that and the economic impact of that historic trade in the city's Georgian boom (Elder 1994). But I had not given much thought to the fact that this venue, with live jazz every Monday night, Saturdays and Sunday lunch-times too—and a local pub 'fringe' venue during the annual jazz festival—was named after *the* Robert Gillow (1702/3-1772), who founded Gillow and Co. in around 1728, importing rum and sugar, and mahogany, after travelling to the Caribbean as a young ship's carpenter. On such an adventure his fame and fortune—and those of several generations of his family—rested: Gillow and Co. 'were enabled to develop, expand, and

probably to help finance their furniture making ventures, by becoming, from the 1740s, West Indies and European import and export merchants' (Stuart 2005). In the pub, there was a reproduction oil portrait in an antique-style frame of Robert Gillow near the bar. (The same image formed the pub sign, hanging outside above the entrance.) I often sat discussing over a beer with friends topics as disparate as jazz and ... well, politics, of course, under Gillow's gaze. In the trio (soprano sax, double bass, drums—lots of space for contemplation), we often played music that bounced back off his portrait, including jazz standards from the early days in New Orleans, and blues, and modern jazz written by African-American civil rights activist-musicians like Charles Mingus. At the time I never seriously connected the heritage of the old building, the pub's name and the resonance of that, with the music I was playing. Until now.

Though (at time of writing) it kept the same name, the pub has changed management and been refurbished since my time there—more recently it almost seems to recognise its heritage, but in what are surely problematic ways. A copy of an old advertising poster decorating one wall acknowledges the historical Caribbean connection, even if it is linguistically and geographically flawed: it shows an exoticised, sexualised, young black woman with overflowing bosom, and the product advertised is *rhum* from Martinique. The backdrop graphic to the pub website draws on old-fashioned maritime maps, suggesting historic international trade. Most extraordinarily of all perhaps, the pub business has a marketing slogan, which features both on at least two interior walls, exterior windows, as well as on its website: 'Trading in the Unusual Since 1720' (The Robert Gillow website). (I understand that 'the unusual' here is intended to refer to, for instance, the large and varied stock of craft beers available.) The heritage theme continues elsewhere, as pub visitors are told: Gillow 'worked as a carpenter on ships sailing towards the West Indies and made new discoveries along the way. During his trips to the farflung corners of the Earth, Gillow saw the potential to exploit these trade routes and provide the North of England with exciting new imports' (The Robert Gillow website).

Well, yes: there was 'exploit[ation]', and it may have been 'exciting'. It is calculated that during Robert Gillow's time in charge of the company, Gillows made around 60 business journeys to Caribbean islands, primarily Barbados (Stuart 2008, 97). Of course it is inconceivable that he was not engaging with (profiting from) others' 'slave-derived' and 'slave-generated' wealth, to note Madge Dresser's nuance (see Dresser 2000; emphases added), since his primary market for luxury goods from England would have been the local plantocracy. James Walvin notes that at this time 'all the mahogany devoured by craftsmen on both sides of the Atlantic in the 18th century had been logged, dragged, and floated to the nearest outbound sailing ships by slaves' (2017, 91). In fact, members of the Gillow family 'had a part-share in ships used in the slave trade,' while the furniture business itself imported 'West Indian woods to manufacture fashionable pieces for the slave trading bourgeoisie in Lancaster [and] throughout Britain, and [exported said furniture] for plantation houses in the Caribbean and North America' (Rice 2010, 76).¹ According to James Walvin, the popularity of

¹ On at least one occasion a Gillow piece seemed directly to reference slavery: a grandfather clock case from the mid-18th century has a carved shell and face on its mahogany case door. The face is that of an African male—the Housman clock case, named after its clockmaker rather than carver or furniture maker, stands today as a 'disturbing reminder of the slave trade [which] may have been intended for export to the West Indies' (see Stuart 2008, 395-96). In the mid-19th century, during his trip to the area

mahogany spread so that it was soon being ‘used for everything, from cradles to coffins’ (2017, 85). Not only is there no mention of slavery—in the context of either the enslaved people who logged the mahogany in mainly at first Jamaica and Cuba, then more widely (Anderson 2012, Walvin 2017), or of wealthy landlords and members of the plantocracy who bought the finished products from England—in this TAST-related heritage entertainment site of the pub today, but the silence is amplified by the fact that a partial, celebratory and racialised narrative of 18th century mercantile activity *is* offered. Such ‘incompleteness and *the injection of euphemism* and distory into the black holes of heritage ... is so disturbing’ (Dann and Seaton 2001, 15; emphasis added).

Playing double bass: materiality and decolonisation

... that vast expanse of water between yesterday and tomorrow.

Black Atlantic artist Lubaina Himid (quoted in Rice 2010, 25)

What I am going to call the Gillow gaze—now a critical positionality adopted by me, surprisingly prompted by the Lancaster pub/man of history, to consider my place and complicity—has made me look at my own instrumentality and musical materiality. At the jazz festival gig at The Robert Gillow I regard my instrument, next to me on the stand, admiringly. I’ve always liked this bass, from the moment I hit its E string for the first time and it generously made me sound a better musician. Years later I consider it with the Gillow gaze, in a very minor moment of the material and eco turns in popular music studies, directed at questions of decolonisation. Can it help me understand live jazz, the festival location, the resonances and silence of heritage through music and event? Though merely mid-19th century, my good quality double bass, its solid resonant fingerboard, top nut and tailpiece of ebony (perhaps West or East African), and my strong springy bow of pernambuco wood (from Brazil), possess—are constructed of—classic features of imperial music-making that are rooted in earlier transatlanticism. Ebony was forested and deforested on a large scale on the island of Mauritius using slave labour by the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century (Grove 1995, 130-133), to supply a new and voracious domestic and European market for furniture and panelling, cabinets, picture frames and the decorative arts. So much ebony was taken from Mauritius, Madagascar and elsewhere that a shift from veneer use to solid and ornately sculptured furniture became fashionable by what was called in France the new *ébéniste* class of wood workers (Dobie 2010, 65). Dutch ebony picture frame design directly influenced, for example, harpsichord design in southern Germany, as one illustration of the ways in which furniture and musical instrument materials and techniques would quickly overlap (Germann 2007, 135).

Pernambuco (aka pau-brasil; Brazil the country was named by its colonisers after the wood) is the preferred wood for bows for the violin family, including the

with Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens perceived in the ‘old Honduras mahogany’ prominent in Lancaster’s fine town-houses ‘something of a retrospective mirror-quality ... [showing,] in the depth of its grain, through all its polish, the hue of the wretched slaves who groaned long ago under old Lancaster merchants’ (Collins and Dickens 2011, 82). The hotel the authors stayed in was—and, rebuilt, still is, with a ‘Heritage Building’ plaque marking Dickens’s visit 160 years ago—directly opposite The Robert Gillow pub.

double bass, ever since the 18th century French innovator François Xavier Tourte's revolutionary work in bow design and construction. To find his perfect wood in Paris, Tourte would visit the wharves of the River Seine, 'where he scavenged slats from New World packing crates and the staves of sugar barrels with which to experiment' (Rymer 2004). The attractions of pernambuco for archetiers and musicians are clear: it 'has the desired density, bending stiffness, and damping behavior for the current violin bow design (Wegst 2006, 1446). Edinese Segala Alves et al explain that it 'has been considered the best wood for bows for more than 200 years because it combines ideal characteristics of resonance, density, durability and beauty' (2008, 324). 'However,' notes Ulrike Wegst somewhat soberingly,

like African blackwood, the most revered wood for clarinets, this tropical wood currently faces a high risk of extinction in the wild, which raises the question whether alternative materials for violin bows exist. (2006, 1446)

Before and since Tourte, and not only for musical reasons, '[t]he story of pernambuco [has been] one of exploitation and near extinction.... European colonial powers fought wars against each other and against indigenous peoples over pernambuco' (Allen 2012, 302-303). Today pernambuco is an official endangered species in Brazil. Since the 16th and 17th centuries, the special 'resonance woods' (see Allen 2012) required for quality string instruments had often been sourced via colonial opportunities—and of course music-instrument manufacture more broadly would be transformed by the demands of military bands as European empires grew in the 18th and early 19th centuries (Howell 2016, 27).

You see, double basses are boats, sort of. This is where Himid fits. Plucked or bowed, there is a deep (I want to write oceanic) sound from my old instrument, which always stands by my side when it makes it. Double. It speaks to me in both head and chest voice simultaneously. Double. One often talks of the 'woodiness' of the sound of one's bass, which can be enhanced by raising the wooden bridge (across the water), or by adjusting the wooden soundpost (interior mast) inside the bass through the f-hole. I feel I have been extremely slowly re-sounded by it, over the course of 35 years playing. But the process of my understanding of this re-sounding has accelerated and its quality deepened as the result of researching and writing these articles—I have been 'thinking through [my] instrument', in Eliot Bates's intriguing phrase (2012, 368). In recent times I have developed tinnitus in my left ear, the one inescapably nearest the bass as I play, in the form of a low intermittent note round E-flat, with sonic swirls that I now, today, in my post-Gillow consciousness, know to be sea-sound. My consultant gave me a physiological reason for the tinnitus, but I knew better, that it was to do with the bass. (Now I wonder whether I know better still, that it is to do with the history of the bass, the music's past.) In making music my left hand embraces ebony, my right pernambuco. Double. The process is all touch, a contact zone, producing waves. I did not fully know what I was doing in playing that music in that place in Lancaster but, in thinking of a heritage music (sort of) in a heritage building in a heritage city, I have written myself newly, or understood my sense of place, self and creativity more fully. Jazz and jazz studies have re-sounded me, resoundingly. Is this, has it possibly become, or how can we make it, as Christine Chivallon puts it, 'a story that reconcile[s] irreconcilable things' (2001, 350), or is that impossibly utopian? At the very least, perhaps it may be a little bit productive.

ManiFESTo

In coda though, let us turn away from the micrology of me, my bass, and some old gigs, to offer something altogether more productive, disruptive, more *helpful* as a way back to and through the circumatlantic, the historical. A manifesto is in order.

ManiFESTo For Jazz (Festivals) in TAST-Related Locations in Britain

1. Manifest the manifest! Intervene to change the scene. Festivalise the manifesto!
2. *The festal is the social; justice all around.*
3. Musicians: bite the hand that feeds you. Make more music that explores, ladens & problematises this silence of history & memory. Mnemonic sonic.
4. Festival directors & jazz controllers: diversify! Disestablish! Retire!
5. Everyone: intangibilise more. It's jazz.
6. Book the bookish.
7. Where there is slavery heritage, there is jazz; the link is intrinsic. Make it extrinsic, & stronger.
8. Redefine heritage. Resound the historic cityscape. Shake, rattle & cajole their timeless elegances.
9. Less technique, more politics.
10. Burn the spear!² Learn from the TASTful creative disruptions of other musics—visual arts—museum sector—theatre—our scholars—

Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to the memory of John Cumming (1948-2020), co-founder of the London Jazz Festival. John was a brilliant and energetic creative producer, a deep thinker about the music and its social significance, as well as an enthusiastic supporter of jazz studies.

The ManiFESTo was delivered previously at the 6th Rhythm Changes international jazz conference in Graz, Austria in 2019 and during a keynote lecture at during the Preston Jazz Festival at UCLan the same year. Many thanks to organisers.

This work originates in research for the EU Cultural Heritage programme-funded CHIME project and I am grateful to the project team for insights and support.

² This may require elucidation. In the article (McKay 2020) I charted instances of transatlantic musical exploration of the slave trade, one of which was the Jamaican reggae singer Burning Spear's powerful 1975 classic 'Slavery days', which asks the question 'Do you remember the days of slavery?' 28 times in the course of a three-minute pop song. 'Slavery days' stands as an emblematic instance in affective cultural history, thus *to burn the spear!* means here to attempt a comparable cultural intervention (eg from jazz or its festival directors).

I also owe thanks to Dr Gina Arnold, my co-editor on *The Oxford Handbook of Punk Rock*, for, during the course of many punk-related conversations in recent years, generously introduced me to the creative and critical possibilities of writing a manifesto, which I have attempted to translate into jazz studies.

References

- Allen, Aaron S. 2012. "Fatto di Fiemme": Stradivari's violins and the musical trees of the Paneveggio.' In Laura Auricchio, Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook and Giulia Pacini, eds. *Invaluable Trees: Cultures of Nature, 1660-1830*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 301-315.
- Alves, Edenise Segala, Eduardo Luiz Longui, and Erika Amano. 2008. 'Pernambuco wood (Caesalpinia echinata) used in the manufacture of bows for stringed instruments.' *IAWA [International Association of Wood Anatomists] Journal* 29(3): 323-335.
- Anderson, Jennifer L. 2012. *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bates, Eliot. 2012. 'The social life of musical instruments.' *Ethnomusicology* 56(3): 363-395.
- CHIME (Cultural Heritage in Improvised Music Festivals in Europe project) website. <https://chimeproject.org>. Accessed 10 October 2020.
- Chivallon, Christine. 2001. 'Bristol and the eruption of memory: making the slave-trading past visible.' Trans. by Karen E. Fields. *Social and Cultural Geography* 2(3): 374-363.
- Collins, Wilkie, and Charles Dickens. 2011. *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices*. London: Hesperus. First published 1857.
- Dann, Graham M.S., and A.V. Seaton. 2001. 'Slavery, contested heritage and thanatourism.' *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration* 2(3-4): 1-29.
- Dobie, Madeleine. 2010. *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth Century French Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Dresser, Madge. 2000. 'Squares of distinction, webs of interest: gentility, urban development and the slave trade in Bristol, c. 1673-1820.' *Slavery and Abolition* 21(3): 21-47.
- Elder, Melinda. 1994. *Lancaster and the African Slave Trade*. Local Studies no. 14. Rev. edn. Lancaster: Lancaster City Museums.
- Germann, Sheridan. 2007. 'Decoration.' In Igor Kipnis, ed. *The Harpsichord and Clavichord: An Encyclopedia*. London: Routledge, 115-146.
- Grove, Richard H. 1995. *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Howell, Jocelyn. 2016. *Boosey & Hawkes: The Rise and Fall of a Wind Instrument Manufacturing Empire*. Unpublished PhD thesis. City University London. <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/16081/1/> Accessed 5 February 2021.
- McKay, George. 2020 [2018 online]. 'The heritage of slavery in British jazz festivals.' *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26(6): 571-588.
- Rice, Alan. 2010. *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

- Rice, Alan and Johanna C. Kardux. 2012. 'Confronting the ghostly legacies of slavery: the politics of black bodies, embodied memories and memorial spaces.' *Atlantic Studies* 9(3): 245-272.
- Rymer, Russ. 2004. 'Saving the music tree.' *Smithsonian magazine* (April).
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/saving-the-music-tree-101375575/>. Accessed 30 January 2021.
- Stuart, Susan E. 2005. 'Gillow family (per. c. 1730-c. 1830).' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/67318?docPos=1>. Accessed November 20 2017.
- . 2008. *Gillows of Lancaster and London, 1730-1840*. Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club.
- The Robert Gillow website. <https://www.robertgillow.co.uk>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Walvin, James. 2017. *Slavery in Small Things: Slavery and Modern Cultural Habits*. Oxford: Wiley.
- Wegst, Ulrike G.K. 2006. 'Wood for sound.' *American Journal of Botany* 93(10): 1439-1448.