

Jazz in the GDR: An Experimental Ground for Historicization

Focusing on jazz in the GDR, this paper explores different methodological approaches ranging from everyday history and concepts of cultural transfer to musicological analysis, looking for insights to the question: how to write the history of subcultural music?

GDR Jazz underwent many sociopolitical changes, “swinging” from being practically illegal to official cultural acceptance. Jazz musicians and enthusiasts were distrusted as a group, but analysis of their social history, subjective perspectives and self-conceptualizations reveals that jazz was not a unified subculture, but hosted a wide spectrum of nonconformity.

I conceptualize GDR Jazz activities as an aggregation of *scenes*, each made up of musicians, enthusiasts and organizers collectively gathered in self-organized jazz clubs and embed it into in the historical and political contexts of the Cold War under State Socialism. The paper examines the culturally rich region of Thuringia, encompassing half of all GDR jazz clubs, trying to reconstruct local jazz scenes, practices and networks interconnecting them. My goal is to display dynamics of interplay between the socialist party and jazz fans, following the notion that ideology and power are always negotiable social practices.

On a larger scale, the paper argues that theories of cultural transfer enable a different understanding of jazz as a highly complex and creative process of transformation, reinterpretation and re-signification, framing and explaining the historic musical and social processes that occurred in GDR jazz. The music itself is taken into account by analyzing representative pieces. The process of *transformation* itself is proposed as the key concept for including musicological perspectives into the discourse on jazz history, combining sociological, historical and musicological theories.

The paper concludes by contemplating implications of these reflections on the study of other music subcultures, such as blues, rock and heavy metal in the GDR.