

Book Review

Free Jazz Communism: Archie Shepp–Bill Dixon Quartet at the 8th World Festival of Youth and Students in Helsinki 1962

Sezgin Boynik and Taneli Viitahuhta, eds.
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Reviewed by David Grundy and Pierre Crépon

From July 28 to August 6, 1962, Helsinki became the setting for the 8th World Festival of Youth and Students for Peace and Friendship, a large international cultural gathering backed by the Soviet Union that had run since 1947. The first to be held in a “neutral” country, the Helsinki event featured a total of fifteen-thousand participants. Among the six-hundred Americans taking part were an eighteen-year-old Angela Davis and, in a separate capacity, the members of the Archie Shepp-Bill Dixon Quartet—Shepp on saxophones, Dixon on trumpet, Don Moore, bass, and Howard McRae, drums—temporarily augmented by clarinetist Perry Robinson. Avant-garde jazz was still in its early stage. Ornette Coleman had found fame in 1959 and was still a few months away from temporary retirement. Dixon and Shepp were little known beyond a small circle in New York. Those who ardently followed the jazz press might have known Shepp for his appearances with Cecil Taylor, with whom he had recorded *The World of Cecil Taylor* (Candid, 1961) and *Into the Hot* (Impulse!, 1962), two discs positively reviewed in *DownBeat*, a magazine where Shepp had also been voted tenor “new star” by three critics (30–31). The first article dedicated to Shepp, a November 1961 *Metronome* profile, also mentioned a brief coffee shop gig as leader with a group featuring Don Cherry (Spellman 26). Dixon, who worked at the United Nations in New York, had yet to record. Serving in the army from 1944 to 1946, he studied music on the GI Bill and started to gig in New York. In the late 1950s, Dixon initiated coffeehouse sessions in Greenwich Village. Dixon and Shepp first collaborated in 1961 and were co-leading a group by early 1962. The two met in late 1961 and the Shepp-Dixon Quartet was founded in April 1962. Prior to the Helsinki trip, the group had performed primarily at political benefits held by left wing organizations, often in private lofts (Young, Chapters 1 and 2).

During the festival, the group played two main concerts: one at the Konservatorio’s concert hall and another at the Rowing Stadium, an open-air venue overlooking a bay ordinarily used for canoeing events. These were the group’s first performances outside New York. Contemporary *OrkesterJournalen* coverage describes a range going from the use of chord changes to modal improvisation to an absence of “any formal restrictions of harmony or rhythm” (32). The group performed pieces by Dixon (“Trio”), Shepp (a dedication to Kenyan leader Jomo Kenyatta), Randy Weston, John Coltrane, George Russell, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk (46–47). Though recorded by Finnish public radio Yle, the music was never circulated and barely discussed outside reports reproduced here. Only a forty-minute recording has been made available for online listening, in Finland, but the book’s editors accessed the remaining music in radio archives (“Miles Davis Quintet”). In other words, the Shepp-Dixon group’s performance in Helsinki is a kind of pre-history to a pre-history, hitherto reduced to a footnote in existing studies.

The texts that make up *Free Jazz Communism*, a short book of just above 150 pages, seek to challenge this. In a brief introduction, the editors, art theoretician Sezgin Boynik and writer and musician Taneli Viitahuhta, describe their work as intended to counter the prevailing narrative of jazz as an instrument of United States Cold War cultural policy. Their purpose is twofold: to present a documentary account of an unexplored event in Cold War history—the Shepp-Dixon performance in Helsinki—and to use this event as a catalyst for broader reflections on free jazz’s role within Cold War cultural politics. The book opens with details of a few photographs of the festival, an editorial introduction, and an interview with Finnish journalist Pekka Saarnio recalling the political atmosphere (12–17). An essay by jazz researcher Jeff Schwartz follows, collating background information available in print sources on Shepp-Dixon in Helsinki (18–26). “Jazz Wars in Finland, 1962” collects five translated contemporaneous press clippings in which journalists debate the merits of the Shepp-Dixon group’s performance (28–35). Context for these pieces is provided in a longer essay by Viitahuhta on the cultural policing of the Finnish jazz aesthetic (26–67). “1962 Testimonies” consists of extracts from a few retrospective sources recalling attendance at the festival, including the autobiographies of Perry Robinson and Angela Davis (68–72).

The volume also prints a previously unpublished 2019 interview with Shepp—who is, of the two co-leaders, the clear focus of the book—conducted by the editors in Helsinki. It focuses predominantly on the Helsinki trip, as well as touching more generally on Shepp’s politics. Shepp does not discuss the trip’s organizational backdrop in depth, though he indicates that it was sponsored by the Communist Party USA and that the artists’ selection was at the party’s initiative (among other participants, Shepp cites folk acts Pete Seeger and The Pennywhistlers). Asked if he was himself a CPUSA member, Shepp answers negatively before making a hush sound and adding “in the United States, it’s not a good term” (76). Readers acquainted with Shepp’s interviews will be in familiar territory. Notable selections include this characterization of the saxophonist’s initial concept:

I was particularly influenced by my experience during university when I began to listen to poetry on recordings . . . poets such as T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, Ezra Pound. . . . After I graduated, I began to think I could combine poetry, literary ideas, with musical ideas. I majored in theatre, and when I wrote my first play it contained music. Many of those songs conveyed political meanings. So I emerged as a *musicien complet*. . . . It hadn’t yet reached completion when I came here in 1962. (80)

One could wish that topics briefly mentioned, such as Shepp’s travels after the festival to the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany, or his introduction to Malcolm X’s thought through Cecil Taylor, were discussed at more length.

Shepp also mentions riots and tear gas in the streets of Helsinki, anti-communist demonstrations against the festival that turned into large-scale clashes with the police involving an estimated two to three-thousand people. Poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who raised a toast with the Shepp-Dixon band on stage, would later compare the spectacle, with some exaggeration, to that of Nazi youth movements (44). The opposition to the festival is one of the focuses of Viitahuhta’s “Policed in the East: Construction of Finnish Jazz Aesthetic.” It deals at length with the American-backed anti-festival program Young America Presents, an exhibition of modern art and architecture that also included daily jazz concerts, notably performances by Herbie Nichols and a solo Jimmy Giuffrè clarinet set. Archival evidence uncovered by historians Joni Krekola and Simo Mikkonen cited here shows that it was substantially backed by the CIA, and there were rumors of CIA provocateurs encouraging the riots (Krekola and Mikkonen 230–55). Viitahuhta’s essay has two main aims: firstly, to delineate what was at stake in the Finnish press’s reaction to both the festival and counter-festival, and secondly, to extrapolate the conservative bias of Finnish jazz criticism over a longer period. Such conservative criticism has parallels in the United States: it was to such criticism that Shepp was reacting in the texts he authored in the U.S. jazz press in the years following the festival, which are also reprinted here.

Although not in immediate relation to the 1962 events, the Shepp texts in question are valuable reference points given the scattered nature of their original publication. Shepp’s “An Artist Speaks Bluntly” and the longer “A View from the Inside” appeared in *DownBeat* in 1965 and 1966 respectively. Often cited but not reprinted, Shepp’s texts are key for the association of free jazz with politics, responding to the perceived racism underlying white critical framings of the music. “Music and Black Identity” was delivered ten years later at a 1977 conference and previously published in a Finnish volume. The texts share certain themes: the control of Black music by white business owners and critics, the relation of the new music to tradition, and a commitment to anti-fascism, anti-racism, and internationalism. The 1966 piece is of interest for the overview of the avant-garde scene it provides. Shepp attempts an instrument-by-instrument breakdown, naming players now mostly ignored such as trumpeter Dewey Johnson and saxophonist Giuseppe Logan, as well as “mainstream” players such as Lee Morgan. The piece therefore differs from later accounts which, interpreting the music through a retrospective lens and discographical documentation, tend to focus on a few singular figures such as Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, or Albert Ayler. Such accounts not only exclude the wide array of musicians involved but also reinforce a division between avant-gardists and “straight-ahead” players that may have been more apparent than real.

Sezgin Boynik’s concluding essay is the book’s longest piece, and, in a sense, its theoretical centre point, aiming to examine “the politics of free jazz from the perspective of the concrete historical determinants involving Black militant organizations [and] addressing the current discussions involving questions around racial capitalism, international forms of Black struggles, and the role of avant-garde music in all of these” (9). Reference points include Marxist theory—notably Vijay Prashad and Robin Kelley’s work on traditions of Black radicalism and communism—and Ingrid Monson’s and Penny van Eschen’s recent scholarship on jazz’s role in the cultural Cold War. The earlier canon of political readings of free jazz is also used: Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People* and *Black Music*