

Social *Text*

ONLINE

On *Free Jazz Communism*

By Gabriel Bristow September 18, 2020

[Communism](#), [jazz](#), [music](#), [free jazz](#), [1960s](#), [Archie Shepp](#)



Jazz, [declared](#) saxophonist Archie Shepp in 1966, “is anti-war; it is opposed to [the war in] Vietnam; it is for Cuba; it is for the liberation of all people. That is the nature of jazz. That’s

not far fetched. Why is that so? Because jazz is a music itself born out of oppression, born out of the enslavement of my people.” This explosive reading of the music—and of what was labeled free jazz or “the new thing” in particular—provides the foundation for the recently published book, *Free Jazz Communism: Archie Shepp-Bill Dixon Quartet at the 8th World Festival of Youth and Students in Helsinki 1962* (Rab-Rab Press, 2019). As the subtitle suggests, this publication revolves around a festival that took place in Helsinki in 1962—the eighth edition of a Communist youth gathering held every few years since 1947. The editors, positioning themselves militantly outside “the dry and lazy academic practice of non-partiality” (8), seek to uncover an ostensibly hitherto unknown history that reveals the communist kernel of free jazz. With Shepp as their guiding light, they home in on the festival performance of the Shepp-Dixon quartet as a “singular manifestation” that “distorts the whole ideological construct of the international political mandate of jazz” in the context of the Cold War (7).

In order to undertake this monumental task, the book gathers together the testimonies of several festival participants, including, most notably, that of Angela Davis (who was an eighteen-year-old studying in Paris at the time). These impressionistic personal accounts are supplemented by an essay written by one of the book’s two editors, Taneli Viitahuhta, outlining the history of an event that saw over fifteen thousand people gather for two weeks in the Finnish capital, with a thousand delegates coming from across the African continent, several thousand sent by Western European Communist parties, and many more from around the rest of the world. The essay convincingly traces the Cold War contours of this historic event, but then veers off into a vulgar theorization of “the structurally central role of capitalism” (60) in jazz, gesturing towards the primacy of class and global capital accumulation (crudely conceptualized) in order to downplay cultural and ideological determinations. This culminates in a clumsy critique of scholar George E. Lewis’s explicitly non-essentialist conceptualization of “Afrological” and “Eurological” modes of music making, whereby Viitahuhta seeks to collapse these historically mutable modes into a monolithic “capitological” system (56-58). Certainly, jazz developed in dialectical relation to capital. But attempting to strip away an understanding of the role of racial logics at work in this dialectic is reductive. In a final twist, the essay ends with a reading of the Cold-War-inflected music criticism of the 1962 Shepp-Dixon performance and an explanation of how such criticism provided the basis for what Viitahuhta describes as the lamentable conservatism of contemporary Finnish jazz aesthetics.

The highlight of this publication is undoubtedly the reproduction of three short pieces by Archie Shepp, nestled in the middle of the book. As well as being a saxophonist and composer, Shepp is also a poet, playwright, and critic. The first of his texts presented in this volume, entitled “An Artist Speaks Bluntly” (originally published in *DownBeat* in late 1965 and frustratingly difficult to find online today), was a definitive statement on the politics of free jazz. Not only did it cause a rupture in the critical consensus at the time—the uncompromising lucidity of Shepp’s prose continues to cut through in the present. The sentences are short, clipped, taking aim and hitting their target with an urgent rhythmic precision. The last paragraph bears repeating in its entirety:

I leave you with this for what it’s worth. I am an antifascist artist. My music is functional. I play about the death of me by you. I give some of that life to you whenever you listen to me, which right now is never. My music is for the people. If you are bourgeois, then you must listen to it on my terms. I will not let you misconstrue me. That era is over. If my music doesn’t suffice, I will write you a poem, a play. I will say to you in every instance, “Strike the Ghetto. Let my people go.” (89)

Reading this, it’s easy to understand why the editors were enthused enough to produce this publication. And while such enthusiasm is necessarily the spark of any such project, it is nonetheless an insufficient basis for the attentive historical work of listening that is required thereafter. The book’s final essay—“A Lily in Spite of the Swamp: Notes on Archie Shepp, An Anti-Fascist Artist,” written by editor Sezgin Boynik—is a case in point.

One significant tangle that Boynik attempts to unpick is that of jazz and nationalism. Certainly, the relationship between free jazz and the multiple nationalisms of the 1960s and 1970s is an important one. Boynik, however, seems more interested in beating one particular drum—that of an at once specific and serpentine definition of revolutionary Black nationalism—than in understanding the polyrhythms, lags, clashes, and breaks that made up the musical and ideological sound and fury of that era. To carefully trace the complexity of this history is anything but dry academicism (or what Boynik calls “over-contextualising” [p. 120]): it is both a political necessity and the only way to do justice to the music. Orientating ourselves in the present cannot be reduced to a game of voluntarist historical revisionism whereby one gets to pick out the one “correct position” of a particular era—in

this case, Boynik's understanding of Shepp's aesthetics—and belittle everything else. Such an approach completely fails to grasp the historical forces at work—both past and present. In trying to pin free jazz to his own idiosyncratic rendering of Black nationalism, Boynik succeeds in drowning out the music itself. Contrary to his insistent charge, the historically complex relationship between jazz and nationalism is not simply the invention of a cohort of bourgeois academics. If you listen to free jazz, one of the things you can actually hear is the density and differentiation involved in these sonic expressions of Blackness. Some of it sounds revolutionary; some of it invokes Pan-Africanism. Some of it conjures a global spirituality; some of it is altogether other-worldly. In other words, the music both reflected, shaped, and at times floated in excess of, the political currents of the era. And given that nationalisms—both the many shades of Black nationalism as well as various strains of American nationalism—were a prominent part of the political terrain, it's not surprising that we can learn something about them from the music. To grasp this—to listen carefully—is to take the sound seriously. To impose a strict political position on the musical history—paying no attention to the sonic and stylistic substance of the music itself—is to render its study obsolete. Why not, in that case, stick to the political history of leftist groupuscule splits? Despite much historical materialist posturing, Boynik's essay is essentially an exercise in idealist historiography whereby he attempts to distill the true meaning of free jazz by bristling against a broad selection of jazz scholarship from the last half century. A little closer listening may have made for a more meaningful intervention.

Indeed, what is striking about the excerpt of the Shepp-Dixon quartet performance in Helsinki that I have been able to listen to from my bedroom is how the music itself speaks more of jazz's immanent, unfolding critique than of an absolute revolutionary rupture or singular Cold War realignment. The first song on the recording is "Oleo," a jazz standard written by Sonny Rollins in 1954 that is one of a number of bebop compositions to be based on—and riff off—the chord progression of George Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm," itself a song from the 1930 Broadway musical "Crazy Girl." In playing this standard, the band extend the established jazz practice of what scholar Fumi Okiji [describes](#) as "reflecting critically on the contradictions from which it [jazz] arises" (5). Interestingly, however, while Shepp's solo strains at the confines of the song's chord progression, it does not do away with it altogether. The solos of trumpeter Bill Dixon and clarinetist Perry Robinson (who joined the quartet for their Helsinki performance) still less so. As such, rather than representing an absolute political or aesthetic break, this group's music is, to borrow Shepp's phrase,

“the logical extension of things that had been intuitively at work in the minds of Parker and Monk” (92). In other words, the quartet’s playing of jazz standards—which it did throughout its existence—was part of a tradition of Black avant-garde experimentation that was bent on a sustained, iterative critique of the historical conditions of its own existence.

The second and final song on the recording is likely “Viva Jomo,” a 5/4 meter Shepp composition dedicated to Kenyan liberation leader Jomo Kenyatta, which was part of the quartet’s repertoire. Here, Shepp’s anti-imperialism is proclaimed up front, and the music ““bubbles” and “squeaks” and “croaks”” (90), taking up both a more quintessential “free jazz” register and the sort of political-aesthetic radicalism that the editors of *Free Jazz Communism* hanker after. Interestingly, in his instructive essay on the lead up to the Shepp-Dixon quartet’s journey to Helsinki, Jeff Schwartz claims that “Viva Jomo” remained “unrecorded” (22). The only way to find out if this is indeed a lost version of Shepp’s anti-colonial anthem would be to ask the man himself, who is living, at the venerable age of 83, between Paris and Hadley, Massachusetts.

The book’s title—*Free Jazz Communism*—inevitably and commendably opens up questions that remain beyond the scope of one single publication. While Shepp’s antifascist aesthetics are an excellent place to start (and over half the total pages are taken up by writing either by him or about him), there is a broader history of the relationship between free jazz and communism that this book points towards.

As the editors highlight, by the time free jazz emerged in the early 1960s, communist activity in the US had been drastically diminished by McCarthyist repression. The civil rights movement was in full swing and a wave of decolonizations was sweeping through Africa and Asia. In this moment, the relationship of free jazz to communism can perhaps be usefully thought of as analogous to that of these newly decolonizing countries to Soviet Russia: while there were overtures and flirtations on both sides, the long-term trend was one of non-alignment. Aside from Archie Shepp, few prominent free jazz musicians considered themselves communists. In [conversation](#) with critic A.B. Spellman, Ornette Coleman discussed his brief encounter with several young Communists in early 1950s Los Angeles who “found jobs for him at three and five dollars a night”:

They made me feel as though they were doing me a great service, simply

because I was a guy from Texas and hadn't been exposed to a free life and they were doing me a favor by accepting me in their organization. But I never joined the organization because I couldn't accept the fact that they felt like they had to respect me because that was their responsibility as Communists. I didn't think they were doing me any favor by acting decent because I could tell that if they hadn't been Communists they would have been prejudiced. It wasn't real. I don't think that any form of social life is real when a person has to find out what you're doing and what your possibilities are before he likes you. (109-110 of Four Lives in the Bebop Business)

This critique of the instrumentalizing machinations of official Communism, this rejection of calculated inauthenticity, is strikingly similar to that of Cross Damon, the protagonist of Richard Wright's [novel](#) *The Outsider*, published in 1953 (contemporaneous with Coleman's encounter). Both Cross and Ornette defend a singular subjective expression that is in excess of the strictures of party dogma. As Cross muses, the "systematizing of the sensual impulses of man to be a god must needs be jealous of all rival systems of sensuality, even those found in poetry and music," and perhaps in particular in "the demonic contagions of jazz" (269 of *The Outsider*). Thus, while various free jazz musicians aligned themselves with different movements at different moments, the music maintained an autonomy. Sun Ra, John Coltrane, Shepp, and others played benefit concerts for Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School in Harlem; François Tusques played in support of numerous leftist initiatives in the ferment of post-1968 Paris; Clifford Thornton was banned from France for playing and speaking in support of the Black Panthers in 1970. Instances of free jazz musicians performing at official Communist Party events are less well-documented, but Don Cherry—though far from a card-carrying member of most anything—certainly played frequently at the PCI's *Festa de l'Unità* and the PCF's *Fête de l'Humanité* through the 1970s. Such occurrences, however, speak less of a committed Communist politics at the core of free jazz and more of a swirling confluence of countercultural currents. At the risk of dragging us back into what Boynik describes as the "long lethargy of postmodernist confusion," perhaps we could talk of free jazz communisms in the plural, with an emphatically small "c." And it is perhaps by continuing the work of recovering such swirling confluences—the tension running from function to autonomy, from discipline to subjective excess—that we can shuffle toward a viable contemporary cultural politics. For all its flaws,

the selection of texts that make up *Free Jazz Communism* certainly stimulate this line of enquiry.



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