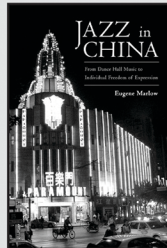


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Jazz in China: From Dance Hall Music to Individual Freedom of Expression
Eugene Marlow (University Press of Mississippi)
by Kevin Canfield

Jazz in China: From Dance Hall Music to Individual Freedom of Expression is a sweeping, informative work of history. A Baruch College professor who also happens to be an accomplished jazz composer, Eugene Marlow begins his narrative in the mid-19th century – decades before jazz even existed.

After the Opium Wars ended in 1860, imperial British culture streamed into Asia. American jazz followed in its wake. “In the 1920s and 1930s,” Marlow writes, “performers like pianist Teddy Weatherford, trumpeter Valaida Snow and bandleader/trumpeter Buck Clayton” were among those who “brought jazz to China”. These and other talented African-American musicians were lured by the chance to play busy dance halls and a desire to escape American racism.

Mao Zedong’s rise to power in 1949 forced jazz into a period of dormancy, but things began to change after the dictator died in 1976. Willie Ruff, the influential American French horn player, brought his band to Shanghai in 1981 and a number of other musicians from the U.S. and Europe followed within a few years (Marlow lists them in an appendix). In the ‘90s, the Beijing Jazz Festival was founded and new jazz records made their way into the country.

Marlow has done ample on-the-ground reporting in China, interviewing homegrown and expatriate musicians who currently play and teach jazz there. They describe a small but enthusiastic community of performers and listeners who gather for live shows in eclectic settings, some of which make for fascinating juxtapositions. In Beijing, Marlow reports, one jazz “club is located next to Tiananmen Square”. Native Chinese jazz players are mostly men, but that’s slowly changing, according to Joey Lu, a female pianist who spoke with Marlow. “There are many women who are learning jazz and you will be seeing them very soon,” she says.

Given “China’s inexorable economic expansion”, jazz seems destined to spread ever more widely, Marlow suggests. His edifying book chronicles these developments in accessible, intelligent prose.

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