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REVIEW

Benjamin Barson. *Brassroots Democracy: Maroon Ecologies and the Jazz Commons.* Wesleyan University Press, 2024, 424 pp. $40 (cloth) ISBN9780819501127.

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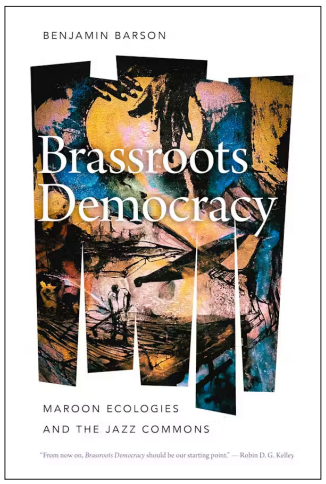

KEYWORDS

Brass Bands

New Orleans

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Social Movements

Long Nineteenth Century

Having had the punny tenacity myself to name a monograph *Critical Brass*,[1] a book called *Brassroots Democracy: Maroon Ecologies and the Jazz Commons* would inevitably pique my interest. Much more than a pun, Benjamin Barson's book is an innovative rewriting of the history of the brass band music that came out of New Orleans during the transition from Reconstruction to the Jim Crow South, which played a crucial role in the emergence of jazz. By theorizing relationships between music and politics in the broader regional context of the Caribbean, Barson intervenes on several conventional narratives, ultimately offering a powerful depiction of the agency of Black musicking during a period of entrenching segregation.

Barson defines "brassroots" as pointing to the "connections between the grassroots" and "community-led brass bands," which emerged out of the diverse Black, Caribbean, and Latin American communities that converged in New Orleans (p. 3). "Brassroots democracy" refers furthermore to the transformative potential of the musical practices of these communities that accompanied or even prefigured political transformation and made New Orleans a "crucible of radicalism" (p. 3). Barson's insistence on this emergent musical-political culture as a site of resistance counters conventional narratives of jazz radicalism as beginning with civil rights–era jazz musicians who supposedly challenged their apolitical predecessors. He argues that brassroots democracy played a vital role in the formation of the activist organizations of the time, including Black unions, mutual aid societies, and anti-segregation activists. Unwittingly reflecting the thematic focus of this volume of the *Journal of Festive Studies* on joy as resistance, the author portrays this "new, jubilant interculture" as an expression of "synchronized joy that nurtured the roots of their community's collective militancy" (p. 6).

In contrast to previous studies that have viewed the supposedly Eurocentric Afro-Creoles as culturally segregated from the Black migrants who came to New Orleans after emancipation, Barson stresses the various points of solidarity between these and other communities. His focus on Creole musicians points him to a musical and political history of jazz with a lineage not in the city's mythical Congo Square or the amorphous cultural "gumbo" of the city, but in Haiti and its Revolution (1791–1804), famously the best-known successful revolt of enslaved people in history. The revolution resulted in mass migration of French planters and their enslaved captives to New Orleans, turning the city into a much more important part of the regional plantation complex with a fortified Francophone/Creole culture. Aligning himself with "the 'Haitian turn' in Atlantic history and Black studies," he explores the musical and political traces of the Haitian Revolution in New Orleans (p. 12). Though many authors have connected New Orleans to the Caribbean world through Jelly Roll Morton's famed claim of jazz's "Latin tinge," Barson goes much further, showing how New Orleans became a place of encounter and circulation for diverse musical

1. Andrew Snyder, *Critical Brass: Street Carnival and Musical Activism in Olympic Rio de Janeiro* (Wesleyan University Press, 2022).

communities that linked the city with Haiti, Mexico, the Plains States, Paris, and West Africa, among other places. He argues that these connections reflect an internationalism in nineteenth-century New Orleans, by which he refers to its musical diversity as well as a Black and worker solidarity that "crossed borders" (p. 14). Having written about the contemporary emergence of a translocal network of activist and musically eclectic brass bands, I was surprised and impressed to see these trends documented in brass band communities of a much earlier period.[2]

Barson treats the Haitian Revolution as the first breath of what historian Julius Scott calls the "'common wind' that connected Afro-American communities across the Atlantic world to a shared knowledge of, and will to, struggle" (p. 13). Again playing on the pun of the wind instrument, Barson treats this common wind as forming an alternative musical-political zeitgeist of the long nineteenth century. He applies the implications of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic, which he understands as a rhizomatic space through which a "counterculture of modernity" like jazz might arise in a place like New Orleans, which was simultaneously a place of racial terror and a maroon community—or a "counter-plantation" (p. 12). In becoming an emphatic blower of the common wind himself, he eschews a distanced tone in favor of a style often more befitting of a manifesto, such as in the book's penultimate paragraph: "Lips to mouthpiece, chest to cosmos, eyes drawn at the emerging police response: musicians collectively engage in the sacred act of drawing breath, against history, against the impossibility of justice, bearing witness to the lives lost in the relentless, unyielding grip of racial capitalism" (p. 282). Some may be taken aback by such language, but Barson finds company with authors for whom scholarship cannot be separated from the moral imperative of solidarity.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which discusses the "trans-Caribbean lineages" of Afro-Creole musicians as well as their connections to and solidarity with cultural groups within and beyond New Orleans (p. 32). The first chapter documents the filtration of Caribbean rhythms in New Orleans music while exploring the potent Haitian imaginary in the activism of Afro-Creole musician Daniel Desdunes. The second chapter discusses his sister, singer and pianist Mamie Desdunes, who "challenged the colonization of pleasure" through her Black blues feminism, which he traces in part to Haitian origins (p. 84). The third chapter discusses musical-political networks between New Orleans and Latin Americans and the crossing of the "sonic frontier" (p. 32). Spanning different periods, populations, and families, this first part, while fascinating, felt a bit diffuse, more like a series of case studies in brassroots democracy than a story.

By contrast, the second half was more cohesive, focusing in amore linear way on the "institutions created by counter-plantation movements" from slavery to the emergence of jazz in turn-of-the-century New Orleans (p. 32). The fourth chapter explores the alternative gardening practices of enslaved communities, making connections to mutual aid institutions and the emergence of a musical commons. Chapter 5 shows how brass became a crucial element of Black Civil War regiments and Black Reconstruction–era practices of democracy, such as political parades, mass meetings, and poll drives. Finally, chapter 6 shows concretely how Black brass music forged a part of an internationalist, intercultural syndicalist culture in *fin-de-siècle* New Orleans that was crucial to emergence of jazz.

2. Reebee Garofalo, Erin Allen, and Andrew Snyder, eds., *HONK! A Street Band Renaissance of Music and Activism* (Routledge, 2020).

While I remain impressed at the book's ambition, I nevertheless had methodological concerns. For one, the musical and political developments Barson connects often felt reminiscent of older structuralist approaches that sought out "homologies" between features of the musical field that could be interpreted as reflective of the social world. Ethnomusicologist Tim Rice explains that, while contemporary "ethnomusicologists continue to view music as a form of social behavior and as a cultural form, their search for homologies and coherences among them has been short-circuited by a move to poststructuralism."[3] Barson, for example, suggests that "the 'impossible' incongruity of intercropping was correlative to the endemic hemiolas within Afro-Caribbean music, which thrive on the experience of multiple time signatures weaving in and out of perception," a claim of which contemporary ethnomusicologists might be skeptical (p. 184).

Moreover, as with many global or regional multisited histories that seek to account for apparently similar phenomena in distinct places and times, I often felt that Barson's broad, all-encompassing framework of brassroots democracy was at times a bit forced in some of its diverse applications. Perhaps, as a good postmodernist inherently mistrustful of grand narratives, I found myself asking if the phenomena he discusses were not more fragmented, diffuse, and distinct than he lets on. Was the Haitian Revolution really so potent an imaginary as to be a relevant frame of analysis in New Orleans more than one hundred years later? Such a concern is well considered by Sydney Hutchinson's article in this *JFS* volume, which argues for the legitimacy of "opaque" conclusions when considering Creolized histories. Hutchinson, like Barson, is inspired by Martinican postcolonial theorist Édouard Glissant, and she writes that "Caribbean people make new things from what [Glissant] called *traces*.... Opaque, disordered, but utopian cultural fragments, traces result from the trauma of slavery and forced transit while rebelling against overly neat, monovocal histories ... they are opposed to systematic thought."[4] Though Hutchinson's defense is perhaps implicitly resonant with his approach, I did not feel that Barson, by contrast, let on to such potential epistemological limitations. In either case, whether such a defense is a methodological copout for the inherent challenges in connecting diffuse phenomena or instead the only appropriate response to the reality of fragmented histories, I remain unsure. In this sense, the book's wild ambition is perhaps both its greatest asset and greatest liability.

These concerns only slightly detract from the book's fundamental rethinking of the foundations of "American" music. *Brassroots Democracy* broadens this history well beyond the United States, showing that jazz's cosmopolitanism and radicalism were baked in from the beginning. Barson provides a rich historical portrait that illuminates how these joyful festive practices confronted hegemonic power and offered alternatives. While I, having played in many brass bands in protest parades myself, am a particularly soft target for his approach, I do not think it is an understatement to suggest that Barson's book might mark a paradigm shift that will blow into the common wind for years to come.

3. Timothy Rice, *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 56.

4. Sydney Hutchinson, "Triangle or Onion?: The Bermudian Gombey Tradition at the Crossroads of the Black and Red Atlantics," *Journal of Festive Studies* 7 (2025): 244.

AUTHOR BIO

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