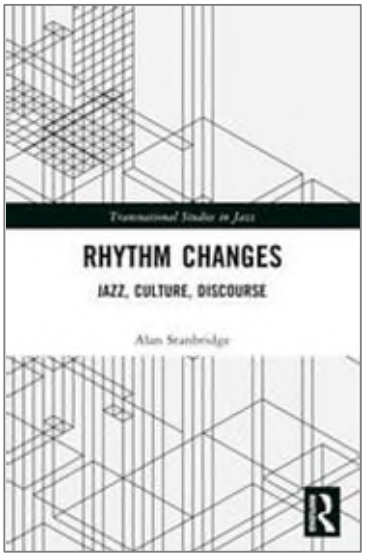

Rhythm Changes: Jazz, Culture, Discourse by Alan Stanbridge. New York, NY: Routledge, 2023. 378 pp. ISBN: 1000755479.

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At its core, Alan Stanbridge's Rhythm Changes: Jazz, Culture, Discourse isn't a book that is centrally about jazz music or culture (as the title might suggest). Instead, it aspires to make a broader argument about the state of jazz studies as a field. The book pursues disciplinary reckoning through an exploration and analysis of canonical case studies from across jazz history.[1] Each example is chosen to highlight various essentialisms (racial, technological, and nationalist) that are perceived to have hindered contemporary jazz research, and that have led to problematic assumptions from musicians, critics, and other jazz scholars.

Stanbridge describes the book as "a collection of essays on jazz encompassing the Broadway tradition, the bebop era, and more contemporary developments."[2] Each of the six main body chapters is conceived as a response or intervention, rather than as parts of a cohesive narrative or an in-depth historical study. The book begins with a short twelve-page introduction discussing the intertextual relationship between Gershwin's original use of the "Rhythm Changes" chord progression and the proliferation of bebop reinterpretations that followed. George Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm" was composed initially for the 1930 Broadway musical Girl Crazy but soon took on an intertextual life of its own after it was picked up by jazz musicians as a core improvisational structure. Stanbridge discusses the history behind this shift, setting the context for him to challenge the assumption that jazz musicians intended to parody the Gershwin original.[2] This sets up one of the central themes of the book, namely the intertextual relationship between original source materials that aren't "Black" or "American" in origin, and their African American jazz reinterpretations.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 each continue a thread from the discussion of intertextuality in the introduction. Stanbridge builds his argument out of what he perceives to be an essentializing undercurrent of Ingrid Monson's seminal work on this topic.[2] He disputes Monson's "ironic" reading

[1] Chapters include a range of different case studies but are centered on John Coltrane, George Russell, Keith Jarrett, and Miles Davis.

[2] Stanbridge centres his critique on Monson's analysis of John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" in: Monson, Ingrid. "Intermusicality" from *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, The University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 97-132.

of John Coltrane's interpretation of "My Favorite Things" as the "transformation of a 'corny' tune into a vehicle for serious improvisation" (p. 58). Out of this critique, he develops his own theorization of intertextuality based on a range of musical examples of irony, parody, and satire.[3] Chapters 4 and 5 explore the discourses circulating around the technological mediation of jazz, engaging in a discussion of the politics of using electronic instruments, and the role of recording technology. Chapter 6 takes to task what the author views as the "problematic" national and racial biases rooted in George E. Lewis' notion of Eurological and Afrological aesthetics, pointing to many of the same essentializing pitfalls levelled at Monson.[4]

Stanbridge achieves his most discerning analysis in the discussion of jazz and technology. He takes a discourse analysis centered approach that sheds important light on the often-overlooked intersection between various purity discourses that are pervasive in jazz: pure acoustics, pure liveness, and pure improvisation. Keith Jarrett and Miles Davis are explored as examples of jazz musicians who traded in these discourses to mediate the critical discourse around their music and practice. Stanbridge also provides an excellent discussion of the ideologically charged discourse around overdubbing in jazz (p. 218). He makes a persuasive case that recording technology plays an important mediating role in even the freest, most highly improvised jazz styles (p. 234). Across these two chapters (4 and 5), Stanbridge plants the seed for important future historiographical work, exemplifying how the deconstruction of these purity discourses sheds light not only on the historiography of genres overtly associated with electronic instruments, such as jazz fusion, but also on other 'acoustic' genres and styles throughout jazz history that have a more concealed relationship with technology.

The rest of the book is largely devoted to extended criticisms of Monson and Lewis (chapters 2 and 6), which while tightly argued, take positions that may draw rebuttal from some segments of the jazz studies community. Stanbridge's critiques boil down to contesting the notion of African American exceptionalism and accusing Monson and Lewis of a false construction and reification of African American authenticity. He views this as a pervasive "essentialist" bias that has limited the scope for evaluating and analyzing non-African American jazz and has had a detrimental impact on jazz research.[5] Much of Stanbridge's criticism is well judged, such as highlighting the biases that may have informed Monson's value judgement that Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" is, "in terms of the improvisational aesthetic standards of jazz … a vast improvement upon the original" (p. 69). He

[3] Stanbridge provides an effective analysis of the nuanced blend of irony and parody in George Russell's arrangement of "My Only Sunshine" (95).

[4] Stanbridge's critique centres on Lewis' article: Lewis, George E. "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives." *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (1996): 91–122.

[5] Due to the word restriction of this review, I can only provide a brief summary of Stanbridge's critiques, each of which is more than thirty pages in length. Readers should consult Stanbridge's original text to get a full sense of his arguments.

also makes a fair case that Lewis' description of Eurological and Afrological as "systems of improvisative musicality" is loosely defined in a way that leaves it open to misinterpretation.[6]

However, some readers might find it harder to agree with Stanbridge's accusations of "narrow, racially-motivated essentialism" (p. 69). Both Monson and Lewis make clear in their original texts that this is not how their work was intended to be read. Lewis writes transparently, "My constructions make no attempt to delineate ethnicity or race, although they are designed to ensure that the reality the ethnic or racial component of a historically emergent sociomusical group must be faced squarely and honestly."[7] In her own similar clarifying statement, Monson explains that her objective is to "explore the ambiguities, indistinctness, overlaps, and variety within racial and musical categories" and to "avoid reifying these categories into monolithic and un-changing entities."[8] The use of the "racial essentialist" label seems difficult to justify, given both authors' explicit efforts to prevent such an interpretation. Aside from substance, some readers might also take issue with the tone of Stanbridge's critical passages. Monson and Lewis are both described as "problematic" and "preposterous," which could be perceived as harsh and unconstructive (p. 62, 260). The severity with which Stanbridge seeks to discredit these scholars could risk compromising the book's overall goal of provoking a productive conversation about the future of the field.

The angle of Stanbridge's criticism overlooks how Monson and Lewis' works –both published in 1996– were products of the state of field at the time. Both scholars were responding to a moment in jazz studies (and music research more generally), when the idea of jazz as an African American vernacular art form was only beginning to be recognized by the field. Their work broke new ground by importing methods from black studies into jazz studies, based on the assumption that African American musical traditions require their own mode of analysis. By recognizing the distinctness of the African American vernacular culture of jazz, their goal was not to create an essentialism, but instead to generate a better explanation for the expressive work of jazz throughout the twentieth century as a vector of African American agency and world building. Bringing this context to bear, Stanbridge's criticism risks being perceived as a challenge to the African American agency and world building capacity of jazz illuminated by Monson and Lewis, or as disputing the idea of jazz as an African American vernacular tradition altogether.

Readers might find it peculiar that Stanbridge doesn't at any point provide a justification or explanation for why Monson and Lewis are singled out for criticism. Both scholars are widely cited and represent important pillars of knowledge in the field, and perhaps this alone justifies the extended discussion. But it is also true that both texts are now more than twenty-five years old.

[6] Lewis, 217.

[7] Lewis, 217.

[8] Monson, 102.

Some readers might challenge the devotion of much of the book to critiquing these older sources, given the proliferation of more contemporary work that has developed and extended the ideas pioneered in these seminal texts.[9]

Stanbridge's focus on scholarly criticism makes it difficult to recommend the book as a full-length text to non-academic readers. The passages of musical analysis in chapters 1 and 3 are, however, the most accessible and therefore most suitable for readers with a general jazz interest.[10] For Stanbridge's intended readership of jazz scholars, there is lots to engage with, even if some of his arguments might prove contentious. In this regard, the book achieves what it sets out to do in bringing to the table several of the key debates currently ongoing in the field. Several chapters could pair well with the source material as assigned readings for graduate seminars looking to stimulate conversations about jazz, race, and authenticity (Stanbridge and Monson, or Stanbridge and Lewis). While Stanbridge's arguments will likely resonate strongly in some segments and invite debate in others, his thought-provoking questions about the future of jazz studies ensure the book's significance within the field at large.

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[9] To give two recent examples, see Braxton Shelley's work that draws from Monson's theorization of the vamp as an organizational structure: "Analyzing Gospel." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 1 (2019): 181–243. Shelley cites Monson's "Intermusicality" chapter and develops the idea that vamps provide an "intermusical" correspondence between musical features such timbre, melody, and harmony and extra-musical affects such as "intensification" that have culturally specific importance in African American genres such as gospel, p. 208-209. Also see Matthew Mendez's 2024 article: "History Beyond Recovery: Julius Eastman and the Challenge of the Heterological." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 77, no. 1 (2024): 163–222. Mendez develops Lewis' Eurological and Afrological categories and proposes his own third "Heterological" category, informing an analysis of Julius Eastman's minimalist aesthetics.

[10] Stanbridge provides an excellent accompanying playlist that enhances the accessibility and general interest of these sections.