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Deep Affinities - A history of jazz in Turkey

The Istanbul International Jazz Day programme is just the latest chapter of an ever evolving story

Turkey's relationship with the Jazz musical genre is multi-faceted, abounding with potential, and woven through occurrences that cross the globe and testify to jazz's immensity as a musical style endowed with a fluidity and capacity for evolution rare among classical music traditions. Such a relationship speaks no less to the richness of Turkey's music landscape, which itself bears a stark resemblance to Jazz, as proclaim some of the finest adherents of both disciplines. With its improvisational prowess, its malleability and capacity to assimilate new rhythmic and harmonic textures, Turkey's traditional music is undoubtedly one of exceptional collaborative appeal for Jazz. A Turkish jazz musician described recently in an interview^[1] the respective characteristics of the two genres that render them capable of combining with one another in fruitful, synergistic ways, "It's in their approach to improvisation that jazz musicians might be influenced by Turkish musicians, and vice versa." As an example of the mutual impact the two musical styles have had upon one another, the musician asks us to, "...consider the rhythmic codes from which Dave Brubeck drew in composing, "Blue rondo à la Turq."

One of Turkey's most commemorated encounters with Jazz dates back to 1934, when Mehmet Munir Ertegun was named Turkish ambassador to the United States. His two young sons, Nesuhi and Ahmet, then aged 17 et 11 respectively, quickly dove into Washington's vibrant jazz music scene. They frequented the District's most prominent jazz sites. It was not long before they transformed their home into a space emblematic of the unifying social power of Jazz. To this day, the Turkish ambassador's mansion in DC is celebrated for its symbolic importance as a site wherein social barriers were saliently disrupted and racial divides transcended, as blacks and white assembled to partake in jam sessions and to celebrate the force of a genre whose evolution proceeded improvisationally. The current Turkish ambassador revels in the symbolic grandeur of the Residence, which, as Ahmet Ertegun liked to point out, provoked the outrage of conservative personalities, who remonstrated against the boys' father for allowing black visitors to enter the home through the front door. The two brothers went on to found Atlantic records, and Nesuhi in particular produced the records of artists who would go on to revolutionize America's musical universe and, eventually, the world – pathbreakers such as John Coltrane, Charlie Mingus, Dave Brubeck and the Modern Quartet, as well as other grand artists of the era, including Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, Solomon Burke, Ben E. King.

Jazz's power to provoke the transcendence of divides etched into social, political and cultural terrains, transpires in the ways in which this first official encounter has been appropriated and retold by voices emerging from both the United States and Turkey. Hacettepe University in Ankara recently opened the country's first Jazz department. During the inauguration ceremony, in March of 2010, particular tribute was paid to Ahmet Ertegun for his indispensable contributions to the promotion, diffusion, and evolution of Jazz.

In Turkey, musicians continually proclaim their deep affinity for the genre, which has served as both a model and a collaborative framework whereby musicians elaborate upon traditional Turkish music schemes. Even more, it appears that Jazz entered Turkey's musical landscape well before the Ertegun sons promoted its development as a mode of resistance in the United States.

According to a Batu Akyol, director of a soon to be released documentary, entitled *Jazz in Turkey*^[2], Jazz music seeped into Turkey as "light western music" and soon came to be hailed as the "music of freedom." Its appropriation and transformation on Turkish soil has prolonged the genre to include new and hitherto inconceivable forms and variations. As Seda Binbasgil, lecturer and Jazz writer, explains in the documentary, "...even...if it's originated from America, it's a music welcoming all cultures and all music of the world... Moreover, it is not only inviting, it encourages all by saying: "Let's do something all together with jazz. Let's take your ethnic and cultural music and experiment together."

In the same film, Gokhan Akcura, Turkish writer and researcher, traces Jazz's roots in Turkey to the Republic's initial foundation. According to Akcura, an African American named Thomas who had lived and worked in Tsarist Russia as a club manager, moved to Istanbul in the aftermath of the First World War. There, he began working at Maxim Casino in Taxim, where he partook in an orchestra named Seven Palm Beach, composed entirely of African Americans. Thus was the country's encounter with Jazz initiated, ushering in a kinship that would persist for generations, and that continues to evolve to this day.

Today, Turkish jazz is more alive than ever, with hundreds of festivals, thousands of concerts and a number of artists often well known internationally. The Special Events organized in Istanbul for the International Jazz Day in 2013 are just the last chapter of a long story that is bound to continue for long.

[1] www.zamanfrance.fr/article/improvisation-turque-inspire-le-jazz

[2] *Jazz in Turkey*, Batu Akyol, Loyka Productions, 2011

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