

Listening for Jazz in Post-Armistice Istanbul

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On the evening of 14 July 2013, while living in Istanbul, I walked down Kumbaracı Yokuşu away from the sounds of protest to the city's contemporary art museum. As part of the Istanbul Jazz Festival lineup, the Istanbul Modern screened director Batu Akyol's documentary *Türkiye'de Caz* (Jazz in Turkey), which gathers interviews with Turkish jazz musicians intimate with the country's jazz scene from the 1940s onward.¹ The emergence of a jazz ecology of musician-composers, entrepreneurs, jazz promoters, and collectors runs in tandem with the history of the Turkish Republic, beginning in the years leading up to and including World War I and gaining momentum in the 1930s and 1940s. The documentary does not present a hermetically sealed nationalist understanding of Turkish jazz, but rather affirms a vibrant celebration of the music. To date, Istanbul's arts organizations host international jazz summer festivals and yearlong jazz programs. There are jazz clubs, radio programs, and magazines that highlight international and local events. Turkish university music departments offer jazz studies and formal performance opportunities for musicians. But there are also informal venues, such as the streets, cafes, and bookstores. While out late in Istanbul when I lived there, I would frequently listen to a lone street musician stationed outside of Narmanlı Han playing "My Funny Valentine" on his trumpet. On more recent trips, I have come across a jazz band playing Dixieland tunes along İstiklal Avenue.² This is all to say that Istanbul is a city where one can listen to jazz standards, Dixieland, bebop, cool, and fusion as well as take lindy hop dance lessons from a local group. Although Akyol's documentary uncovers a jazz soundtrack dating to the 1930s that is composed of personal stories of local musicians becoming jazzers, the post-Armistice period (1918–23) remains mute, mired in what I consider to be a standard version of the city's origin story of jazz. I want to consider the case of jazz in post-Armistice Istanbul to think about how master narratives erase some sounds and privilege others.

In 1958, musician and composer İlhan K. Mimaroglu published *Caz Sanatı* (The Art of Jazz), the first book written in Turkish on the history of jazz. In the foreword, Mimaroglu writes that his book was meant to prove that jazz is an art with its own rules, technique, history, and key musicians. The work could be considered a guide to jazz at that time with appendices providing a bibliography of books and journals dedicated to the topic and a discography of canonical records spanning the early years of jazz recording. It also provides Turkish explanations for jazz lingo. The definition of jazz as a style with specific swing characteristics, improvisations, and "blues" sonorities does not apply to the dance music period of the 1920s and 1930s. What is understood as a jazz tradition—"an overarching genre embracing a succession of interrelated styles"—did not emerge until midcentury, the time when Mimaroglu was writing.³

The early jazz history noted in *Caz Sanatı* follows what is understood as the grand jazz narrative. In Mimaroglu's telling, the music originated in the New Orleans district of Storyville, and was associated with African American slaves. During the Mardi Gras

festival, French and Spanish influences along with Creole, African American slaves, and various Southern whites joined in listening to a parade of musicians playing various ragtime tunes.⁴ From there, the music traveled to Chicago (and Kansas City) then to New York City before hopping across the Atlantic to Paris and beyond. In the 1950s, use of jazz to combat the spread of communism was part of the US State Department's Cold War strategy. Top-notch performers were sent to countries considered "developing" or "underdeveloped," including Turkey.⁵ Mimaroglu makes a nod to the Cold War era of jazz as diplomacy by noting who came to Turkey. "In 1956, big name artists like Dizzy Gillespie gave concerts in Ankara and Istanbul. But, for two years the U.S. government did not send other jazz musicians. Finally, the Dave Brubeck quartet arrived."⁶ There had been a thirty-year gap, recounts Mimaroglu, in which US jazz musicians did not perform in the country. This lapse is invoked in *Caz Sanati* and even more so in Akyol's documentary to imply how jazz became Turkish. However, it is Mimaroglu's origin story of jazz that has been recycled and retold, having the effect, I argue, of erasing or silencing sounds.

The story of "lost" jazz sounds of the 1920s has been shaped by what I have termed elsewhere as the "Mimaroglu Narrative"—the story of how jazz was introduced to the city and its residents.⁷ The eight-page appendix "Türkiye'de Caz" (Jazz in Turkey) dedicated roughly 200 words to it, telling of a locally trained classical violinist who was a member of a string quartet in Istanbul. At one point, one of the musicians in the quartet went to Paris and heard jazz presumably for the first time. After returning to Istanbul, one Leon Avigdor, struck with curiosity, followed the same path to Paris. When Avigdor returned to Istanbul, he learned to play the alto saxophone and founded a quartet called Ronald's, which consisted of a banjo player, a drummer, and a pianist from White Russia who had fled to Istanbul.⁸ This story has become conventional wisdom, recycled in Turkish reportages on jazz and in master's theses. It even reappears in Akyol's documentary when a noted Turkish jazz promoter repeats it.⁹

In August 2013, fifty-five years after the first printing of *Caz Sanati*, an Istanbul publishing house reprinted the book.¹⁰ The timing of the reprinting coincided with the documentary's screening. Although Akyol's documentary still gives short shrift to the 1920s—in a 100-minute documentary only about four minutes focus on the 1920s—it provides slightly more information than most tellings by adding black-and-white footage of a busy, post-Armistice port, and by mentioning Frederick Bruce Thomas (1872–1928). Thomas hailed from southern Mississippi and became a well-known impresario of a Moscow nightclub and later of a nightclub in Istanbul. After the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, he joined the waves of émigrés who landed in Istanbul. In the early 1920s he opened the famed Maxim nightclub on Siraselviler Avenue near Taksim Square. A biography on Frederick Thomas was published in early 2014. The biography, subsequent popular articles in Turkish magazines, and cultural inserts in newspapers seem to attest to an ever-growing interest in the city's early jazz scene. Instead of a resident non-Muslim introducing jazz to the city's residents, the torch is handed to the black American Thomas, a personage who is mentioned in various memoirs.¹¹ The Mimaroglu origin story, which has been around for half a decade, and recent attention directed toward Thomas, has not expanded our historical recognition of the early jazz soundtrack of the city, which ran in tandem with the music cultures of rembetiko, classical Ottoman and Western fare, and tango.

My interest in jazz culture stems from my belief that it is a site of creative innovation and contestation that reveals how everyday residents of Istanbul engaged with configurations taking place at the city and state level. The lens of jazz culture provides an integrative approach to uncovering sounds in the 1920s. Jazz culture is based on the live performance of jazz, which primarily took place in nightclubs and bars in the predominantly non-Muslim district of Pera-Beyoğlu. It also includes fashion trends, such as the latest dances. In Istanbul, small shops advertised where to get the best dancing shoes; local dance teachers taught the latest dance steps in studios, homes, and hotels; and public dance contests, tea dances, nightclubs, and bars provided stages for dancing the Charleston, the Shimmy, the Black Bottom, the Foxtrot, and the One-Step, which consequently provided opportunities for touring performers. In other words, the various components of jazz culture provided a new urban kinesthetic—a new way of seeing, listening, and performing the body to the rhythms and ethos of jazz.¹²

If the recording industry and jazz criticism are two means to document the history of jazz, how can a soundtrack be established for post-Armistice Istanbul? The melodic line connecting the various components of jazz culture was predicated on the ability of people to listen to jazz through live performance, a gramophone record, or the wireless radio. But the late-Ottoman/early Turkish Republican recording industry was interested in recording local musicians and musical styles rather than ragtime or early jazz performance.

First, if we start to understand the Mimaroglu narrative as hearsay, and if we start looking at the range of sources for the 1920s, a different sounded history for jazz emerges. A sounded history would entail complicating the grand Turkish nationalist narrative (in the historiography and in popular accounts), which usually depicts the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey as one from a multiethnic state and the religiously justified rule of an imperial, monarchic order to a nation-state structure in which the state prioritized ethnic homogenization, secularization, and Westernization. As this relates to early jazz, the cultural and social programs attached to post-1927 one-party rule swallowed up the dynamics of the 1920s. The first years of the republican period were punctuated by state-driven reforms, which reinscribed notions of time, ways of dress, and typographies. Recovering a sounded history for jazz can move us beyond tropes of the 1920s as a swan song for the Ottoman project or the beckoning toward something new. Although recent scholarship is providing a more robust picture of how individuals engaged with republican reforms and solidified a Turkish musical language, for the most part the republican years remain divorced from the post-Armistice years.¹³

Another factor in the silencing of early jazz sounds is the impact of the 1928 Language Reform, which inscribed a state of “historical amnesia.”¹⁴ To provide an anecdote, a conversation I had with a noted vinyl collector about the beginning of the city’s jazz era produced the response that jazz began in 1927–28. “Why?” I asked. “I don’t know, but I was never able to read Ottoman Turkish,” the collector responded. As our conversation continued the vinyl collector wondered about how a different story of early jazz might have been told had the collector been able to read earlier Ottoman sources. I would like to suggest a chronology that interweaves the post-Armistice period with the early years of the republic. An early jazz chronology would begin with a first period stretching from 1914 to 1932, when a law was passed effectively forbidding foreign musicians, dancers, and singers from obtaining contracts in the city’s performance venues.¹⁵ The *Chicago*

Defender reported in 1933 that Istanbul no longer offered contracts to musicians given the soon-to-be enforced restrictions.¹⁶ The chronology would then move to a second period lasting from 1932 until the 1950s, focusing more on how local musicians appropriated jazz, which Akyol's documentary addresses. By establishing a different chronology, we can better decenter a narrative of elite-driven reforms and consider how the emergence of jazz culture was part and parcel of the period of political transition.

Second, if we start to populate the city's early jazz history with musicians, with the people who came into the city—and particularly into the district of Beyoğlu—in the post-Armistice period, we can start to establish a sounded narrative. All in all, the 1920s jazz culture was the beneficiary of 19th-century economic, cultural, and social forces that caused a web of people to move in and out of the district, the opening and closing of small businesses, and the fluctuation of fashion trends and leisure habits. In the aftermath of World War I, US Navy sailors, foreign visitors, refugees, and relief workers arrived in Istanbul just as the syncopated rhythms of early jazz dance tunes emerged in the city. The US Navy fleet, which docked outside of Dolmabahçe Palace, had amateur musician-sailor jazz bands representing a particular destroyer, such as the USS *St. Louis*, as well as an all-destroyer jazz band. The jazz bands played at official social events and late-night bars, and some of the amateur musicians offered private lessons.¹⁷ Likewise, touring performers traveled from one city to another to obtain or fulfill contracts. The black American trombonist and composer Earl B. Granstaff captured a sense of this jazz scene when he remarked to a *New York Amsterdam News* correspondent in 1927 that “black musicians are occupying more and higher positions in Constantinople than in any other place.”¹⁸

Third, let us look at the kind of sounded information we have. If we look at the Ottoman Turkish press, we get a sense of how cultural critics reacted to jazz music and dances, but not of what or who they were listening to.¹⁹ By using the African American press and the publication of the US Navy sailors stationed in Istanbul, a more vibrant live jazz performance scene emerges. Against the discursive parameters of jazz culture's impact on daily life in the nascent republic set by the city's illustrated press, US or European reports flesh out the scene. An example of these reports is that of the impresario Frederick Thomas, who is referred to in Turkish memoirs without recounting details of his life. There is a marked distinction when reading about Thomas in the US press. A reporter for the *New York Times*, W. G. Tinckom-Fernandez, in his 1928 obituary on Thomas, heralded him as the “sultan of jazz.”²⁰ Among black American musicians living and working the performance circuit outside of the United States, Thomas was known for offering contracts to musicians to play at his Moscow club Aquarium and later at his Istanbul club Maxim. The *Chicago Defender* noted his movement from Moscow to Istanbul by publishing letters written by two black American performers living in Cairo.²¹ By drawing on US and European newspapers, accounts, and private archives of 1920s jazz musicians, and by coupling the names of jazz musicians that emerge from non-Turkish sources with early jazz records recorded in Berlin, Paris, and Barcelona studios, we can recreate a sound track.

Fourth, what does forging a different sound track of early jazz for 1920s Istanbul suggest about Istanbul as a transnational city? Here I profit from Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's suggestion that the “transnational can be conceived as a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is

still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center.” The transnational “designates spaces and practices acted upon by border-crossing agents, be they dominant or marginal.”²² Imagining the encounters of peoples and places from around the globe within such a localized part of the city assigns meaning to those people, those spaces, and to the district as a whole, not to mention the city’s non-Muslim minority populations. Such is the case for turn of the century black circuit performers who primarily established careers outside of the United States, such as two unknown black American musicians, George Duncan and Billy Brooks. Their story offers a contemporary eye on the transnational jazz scene of the eastern Mediterranean in which Beyoğlu plays a principle role.

By listening for jazz in post-Armistice Istanbul, we privilege the associative meanings of jazz sounds—political, imperial, national, urban, modern, and transnational—that might have overlapped with the sounds of rembetiko, classical Ottoman music, or tango. By so doing, a more nuanced and sounded narrative of the period emerges—one emphasizing that people were as conscious of sound in their lives as they were of what the world looked like. And, as jazz historian Scott DeVeaux reminds us, by decentering master narratives, we prevent the risk of crowding out other stories.²³

NOTES

¹Some of the interviewees in Batu Akyol, *Türkiye’de Caz* (Istanbul: Loyka Productions, 2013) include contemporary musicians, namely pianist Kerem Görsev and trumpeter İlhan Erşahin, as well as saxophonist Cüneyt Sermet, trumpeter Muvaffak “Maffy” Falay, and pianist İlham Gencer, to name a few.

²Maria Luisa Gambale, “Sounds of Istanbul: Trumpet on Istiklal,” accessed 8 October 2015, <https://soundcloud.com/maria-luisa-gambale/sounds-of-istanbul-trumpet-on>.

³Scott DeVeaux, “Struggling with Jazz,” *Current Musicology* 71–73 (2001–2): 361.

⁴İlhan K. Mimaroglu, *Caz Sanatı* (İstanbul: Yenilik Yayınevi, 1958), 38–40.

⁵Penny M. von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004) is a seminal text on this period.

⁶İlhan K. Mimaroglu, *Caz Sanatı* (İstanbul: Yenilik Yayınevi, 1958), 116.

⁷I discuss the “Mimaroglu Narrative” in my forthcoming book manuscript, *The Decadent Modern: Cocaine, Jazz, and the Charleston in 1920s Istanbul*.

⁸İlhan K. Mimaroglu, *Caz Sanatı* (İstanbul: Yenilik Yayınevi, 1958), 122.

⁹Hülya Tunçağ, one of the leading Turkish jazz promoters who has hosted numerous jazz radio programs, repeats the story in two popular arenas: “The Story of Jazz in Turkey,” *SkyLife*, July 2010, accessed 3 April 2013, <http://www.skylife.com/en/2010-08/the-story-of-jazz-in-turkey>; and Akyol, *Türkiye’de Caz*. It is unclear whether Hülya Tunçağ knew of the story’s origin. As an example, the story is repeated in Gökhan Akçura, “Türkiye’de Caz Öncesi Caz,” in *İvrir Zivir Tarihi II: Gramofon Çağı* (Istanbul: Om Yayınevi, 2002), 139–40; and Damla Erlevent, *Halide Edib Adıvar’ın Son Dönem Romanlarında İstanbul’da Gündelik Hayat ve Müzik* (master’s thesis, Bilkent Üniversitesi, İstanbul, 2005), 88–89. The latter reproduces and references the story from Akçura’s book, not Mimaroglu’s. In fact, *Caz Sanatı* is not cited.

¹⁰Mimaroglu, *Caz Sanatı*.

¹¹Vladimir Alexandrov, *The Black Russian* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2014). In my “‘Awakening a Horrible Monster’: Negotiating the Jazz Public in 1920s Istanbul,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 30 (2010), 574–82, I position Frederick Thomas as part of the city’s jazz ecology and as a known impresario amongst jazz musicians of the day.

¹²Judith R. Walkowitz, *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), 5.

¹³Here, I am referring to the rich contributions of Hale Yılmaz, *Becoming Turkish: Nationalist reforms and Cultural Negotiations in Early Republican Turkey, 1923–1945* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2013); and John Morgan O’Connell, *Alaturka: Style in Turkish Music (1923–1938)* (London: Ashgate, 2013).

¹⁴Numerous scholars have examined the historical amnesiac state. For a notable example, see Michael Meeker, *A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002).

¹⁵The Grand National Assembly passed the Law on Activities and Professions in Turkey Reserved for Turkish Citizens of 16 June 1932 (Law No. 2007).

¹⁶“Actors Abroad Find It Quite Tough to Get New Contracts,” *The Chicago Defender*, 3 June 1933, 5.

¹⁷“St. Louis,” *Far Seas*, no. 3, 4 December 1920, 4.

¹⁸J. A. Rogers, “The American Negro in Paris,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, 14 September 1927, 14.

¹⁹Mimaroğlu provides two names of jazz musicians who performed in the 1920s—jazz band leader Sam Wooding and Paris-based trumpeter Arthur Briggs. See Mimaroğlu, *Caz Sanati*, 127.

²⁰William George (W. G.) Tinckom-Fernandez, “Life is Less Hectic in Constantinople,” *New York Times*, 8 July 1928, 50.

²¹“Letter from Egypt: Two Americans Who Left Home in 1878 and Never Came Back,” *Chicago Defender*, 12 December 1922, 13.

²²Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shi, “Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally,” in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shi (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 5. The authors distinguish transnationalism from the more seamless and hegemonic process of globalization.

²³Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Literature of Jazz Issue*, *Black American Literature Forum* 25 (1991): 525.