

New Jazz Studies: Its Beginnings – and Its Endings?

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In these brief introductory words to a panel discussion about new jazz studies, I take the opportunity to introduce key points relating to its development and concepts. Giving this keynote to an audience mostly composed of jazz journalists, professionals, musicians, fans (and also a few jazz studies colleagues), I present in the first part information about its beginnings in the USA, early reception in Europe and the late take up in the German-speaking countries. Even at the risk of boring some participants with this information, the sheer existence of this panel at a Radio Jazz Research Conference illustrates the need for a knowledge exchange between journalism and academia that for a long time in the history of jazz had been turned upside down. Jazz collectors and fans had mostly learned about jazz through journalistic activity which also impacted the scholarship on jazz catching up much later. Simply because there is growing interest in the changes in jazz scholarship over the past thirty-five years, I end my last part with a reflection about the situatedness of new jazz studies and its aims in a rapidly changing world today with political developments that could herald the end of the new jazz studies project. Only by disseminating knowledge about its approaches and objectives, and by constantly nurturing them, can we prevent these ideas from falling victim to the spirit of these times.

The Beginnings of New Jazz Studies in the USA

The term “new jazz studies” may have appeared for the first time in a review by Mark Tucker in 1998 in which he discussed two books edited by Krin Gabbard that have often been described as starting new jazz studies: *Jazz among the Discourses* (Gabbard 1995a) and *Representing Jazz* (Gabbard 1995b). These books, a collection of papers from a jazz panel chaired by Gabbard at the 1990 Modern Languages Association conference, brought a “new edge to jazz studies” (Tucker 1998: 147), building on a body of poststructuralism, critical, feminist and queer theory, cultural studies and more new thought that had swept through the humanities since the 1980s. “New edge” meant a

profound questioning of the jazz canon and of jazz historiography, following up on Scott DeVeaux's (1991) article about the construction of jazz historiography that Sherrie Tucker has called "one of the most influential articles in academic jazz studies" (Tucker 2012: 264). The scholars assembled in these two books deemed 'old' jazz studies inadequate for this endeavour with their histories of 'great dead men' – "a handful of master improvisers and genius composers" (Gabbard 1995c: 1) and their 'great artworks', imitating the historiography of Western classical music history. As Gabbard writes in the preface to *Representing Jazz*, new jazz studies see "value in writing this other history of jazz" (ibid.: 2–3) concentrating on jazz myth and jazz culture, the work of "authors, filmmakers, dancers, painters, photographers and the rest" (ibid.: 2) instead of jazz per se (cf. ibid.). 'New' meant here a "feisty revisionism" (Tucker 1998: 132) including furthermore the opening of the concept 'jazz', and the reasoning of the hows and whys of jazz studies as they offered a critique of its goals and methods like, for example, of jazz analysis in Robert Walser's (1995) article.

In 2004, 'new jazz studies' was officially coined as a term and brought to life in the articles included in the book *Uptown Conversations: The New Jazz Studies*, edited by Robert O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffith (2004). O'Meally had founded the Jazz Study Group at Columbia University in 1995 out of which he had started the Center for Jazz Studies, an important breeding ground of new jazz studies which he led for a total of sixteen years.¹ What is fascinating about *Uptown Conversations* is its spirit of inter- and transdisciplinarity: musicologists, anthropologists, literary scholars (the editors, for example, are all literary professors), historians, and more are having a conversation about different aspects of jazz with composers, instrumentalists, painters etc., echoing the Center's mission statement which claims to have "transformed debates in and out of the academy, the nightclub, the concert hall, and the recording studio about the music, the musicians, and the larger cultural context in which they sounded out their ideas, passions, and aspirations" (Center for Jazz Studies n.d.).

¹ O'Meally served as director from 1999-2007 and again 2014-2022. The Center's other directors were George Lewis (2007-2011), John Szwed (2011-2014) and Kevin Fellez (2022-2025), the recent director is Tom Wetmore (cf. Center for Jazz Studies n.d.).

The Beginnings of the Reception of New Jazz Studies in Europe

It took several years for European scholars to embrace new jazz studies. Martin Pfeleiderer (2019) claims that their reception has started in the work of British scholar Tony Whyton in the 2000s, but I would add the names of a few other UK-based scholars like Nicholas Gebhardt, George McKay, Catherine Tackley (née Parsonage), or Tim Wall. Whyton, together with Walter van de Leur, who formed a team of researchers from UK, Denmark, Norway, Austria, and the Netherlands for the HERA founded research project “Rhythm Changes: Jazz Cultures and European Identities” (2010-2013), bringing in European early career researchers like Christa Bruckner-Haring or Loes Rusch, for instance.

New to this European reception of new jazz studies was a turn away from the US exceptionalist narrative of jazz as ‘America’s classical music’ towards a transnational European perspective of “jazz as an exchange of ideas and inspirations” (Rhythm Changes n.d.). In the outstanding article “Europe and the New Jazz Studies” in the book *Eurojazzland* (Cerchiari/Cugny/Kerschbaumer 2012), Whyton postulates:

“As a research area still in its infancy, European New Jazz Studies offers the potential for groundbreaking insights into cultural aspects of jazz past and present, examining topics from cultural identity to mediation, from migration to cultural exchange. Within this context, a New European Jazz Studies should engage with national, transnational, and transcontinental exchange as a critical discourse, resisting essentialist ideologies and examining the way in which jazz cultures obtain their meaning in the function that the music has for its musicians, audiences, and industry“ (Whyton 2012: 378).

One year later Nicholas Gebhardt takes the same line of argument in his article “When Jazz was Foreign” in *Jazzforschung / Jazz Research* vol. 44. He claims that scholars need to be “rethinking jazz historiography from within a transnational or global perspective“ (Gebhardt 2013: 185) and puts the myth of jazz being born in New Orleans into perspective:

“Once we locate the origins of jazz within the particular historical conjuncture of proto-industrial plantation societies, the transatlantic trade in people and goods, the spread of Enlightenment ideas of autonomy and democracy, the rise of revolutionary movements throughout the Americas, the consolidation of mercantile capitalism, and the shifting centres of hemispheric power from

European to New World societies and cultures, a different kind of narrative comes into view“ (ibid.: 194f.).²

Perhaps intended, yet in its dimension unforeseeably positive outcome from the Rhythm Changes project, was the eponymous series of international conferences that started 2011 in Amsterdam, since then being held in Salford, Birmingham and Graz. Its tenth edition will take place in April 2027 in Birmingham.³ Rhythm Changes conferences are perhaps the largest and most cheerful gatherings of new jazz studies scholars, musicians, journalists, and other professions as well as fans from everywhere where new jazz studies have thrived in the last thirty years. The emphasis on Europe is still noticeable, but scholars from Australia, North (and sometimes South) America, Africa, and gradually increasing from Asia are taking part in this transdisciplinary format of discussing matters of jazz, its culture, audiences, media, economy, ecology and more. From this community, some of the most interesting books on jazz have been published, among them, for example, the *Routledge Companion to Jazz Studies*, edited by, Gebhardt, Nichole Rustin-Paschal and Whyton (2019).

The Beginnings of a Late Reception of New Jazz Studies in German-speaking Countries

Even though Graz has been part of this scene from the beginning of the Rhythm Changes project, it is remarkable that we do not see many German-speaking scholars in the Rhythm Changes community; in the 44 chapters of the *Routledge Companion to Jazz Studies*, for example, there is but one author (Wolfram Knauer). Pfeleiderer (2019: 294) attests German-language jazz scholarship in its historical centres in Graz and Gießen a certain hesitancy (‘Zögerlichkeit’) in embracing new jazz studies. He explains the delayed reception on the one hand with the focus that Graz had laid on transcription-based analysis since the late 1960s – a very ‘old’ jazz studies approach. In Gießen, as I also

² Such „a different kind of narrative“ has been written, for example, by Catherine Tackley (2014) for Black British jazz.

³ An overview of all conferences incl. posters, calls for papers, and more information can be found on the website of the Institute for Jazz and Popular Music Research Graz, cf. <https://jazzpopforschung.kug.ac.at/en/events/events-by-the-institute-for-jazz-research/conferences/rhythm-changes-conferences>, and, of course, on the Rhythm Changes website <https://rhythmchanges.net>.

discuss in my analysis of historical curricula in Graz and Gießen (Doehring 2019), Ekkehard Jost did not take notice of new jazz studies either. As Pfeleiderer explains, Jost had opened his research on jazz from within musicology towards a sociohistorical and cultural perspective, for example in his manifesto-like introduction to the 1982 (!) *Sozialgeschichte des Jazz in den USA* (Social History of Jazz in the USA). Unfortunately, this book has never been translated into English, so that many international scholars overlooked his approach of a social history based on Marx, Althusser and the sociology of the arts (Max Weber, Arnold Hauser). Pfeleiderer (2019: 297; transl. AD) comments impassively, for Jost “there was no reason [...] to welcome new jazz studies as the entirely new direction in jazz research that [...] it saw itself in the United States.”

It was only after the older generation of scholars had stepped down that younger scholars were able to bring their issues to the table: the Jazzinstitut Darmstadt, an archive founded in 1991 without any higher educational duties, had opened its doors a bit earlier to new jazz studies in the 2010s, with Knauer as its director of many years’ standing with an interest in the proceedings at Columbia. It was here where a group of younger scholars (among them, for example, Mario Dunkel, Martin Niederauer, Michael Kahr and me) founded a German-language working group called Neue Jazzforschung (new jazz research) in 2015.⁴ Since then, new jazz studies have gradually gained acceptance also in German-speaking academia.

Current Key Subjects

For the following discussion, I would like to add some aspects that Jost has overlooked in his accounts of new jazz studies, but which I deem very important and which, since my move to Graz ten years ago, we have identified as key subjects of our work: (1) new jazz studies’ emphasis on gender; (2) its aspiration to overcome rigid genre borders of jazz; (3) its integration of media perspectives; (4) the introduction of a global or ‘diasporic’ jazz perspective.

⁴ I remember that one suggestion was to name it Kritische Jazzforschung (critical jazz research), as several participants identified as critical theorists. However, they were outvoted.

1) It is through new jazz studies' opening towards the humanities and social sciences that the category of gender has finally arrived in the study of jazz, more than forty years after first heroic, yet isolated, writings on this topic such as, for example, Valerie Wilmer's (1977), Sally Placksin's (1982), or Hazel Carby's (1986). In 2008 we find the first English new jazz studies anthology *Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Rustin/Tucker 2008). In 2016 the German counterpart (Knauer 2016) follows with half of the seventeen articles coming from musicians and scholars from the German-speaking area. One could say that, with a certain delay, we are progressing. But it would be way too early for mutual back-patting, as the recent book *Women and Jazz. European Perspectives from Researchers and Artists*, edited by my colleagues from Graz Christa Bruckner-Haring and José Dias (2026) shows: in it, female researchers, musicians, journalists and organisers give account of the way women experience the grossly distorted gender imbalance of the jazz world and fight against its everyday sexism. There is still much work to do. However, small things have started to change: for example, it would be unimaginable to attend a new jazz studies conference today where gender does not feature in many of the presentations or has had an impact on how we organize these gatherings.

2) With new jazz studies, our conception of jazz as a genre has evolved. Especially German jazz aficionados and aficionadas might remember Jost's strongly biased critique of fusion jazz that he kept even in his new edition (2003) of the *Sozialgeschichte*. This criticism, appearing to be based on musical grounds, has lost much of its power today because what we understand as jazz, rather than being 'in' the music, is in fact a matter of a discourse, as Krin Gabbard (2002) has declared (and as is obvious in Jost's case: his free jazz aesthetics, not 'the' music as such, clouded his judgement). Moreover, jazz is also a matter of culture, of economic, Race⁵, educational, age, or gender relations and more. The once firm boundaries towards popular or classical music have become especially permeable today, as I discuss in two articles recently in press (Doehring 2026a, 2026b). It is especially this new understanding of jazz being a music of fusions and of hazy mid-fields between genres that advances the new study of jazz *and* popular

⁵ Race is a social and political, not a biological category. The capitalisation in my text illustrates this understanding.

music: “When we expand our subjects, we change our disciplinary modes – and in this way, we can help to ensure that our work produces relevant research for our times“ (Doehring 2026b: 220). In Graz, these developments have led us to rebuild the musicology program with an emphasis on jazz and popular music and to rename the Institute in 2024 to the Institute for Jazz *and Popular Music* Research.

3) Thinking of the research that, for example, Bernd Hoffmann (2023, 2024) has been doing for many years, it would be wrong to state that jazz scholars had had no interest in media before new jazz studies arrived. But with new jazz studies, especially through its pointed criticism of jazz movies (Gabbard 1995b, McGee 2009) and the jazz press (Gennari 2006, Brennan 2017), we can understand more clearly today how media have impacted the way we conceptualize jazz, as recent research shows: Think of, for example, Tim Wall’s (2027) research on the BBC radio in his forthcoming book and presented at this conference; or of Nic Pillai’s (2016, 2019) work on jazz on British TV; or, turning to the work of early stage researchers, the yet-unpublished dissertation from Sarah Mengede at Newcastle University (2026) about gender relations in rock and jazz journalism; or Benjamin Burkhart’s (2025) *Platform Jazz*, his habilitation thesis at Graz, which shows how especially digital platforms support the perpetuation of conservative swing aesthetics and gender stereotypes for young female musicians. Media both enable and limit our understanding of jazz, and it is important that journalists, as many of you in the audience are, get to know about this aspect of new jazz studies.

4) Finally, new jazz studies have gradually opened the research on jazz towards a more global perspective on jazz, turning away from the US-centric, at times heavily nationalistic and “conservative” (Havas/Johnson/Horn 2025b: xxii) historiography of US jazz styles. Jazz was instead increasingly seen as “a transgressor of the idea of the nation, as an agent of globalization“ (Atkins 2003b: xiii) as E. Taylor Atkins (2003a) important anthology *Jazz Planet* illustrates. While there have been early attempts at assessing European jazz (for example, Jost’s (1987) deeply informed *Europas Jazz 1960-1980* (Europe’s jazz), once again not translated, Ádám Havas has criticised in his excellent book *The Genesis and Structure of the Hungarian Jazz Diaspora* (2022) that ‘Europe’ often

meant ‘Western Europe’, neglecting South and East Europe. The most comprehensive work in this regard will be the five-volume *Oxford History of Jazz in Europe*, edited by Walter van de Leur. In the recent *Routledge Companion to Diasporic Jazz Studies* (Havas/Johnson/Horn 2025a), as presented by Havas at this conference, the scope is further widened to include regions like the Global South and the Global East. Among its 55 authors, only 11% are from the US. Compared to the 40% of American authors of *The Routledge Companion to Jazz Studies* (Gebhardt/Rustin-Paschal/Whyton 2019), this is a clear sign of change of who is contributing to this programmatic “intervention against homogenizing, essentialist and geoculturally biased narratives” (Havas/Johnson/Horn 2025b: xxiii).⁶ Jazz appears here as the outcome of multi-ethnic interactions on a local and global scale, bringing in more voices and sounds from equals from all over the world.

The Endings of New Jazz Studies?

I have shown how, beginning in the 1990s, new jazz studies have entered United States’ academia and have been slowly adopted via the Anglophone European world in the new millennium. Today, more than thirty years after Gabbard’s twin publications, we might say that new jazz studies have arrived in many – definitely not all (cf. the anecdotes in Doehring 2026b) – jazz programs at universities. Can we infer from this observation that new jazz studies are done with their commitment to present a different, new perspective on jazz? Have new jazz studies, then, come to an end?

At least the *Routledge Companion to Jazz Studies* (Gebhardt/Rustin-Paschal/Whyton 2019) seems to suggest so by dropping the word ‘new’ from its title. Of course, after four decades nothing should be called ‘new’ without pausing for a reflection what we actually mean when we call something new. I argue that newness should not be understood in the sense of, for example, Niklas Luhmann who conceived newness as the irritation of a system that can lead to its selection by and then its integration into the system, thereby perhaps slightly restructuring the system in its course but essentially keeping everything in ‘perfect’ order. Instead, newness in a new jazz studies sense asks us to question

⁶ Alas, what did not change is the still unsatisfying gender ratio among its authors: In both *Companions* (Gebhardt/Rustin-Paschal/Whyton 2019; Havas/Johnson/Horn 2025), only 16% of the authors have been read by me as non-male; cf. the criticism mentioned above in Bruckner-Haring/Dias 2026.

essentialising concepts⁷ (such as Luhmann's), to understand newness as situated in relation to its surrounding actors and to ask in a critical perspective for whom newness affords which connotations and why.

On the one hand, Alan Stanbridge, for example, has criticised the use of 'new' for jazz studies because to him it implies first a radical break instead of emphasizing the continuity of much work in this field, and second, because "that which is held to be 'new' becomes old rather quickly" (Stanbridge 2023: 14). On the other hand, the editors of the *Companion to Diasporic Jazz Studies*, for instance, see the benefit of the term new jazz studies in marking a now-established field of inquiry beyond the US-centric historiography. Both views are valid, so the postulate of newness can neither be simply assumed nor dismissed. What is needed is a profound discussion and analysis on a case-by-case basis of the aims of such a postulate as well as its shortcomings. In any case, it can be said that many of new jazz studies's claims – such as the criticism of gendered and racialised formations of discrimination, for example – have not yet been fully realized, they remain a 'new' task for the study of jazz.

This is especially true in a rapidly changing world where political parties from the extreme right attack cultural actors, subsidies and university programs along the lines of gender, race, or critical theory. I am not only arguing from a position in Graz where the state of Styria has been governed since 2024 by a governor from the far-right FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreich, freedom party of Austria) but I do see similar constellations elsewhere. In 2024, for example, the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia lost the option of an "undergraduate jazz studies special concentration" (Center for Jazz Studies n.d.); jazz studies, once "an integral part of Columbia's renowned Core Curriculum" (ibid.), are now only part of the minor (!) in music as a 15-credit point "pathway". This means that jazz has sunken down to mere 8% of a BA program in music at one of the once-leading jazz universities worldwide – which since the start of the Trump presidency in 2025 is unable to publish most of its new jazz studies-related research on its website or cannot even apply for research funding (Yourish et al. 2025). If new jazz studies, as the Center still claims on its website, "present more than a new animating paradigm for scholarly inquiry" by providing students with "models for dialoguing across difference" (ibid.), it is

⁷ Think, for example, of the BAM (Black American Music) movement led by Nicholas Payton.

high time to take action, to disseminate new jazz studies further and stand up for their goals.

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