The Reception and Development of Jazz in the Netherlands (1945–1970s)

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In the decades after the Second World War, the Netherlands underwent significant economical, political and cultural changes, which invited the Dutch to rethink their national identity. Jazz, which triggered cultural debates since it first arrived in Europe, provides an ideal lens to look at these changes. This essay seeks to position jazz in the ever-changing cultural and social landscapes of the Netherlands in the postwar years, beginning with the liberation in May 1945 and ending in the 1970s.

As Mehring (2015) argues in Soundtrack van de bevrijding ("The soundtrack of the liberation") it is hard to know the actual music performed during the euphoria that came with the end of the German occupation in the Netherlands. Film footage shot during those days is silent. Documentary makers have typically added the music that was both antithetical to the Nazi-regime and that symbolized the youth culture of the Allied forces: American big band swing. In the months after the liberation, some 300 songs were written by Dutch songwriters to commemorate the end of the war. These were published as sheet music but few of them were recorded at the time. Mehring distinguishes different categories: marches, patriotic hymns, romantic love songs, boogie-woogie and swing, and foxtrots, which was “one of the most popular genres among the liberation songs.” Technically, the foxtrot is not so much a genre as a dance, typically danced to big band music. In the 1930s and 1940s, many quite divergent works were identified as “foxtrots” on their record labels—a marketing ploy rather than a genre classification. Dancing had been instrumental to the success of swing music in the 1930s and early-1940s, and it continued to be the main attraction after the Second World War.

1 This essay draws on papers delivered in Nijmegen (The Politics and Culture of Liberation Conference, Department of English and American Studies, Radboud University, June 8, 2013), Paris (Colloque International: Les Circulations Globales du Jazz, Musée du Quai Branly, June 27, 2013) and Darmstadt (Darmstädter Jazz Forum/Tagung des Instituts für Jazzforschung Graz, Sept. 28, 2013).

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Swing music warrants a somewhat technical digression. Characteristic of swing music was the ongoing pulse in the rhythm section, which played a steady, yet light, four-to-the-bar beat, with an uneven rhythmical subdivision, often expressed by the drummer on his cymbal: *ching chick-a ching chick-a*. That subdivision—called swing eighths or uneven eighths—is to be found in the melodies and accompanying lines in the music, together with so-called syncopations, or shifting accents. Swing is an interpretative practice, and its subtleties are hard to notate. Creating swing is a procedure that can be, and has been, applied to all kinds of music. Published sheet music does not capture that interpretative practice well, and publishers typically do not bother to notate swing because the performers knew how to interpret the written rhythms in swing style. A case in point is the published sheet music of Glenn Miller’s *In the Mood*, the archetypical soundtrack to World War II documentaries. From the original published music one cannot know that this is to be played with a swing interpretation, apart from the somewhat vague indication “medium bounce tempo.” Another iconic song from that period, *Lili Marlene*, was sung by Marlene Dietrich with a laid-back swing feel over a lightly strumming guitar, but the notation (with dotted eighth-sixteenth figures) suggests a much squarer rhythm. Similarly, the published liberation sheet music from the Netherlands gives many important historic perspectives on repertoire, lyrics, and iconography (covers), but leaves much unanswered as to the actual interpretation(s) of the material at the time. Accomplished performers could easily turn any piece into a swinging, danceable rendition.

One of the most intriguing and informative documents in Mehring’s book is the repertoire list of amateur pianist Jan Hendriks, who played for the Allies with a professional band consisting of Amsterdammers “who followed the troops.” The typed list, titled “Foxtrots,” and marked 1944 in pen, shows that Dutch musicians had knowledge of relatively recent swing numbers such as *Take the “A” Train*, recorded in February 1941 by Ellington and his Orchestra, and *As Time Goes By*, written in 1931 but popularized through the movie *Casablanca*, which premiered November 1942 in the United States. Also on the repertoire were rhythm and blues numbers such Louis Jordan’s *Is You Is, or Is You Ain’t My Baby*, which peaked on the U.S. charts in the summer of 1944. The inclusion of “Hé Baberebob” (in all likelihood Lionel Hampton’s jump blues hit *Hey Ba-ba-re-bop*, recorded and popularized after March 1945) suggests a slightly later date for this list. But even if played sometime in mid-1945, much of this repertoire was quite up to date, given the difficulty to obtain records. It shows that jazz as a sonic culture traveled fast. Musicians in the Netherlands may have had no access to the actual recording or the sheet music of Hampton’s *Hey Ba-ba-re-bop*, but they picked up tunes from the airwaves: the BBC was a major source, as was the American Forces Network (AFN) (Kleinhout 2007: 60, 65).