

The Jazz Debate in the GDR (1955)

Abstract

This protocol of a discussion between Reginald Rudorf and officials of the Ministry of Culture and the Association of German Composers of the GDR [*Verband deutscher Komponisten* or VdK] on April 1955 was probably written by the Department Head of the Chief Music Department in the Ministry of Culture, Uszokoreit (uk). In this debate, Rudorf tries to convince the officials of the importance of “real” jazz for the new German dance music and of the anti-Fascist stance of jazz fans. The occasion was a draft that Rudorf had sent to the Ministry of Culture, evidently to secure the spread of jazz and the recognition of jazz clubs in the GDR and to justify contacts with West German jazz fans.

Source

Jazz debate

about the draft from colleague Rudorf to the Ministry of Culture on April 7, 1955, in Berlin

Beginning: 11 o'clock

Present: the colleagues

Prof. Knepler

Siegmund-Schultze

Dr. Rebling

Prof. Notowicz

Spies

Schwaen

Forest

Masanetz

for part of the time:

Möller

Müller

Rudorf

Ulbrich, Defa

Bartsch, Defa

Lukacz

Berenbrock

Bormann

Folkmann, Ministry of Culture

Fischer,

Hartfeldt, DSV

Sasse, VdK Halle
Dr. Glücksmann, AWA
Morche,
Seeger, Neues Deutschland
Lahl, CC of the SED
Watzinger,
Uszkoreit

Prof. Knepler, the first to speak, considers the theses of colleague Rudorf to be false, and what is more, dangerous. The distinction between real and commercial jazz is arbitrary. There is no jazz that can have a progressive impact on our dance music. Of course, a Negro folk music does exist. But that is not a primary concern for us, but rather for the American people. It is surely a task to cultivate Negro music, just as one should cultivate English, French, and Indian folk music, but with us our German folk music is front and center.

Colleague Forst agrees with colleague Prof. Knepler. He is of the opinion that people in Germany should dance not to Russian or Negro music, but to German dance music. It must be identified and developed. Resorting to foreign folklore cannot be a way out. As for the proposals by colleague Rudorf to set up Hot- or Boogie-woogie clubs: in Germany we have no clubs for Russian dances, English dances. But we have a Central House for Popular Art [*Zentralhaus für Volkskunst*]. There one could certainly also organize evenings with foreign folk dances and songs, among them of course the folk art of the Negroes.

The thesis that the followers of real jazz were often anti-Fascists is false. They were mostly followers of cosmopolitan dance music.

Colleague Rudorf clarifies that he did not say that jazz offers the solution to our current dance music issue. What he seeks is

- 1.) a study of what jazz actually is
- 2.) the meaning of jazz for our dance music

He further maintains that during the Nazi period members of the hot clubs transcended racial hatred. Leading jazz fans wound up in concentration camps. The anti-Fascism of jazz fans is still present today. For example, the hot club Düsseldorf has taken a stance against the remilitarization of the Paris Treaties.

He describes it as an arbitrary act to recognize the rural folk music of the Negroes, while the so-called City blues[!], the music of the urban Negro proletariat, receives no recognition. He points out that the biggest jazz festival in New Orleans was on May 1, the day of struggle for workers. The City blues are the continuation of rural folklore. Coll. Müller: The City blues arose and were sung in bordellos and gangster circles.

Coll. Rudorf asserts once more that in his view the elements of jazz are indispensable to the development of a new German dance music.

The entire folk music of the Negroes was strongly influenced by Europe and especially by Germany (*Ländler*, chorales etc.).

Coll. Uszkoreit[!] notes that this discussion does not accord with the intentions of our state with respect to cultural policy. It is a discussion that has been forced upon us. The series on jazz broadcast by the SRK had a very unpleasant effect on him. For example, it is very difficult to persuade our democratic radio to

have shows with contemporary music. But no fewer than 12 broadcasts are available for jazz. The attractiveness of jazz for young people is not to be equated with quality (reference to comics). He points to the magazine *Podium* and to a statement by a Czech citizen: "Jazz is at least the musical Esperanto that unites us all." Internationalism! With us it is not musical Esperanto that are front and center, but the situation in West Germany, for example. Would it not be nicer and better if our young people drew their courage and joy in life from our folk dances?

Coll. Rudorf makes the following proposals:

- 1.) to occasionally broadcast radio shows that feature the folk music of the American Negro.
- 2.) to issue 1 or 2 series of records, possibly only with the rural folk music of the Negroes.

Prof. Notowicz responds to the assertion by coll. Rudorf that jazz is the only folk music created by the proletariat. We have very characteristic creations of the proletariat in all countries; points especially to the Soviet Union. There, jazz is of no importance.

Colleague Prof. Notowicz expresses the opinion of the colleagues when he maintains,

- 1.) that one important problem must be the creation of a German dance music.
- 2.) The clarification of the question of what is real jazz and what is commercialized dance music should be brought about in the form of an expert discussion in the Commission on Folk Music and Musicology. Colleague Rudorf declares his willingness to compile a tape of good examples.

Since the audio equipment was not functioning, one had to dispense with listening to the examples of real jazz that colleague Rudorf brought along.

End of the discussion: 14.00 Hours

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Source: SAPMO, DY 24, A392; reprinted in Uta G. Poiger, "Amerikanischer Jazz und (ost)deutsche Respektabilität," in A. Lüdtko and P. Becher, eds., *Akten, Eingaben, Schaufenster*. Berlin, 1997, pp. 134–36.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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