

VOLUME !

Volume !

La revue des musiques populaires

9 : 1 | 2012

Contre-cultures n°1

Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire : Jazz, Rock, Funk and the Creation of Fusion*

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/volume/3129>

DOI: 10.4000/volume.3129

ISSN: 1950-568X

Publisher

Association Mélanie Seteun

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 September 2012

Number of pages: 186-188

ISBN: 978-2-913169-32-6

ISSN: 1634-5495

Electronic reference

Peter Mills, "Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire : Jazz, Rock, Funk and the Creation of Fusion*", *Volume !* [Online], 9 : 1 | 2012, Online since 15 October 2012, connection on 24 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/3129> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/volume.3129>

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evenhanded approach to shed new light on DSOTM as a cultural phenomenon.

Even with its occasional moments of uncritical adulation, this is a thought-provoking collection of essays that provides a welcome example of interdisciplinary conversation on popular music.

It will certainly encourage readers, regardless of their opinion of the album, to think in new ways about *The Dark Side of the Moon* and to give it yet another listen.

Patrick BURKE

Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire : Jazz, Rock, Funk and the Creation of Fusion*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

Is there a musical field as maligned, scorned or critically underwritten as jazz-rock or "fusion"? I don't say "genre" because as Kevin Fellezs frequently observes in this eye-opening volume most of the music that falls into these categories does so by deliberately, perhaps even defiantly, avoiding the generic form. Indeed he sees the featured musicians of this study as being amongst those who struck a blow against the generic by refusing to allow their music to settle into a genre, even when discussing fusion itself – in fact especially then, as he talks about the "not-quite-genre" of fusion. He takes this unwillingness to coalesce into a single recognisable musical vocabulary as a sign of rude creative health and in the book overall makes a sound case for doing so.

The book falls into two distinct parts; the first three chapters explore the roots of the cultural practice which came to be called "fusion" or "jazz-rock". Clearly the former term is more fluid in its sensibilities and meanings, able to accommodate many musical tributaries in a shared flow – so we hear of country bands mixing with r'n'b, and how pop and soul came together to

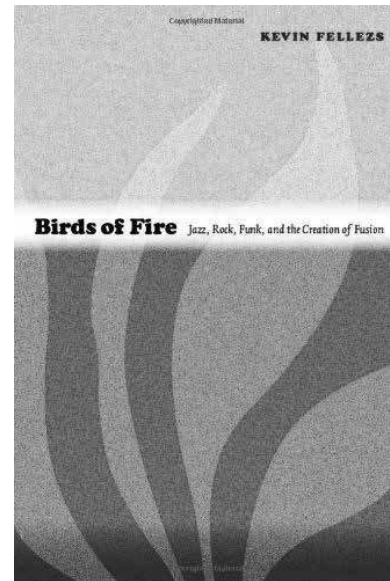
make the fat rich sounds of bands like Blood Sweat and Tears, how Stan Getz matched Joao Gilberto's Bossa Nova rhythms to his own lean jazz stylings and so on. Thus the book's frame of reference is wider than one might expect from the basic premise.

This especially informs latter sections which encompasses four "case studies" of acts whose arc of creativity harmonises with both the musical field of "fusion" as widely understood but also demonstrate an unwillingness to be categorised at all. They are Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock, John McLaughlin – so far so Mahavishnu – but then a curveball, in the shape of a chapter on Joni Mitchell's late 1970s work. These names crop up throughout the book too, as do a host of others from a crowd of apparently distinct genres.

The very nature of genre is something which exercises Fellezs, and he spends the first chapter considering where our assumptions about what sounds belong where, and to whom. This is done initially by reiterating the received wisdoms of cultural studies surrounding genre, and it does this well, but the real action starts when

he applies these ideas to the realities he has discerned in the work of Hancock and unexpected presences like Gary Burton and Asleep At The Wheel. The picture is built further via an impeccable cultural-musical history of how jazz, blues, soul and funk and rock both did and did not “fuse” in order to create the multiple musical hybrids that he is pursuing. Such a wide range challenges our notion of the idea of “fusion” as a term we can use to identify a limited musical field and this trip, which also draws in Brazilian and Puerto Rican musics, is a bracing one. He also charts the awkwardness at the heart of fusion’s creativity by examining what he calls “fusion’s discontents” and how struggles between these pioneers and the keepers of “real jazz” were frequently creatively, and sometimes personally, at odds over musical style, performance issues and matters as basic as the volume at which the music was designed to be played and heard.

This issue of loudness and structure may seem esoteric but come to life in his case study of Tony Williams’ Lifetime, whose 1969 debut album *Emergency!* I can recall seeing nestling in the record collections of friends’ older brothers and second hand racks in the mid-1970s, when I first began taking notice of such things. Williams, a drummer with years of impeccable jazz credentials on his CV, was given much grief from the jazz community for his stated love of The Beatles, Cream and Jimi Hendrix and brought some of those dynamics to his playing and the band’s sound. This made Lifetime popular with rock fans but less so with the jazz community and the story is an intriguing and under-explored one in its specifics but serves Fellezs’ central thesis well.



The case study of John McLaughlin – a prodigiously talented play-anything session guitar-for-hire on the UK music scene in the 1960s – further illustrates the spurious nature of the notion of genre. With the fiery zeal of the recent convert, McLaughlin’s complete immersion into the spiritual consequences of approaching music in this way led to some landmark recordings with the Mahavishnu Orchestra. Yet ironically the story of that band, related well here, is not at all unlike that of “conventional” rock bands from the Beatles to Spinal Tap; they fell apart very quickly amidst ego-driven grievances. Most remarkable however was the great commercial success they had in the brief time they were recording, wholly unforeseeable for such apparently uncommercial and even unmarketable music.

I sense that Fellezs' central interest is the work of Herbie Hancock and it does indeed provide an ideal subject, beginning in the mid-1960s, drawing in his jazz-funk period of the 1970s, notably 1973's *Headhunters*, and the issue of the uncredited Pygmy music Hancock "borrowed" for that album and then the wider issue of Hancock's musical profligacy and variety, culminating in his massive and still-startling sounding electro pop hits of the 1980s such as "Rockit". Fellezs has not interviewed Hancock but makes very good use of archival materials to build up a conversational as well as a musical picture of what Hancock's ideas and intentions were.

Perhaps the least expected presence here is that of Joni Mitchell – she is rarely thought of as a fusion artist but after reading Fellezs you'll wonder why. Focussing on three albums *Hejira*, *Mingus* and *Don Juan's Reckless daughter* it is interesting to see how the recordings were sniffed at by both the rock press, who wished she would go back to the confessional singer-songwriter mode she became famous for, and the jazz community which asked what this white Canadian folkie thought she was doing messing round with jazz musicians to make rock records. This, perhaps more clearly than any other example he chooses, illustrates Fellezs's theory of fusion being a trouble-making field akin to the

"broken middle", where creativity happens in the spaces between genre.

Hovering over much of this volume, but never really examined straight on, is of course Miles Davis. A one-man genre unto himself, his work both defines and transcends the notion of jazz-rock or fusion or the idea of genre in itself. Davis's work and career has been well documented many times so one can understand why he is something of a ghost at the banquet here – involved in almost every story that is told but never the main focus.

The closing section draws together examples of fusion in the present day (including Hancock's recordings of Mitchell tunes, neatly linking two of his subjects) and what the term might mean in the digital age. One might wish for more on the current state of play having read a few paragraphs on the topic, but this is a rich read already. The tone is scholarly, certainly, but also welcomes in the non-expert. Like all the best writing about music, Fellezs book makes you want to seek out the recordings he writes about. I went out and bought the Mahavishnu Orchestra's *Birds of Fire* after encountering those of Fellezs. If you don't know the music he writes about yet, you'll want to soon. Recommended.

Peter MILLS
