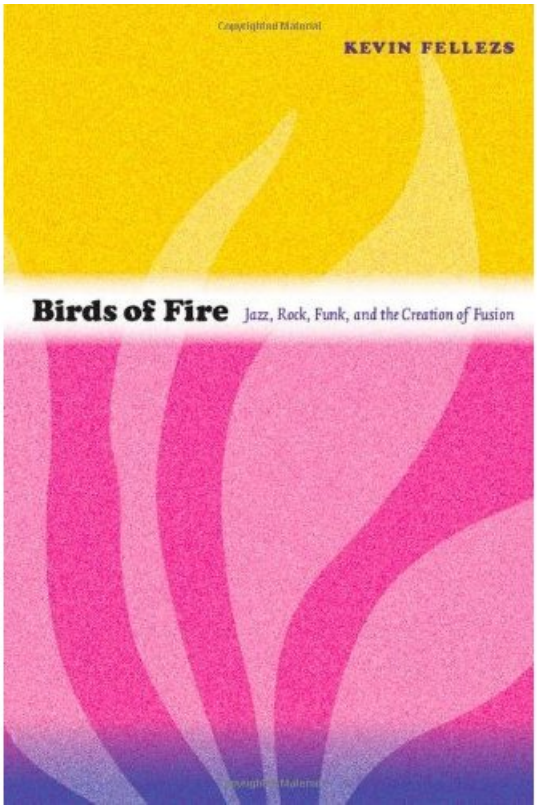
# Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion

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Although it bears the subtitle “Jazz, Rock, Funk and the Creation of Fusion,” Kevin Fellezs’s *Birds of Fire* is not a comprehensive exploration of this quirky pseudo-genre’s origins. Instead, the book uses critical theory—in particular, the pioneering work of George Lipsitz and Isobel Armstrong—to frame fusion music as a chaotic “broken middle” (Fellezs attributes the term to Armstrong, although British philosopher Gillian Rose seems to have coined it) between musical genres that presented musicians, record labels and audiences with a new set of musical complexities to navigate.

Fellezs’s first book, *Birds of Fire* demonstrates his agile mind and thoughtful approach to critical studies in music, sure to be followed by many more throughout his career. The book includes three introductory framing chapters, plus profiles of fusion artists Tony Williams, John McLaughlin, Joni Mitchell and Herbie Hancock. But Fellezs insists that the book is not an attempt to shoehorn those artists into the mainstream jazz discourse, calling instead for readers to consider their music as an act of cultural transformation: “turning the text upside down,” as Stuart Hall notes in the book’s introductory quote.

Although Fellezs is effective in articulating this central assertion, it is not one that requires a book-length forum to argue convincingly. More importantly, Fellezs positions fusion as a rejection of jazz, arguing that the two genres are incompatible. But in doing so, he fails to show that those same processes of inter-generic mixture and subversive music-making have characterized jazz throughout its history. Because of this, the fusion process is much more jazz-like than Fellezs suggests—a fact that many musicians, fans and critics have recognized throughout its existence. Unfortunately, Fellezs has missed an excellent opportunity to explore the sounds, processes and implications of fusion music, and is led along the way to make some strange conclusions about its vitality and influence on contemporary music, especially jazz. The writing is also heavily laden with unnecessary jargon—another missed opportunity, as the book’s perspective would likely strike fusion’s many enthusiastic fans as intuitive and fascinating if the language were more accessible.

One reason for Fellezs’s myopic perspective on fusion’s impact is likely the limited and uncreative methodological approach employed in his research. Fellezs states that his research materials largely consisted of jazz-oriented periodicals from the 1970s, rock magazines, newspapers, reviews, liner notes, advertisements, and similar materials. Fellezs describes these as “the archival documents of conventional music history research,” but fails to

articulate why these conventional methods are appropriate for research about music that is so decidedly unconventional. There is no discussion of the thriving communities of fusion die-hards online, nothing of how YouTube videos of Mahavishnu orchestra [1] feature hundreds of thousands of views and thousands of "likes," and, most disappointing to this ethnomusicologist, no interviews with musicians.

Fellezs explicitly states that he was "uninterested in interviewing fusion musicians," because he "did not want retrospective recollections spanning thirty-plus years. There was ample material in the music journals, trade publications, recordings, and other accessible items from the 1970s to aid me in my attempt to capture the musicians and listeners, particularly critics, in the heat of the moment" (12). Fellezs's admission to being uninterested in interviewing musicians (rather than, say, unwilling to go to the trouble of contacting celebrities, which might be more understandable) is a shockingly flimsy justification for their omission. This position is further challenged by the fact that he relies on a number of interviews of musicians from the 1990s—such as Anil Prasad's excellent anthology [2]—and cites their retrospective recollections of twenty-plus years to support his arguments. For a scholar whose publicity bio [3] touts him as "an accomplished jazz pianist," his stance is surprisingly dismissive of musicians themselves. Because this music is recent enough that many of its practitioners are still alive, one would think that interviews would offer an additional layer of worthwhile perspective that is unavailable to many music scholars.

The structural organization of the book, with three chapters of theoretical framework followed by the four artist case studies mentioned above, further limits Fellezs's approach. Each of those four chapters meanders through biographical material, making it challenging to hear the four artists' work in conversation with each other. These chapters prove most insightful in the rare instances that they make the necessary twists to connect the varied musical projects, as occurs at the end of the chapter on Herbie Hancock.

Sidemen also receive short shrift in this layout, which is unfortunate, as their contributions to the broken middle are often magnified by their position within these groups. Most fusion acts chose rock's band-oriented identities over jazz's bandleader-and-sidemen presentation; because of this, their sonic contributions are both essential and marginal. Organist Larry Young is a perfect example: the Newark, NJ native makes important contributions to multiple musical projects discussed in the book, and is even identified by Tony Williams as "the real genius" and "the heart" of his Lifetime band. Constrained by his structural obligation to focus on bandleaders Williams and McLaughin, Fellezs ignores Young's foundational impact to the genre; as a result, *Birds of Fire* is complicit in the history of silence that has surrounded Young's career [4].1

Because Fellezs's sources are mostly jazz critics from the 1970s, these are the authors with whom the book is primarily in conversation (rock critics, he notes, mostly ignored fusion at that time.) Fellezs's chastising tone towards their negative opinions fails to contextualize them in terms of the challenges that jazz fans faced in the fragmenting musical landscape of the 1970s; he only puts forward the tired stereotype that jazz was becoming old-fashioned and out-of-touch with its younger practitioners, who looked to rock for excitement. Furthermore, he did not conduct follow-up interviews with any of these critics, most of whom are also still alive.

This approach has led the author to some conclusions that would frustrate many music listeners, especially jazz fans. The narrative is peppered with telling inaccuracies about jazz minutiae (on the first page, for example, the Newport Jazz Festival is placed in Connecticut, not Rhode Island) and Fellezs occasionally slips into vague generalizations about jazz music and culture, such as claiming that Jaco Pastorius's "fretless bass pyrotechnics helped position the electric bass as a 'legitimate' instrument in jazz," without explaining what he means by "legitimate" or why he was compelled to enclose the word in quotation marks (28). While ostensibly a true statement, it is also meaningless; as the late musical titan James Brown put it, "like a dull knife, it just ain't cutting—just talking loud and saying nothing" (Brown 1972).

Too often, Fellezs seems content to swim through what Jeff Titon [5] has called the "quicksand that we drown in, paralyzed . . . condemned and banished to a life of theory." As a result, he comes very close to the dangerous endgame of such a strategy, which Titon identified as "think[ing] the world into being, as text—a position of intellectual arrogance, to say the least" (1995:290).

In his final chapter, Fellezs offers a rhetorical shrug towards the music's impact, claiming that its "failure to realize itself as a genre speaks to both its commercial irrelevance as well as its aesthetic ubiquity," and that its only current relevance is its pioneering "central position of aesthetic mixture … [and] its liberatory liminal aesthetic [that] began to resonate throughout mainstream culture" (224). But this sells short the impact of fusion as a genre. In fact, the specific sounds, musical processes and aesthetic positions that fusion musicians took in the 1970s still

resonate, at least within mainstream jazz culture. Even his belief in fusion's commercial irrelevance is overstated. After all, many of the musicians who found commercial success in the 1970s are still involved in lucrative global tours afforded by their celebrity.

Had Fellezs attended this year's Newport Jazz Festival, for example, he would have seen and heard fusion's continued impact, a striking reality considering its rocky introduction at the festival 40 years prior. Not only were early fusion pioneers Al Di Meola and Charles Lloyd headlining the main stage, but younger musicians such as Trombone Shorty [6], John Hollenbeck [7], and Hiromi [8] led projects that drew directly from the sounds that Fellezs's protagonists first developed in the 1970s.

Or, he could simply spend a day on campus at UCLA, where he could dig the marching band working up a halftime show based on Weather Report's "Birdland," sit in with the Jazz Fusion Ensemble led by octogenarian jazz guitar master Kenny Burrell, or enjoy Rollins, that beacon of straight-ahead cool, blowing over a laid-back funk vamp at a recent concert at Royce Hall. Bruin alumna Gretchen Parlato [9] [youtube video [10]] provides a perfect example of how fusion is now thriving in the once-broken middle, fully part of the jazz tradition. Her music is full of odd-meter rock beats that pay homage to Williams, electric textures that allude to albums such as Hancock's Thrust, creative incorporation of non-Western music that would make McLaughlin blush, and the same strident artistic independence asserted by Mitchell. Today, many in the jazz community treat 70s fusion as an influential aesthetic channel, an attitude far removed from fusion's early reactionary jazz critics and apathetic rock writers.2

Criticisms aside, however, *Birds of Fire* does have something to offer readers interested in a useful framework for relating fusion to issues of race, genre, and capitalism. Fellezs demonstrates that the broken middle of the music industry in the 1970s was an important context for fusion as a musical process; this gave rise to today's musical landscape full of broken middles, where mixture is an inevitable component of cultural production. In this sense, *Birds of Fire* can be read as a helpful prequel to the work of George Lipsitz, especially his 1997 book Dangerous Crossroads [11].

In particular, the second and third chapters offer insightful discussion of the context in which fusion was born, broadly considering the many aspects of the cultural moment that brought it into being. His inclusion of a third genre, funk, in addition to the usual jazz-rock binary, elegantly complicates and enriches his exploration of the music's sounds and meanings. The book's expansive bibliography is invaluable, pointing both to important reviews and music journalism of the time as well as extensively referencing the body of critical studies work that has dealt with jazz since the 1960s.

Fellezs also includes important insights about the individual bandleaders that he profiles, especially Williams and Mitchell. Further scholarship would do well to offer similar treatments of fusion artists such as Gary Burton, Pat Metheny, Joe Zawinul, and Chick Corea, who are only mentioned briefly in *Birds of Fire*, not to mention those coming from the rock world such as Jeff Beck or Bill Bruford.

Perhaps most important to the readers of this forum, Fellezs leaves the door wide open for careful ethnomusicological inquiry of this music. Although the lack of ethnological methodology limits what Fellezs is able to accomplish, *Birds of Fire* lays a durable foundation for further study. Theories developed by ethnomusicologists, such as Mark Slobin's "hyphen-cultures" (Slobin 1993 [12]) and Mantle Hood's "bi-musicality" (Hood 1960 [13]), could add another theoretical dimension to this work, as well. Fellezs demonstrates clearly that fusion music overflows with fascinating currents, contradictions and variable meanings—sonic traits waiting to be further explored by the research and insights of thoughtful scholars trained in the discipline of understanding nuances in their cultural context. With this book, Fellezs has forged a path for fusion (and other jazz-related music previously dismissed as "simply commercial") to be discussed with academic rigor. It is now up to other scholars to listen critically to this music, do their own research, and elevate the conversation to the level of creativity, flexibility, and playfully subversive artistry sounded out by the musicians themselves.

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- 1. For more on Young's life and music, visit his website: http://www.larryyoungmusic.com/index2.html
- 2. For other recent examples, note the inclusion of Weather Report in the recent audience survey of 100 Quintessential Jazz Songs by NPR and KPLU [http://www.npr.org/2011/02/19/133479768/the-mix-the-jazz-100], and the presence of numerous fusion artists in the recently-updated Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology [http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=3320] .)

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