

MUS 557, Topics in Theory: What is “Jazz Theory”?

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What is “jazz theory”? Answers to this question tend in two different directions. One concerns the technical-practical knowledge that underpins musical performances in idioms presumed to fall under the stylistic umbrella of “jazz.” Such knowledge includes, for example and among other things, relationships of chords, scales, and modes; rhythmic concepts such as swing eighths, two-feel, and double time; and formal structures such as 12-bar blues, 32-bar song form, or, in performance, “trading fours.” The other understands jazz as quintessentially social music, born of and nurtured by Black forms of subjectivity. In this view, jazz is a musical manifestation of, among other things, resistance, endurance, subaltern creativity, and sociopolitical critique.

In this seminar, we will examine a range of work in and around the idea of “jazz theory,” from textbooks and practical how-to guides, to theoretical interventions in jazz discourse (e.g., Baraka, Gilroy, Chapman), to literary representations and allusions (e.g., Ellison, Morrison), to recent articles and monographs (by, e.g., Okiji, Hannaford, Moten, Steinbeck). We will ask, and seek to answer, whether and how divergent views of “jazz theory” can be configured into productive relationships with one another.

This seminar is primarily intended for MA or PhD students. Though it counts as a theory course for performers, any MM or DMA students considering enrolling must confer first with Prof. Sheehy.

3 credits