

Stefanie Drews

As a student at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies I had the opportunity to participate in the jazz block seminar “Old and New Dreams: The History of Afro-American Jazz,” which also included watching parts of Ken Burns’ jazz documentary. This promised to be an enlightening experience since I had never actively listened to jazz before or given much thought to what makes this kind of music special. At times, I used to find the music hard to grasp. Nevertheless, I did like swing and blues before the seminar when I happened to listen to it. I had, however, not been aware of the part these types of music played in the history of jazz and therefore found it very interesting to learn about these musical developments.

Since jazz is seen as an essentially black music that emerged in the United States, it is closely linked to racial tensions in society and the civil rights struggle of 20<sup>th</sup>-century America. This, of course, makes the history of jazz a relevant topic for American Studies. It was enlightening to see how musicians tried to take a stance with their music and to learn about what particular problems black artists faced while pursuing their careers.

The artist I chose for my presentation in class was saxophone player Sonny Rollins, who is still widely considered a living legend. He started his musical career in the 1940s and has – with some interruptions – remained active since then. In addition to the great amount of music he has written and recorded during his long career, his virtuosity was, and still is, very impressive. I also enjoyed reading some of the interviews he gave at different points of time and learning about his views on music, society and race relations. Sonny Rollins’ “Freedom Suite,” which was released in 1958, was considered the first (instrumental) civil rights recording. In addition to that, it was remarkable how in the 1950s and early 1960s many jazz musicians, including Sonny Rollins, looked beyond racial aspects and performed with other talented musicians regardless of the color of their skin. In this sense I found it encouraging to see how jazz helped to bring people together. What mattered was that the individual was a good musician; he was judged on the basis of his skills. That is a very nice thought and an ideal that, I think, is still relevant today.

The jazz film series and the block seminar have expanded my horizons in two ways: first, I have learned very much about jazz music and also learned to ... maybe not love it (yet?) but definitely to appreciate it. And second, it was inspiring to explore the vision that was

attributed to the music and the power it has to influence people's lives and maybe even society by creating controversies and discussion.