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## **Personal Essay: Ferdinand Sacksofsky**

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**How the HCA Musicology class  
influenced my perception of Jazz**

Heidelberg Center for American Studies  
Musicology: "Old and New Dreams:  
The History of Afro-American Jazz"  
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Dr. Christian Broecking

To be honest, when our musicology seminar at the HCA started, I was under the impression that I don't like jazz. Besides that, I felt that jazz was simply a music genre and a relic of the past. In my mind, a jazz song wasn't even considered an "oldie," like the songs from the 1960s and 70s. It belonged to an even earlier era. Jazz was the kind of music my grandmother might have listened to in her youth.

I never asked my grandmother what kind of music she listened to when she was young, but if it was jazz, she would have just witnessed the humble beginnings of it. It became a genre that survived all trends of the music industry after it as well as the social changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which were in some cases often even influenced by jazz' very own artists.

Working on and with jazz and learning about its history during the past few weeks, the most surprising thing was probably the impact jazz had on society, especially on the Civil Rights Movement. It seems like jazz gave many black artists a way of expressing themselves and embracing black culture in the United States during a time of racism and segregation. Becoming a musician was suddenly a career option for members of the underprivileged black society. In some ways, music became a tool to escape segregation and to express the suffering of black people in the land of the free. It was astonishing to me that even artists like Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, or John Coltrane, who had become bright stars of the music industry, were still treated like second class citizens. And yet, or maybe even because of this, jazz sparked a fire in the black community that turned out to become much bigger than Bessie Smith, Benny Goodman, or Duke Ellington could have ever imagined. In retrospective, I can see how the expression of black culture inspired many to protest against suppression and injustice. It would be foolish to give jazz and the development of an Afro-American music scene sole credit for starting a movement that would bring racial equality to the United States, but its role was bigger than I expected.

On a personal level, I have to admit, that my impression of jazz proved to be wrong. First of all, I wasn't aware that jazz is not only still very much alive, but also still developing. Today it seems only natural to me that a music genre which survived beat-music, glam-rock, grunge, and boy-bands, to name a few, is still evolving and prospering. Jazz might have lost its mainstream appeal over the years and it can't compete anymore on a commercial level with current music sensations, but, to my surprise, it is still everywhere. When we watched the first episode of Ken Burns' documentary *Jazz*, I realized that I already knew jazz from a couple of movie soundtracks. Whenever I watched a movie or

saw a piece of film over the past three weeks, I paid more attention to the soundtrack than before and realized that some of my favorite soundtracks are often jazz, or at least strongly influenced by it.

Since our seminar "Old and New Dreams: The History of Afro-American Jazz" went hand in hand with the Enjoy Jazz festival, I was offered a great variety of opportunities to broaden my horizon about jazz. The seminar, as well as the weekly events at the HCA, where episodes of *Jazz: A History of America's Music*, were shown to the public, helped me not only to learn about the history of jazz but also to develop an understanding of the music.

In conclusion, I can say that this class has changed my perception of jazz in many ways. On one hand, as a scholar of the American society and its historical developments, I have discovered a new influential cultural element I wasn't aware of until now. Researching the impact of jazz on the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement helped me to understand a new side of the cultural self-conception of black U.S. citizens. On the other hand, it changed my personal appreciation for jazz as a music genre. As far as I can say now, I simply didn't know what jazz really sounded like before this class. I probably won't put any jazz on my iPod in the near future, but after I had worked on a presentation about Bessie Smith one day (which was part of Dr Broecking's Musicology class), I caught myself whistling jazz tunes later that evening...