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Mid-Century Modern Jazz: Music and Design in the Postwar Home

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Abstract

This article takes an imagined, transnational living room as its setting, examining jazz's place in representations of the 'modern' middle-class home across the post-war West, and exploring the domestic uses that listeners both casual and committed made of the music in recorded form. In magazines as apparently diverse as *Ideal Home* in the UK and *Playboy* in the US, a certain kind of jazz helped mark a new middlebrow connoisseurship in the 1950s and 60s. But rather than simply locating jazz in a historical sociology of taste, this piece attempts to describe jazz's role in what was an emergent middle-class sensorium. The music's sonic characteristics were frequently called upon to complement the newly sleek visual and tactile experiences – of furniture, fabrics, plastics, the light and space of modern domestic architecture – then coming to define the aspirational bourgeois home; an international modern visual aesthetic was reflected back in jazz album cover art. Yet to describe experience or ambience represents a challenge to historical method. As much as history proper, then, it's through a kind of experimental criticism of both music and visual culture that this piece attempts to capture the textures and moods that jazz brought to the postwar home.

Introduction

The speed, spite and weird danger of the early-century modernist imagination had been spelled out by manifesto writers of the 1910s, by typographic explosions across posters and little magazines in Paris, Milan and Zurich. Two world wars later and a continent apart, bebop, a truly modern jazz, was heralded in terms inherited from that moment: it was frenetic, angular, expressionist. But the music was soon muted, and while expressionism survived, in music as in art and design, postwar reconstruction bred modernisms that were often calmer, approaches that – for the time being at least – still looked ahead, but which were now more given to the rational than the heroic.

Applied, that often meant the amelioration of life through sober planning and tasteful living. In contrast to those earlier manifesti, the journals that announced this modern programme – the spirit of which was now at least as American as European – did not much trade in polemic or bombast, and the aesthetes they addressed were buying in to the bourgeois, not demanding out. The February 1960 issue of the US magazine *Hi-Fi Review* is as good an example as any. There, a feature shows readers how to position their new stereo equipment in homes that picture the contemporary suburban ideal, these less the early-century landmarks of Frank Lloyd Wright than the mass-built derivatives that gave such architecture to the middle-classes. It wasn't a coincidence that innovative, high-end audio was placed in such surroundings. An early modernism fascinated by subjective sensation had faded into a mid-century variant preoccupied with the space-, light- and media-enriched interior; modernist futurism had transmuted into consumer aspiration.

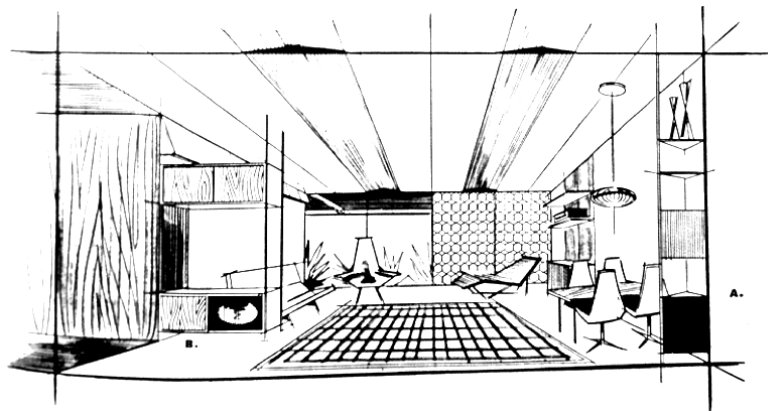


Fig. 1: Speaker positioning at A and B in *Hi-Fi Review* (Anon. 1960, p. 51).

But turn the page of this magazine and the diagrams of a new (and rather white) America cede to a reminiscence of old Europe, and one made by way of a provocatively cosmopolitan blackness; this was the cultural amalgam that gave mid-century modernism its soundtrack. Along with regular features on stereo set-up and placement, February's issue includes a feature on the recording of Miles Davis and Gil Evans' third LP collaboration for Columbia, studio reportage by Nat Hentoff that would eventually form the basis of the record's liner notes. As it comes into being under the eye of producer Teo Macero, *Sketches of Spain* – a jazz album in principle, but one akin to any number of 1950s mood music LPs – is described according to the standard terms of this technical- rather than musical-minded journal (“we’re going to cross-feed some of the instruments,” Teo explained, “to get a true stereo picture”). It’s writing that’s fascinated by medium, a modernist endeavour if ever there was one,

yet Hentoff's attempts to assure his readers of the project's cultivation yield numerous allusions to a European art music world (Hentoff 1960, p. 53, 56). The music recorded similarly subjects ideas of antique Europe to new technological exploitation. The album's central track, Saeta, sounds a hazy vision of some half-Catholic, half-pagan ritual, an approaching procession march rapped out on the snare, a hurdy-gurdy drone imitated in the woodwinds; Evans' complex combinations of instruments are written to be recorded, with microphones enabling a tonal balance that would be unworkable in normal performance, and (inevitably) the procession ranges across the still-novel stereo image. Davis imitates a flamenco lament, short-circuiting his trumpet's technology by pressing valves half-way down, producing smears, leaps and slides that cry and wheeze like a damaged larynx – and, crucially, playing lines that replace melodic idea with mood, invention with character acting, this a star fading into the background in service of the directorial project. Half-European, half-American, half-live, half-manipulated: *Sketches of Spain's* betweenness throws into relief the mediatised cosmopolitanism that characterised this moment, and characterised jazz.

That's one subject of this essay; America was the self-proclaimed beacon of free-world modernity after WWII, and if the signal it sent abroad was strong, so too did it listen to messages received, even if hush-hush. Yet Davis' gaze will often be reversed, to see the music – and it is as much about seeing as it is hearing – not from *Hi-Fi Review's* stateside dreamhome, but from a British, and subsequently transnational living room, one as imaginary as the trumpeter's own sketches. That setting is apt to pick up more of the ways that American jazz production was part-shaped from abroad. Britain's distance from jazz's perceived source also focuses attention on the media through which jazz was disseminated, and on the ways jazz's postwar meanings and associations were sensed as much as articulated; jazz helped construct, and was in turn constructed by, a modern domestic sensorium. But to imagine or describe experience, or ambience, represents a challenge to historical method, preoccupied as it still tends to be with written sources. As much as history proper, then, it's through a kind of experimental criticism that this piece will attempt to capture the surfaces, textures and moods that jazz brought to the postwar home.

Kinetic and visual, tactile and ambient

The audience for modern jazz in Britain was mutable in age and class. A *Melody Maker* survey depicted the early-60s scene as one peopled by young men (and working-class, some observers would have added). But others involved with the

recording and promotion of modern acts would later describe an older, more mixed audience, ‘people with money to spend’, as the promoter Jack Higgins reported in 1967: ‘[t]hey’re married, have houses and cars’ (Coleman et al 1964, p. 8-9; Anon. 1967, p. i).¹ Both notions were accurate. Styles, tastes and the social distinctions of those who listened and looked, all these were in a moment of unusually rapid transition during the latter-1950s and 1960s.

Inevitably, the music’s own cultural location began to change. By the mid-1960s, and in Britain as across the West, jazz was gaining access to institutions – of performance, broadcasting, debate, education – previously reserved for officialised and intellectualised forms of western art music. References to jazz in the BBC magazine *The Listener*, where independent critics augmented, interpreted and in so doing ratified the corporation’s public service ideals, had long been relatively frequent. But even in the 1950s the music’s culture-industry character had left it *infra dig* to a cast of patrician critics: low trash with scary dollar clout, the vanquisher of authentic popular culture (folk, music hall), jazz was what the people went for when left to their own devices (Henderson 1958). This was an old story, the terms of which hadn’t changed for thirty years. Yet elsewhere the historian Eric Hobsbawm – working under his jazz-critic nom de plume, Francis Newton – could soon write that ‘[e]very day jazz is becoming culturally more respectable’ (Newton 1959); Hobsbawm was the jazz critic for the British politics-and-culture review *The New Statesman*, an intellectual writing for intellectuals, and the journal’s mere publication of that claim was proof that it was true.² Others working in similar spheres followed suit. By the first years of the next decade Philip Larkin was covering jazz for *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Listener*’s music writers would come to contend that jazz should be taken seriously, not least because – as the eminent music critic Deryck Cooke suggested in 1963 – it was in that music that a ‘fizzy vitality’ apparently abrogated by contemporary art music could now best be found. Jazz had lost much of its meaning as a marker of cultural malaise (its place in intellectual discourse for the time being taken by ‘beat music’), and the passage to respectability was largely complete. Popular obscurity soon followed.

It’s not hard to locate jazz in a historical sociology of cultural value. Trickier is pinning down the immediate perceptions of jazz that informed those judgements, to think not about Cooke’s vote for jazz over art music, but how (and where) he came to feel jazz’s ‘fizzy vitality’ at all. Jazz struck a particular sensory profile in the middle-class British home of the 1950s and 60s, this formed of sound and image, but also things more abstract: an impression of velocity, a particular emotional repertoire. No tone, gesture or mood was separable from the medium on which it was borne, and a

good deal of modern jazz's phenomenological reputation was made through the device of the decade, television (indeed, Cooke was describing music heard on a TV show). Sets bought or hire-purchased in the spirit of experiment – many just before the first televised coronation in 1953, and with 3 million households watching by the following year – received broadcasts that, in their format and directorial technique, were just as exploratory (Turnock 2007, p. 7). Music was especially problematic for programme makers, and the debate as to what visuals could and couldn't do with it sputtered across the pages of the trade-and-fans' newspaper *Melody Maker* for years. The quandary was articulated by an American producer: 'After you've shown a close-up of the brass, the leader, the drummer and the pianist's fingers mirrored in the keyboard lid', he asked the paper in 1955, 'what then? Audiences get bored' (Hutton 1955).

But others identified those close-ups as television's great potential, since they promised music's domestic audiences an intimacy unavailable to any other. Christian Simpson was charged with producing a 15-minute 'music item' for the BBC in November 1954. Sending a memo back upstairs, Simpson suggested the programmers overlook the light music stalwart Monia Liter in favour of a jazz group, and a new kind of music television:

What I am after is the type of youthful enthusiasm and energy which accompanies these performances, the whole thing to be presented as a camera study of instruments, faces, eyes, mouths, etc. It is seldom that we are able to capture the making of music in real close-up – this would be an opportunity.

The principle (and tiny budget) was agreed, and the advance publicity material for what was titled *Jazz Session* quoted Simpson's aim, 'to suggest in the sets and lighting the sense of improvisation and recreate the pace and energy of the music with tremendous movement on screen'.

Almost no British television broadcasts of the time survive, so who knows what they pulled off with a couple of cameras and a quintet of skilled, boppishly mainstream players including pianist Dill Jones, vibraphonist Bill Le Sage and trumpeter Bert Courtley. A viewer in Surrey wrote to the BBC immediately after the transmission to praise 'the most exciting photographs of a small jazz group I've seen ... As a jazz-lover, for once I wasn't embarrassed or angered by vain efforts to "domesticate" or tone down'. The home space was momentarily rendered unusual, undomestic. Colleagues sent a memo to Simpson saying that 'no one interested in television could have helped but revel in it', never mind the jazz (BBC WAC file T12/179/1). Energy, movement, excitement, improvisation – these were modern jazz

attitudes, or at least an attitudinal association constructed for the music through its media presentation, its close up camera studies of eyes and mouths (how constructivist it all sounds).

The dynamism has to be taken on trust, but traces of the show's smoky atmosphere linger in the BBC files, its most ephemeral element now the most historically legible. Bakelite ashtrays were present on set, and 50 Player's were on the props chitty – a later *Jazz Session* broadcast actually required the musicians to smoke on screen – and this was part of designed informality, one that made a virtue of the pittance available. The programme's opening shot featured the bare back of a panel, on which the show's name had been stenciled. In an almost empty studio, scene shifters and electricians were asked to remain in shot while they did their work (and were paid 15 shillings extra for the trouble); a rather literal behind-the-scenes studio aesthetic removed jazz from the world of showbiz artifice, and placed it in a newly constructed, unvarnished space not then occupied by any other music style. While it was made for a new home audience, this was a reinforcement rather than overturning of previous jazz representations, the most famous of which was Gjon Mili's 1944 film *Jammin' the Blues*; in the US, what Nicolas Pillai (2016) calls this 'contrivance of the casual' would govern the design and mood of the CBS programmes *The Sound of Jazz* (1957) and *The Robert Herridge Theatre* featuring Miles Davis and Gil Evans (1960) – and, indeed, the 1960s NET series *Jazz Casual*.

Those programmes' deliberate revealing of production technique recalled the visible cameras and booms that cluttered the modernist moving image back to Dziga Vertov (and forward to Jean-Luc Godard). And if the modern jazz imaginary was not fully original, then neither was it singular, the popular media collaging together any modernism going to get the message across. A last glance beyond the British jazzmen, ciggies dangling, and at the set sketched out in blueprint and deposited on file: what scenery there was consisted of flats divided into grids Mondrian-like, broken up by diamonds of the kind found in that painter's work, but also common in the geometric visual patterning surrounding and following that harbinger of compromised Anglo-modernity, the 1951 Festival of Britain.

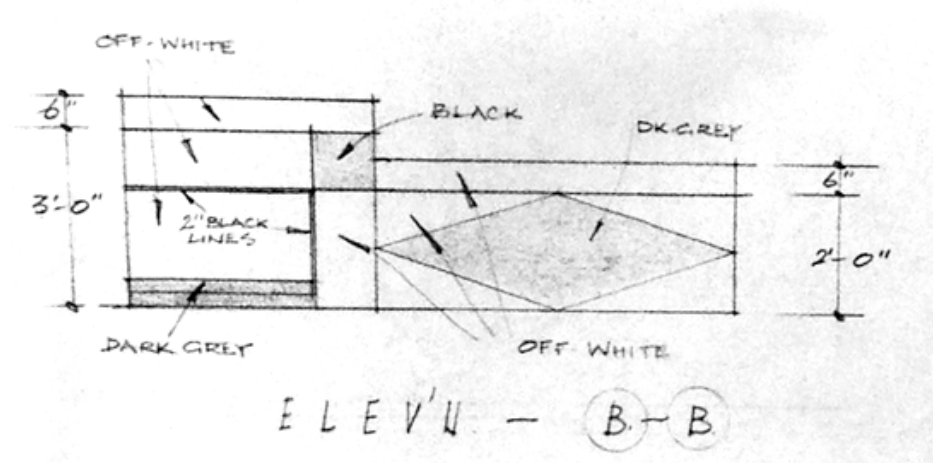


Fig. 2: plans for *Jazz Session* scenery flats. BBC copyright. Reproduced with permission.

It was far from the only invocation of the modernist painter in the postwar jazz imaginary. Few were as brazen as those flats, or the cover of Donald Byrd's first album as a leader for the Boston label Transition. Nevertheless the vocabulary of rhythmically juxtaposed cells proliferated, appearing across continents in different contexts but playing the same role, a visual equivalent of the jazz sideman: along with Mondrian, Byrd hops from his own record to the cover of *The Jazz Messengers*, just as Horace Silver slips from that cover to the living-room shot below, used in cropped form for the cover of his *Horace Silver Trio and Art Blakey-Sabu* (Blue Note, 1955).



Fig. 3: *Byrd Jazz* (Transition, 1955); *The Jazz Messengers* (Columbia, 1956);
Melody Maker, March 3, 1962, p. 7

The curtains were cut from that cover, but they are what interest here: not a million miles from early Mondrian, their crude blocks and curves, like carved wood or bone, tap equally into a history of modernist primitivism once often aligned with jazz. Yet at the same time they articulate a thoroughly contemporary modern visual patterning that was centred on the organic and biomorphic. Especially popular in

American graphic design – these forms appear in the work of designers like Paul Rand and Alvin Lustig, and also on the mid-decade jazz album cover work of Paul Bacon and Reid Miles – organic designs spread across materials in the early-to-mid 1950s (the fabrics advert detail below is for a British interiors store, Heal’s).

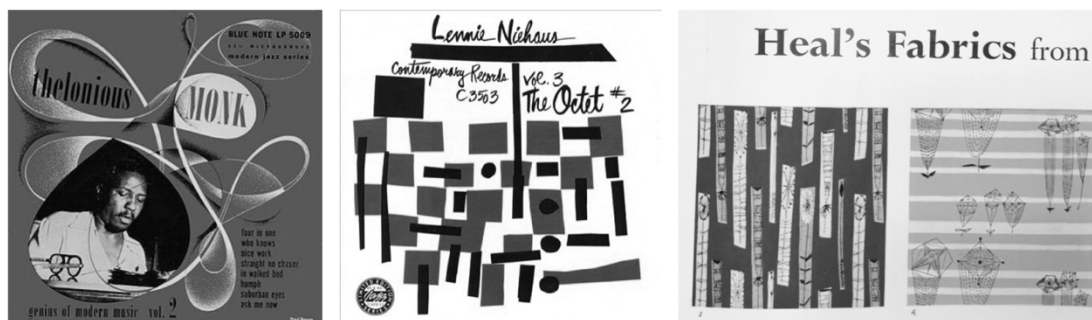


Fig. 4: Paul Bacon for Blue Note (1952); Reid Miles for Contemporary (1955);
Ideal Home 69/4 (April 1954), p. 33.

As the fabrics and illustrations suggest, jazz played amid a nexus of associations that linked the gestural and the visual with the tactile, with the solid forms that occupied the contemporary home, bundling them together and creating a coherent sense of modernity – a sense that invoked all senses, and a cosmopolitan reach native to the living room of the moment. In Britain and through the 1950s, companies like G-Plan and Stag had helped change the way that furniture was designed, made, sold, and used. The units advertised their machine-tooled distance from hand-carved tradition, but also their proximity to a contemporary Scandinavian look (in the modern British mind, Scandinavia was to furniture what America was to jazz). So furniture advertising called upon that music – technical, cultivated, but popular – to vouch for a shared ethos, plotting the co-ordinates of mid-market, mass-produced taste distinction. Ellington’s *Liberian Suite* accompanied black coffee in Beautility’s sideboard advert, Greaves and Thomas illustrated their units’ modularity with Thelonious Monk’s *5 by Monk by 5* and Mose Allison’s *Young Man Mose*, and Dave Brubeck’s *Jazz Goes to College* sat on a (rather more upmarket) Heal’s bureau.



Fig. 5: Heal's and Greaves and Thomas adverts (Hyman and Braggs 2007, p. 13, 89);
Ideal Home 80/5 (November 1959), p. 177.

The associations were felt as well as seen and imagined. Home magazines of the 1950s and 60s were full of fabrics, leather and, especially, carpets – both natural and using new synthetic materials – that invited the touch, promising a sensual comfort not always available to earlier generations. This was denoted by a trope that stretched across domestic advertising and hi-fi literature through the 1960s, in which a female listener sprawled in close, sensuous contact with tactile modernity. And all the better to come into audio contact with its sounding counterpart: in a 1970 issue of *Ideal Home*, one woman enjoys her Heuga carpet tiles along with the Don Rendell-Ian Carr Quintet, and another curls up on her Minty's sofa to relax – or maybe not – with *The World of Cecil Taylor*. What linked so many of these sensual experiences, what made them modern, was their high definition, and that definition's evidently technological premise. The energy of the close-up camera study flashed across a room suddenly full of plastics, fibres, textures not quite real, machine-made and all the more exciting for it.



Fig. 6: *Ideal Home* 99/5 (May 1970), p. 3, 34.

A growing hi-fi culture owed as much to this desire to enhance domestic affect as it did any purely musical impulse: in 1962, *Melody Maker* – the paper then strongly allied with jazz and its fans – acknowledged that hi-fi had been seen as ‘a minority cult for the wealthy’, one ‘more preoccupied with pure sound than pure music’ (Brown 1962, p. ii). Most jazz was heard in grey through stereograms and Dansettes. But it was here that the music became more than an index of consumer self-image, and the subject of design investigation proper. The West German manufacturer of home technology, Braun, had in the 1950s entered the hi-fi market. The company’s design team, led by Dieter Rams, played a significant role in what would be a general transformation of hi-fi from hobbyist pastime to consumer industry: rather than separate components designed to be hidden in a cabinet, Braun’s units were boxed and fascia’d to sit in the front room unapologetically, modular and stacked, signalling the transformation of the living room into a mediatised space. Rams’ team spent a great deal of time refining the units’ interface with the user’s touch – the dials, knobs and switches were crafted to welcome fingerpad or pinch – and, with the same spare, straight, even blank functionality as the contemporary furniture designs of Knoll and Eames, the devices were meant to ‘sit well in good, modern apartments’. This was never more apparent than with the LE1 electrostatic speaker (1959), which, set in metal rather than wood casings, was intended to produce what Rams later recalled as ‘an impressively clear and transparent sound – perfect for the genres of music that we loved listening to at the time: jazz, and also Baroque’ (Rams 2014, p. 37, 38, 35). The detail, timbral range and space of these musical styles demanded particular solutions in their successful domestic reproduction. Again, jazz was the common denominator in a project of visual, tactile and audio modernity: Braun’s corporate identity, functionalist and

unusually uniform for the time, was overseen by Wolfgang Schmittel, a jazz photographer whose stark images of visiting players, black faces and hands emerging from nothingness, were exhibited under the Braun aegis.

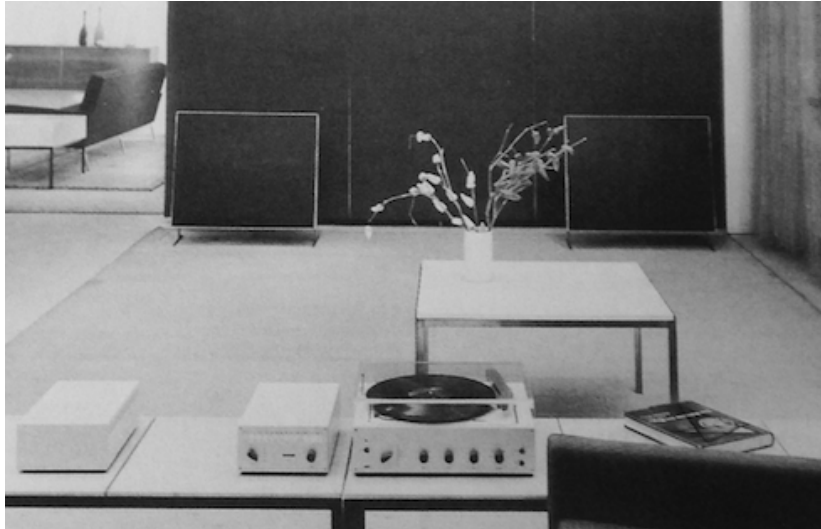


Fig. 7: Braun Studio 2 and Lautsprecher LE1 in the Knoll showroom, Wiesbaden (Rams 2014, p. 35).

What was it that the more affluent modern jazz listeners heard in such clarity? Something as vibrant and nearly-real as any other modern living room texture: the sound of one roomspace, projected into (and merging with) another, the first faked, the second as sure as the chair you sat in. A contemporary record like Cannonball Adderley's *Them Dirty Blues* (Riverside, 1960) sounds like a neutral presentation of a band working through their repertoire, and though the musicians are recording without dubbing, the audio experience offered is in its own way as multi-perspectival as any television cut between cameras, impossible in normal performance. Nat Adderley's cornet is recorded close enough to obliterate the acoustic space around it, detail confined to breath in the attack, spit in the valves, even a tiny croak between notes and during the split-second disagreement between lip, fingers and air column. But his brother Cannonball stands back from the microphone, and when he plays the saxophone finds the limits of the space in which he stands and reports back, as if he was enveloped by a sounding aura; seen rather than heard it would be spotlight in a dark room, the things around him hazily visible but soon fading into historical darkness. And the room isn't even one room. Sam Jones' bass solo sounds different dimensions: he must be in a booth. What seems like one audio picture of one space is more like a composite, several heard at the same time. Apart from the saxophone,

every instrument is completely, unrealistically close or contained. But that containment works against itself, and the sound exceeds the capacities of its recording media. So hot is the signal that the bass peaks all over the record, and when Cannonball reaches the top of one of his ecstatic lines, or breath-accented a jagged change of direction within one, the sound clips, and a swathe of noise cuts through the thin whir of the drummer's brushes as if it's chewing through the master tape. The room, for a moment, is transformed into pure, corrupted technology.

Emotion and control

Vitality wasn't the only sort of kinesis perceived by high-brow British critics as they turned their attention to jazz, even in passing: as the thinking became more serious, the judgments more subtle, so something more troubling was sensed in the music. Some of the most astute jazz commentary in the BBC's *The Listener* was made by art critics, and in the service of modern art rather than music. That kind of association marked and furthered jazz's legitimation, and jazz labels would soon return the compliment, many album covers of the late-1950s and early-60s making use of Abstract Expressionist-style images. Beyond legitimacy, and way beyond the old, interwar critique of jazz as mass-cultural malaise, a writer as perceptive and urbane as David Sylvester could access a widely shared intuition of the music's contemporary affectiveness to explain a kind of cultural production, and emotion, that crossed media and genre. Describing a 1956 exhibition that collected painting dubbed 'art autre' (a forerunner of art brut, or outsider art), Sylvester wrote that such work

is experimental, not self-expressive ... the gestures it uses are not at all tense or tempestuous but, on the contrary, casual. It is true that the resultant paintings sometimes give an impression of violence, but whereas the expressionist arrives at violence through an act of violence, here there is only a semblance of violence: it is an affected, almost a calculated violence, like the frigid violence of the Mannerists. If an analogy be drawn between automatism in modern painting and improvisation in jazz, *art autre* relates to 'cool' jazz, not 'hot' jazz (Sylvester 1956).³

The casualness of jazz they'd known about. But now that attitude, that coolness, was associated with a technique that contained expression, and concealed a kind of aggression. If Sylvester meant it approvingly, others were more uneasy as they described a contemporary mode of living, rational but aesthetic, tasteful but disturbing in its containment. Heinz Huber's short story 'The New Apartment', translated from German, read on BBC radio and published in *The Listener* in 1959,

was a satire of domestic design, neighbourly envy, and something darker. (Arts criticism, preoccupied as it always has been with object and evaluation, deadline and wordcount, is sometimes bested by fiction for its extended meditations on cultural mood). Huber's main character is resentfully admired by the narrator for 'his judgement, his taste, his modernity', for his graphite-grey carpet, bare walls and 'strange-looking branch projected from a glass vase, standing on the ground' (recall the Braun showroom pictured above).

He says he understands nothing about art, says he's a rationalist, a technician ... but he quite simply has it, that unerring sense of style, that infallible modernity ... He's an expert in *Cool Jazz*, and that's what his whole flat is like – *Cool Jazz* converted into armchairs, carpets, lamps (or rather light-fittings), and pictures' (Huber 1959, p. 989).

At a gathering, the characters sit together, carefully calibrating their interaction according to the mores of their social station, drinking brandy and soda rather than 'high-society' whisky, praising modern cool but disdaining bohemian 'erotic disturbance'. Perfect middlebrows: '[e]xact improvisation, *Cool Jazz*, precision of living style'. But the austere functionalism common to modern design and cool jazz is, in this story at least, a sign of a troublesome emotional repression that these people have tried to assuage by consumption (so perhaps jazz's escape from culture-industry critique was not yet total). The angst and ruin of the apartment's Nazi-period occupants is recounted by the new tenants in morbid detail, as is the choice of wallpaper they used to cover the flat's decay.

A strikingly similar anxiety had been articulated over BBC radio a month previously by Reyner Banham. The design critic was reporting from the Hochschule für Gestaltung, an innovative design school in the Bauhaus tradition at Ulm, West Germany (its staff and students worked closely with Dieter Rams and Braun). There, industrial and product design classes were reinforced with new communications theory, and a rationalist 'mental discipline' that did away with old aestheticism, the programme's mastermind Tomás Maldonado refusing 'to give any place to problems of "art" and "taste"'. The students, Banham reported as

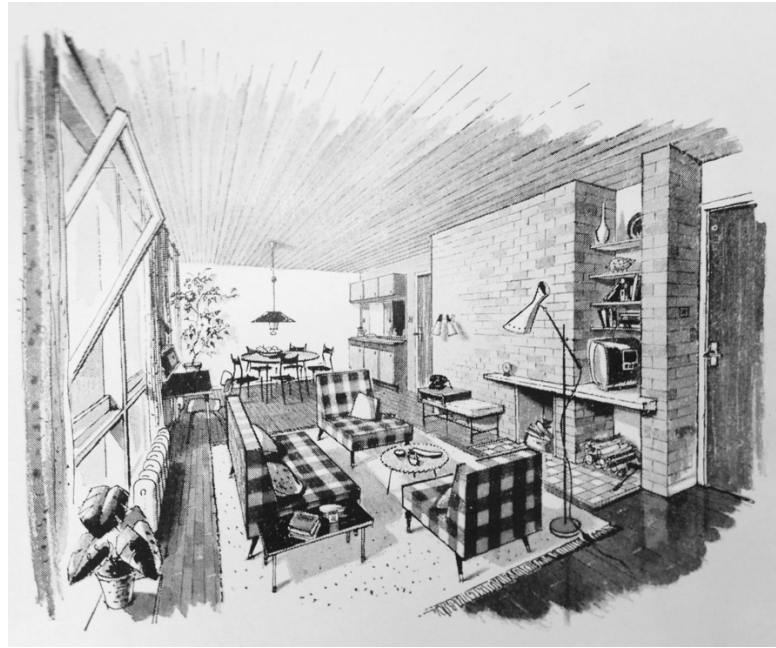
self-possessed, unflorid ... many wear suits and read really dull 'top people's' newspapers ... The preferred relaxation was really cool, modern jazz. Indeed, cool jazz was the standard background, it seemed, at all working hours until about three in the morning.

For me, this jazz is the memory that sums up the school – something new, highly technical, esoteric, rather abstract, immensely well done, neither lush nor flashy. It goes well with the esteem in which things like computers and printed radio circuits are

held there. It touches both what is undoubtedly good about the *Hochschule* and what worries me about the place. The mental climate up there ... is really cool; rhetoric is something you dissect but do not use (Banham 1959, p. 884, 885).

Coolness, Banham concluded, was bought at the price of 'detachment from the outside world', and, Huber would have added, perhaps the inside too. It was only implied, but all of this reinforced a familiar set of race stereotypes; such 'white' European interiors found their binary opposite in an exteriority and expression long associated with blackness, and with David Sylvester's hot jazz. Yet these modern critics reversed what had been their predecessors' relative valuation of those supposed characteristics, and while the relationship between an imagined jazz blackness and the home was still in question, it was now its absence that was worrying, not its presence. The lived, modern complex of technique, function, rationalism and emotional repression: a certain sort of cool jazz – one not coincidentally associated with white musicians – was its master signifier.

However glacial the temperature in Huber's apartment, the modern home could sometimes be associated with modern jazz in sunnier terms. In the US, several domestic and music magazines had featured Dave Brubeck and the house he had built in Oakland, California; completed in 1954, a steel, wood and glass stack topped with a cantilevered cylinder and set amid trees, the home more than nodded to Wright. The pianist's family beamed their way through numerous photo-essays and adverts, an ideal American suburban family at play and rest. As Andy Birtwistle (2013) comments in his perceptive essay on the musician, Brubeck's music was often placed in the context not just of this American modernism – or of the Ab-Ex that adorned album covers like *Time Out* (1959) – but also the older European modernism of his teacher Darius Milhaud; this was the modern rendered respectable, literally domesticated. Meanwhile in Britain, a 1959 *Ideal Home* awards feature included Gilbert Annesley Marsh's model 3-bedroom home (£3,520-4,020). 'It's rather like jazz music', the architect commented. 'There's traditional jazz, mainstream, progressive and experimental. It would prove a tremendous fillip if a progressive attitude were adopted in housing – *with a strong touch of the experimental!*' (Anon. 1959, p. 101). The light, open layout of Marsh's home was the progressive part; the experiment lay in its use of new materials like polystyrene and resin-bonded glassfibre.



Marsh's 3-bedroom home (Anon. 1959, p. 101).

But more often than not there was tension between the home and imaginings of jazz's experimental hip. Whatever cool was, it was not to be pinned down, and if that meant it couldn't fully be trusted, it was also part of the draw for those who felt trapped by family life. Bill Osgerby's 2005 study of American men's magazines like *Esquire* and *Playboy* shows how the fantasy of the bachelor pad – and for most, a fantasy it would remain – was constructed in the 1950s around a tightly defined set of ideals and tropes: features showed Wright- and Mies-styled open floorplans whose wide vistas spelled masculine power, and modern art and hi-fi systems that alluded to wealthy savoir-faire. Jazz was the sonic counterpart to all this, ever-present in those magazines, in the Playboy Club (with its lounge's huge record library and live music shows) and in the interior set-ups themselves; Osgerby shows a fantasized mood control panel from a 1947 *Esquire* that enables temperature, lighting and music genres – jazz, classical, gypsy, boogie-woogie – to be operated at the flip of a switch. Real-life pads also featured in the UK lifestyle press. An *Ideal Home* piece on the Chelsea studio-cum-apartment of designer and jazz pianist Bob Gill showed a double-height converted mews filled with international style posters and the hum of creativity – a space uncannily like that featured in Antonioni's exactly contemporary film, *Blow-Up*, itself soundtracked by Herbie Hancock and other hard bop players. A peek into outsider lives on the part of a straight readership, the article couldn't help but close by remarking that Gill would shortly move, since his new wife found the space uncomfortable and unhomely (Anon 1966b).

That was the moral of the story: home ultimately meant family, not the louche experimentalism of modern music and art. A 1963 *Ideal Home* article pressed the point. Robert MacGowan, a young designer at the BBC, was pictured sitting amid the Scandinavian furniture in his modern house at Twickenham, interviewed for a feature on the homes of TV art directors. Despite the light, space and landscaping of the innovative development he lived on – one of the Span estates that would dot the south-east and inspire numerous modern projects across the country – the Glasgow School of Art graduate clearly bristled at his new suburban environment, only ‘grudgingly admitting’ that architect Eric Lyons’ visionary plotting of rectilinear house groups and mature landscaping gave the benefit of safe play space for children. The article’s writer prodded at him like the bohemian curiosity he was.

MacGowan designs and lives entirely in the idiom of the 1960s. Long and stringy, in tight, faded jeans, his hair almost crew-cut, lean and hungry about the face, he looks himself like a character in a TV contemporary drama. One wall of his home is painted dark red, there is a lot of black and white and grey. All upholstery is dark, sometimes purple, all wood surfaces are stripped bare.

He is forever hanging more shelf units to accommodate stereo sound speakers and his tapes of far-out (‘as far as you can go’) modern jazz. He paints unceasingly and expressed surprise that a composition in oils of vertical yellows, greys and blues, was not clearly a Scottish landscape (Macgregor Hind 1963, p. 108).

Art school boho – what was the far-out jazz, Mingus, Ornette? – transplanted to the domestic magazine world only with difficulty. But the description of the landscape that divided nature into columns of colour is suggestive, and not just of *Ideal Home*’s philistinism. Indeed it harks back to those Mondrian scenery flats sketched by one of MacGowan’s predecessors at the BBC: the Dutch modernist’s grid compositions, as the art critic Rosalind Krauss would later write in a famous essay on the subject, were nets thrown over nature, like ‘looking at a landscape through a window, the frame of the window arbitrarily truncating our view but never shaking our certainty that the landscape continues beyond the limits of what we can, at that moment, see’. Becoming one of 20th-century art’s most fundamental tropes, the grid had operated a quintessentially modernist division of space (the visual field divided and constrained) and time (no narrative or development was possible), reducing expression to pure form. But this anti-romantic attitude was a pose, Krauss argued, and the visual rationality of the grid was conflicted, since artists and critics commonly claimed that its muting of local language, and its implied totality, gave the grid universal, spiritual and ineffable meaning; the device thus allowed ‘a contradiction between the values of science and those of spiritualism to maintain

themselves within the consciousness of modernism, or rather its unconscious, its repressed' (Krauss 1985, p. 19, 21, 9, 13).

No wonder the abstracted grid was the key visual signifier for a jazz equally representative of the modern: not just because it sounded the American city, itself a collection of grids thrown over nature – as the jazz-loving Mondrian remarked with his 1942-3 painting *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* – but because, however partially jazz cool could be accommodated in the home, it stood equally accused of the subjugation of expression in the name of technique, of emotion in the name of control.



Fig. 9: *Map of the Hackensack and Central Bergen Area*, The Hackensack and Central Bergen Board of Realtors, Inc., n.d.

Blackness and whiteness

The history of western art music is filled with famous domestic spaces, salons in which music was made and theorised, but there has been only one important living room in jazz. We've already seen its soft furnishings, and the street grid on which it was located: Horace Silver, curtains his backdrop, gestured from the piano bench in the living room of 25 Prospect Avenue, Hackensack NJ, where Rudy Van Gelder – at the beginning, an optometrist by trade – recorded so much of the emergent hard bop that was issued by Blue Note, Prestige and Savoy.

If jazz was part of a transnational construct of the modern, then it was historically correct that so much of it came into being in a suburban house built by Van Gelder's parents in the square, open, mid-century modern style seen across America and often coveted elsewhere; it was right that the Englewood Cliffs studio the engineer built and moved to in 1959 after business boomed was inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's 'Usonian' houses, diffusion-line modernity costed for professionals rather than plutocrats.



Fig. 10: The Hackensack, NJ Van Gelder home (Myers 2012).

Difficult, though, not to think again about race: overwhelmingly identified with its black musicians and their tough urban homelands, the jazz that Van Gelder recorded in the 1950s and 60 jazz entered the production process in modern suburban architectural spaces of the kind that were still *de facto* if not *de jure* 'white'. What did it mean that so many of the visual and spatial modernisms assigned to postwar jazz were identified not only with white people – the artists, the house builders – but with a fictive kind of whiteness long in the making, one whose professed rationalism and teleology gave rise to the modernist project from which those not white had been long and explicitly excluded? In the relationship between a music often portrayed as black and an international modern painted white, what was fluid conversation, and what was grid-bound containment?

Containment is the word, since the meanings of mid-century modernism, consumable above all, most surrounded jazz in its packaged, commodity form. From recording to album art: in particular, the covers produced in the decade from around 1955 by designer Reid Miles immediately came to be seen as exceptionally skilled modern framings of black music subjects. As was also true of Rudy Van Gelder, while Miles worked for several labels it was with Blue Note that his work was most closely identified, label co-owner Alfred Lion's purposeful oversight of the production process stimulating exceptional responses from all its participants. These now-canonical covers, hundreds of them, are not best characterised by the organic forms, freehand lettering and intuitive composition common in modern American graphic design during the 1950s; rather, the artwork of the mature Miles was in deep dialogue with an international style of design that emanated most strongly from Switzerland and Germany. There, an enduring influence of constructivism –

identified above all with Soviet poster design, and involving the incorporation of photo images and type – combined with a newer sobriety and limitation of resources, often based around an exact use of the inevitable compositional grid (this often remaining visible in the finished design).⁴ Rule-based and clean, rational and cool: as is common in design history, Reid Miles is often lionised as a lone genius, but the extent to which he shared these values and techniques with his European counterparts is plain.

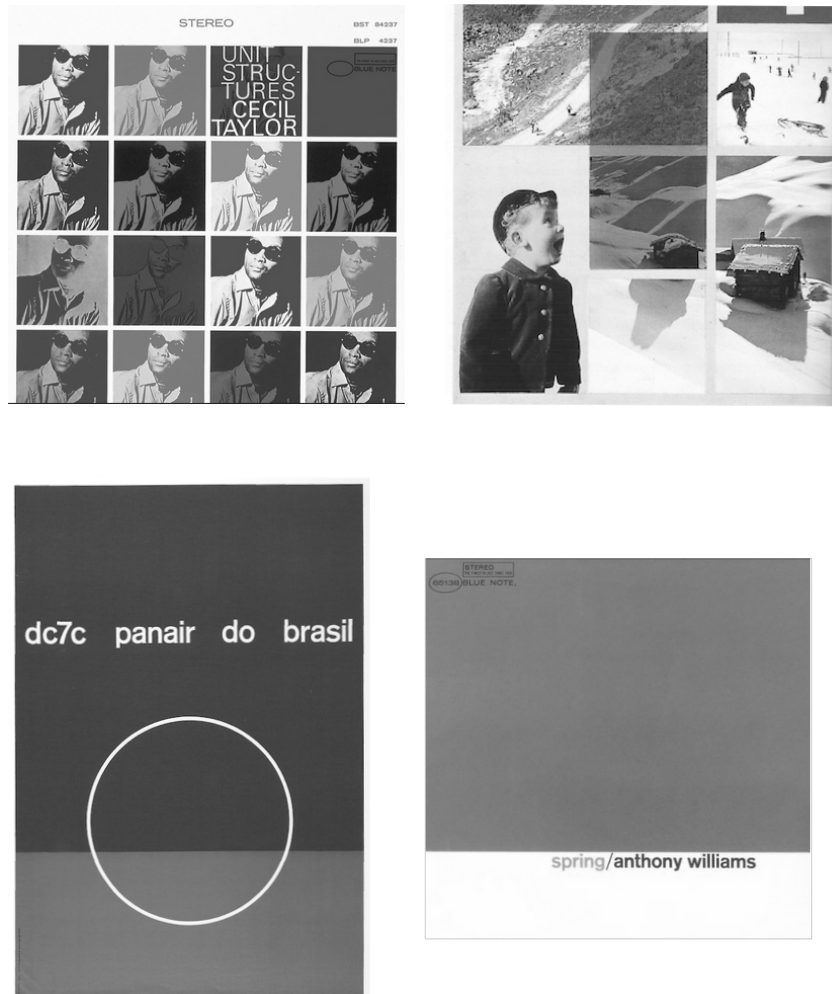


Fig. 11: Cecil Taylor, *Unit Structures* (Blue Note, 1966); detail of Swiss Tourist Board poster by Emil Maurer (1952); Brazil Airlines poster by Mary Vieira (1957); Anthony Williams, *Spring* (Blue Note, 1965).

These covers routinely organise black faces inside grids, on which close-up textures of black skin are framed and rendered buyable. If Krauss saw those grids as rationalism silencing subjectivity, experience overcome by a will to order, then it's not hard to imagine that Enlightenment prerogative harmonising here with a history

of blackness as commodity – stretching from slavery to mediatised cool – the grid as a prison, the sound the experience contained, the cover a bill of ownership.

There's little doubt that the cosmopolitan dash of this work excited (and excites) commodity fetishism. But however these products articulate the binding of black creativity with a transnational regime of thought, commerce and aesthetics, there must be something new and liberating in play here too. As the historian of graphic design Richard Hollis shows (2006), in Switzerland debates simmered around the extent to which intuition and rational planning should inform this modern approach – a decade past fascism, central European discourses were still not done with an attachment to the doctrinaire, the untainted – and important theorists demanded that truly modern design be anonymous, serving a uniform design language rather than an individual's own project. This was modernist ideology at its most severe. Yet while he adopted an internationalist vocabulary, Reid Miles' use of it was anything but formally pure: if his work reflected a dialogue with international design, then this part of it was voiced with a distinctive playfulness and sense of improvisation. Grids are there, but often squashed and malformed. Grotesk type is common, its letters reduced to their absolute basics, but it is often sliced into, its spacing demands dismissed, its claim to communicative functionalism undone.

And those photographs, taken for Blue Note by Alfred Lion's owner partner Francis Wolff, speak so much of the agency of the musicians presented. The posed shot, the stagey gimmick, these were almost completely alien to Blue Note's covers. Wolff's expert photos were almost always taken in the Van Gelder studio as the musicians recorded, and what is seen materialises the room heard on record. Musicians are shown immersed, serious, business-like, thoughtful, energetic, and heard that way too. Their skin is, admittedly, sometimes erotically described, but its black-and-white textural detail – a visual analogue of the key-click and finger-snap detail caught so clearly by Van Gelder's microphones – contrasts with the blank colour fields around them in such a way as to emphasise subjectivity; when photographs are cropped in constructivist style, and they often are, it is in the service of a visual rhythm that describes too the players' own work. Expression has the upper hand in the battle against control.

Christmas, 1964

Blue Note's albums were pressed in small numbers, and in Europe they were like gold dust – a few had been licensed to and repackaged by local labels, but the originals were not distributed in Britain until early 1961. Even then they went on sale at the

extremely high price of 49s 4½d, surprising retailers and label alike by selling well in London, Manchester and Leeds, as Francis Wolff reported to the trade press. The fetish value of the imported luxury was understood. As *Melody Maker* put it, ‘Mr. Wolff agreed that the American sleeves – better designed, more informative and far more durable than the vast majority of British disc covers – might have had a part in the big sales’. The presence of that original sleeve was underlined in the company’s adverts. And visual images were not always needed for a modern cool to be encapsulated, as attested by the black, type-only cover of Cannonball Adderley’s *Somethin’ Else* (1958), Blue Note’s biggest British success in the early-1960s (which meant 2000 copies sold in two years, ‘very good for a jazz LP in Britain’ as Wolff told *Melody Maker*) (Dawbarn 1961, 1962).

At that price only the initiated would have been tempted. But it’s easy to hear in *Somethin’ Else* how a certain kind of modern jazz could so easily make itself comfortable in the hi-fi home. The opening Autumn Leaves – given a strangely foreboding arrangement, but whistleable enough – showcases Miles Davis’ signature Harmon-muted sound, this a tonal reduction that stripped away the trumpet’s conversation-stopping blare. The fizz of Art Blakey’s ride cymbal is so effervescent that its strikes don’t mark swing time as much as create an uninterrupted sonic texture at the top of the range, the top of the roomspace. At the bottom is a deep, dark wood bass, and sometimes hollow toms; between, a snare and hi-hat, crisp and clean. Within that floor-to-ceiling register – as much a colour field as any painted wall, or block on an album cover – the bass and piano create timbral movement, Sam Jones’ bass lines slow waves from low to mid, Hank Jones’ pearled piano touch, and his old fashioned concentration on the upper register of his instrument, passing glints of light. Both Davis and Adderley are close-miked but controlled, intimate, breathing audible. The trumpet and saxophone, modern jazz’s central horns, were also the ones closest to a standard speaking register.

The chatter is crucial: the music’s foregrounding of improvisation made the soloists two voices in a room full of others, its reduction of composed material – too attention-demanding, too strong in identity and statement – a part of its values and claim to individualism, but also of its ability to turn wallflower. Still, the devoted would find enough difficulty to occupy them, or maybe to agitate: Davis’ underpitched call in Autumn Leaves’ introduction, and the strain it takes for him to get the right notes subsequently; the moment five minutes in when Sam Jones fumbles his chord progression; the outro audibly edited in after Hank Jones’ rhapsodic, tempo-changing passage had proven a risk too far.

And not just effort, or fault, but also the strangeness of true hip. The title piece's queasy tonal ambivalence – its rooting harmony is not a straightforward minor or major, but an 'altered' chord that harks back (and across) to the octatonic breakthroughs of early modernist composers at the end of the European century – this track must have inspired more than a few turned heads, cocktails lowered, attentions engaged. Remember the scene in the previous year's *Jailhouse Rock*, where Elvis' character is brought to a party in a smart suburban home full of middle-aged professionals, the party pausing to consider a record by the unfortunately fictional jazz musician, Stubby Reitmeyer.

I think Stubby's gone overboard with these altered chords, don't you?

- I agree. I think Brubeck and Desmond have gone just as far with dissonance as I care to go.

They sounded informed, but they were square; their British counterparts, naturally a few years behind, would have been reading *Ideal Home*, and the jazz column in which the broadcaster Benny Green provided pugnacious biographical sketches, careless historical surveys and, above all, record reviews for those seeking something more daring than the magazine's light-classical recommendations. *Ideal Home's* music offerings had always been made on the assumption that readers were clueless social climbers ('Buying the Right Records', November 1956); modern jazz's full, mid-1960s entry to mainstream domestic respectability was therefore marked at the moment when, in November 1964, it was suggested as soundtrack for the season's parties. One final coordination of the rational and the subjective, one final grid:

| TYPE OF PARTY | DRINK | FOOD | ATMOSPHERE |
|----------------------|---|---|---|
| Impromptu party | D1 Simple bar | F4 Quick tuna fish mayonnaise (Fresh fruit) | <i>A little foresight will keep the larder ready for the spur-of-the-moment party</i> |
| Large cocktail party | D1 Simple bar D10 Vodka mixes D13 Bourbon D41 Horse's neck | F19 Cocktail -F26 pieces | SR8 Camelot—orchestral C3 Dutch whiffs <i>Concentrate on "drinks" not "cocktails" and you'll be free to enjoy your guests . . . and see them all</i> |
| Lunch party | D19 Chilled white port D23 White wine D45 Liqueurs | F7 Cold boiled chicken with tuna fish sauce F12 Chinese combination salad F13 Mandarine gâteau | SR11 Instrumental jazz—Miles Davies C1 Cuban cigar—half corona <i>More usual than a dinner party, especially when friends are staying for the weekend</i> |
| Patio party | D34 Cool Harveys' cup D39 Orange and lemon pressé | F3 Country-style corn casserole F10 Fish and mushroom pie, served cold F18 Late-night soup | SR11 Instrumental jazz—Cannonball Adderley <i>Quiet music, light drinks and soft atmosphere, keep neighbours sleepily content</i> |

Fig. 12: *Ideal Home* 90/5 (November 1964), p. 7.

The letter codes linked to recipes and one-line album descriptions by Benny Green. Cannonball Adderley's *Them Dirty Blues*: 'a magnificent example of music difficult to play but very easy to listen and dance to'. Miles Davis' (or 'Davies') *Sketches of Spain*: 'a choice souvenir of that summer trip to the Continent' (Green 1964). Perhaps it was the trumpeter's fault for so willingly fading into the background on that record; whatever, the utopian visions of abstract modern art, the critical radicality of black bebop hip, they now sounded softly over cold boiled chicken with the couple who had holidayed in fascist Spain.

The texture of cool modernity had worn down, the excitement had passed, the mood had lost its meaning. Some new musical source was needed to make the home feel different again. It was coming. But it wouldn't be jazz.

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Endnotes

¹ The *Melody Maker* survey suggested that modern jazz fans showed a strong preference either for record buying or club-going, but not both. Meanwhile, a 1966 *Jazz Journal* market survey (analysed in Anon. 1966) found that on average its readers bought between 20 and 30 LPs per year, 'with some extroverts in the 100 to 200 class', and the 'vast bulk' of these albums – in which swing, mainstream and

modern jazz were all well represented – coming from non-budget series. The contrast in age, wealth and status with the average pop fan of the period, whom the *Melody Maker* survey found buying only 2 or 3 LPs in a year, was marked. On the British jazz audience's class make-up see also Heining (2012, p. 35-58).

² Cultural categories were being questioned – the journal's volume index could set Basie next to Benvenuto Cellini – but high-low distinctions were not being abandoned as much as shifted sideways: Newton rarely missed an opportunity to assail rock and roll, sometimes employing the same terms with which jazz had been dismissed 30 years earlier, and he took pains to reconstruct hierarchies of the populist and the intellectual within jazz itself (Newton 1957a, 1957b). Still, all this he did while quoting Adorno, or – a frequent touchstone – André Hodeir, the scholarly critic-composer who was through his writing playing a central role in jazz's critical repositioning, both in his native France and internationally (see Perchard 2015).

³ See also Forge (1957). Columbia's art director Neil Fujita provided his own abstract paintings for *Mingus Ah Um* (1959) and Brubeck's *Time Out* (1960), and a Jackson Pollock painting sat in one corner of Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* (1961) (see Cawthra 2011); it was reduced to illegibility, but its meaning, its setting of taste and status coordinates, was immediately readable.

⁴ The constructivist link, and the designers' central role in a burgeoning European social democratic project, meant that this design was at least implicitly linked to a broader social vision of the kind in which, for instance, a music identified as black American would be afforded serious attention.