

Is a Hit, but Is It Good for Jazz?

Krin Gabbard

... La La Land () ... //

ultimately makes a strong case that jazz does indeed still matter.

Any understanding of *Whiplash* as a “jazz film” must begin by situating it within larger traditions. A work of profound cinephilia, *Whiplash* references multiple films, most of them in the musical comedy genre. But Chazelle does more than just quote from classical musicals, and he makes no attempt to recreate their aesthetics. As he has said in interviews, Chazelle was as devoted to seriously representing the emotional lives of his characters as he was to paying homage to American musical cinema. He wanted “to smash into that old-fashioned musical logic” by finding magic in the “grit and texture” of everyday life.²

A catalog of the many films and cinematic traditions that Chazelle has addressed in *Whiplash* should start with his joking reference to Frank Tashlin’s *Millions* (1956). At the very beginning of *Millions*, the outer edges of a square space containing the word “Cinemascope” suddenly expand to the traditional wide-screen ratio, recalling the opening scene of Tashlin’s film in which actor Tom Ewell appears to physically push the walls of the image to the outer edges of the screen. Chazelle has claimed another minor bit of inspiration, admitting that “Another Day of Sun,” the production number that follows the Cinemascope gag, was based on the scene in Rouben Mamoulian’s *Swing Time* (1932) that begins with Maurice Chevalier singing “Isn’t It Romantic” in a simple tailor’s shop. Different groups of people hear the song and sing it themselves so that anyone passing by can also pick it up. Thanks primarily to a singing troupe of soldiers marching across the country, the song is finally passed to Jeanette MacDonald, who gives it her own operatic interpretation from high up in her chateau.

Chazelle had this scene in mind when arranging *Whiplash*’s opening song “Another Day of Sun” to be passed from one motorist to another as they step out of their cars to sing in the middle of a gigantic traffic jam.

A more crucial influence on *Whiplash* is the work of the French director Jacques Demy. In interviews, Chazelle regularly singles out Demy’s *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964) as his favorite film. The use of bold colors for costumes, interiors, and even cityscapes in *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* recalls the look of Demy’s film, as does an emotionally charged conclusion in which the lovers are reunited. Demy’s *Yves* (1967) also comes up in Chazelle’s interviews. As in *Yves*, actors sing in a quickly articulated style with a conversational tone, much like the vocals of French performers Charles Aznavour and Jacques Brel. “Another Day of Sun” features several actors singing in English but imitating the conversational style of the songs in Demy’s films. And like the agile motorists at the beginning of Chazelle’s film, actors seem to spontaneously break into singing and dancing throughout *Whiplash*. In *Yves*, of course, no one ever stops bursting into song.

The soundtrack of *Whiplash* has much in common with the scores that French composer Michel Legrand wrote for Demy’s films. Justin Hurwitz, who played in a band with Chazelle when they were teenagers and has composed the music for all four of Chazelle’s films, has talked about his borrowings from Legrand’s cinematic compositions. The best example may be Legrand’s practice of recording a jazz trio of piano, bass, and drums in front of a symphony orchestra. The music behind “Another Day of Sun” is an excellent example of how Hurwitz has made use of this practice. As a devoted jazz enthusiast, Legrand regularly borrowed from great American traditions.

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Chazelle and Hurwitz have paid off that debt with their own tributes to Legrand.

Chazelle has also mined the rich veins of American musical comedy, especially the well-established trope of soon-to-be lovers transcending early stages of hostility through dance and song. We see this in the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers film *Band Wagon* (1935), for which Chazelle has expressed admiration. Chazelle has also spoken of his affection for *On the Beach* (1952), another film in which an attractive couple are joined in song and dance before finding romance on the other side of their initial antagonism. In terms of *On the Beach*, Chazelle prominently looks back to Hollywood musicals in "Epilogue," the long production number that closes the film and recalls the stylized, color-drenched scene designs for the extended ballet sequences that conclude *On the Beach* (1951) and *On the Beach* (1953).

To their credit, Chazelle and actors Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling labored to create the seamless dance numbers that distinguish many of Hollywood's classic musicals. Compare the extended dance takes of Mia (Stone) and Seb (Gosling) with the screen performances of Fred Astaire, who insisted on long, unedited takes when his dances were filmed. Then compare these sequences to the numbers in a film such as Rob Marshall's *Chicago* (2002), which are cobbled together from numerous shots, few of which last more than a second or two.

On the Beach is also distinguished by several scenes in which characters actually sing as they are being filmed, unlike the vast majority of performers in musical films who mouth words as they listen to playback. Often these words are supplied by someone other than the actor on screen. Chazelle has said that he likes "roughness," and he is more than willing

to sacrifice some of the surface sheen of the conventional Hollywood film. So, when Mia joins Seb at the piano for a short performance of "City of Stars," when Mia briefly sings "Someone in the Crowd" in a lady's room, and when Mia sings her climactic aria, "The Fools Who Dream," they are singing in real time and, as in the dance sequences, without edits. Although directors can do as many retakes as they wish in these situations, the performers take great risks when they present themselves live and unedited. In some ways, Gosling and Stone are like jazz musicians flying above the music without a net.

There are not many examples in cinema of actors singing in real time, but a few that do exist are worth mentioning. For *Breathless* (1965), Jean-Luc Godard recorded Jean-Paul Belmondo and Anna Karina singing outdoors, making sure that their vocals reflected their body movements, including the moment when Belmondo continues singing as he jumps down from a tree. This is as good an example as any of Godard's project of exposing and problematizing the conventions of dominant cinema. In a completely different appropriation of this tradition, Anne Hathaway laboriously tugs at our heart strings when she exudes "I Dreamed a Dream" live and in tight close-up in *The Iron Lady* (2012).

Robert Altman's *The American* (1993) also deserves mention for one of the most elegant performances ever by a singer-actor. In *The American*, Annie Ross plays Tess, an older jazz singer with an elaborate romantic history.³ The same description can be applied to Annie Ross herself, but in creating Tess, Ross sings in a lower register and with a sharper attack than when she performs in clubs. She developed a voice and a singing style that is entirely compatible with the character of Tess. Ross's portrayal is even more compelling because

she sings in real time with her backup band, avoiding the moment in most mu-

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the narrative. Music enters first when we see Guy (Jason Palmer) playing his trumpet along with a singer. Later, at a party scene, a character breaks into song and then joins one of the guests in a tap-dance competition. Audiences might tend to bracket off these early scenes with their diegetic soundtracks from the realism of the film's mostly nonmusical moments. But the film is almost over when Madeline (Desirée Garcia) sings to herself with nondiegetic sound while wandering through the park. Even more strikingly, when she later learns that Guy is still interested in her even though they had broken up earlier in the film, she exuberant-

respectively, tenor saxophone and trombone. And thanks to Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington, who wrote extraordinary music for the film, the jazz lives of the protagonists strongly resonate through the music.⁶ *Blue* ends with the expatriate jazz artist Ram Bowen (Newman) deciding to stay in Paris and not return to his American home. His decision comes just as the film's other main characters are heading back to the States, including the American schoolteacher Lillian (Joanne Woodward), with whom he was having an affair. Determined to become a serious composer, Bowen is convinced that he can only achieve his goal if he remains in Paris and, as he tells Lillian, only if he works alone: "I got to follow through with the music. I got to find out how far I can go. And I guess that means alone."⁷

In *Blue*, Mia goes off to Paris to practice her craft and becomes a huge success. Seb decides not to accompany her, even though that would have been a real possibility, as the fantasy ballet at the end of the film makes clear. But when it looks as if Mia will get a major role in a film that will shoot in Paris, Seb's advice recalls what Paul Newman said to Joanne Woodward: "When you get this, you got to give it everything you got." Although the woman in *Blue* abandons the man, while it is the man in *Blue* who walks away from the woman, both films embrace the myth that great art can only be created by a scrupulously isolated artist— and maybe only if it's in Paris.

Whether intentionally or not, *Blue* has much in common with a jazz film that fits Rick Altman's definition of the show musical: Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York* (1977). In Chazelle's film as well as in Scorsese's film, the leading man is much more devoted to jazz than is the leading lady. In both, the man ends up performing in his own jazz club while the woman ascends to movie stardom. In

both films, the lovers break up and then reencounter each other in the last moments of the film. And in neither film do the lovers reconnect; the films do not shy away from the darker side of romance.

I would argue that *Blue* is in some ways a response to *New York, New York*, whose glum ending probably prevented it from striking box office gold. The last big production number in Scorsese's film is the boffo performance of the title song by Francine (Liza Minnelli), who has the screen all to herself. In the scene at Jimmy's (Robert de Niro) club the Major Chord that immediately precedes Minnelli's big number, the music is portrayed in a much less sensational fashion. In fact, we see a modernist jazz group performing only for a few moments and certainly not in a spotlight. The camera quickly cuts away and follows Jimmy to the bar, where he flirts with some young women, and then into his office. Late in the film but hardly at the end, jazz has disappeared from *New York, New York*.

Scorsese's film concludes with Francine and Jimmy agreeing to meet later in the evening. But both independently decide not to meet, heading off in different directions as the film ends. At the end of *New York, New York*, Seb and Mia also pass up a moment to reunite after several years of separation. And in addition to placing the name of one of America's two largest cities in their titles, *New York, New York* and *New York, New York* share the practice of placing the characters' nonreunion immediately after a major production number. But there the similarities end. Instead of giving the production number to only one of his lead characters, Chazelle features them both. And instead of leaving the two leads entirely separate from each other, Chazelle brings them together in an extended sequence that could be one character's dream, the shared dream of both characters, or perhaps even the

audience's fantasy. The first part of *Chazelle*'s concluding number revises the romantic history of Mia and Seb to eliminate all conflict and obstacles to their love affair. It then takes them into a fantasy world where they even end up with the same married life we have already seen Mia living with her husband (Tom Everett Scott).

The conclusion of *Chazelle* allows us to have it both ways, first revealing how painful it is for Mia and Seb to recall the intense feelings they once had for each other. Chazelle abandons the feel-good conventions of the classical musical when the former lovers agonizingly lock gazes for the first time in five years. But this moment is immediately followed

and upbeat performances on top of a complex, emotionally fraught story line.

When asked to list his favorite drummers, Chazelle has named Roach, Jo Jones, and Buddy Rich, adding that he liked the “theatricality” of solos performed by Rich and Gene Krupa. This preference is surely compatible with Chazelle’s larger ambitions. He told Terry Gross that he always wanted to be a filmmaker, even when he was working hardest at becoming a jazz musician. At least according to Justin Hurwitz, Chazelle won awards as a jazz drummer at competitions when he was in high school. Nevertheless, Chazelle told Gross that his playing never “measured up” to that of his idols. He aspired to be an excellent drummer, in part because of an aggressive high school band director who was fond of saying “not my tempo” to the musicians in his ensemble.

Chazelle freely admits that his second film, *Whiplash* (2013), is autobiographical. If nothing else, the film documents the pain and exertion that are the inevitable side effects of pursuing perfection, at least for anyone who wants to be a great jazz drummer. And like the Paul Newman character in *Hombre*, Andrew (Miles Teller), the drummer hero of *Whiplash*, sends his girlfriend away, believing that he cannot succeed with romantic distractions.

When talking with Terry Gross about *Whiplash*, Chazelle was careful to add that his own teacher, on whom the character of Fletcher (J. K. Simmons) is based, was not at all as sadistic and violent as the character in *Hombre*. Obviously, it makes a better story when Fletcher turns out to be so devoted to bringing out the potential he sees in Andrew that he is prepared to go to almost any extreme, even losing his job at the conservatory. What’s missing from *Whiplash* is a compelling reason why someone would want to suffer through brutal initiation rituals to

play lightning-fast, bombastic compositions with the kind of military precision that Fletcher demands. Late in the film, when Andrew goes to hear Fletcher in a jazz club, I was amazed to hear him playing jazz piano in the soft, lyrical mode associated with someone like Bill Evans, who never recorded anything like the harsh compositions in *Whiplash*.

Significantly, there are no important black characters in *Whiplash*, while Andrew aspires to play like the white show-off Buddy Rich.¹⁰ The driving, intense arrangements programed by Fletcher recall

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move freely with grace and humor and that everyone, regardless of race, gender, and class, gets it. Pity that this fantasy is so typical of American jazz films in which black artists applaud and even congratulate white artists who have stolen their music. Chazelle has succeeded in capturing the utopian magic of the old musicals, but at least in *Whiplash*, he seems to have overlooked the racial hierarchies that were implicit and frequently explicit in those films, beginning with Al Jolson's blackface appearances in the pioneering musicals of the 1920s and 1930s.

Shortly after the scene at the Lighthouse when Mia and Seb joyfully improvise their own call-and-response, the film lets us know that Seb has made a painful compromise by joining Keith's band. When we first see Keith and his large ensemble on stage with Mia in the audience, Seb has a moment alone in the spotlight playing what is clearly his own music on a grand piano. Little by little, however, as Keith takes over and begins to sing "Start a Fire," the music loses its magic. Although he smiles throughout the process, Seb moves from the grand piano to

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Keith is not being entirely fair when he says that Seb wants to be a revolutionary. On the contrary, Seb is content to play the older, venerated music, and he never expresses a desire to reach out to young people.

Chazelle has said that building so much of the film around Seb's jazz purism and Keith's insistence that he must move on is "kind of meta." In other words, the film is commenting on itself by equating jazz with Hollywood musicals. Although *Whiplash* is highly influenced by older movies, Chazelle hoped that his film could "push things forward, modernize, and update." And at least according to Keith, Seb must move on from his desire to play older, purer jazz, just as Chazelle must move on from blandly revisiting the conventions of the classical musical. It is significant that early in the film, Seb is trying to recreate a riff that Thelonious Monk recorded almost fifty years earli-

