*Transcultural Jazz: Israeli Musicians and Multi-Local Music Making,* by Noam Lemish. New York: Routledge, 2024 (published December 2023). xiii, 240 pp.

For those familiar with the global jazz scene, it may be a surprise that so little research has been produced on Israeli jazz—a country with several high-ranking jazz conservatories, one of the largest exporters of international touring artists, and with artists signed to top international record labels.[1] Noam Lemish's first full-length monograph, *Transcultural Jazz: Israeli Musicians and Multi-Local Music Making*, is timely as it fills a gaping void in jazz studies. One of Routledge's "Transnational Studies in Jazz" series, it takes a multidisciplinary approach to surveying the transient and dynamic Israeli jazz scene, employing ethnography as a method to platform the perspectives of several jazz scene pioneers. Lemish provides theoretical analyses of the music and a more general historical overview of the development of the genre in Israel as it transformed into the hybridized (and what he problematizes as a) genre of Israeli jazz, in tandem with Israeli musicians playing American and European-style jazz in the United States and Europe. As a jazz scholar who focuses on Israeli jazz, it is exciting for me to see this addition to the field solely dedicated to Israeli jazz, in addition to Ofer Gazit's new monograph, *Jazz Migrations: Movement as Place among New York Musicians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), which considers Israeli jazz musicians as part of a wider community of immigrant jazz musicians in New York City.

In his book, Lemish explores the multidirectional flows of cosmopolitan musical practices that have contributed to the messiness of global music in Israel. Expanding on his 2020 article,[2] Lemish highlights the pattern of Israeli jazz musicians' lifestyle as "multi-local" musicians, and how the dynamic and peripatetic nature of Israeli jazz musicians lends itself to a unique polyphony of style and talent. He pays attention to the importance of his interlocutors' musical education, both in Israel and abroad, as a key factor in why the Israeli jazz scene is known for having technically talented players. I appreciate that Lemish outlines the many global and local musical influences of Israeli jazz musicians, both through their musical upbringing at home and their continued musical education abroad. Lemish also provides a comprehensive background on Israeli musical genres in order to inform the reader about the musical landscape that Israeli jazz musicians draw from in their own compositional practices.

I find myself critical of Lemish's decision to incorporate a significant amount of personal political commentary regarding Israel and the broader

[1] Patrick Jarenwattananon, "Why Are So Many Jazz Musicians from Israel These Days?" *A Blog Supreme* (2010), NPR Jazz, npr.org.
[2] "Audiotopias of the Multi-Local Musician: Israeli Jazz Musicians, Transcultural Jazz and the Polyphony of Style," *Jazz Perspectives* 12:2 (2020), 227–45.

"Middle East conflict" into this jazz studies text. While I acknowledge that integrating such commentary could be justified if it effectively connects the political context to the evolution of the jazz community under discussion, his attempt appears strained. While the book was no doubt written before October 7, 2023,[3] in a post-October 7 world, some of his assertions analyzed below appear dated and even trite. In his analysis, Lemish presents a starkly dichotomous portrayal of the Israeli–Palestinian situation comparable to oversimplified narratives commonly encountered on social media—Israel as the occupier and aggressor and Palestine the innocent victim. After the October 7 massacre and the misinformation on various social media platforms, it is all the more important that great scholars like Lemish articulate the complex dynamics of the Israeli political landscape that has been disrupted; the abstract and reductive political framings should give way to immense grief in the aftermath of the event and a substantial shift in discourse.

Lemish grapples with a contradiction within music-making practices in the Israeli jazz scene, particularly in focusing on "falafel jazz," which emerged from the hybridization of Black American jazz traditions with local Israeli musical practices. Lemish claims that Israelis choose to incorporate Israeli musical genres in their jazz practices in order to produce a more distinctive sound and to market themselves. He goes on to say that Israelis choose to play jazz to escape the confines of their national identity and the culture that shapes it. Yet, throughout his interviews with his interlocutors, they speak of their love for their Israeli culture and the music they grew up listening to and learning from. There are many reasons why musical practices are hybridized and how music communities develop at 'musical borderlands.'[4] Lemish's notion of "blending of blends" does not occur simply to find a 'new sound,' or escape the Israeli hegemonic culture; instead, something more nuanced is taking place here. Motti Regev's research on cosmopolitanism in Israeli popular music would be one avenue for considering jazz's presence in Israel and its movement out of the country.[5] Music can be a resource for individuals to negotiate the structural

[3] On October 7, 2023, Hamas carried out a massive terrorist attack on Israel in which they killed over 1200 people and took over 250 civilians captive in Gaza. This date marked the beginning of a large-scale, multifront war between Israel and several Iranian proxy militias, including Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, as well factions in Syria and Iraq, and direct attacks from Iran. At the time of this review, the war is still ongoing, and 101 Israeli hostages are still being held by Hamas in Gaza.

[4] Following Galit Saada-Ophir, "Borderland Pop: Arab Jewish Musicians and the Politics of Performance," *Cultural Anthropology* 21:2 (2006): 205–33.

[5] Motti Regev, "Cultural Uniqueness and Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism," *European Journal of Social Theory* 10:1 (2007): 123–38; "Ethno-National Pop-Rock Music: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism Made from Within," *Cultural Sociology* 1:3 (2007): 317–41; "Pop-Rock Music as Expressive Isomorphism: Blurring the National, the Exotic, and the Cosmopolitan in National Music," *American Behavioral Scientist* 55:5 (2011): 558–73; and *Pop-Rock Music: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Late Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Edwin Seroussi and

conditions of their communities, and it can also be used as a framework through which one can perform or inform one's sense of place (including nation).[6]

Lemish also writes about the "falafel jazz" subgenre as coming out of a history of Jews appropriating Arab and Palestinian culture as part of the Zionist project, which involved a rejection of diasporic life. His writing on Zionism, once again, is dated—this time he uses an analysis of the Zionist project that was relevant to its pre- and early-Statehood period; but by the 1970s, when jazz was becoming a genre that was performed and taught in Israel, the Zionist cultural project of Hebrewism was in a process of fracture. I refer here to Assaf Shelleg's chronology of the development of art music in Israel in tandem with the increasing influence of Hebrewism on Israeli culture, followed by its subsequent fracturing and dilution.[7] While it is true that early policies and polities of modern statehood in Israel were crafted upon a bibliocentric and territorial brand of nationalist Zionism, for the most part that structure has disintegrated, in part due to the changing population and landscape of the young country. The Ashkenazi-centrism that controlled the culture-building project of early 20th-century Zionism has been overhauled. In the past fifty years there has been a return to the aesthetics of Jewish diasporas, particularly those of the Middle East and North Africa. To refer to Jewish Israelis as 'appropriating' Arab culture is to erase thousands of years of history of Jews producing music in diasporas, particularly in the many Arab-controlled countries that Jews had been living and working in (before they were, for the most part, murdered or exiled).[8] Rather than viewing the Jewish diaspora as a static event that ended with the establishment of the State of Israel, Sheffer reflects on ongoing changes in Jewish diasporas, caused by changes in the ease of movement where Jewish people reside, new technologies for communication and travel, and ease of global economic activity.[9] Most of the Israeli jazz musicians performing "falafel jazz," or jazz with Middle Eastern and North African characteristics, are themselves the products of intersecting Jewish diasporas, using ethnography

---

Motti Regev, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

[6] Bennett Andy, "Identity: Music, Community, and Self," in *The Routledge Reader on Sociology of Music*, ed. John Shepherd and Kyle Devine (Routledge: New York, 2015).

[7] Assaf Shelleg, *Jewish Contiguities and the Soundtrack of Israeli History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[8] Laurence D. Loeb, "The Jewish Musician and the Music of Fars," *Asian Music* 4:1 (1972): 3–14; Philip V. Bohlman and Ruth F. Davis, "*Mizrakh*, Jewish Music and the Journey to the East," in *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1940s*, ed. Bennett Zon (Routledge: London, 2007), 95–125; Avner Bahat, "The Musical Traditions of Oriental Jews: Orient and Occident," *The World of Music* 22:2 (1980): 46–58; Saada-Ophir, "Borderland Pop"; Christopher Silver, *Recording History: Jews, Muslims, and Music across Twentieth-Century North Africa* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

[9] Gabriel Sheffer, "Is the Jewish Diaspora Unique? Reflections on the Diaspora's Current Situation," *Israel Studies* 10:1 (2005): 1–35.

(via oral history and recordings) to learn about their own histories and heritage and incorporate them into their own music.

Lemish highlights three "waves" of Israeli jazz musicians by spotlighting three musicians—one representing each wave, in chapter 6.[10] Journalistic articles that have referred to the "three waves" of emigration of Israeli jazz musicians have never been specific about the delineations of each of these waves, and judging by the similarity of age between the three musicians Lemish singles out, I wonder: how many "waves" have happened since? There is considerable representation of Israeli jazz musicians making the move from conservatory programs in Israel to partner programs at Berklee College of Music in Boston and The New School for Jazz in New York City, as well as in other conservatories, who have gone on to pursue an array of careers in jazz, even having built an ecosystem of venues that frequently feature Israeli jazz musicians in Brooklyn (such as Wilson Live, Bar Lunatico, and Ornithology Jazz Club).[11] There has been further growth in the transnational Israeli jazz scene, with several younger generations than those covered by Lemish, and he leaves the door open for far more research on this community. Not only that, but with the events of October 7 and the following war, we have entered a period of significant instability and change that will continue to affect aesthetic practices of Israeli jazz musicians at home and in the diaspora. Lemish's text is an excellent introduction to the complex and messy transnational community of Israeli jazz, and I look forward to seeing how this field of research continues to develop, thanks in part to Lemish's research.

REBECCA ZOLA

[10] The "three waves" of Israeli jazz immigration have been written about in journalism on Israeli jazz. Most notably, this article: Santo, Orli. 2016. "The Three Waves of Israeli Jazz Musicians." NY Jewish Week. https://www.jta.org/2016/06/01/ny/the-three-waves-of-israeli-jazz-musicians

[11] This observation comes from my own ethnographic research of the Israeli jazz community, in progress for my forthcoming dissertation.