



## Sidney Finkelstein: an appreciation of the great Marxist cultural critic

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*Finkelstein's "Jazz: A People's Music" is sold out, but a new edition is at the typesetters and preorders are being taken by International Publishers.*

*In this article originally published in [Culture Matters](#), Dan Rosenberg offers an appreciation of Sidney Finkelstein, who died on 14 January 1974.*

The Marxist cultural critic Sidney Finkelstein lived in a suitcase in my mother's closet. My parents never used the suitcase in question for travel. When I was around 13, in 1966, I asked my father what the deal was with this suitcase. He put it on the big bed and opened it up, and out

jumped several hundred pamphlets, booklets, and magazines, with materials by Finkelstein among them. They were all publications of the Communist Party USA, to which my parents, along with Finkelstein, belonged.

Having worn red diapers all my life I was not completely taken by surprise, but my dad went on to explain that during the McCarthy period of the 1950s, (coinciding with my infancy) we had gone underground.

My parents lived a secret existence on the recommendation of the party in the face of potential fascism. And my mother and father had cleaned out many of their books, while locking up the remainder in the green suitcase, which remained in hiding for more than ten years.

### **Encounters with jazz**

Upon Sidney's release from the suitcase, I was able to read his articles on the arts and proceeded to acquire at last his fundamental book on jazz: *Jazz: A People's Music*. [The last edition is sold out, but a new edition is at the typesetters and preorders are being taken by International Publishers] Sidney came out of the suitcase in the form of articles written for a magazine once called *Masses & Mainstream* and then *Mainstream*.

My eyes rested first on one with an orange cover. Finkelstein had the headlining article: "Jazz: National Expression or International Folk Music?" It appeared in 1960. That was the year I had begun studying the drums under the percussionist Roger "Montego Joe" Sanders in Brooklyn, from whom I learned a bit about improvising. (I learned a little later that he worked with Nina Simone, and much later that he recorded with Max Roach.)

After the Beatles appeared in the U.S. in 1964, I went hunting across the radio dial in search of as much of their music as possible. When I could not find it on the AM stations, I turned in frustration to the ones on FM. This became an adventure culminating in two jazz stations at the far end, reception fading in and out although they were right there in New York City where I lived: WRVR and WLIB-FM.

On the latter, I encountered the pianist Billy Taylor one afternoon as I struggled with my math homework. He was the station's most illustrious disc jockey, and he explained and taught between the records. In time, I found "Just Jazz with Ed Beach" on WRVR, featuring two and four-hour programs on particular musicians, with Beach's puns in the interludes. The names then appeared to me for the first time: Coleman Hawkins, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Lee Morgan, Art Blakey, Freddie Hubbard, Hank Mobley.

I never abandoned the Beatles, but more often I lived on the edge of the FM dial. In the same year, I read Sidney's article on jazz in the left cultural magazine *Mainstream*, my dad took me to see Duke Ellington at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Around and about the Left movement in New York City, I certainly had heard of Sidney Finkelstein. My piano teacher knew him well, and spoke of him often when I mentioned my growing interest in jazz. Her appraisal in 1966 was a mixture of admiration and pity. He could have done so much, could have gone so far with his knowledge in a more tolerant society.

She thought of him as simply brilliant, but spoke rather snidely of the fact that he could not play an instrument. She described to me his hands and fingers: fat, she said. Ungainly. Clumsy, cumbersome, too thick for the delicacy of piano fingering. She went on about her friend Sidney: he lacked style, and was a bit crude. I did not think much about this. I did not know him yet. Besides, she wasn't such a great teacher.

### **Finkelstein's work**

Meantime, I slowly made my way through the bushel of Finkelstein articles now free of underground existence. In a piece "How Art Began" (1954), Finkelstein discussed how early societies imaged their existences through artistic expression: pottery, increasingly embellished, for storage of food, water, and seeds; cave paintings, in depiction of the rituals of the hunt; burial tombs with carvings, portraits, and sculpture, culminating in pyramids; dances reflecting the rhythms of work, the gods, birth and death.

Nothing arises from people more naturally than art, wrote Finkelstein. But in exploitive societies, the “ruling class sees only itself as human,” impacting the acceptable forms and depictions. Nevertheless, working and lower class populations find “ways and means to express in art the humanity of the ruled, the ‘nobodies.’”

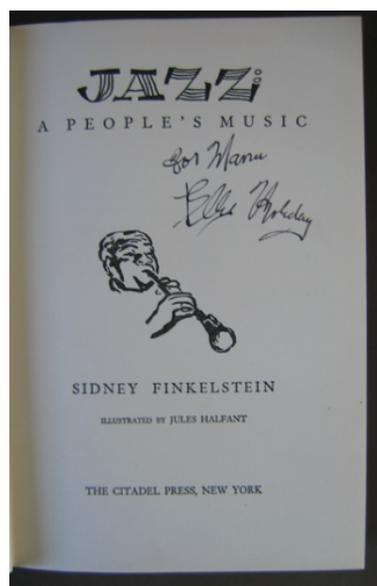
He wrote on architecture, film, literature, painting, and poetry, and more than once on Shakespeare. I had difficulty understanding everything. *Mainstream* and *Masses & Mainstream* possessed an impressive board of editors, to which Sidney belonged from the outset in 1948. Screenwriters like John Howard Lawson; writers like Lloyd Brown, Howard Fast, Phillip Bonosky, Jesus Colon, Barbara Giles, and Shirley Graham; artists like Hugo Gellert; scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois, Herbert Aptheker, and Annette Rubenstein. Paul Robeson’s name was always on the masthead.

Most were in or close to the Communist Party. Party members on the magazine belonged to the same party club or branch of people working in the field of culture. Blacklisted journal full-timers were not among those who went underground but instead worked as open Communists, including Sidney. *Masses & Mainstream* started as a fairly appealing and large-format left-wing journal (taking off from the widely circulated but defunct *New Masses*), but the Cold War and anti-Communist persecutions beat it down into the narrower *Mainstream*.

My parents rebuilt their book collection even before they took the magazines out of the suitcase, but they owned none of Sidney’s books. Later, I acquired *Realism in Art*, *How Music Expresses Ideas*, *Art and Society*, *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature*, *Sense & Nonsense of McLuhan*, and *Composer and Nation*. I showed a deft hand in obtaining books, sometimes without the knowledge of their owners. But in my mid-teens, *Jazz: A People’s Music* was the one I wanted.

My aunt had a substantial collection of old jazz records, given by her father: a good deal of Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, and Teddy Wilson. She had a four-album set of Louis Armstrong, also Duke Ellington’s Masterpieces by Ellington. Of these, she made a present to me in 1970.

And when I was about to leave her house with the record-laden shopping bags, she gave me *Jazz: A People's Music*. It appears that she was not the only one who made a present of it.



Back home, I studied it like the Bible. To this day, I am surprised that so few jazz historians and observers have mentioned his book. Then again, it was written in Cold War times. The well-known jazz critic Martin Williams certainly knew of Finkelstein, but told me in 1985 that he found it laughable for Marxists to write about jazz. His guffaw was instructive. Of those who commented favorably or drew upon the book, most were on or close to the Left: Francis Newton (the British historian E.J. Hobsbawm), Frank Kofsky, Amiri Baraka, and Ross Russell stood out. In his biography of Charlie

Parker, Russell referred to Sidney as “a recluse,” “tough and hardboiled,” and “proletarian.”

I was soon thrilled to learn that Finkelstein would be coming to our house to lead a discussion on culture, sponsored by my parents’ party club. I determined to obtain his autograph on the sacred day, which was a Friday in December 1970. The crowd was already sitting in our living and dining rooms when he arrived. I had been clutching the holy book all night, and I came running when he rang the bell. He entered the house and I was rendered speechless with fright. I quickly gave *Jazz: A People's Music* to my brother Jesse and whispered that he should get Sidney to sign it for me. Sidney happily complied but autographed it “To Jesse with regards,” an everlasting humiliation whose ink is sadly still visible.

### **Jazz: A People's Music**

Finkelstein published his book on jazz in 1948. He dedicated it to the birth of modern Israel, which took place that year. There had as yet been no wars between Israel and the Arab states. Finkelstein hoped that Jews and Arabs might live together peacefully. Finkelstein’s subtitle, “A People’s Music,” reflected his belief that African Americans were its initiators and developers.

The belittling, ignoring, ridiculing, stereotyping, and commercializing of jazz, in his view, belonged to the overall oppression of African Americans. Supporting, appreciating, teaching, listening, and exploring the theories and accomplishments of jazz musicians were on the other hand part and parcel of fighting for equality.

Left-wing artist Jules Halfant supplied illustrations for Finkelstein's book. As Art Director of Vanguard Records during Finkelstein's later years, Halfant hired Sidney to write liner notes. Sidney often gave Joan Baez and other Vanguard LPs to his friends. When I knew Halfant, he was on the board of a progressive Jewish children's school in Brooklyn, which one of my brothers attended.

At the time *Jazz: A People's Music* was published, Finkelstein held to the Communist Party's view that the African-American people in the United States were an oppressed nation. U.S. Communists particularly applied the thesis to the contiguous areas of black majority or near majority in a region of Southern states, strongholds of slavery a century before. Their espousal of "self-determination" shared certain characteristics with anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa.

Finkelstein's first chapter is one of the clearest outlines of the emergence of a field of music. He asserts, "This genuine creation within jazz is an imposing production, the most important and lasting body of music yet produced in the United States." Thanks to the best in jazz (for he saw the influences of commercialism and branding), "our age will be respected in the future." But jazz stemmed from many influences, thus assimilating old elements into a "wholly new music." Since its main innovators came from "the most exploited people among us," Finkelstein was not surprised that by its white evaluators "it is called... 'barbaric.'" Significant achievement lay in their incorporation of African musical styles, "European hymn tunes, French folk songs, Spanish songs and dances, mountain songs and dances which were transplanted growths from Europe."

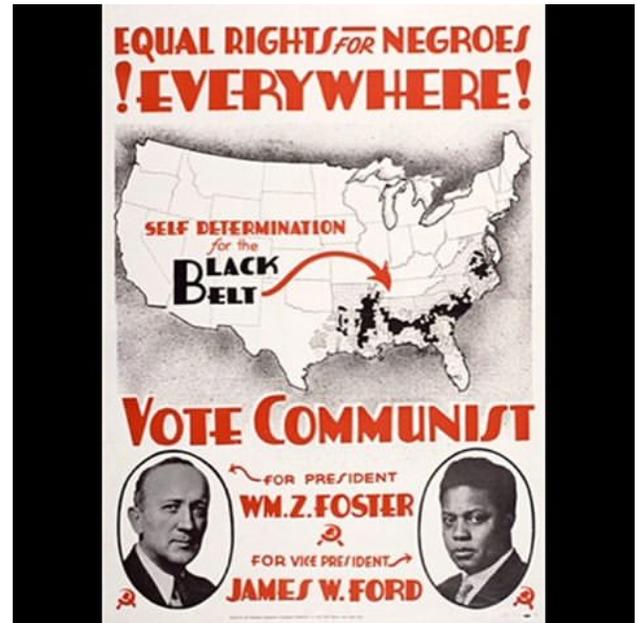
It was above all “a fresh and new musical creation” of the “Negro people.” And, wrote Finkelstein in 1948, they constituted “a group within America, a nation within a nation.” Bringing together the Marxist criteria, he observed that African Americans, “bound together by their common economic life and struggle...have built up a history, tradition, and cultural life of their own, along with a growing sense of their own nationhood.” U.S.

Communists would eventually abrogate the nationhood theory in the face of crucial socio-economic developments. But they nonetheless maintained the conviction that the fight for black equality was indeed a “national question” central to the rights of all working people.

### Ellington's role

Finkelstein explained that jazz is both simple and intricate, containing group, individual, social and reciprocal components. He objected strenuously to biased assertions of the “subconscious,” natural,” and indeed “primitive” attributes of jazz improvising. On the contrary, “jazz is a flow of emotion in music guided by the most conscious skill, taste, artistry, and intelligence.” The notion that “musicians who can't read notes” create jazz tends to cheapen the integrity of improvisation.

His extended treatment of the magnificent Duke Ellington is a comprehensive argument for the intelligence at the core of jazz. More than anyone else, submits Finkelstein, Ellington's “handling of instrumental sound, ...power of melody, ...rightness of harmony and interweaving of melodic lines...made many products of the conservatories seem, by comparison, mechanical



*A Communist Party election poster from 1932 promoting “Self-determination for the Black Belt.” | Daily Worker / People's World Archives*

and bloodless.” Ellington’s “unity and variety” often appeared through three movements of a composition: “an opening theme, which is actually a group of two or three melodies, and is antiphonal from the very first bars.”

This “A” section of a piece might be played twice. The “B” which followed was “frequently the section where the blues enter, often treated as a series of solos or duets.” The closing reiteration of “A” always contained “a new harmonic twist, a cadence of instrumental reply, rounding out the performance like the classical ‘coda.’”

## **Bebop**

Finkelstein made many of the same points on jazz complexity in his other writings on music. The same year that *Jazz: A People’s Music* came out, he published “What About Bebop?” in the September *Masses & Mainstream*. Here, he discussed the latest genre in greater detail than in the book. He defended the startling new sound, whose beacon was Charlie Parker, as in full keeping with the “constant experiment and change” characteristic of the “main line of jazz.”

He showed its constituent past, the blues and the music of Kansas City and the Southwest epitomized by Count Basie and Lester Young. He pointed out that a certain “bitterness” came through this particularly “witty” music marked by “unresolved dissonances, chromatic notes, common chords with raised or lowered notes.” It demanded “musical tight-rope walking” and “the most knowing musicianship.” Finkelstein reminded his readers that bebop again revealed “the pre-eminence of the Negro musician in every new development of jazz.”

His bebop article welcomed the other heralds of the new style: trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, drummers Max Roach and Art Blakey, saxophonists Wardell Gray, Dexter Gordon, and Lucky Thompson, pianists Thelonious Monk and Tadd Dameron, trombonist J.J. Johnson. In another venue, Finkelstein warned: “Always in jazz, each innovation that found a public was immediately vulgarized, commercialized, and imitated by white musicians who made far more money than the genuine black originators.”

Elsewhere he added that black jazz musicians faced pressures not to remain creative: “to clown, to play a role dictated by managers, agents, and sensation-mongers.” Moreover “powerful commercial music houses” would rather the artist “plug” or “put over” the “songs they want to make into hits.” And in “Jazz: National Expression or International Folk Music?” (mentioned above), he took issue with his fellow Communist E.J. Hobsbawm for failing to appreciate the crucial role of African Americans in shaping jazz, to which he devoted the entire final chapter of his history of classical music, *Composer and Nation*.

### **A master class with Finkelstein**

On the Saturday of Thanksgiving weekend 1971, about a month before my 18th birthday, I went over to Sidney Finkelstein's house. He had just moved to our neighborhood. I brought *Jazz: A People's Music* with me. While at college that fall, I had made careful notes about music I wished to explore and discuss with him. Although my earliest jazz discoveries included the musicians most eminent when I was a teenager, particularly John Coltrane, my focus on this day was the tenor saxophonist Young and the alto saxophonist Parker. I especially wanted to listen to Young's recordings with Count Basie from the 1930s.

True, I had picked up a Basie album in one of the record stores in the town of State College, Pennsylvania, but it dated from the 1940s band that had Lucky Thompson on tenor. I would come to respect Thompson as a superior musician and composer, but at the time I was set on deepening my understanding of Young, and his disciple Parker. Finkelstein remarked that Count Basie “was strong in the one point where [Duke] Ellington had been comparatively weak. Ellington had never made much of the solo tenor sax...”

This point may have been truer when Sidney's *Jazz* was published (though at the same time he recognized the importance of tenorist Ben Webster to Ellington), but Ellington would make much greater use of tenor soloists in later years, especially Paul Gonsalves. In any case, I wanted to hear the Basie sound with Young, which Sidney described so evocatively: the opening spare

piano on so many pieces, the powerful bass and rhythm guitar, the drummer Jo Jones' mastery of the high-hat, and the powerful riffs behind and in between the soloists.



*Lester Young*

Sidney opened up the door and let me in. It was a sprawling house. A burly fellow, he drew me into his living room, which contained built-in bookcases on every wall. Perhaps he had more upstairs. I was envious, books were packed like commuters struggling to breathe on the subway, floor to ceiling. My one-time neighbor, the great Puerto Rican Communist writer Jesús Colón, who had been an editor with Sidney of *Masses & Mainstream*, had had a similar set-up. But Jesús had lived in an apartment, towering his books in the hallways.

Sidney shelved his records similarly, in the dining room: all the walls were covered, even above the windows. He filed them by type: classical, folk, jazz, blues. Within each, he classified them by period and genre. At the end of each shelf, he attached a sign to guide his searches. The majority of his records were 78 RPMs, no surprise considering that this format had characterized music releases for most of his life. We had some 78s at home as well.

From Sidney's records, the root of the "album" concept was pretty obvious: a collection of songs, like a collection of photos. Here were a number of Teddy Wilson's records with Billie Holiday and Lester Young, in a hardcover binder containing ten 78s, with two songs apiece. Over there were Benny Goodman sets, with Lionel Hampton, Gene Krupa, and Wilson. Like books, the spines of the binders held the titles.

But thousands of LPs took up one side of the dining room. I do not know how Sidney could get the ones from the upper reaches. I did not notice a ladder enabling him to do so, or to pluck a

book from the thin atmosphere by the ceiling. I'm sure he had a way. I had told Sidney over the phone of my concentration on Young and Parker. In the most extreme Brooklyn accent I had ever heard, he confirmed the goal of our session.

While he went over to the stacks of 78s, I browsed his long-playing records. Sidney knew where the desired 78s were, so I did not have much time. He had one shelf with the modern jazz names with which I had become initiated into jazz. I remember in living color: Sonny Rollins' "Saxophone Colossus," Charles Mingus' "Pithecanthropus Erectus," John Coltrane's "Giant Steps," and Ornette Coleman's "The Shape of Jazz to Come," an elite representation for sure.

### **Young and Parker**

Sidney came back to the record player with a stack of albums of 78s. We began with "Lester Leaps In," went then to "Dickie's Dream" and "One O' Clock Jump" (on which Young played the second tenor solo) and on to "Lester Leaps Again," all with Basie.

This was the first time I heard what Finkelstein had described as Lester Young's "cloudier" tone on the tenor (contrasting nicely with the growl of his bandmate Herschel Evans), airy, lagging the beat, over and above the just plain cool rhythm section. I could not imagine a more effective platform for improvisation than Basie.

"Setting the tone" was putting it mildly, cool, laid-back, but jumping. Finkelstein would start and stop the records to point things out to me, to suggest other songs to hear, to show contrast and dynamics. I recall that he was easy to talk to, unpretentious. Some of the other intellectuals in Communist circles were on the contrary quite stuck up.

My head was full. He asked if I wanted some tea. To me, tea was only something I drank when I was sick. I would have it on a tray with a thousand pounds of sugar, and drink it with a spoon. I said sure, and he disappeared into the kitchen. I listened to more music, and glanced again at the wall with LPs. Soon he returned, with tea, sugar, and a spoon. Though quite healthy, I was able to drink the stuff as accustomed.

I asked if we might turn our attention to Charlie Parker. He walked over to the appropriately marked section of 78s and took down a few albums. In his book, he had emphasized “Slam Slam Blues,” “Congo Blues,” “Get Happy,” “Hallelujah,” “Ornithology,” “Buzzy,” and “Parker’s sick, nerve-wracked ‘Lover Man,’ made when he was at the point of collapse.” (Parker suffered a nervous breakdown in 1946). These were the pieces I wanted to hear.

To be sure, I was no perfect stranger to Parker. I had an LP of his called “Now’s the Time,” from the early 1950s. One of the 78s given me by my aunt was “Sweet Georgia Brown” from a 1946 concert. But I felt a need to seriously build up my appreciation of musicians before Coltrane, and to see how developments evolved. Sidney meanwhile asked if I wanted a ham and cheese sandwich. A fussy eater, I was no fan of ham, but said yes. I figured Sidney did not have much else in the refrigerator. It is possible that Ross Russell’s reference to Sidney, quoted above, as a “recluse” was accurate.



*Charlie Parker*

Sidney put on the first 78, with “Hallelujah” on one side, with phenomenal solos by Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. The riff at the end was explosive. It was interesting to me that the pianist and tenor sax player were the relatively more “traditional” Teddy Wilson and Flip Phillips, respectively.

Finkelstein showed me that while jazz styles were distinct, they borrowed from and coexisted with older ones. We chomped and listened. He turned the record over. Parker continued. We heard “Congo Blues” (with another powerful closing riff and a sweeping solo by Wilson) and “Get Happy.” Eventually, during “Ornithology,” Sidney pointed out that it was based on another song called “How High the Moon,” an example of which he promptly withdrew from one of the shelves.

After this we listened to Parker’s “Buzzy.” We talked only between songs and between musicians. My tea got cold. I had been there three and a half hours. We had begun to tire.

Wrapping up the lesson, I asked Sidney if I might borrow several LP albums to tape-record. I didn't want to appear too greedy, so I narrowed my request to Coleman Hawkins' "The Hawk Flies High," a collection of Charlie Parker's performances on the Dial record label (highlighted by "Cool Blues"), Charles Mingus' "Pithecanthropus Erectus," and Ben Webster's "Soulville."

My stereo equipment at home was barely primitive. I would place a tape-recorder in front of the speakers of my record player. The resultant cassettes included my brothers laughing, my parents calling me down for dinner, arguments, and slamming doors. But I would have the music in any case.

However, this was only the first of our jazz conversations. About a month later, Sidney came over to my house for a meeting of the local Communist Party club, of which my parents were leaders. I brought down the albums I'd borrowed, and also had him listen to John Coltrane's piece "Olé," which was based on the melody of an anti-fascist song of the Spanish Civil War, "El Quinto Regimiento." Finkelstein loved the extended performance, which featured Coltrane on soprano saxophone, Eric Dolphy on flute, and Freddie Hubbard on trumpet, all pacesetters.

And thereafter, whenever I saw Sidney, whether at a neighborhood political activity, a meeting, a demonstration, or a celebration, we talked about jazz.

I remember when Sidney passed away. I heard about it from my mother. I had actually seen him the summer before, at a petition drive on one of the main thoroughfares. He looked alright, but didn't stay. But in early 1974, my mother told me that he wasn't answering his phone or his doorbell. No one knew what had happened. The sense of concern extended to his lifelong friends Phillip Bonosky and Herbert Aptheker.

Those closest to him did not know if he had a family. There was no one else to call. Finally, some of the party club members were able to get into his house. He lay sprawled in a corner against a wall, beneath a column of books. He had had a stroke.

## **In Sum**

He died soon after, at 64. My teenage mind had played tricks on me back when we'd gotten together two years earlier: I'd thought he was ancient. Young folks are susceptible to vague calculations of advanced age. I may have known him, but I clearly did not know much about him.

A *New York Times* obituary was bare bones. However, his personal papers at the University of Massachusetts show the scope of his work and career. He had two master's degrees, including one earned when in his 40s. The notorious House Committee on Un-American Activities obliged him to testify in 1957 upon the subject of his party membership (banned under the Smith Act). His reviews of culture had begun at several well-established papers prior to the Cold War. He had worked for the U.S. Post Office, before serving in the military during World War II. His second master's thesis was on Picasso. A background note supplied by the University of Massachusetts library observes that he was the Communist Party's "leading musical and cultural theoretician." It calls *Jazz: A People's Music* his "most famous" book.

I wonder how famous Finkelstein was and is. His books exerted a pull beyond the Left, but certainly did not draw the attention they merited when he was alive. *Jazz: A People's Music* is now 70 years old. It remains in a second printing with a marvelous preface by Professor Geoffrey Jacques of the University of California at Santa Barbara, who traces many of the jazz developments after 1948 and places Finkelstein in historical context. [The last edition is sold out, but a new edition is at the typesetters and preorders are being taken by International Publishers.]

Hundreds of works on jazz, many quite perceptive, have filled the genre's shelves in the past seven decades. But Sidney's is a foundational text. Analyses of jazz and society will therefore run aground if they fail to consult *Jazz: A People's Music*.

TAGS: CPUSA history jazz music

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