

Why Jazz Music Is A Dirty Word

Why is it that 'jazz music' and even the word 'jazz' is so offensive and polarizing to the average music listener today? The word 'jazz' instantly turns many people off...they immediately will say they don't like jazz at all. The fact is that a very large part of the US population won't listen to jazz period. Even further the word 'jazz' for many people is a dirty word!! Why is this?

Here are the top 5 reasons why people think and feel this way and have already written 'jazz' music off:

- 1) It's old and outdated music.**
- 2) It's way too dissonant and too far outside the normal harmonic box.**
- 3) It's insider musical language that only other jazz musicians can understand.**
- 4) It's boring with 10 minute solos featuring musicians playing strange sounding scales.**
- 5) It's music played by a bunch of artsy weirdo's and drug addicts...you have to be using drugs/alcohol to really appreciate it!**

And all the criticisms listed above contain valid legitimate reasons why the general public feels the way they do about jazz music. Let's take a closer look at these reasons.

For many today the word jazz implies old outdated music. They consider it music of the past and that its value and relevance for the most part has faded away. One of the things that is responsible for this misconception is that many purist jazz musicians today insist on only playing old "Jazz Standards" from the 1930's and 1940's. They and their music seem to be trapped into an 'historical box', (much like many church folk who insist on singing and hearing nothing but old hymns from 100 years ago). Instead of writing and playing new jazz music these jazzers keep on playing songs that were written 'back in the day'. Of course the way that jazz is depicted in movies and on the big screen plays a large role in 'typecasting' jazz music as old, out of touch, and therefore not relevant.

Other jazz artists, as their jazz language develops choose to move further outside the harmonic box by writing and performing jazz that contains so much dissonance that only other jazz musicians can appreciate it. Here is how the dictionary defines dissonance:

Noun - inharmonious or harsh sound; discord; cacophony.

a. a simultaneous combination of tones conventionally accepted as being in a state of unrest and needing completion.

b. an unresolved, discordant chord or interval. Related words for dissonance are: disagreement, dissension, noise, racket.

To the average music listener it's almost as if jazz musicians just decided to be different and break all the accepted rules of harmony that Classical music contains. And on the surface it appears that the more dissonance and unresolved chords that a jazz composition includes the better jazz composer you are!

Of course there are many accepted rules that apply to Classical music but as music history has documented, with the dawning of the 'Romantic era', composers began breaking out of the harmonic box more and more using much more dissonance in their compositions. Many of the musicians who have been trained in Classical music that switched to playing jazz can testify how liberating it can be to break free of all of Classical music's harmonic rules! ***But let's face it; we've all heard jazz music that breaks so many conventional harmonic rules and is so dissonant that it can get on one's nerves. If there is too much tension and harmonic clashes that are never resolved it can leave the average listener hanging and in need of a sedative!*** This has been a crucial factor in turning most people off to enjoying jazz music.

Of course, those who study jazz music and are initiated into hearing more dissonance grow more accustomed to hearing heavy dissonance and appreciating it. It then becomes 'jazz insider' language that only the educated ear can appreciate. This 'jazz insider' language has turned many listeners off and has been a major factor in giving jazz a bad reputation. To the uninitiated ear heavy dissonance used in a song isn't beautiful – it's ugly noise that irritates! ***I heard a quote somewhere one time where a person shared that they listened to a recording by jazz saxophonist John Coltrane one time and they thought it sounded more like a parakeet crapping out blood!*** That's very sad because John Coltrane was an incredible jazz musician and viewed his playing in a spiritual way. But many have also complained about Charlie "Bird" Parker that his music was nothing more than noise!

Then there's those 10 minute solos where a jazz musician plays every dissonant scale he's ever been taught and then he plays them backwards in retrograde motion and wonders why no one appreciates his soloing except for a few other jazz comrades! This can come across as arrogant to many listeners because they feel almost like the soloist is saying "gee whiz, just listen to what I can do on my instrument"! ***This tends to take the focus off the music and the emotional feel of the music and place more emphasis on the individual soloist as a performer.*** Usually when jazz musicians go off on lengthy solos the listening audience shifts back into more of a spectator role and the technical expertise of the performer tends to overshadow everything else. Unfortunately it is only other jazz musicians who really know how much work and dedication is involved developing technique that really can appreciate it.

There are however those times when a jazz musician plays a solo that lifts and transports both the performer and listeners to a sublime level. There is the perception in the audience that the soloist is genuinely expressing and responding to how he feels about the music he is playing and that he has something deeply important to communicate and share with the listeners. Without allowing time and space for jazz musicians to have the opportunity to freely express themselves would only serve to take away from jazz music one of its most precious elements – the freedom to improvise.

Jazz musicians and Jazz historians have always valued free improvisation as a unique element in their music. Allowing space for individual musicians to express themselves freely with 'on the spot' improvisational soloing has always been the norm. ***Freedom to choose, freedom to play, and freedom to improvise...freedom is what jazz is all about!*** But the original roots of jazz language stems from the musicians collectively experiencing together an 'ecstatic' experience where they are lifted out of the ordinary state of mind and the music seems to just flow freely out of them. There are many examples in the history of jazz that document this ecstatic nature and its effects on jazzers and listeners. New Orleans old timer Jim Robinson once shared how the ecstatic used to flow on the bandstand on certain nights: ***"If everyone is frisky the spirit gets to me and I can make my trombone sing!"***

Singer Ethel Waters testified that certain stride pianists, "stirred you into joy and wild ecstasy" and Drummer Billy Higgins once said **"Music doesn't come from you, it goes through you!"**

Of course we've all seen the old black and white movies picturing jazz musicians all strung out on drugs in a smoke filled club with half-naked ladies where the audience is stoned out of their minds as the music plays. A brief survey of jazz history easily reveals that many of the great jazz musicians used drugs and were in fact heavily addicted to them. Of course drug use and addiction is unfortunately a fact of life in modern society and for many musicians in every style of music... not just jazz musicians.

So far we have addressed in detail the main reasons why the average listener doesn't like jazz. But there are other reasons that go even deeper. Many people might hate jazz music because many of the jazz musicians who played it and wanted to preserve it changed its original context. ***Jazz music shifted from being music that was to be enjoyed and danced to into music that was to be instead appreciated as an art form. Music for the brain, not for the soul!*** What started being implied is that a listener must acquire a taste for jazz music. You might not like hearing it at first but stick around...it will grow on you and you will begin to understand it!

Jazz pianist (and respected spokesman for jazz), Ben Sidran sheds some brilliant light on the true roots of jazz music when he says in a recorded dialogue/narrative that "if you had been in a Harlem jazz club in 1927 you would've seen some people dancing! This music (jazz) was meant for dancing!" He goes on to point out that many of the pioneers in jazz music, (Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie) all played their music for dancing. Even more profoundly Sidran goes on to make the case that in our ancestral human history ***that rhythm proceeds even language! That hundreds of thousands of years ago that early humans would gather around a fire and dance to a groove before they even had a language they could speak!!!***

That jazz music has at its very roots a strong rhythmic element is a well established fact. But probing deeper into our history as human beings reveals ***our universal need to have an ecstatic experience – to 'step outside of ourselves' so to speak and dancing to a beat is one of the most powerful methods for achieving this.*** This ecstatic element was another key ingredient that helped create jazz music that the common listener loved because it made the listeners want to get up and dance! The unique 'swing' rhythmic factor in jazz is closely connected to body and dance movement. To illustrate this point imagine back to when you were a child joyfully skipping on the playground in a rhythmic pattern. This skipping is rhythmically very similar to the swing elements present in jazz music! Dancing to music or even tapping your foot also ***takes the listener out of the role of just being a passive spectator to being an active participant.***

Other significant elements that help make jazz unique is rhythmic syncopation. Syncopation in music includes using a variety of rhythms which are in some way unexpected in that they deviate from the strict succession of regularly spaced strong and weak beats. Extra stress and emphasis is placed and accented on beats out of the norm. This adds an element of surprise in jazz music as well as playfulness. ***Much like children at play, spontaneously and playfully making something up on the spot, jazz has always had this quality at its core.*** Once again the dictionary defines the word playful as "1. Full of fun and high spirits; frolicsome or sportive: a playful kitten. 2. Humorous; jesting:" Surprises and playfulness in music is fun, can help relieve monotony, and has always been a part of jazz composition.

However, in the early 1940s, jazz musicians started looking for new directions in jazz to explore. A monumental paradigm shift occurred within jazz and a new style of jazz was born called bebop. It had lightning fast tempos, intricate melodies containing angular intervals, and much more dissonant complex harmonies. Bebop started to be considered jazz for intellectuals. No longer were there huge big bands playing jazz music in dance halls, but instead smaller groups that played this new form of jazz music not for dancing audiences but instead for listening audiences. ***Much of the playful elements disappeared only to be replaced by a more serious focus on technical expertise and analysis of jazz as an art form.***

But yet today the average typical listener really enjoys music that has roots that stem from jazz – but just don't call it jazz! People still want to dance to music and be participants not just spectators. So rock music, r&b, and rap dominate the popular music that the majority of music lovers listen to and purchase today. Ironically all these musical styles were birthed right out of jazz music! They all have a strong rhythmic element with plenty of syncopation.

Jazz historian Joachim E. Berendt in his book "The Jazz Book" offers the following observation about how jazz has continued to evolve: "Today, the jazz musician must be fluent in many styles, not just one...one of the main reasons why rock elements can be so smoothly integrated into jazz is that, conversely, **rock has drawn nearly all its elements from jazz - especially from the blues, spirituals, gospel songs, and the popular music of the black ghetto, rhythm and blues and soul music.**" Drummer Shelley Manne once said, **"If jazz borrows from rock, it only borrows from itself!"** Jazz saxophonist/Educator Dave Liebman shares that "To me 'fusion' doesn't mean a rock beat or an Indian drum. It's a technical word that means to put together...of course all music is a fusion...now of course it's commonplace to put together styles; everybody does this every day"- (Downbeat Magazine Jan. 2011) Jazz bassist and educator Dr. Lou Fischer states that "Fusion to me represents a juxtaposition of any and all genres of music. In the broadest sense, we play fusion music any time we play jazz. Even in straight-ahead jazz, there's a fusion of all elements—classical, African traditions and rhythms, Brazilian music." So we can rejoice that the true ingredients in jazz music continue to have a major impact and influence on many styles of music.

Educating our present day culture about jazz music involves shattering the many misconceptions that exist about jazz music. A great place to start this process is by pointing out that most all the popular music being played today is a derivative of jazz and the blues. Jazz Education is playing a critical role in helping bring this about. Jazz programs in public schools are helping to develop new jazz musicians from the younger generations and to garner a greater appreciation for jazz. ***But it will also involve jazz musicians taking a hard look at the many reasons why people say they don't like jazz and what made jazz into being a dirty word and do some soul searching.*** Being sensitive to these reasons will take much time, patience, and persistence but can help bring about more favorable acceptance and greater appreciation for jazz. My vision for jazz music in the future is a world where jazz, (in all its many flavors) will be the most popular music in the world and even the word jazz itself will be used, understood, and respected in a sacred way!

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