

The True Language Of Jazz

Recently, there has been an upsurge in sales and interest in jazz recordings from the past - especially the 1970's. In a recent Jazz Times magazine article "1970 Is Happening (Again)" Lee Mergner points out that "at the time rock and funk were, depending on your perspective, destroying or invigorating jazz." Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, Weather Report, Jeff Lorber Fusion, Chick Corea/Return To Forever, the list goes on and on of extremely gifted and talented jazz musicians who were committing 'blasphemy' (according to the jazz purists) by stepping outside the boundaries of swing and embracing funk, rock, r&b, and soul beats to create new music.

Downbeat Magazine also recently posited the question, is now the time to reclaim Ray Charles for jazz? The article goes on to state that Ray Charles' role, impact and methods as a jazz musician remain under-appreciated. Yet jazz critic Nate Hentoff often related that Ray was a favorite of jazz musicians! Producer Jerry Wexler shares that Ray influenced the shape of jazz..."Horace Silver, Cannonball Adderly, Jimmy Smith, even Mingus-they all dug Ray and got caught up in his spirit". Other well respected jazz musicians such as Clark Terry, Blue Mitchell, and Thad Jones all played on Ray's Big Band recordings.

And so the debate continues to rage on, 'what is the true language of jazz'? Is there such a thing as 'pure jazz'?

Michael Fagien of Jazziz Magazine observes that "for saxophonist Kirk Whalum, it's not about living up to jazz standards; it's about soul music and something even deeper." Whalum goes on to share in that article/interview that **"when the music gets put on a pedestal, it gets sterile. And that's what's happening to jazz. I'm just not hung up about what's jazz and what's not."** I think when people hear me, they say, 'Oh, wow, I thought you said something.' And that's what some of the old jazz cats had. ... Arnett Cobb would say to me, 'You know what? You ain't saying nothing.' Just like that! 'You ain't saying nothing. **'You're playing too many damn notes and you ain't saying nothing!'** I needed somebody like him to help me get that."

For me personally, jazz music is the ecstatic, spontaneous, syncopated creation of music that comes from a 'divine spark'. It flows from responding to the musical moment and expressing what you feel at that moment. I hear way too much jazz music/language that is basically just 'jazz insider' language (C#9b5 with 6 modal scales thrown in!) This overly studied academic approach is what has hurt jazz with the average listener. How much musical dissonance being played is a direct expression of a musician's life and soul? **Are you just playing scales or really 'saying something'?**

Nat Adderly shares an experience that his brother Cannonball taught him. Cannonball told him, "This cat's coming down from Kansas City. They call him "Bird". This cat can put down some sounds." So Nat met up with Cannonball and together attend a Charlie Bird Parker concert. We arrived at the club and sat down. Bird was playing. A short time later I walked out! I caught up with Cannonball later at a jam session. Cannonball said "man, where'd you go?" **I said "man that was nothing but noise...that ain't music!"** Cannonball said "You know the problem with you? You don't like it because you don't understand it! You don't know enough about this style to understand and appreciate it. I'm not saying that it has to be your favorite style of music. But your ignorant...your ignorant to what he's doing." - (story quoted from Rickey Minor's book "There's No Traffic On The Extra Mile").

While I am all for Jazz Education, being a jazz educator, jazz composer, and avid promoter of Jazz Education, the old expression "jazz isn't taught-it's caught" really does make a valid

point. ***Being too analytical of the music can often rob you of the natural emotional responses that should come from hearing and playing music.*** The great composer Claude Debussy once said concerning listening to music that "the only law is pleasure". The roots of jazz music came from the Negro spirituals, the blues, and church. They were often ecstatic in nature. The dictionary defines the word ecstatic ***as "an overpowering emotion or exaltation; a state of sudden, intense feeling."*** A person playing or listening to the music is overpowered emotionally and both the players and listeners can feel it! A person becomes 'jazzed'!

However, there are both the technical and spiritual aspects to jazz. You have to master the technical aspects to develop jazz language but the rhythmic feel of swing still has a very strong spiritual/emotional element as well – you can't have one without the other. Within the jazz community there are extreme positions taken that only serve to separate and divide the jazz community. I think we need to find common ground and the common ground is this: blues and jazz has birthed a myriad of musical styles – swing, funk, r&b, soul, rock, fusion, Brazilian/Latin & Afro-Cuban jazz. And we should be able to appreciate this smorgasbord even though it might not be our favorite style of jazz. Why? ***Because jazz in all its flavors is a gift to be enjoyed and savored!***

The great Christian missionary and Apostle Paul was most concerned about spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ in his day. The purity of the message was being compromised by others who preached a different gospel. Yet Paul said words to this effect... 'one preaches Christ out of contention, another preaches Christ out of envy, but I still rejoice that Christ is being preached!' And that is exactly how I feel about the issue of jazz purity! ***Because of the spontaneous nature of jazz music you can't control or predict just what direction it will go in...but I can hear its influence in many different musical variations/flavors and rejoice in the fact that jazz is still being preached!***

Leonardo DaVinci once said that "Do you know that our souls are composed of music?" Music and religion are intimately linked and music is one of the most powerful tools to convey religious meaning. I think the Creator has graciously given us the gift of music to transform us from the humdrum, everyday existence, into something out of the ordinary. Whether music excites us or soothes us it transports us to another place. When we play and listen to music we should be lifted out of ourselves and enjoy the very language created by God!

So celebrate today and 'be jazzed'!

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