

Community Jazz

By Sean O'Bryan Smith

Recently I have found myself talking to more and more artists and players about the overall status of jazz. There is no question that there are some odd times afoot for our beloved art form. Venues all over the country are closing, work is scarce, and the competition among players is fierce to say the least. Heck, this week alone my home base of Nashville just lost their only traditional jazz station. It seems that across the board jazz is in a diminishing state. So what can we as players and jazz artists do to make a difference? ***One of the most important things I believe we must do is focus on developing and once again bringing back a sense of community among jazz musicians.***

The communal nature of jazz is where it all began. The art form itself derived from spirituals and blues on African Slave Ships. The music was a way for the slaves as a community to express themselves. From those beginnings jazz continued to evolve into its various incarnations all the while holding true to its sense of community. Jazz continued along this path until the emergence of the first jazz artists. ***As forms of jazz like bop began to come forth the focus shifted from the audience perspective to the individual artists.*** Even though this shift was great for the additional exposure of some of our jazz heroes this only served to bring about an underlying problem in the jazz community that only recently we have begun to recognize. ***That problem is that the focus is now almost completely upon the individual artist and not on the players as a whole unit.***

In these infancy years of jazz, players were truly into the concept of a jazz community. One story of lore that shows how much things have changed re-accounts the days around the Great Depression within the jazz community. The story goes that a number of musicians would gather at the local jazz club. At that time many of these clubs were more than likely considered "seedy" establishments but nonetheless it was a place for musicians to connect and create. More importantly this was an era (to a certain degree) for non-pretentious musicians. All players regardless of skill level were welcome to these jams. As the story continues a worker at the club, (who was also a musician) finishes his shift, runs home to freshen up and get his instrument, then returns to the venue four hours later only to find the jam and same tune still going on that was going on when he left. Now you ask yourself WHY in the world was this the case? ***It was because every single musician in the place was allowed to play and not only play a phrase but play until they actually "said" something musically.*** In doing this all of the players had a camaraderie that was unsurpassed and a strong sense of community. This story brings up some interesting points.

First of all, what happened over the years in the jazz world to bring about this monumental shift? Well, as a society people have increasingly become more focused on the individual artist which has created many new challenges for players. All the emphasis on an artist being a celebrity and the hype associated with it only served to help destroy a sense of community among fellow jazzers. And let's face it there is a universal need for us as human beings for acceptance and positive affirmation whether it is by peers, fans, friends, family, etc. But if only one person is getting all of the limelight this creates a rift in the band that only serves to alienate and help destroy community within the group. Unfortunately as that continues a ripple effect then emerges and the next thing you know it is all toppling over much like a house of cards.

Another contributor to the demise of the jazz community is the evolution of technology in the music industry. As more and more advances have developed new methods to record and perform have surfaced. Many artists have taken upon themselves to forego using actual musicians and instead play and record everything themselves. Or they will play 'live' gigs without other players and replace other musicians with some cheesy loop or drum machine. Needless to say this doesn't always bode well for the performer or the listening audience. But even more importantly this only serves to be a blatant middle finger to the communal aspects of jazz. How can we commune if there is no one else to commune with?

Lastly, one of the most damaging contributors to the aspect of a jazz community is the economic times we are living in. If the truth be told it is rough out there to be a jazz musician right now. The gigs have dwindled away to nothing which increases the competition for work. Everyone is scrambling to take care of their families since this is not only their craft but also how they make a living. ***The bad part is that this personal focus on 'looking out for number one' only helps to destroy any sense of community.*** What happens is that jazz musicians get paranoid and are unwilling to share the limelight, their music, riffs, or jam on gigs with other jazz musicians period. Their strategy is to isolate themselves and not do virtually anything that may give another fellow musician the edge. Sadly, it isn't because they don't want to develop strong bonds between themselves and other musicians, or even share and help inspire other players, but in reality it boils down to the fear that by doing so they may lose the limelight that might even result in losing gigs.

But it isn't all doom and gloom out there! What has me encouraged is discovering the deep passion of other musicians and artists who feel as I do. Once again they are talking to one another and finding ways to help each other. Many musicians are once again starting to play music 'live' together and spend less time playing music as isolated individuals using only electronics. The opportunity for jazz musicians finding work may not be plentiful yet but the quality of the work is slowly improving. This will eventually inspire the listeners to start paying more attention as the quality of music improves. ***From there it falls squarely on jazz artists shoulders to take the time necessary to share with other artists and aspiring players and focus on building and restoring the strong communal bond that should exist within the jazz community.*** If jazz dies out in vain with us what was the point? The music will not live on if we destroy the communal aspects of the genre and not do anything. Let us be a community of people who love one of the most natural forms of musical expression there is...and that is jazz!

Blessed Grooves,
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