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JAZZ WRITERS AND CRITICS:
THE ROLE OF CRITICAL VOICES IN THE LIFE OF JAZZ

By Naedine Joy Hazell

Submitted to Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies.

May 2014

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Instructor

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INTRODUCTION

Jazz has got good genes. Like the country in which it was born, jazz is an amalgam of musical traditions and it has drawn on that family background to preserve and evolve.

Similarly, jazz was well cared for in its youth. It was born and thrived within a tight-knit family for nearly two decades before the broader public – and the critics – knew much of its existence.

Finally, jazz has great timing. When it burst onto the musical scene, it was a case of being the right voice at the right time for a country also coming into its own. Brash and fun-loving, jazz was full of playful bravado, soulful pathos and a seductive, sliding sound that felt a little racy while still being familiar.

In jazz, some heard the voice of a young country re-imagining itself after World War I, a country developing its own standards instead of looking for them across the Atlantic. Others heard a threat. As day follows night, the critics arrived, but jazz played on, right over the din of disapproval from the pulpits, parents and pundits.

As jazz matured and gained popularity, helped along by new technology – the Victrola and the advent of commercial radio – jazz was suddenly everywhere. It was an adjective (jazz and jazzy described almost anything hot and new), a verb (they were “jazzin’” it) and a noun. F. Scott Fitzgerald published his popular short story collection under the title “Tales of the Jazz Age” (1921) and the full-length musical film that finished silent movies was Al Jolson’s “Jazz Singer” (1927).

(Neither had much, if anything to do with jazz, but the titles speak to the elasticity of the term.)

What with the Depression and the natural life of popular trends, which burn brightest before flaring out, few would have been surprised if jazz had succumbed by the 1930s. But no.

As would be the case a few times in the coming century, musicians, enthusiasts and advocates -- many of them writers -- thumped jazz on the chest until the beat was again strong enough for all to hear.

Jazz most certainly would have existed without its peripheral supporters, including the jazz writers and critics. What is less certain – in fact it looks unlikely – is whether jazz would have attained its current elevated cultural position without the contributions of jazz writers, critics, essayists and academics.

“The reason jazz is worth writing about is that it is worth listening to.”
 – Cultural critic Gilbert Seldes, 1923 ¹

EARLY YEARS

Just about the only time in the life of jazz that someone hasn't asked if jazz was dead was when it busy was being born. In those early days, when jazz was a joyous noisome infant, it had devoted family and friends watching over it.

It was when jazz got just old enough, and well known enough, to hold its own before a large and diverse audience – and it started attracting attention – that the jazz debates began.

Its biggest non-family fans were Europeans. Jazz was seeping into popular music in United States (the Original Dixieland Jazz Band had a hit in 1917-18 with “Tiger Rag”), but across the Atlantic they heard something more than pop.

In 1919, German critic George Barthelme wrote in a Cologne newspaper that jazz “is a musical revelation, a religion, a philosophy of the world, just like Expressionism or Impressionism.” ²

A scant two years later, in 1921, the *New Republic* published a scathing assessment of jazz's place in the modern arts by a British critic who claimed to have overheard a conversation about jazz in a Paris bistro. “Jazz is dead, or dying at any rate, and the moment has come for someone who likes to fancy himself

¹ Seldes, Gilbert, 1923, “Toujours Jazz,” *Dial* August, 166

² Levine, Lawrence W., 1989, “Jazz and American Culture,” *Journal of American Folklore* Jan.-March 1989 102:403, p, 12, citing Frederick S. Starr's “*Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917-1980.*” New York: Oxford University Press.

wider awake than his fellows to write its obituary notice,” wrote Clive Bell. ³

Saying jazz deserved no place in the modern arts movement, Bell wrote “so many intelligent and sensitive people [have turned] against jazz. They see that it encourages thousands of the stupid and vulgar to fancy that they can understand art, and hundreds of the conceited to imagine that they can create it...”⁴

Soon after, American cultural critic Gilbert Seldes took up the fight. “Jazz, for us, isn’t the last feverish excitement, a spasm of energy before death. It is the normal development of our resources, the expected and wonderful arrival of America at a point of creative intensity.

“Fortunately, the music and the way it is played are both of great interest, both have qualities which cannot be despised; and the cry that jazz is the enthusiastic disorganization of music is as extravagant as the prophecy that if we do not stop ‘jazzing’ we will go down, as a nation, into ruin. I am quite ready to uphold the contrary,” Seldes wrote in his essay “Toujours Jazz.”⁵

Written and verbal debate has played on through a century of jazz with the insistence of a backbeat – new art versus pop trash; seamy versus swinging; swing versus bebop; bebop versus cool; bebop/cool versus free; free versus fusion; jazz is dead, jazz has been reborn -- and on it goes, a steady rhythm maintained by the musicians, the cultural critics and jazz writers.

³ Bell, Clive, 1921, “Plus de Jazz”, *New Republic*, September 28: 355, p. 92

⁴ (Bell, 1921, p. 96)

⁵ (Seldes, 1923, p.166)

“In the first decades of the 20th century the new experimentation and innovation in the arts that would become known as ‘modernism’ needed explicators and theorists.”⁶

In the early years of jazz, up to and including the early 1920s, strong opinions about whether jazz would, or should, survive its formative years meant there was at least enough interest to keep the conversation going. It had worthy company. Other debates of the day included whether women should get the vote; did representational painting have anything left to say; should the U.S. join World War I?

As a rule, newspapers editorialize about subjects that interest their readers. They don’t bother with the already dead. In October 1924, the *New York Times* expressed its opinion that jazz “...is to real music exactly what most of the ‘new poetry’, so-called, is to real poetry. Both are without the structure and form essential to music and poetry alike, and both are the products, not of innovators, but of incompetents....Jazz, especially when it depends much on that ghastly instrument, the saxophone, offends people with musical taste already formed, and it prevents the formation of musical taste by others.”⁷

The public didn’t seem to agree.

Spending substantial time at the top of the popular song lists in the 1920s (still measured, in part, by sheet music sales), along with Fanny Brice and George Gershwin, were Bessie Smith (“Down Hearted Blues”), Fats Waller (“Ain’t Misbehavin’”), the Paul Whiteman Band (“Three O’Clock in the Morning”), Duke

⁶ McDonald, Ronan, 2007. *Death of the Critic*. London/New York: Continuum, 81

⁷ *New York Times*, 1924, Editorial, “A Subject of Serious Study” Oct. 8

Ellington (“Black and Tan Fantasy”), Louis Armstrong (“West End Blues”) and Bix Beiderbecke (“In A Mist”).⁸

In part thanks to records and radio – in 1921 about \$1 million of radio equipment was sold in the U.S. but by 1929 that number was more than \$850 million⁹ -- the word about jazz had gotten around, at least jazz played by white musicians. (It would be a few years before African American bands were recorded on white-run labels and before the Harlem-based Black Swan record company was formed in 1921.) Following the records were the jazz writers – who were mostly fans, although some classical music critics embraced the “new” music -- and eventually jazz critics.

“...The appearance of a new form – the novel, free verse, film, jazz – seems...to give rise to a body of clamoring, quarrelsome critics, eager to air their opinions on the attractive new subject. If art comes, the critic cannot be far behind.”¹⁰

⁸ Tsort.info, 2014. “Songs from the 1920s.” Accessed April 26, 2014, <http://tsort.info/music/ds1920.htm>, Version 2.3.0020

⁹ Harris, Tyler, 2006. “All The Things You Are: Jazz Music, Pathways Analysis, and a Theory of Cultural Flows.” Master’s thesis, Carleton University, (Harris 2006) p. 101

¹⁰ Collier, James Lincoln. 1993. *Jazz: The American Theme Song*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 226

“For the jazz canon to take shape, and for jazz criticism to develop into a field of sanctioned discourse, it was necessary for the incipient desires of young [enthusiasts] to become aestheticized and formalized. For the discussion to take place...the very passions that were unleashed by the music needed to be mastered and tutored.”

John Gennari, 2006 ¹¹

FROM JAZZ BABIES TO YOUNG ADULTS

The end of the Depression largely accepted jazz accepted having been packaged to please with even more “sweet” swing dance music. Now the debates focused on the best of the bands (and there were hundreds).

It was a heady time for jazz artistically and commercially, with the production of less expensive Victrolas, mass marketed records, the 1933 repeal of Prohibition and the Hot Jazz Clubs on college campuses.

“Into the midst of music- and nonmusic-related periodicals sprang the jazz magazine, a curious literary enterprise that began as if it were totally unconcerned with critical music judgments. Its rise was made...to meet a growing demand for serious jazz criticism.”¹² Of course, jazz musicians had been reviewed before, but usually by classical music writers who used that genre as a point of reference.

R.D. Darrell, a conservatory-trained musician who wrote for *Phonograph Monthly Review*, took to Duke Ellington in the late 1920s and therefore exposed

¹¹ Gennari, John. 2006. *Blowin' Hot And Cool: Jazz And Its Critics*. Chicago/London: Chicago Press. p. 75

¹² Welburn, Ron, 1987. “Jazz Magazines of the 1930's: An Overview of Their Provocative Journalism,” *American Music*, Autumn, 5:3 p. 255-270

“serious music” fans to popular music as well, while still differentiating between ‘merely jazzical’ and ‘classical’ music. In 1927, he wrote that Ellington’s release of “Dreamy Blues” and “Runnin’ Wild” was “quite unbeatable.... a genuine musical, not merely jazzical, achievement.....’Runnin’ Wild’ is one of the finest dance tunes ever written (as Gilbert Seldes and many another has testified)...but the ‘Dreamy Blues’...is the real musical achievement. It is a poignantly restrained and nostalgic piece with glorious melodic endowment and scoring that even Ravel and Stravinsky might envy.”¹³ (Ellington rejected such comparisons with European classical music whenever he was given the opportunity saying that they denied jazz musicians their “rightful share of originality....”)¹⁴

Until the mid-1930s, jazz fans had to content themselves with such reviews – newspapers of the day spent little space reporting on jazz music – in the U.S. music magazines that primarily covered classical and marching band music or they could subscribe to the European jazz monthlies. For nearly a decade, the writers for the European magazines -- which had American correspondents including John Hammond, who would soon become a force in U.S. jazz circles -- wielded more influence over jazz than would be experienced in the U.S. for years. In the 1930s, “jazz critics working in Europe.... exercised an influence on European jazz tastes that was less a matter of persuasion than imposition. Because the major European record companies afforded them the opportunity to both select American imports and produce European sessions for American jazz

¹³ Gennari, John, 1993. “The Politics of Culture and Identity in American Jazz Criticism.” PhD. Diss. University of Pennsylvania. p 92

¹⁴ Ellington, Duke, 1944, “Certainly It’s Music!”, *Listen*, October, p. 5, cited by J. Gennari, 1993, p. 98

musicians ...these critics were able, to a much greater extent than critics functioning in the U.S. market.... to determine which musicians and performances would be represented under the rubric of jazz.”¹⁵

As the critics held so much sway over which artists and records would dominate the European record markets, they influenced what would be bought and what would be heard on radio. The power of that persuasion might have been behind European polls that consistently put Louis Armstrong at the top as best trumpeter from the 1930s to the 1950s, a position he never once enjoyed in similar polls in the United States.¹⁶

Armstrong and others African-American musicians had been heralded, along with white jazz musicians, from the start in Europe where the countries had less pronounced black-white divides and slavery was deeper in their pasts.

The European magazines had competition starting in 1934. That’s when *Down Beat* magazine began publishing and the same year that the well-established *Metronome* magazine – which had covered classical and marching band music since the 1880s – changed its description to “modern music and its makers” and further shifted its coverage, which had already begun to transition to jazz with the creation of a “saxophone department” in the 1920s.¹⁷

In 1934, George T. Simon, a drummer who had just graduated Harvard, started a “reviewing the bands” column for *Metronome* (he assigned grades from A+ to E) and wrote his first DISCUSSIONS record review (a format that soon would be copied by other magazines). “... between the late 1930s and the early 1950s,

¹⁵ (J. Gennari, 1993, p 79)

¹⁶ (J. Gennari, 1993, p. 79)

¹⁷ (R. Welburn 1987, p. 258)

largely through Mr. Simon's efforts [*Metronome*] became the jazz magazine second only to *Down Beat*," wrote the New York Times critic Ben Ratliff in Simon's Feb. 16, 2001 obituary.¹⁸

While the upstart magazine *Down Beat* favored cheesecake photos of women on its covers and sassy headlines, *Metronome* was more conservative and made an effort to continue its "musicians as writers tradition: saxophonist Dick Stabile wrote on reed players; Teddy Wilson, the pianist, wrote on chords and soloing; drummer Gene Krupa began [a column called] "Drummers Dope"; trumpeter Harry James wrote "Jamming with James." ...[all the columns] were ghost written by Simon.

"Even if these columns were essentially about the theoretical and pedagogical challenges of jazz in particular and music in general, they provided needed commentary on jazz structure, harmony, rhythm, and melody.... they kept amateur and professional musicians informed about the important qualities of the music."¹⁹

For its part, *Down Beat*'s writers included many enthusiasts in their 20s who had been members, if not leaders, of their jazz clubs at college. One such was Marshall Stearns, who had headed up Yale's club and, by 1936, was writing a column for *Down Beat* that "was responsible, in part, for stirring up healthy yet

¹⁸ Ratliff, Ben, 2001. "George Simon, 88, a Jazz Critic Who Reviewed the Big Bands." New York Times Archives Online. Accessed April 2014.

www.nytimes.com/2001/02/16/arts/george-simon-88-a-jazz-critic-who-reviewed-the-big-bands.html

¹⁹ (R. Welburn 1987, p. 260)

conflicting controversies about jazz historiography.”²⁰

In its first five years, all as a 48-page monthly in a newspaper format, *Down Beat* printed band and music reviews – under often deliberately provocative headlines -- solicited band leader responses and fomented arguments between jazz writers as well as musicians on topics ranging from the origins of jazz to the demystification of Duke Ellington’s style. In 1937 it transcribed and analyzed some pieces of music; it fostered a debate over the inferiority of women musicians; and accused some musicians of showboating. A year later, the magazine instituted “Critics in the Doghouse” for bandleaders who had complained that the writers “took potshots at everyone instead of offering constructive criticism.” In that column, the musicians could bark back and they did. “Such commentary was one of the few instances where both black and white musicians’ remarks on jazz found a forum.”²¹ In the July 1, 1939 edition of *Down Beat*, Count Basie filed a “Critics in the Doghouse” column (“Count Basie Examines Count Basie”), defending his band as having “No Rhythm Worries.” He wrote, in part, “I am sure that the rhythm section is right as it is. It’s the one section that has given us no trouble at any time. And when I speak of the rhythm, I mean bass, drums and guitar. You can count me out.”²²

Violinist Stuff Smith (“Stuff Smith Examines Stuff Smith”) took to the Doghouse in August 1939, saying: “I try to give the public a combination of

²⁰ (R. Welburn 1987, p. 262)

²¹ (R. Welburn 1987, p. 264)

²² Alkyer, Frank and Ed Enright, 2009, *DownBeat – The Great Jazz Interviews: A 75th Anniversary Anthology*. Hal Leonard Book: Milwaukee, p. 14-5

entertainment, comedy, novelty and swing...We can, and do, play rhumbas, fox trots, waltzes, boleros, swing, corn (if our patrons insist) and light classics.”²³

The top 20 songs of the 1930s, according to compilation of source charts, included “A Tisket, A Tasket” (Ella Fitzgerald), “Sing, Sing, Sing (With Swing)” (Benny Goodman), “Body & Soul” (Coleman Hawkins), “One O’Clock Jump (Count Basie) and “Strange Fruit” (Billie Holiday), “Minnie the Moocher” (Cab Calloway) and “Begin the Beguine” (Artie Shaw).²⁴

Down Beat itself, on its web site, explains it like this: “The bylines of many writers who would one day emerge as the most-noted authorities on jazz first appeared in *Down Beat* as early as 1935. John Hammond appeared in June, calling Ray Noble's orchestra the "fizzle of the season." Marshall Stearns, president of the Yale Hot Club, praised Ellington. Stanley Dance... received his first American byline in February 1936 when he took exception to a point in Stearns' article that suggested Ellington's ‘wah-wah’ trumpets were old-fashioned.”²⁵

Down Beat knew its audience was young, hip and avid fans of jazz and it took pride in poking them with sharply worded articles with titles including “Is Benny Goodman’s Head Swollen?” and articles that set off long-running debates

²³ Smith, Stuff, 1939, “Stuff Smith on Stuff Smith”, *Down Beat*, August, 6:9 (Smith 1939)

²⁴ Tsort.info, 2014. “Songs from the 1930s.” Accessed April 26, 2014, tsort.info/music/ds1920.htm, Version 2.3.0020.

²⁵ About DownBeat, “A History As Rich As Jazz Itself.” *Down Beat*. www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=about

with titles like “Disc Collectors Are Jerks.”²⁶ Debate was good for circulation and for the art of jazz, as academics would write decades later.

Down Beat’s description of its early writers as those “who would one day emerge as the most-noted authorities on jazz” accurately describes the not-quite-neophyte status of its writers, many of whom were still primarily fans who wrote. Established critics, most of whom had covered the classical music and opera scene for decades, often complained that the jazz writers in *Down Beat* and *Metronome* had no musical training, understood little about composition and were far too cozy with the musicians they wrote about as well as radio producers and record companies. (It was a complaint that would be heard years later by then then-seasoned jazz critics writing about the new rock writers, but that’s another essay.)

“Regrettably, this attitude of being all-out-for-jazz frequently justified rounding off corners when the canons of good journalism ran head on into some previously staked-out position. In particular, concern for conflict of interest was simply heaved out the window. Almost all of this group of critics was deeply enmeshed in the very industry they were supposed to be reporting on.

... The whole system was, to put no fine point on it, hopelessly flawed.”²⁷

Its journalistic flaws aside (or perhaps because of them), *Down Beat* was a run-away success. By September 1939 – five years after it began publishing -- *Down Beat* had 80,000 subscribers (slightly more than the far more well-

²⁶ (Gennari 2006, p. 101)

²⁷ (Collier 1993, p. 241)

established *Metronome*) and boosted profits substantially by deciding to publish twice a month. (For comparison, *Down Beat*'s circulation today is around 70,000 although the U.S. population has more than doubled since it began publishing.)

Also around this time, there appeared a few books on jazz including Winthrop Sergeant's *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid* (1938), some say the first book "to apply the scrutiny of a professional music critic to jazz, describing chord structures, scale systems, and rhythmic patterns in a way that gave 'hot jazz' meaning as a complex musical language rather than as a vague emotional state."²⁸

The appearance of these magazines and handful of books on jazz are critical markers of "how jazz came to signify various contours of status, distinctions and identity in American music," say those who study cultural flow, the soft science of how culture is created through our choices.²⁹

"....cultural forms travel along many pathways, often simultaneously; that they encounter people, institutions, other forms and practices, which may alter, encourage, deform, misdirect, ignore or applaud them" so that their ultimate place in culture "is always the result of the numerous encounters and transformations which occur along the pathways."³⁰ In short, the magazines, as well as the record producers and radio shows and club owners, all played roles in promoting jazz but perhaps none so – at least in this period -- than John Hammond.

²⁸ (J., Gennari, *Blowin' Hot And Cool: Jazz And Its Critics* 2006, 119)

²⁹ (Harris 2006, p. 38)

³⁰ (Harris 2006, p. 38)

The son of a wealthy New York family (Vanderbilt), Hammond dropped out of Yale in 1931 when he turned 21 and claimed his inheritance. From there he moved to Greenwich Village and was free to pursue his devotion to music (at this point jazz) without having to worry about a paycheck or being beholden to any tastes other than his own.

Hammond became a rainmaker for jazz.

“[Hammond] went on to discover the Basie Band, promote the careers of Basie, Holiday and others, and supervise scores of important jazz recordings, almost invariably using mixed black and white groups, all the while churning out a steady stream of reports and articles on his favorites for whatever periodicals would publish them including *The Brooklyn Eagle*, *New Masses*, *Down Beat* and the *Melody Maker*.”³¹

Hammond was said to be the man who persuaded *Down Beat* to be the loud and insistent force behind Benny Goodman’s meteoric rise in the 1930s. Musicians and writers alike were fair game in *Down Beat*, which prided itself on open discourse that some heard as dictatorial. Both Hammond and Goodman were hot enough to be taken on in Columbia College’s *Jester* magazine’s 1936 editions. In January, student Barry Ulanov (who soon after became a jazz writer himself) criticized Goodman as having “exquisite glibness.”³²

In October, also in *Jester*, Ulanov took on “His Royal Hammond.” He “has done his philanthropic bit for the cause; pushing deserving orchestras to the various record and dance hall types, befriending (a very philanthropic word)

³¹ (Collier 1993, p. 236)

³² (Gennari, *Blowin' Hot And Cool: Jazz And Its Critics*, p. 82)

individual artists...and so on. But know him, for ye must fear him. He is the boy who shapes your opinions for you, swing opinions anyhow, by his articles in the musical dopesheets....His opinions along with those of a few other swing dopesters are the distinct gospel of the night club managers, radio broadcasters, and the phonograph record companies, who more often than not choose their bands from among his recommendations.”³³

In November 1937, a year before it instituted its Critics in the Doghouse column, *Down Beat* published an article by George Frazier titled “Do Musicians Despise Critics?” that asked: “Don’t you believe that Benny Goodman’s success can be attributed, at least in part, to John Hammond’s enthusiasm? Don’t you believe that Count Basie owes John a vote of thanks? Well, whether or not you believe so, Goodman and Basie do.”³⁴

Months before Frazier’s defense, in February 1937, Hammond had helped launched another then-unknown, tenor saxophonist Lester Young when he wrote about an early morning jam session with Goodman, Basie, Harry James and others. “The music was something tremendous for everyone distinguished himself. But one conclusion was inescapable; that Lester Young was not only the star of the evening but without a doubt the greatest tenor player in the country. In fact, I’ll stick my neck out even further; he is the most original and inventive saxophonist I have ever heard.”³⁵ In less than a year, in January 1938, Young was playing with Benny Goodman (whose career Hammond had promoted heavily in

³³ (Gennari, *Blowin' Hot And Cool: Jazz And Its Critics*, p. 82)

³⁴ (Gennari, *The Politics of Culture and Identity in American Jazz Criticism*, p. 109)

³⁵ (Gennari, *The Politics of Culture and Identity in American Jazz Criticism*, p. 111)

Down Beat during the mid 1930s) at what would become a famous Carnegie Hall jazz concert (in which Hammond had a hand).

It was a young art and inspired passion all around with little love for the critics, or even the fans. In 1937, writing in *Metronome*, swing musician Benny Carter complained about fans: “rich man’s sons.... (who) listen to records, not knowing what to listen for, and proceed to form all sorts of opinions.” In the same essay, he complained about the writers telling the tale of one critic listening to a band and tapping his foot “entirely out of rhythm. Yet, time and time again, he has stated blatantly that ‘such and such a rhythm section stinks.’”³⁶

This generation of jazz writers (critics might be too strong a word still although it was used by the writers themselves) were being heard and, on the accepted theory that there is no such thing as bad publicity, jazz benefited.

“Their primary accomplishment was to force on American society the idea that jazz was an important element in the culture, something that not only could, but should, be taken seriously.”³⁷

As the 1930s drew to a close, culture critic Alain Locke wrote in the magazine *Opportunity* about the music scene in 1939. “The music season just closing has been one grand crescendo for Negro music, with almost too many events and too wide an upswing to be adequately chronicled in a single article. ...This year Negro music has really gone to par...The main reason lies perhaps in this central fact.... that instead of being sentimentalized extravagantly, Negro

³⁶ (Gennari, *The Politics of Culture and Identity in American Jazz Criticism*, p. 147)

³⁷ (Collier 1993, p. 240)

music is being intellectualized seriously, soberly, and in some cases controversially... interest in Negro music is deepening into technical analysis and criticism.”³⁸

Perhaps most importantly, the jazz writers – in magazines, books and newspapers -- had created forums for conversations about jazz and had begun to establish standards that would be the tools used to frame future debates about jazz. And the debates were coming.

³⁸ Locke, Alain, 1939. “Negro Music Goes To Par,” *Opportunity*. July, 17 (7), p. 196

By the 1940s, “with the growth of Swing music during the 1930s, jazz journalism and jazz criticism gained some stability amid the bickering of critics. This internecine conflict, where the writers affiliated with a particular jazz magazine were the principals and with musicians generally displeased with all of them, proved beneficial to the development of the new craft and pursuit of jazz criticism.” – Ron Welburn³⁹

MOLDY FIGS VERSUS NEO-MODERNISTS

By the 1940s, jazz was a strong enough art to weather its first big fight and it was a doozy. Beginning first as a modernist-revivalist debate (swing versus earlier New Orleans/Chicago/Kansas City jazz), it morphed over a few years into the better-known swing versus bebop debate. Once it became fully engaged it would set a standard for its ferocity with barbed commentary from both the so-called Moldy Figs, who saw bebop as the end of jazz, and the modernists who saw it as a fresh beginning truer to jazz’s original sound.

One example occurred in 1943 with *Esquire* magazine’s first jazz poll, concert and winner’s album, which drew much commentary for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was that it was not a reader’s poll but decided by a panel of two dozen or so musicians and writers, black and white.

“What bothered the offended critics most often was their equation of ‘the real jazz’ with the older New Orleans musicians [versus] the artists they dismissed as ‘swing musicians’ while categorically denying that swing music was jazz.”⁴⁰ Ralph Gleason, writing for *Record Changer* magazine, criticized the *Esquire* poll choices, which included at least as many African American

³⁹ (R. G. Welburn 1983, dissertation synopsis)

⁴⁰ Feather, Leonard, 1987, *The Jazz Years: Earwitness to an Era*, New York: De Capo Publishing, p. 82

musicians as white musicians. He said the winners of the Eskys (as the short-lived awards were called) had been chosen by a group of critics and musicians he described as “the exponents of big-band jazz, or small bands like [Red] Norvo and [Teddy] Wilson....there is no answer but to usurp the fountainheads of information ourselves and attempt, by using the word jazz to mean the music of Bunk [Johnson] and [Joe “King”] Oliver, to erase, in time, the damage already done by Feather-Miller-Goffin-Ulanov and their ilk.”⁴¹

Even more division was to come in the second half of the 1940s with the increasing popularity of bebop. “... jazz criticism considered and debated its instrumental attack, its place in history, its theoretical properties, and its extra-musical posture and image. With bebop came several periodicals that either championed its cause on one hand, and others that became standard-bearers for more traditional jazz style and musicians. At no time previously was the jazz community or following so severely divided into stylistic camps.”⁴²

Writing in the national magazine, *Colliers*, a pair of critics wrote: “Bebop represents a revolt, not only from the monumental corn of big band arrangements but from the rigidity of tradition. Consequently, the boppers have cast aside many traditional jazz ideas and forms and introduced new effects.”⁴³

The new effects begged for explanation, discussion and argument. Armed with more than a decade of practical knowledge, an agreed upon language and the start of acceptable standards, the critics went at it. There are those who would argue that the argument was good for jazz, as it showed that it has moved beyond

⁴¹ (Feather, 1987, p. 83)

⁴² (R. G. Welburn 1983, p. 172)

⁴³ Porter, Lewis, 1997, *Jazz: A Century of Change*, New York: Schirmer Books, p. 173

popular. “The canon should be plastic and pliable, since ‘quality’ is not an eternal and unchanging facility, but rather one that mutates along with the cultural evolution of society⁴⁴The merely popular entertainment of our age becomes the high-brow classic of the next, as the 19th-century novel attests.”⁴⁵

The jazz writers were the interpreters, or middlemen, in the conversation between the audience and artists. They were leading, and trying to influence, a cultural debate – a central role for critics, according to Matthew Arnold writing as far back as the mid-1800s. He said: “Creative genius is not self-sustaining – it flourishes only in certain conditions and amongst these is the currency of ideas generated by a healthy critical culture.”⁴⁶ Healthy, in this case, was sometimes vicious as the newbies dismissed the older guard as commercial sell-outs and stuck in their ways and the old guard refused admittance to the newcomers to the established jazz world. The criticism was marked by “extremist viewpoints” during which the “traditionalists (or moldy figs) marred...a perfectly valid case by wild overstatement.”⁴⁷

In 1946, the third year of *Esquire’s* jazz poll/concert/album, Jazz Record had particularly strong criticism in its November edition by Carter Winter: “Every single year there’s a new crop of phoneys – black and white – trying to pervert or suppress or emasculate jazz.... On the one hand you have the professional vipers – the real mad cats – headed by Diz Gillespie who try to cut the heart of the main line jazz and twist it into something like one of Carmen

⁴⁴ (McDonald, 2007, p. 23)

⁴⁵ (McDonald, 2007, P. 18)

⁴⁶ (McDonald 2007, P. 68)

⁴⁷ Hentoff, Nat, 1959, *Jazz: New Perspectives on the History of Jazz by Twelve of the World’s Foremost Jazz Critics and Scholars*, New York: Rinehart & Co., p. 308

Miranda's hats because they want to be frantic.... On the other hand you have those characters who are convinced...that jazz is dead or dying....Their groove is just as crappy as Gillespie's." ⁴⁸

In the early 1940s, at least from the outside, it looked like swing was here to stay. Billboard's Top songs of 1941 included the bands of Glenn Miller ("Chattanooga Choo Choo" and "Elmer's Tune"), Artie Shaw ("Stardust"), Jimmy Dorsey ("Green Eyes", "Maria Elena" and "Amapola") and Duke Ellington ("Take The 'A' Train"). ⁴⁹

The stakes were, by this time, much higher. Jazz was a successful music, as well as a business, with an impressive infrastructure that included hundreds of bands crisscrossing the country, clubs, record companies, radio programs with advertisers, magazines and so much more. Huge investments had been made and there were many who wanted to protect them.

"...[Because] pleasing a mass audience is invariably a risk-filled proposition, the culture industry...tends to rely upon forms and styles with a proven track record. This leads to a process of marginal innovation, or of change within continuity.... In so implementing and creating standards of sound and behavior, the cultural industries act as gatekeepers exercising influence over the artists who reach the audiences, the way they reach the audiences and the types of audiences they reach." ⁵⁰

When the artists have a different idea, it is the writers, critics and knowledgeable audience members who help them spread the word whether

⁴⁸ (Feather 1987, p. 83)

⁴⁹ (Tsort Info 2007, *Songs From 1941*)

⁵⁰ (Harris 2006, p. 56) (Porter 1997)

through their criticisms of each other or the musicians. George Frazier, then a 20-something writing for *Down Beat*, spoke for those who were increasingly disenchanted with the Big Bands, when he criticized Benny Goodman (who for nearly a decade could do no wrong) for being a commercial sell out. He took a lot of guff for his position from *Down Beat's* readers and responded: "...I'm a big boy now and no longer allow myself to be overawed by the big bigness of his name. Benny this and Benny that and the back of me hand to yiz, as I once warned my audience of smart young women." ⁵¹

The Big Band backlash – and there were more than just musical elements to the decline of the Big Bands, including the shortages that were endemic during World War II – has been traced by some to the appearance in the late 1930s of several books on jazz that included its pre-popularity past. Winthrop Sargeant's book *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid* (1938), among other points, was the first to claim American jazz has a hybrid of African and European music; *Jazzmen* (1939) was a collection of nostalgic essays that elegized early jazz in New Orleans and Chicago; and Marshall Stearns serialized history pre-1930s history of swing in *Down Beat*. "Historicity was now a central feature of jazz criticism, with critics and aficionados defining themselves by whether they thought jazz was in decline or was still progressing forward." ⁵²

In The New York Herald Tribune, Bill Gottlieb wrote that bebop is: '.... a difficult music to play and understand. That's why our young musicians, better

⁵¹ *Down Beat*, 1941, "Crosby Band 'My Pet' But Dissipates Talent", cited by Gennari, *Blowin' Hot And Cool: Jazz And Its Critics* 2006, p. 71

⁵² (Gennari, *Blowin' Hot And Cool: Jazz And Its Critics* 2006, p. 119)

schooled than yesterday's swing men, are turning to it once they find that swing was a pushover." ⁵³

Bass player Bill Crow, in his book *Jazz Anecdotes: Second Time Around* remembers when bebop arrived on the Street (52nd street, home to many jazz clubs in the 1930s and 1940s). "When bebop hit the Street during the 1940s, all the musicians felt the excitement of the change, though many had a negative reaction to it. The younger musicians adapted more easily to the new ideas. Since everything about jazz was fairly new to them, this new way of playing was just one more thing to assimilate." ⁵⁴

Rudi Blesh's 1946 book *Shining Trumpets* explored the anthropological origins of jazz and he argued that the underlying tonal quality of blues and jazz could be traced to variations in African speech and drumming. ⁵⁵ The book became "... a polemical weapon in the war between purists and the modernists," wrote Andrew McCarthy in a 1959 essay. ⁵⁶ "It is sometimes overlooked that what has made jazz so interesting is its lack of rigidity."

Among the jazz institutions that found themselves at sea during this transition was *Down Beat*, which had benefited greatly from the Big Band era. In its own history, *Down Beat* writes that it was: "... slow to realize that that [Big Band] era was passing. It reminisced increasingly...In the late '40s, jazz seemed to be losing its cohesion. As the big band era ebbed and swing stars were

⁵³ (Porter 1997, p. 176)

⁵⁴ Crow, Bill, 2005, *Jazz Anecdotes, Second Time Around*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 115

⁵⁵ (Gennari, *Blowin' Hot And Cool: Jazz And Its Critics* 2006, p. 133-35)

⁵⁶ (Hentoff 1959, p. 322)

dismissed as ‘has-beens,’ tradition and modernism fought for the privilege of defining jazz.”⁵⁷

Between the end of World War II and the end of the decade, much changed. The singers who had fronted the bands dominated the top of Billboard’s 1949 charts– Frankie Laine, Vic Damone, Perry Como, The Andrews Sisters, and Evelyn Knight – which did not include one band. ⁵⁸

Down Beat’s history also noted: “Two of the top three big band winners in [*Down Beat’s*] 1949 poll (Barnet and Herman) disbanded before the results were announced. It was embarrassing and alarming. Everyone recognized the slump but no one could explain it, as if an explanation might lead to a solution. Critics, pundits, and industry types wrung their hands in *Down Beat* columns wondering how to ‘bring back the bands.’” ⁵⁹

But there was no going back.

⁵⁷ (Down Beat n.d.)

⁵⁸ Billboard, 1949, “Top 30 Songs of 1949,” www.billboard.fm/charts/billboard/top-100-songs/1949

⁵⁹ (Down Beat n.d.)

“On one level, [the] debates between traditionalists and modernists required a level of thought and articulation that prepared the way for the emergence and critical acceptance of jazz as an art music. Due to the level of sophistication demanded in the defense of either camp....What was being constructed was an aesthetic discourse.”

-- Tyler Harris ⁶⁰

OFF THE CHARTS

With its jazz baby and young swinging phase behind it, jazz entered the 1950s with a sophisticated swagger and an air of mystery as it, literally, minded its own business. Its new attitude proved appealing. By time the decade was over, jazz had come to be synonymous with democracy and freedom, made the cover of *Time* magazine (Dave Brubeck), fostered festivals (Newport) and tours and was the subject of increasing academic study. Through it all, the jazz writers were front and center, eventually leaving their intra-jazz bickering behind in favor of focusing on the art world outside jazz.

“Critics were an extremely important factor in the transition of jazz music during the 1940s and 1950s. They were responsible for developing a critical lexicon that could be used to judge and sort jazz music. But even more so, they were the first people who really tried to make distinctions about jazz...critics went to great lengths to define and distinguish that music.” ⁶¹

The writers and critics knew that jazz was literally off the charts, no longer popular music and continued to frame jazz – through written disagreements and celebrations of jazz’s origins, development and role in the history of the country as well as race relations – as an important music.

⁶⁰ (Harris 2006, p. 143)

⁶¹ (Harris 2006, p. 147)

“For the jazz critic, bebop was never supposed to replace swing as the popular music of the day. It was about changing the public perception, changing the pathway of jazz, making jazz intellectually accepted amongst the elites instead of the masses.”⁶²

Urging critics and fans to put aside their difference, saxophonist Charlie Parker told a reporter, not long before his death in 1955: "There is no point in talking about different kinds of jazz. The most important thing for us is to have our efforts accepted as music." Asked about the differences between jazz and European "art" music, Parker replied: "There is no boundary line to art." ⁶³

While some jazz writers continued their play-by-play coverage of the bebop versus cool debate and then the cool versus hard bop, others turned to jazz's bigger picture. In retrospect, it is not unsurprisingly that their bid for high-art legitimacy was being made the same year that Bill Haley and His Comets were hitting the top of the Billboard charts as the warm up act to Elvis Presley in 1956.

Writer Nat Hentoff was among those making the case for jazz to enjoy a higher profile. In a 1955 essay titled “Jazz and the Intellectuals: Somebody Goofed,” Hentoff admonished them. “None of our ‘major’ novelists of the past few decades seems to have been more than remotely aware that jazz and jazzmen exist. It is as if Jelly Roll Morton, Bix Beiderbecke and Charlie Parker were American Indians.... The sociologists, writing psychologists, and cultural historian also have almost entirely ignored the existence, let alone the pulsating

⁶² (Harris 2006, P. 143)

⁶³ Russell, Ross. 1973. *Bird Lives!: The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie (Yardbird) Parker*. New York: Charter House, p 293.

ramifications of jazz and the jazz life.... In any case, even with the limited field of jazz specialists, the contentious critics and quasi-historians have, except for a few books, also done surprisingly little to document well, explore deeply or otherwise illuminate the rich, swift evolution of jazz.”⁶⁴

Further Hentoff complained that *Down Beat*, *Metronome* and *The Record Changer* had done their bit but not with “the depth of perception that *Musical Quarterly* applies to classical music or *The Kenyon Review* to literary criticism.”⁶⁵ He was joined in self-criticism by Martin Williams, writing in *Down Beat*, about jazz writers and their lack of reference to musical attributes in reviews. “We assure ourselves that jazz is an ‘art’ and often proceed to talk about it as if it were a sporting event.”⁶⁶

Hentoff finished off his Chicago Review diatribe by practically accusing the intellectuals of racism. “It’s all very well for Negro intellectuals to move within our regular traditions...of writing, painting or composing or for them to be folk artists. But for the Negro to have created an increasingly complex musical language on an Afro-American base, a language that has become as original, as challenging, and as intellectually stimulating as jazz, is quite another thing.”⁶⁷ Race, as part of jazz criticism, was moving to the forefront.

While the level of debate had evolved from the bar-fight tone of earlier decades, it maintained the edge that comes with a chip on the shoulder. The chip

⁶⁴ Hentoff, Nat, 1955, “Jazz and the Intellectuals: Somebody Goofed.” *Chicago Review*, Vol. 9:3, p. 110

⁶⁵ (N. Hentoff 1955, p. 110)

⁶⁶ Williams, Martin, 1958, “Criticism: The Path of the Jazz Critic.” *Down Beat*, Aug. 21, p. 42

⁶⁷ (N. Hentoff 1955, p. 112)

would only disappear when jazz writers and critics thought that the music had gotten its due and they weren't finished fighting about that yet.

Before jazz could be lost to the ages, buried beneath crooners, rock 'n' roll, folk, heavy metal and more, there was work to be done ensuring that its foundations and history were recognized, appreciated and celebrated. Hentoff and fellow author Albert McCarthy did their part in 1959 with a book called *Jazz*. It included a dozen essays that approached jazz from anthropological, musical history and sociological viewpoints. For example, longtime jazz writer and musician Gunther Schuller's essay about Ellington is replete with a detailed and scholarly analysis of the music and surmises: "Ellington developed his ideas quite independently *within* his genre, with almost no borrowing from outside his specific field. There are certainly no traces of any influence from classical music...."⁶⁸ Pages later he takes another critic to task for implying that Ellington was influenced by the work of classical composer Frederick Delius. "It smacks of over simplification and the kind of snobbism that implies a piece of jazz music is not very good until it can be equated with some accepted European compositions."⁶⁹

Hentoff, in the final essay in the book, titled "Jazz at Mid-Century: Whose Art Form?" insists that jazz has attained respectability. As proof he quotes an Aug. 24, 1958 article in the New York Times Magazine headlined: "Jazz Makes It Up The River" with the subhead "The long voyage from New Orleans barrelhouse to public respectability ends in a triumph." He concludes that the consensus is

⁶⁸ (N. Hentoff 1959. P. 256)

⁶⁹ (N. a. Hentoff 1959, p. 268)

that jazz “has indeed become triumphantly accepted and honored, and perhaps may even be an ‘art form’ as its more fervent proselytizers claim.”⁷⁰

In the 1950s, non-academic newspaper/magazine critics wielded great power of public taste. “It is because criticism has both an objective and a subjective quality, flitting between principle and prejudice, that it is in the land between the poles of scholarship and journalism that it has often proven most fruitful.”⁷¹

However, scholarship soon became part of the business of jazz. The Lenox School of Jazz in Massachusetts was one of the first institutions, in 1956, to formalize jazz study through roundtable discussions, recorded jam sessions and educational clinics at the Music Inn in Lenox. At *Down Beat*, academics helped save the magazine, which had lost half its subscribers with the end of the Big Band era and its identity, until a decade forward it had embraced band jazz festivals, jazz summer clinics and jazz band tours at high schools and colleges around the country.

“Jazz education turned out to be the strategy both *Down Beat* and its advertisers needed. The business justification was a straight and clear. The best way *Down Beat* could survive as a magazine was to serve musicians, particularly learning musicians. And jazz education provided the magazine an opportunity not only to write about music, but to help build it as well. ‘We had this burgeoning school jazz movement,’ says [Charles] Suber, ‘with several hundred thousand kids and a generation of educators who came out of the swing band

⁷⁰ (N. a. Hentoff 1959, p. 327)

⁷¹ (McDonald 2007, p. 79)

period. It was not only a growing audience. Most of our best circulation that the advertisers wanted to pay for came directly from this market’.”⁷²

While institutions increasingly embraced jazz – including the U.S. State Department that sent bands and jazz musicians to countries around the world on goodwill tours – the popular music industry, including the radio networks and the big record labels, continued to embrace and promote singers, including many who had fronted the Big Bands. The shift was noted. The *Down Beat* reader’s poll had stopped differentiating between “Swing Band” and “Sweet Band”, combining them into “Favorite Band” in 1947, the same year it introduced a new category “Small Instrumental Combo” to reflect the creation of smaller groups. *Down Beat* had introduced “Hall of Fame” into its readers poll and Louis Armstrong was the first inductee followed in 1953 by Glen Miller, Stan Kenton in 1954 and so on.

Soon, many of those Hall of Famers were circling the globe at the request U.S. State Department officials as representatives of democracy as heard through the free and improvising language of jazz. The concept of jazz has a weapon, or an olive branch, in the Cold War that followed World War II and Korea, was summed up in the first issue of a new magazine, *Jazz*, which used Thelonious Monk’s statement “Jazz and freedom go hand in hand” as its motto. In the magazine’s second issue, the editors explained their philosophy, in part: “Jazz, with its message of life and hope, has captured the imagination of young people throughout the world. Jazz, born in America, symbolizes the creative union of all races and creeds, which lies in the future. It is the music of our time, the first

⁷² (*Down Beat* n.d.)

universal art. By helping, in a modest way, the spread of jazz where it is needed most, we hope to make a small contribution to the cause of peace and freedom.”⁷³ The musicians and writers associated with the magazine included Duke Ellington and John Coltrane, old-school critics like Hugues Panassie and George Simon as well as new-school critics including Martin Williams and Hentoff.

Esquire's January 1959 issue proclaimed it the “Golden Age of Jazz.” “Its presence is loudly attested to by the ringing of cash registers in night clubs, concert halls, record stores, and music schools; by the subscription lists of the half-dozen magazines entirely devoted to jazz, and the dozen others which feature it regularly. Its purchasing power is as much evidenced by the 12-record Encyclopedia of Jazz that was recently offered to supermarket customers across the nation as by Norman Granz's multimillion-dollar concert-and-record empire, built wholly out of the marketing of this kind of music.”⁷⁴

Over the past year, *Esquire* noted, new jazz albums had appeared at the rate of one a day, with sales sometimes surpassing half a million. As for the airwaves, jazz occupied “an incalculable amount across the nation,” part of “the gradual recognition, in books and television and movies, that this music is perhaps the most indigenous expression of our national life.”

What jazz had lost in national popularity it had gained in national and international reputation. And just in time.

⁷³ *Jazz*. 1:2, November/December 1962, p. 3

⁷⁴ John Clellon Holmes, 1959. “The Golden Age of Jazz: Time Present,” *Esquire* 51 (January 1959): 100

“I came of age in the 1960s...Those writers knew that jazz was not anything other than what it was, regardless of how many ways it had been between the time Louis Armstrong left New Orleans.... and Ornette packed up his plastic alto saxophone...⁷⁵
-- Stanley Crouch

FREE TO BE

Consensus has never been a hallmark of jazz and the 1960s were no exception, either musically or critically. The pattern that had marked jazz music and discourse for decades played out during this period as well – with those who had played and defended the last big change in jazz (bebop, cool and hard bop/funk) finding themselves, to lesser or greater degree, in opposition to those performing and advocating for free, or avant garde, jazz. This time around, there was one difference: race and politics, long a subtext in jazz writing, entered into many of the columns and reviews, sometimes taking precedence over writing about the music itself. It seemed there still was plenty to write about.

“At various times during the 1960s, musicians, critics, fans, politicians and entrepreneurs claimed jazz as a national art form, an Afrocentric race music, an extension of modernist experimentation in other genres, a music of mass consciousness, and the preserve of a cultural elite. The debate over its meaning framed the reception of free improvisation and greatly influenced the standing of jazz in American culture.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Crouch, Stanley, 2002. “The Jazz Tradition is Not Innovation.” In *Considering Genius*, New York: Basic Civitas Books, p. 209

⁷⁶ Anderson, Iain D., 2000. “‘This is Our Music’: Free jazz, cultural hierarchy and the Sixties.” PhD. Diss. Indiana University, p. 264

Articles in *Jazz* and *Down Beat* magazines contained strongly worded support for the newer forms, as well as against. In 1960, LeRoi Jones, who later wrote under the name Amiri Baraka, defended “the New Thing” writing: “Contemporary jazz during the last few years has begun to take on again some of the anarchy and excitement of the bebop years.... The music has changed again, for many of the same basic reasons it changed 20 years ago.... The New Thing, as recent jazz has been called, is, to a large degree, a reaction to the hard bop, funk-groove-soul camp, which itself seemed to come into being in protest against the squelching of most of the blues elements in cool and progressive jazz. Funk (groove, soul) has become as formal and clichéd as cool or swing, and opportunities for imaginative expression within that form have dwindled almost to nothing.”⁷⁷

Conversely, *Down Beat* writer John Tynan, in November 1961, sounded off on free jazz calling it “gobbledygook” and “nonsense.” He labeled John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy’s playing as “anti-jazz” and said Coltrane’s quintet failed to “swing.”⁷⁸

The musicians themselves were far from unified. As Elvin Jones said in 1971, “It sounded just like a kid picking up a horn without knowing how to finger it properly, running up and down the keys, creating some kind of distorted sound

⁷⁷ Baraka, Amiri, 1968. “Jazz and The White Critic, 1963.” In *Black Music*, New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc.

⁷⁸ (Gennari, *Blowin' Hot And Cool: Jazz And Its Critics* 2006, p. 254)

without any pattern, at the end of which this is freedom.”⁷⁹ Similarly, Art Blakey told Taylor he didn’t understand free jazz. “...freedom without discipline is chaos. It’s got to have a point, to be reaching for something....”⁸⁰

By 1965, the *New Yorker’s* Whitney Balliett struck something close to balance when he wrote: “The new thing, the third great revolution in jazz, has suddenly found its audience.” Well-attended concerts at Judson Hall and in a small studio above the Village Vanguard, as well as an uptown club called The Cellar, were proof, he wrote. In a lengthy review of several shows, Balliett describes free jazz in paragraphs of descriptive detail, trying to capture the atonal free form in onomatopoeia language that he must have hoped would help put readers into the room with the audience. He summarized that avant garde was “an attempt to free jazz of its metronomic rhythms and its reliance on chordal or melodic improvisation, set keys, and choruses of specific length.”⁸¹

“At its worst, then, the new thing is long-winded, dull, and almost physically abrasive. At its best – in the hands of Ornette Coleman or Cecil Taylor – it howls through the mind and heart, filling them with an honest ferocity that is new in jazz and perhaps in any music,” Balliett summarized.⁸²

Critic Frank Kofsky insinuated in some writing that critics who did not

⁷⁹ Taylor, Arthur, 1982. *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interviews*. New York: De Capo Press. p. 228 (Taylor 1982)

⁸⁰ (Taylor 1982, p. 248-9)

⁸¹ Balliett, Whitney, 2002. *Collected Works: A Journal of Jazz 1954-2001*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, p. 232

⁸² (Balliett 2002, p. 234)

support the new form were inherently racist when they used the term “anti-jazz” to criticize free jazz because it had to be heard as musicians throwing off spiritual and musical shackles.

In an essay titled “Jazz and the White Critic” that appeared first in *Down Beat* in 1963 Amiri Baraka wrote that “the most damning fault of the white critics who were dismissing ‘the new thing’...[was] their failure to recognize that free jazz, like bebop, was the exact registration of the social and cultural thinking of a whole generation of black Americans’.”⁸³

And the magazines carried the retorts as well. In one Leonard Feather, alluding to Kofsky, accused him of shedding “crocodile tears for Malcolm X” (after his assassination) and trying to be a “soul brother” to black musicians instead of assessing their music alone. “There has been a resurgence in recent months of a brand of literary wrangling that should have been extinguished permanently with the moldy figs-vs.-beboppers nonsense of the 1940s...Jazz criticism, at best, like all forms of criticism is parasitical and totally dependent occupation. Without the powerful engine of art, the caboose of criticism would grind to an immediate halt. Yet one finds constantly that several of the better-known jazz writers.... use their time not so much to listen to jazz as to turn the art into a literary soapbox.”⁸⁴

As in other decades, there also were books that aimed at putting jazz into a broader musical context. In his 1963 book *Blues People: Negro Music in White*

⁸³ (Baraka 1968, p. 16)

⁸⁴ Feather, Leonard, 1965. “A Plea for Less Critical Infighting, More Attention To The Music Itself.” *Down Beat*. Vol. 31: 26 (Dec. 16, 1965)

America Baraka focused on the folk sources of black music including jazz and succeeded, to some extent, in wresting jazz away from the largely white superstructure that had constructed that image and supported it.

“Jazz made it possible for the first time for something of the legitimate feeling of Afro-American music to be imitated successfully,” Baraka wrote of the morphing of blues into jazz. “The Negro middle class would not have a music if it were not for jazz. The white man would have no access to blues. [Jazz] was a music capable of reflecting not only the Negro and a black America but a white America as well...the Negro had created a music that offered such a profound reflection of America that it could attract white Americans to want to play it or listen to it for exactly that reason.”⁸⁵

The continued debates among musicians and reviewers and the continued splintering of jazz into various niches had less of an impact on the art form than it might have in the past. It was, by the 1960s, simply the repetition of old arguments -- what jazz musicians and writers did. The old versus new debate had swelled to include long simmering issues of race and equality inside jazz.

Meanwhile, the world outside jazz played on and soon the next “next thing” for jazz would encompass whole other musical worlds.

⁸⁵ Baraka, Amiri, 1963, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, New York: William Morrow & Co., p. 148-9

“The 1970s will be remembered, at least among many of us who have lived through them in the role of chroniclers, as the decade of the irresolvable dilemma. The questions ‘What is jazz?’ has become more than ever before incapable of a firm answer.”⁸⁶

-- Leonard Feather, 1980

FUSION FORMS

Jazz took so many directions so quickly in the 1960s that it's difficult to imagine anyone being surprised when it ran headlong into rock and created jazz-rock, or fusion. In fact, surprise seems to be one of the only emotions that went unexpressed during the fusion fights, arguments that over time persisted and solidified and eventually swung the jazz pendulum back in time to be-bop.

With fusion, jazz musicians who embraced rock and its electronics were sometimes criticized or shunned, as if they had married outside their faith. Jazz, never an easy art form to characterize, was becoming amorphous in the 1970s, said the critics who were still paying attention and hadn't left jazz behind on their way to covering rock.

“The debates that went on in the [past]....seem like ladies' tea party chatter compared to the arguments now raging with respect to the various fusion forms,” wrote Leonard Feather.⁸⁷ “As you can see, we have a problem. If jazz was ever definable.... it certainly has reached a point at which there is almost no agreement on where the borderline lies....” Feather went on to list numerous fusion efforts including folk artist Joni Mitchell's album with Charles Mingus and quoted

⁸⁶ (Porter 1997, p. 234) citing Leonard Feather, “The Decade of ‘What Is Jazz?’ Boston Globe and Los Angeles Times 1980)

⁸⁷ (Porter 1997, p. 235)

Herbie Hancock as saying that he's gone "from jazz to fusion to disco and r&b; my next album will touch rock and Latin bases."

The long-time musicians tended to take the long view. "The music goes on," Art Blakey said in 1971. "The sun goes down and we go through a period of darkness, then all of a sudden somebody rises up and there's a new leader in music.... [but] there's got to be some direction or else the music is finished."⁸⁸

By the 1980s, avant garde, free, fusion, bebop, even big band – all could be heard in New York. Whitney Balliett was practically blasé about the many forms jazz had taken, noting in a 1980s essay titled "The J.C.O.A.," that by time a label is applied to a pioneer movement "its work is mainly done. All that remains is consolidation, embellishment, and dissemination.... In time, a new avant-garde appears, and the preceding movement, which helped feed it, becomes respected and part of the mainstream.... The present avant-garde in jazz is almost ready for the mainstream."⁸⁹

While fusion had its commercial successes, the critics were less kind to the musical results. Critic Peter Watrous of The New York Times labeled fusion "The Miles Davis Curse."

"While the early attempts at fusion were often musically sophisticated, the music quickly faltered, losing its complexity and experimental vigor, and by the late 1970s it barely existed," Watrous wrote. "Within a handful of years, jazz

⁸⁸ (Taylor 1982, p. 249)

⁸⁹ (Balliett 2002, p. 386)

fusion became a sort of instrumental pop music, using pop's melodic ideas, rhythms, instruments and textures. And with that, a dream vanished...."⁹⁰

In his 1997 book, "Jazz: A Century of Change" Lewis Porter looked back on fusion saying it: "... remains the most divisive issue within the jazz community. Get a group of jazz musicians together and say 'Kenny G – and you needn't bother to complete a sentence – and you'll hear a heated debate" about selling out versus remaining true to jazz. ⁹¹ A few pages later, he accedes that "fusion artists have accomplished what skeptics denied: they really did bring young people back to jazz, maybe not in huge numbers, but in enough numbers that jazz is once again on the charts." That opinion is echoed by John Gennari, who wrote: "Where it was an article of faith among jazz purists that fusion was a creative dead end, [others] considered how the form connected with developments outside the jazz mainstream," influencing musicians in the late 1970s and early 1980s including Prince, Funkadelic and Living Colour.⁹²

As always, most critics, and even academics studying jazz, were looking for a smooth narrative and musical path through the thickets. At this point, jazz had traveled some 75 years on a bumpy road that threatened, sometimes, to shake the whole thing apart as it explored the byways and back roads of new sounds and musical places. By the 1980s, it was clear that some in the jazz world thought they'd been out on the road too long, and maybe lost their way – they wanted to

⁹⁰ Watrous, Peter, 1995. "A Jazz Generation and the Miles Davis Curse." Accessed April 2, 2014. www.nytimes.com/1995/10/15/arts/jazz-view-a-jazz-generation-and-the-miles-davis-curse.html

⁹¹ (Porter 1997, p. 243)

⁹² (Gennari, *Blowin' Hot And Cool: Jazz And Its Critics* 2006, p. 357)

go home.

Musicians who favored swinging the old jazz their way – Wynton Marsalis and his brother Branford, leading the so-called “young lions” – were welcomed by the segment of the jazz community long disenchanted with fusion. And their arrival coincided with a new round of jazz concerts and festivals. “Jazz is awash in its past, and that’s a mixed blessing. As much as the constant revivals of past glories make for satisfying, historically important listening, the danger is that if looking backward becomes jazz’s prime activity, the music becomes embalmed, lifeless,”⁹³ Peter Watrous wrote in the New York Times in 1988.

In 1986, critic Stanley Crouch was making a case for a neo-classicism movement in jazz, so that it would be as appreciated as in Europe. “At this point, after many years of avant-garde frauds and sellouts to the rock-and-roll god of fusion, we are lucky to see a growing number of young musicians, most of them black, who are committing themselves to jazz.... this is something that all of us who believe in jazz must be grateful for...”⁹⁴

The Village Voice’s critic Greg Tate wasn’t quite as joyful about the new musicians saying that these young lions were playing a stale version of jazz from decades before. He urged them toward innovation instead of veneration. In a 1989 essay “Blow On This,” Tate wrote that there was once again talk about jazz being dead. “Nowadays, the discussion done got grim. You got muhfukahs so

⁹³ (Porter 1997, p. 246)

⁹⁴ (Crouch 2006, p. 228)

hyped on a jazz is dead kick idea they want to be the first on the block to deliver the last rites and shit.... It doesn't take a genius to know that things ain't what they used to be in jazz when innovation was the music's stock-in-trade." Tate urged the new traditionalists to venture out onto the edge along with hip-hop, house and rock because, after all, "Keeping one ear to the street and the other to the academy was good enough for Edward Kennedy Ellington."⁹⁵

When the critics are handing out credit for jazz remaining a force in the musical world, fusion might have its supporters but some of the loudest accolades have gone to the new traditionalists. And that, of course, meant there were critics as well. "In jazz, an entire generation of young musicians is rejecting, with a surety only Freud could have predicted, their immediate musical parents – the avant-gardists of the 60s and 70s – in favor of the 40-year-old rules of be-bop," Peter Watrous complained in the *New York Times* in 1988.

Wynton Marsalis, de facto spokesperson for the (no-longer) young lions and (now) artistic director of jazz at Lincoln Center, has consistently defended his vision against those who call it narrow. "The real problem in jazz is not narrow definitions of it but the dominance of arrogant and incompetent writers who believe their underdeveloped taste constitutes the truth.... You represent an unfortunate intellectual tradition that has burdened this art with varying degrees

⁹⁵ (Gennari, *Blowin' Hot And Cool: Jazz And Its Critics* 2006, p. 356)

of paternalism and little actual concern for [the] musicians....”⁹⁶

Anyone listening carefully might have heard the critics rubbing their hands together in glee as they leaned into their keyboards – we write for the readers, we write for posterity, we write for the love of jazz, many retorted settling themselves in for a fresh round of debate.

And the beat goes on.

⁹⁶ (Porter 1997, p. 267)

There's something finally mysterious and unintelligible about the relationship between the artist and audience, and the critic's job is to provide words for an experience for which there are no words. The circle – musician, critic, audience – composes a dynamic that is perpetually in motion, always fulfilling and always unsatisfying. And it's this dynamic tension – of a desire awakened but only partially met – that makes jazz performance meaningful and demands its repetition.⁹⁷

CONCLUSION

Forged in the fire of nearly constant controversy, jazz is -- at its century mark -- as strong a musical form as opera and European classical music, both of which are supported by many more hundreds of years of history and tradition. Jazz didn't die of the fight; it thrived because of it.

Biting, sarcastic and impassioned, the written and verbal debates -- about whether the newest thing deserved to be called jazz -- fueled interest (and circulation) when it might have flagged. More importantly, the finer points of the arguments helped establish boundaries, codified language, named names and ultimately fought for jazz's place in the artistic canon and eventually in academia where today there is study of ragtime, Dixieland, boogie woogie, blues, big band, bebop, cool jazz, hard bop, avant garde, free, fusion and whatever comes next.

For decades, polls have shown that jazz holds steady in terms of audience. The 1982, 1992 and 2002 Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts, four types of music out of 20 registered "no change in popularity" and the estimated audience size remained the same. They were jazz with 15 million adults; classical/chamber

⁹⁷ (Gennari, *Blowin' Hot And Cool: Jazz And Its Critics* 2006, p. 6)

music with 13 million adults; opera with 6 million adults; and Latin/Spanish/salsa with 6 million. ⁹⁸

Further, the canon building that began in the 1950s with the popular writers and critics of the day – those who wrote the first draft of jazz history -- continues today, albeit out of the limelight. Academics and cultural anthropologists methodically mine the jazz past for nuggets of information, records, impressions and memories paying particular attention to those areas that might have been overlooked or denied.

“If we are to comprehend American culture, we can no longer afford to assume jazz really was what many Americans thought it was. We have to make that empathetic leap and allow ourselves to see jazz as an integral vibrant part of American culture throughout this century; to realize that before even the most prescient Europeans and long before any appreciable number of Americans thought of jazz as an indigenous American contribution to the culture of the world, jazz was precisely that.”⁹⁹

When the canon has been more carefully researched and written and the marble busts are being carved, there will still be room for jazz writers – probably more seasoned writers with deeper knowledge and perspective, nearer in style to the writers who covered European classical music for so many years. About a quarter century ago, in 1988, critic Stanley Crouch yearned for them. “What I am concerned about, and what I see as the task facing the serious writer about jazz, is

⁹⁸Mizell, Lee and Brett Crawford, Caryn Anderson (Lee Mizell n.d.), June 2005. “Summary Music Preferences in the U.S. 1982-2002.” Prepared for the National Endowment for the Arts.

⁹⁹ (Levine 1989, p. 6)

how the literature on the music might help create a following for the art in this country that would parallel the listening public that European concert music has,” Crouch wrote in “Jazz Criticism and Its Effect on the Art Form.”¹⁰⁰

“Unlike European concert music, the idiom hasn’t inspired the support of wealthy patrons (black or white), the erection of concert halls, or quality explanation in the most prestigious musical institutions across the country.”¹⁰¹ A year after Crouch’s essay, there was a jazz summer concert series at New York’s Lincoln Center and they continued through subsequent summers.

In 2001, in the *New York Times*, critic Ben Ratliff wrote: “Today jazz is routinely treated with reverence. It has equal billing with opera and classical music at Lincoln Center. Academics write scholarly treatises on the subject. And when something jazz-related pops up on the larger radar screen of American culture, it tends to be discussed in deeply respectful tones.”¹⁰²

In 2004, the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera and the New York City Ballet welcomed jazz into the highbrow family of performing arts organizations at Lincoln Center.

In the nature versus nurture debate, those who argue strongest for the influence of nature would have to nod approvingly of the sustaining quality of jazz’s parentage and, it is hoped, this essay has argued persuasively for a recognition of its diligent nurturing by many, including jazz writers and critics.

¹⁰⁰ (Crouch 2006, p. 227)

¹⁰¹ (Crouch 2006, p. 227)

¹⁰² Ratliff, Ben, 2001. “Jazz in the Catbird Seat: It Wasn’t Always So.” *New York Times*. Accessed March 3, 2014. www.nytimes.com/2001/01/06/arts/jazz-in-the-catbird-seat-it-wasn-t-always-so.html (Ratliff 2001)

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