

Notes and Opinions

Black Jazz in the Digital Age

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If you love Black people, could you raise your hands? Okay that was a rhetorical question, but not a trick question so I'm glad to see we got a few respondents. Not trying to haul anyone in on charges of exoticism or paternalism.

I recently asked my friend Vernon Reid if he thought we'd ever see jazz resurrected as a creative force in modern Black life and he said only when we got back to doing it for the love and not for legitimacy and lifestyle. My late friend Billy Quinn once said he had no problem with the term jazz having once been a euphemism for sex since the music had always sounded like love to him. My own love for jazz didn't begin in the bedroom, in the streets or even with records, it actually began with the love I discovered in a book: LeRoi Jones's *Black Music*. I was guided to an act of love for the Black avant-garde after deciding to create a comic book about a trumpeter who blew over a post-apocalyptic city from high above on the stratospheric lip of a crystal skyscraper. I must have been thinking about Miles Davis already. Little did I know, I'd soon be thinking about Dewey aka Inky aka The Prince of Darkness as often as I thought about myself for the next 30 years.

There are as many jazz initiations as there are jazz listeners, but since mine came about at the hands of Black Cultural Nationalists, I've always thought of jazz as first and foremost a liberating and even post-liberated enterprise—a tachyon beamed future-sent Black cultural revolution in sound. Being raised during the 70s in a Black cultural Mecca, namely the Washington DC of the 1970s, certainly didn't hurt in fortifying this point of view. Here was a time and a place where the people promoting and advocating for the music were also advocates and organizers of social change at universities, media organizations and businesses that employed the Black working class. Some were poets, painters, sculptors, and filmmakers whose work conveyed and amplified The Struggle, some were even card carrying communists and socialists. All tacitly followed the belief espoused by Paul Robeson in 1937 that “The ARTIST must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative.” Later figures would take up Robeson's charge and follow suit: Max Roach, Archie Shepp, Jackie McLean, Stevie Wonder, Bob Marley, Fela Kuti, Steel Pulse, Public Enemy, and Rage Against The Machine.

My jazz educators were all big time vinyl junkies who already owned complete Miles, Trane, Blue Note, ESP, and ACTUEL collections when I met them. It was in Washington that I got to interview Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins, Betty Carter while barely out of high school and to routinely witness performances by the likes of Muhal Richard Abrams, Henry Threadgill, George Lewis, George Coleman/Frank Foster big band, Miles Davis, David Murray, Julius Hemphill, Oliver Lake and the Sun Ra Arkestra among predominantly Black audiences. My parents weren't big jazz fans in the sense of buying records or being concertgoers. But both had grown up in Memphis where their courtship was played out on Beale Street listening to Mingus, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, et al. In addition, my Mom had gone to high school with Frank Strozier, George Coleman, and Phineas Newborn Jr. So even though my folks made sure I knew who Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Nina Simone were, checking for Trane, Miles, and the rest became my own kind of adolescent vision quest.

To be 16 years old and be a jazz lover back then was to be something of a generational anomaly. It meant many of my friends were about ten years older than me and tolerated me trying to be erudite about the music they loved and had pointed me towards. Most of my younger buddies were heavy into rock and funk, as was I, and wanted to be Carlos Santana or Jimmy Page when they grew up, as I did I. To my ears, the R&B of that era wasn't so far from jazz anyway—it just had more amazingly graceful vocalists, and if you listened to Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Chaka Khan, and Curtis Mayfield, you heard voices that could match any horn this side of Jeanne Lee for plaintiveness and improvisational pliancy.

By that time, R&B was usually played by session musicians who had as much jazz information at their fingertips as blues and gospel. This is certainly true of the cats who created the sounds of Motown, P-Funk, Earth Wind and Fire, Ohio Players, Kool and The Gang, The Isley Brothers, Mandrill, etc. What's equally interesting to note is that the rhythmic and sonic language of electronic keyboards in modern pop was as much developed by certifiable jazz players—Hancock, Corea, Zawinul, Lonnie Liston Smith, George Duke—as by Stevie Wonder and Bernie Worrell.

Equally peculiar to this era was a sense of unified Black community that didn't require the worlds of Black jazz and Black pop to play by the rules of intracultural segregation that prevail today. In the fusion moment you could go to venues like Howard University's Cramton Auditorium and see Weather Report open for the afro-funk band Osibisa, or witness Billy Cobham's Stratus unit on tour with P-Funk or strangely enough, Bob Marley and the Wailers warming up the stage for Chick Corea's Return To Forever while future members of DC's Rasta-punk pioneers Bad Brains sat taking notes on both. Of course, DC had its own brand of live funk and hip-hop called go-go: freewheeling bands of 12 members or more who weekly put on marathon, funkathon shows of generally 6 - 8 hours in length. Outside of New Orleans it remains the only Black music that demands young Black musicians become instrumentalists.

This state of affairs, this kind of adventurous programming, this kind of polyglot music community was pretty normal back then in urban America, but is almost unheard of in the States today where it is seemingly forbidden for fans of one kind of music to occupy a concert hall with fans of another, except at a Björk show.

So exactly what did happen to the Black Music scene I grew up with? Well, the simple answer to that is commercial disco happened—commercial as opposed to the underground variety, which had started in DC's gay clubs in the early 70s. Most hip-hop producers will tell you they don't sample records that were made after 1977 because that's when the soul left the wax, when Black pop stopped being made by bands and instead started being made nearly exclusively by producers and programmable machines. Steve Coleman will tell you one reason he started playing jazz was that there was nowhere left to play funk in Chicago after bands got replaced by turntables in the late 70s. 1976 is also when Miles Davis went into semi-retirement for about 5 years. The dialogue Miles had prophetically already been having in his 70s music between jazz culture and the emergent electronically enhanced forms of reggae, dub, punk, no-wave, hip-hop, Detroit techno, Chicago house, drum and bass, electronica, etc., got retired like a Blade Runner replicant with him. Keith Jarrett summed up Miles' passing in 1991 by saying that for all musicians a certain resonance had left the room. Miles's presence in jazz from the moment he hired Coltrane all the way through Bitches Brew did two very significant things for jazz musicians: it made risk-taking and experimentation commercially viable, and it made a forced hybridity of free jazz, soul and funk ideas seem not only hip, but inevitable and inexorable to his harmonic camp, which is another way of saying almost everyone on Blue Note at the time.

The early 80s is also when the performance and cheap housing possibilities for free jazz musicians pretty much dried up in lower Manhattan. So, where in 1977 you could go out on any given evening and hear Julius Hemphill, Henry Threadgill, Anthony Davis, and Arthur Blythe in one loft, and Lester Bowie, Cecil Taylor, and Jimmy Lyons in another, Oliver Lake and Michael Gregory Jackson dueting in a third, all for the cost of a couple beers, by 1982 when I actually moved to the city that deal was pretty much done. The strain of music those players represented didn't die out, of course, and became the foundation for the range of things being done by people like John Zorn and Bill Laswell in the 80s. Yet the demise of that musical scene was also the last time relentless, progressive Black jazz musicians had a street presence on the ground, as it were, in NYC bohemia. That generation was also hit by the slashing of government funding for the arts by Reagan that also trickled down to inner city high school band programs.

The upshot of this has been what we've experienced as jazz culture in the States for the past 25 years—where the musicians rewarded recording contracts by American labels largely play a somewhat regressive and well-mannered form of postbop, the musicians of the avant-garde in the 70s appear in NYC about once a year, and the dialogue between all generations of Black musicians has become about as random. In this time all the major jazz languages from Dixieland to M-Base have become universal. Teenage jazz big band programs have become about as popular as soccer in lily white American suburbs while even lite pop jazz has all but disappeared from the menu for young Black pop listeners.

Now all this leaves a few questions on the table:

- A. Does it matter whether progressive Black musicians play jazz now or in the future?
- B. Does it matter whether Black people ever listen to another lick of real jazz from now until the end

of time?

- C. Has jazz more than fulfilled its sociocultural, esthetic, and political mandates for Black people given the advances well-educated Blackfolk have made in American society over the past 25 years?
- D. Have jazz's possibilities as a Black art form been exhausted, or does the virtual absence of a coherent community of Black jazz listeners explain the creative stagnation of the art form at present?

Another way of asking these same questions is to explore the notion of exactly what information did African American genius, living under American apartheid, bring to the formation of jazz that jazz is losing or has lost access to today? Even more pointedly, what will jazz lose if it loses contact, loses the call and response conversation it used to enjoy with Black working class humanity and that group's racialized self-consciousness and ritualized cultural practices? There is, of course, further the question of whether we err on the side of novelty by thinking of jazz in teleological, futurological terms, of thinking of jazz as in need of a newer post-modern post-Black destination point.

Why does jazz have to be going anywhere since where it has been already staggers the imagination with its telltale monuments? Its Kind of Blues and Love Supremes and Speak No Evils and Nefertiti and Spiritual Unities, Percussion Bittersweet and The Shape of Jazz To Come and Unit Structures and Spring for Two Blue Jays and Fanfare for the Warriors, Vade Mecums, Thembis, Dark Magus, Destination Out, The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra and Let My Children Hear Music and Inside Betty Carter and Creative Orchestra Music and Just The Facts and Pass The Buckets and so on and so on.

There's also to be considered in this the transcultural, interdisciplinary impact of what we can call the jazz affect, the jazz tinge, jazz transmissions, jazz sensibility, jazz residue, so clearly present all over the 20th century artistic map, from Mondrian to Matisse to Pollock to De Kooning to John Cage to Allan Kaprow to Julio Cortazar, to the Black Mountain group (about which founding poet Charles Olson once remarked there was no Black Mountain school, there was just Charlie Parker). So that we see the impact of jazz aerodynamics in the way buildings by Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid are designed, and echoes of jazz concrete expressionism in paintings by Rauschenberg, Basquiat, and Richter, in the way dances are choreographed since Graham by the likes of Cunningham, Ailey, Fagan, Pina Bausch and William Forsythe, and in the way films are edited from Godard on (who himself once said there was more narrative in a John Coltrane solo than in most movies).

What jazz clearly made manifest in the postwar world of art and letters was the privileging of individual will and in the grand opportunities that lie in seizing or freezing the improvisational moment. With that came the necessity of complicating the folk vernacular utterance without compromising the folk vernacular voice and vounce, and the folks' way of violating, of doing violence even, to the rules of engagement. This, of course, was something Picasso had picked up from the source, namely the unity of multiple perspectives on space, time, quantum forces, and collective memory found in African sculpture.

Vernon Reid also once remarked that he thought the Black rage we once heard in free jazz had migrated to hiphop. As I survey the stage of the Black intellectual conversation going on today, I find that the self-conscious engagement with philosophy I once heard in 70s jazz, politics, religion, and literature has migrated to contemporary African American visual art where one is expected, after Basquiat's example, to wrestle with race, politics, history, identity, and knotty conceptual questions as a matter of course. Why this is no longer the case in jazz has something to do with the class aspirations and subject position of most younger musicians who are not, at the end of the day, social rebels, but middle class arts professionals whose art has no significance even among a Black middle class—American mass media oriented consumers who prefer soul and hiphop to postbop. This leads us to the question of why has there been no viable rapprochement of jazz and hiphop comparable to Miles's Bitches Brew.

Once during an interview with Wynton Marsalis he asked me what quantifiable musical relationship I could conceivably hear between jazz and hiphop. My first answer, besides the obvious rhythmic one, was the timbre and tonality of the voices, the male voices in particular. Even Wynton didn't find anything to argue with in that. Developing that idea even further I'd say the great MCs of hiphop and the great players in jazz share the characteristic of having unmistakable tones, tones one can identify in sometimes one or two notes, and certainly within 8 bars. The sonic, rhythmic, lyrical organization of ideas of Trane, Wayne and Joe Henderson are immediately distinguishable to the serious listener from those of Ornette, Dolphy, and David

Murray—as those of Biggie, Rakim and Chuck D are distinguishable from the flows of Q Tip, Ghostface Killa, and Trick Daddy.

The problem with most jazz-hiphop hybrids to date is they proceed as if that riddle can be resolved by beats and technology when really the most remarkable, memorable, dramatic musical events in hiphop are the ones which derive from the form's most human elements, its mighty mouthed “pearls and gems of wisdom” dropping MCs and its superhuman beatboxers, like the one and only Rahzel who can somehow make the back of his Afro-Tuvan throat sound like two squabbling turntables and a light saber battle between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker at the same time. What would happen, I've wondered, if Rahzel was given, say, Trane's Meditations to extrapolate upon or Sun Ra's Atlantis: sounds like we'd never heard in our life, no doubt, at least not from the body of one human being. But in what context today would such an experimental collaborative foray between Black avant-gardes take place—on whose watch and under whose willpower?

60s and 70s jazz pushed hard on the question of how free music, and especially a Black music, could be, and still be musical. Improvisational sound artists “utopically” asked what role music might play in transforming society. Another question we might ask today is what is the future of radical Black consciousness, and even the Black male voice in jazz, and does anybody here even care? In posing this, I'm reminded of a comment saxophonist Billy Harper made in the 70s, questioning whether the assumption that jazz was “on the way out” wasn't tantamount to asking whether the Black man was on the way out? Given the current rates of incarceration, unemployment, and homelessness for Black men nationally, Harper's rhetorical and slightly testeronic lambaste may be more relevant than ever. There is also to be considered what we'll call the Coltrane conundrum: where does any art form go after it's found god? Or at least realizes a means of evoking the source of all life itself as some feel Coltrane did—some even to the point of starting an actual church in his name? Where could it go, but to search for the devil perhaps? Perhaps Miles Davis and hiphop present a rhythmic, symphonic inquisition on the origins of evil, human fate, and the problem of free will. But I digress.

The episteme we know as “race” in America is useful in political discussion, but not so surgical a tool to use when holding forth on creativity. Focusing on ethnic, tribal, and regional sensibilities takes us closer to the action in an America which remains a very clannish, tribalized nation, one where crock-pot more than melting pot may be the defining anthropological paradigm. One of the most illuminating aspects of living in Harlem for a quarter century is that you are constantly reminded how every decade of Harlem's existence is visible for inspection on a daily basis. And this isn't just in the faces of elders, but in the architecture, in the fact that you can now go to hear jazz in Minton's again, and in the fact that outside of the Apollo you are more able and more likely to hear live jazz in “H-town” than live hiphop or R&B. Where jazz resides most is in the fact that Harlem is a community of people who are all about owning the moment in ways that have left much contemporary Black music practice. Much of this can be attributed to the fact that modern hiphop and R&B have become virtual Black musics—increasingly designed more for downloading than public dancing or displays of affection, more readily made to be enjoyed as ringtone and iPod Shuffle snippets than as album cuts, as disposable, beatdriven musical Ritalin for the Attention Deficit Disorder set.

As all that was once solid about even Black popular culture melts into air, Black culture becomes more digitized and disembodied. The paradox is that what happens on the ground to real Black bodies in Harlem's non-virtual streets becomes more striking and apparent as rappers and their entourages, having to shoot and be shot at to maintain the profit margin and the public interest margins, becomes even more suicidally pronounced. Yet even as Black culture becomes more defined by commerce than by creativity, I am reminded of Ornette Coleman's statement that the most sacred thing on earth is human feeling, and Vernon Reid's notion that the music will get more soulful again when it becomes the product of a profound love of music for music's sake.

As someone who seven years ago formed a 20 to 30 member improvising ensemble, Burnt Sugar, The Arkestra Chamber, I clearly don't think live music, jazz, or huge unprofitable orchestras are exhausted, antiquated means of pursuing personal and communal human truths and feelings. I do sometimes wonder if I'm guided more by quixotic nostalgia than on a mission from god, though who's to say these are opposing ideas? But just because the cultural landscape has changed so drastically, so digitally around Black improvisational music, that doesn't mean I've lost all human feeling in my heart, lungs, nuts, fingers, limbs, or my vivid memories of remarkable jazz things past.

Work Cited

Robeson, Paul. *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974*. Ed. P.S. Foner. New York: Bruner/Mazel Publishers, 1978.