

Jazz

People who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image. No doubt they sense this mystery, but they wish to get rid of it. They are afraid. By asking “What does this mean?” they express a wish that everything be understandable. But if one does not reject the mystery one has quite a different response. One asks other things.

—René Magritte

“Turn it off.”

This is a common response to contemporary jazz music. Is it because this “sophisticated” popular form, that has been slowly allowed a “high culture” status, is musically too sophisticated for most listeners with its strange time signatures and chords? Are listeners intimidated by the endless names of players appearing in different combinations and dates of sessions, the minutiae of which are the truck and trade of many jazz enthusiasts: who played what, when, with whom, what was the venue, how did they sound in this circumstance? The history of jazz shows a fast-changing and rapidly-evolving form. The sidemen one night are the leaders the next, so the recipe never remains the same.

Certainly some forms of pop music have elicited violent revulsion, even shock and horror. Rock and roll was the devil’s music exposing youth to impure experiences and thoughts. However, rock music overcame its roots (we now have “easy rock”) and has gained a certain cultural legitimacy and domesticity. The same can be said of many classical works that at first shocked audiences but are now part of the standard repertoire.

It is, I think, the “hook” that eventually seduces the audience to accept these domesticated forms. A little surprise change that repeats, a gimmick guitar lick or vocal phrase. The composer/band/vocalist casts it out to you, the listening audience. It takes only a few beats, a gentle tug, and WHAM. The hummable chorus, the whistled overture become all too familiar. The voice broadcasts, the commercial plays, the product sells, the world goes round. Radio is full of white voices and smooth music addressed to a make-believe audience that are presumed to aspire to a watered-down version of European cultural ideals (the familiar overture, the recognized hook).

To me, the very idea of jazz evokes something undomesticated: from its name to its instrumentation it wreaks havoc. Its boorish name—jazz, jissm, eroticism, the body, the music of bordellos filled with strippers, prostitutes, sex. . . A ratchet is thrown into the machinery, the gears are gummed up, the sprockets cease, ears open, it puzzles, fascinates. It makes you think, it hurts—all things offensive to mainstream radio and apparently most listeners. Jazz radio shows are not money makers even with an audience.

Perhaps jazz in this “offensive” form cannot exist on commercial radio.

The vision of jazz is of black guys in nice sharkskin suits faithfully living a tradition through performance. Sweaty, stoned, drunk, they reach into their souls to reveal the pain of existence through a spirituality that their musical practice allows them to reach. The god in the pit of their stomach pushes their lungs and limbs to produce sounds we can hardly manage, new sounds. Today contrivance is taken for granted and Hip Hop appears as the commodified representation black musical culture. Its promoters know they've got a hot product, a new gospel to sell.

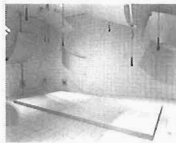
There is a new music/new jazz of today, a scene dominated, oddly enough, by classically-trained musicians such as John Zorn, Mishe Mengleberg and Dave Douglas, who are tired of the strictures of the classical tradition. New jazz is a hybrid of written music and improvisation, and it grew out of the revival of free jazz. Free jazz was itself a response by largely black players to the white take-over of bebop, and is often dated to October 1, 1964, the "October Revolution" performance by flugelhornist/painter Bill Dixon. No writing, just playing. Freedom for the soul, a study in listening, mind meets gut.

—Mike Hansen

Laboratory



#1



#2



#3



#4



#5



#6

—Lynne Cohen

Labour

No one wants to hear about it. Too time-consuming. (*see* "Process")

—Janine Marchessault