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THE PRESENT STATE OF JAZZ

Back in the 1960's I heard one of Britain's best known jazz commentators complain that there had been no radical innovations in jazz since the Miles Davis Band of 1949-50. My first reaction was that to expect a revolution, or even a significant development, every ten years was pitching it a bit high, even for a music which has evolved as fast as jazz. But the truth was that a revolution, more radical than any previous change of direction, was already well under way, a revolution which met with the inevitable dislike, incomprehension and hostility, and which has now resulted in a steep decline in the popularity and understanding in which jazz gloried in the late 50's. Ten years ago many people, myself included, expected the strange new idiom to be absorbed and modified into a new and more easily acceptable mainstream style, just as the fresh departures of bebop were clarified and codified in the more popular jazz of the 50's. And just as bebop itself became more intelligible and more widely-appreciated as a result, so too it seemed likely that we would eventually look back on the 'new wave' or 'new thing' or 'avant garde' or 'free jazz', as it was variously called, with more understanding and greater discrimination.

The latter is, I think, true, but the former is not. There is a widespread feeling, even among the most dedicated of jazz enthusiasts, that jazz has burnt itself out in some seventy frantic years. Certainly the new jazz is an interest even more esoteric than the old, and the idiom has to a large extent simply coalesced with other contemporary musical movements, in particular progressive pop and what we might call the straight avant garde.

To understand the New Wave we have to go back to its beginning in the first recording, in 1958 and 1959, of Ornette Coleman. Startling as they seemed at the time, it is clear now how deeply rooted the music is in many aspects of the jazz tradition. Coleman's complete disregard for orthodox pitch was probably the hardest thing to stomach - "Don't you guys ever both to tune up", trombonist Bob Brookmeyer once shouted in desperation - but there was also the fact that the solos seemed to lack any structure or musical basis, and to cap it all he played a plastic saxophone, a joke instrument, while his musical companion, Don Cherry, played what was described as a 'pocket trumpet', a shrivelled-up cornet which looked as if it had been left too long in the wash. Michael Frayn and Kenneth Tynan heard Coleman during his first season in a New York Club, and their reaction was typical. Frayn wrote: "Ornette Coleman's Quartet was making the most extraordinary noises, far out on some limb of its own. A famous English dramatic critic sitting about two feet in front of Mr. Coleman's deeply disturbed saxophone shouted to me, 'I think they have gone too far.' 'I think perhaps they had."

Coleman's approach had two main features. First there is that disregard for pitch. Jazz musicians had always placed special importance on precise shadings and gradations of pitch, but although they delighted in playing notes slightly sharp or slightly flat, or in slurring and sliding around the note, they never completely abandoned orthodox intonation: you could pitch a note wrong and make it sound right, but there was still a wrong and a right. But in Coleman's music there is no question of correct or incorrect pitch as such: any pitch will do so long as it fits the particular phrase. One of his reasons for choosing a plastic saxophone was that it allowed greater freedom in pitching notes, and it is significant that he prefers to work without a piano. Nevertheless this total disregard of conventional intonation is not without precedents. 'Poor' intonation was one of the characteristic features of the New Orleans bands, and although this is often put down to bad musicianship, particularly where brass instuments are involved, it is clear that clarinettists in particular make a positive virtue out of missing their notes. Coleman is reported to have expressed admiration for the work of George Lewis, who played in the most archaic of jazz styles, and when one hears Lewis's defiantly and gloriously out-of-tune clarinet one can understand why. In this respect Coleman had simply jumped 50 or 60 years, back to the roots of instrumental jazz.

The second important element in Coleman's music was the new orientation of the solo line. Typically a jazz solo was built on the structure of the tune being played. Whether it takes the form of

thematic or harmonic variation the length and shape of the solo is determined by the melodic and harmonic structure of the original melody. This was true even in bebop, where some attempt was made to break out from the tyranny of the bar-line, to get away from the tradition of dividing the solo up into simple two and four-bar units. With Coleman, however, the solo line dictates its own length and shape, so that instead of shaping the solo to the theme being played, the melodic line determines its own structure. The solo is constructed linearly rather than vertically. Naturally this gives the soloist great, almost complete, freedom in building his lines, but at first hearing such music inevitably sounds disorganized. We had become used to listening to the solo through the theme on which it was based, so that at any time we knew by reference to the melody or its supporting harmonies exactly where we were. But with Coleman this was not always possible, and his music came to be called 'free form' jazz. The label is not entirely accurate: in free form jazz the solist has complete freedom, with no restriction placed upon choice of key, harmonies, rhythms, bar-lines etc, but Coleman has seldom gone to that extreme. His approach has rather been to work from his original melody, usually basing the solo on some thematic, rhythmic or harmonic motif with which that theme provides him.

Coleman's highly original music provided the main impetus for the New Wave, but other strands in the new music can be traced back more easily to the jazz of the fifties. The first leads us to the music of Charlie Mingus, itself drawing heavily on the traditions both of bebop and of blues and gospel music. Mingus's apparently chaotic but fundamentally controlled and structured music made central use of bizarre sound effects - what one might call onomatopoeic noises, with saxophones literally wailing and screeching - and of constantly varying and overlapping rhythms. The sound effects take us back to the moans and cries of the traditional vocal blues; the rhythmic complexity marked a further step on the road which began with the heavy, indeed stilted, beat of traditional jazz and then moved through the solid pounding stride of early swing and the light flowing rhythm of Basie inspired jazz to the fragmentation of the rhythm section - drums and piano placing accents against the even beat of the bass - that we find in bebop. In the 60's both these aspects of Mingus's music - the wild sounds and the shifting rhythms - were taken further, even to the point of complete cacophony and the total absence of anything approaching the steady, forward-moving rhythm typically associated with jazz.

A second strand was the increasing harmonic sophistication of jazz, beginning again with bebop and reaching a climax by the end of the 50's. This sophistication took two forms, that of increasing complexity leading towards the experiments in polytonality and atonality that we find in the work of George Russell and, most strikingly, Cecil Taylor; and that of increasing simplicity, with Miles Davis introducing solos based on elementary modes and scales rather than harmonic progressions, and John Coltrane paring away the harmonic basis of his music to such an extent that his version of "These are Some of My Favourite Things" has been

dubbed "These are Two of My Favourite Chords." With this increased harmonic sophistication it now became justifiable, within the established jazz idiom, to play virtually any note against any other note; and once this point is reached the need for justification itself disappears, and one is entitled to play whatever one will. Thus the combination of Coltrane's complete control over soloing within a harmonic framework, be it complex as in the Giant Steps album, or simple as on "Favourite Things", and Coleman's abandonment of the fixed harmonic structure as such, opened the door to complete freedom.

Thus in the early sixties we see the boundaries of all the elements central in jazz - the solo line, the harmonic structure, rhythm, sound and pitch - being extended. Or to put it another way, the rules governing the use of these features were broken and abandoned, and jazz reached the point where anything went. It is not to hard to understand why jazz musicians, especially negro musicians, should have so emphasised complete freedom, the right to unlimited self-expression, and the nature of jazz as a music which does not conform to the rules or stereotypes of European music. There is, however, the problem which is being faced in the fine arts, with particular reference to abstract expressionism, but which has jet to be faced in jazz: the problem of how far free self-expression is of value just in itself, and of how far there is a need also for communication, for the artist to say something to his audience. This may be required on grounds not just of commercial, but also of aesthetic, viability. It is ironic, too, that in insisting on the freedom, the self-expression, the negritude, of their music, contemporary jazz musicians have often fallen for what is, after all, a white stereotype of the jazz musician as an untutored savage pouring out his emotions in a primitive frenzy, which communicates itself directly without reference to accepted musical conventions. I believe this has always been false, and the excesses of the jazz avant garde made the point even more plainly.

Certainly something of value has been lost in the frantic experimentation of the last decade, not just the strengths of earlier jazz idioms but also the strength implicit in the music of Ornette Coleman, Charlie Mingus, George Russell and the early Cecil Taylor. Fundamental here, I think, has been the influence of John Coltrane, an exceptionally powerful figure both personally and musically. Ornette Coleman, by contrast, has always been something of an outsider in jazz. He arrived on the recording scene as a complete unknown with his musical idiom already fully formed - his earliest recordings are in many ways his best. He has not changed his style much as jazz has gone on from his innovations; if anything he has become more conservative. And he has worked almost entirely with his own groups, having little contact with other major jazz figures. But Coltrane was right at the centre of the contemporary jazz establishment, so that when he turned towards free jazz, most notoriously in his tumultuous Ascenscion LP, the influence was as enormous as it was unfortunate. Archie Shepp is probably the most talented of those who have followed Coltrane into this dead-end of massed instruments roaring hoarsely at one another.

Breaking the rules can produce fresh inspiration but it can also lead to waywardness, and there is nothing so boring as the untrammelled self-expression of the man with nothing to express. One chaos gets to sound very like another, and the listener quickly judges, correctly, that he has heard it all before. This, I fear, is the point that jazz has now reached. Instead of capitalizing on the exciting developments of ten years ago, it has moved into the dead-end of freedom for the sake of freedom. We can only wait and hope that the time will pause and reconsider the many possibilities left unexplored in the frantic race for greater and greater originality.

DON LOCKE

C O N T E M P O R A R Y C O N C E R T C A L E N D A R

January 29th The Chasm - an offshoot of the Osiris Music Group - present a concert in the BMI. Judith Jones (soprano) - Cage: The Wonderful Widow of 18 Springs; Wolff: Song; Berberian: Stripsody. Simon Desorgher (flute) - Boulez: Sonatine; Varèse: Density 21.5; Anthony Gilbert: The Incredible Flute Music. Peter Lawson(piano) - his own Momenta 94. Two electronic scores - Varèse: Poème électronique; Simon Desorgher: Film Score.

February 23rd Barber 20th Century Concert. London Sinfonietta under David Atherton. Schoenberg: Pierrot Lunaire; Boulez: Le Marteau sans Maître.

February 25th Barber Lunchtime Concert. Paul Patterson: Live Electronics.

March 1st Barber 20th Century Concert. Motet Choir and Instrumentalists - Stravinsky: Mass. Carl Hickmann - John Joubert: Piano Sonata No 2 (first performance). New works by John Casken and Jolyon Laycock.

March 3rd Barber Lunchtime Concert. Holst: Savitri - one-act opera conducted by Anthony Carver.

March 11th Embarkation. Concert in Carr's Lane Church Centre.

March 24th Barber Lunchtime Concert. Embarkation.