

FUSION SELLS

but is it jazz

PRO

By Linda Kohanov

FUSION-BASHING HAS BECOME DOWNRIGHT FASHION-able, as if it were some gross blemish on the face of contemporary music. Fusion has attracted

enough of the general public to prompt jazz radio to program the music—not in addition to, but in *place* of mainstream artists. Fusion sells better, knocking serious jazz off the charts. No wonder so many jazz critics and artists are irate.

The problem stems from the fact that fusion was never given an identity separate from jazz. The word "fusion" itself sounds like a halfway house for confused musicians. And indeed a lot of aimless artists have fallen into the cracks between jazz and rock, giving those few visionary fusion musicians a bad name by association.

Let's face it, rock, new age and classical music are fusions of styles too numerous to list. Yet all of these categories have an identity that, for better or worse, implies some sort of autonomy. It's fruitless to evaluate the quality of any other genre on the tenets of mainstream jazz—though they may have elements in common. Fusion releases, however, are often dismissed before the CD drawer closes, despite the fact that the music has developed beyond its original association with jazz.

Some fans of the fusion's early incarnations were disillusioned when the renegades like Miles Davis and John McLaughlin were supplanted by the more congenial sounds of Jeff Lorber and Spyro Gyra. Fusion aficionados were even *more* incensed that innovators like Chick Corea and Weather Report would dare relinquish their edge for a splash of funk and a taste for the romantic. The evolution of the genre, however, simply paralleled the progression of rock into the pop music we know today. There will always be those who yearn for the good old days of Davis' *Bitches Brew* and Herbie Hancock's *Head Hunters* (both Columbia), just like there are those who bemoan the death of rock'n'roll while clutching Jimi Hendrix albums.

The fact is, in any genre there are few musicians who rise above the mediocrity, self-indulgence and commercial compromise endemic to the art—and ultimately the business—of playing music. Bach and Mozart tower over hundreds of now-obscure composers who were popular and well-paid during their day, and even those giants weathered stylistic stages and less-than timeless ideas. Jazz has gone through numerous upheavals—swing, bebop, cool and free—that now exist side by side. To think that fusion should always seethe with the raw energy of Miles' *Live-Evil* (Columbia) is entirely unrealistic. What's wrong with surrendering to the impressionistic sound of Pat Metheny one minute, grooving to the uplifting energy of the Yellowjackets the next, and then losing complete control to Bill Frisell's delicious, distorted guitar lines and John Zorn's hardcore mayhem?

There's no reason to expect these guys to come up with a great album every time either. Bird and Coltrane didn't always hit the mark, and Miles has conducted a roller coaster ride of a career. Practically every rock artist who hasn't died young has gone through slumps and revelations. Chick Corea's Elektric Band, for one, proves that fusion can be played with substance, and artists can make a respectable comeback in the genre.

And what about all this lowest-common-denominator pablum everybody's complaining about? Cheer up. The bandwagon has migrated over to new age, where dreams of rich yuppie fans and TV-star girlfriends are seducing increasing numbers of misguided musicians. Some releases are even being marketed as "new age jazz," a fusion between two fusions that cancels out the strengths of both.

But, hey, it's bound to take some of the commercial pressure off fusion and allow inspired musicians to rise to the surface once more. ●

By Gene Santoro

CON

IT'S A HARD BUSINESS SLAMMING AN ENTIRE STYLE OF music. Anybody who tries has to lapse pretty quickly into hyperbole. But in the case of the replicating boredom called fusion, hyperbole is the name of the game.

Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew* (Columbia) is the clichéd choice for jazz-rock fusion's beginnings, but it's easy enough to argue for the Butterfield Blues Band's *East-West* (Elektra), or Cream's *Wheels of Fire* (Atco, now Polydor), or Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* (Reprise) or the Trane-and-Ornette-inspired jams of the Grateful Dead. The musical amalgam flowing from those sources was all too soon transformed, although it had compelling reasons to come into existence. Jazz purists in the late '60s, like their descendants today, managed to forget that the music began and continues only as a hybrid; for them, welding rock beats and electronics to improvisation was the equivalent of shitting in the Vatican. Rock fans, however, were discovering jazzers because they showed up alongside rock heroes at venues like the Fillmore East and West. So fusion started out positive.

And its recordings reflected that. Miles' *On the Corner* and *Pangaea*, Weather Report's first album, Herbie Hancock's *Head Hunters*, the Mahavishnu Orchestra's *Apocalypse* (all Columbia) remind us that the folks who've debased the genre and its name came in the wake of revolutionary sounds. But come they did, the trendoids who strapped on their axes and let their fingers do the running while their brains idled.

Improvisation, after all, has several goals. One is to revel in the thrill of mastery. Another is to tell a story that grows out of whatever informs the solo. Both points got lost as the pioneers themselves lapsed into limp versions of the Dead on a bad night. (Miles' *The Man With the Horn* or Weather Report's *I Sing the Body Electric*, both Columbia).

Every art form has a floodtide moment when its breakthroughs crystallize. Jazz-rock fusion's moment had come and gone by the mid '70s, but a funny thing happened: It made money. People who'd been turned on to it at rock concerts wanted more.

Then another funny thing happened. As the first generation of fusion fans grew older, their tastes began to mellow. They had jobs and houses and families and wanted music to feed the baby by. The industry, as it's fond of saying, tried to give them what they wanted. At the same time, music schools from Berkeley to Miami were codifying fusion. Staffed by many first- and second-generation fusioners, they started turning out students armed with technical mastery but little to say that hadn't already been said.

But for all the acres of unmusical crap stuffing radio between ads, the last 20 years has seen attempts to expand on the insights of jazz-rock's first generation. No surprise there: Music grows by accretion as much as by internal development. Writers, editors and publicists love phrases like "boundary-breaking" and "genre-bashing," but creative musicians don't think along bin-label lines; they appropriate what they like and play what they hear.

So post-*Dancing in Your Head* Ornette Coleman's harmelodics, Ronald Shannon Jackson's mighty Decoding Society, James "Blood" Ulmer's mutated blues-and-gospel, the AACM's ambitious swirl of classical, jazz and r&b, John Zorn's jumpcut dadaism, Wayne Horvitz's Monk-meets-rock, Bill Frisell's metal-meltdown-floats into-big-sky-country, not to mention Bobby Previte, Geri Allen and Steve Coleman—all this could have been called "fusion," if the word hadn't become shorthand for sonic pablum. They might all have a better chance of reaching a wide audience, too, if the pablum hadn't crammed every significant outlet. That's a loss we all share. ●



MILES: BLAME IT ON BITCHES ?