

Jazz Ain't Dead, But Charlie Parker Is – So Let's Move On, Shall We?

By Will Layman 29 June 2010

Writer and jazz critic Paul da Barros asks an essential question about jazz in the new century. “How can the music can get back into the culture in a meaningful way?”

If jazz cannot answer that question, then it is doomed to obscurity. Without a hook into how life is lived today, jazz will be museum music, the taste of a small minority of fanatics. No matter how many Clifford Brown solos these fans can scat from memory, their support alone can't nurture a living art. For many, this threshold was crossed long ago.

Once, We Were Popular

Jazz started off as popular music, music that came from and directly served folks. Ragtime had its own dance, the Cake Walk. Early jazz in New Orleans was social music—played in brothels and speakeasies, in funeral parades and at celebrations. The rise of the big bands and the blossoming of “swing” made jazz *the* pop music of the '30s and '40s—in dancehalls, in radio broadcasts, and in the hearts of millions of jitterbugging teens... and their parents. Yes, there was a time when Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, and Tommy Dorsey were as big as Madonna or Jay-Z.

The '50s brought us rock 'n' roll, but not the death of jazz's popular connection. Elvis Presley may have been bigger, but everyone still knew who Miles Davis was. As The Beatles came to dominate radio, jazz still thrived on jukeboxes and even on the charts—Ramsey Lewis' “The In Crowd” was funky piano that went to number five on the pop charts in 1965. Jazz managed to absorb the influence of rock and soul without losing its essence, and plenty of rock musicians found themselves playing Coltrane tunes or, at least, playing his tunes the way they thought Coltrane would have.

Somewhere around 1980 or so, however, the connection of any real jazz to the popular pulse becomes problematic. “Smooth jazz” became temporarily popular, but it's not really jazz. Hip hop used a few notable jazz samples to create hits

(US3's "Cantaloop" in 1993), but the jazz music had become mostly just something to play in the background. A few jazz vocalists, such as the 70-plus Tony Bennett in the '90s and the sultry Diana Krall in the last decade made popular inroads, but they did so with music that might best be called "nostalgic": that is, compositions, style and affect straight out of 1960. The mass success of Norah Jones was no more jazz than, say, Carole King's *Tapestry*.

So, What Is Jazz Today?

Ask the average person to name a jazz musician today. My informal poll reveals that the most likely answer is Miles Davis (died 1991), an answer that might have been given 55 years ago. Other common answers: Louis Armstrong (died 1971), Dizzy Gillespie (died 1993), Duke Ellington (died 1974), and Wynton Marsalis (at last, an actual living human being).

Which is to say: for most people, jazz is a dead man's music. This just might be the problem in making jazz a sustainable art form.

For now, at least, I'll confess that this is an extremist view. There is a teeming jazz scene all over the world. While the New York scene alone would seem to contain endless tendrils of possibility, there are nearly equal scenes in several European cities, in Vancouver, maybe in your town. Young musicians are studying jazz in record numbers, and their invention is both within and bursting beyond the great tradition in startling and glorious ways.

Still, however, the disconnect is between the quality and variety of contemporary jazz invention and its actual audience. How is this still-incredible music, the brilliant, second / third / fourth-generation result of Pops and Duke and Dizzy and Miles, going to find its way to the ears (and hearts) of younger fans—arguably the lifeblood audience it needs to continue?

Paul da Barros' question comes from a recently released documentary that attempts to bridge the divide between new jazz and its ideal audience. *Icons Among Us: Jazz in the Present Tense* goes light on history—which has been told a million times over, right?—and features interviews and performances with musicians and bands in their 20s, 30s and 40s. A few of these have achieved significant renown, but most are big names only to dedicated jazz fans.

The film, produced by Paradigm Studio and culled from a four-part TV documentary, is just about a perfect balance between performance and conversation, with no intrusive narration trying to Explain It All To You. The musicians talk a great deal about why they don't much care for the word "jazz", they talk about why they won't be, why they can't be entirely confined by the history of the music, and they assert with conviction that the truth and beauty of the music "is now", according to trumpeter Nicholas Payton.

There are only a few elder statesmen on hand here. Herbie Hancock shows up, saying, "The younger musicians that are coming up are bringing new blood to jazz, new blood to expression." Singer Diane Reeves believes that the new music is ready to feed a hunger among people: "The music and the times are very linked. Even though it's still underground. When this new sound emerges, people will once again be active listeners because they've been fed a line for so long." And Wayne Shorter, the mystical and elliptical saxophone great, demands that musicians explore the unexpected.

But mostly this is a film that gives you hope that there is a rising tide of great, daring music that is bound to be discovered. It is a glimpse, you end up hoping, into a future beyond category.

First Off: Don't Call It 'Jazz'

The challenge that de Barros presents is one of connecting "jazz" to the present. In the film he suggests, "If you look back at what we know consider a golden age in the music in the fifties and sixties, you think of more than music. You think of integration, the civil rights music, you think of a kind of bohemian outsiderism. The problem jazz faces right now is, if you say 'jazz' to somebody, they don't have something obvious in the present culture they can connect it with. What is it actually saying? If you asked Lee Morgan or Sonny Rollins what their music was saying, they would say, 'Well, I'm a black person in a white society with something to say and I need to be heard'. That was part of the message of that music—that was part of the urgency of it."

One solution to this problem, for musicians in the moment, is simply to avoid calling their music "jazz" at all.

Trumpeter Dave Douglas says, “I’m very careful not to use the term ‘jazz’ too loosely because then you open up this whole can of worms that is the argument of what jazz is. I think that’s a great argument to have. But in terms of the global vision of what music and what’s happening in the scene, it slows down looking at all the different music that is proliferating.”

There is plenty of historical precedent for this, of course. “Jazz” was a pejorative term early on (derived, apparently, from a slang word for sexual intercourse) and most musicians found it reductive. Eventually, however, most had no way to avoid it. Miles Davis hated it, and he is arguably its iconic essence. In *Icons Among Us*, pretty much no one likes it.

Pianist Matthew Shipp sees the word as a trap, a dead end, even as he personified the idea of the music. “Jazz is just a four-letter word, it has no meaning. Jazz is a living organism. If jazz is to be a living organism, you can’t seek the living among the dead. “

Guitarist Bill Frisell also sees the word as a kind of fence even as he accurately understands the tradition as one of growth. “I don’t like when the name of something has the effect of excluding. If you say it’s one thing then it can’t be something else. The words are always smaller than whatever it is you’re trying to describe. For me ‘jazz’ is infinite. It’s always been about some kind of mystery. Historically, the nature of it is that it changes.”

"In Order to Find The Way, You Must Leave The Way"

The young musicians in this film are almost universally seeking a kind of liberation from the past. They grew up in an era—which is still the norm today—in which “jazz” meant playing music the same way it was played 50 years ago. The film gives some voice to the “Young Lions” movement of the ‘80s, when Wynton and Branford Marsalis seemed to be reviving jazz by renewing its interest in the past. But, while today’s younger players are super-informed about jazz history, they seek to honor it by breaking free of it.

Pianist Robert Glasper, who is making brilliant and accessible music that feels informed by hip hop as well as tradition, is hilarious on this topic.

“If Charlie Parker got out of his grave today, he would not want motherfuckers playing the same shit he was playing when he was alive. He’d look around, ‘What the fuck are you doing? I played that already! Why are you playing this? I’ve been dead for a hundred years—I’m back now and you’re still playing my shit. Move on.’ That’s a smack in the face to people if you keep shit the same way. You’re supposed to continue on a legacy.

“That was some bad shit back then. *Loved it*. Killin’. Now let’s do *this*. Move on. Accept. John Coltrane was a human being. I’m a human being. He’s not God. I hope to one day be badder than he is. And it’s possible. He started some of this shit, but you’ve got to realize that we’re all human, and it is possible to move on and be great just like Trane was. And if you don’t think it’s possible that it’s *not* going to be possible.”

Matthew Shipp, who plays beyond mainstream jazz yet has garnered attention from some rock audiences, is also knowingly flip about tradition. “I don’t have to look at it through the prism of ‘Bud Powell played this way’ or ‘Bill Evans played this way’ or ‘Keith Jarrett played that way’. Fuck them. They’re just people. I do it my way.”

The point is not to reject the past but to honor it with a kind of independence. Payton puts it in a wonderfully Buddhist manner: “In order to find the way, you must leave the way. You have to be open.”

Selling the Sound

The truth is, there is no lack of appeal in new, young jazz musicians. There is power and sex and groove in so much of this music. However, *Icons Among Us* acknowledges up front that people aren’t yet buying it, presenting these statistics: The most robust jazz record sales since the advent of rock peaked at only five percent. Today that total is only three percent, with half of that generated by a small handful of artists.

Well... record sales aren’t everything.

Icons Among Us features a *wow* performance by bassist (acoustic) and singer Esperanza Spalding at the Newport Festival. Spalding has performed several times for President Obama and, after she appeared on *The Late Show*, David

Letterman said, “You are the coolest person we’ve ever had on the show!” Her rendition of the Betty Carter classic “Jazz Ain’t Nothin’ But Soul” at Newport is so full of charisma that you would think the conversation about the music’s new popularity should be over.

Other featured performances are less polished but even more daring and explosive. The band Garage a Trois, featuring the saxophonist Skerik, puts on an antic/noisy/joyful groove show at Tipitina’s in New Orleans that makes most punk shows seem tame and stupid. The daKAH Hip Hop Orchestra corrals a big band, strings, and a team of MCs who rap with the feverish wit and syncopated zip of bebop. Several performances by musicians identified with the “jamband” movement—Medeski, Martin and Wood (with John Scofield), Marco Benevento, the Jacob Fred Jazz Odyssey—make the case that this kind of jazz is already speaking directly to larger masses of young people.

John Medeski sees the connection. “There are a lot of young people out there looking for something out there other than the mainstream shit. But nobody’s giving it to them—so how do they even know that it exists? We realized we have to find people looking for the spirit, the real thing. Not just an imitation. The thing being an energy. There are people who want that feeling that only comes from improvised music.”

Again, though, terminology is an issue. “MMW” isn’t always seen as real jazz, which the musicians who work in that vein realize. Despite rejecting “jazz” as a boundary, other boundaries don’t work, either. Pianist Robert Walter says, “No one is comfortable with being a ‘jamband.’ It’s a term that is just related to the crowd—kids that used to follow around the Grateful Dead or Phish, and are looking for somewhere to go to hear improvised music that is unique every night.”

Pianist Marco Benevento says that “jamming” is just another word for improvising. “It doesn’t have to mean noodling. I’m not going to let one word, ‘jamband’, ruin what I do. We’re all using twelve different notes. Call it what you want. It’s twelve notes. It sounds easy, but there are a million combinations.”

The tension in this war of labels, certainly, gets us back to Paul da Barros’s challenge. The “jambands” seem to have connected because, culturally, they *mean* something. What they mean, perhaps, makes the musicians

uncomfortable. Kids who are grooving to the “energy” (and, well, maybe to some other substances) seem more like fans of a scene than a music.

In short, what about all the other powerful new jazz that doesn’t invite that old-fashioned swirly dancing?

Spreading the Beats Around

Icons Among Us finds that a critical mark of the new jazz is its international flavor. Musicians from other countries—bassist Avashai Cohen, for example, and Dutch saxophonist Tineke Postma—are captured bringing influences into the music from beyond the usual American sources. Pianist and producer Bugge Wesseltoft talks about wishing that he were born in the Bronx so he could be a more authentic jazz player, and then realizing that he would have to bring his own culture to bear on the music if it was to be authentic to him.

Wesseltoft notes that the American jazz scene is very small—and that the music may be more alive now in Europe, sustaining the “non-static-ness” of jazz. No doubt: a certain gauntlet gets dropped.

The live footage of Wesseltoft playing his piano, then using a computer and looping program to create a groove is intoxicating—custom-made for explaining to a new generation how improvisation can mesh inventively with modern production. Popular (English) jazz pianist and singer Jamie Cullum says, “Bugge makes the beat-heads go crazy and the jazz-heads go crazy. I don’t know why he’s not an international superstar.”

It’s intriguing that *Icons Among Us* uses this opportunity to show how even the hippest modern jazz musicians remain, despite their own rhetoric, hung up on categories.

Glasper says, “There’s a whole movement of cats from Europe that play jazz. But there’s something missing. They’re classically based and trained. Jazz isn’t based on classical music—it’s based on blues and church and spirit. You can play all the shit you want, but if you don’t have none of that... “

Wesseltoft replies:” You can’t separate things and say, ‘This is exclusively our art form.’ Once you mix two cultures together, something new will come out. I love

that possibility. I think the only problem for jazz is when you stop developing it, when people say ‘This is jazz, that’s not jazz.’ I say, fuck them.”

Jazz’s Future Power Source

So, when great musicians who ought to be rowing in the same direction are indirectly trading put-downs, what’s the chance that jazz finds a new audience? Some among us hopeful.

Trumpeter Terence Blanchard sees it coming if jazz fans can drop their obsession with the past. “There’s a movement about of young guys that is the quietest revolution I’ve ever witnessed. They have vision, and the jazz community hasn’t caught up to it yet because the community is still trying to be the jazz community of old. Things have moved on and changed and we’re not going back. So just let it go. It’s gone. *Poof.*”

Paul da Barros believes that the “connection to the culture” is critical because it gives the music a critical power. “We understand the relationship between Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman with black freedom. We do not understand the relationship is between Bill Frisell and the society.

“The big subject is: How can the music can get back into the culture in a meaningful way? How can we perceive the meaning of this music? What they hear might be great. They might hear Charles Gayle or Dave Douglas or Bill Frisell or Robert Glasper and they may love it. But they’re going to forget it immediately if it doesn’t mean anything to them, if it doesn’t have a place for them in the culture, in the society. Right now it doesn’t seem to have any meaning that somebody can attach to it.”

Where does da Barros feel that this connection is best being made today? “The one person out there who has sold a social idea that makes sense to people is Wynton Marsalis. He has put the music in the context of a cultural, social and historical meaning. He has said, ‘This is the accomplishment of African Americans and white Americans working together.’”

The problem is that Marsalis—as brilliant and articulate as he is—is probably the one musician in *Icons Among Us* who is captured playing music that sounds wholly cocooned in the past. Which is not to say that there is not a critical role for

his Lincoln Center Orchestra, but only to say that his role is curatorial, not popular.

No matter how good Marsalis is at cultural connection, it is the other musicians in *Icons Among Us* who have shot at getting the heart of the future racing. The pulse of today's music tends to take you off the tracks of jazz. That, of course, is how today's best jazz musicians will get the music back on track again.

If Charlie Parker rose from the dead—if Bird did indeed live again—I have no doubt that he'd cheer on the hip hop orchestras and Bugge's piano thumping electronica. He would *definitely* be a fan of Esperanza Spalding.