

Jazzing Up

Despite the new wave of hip-hype, jazz still sells itself short, argues **Mark Sinker**

Jazz is dead! Jazz is back! Jazz is everywhere!! Except actually it isn't, it just likes talking that way. In today, after a decade's resurgence, more people don't know - probably don't want to know - about it, than do. Shifts in fashion revived it. If it's really reached an impasse, can't future shifts sweep it away again?

The last true-born British beatnik bit the dust on *Ready Steady Go*, courtesy John Lennon. He'd won a design-a-Beatles-LP-sleeve competition, and came up to collect his prize: two records of his own choosing. Asked what they were, he admitted to Shostakovich and Charlie Mingus.

He was sheepish, Lennon cheerfully derisive. The shy, pale-bearded, corduroy-jacketed serious art-hipster was outflanked in prime time - by a witty and supercool rising icon of Pop Culture. Elsewhere, at much this time, an aggressive young Brian Jones was doing the same for blues and pub-jazz purists, old before their time, in the pages of *Jazz News*. This was the 60s, and British jazz had already lost the first battle for youth's hearts and minds.

In the 90s, classical music - 'serious' music - still sells itself by not being pop, and vice versa. In one camp, we're told, timeless quality triumphs over mass-produced commercialism. In the other, urgent fun is better than elitist irrelevance. Classical music ponders universals, pop is trivial trash, insists one ideology. Pop Culture tells you about what's all around you, squawks the other: High Culture is just some stuff dead white people did.

And jazz in the 90s, after a rise in presence that owes something to a (temporary?) exhaustion in both these modes, is constantly - separately - being wooed by each. Wynton Marsalis, the name trumpeter of the 80s, wants it one way: Miles Davis, his predecessor in the 70s, 60s and 50s, the other. For dozens of reasons, stretching back into its pre-history, it resists co-option. You can love it or hate it, and you can define it every which way - it seems quite bafflingly difficult to agree limits to it - but you can be certain it won't end up choosing, or being chosen.

Jazz has always positioned itself exactly between these

mutually reinforcing oppositional paradigms. It's become, in fact, a precise, wide-ranging exploration of just what kind of a contradictory, impossibly wriggly line the boundary between the 'serious' and the 'popular' actually is. It's become a vector (though not the only one) for a particular kind of impatience in art and culture, the kind that dismisses both the 'classical', and the 'pop' sales-models of themselves as lamentably inaccurate ways to think about music.

These aren't bad times for jazz. People with a stake in it will endlessly tell you how healthy it is. Even though you know this is their job, and even though you're bored with this limply complacent metaphor ('health'), you see what they're saying. Jazz has a radio profile; a clutch of magazines focus exclusively on it; it has a wide-ranging following; and a constant influx of youthful players add themselves to a broad-ranging and experienced older community. There's probably never been so much of it, in the face of stiff competition from every kind of leisure seduction.

Jazz is as strong as it's been for decades. It's also in cri-

sis, but it isn't a new crisis (though the straitened circumstances of recession are probably intensifying it: for example, Jazz FM's present difficulties - staff cuts, reappraisal of its direction). The natural jazz audience, stretched between two hard-to-resist models of music consumption, tumbles naturally into mutually uncomprehending crowds: soul-jazz fashion victims, middle-aged traditionalists and pretentious pseudo-intellectuals (as a rude simplification). All believe they alone understand and own a music called 'jazz'; magazines, radio and even players are confused and tentative about breaking down these inner barriers.

The roots of this internal division probably lie in bebop - a burst of politicised art-dazzle that arose in the minds of a dozen young African-American intellectuals half a century ago. They made a music out of Tin Pan Alley that dared the rest of the world to follow, that demanded High Art respect by its speed, its difficulty, its weird in-joke logic - at the same time as mocking everything High Art took itself to stand for. Charlie Parker knew Stravinsky was his true artistic peer - but pervasive racism and a self-destructive lifestyle stood in his way. He also knew he was playing a people's music.

The question of elitism is a question of exclusion; the problem of pop is a problem of discrimination. Jazz was once - for perhaps a decade - the shining example of a



way to explode beyond elitism, to transcend discrimination - it whispered of a global unity-within-difference, where race, class and sex prejudice might melt away, while individual, lived uniqueness could still be celebrated.

Powerful ghosts of this survive, ignored and evaded. Jazz still demands to burst limits. To erase meaningless consumer distinctions. It covers a range, from electric blues to cocktail noodling to the fiercest solo experiments, far beyond any other music. And yet a singer like Brooklyn's Cassandra Wilson will only be promoted in terms of her desire to blend 'funk, soul, hip-hop'. Note will be made of her excellent uniqueness. But little attempt will be made to explain the specifics of this uniqueness: what it *really* challenges (for example, the artistic grouping she came up with, known as M-Base, will be mentioned, but what they stand for, how they're unusual, will not - their ambitious collectivity, their rather un-jazz fascination with sci-fi and computer-based technology). The idea of fusion as melting-pot transcendence has been basic to jazz outreach for 30 years at least - it's not a bad idea, but it's no breakthrough.

This timidity in description and contextualisation is the norm, unfortunately. Today's wave of Jazz Poetry, for example, has intelligent exponents, and considerable possibilities. Galliano, the Dream Warriors, Young Dis-

ciples and A Tribe Called Quest all have things to say.

But they don't force their music to its own edges. They don't run with the full energy of their own hype, as pop listeners are used to. They don't demand that unbelievers turn to it because it's saying things nobody else is (even if it is).

With the best will in the world, well-meaning people usually talk gibberish the moment they start to talk about jazz. It's constantly evoked for the weight of its presence, its genius, its difference, its history, its moral dynamic, its superiority. And it's stripped - in the process of invocation - of all the things that go to make up

these characteristics. Adherents blame the music's perceived, wider unsexiness on each other: falling back on internal style face-offs to explain why something they love isn't universally loved. Unbelievers meanwhile are turned off by all this cryptic moral grandstanding, outflanking and hipper-than-thou crusading.

What's missing is daring, really. A belief that jazz matters more than anything else: that it's a way of changing everything, of throwing cultural cliché into crisis, that, without it, progressive thinking and humane politics just won't survive. Charlie Parker knew this. Lennon knew it about rock. Jazz

today - 'sound of surprise' - is too content to tell itself it matters, too smugly willing to read outsider disbelief as just more proof of its superior sensibility. It has to prove it's asking the questions that matter, and it has to prove it to everyone, high and low, black and white, young and old, male and female. It has to acknowledge that they went elsewhere, whenever they did, for good reasons. It has to get them back with better ones.

Anything else is betraying its tradition, its possibilities, and - above all - all the people who are convinced they don't need to know anything about it.#

Jazz Crusaders

Who's who in the jazz style-war: how to choose your friends in the hip revival.

	Middle-aged traditionalist	Soul-jazz fashion victim	Pretentious pseudo-intellectual
Idols	Jelly Roll Morton	Galliano	John Zorn
New idols	Jelly Roll Morton	Gangstarr	Stock Hausen and Walkman
True idols	Jelly Roll Morton	Roy Ayers	Frank Zappa
Clubs	Ronnie Scott's	the Fez	stays at home
Wears	chunky sweaters	pork pie hat	black
Drinks	real ale	Mexican bottled beer	life-threatening quantities of Turkish coffee
DJ	Humphrey Lyttelton	Gilles Peterson	tunes the radio to catch three different stations while reading <i>Society Of The Spectacle</i>
Politics	SDP	Acid Party	obscurantist/terrorist
Reads	<i>Jazz Journal</i>	<i>Straight No Chaser</i>	<i>Wire</i>
Hates	young people with their noisy pop	getting home before 5.00am	everything

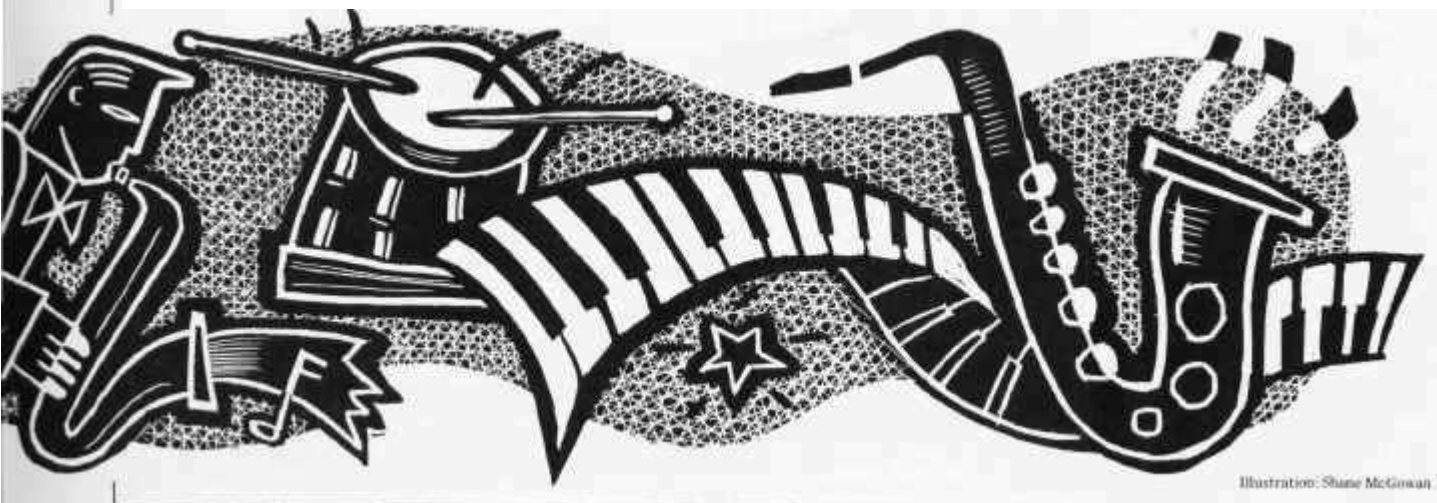


Illustration: Shane McGowan