



And Now, Our National Anthem

DOES JAZZ SOUND LIKE AMERICA?

BY LARRY BLUMENFELD

“

have a special honor to bestow,” said

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General Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, from the stage of the Smithsonian Institution in February 2002. Saxophonist Wayne Shorter, one of the judges on hand for the annual Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, rose from his seat and approached the podium. “But first I’d like everyone to pause for a moment,” Myers continued, “and recognize the men and women of the United States armed forces who are fighting to protect our American way of life.”

Most members of the audience knew the saxophonist as a true standard-bearer: a former member of Miles Davis’ celebrated 1960s quintet, a key figure in the ground-breaking ’70s and ’80s fusion group, Weather Report, and the composer of some of the most frequently played tunes in modern jazz. But many were likely unaware of Shorter’s membership in the United States Army Band while he was stationed at Fort Dix, N.J. from 1956 to 1958—a fact that General Myers highlighted with pride. Shorter explained how important the military experience had been to him. “I like to believe,” he said haltingly as he accepted

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Terence Blanchard, performing at a post-9/11 benefit concert for Jazz Alliance International

his award, “that music has the power to bring out the best in us, and to erase our differences, and I hope that it’s true.”

Later that night, Secretary of State Colin Powell hosted a party and jam session at the Harry S. Truman Federal Building of the State Department. General Myers attended, as did Alan Greenspan, chairman of the Federal Reserve. Powell said a few words about jazz, “this uniquely American art form.” He drew laughs when he insisted that contrary to what some might think, Republicans really *do* love jazz. “I was born in Harlem and raised in New York,” he added, “so I didn’t have a choice.” Moments later, Powell, the son of Haitian immigrants, admitted that he was not completely at home among this crowd. “Actually, I know a lot more about calypso,” he said. Soon, pianist Herbie Hancock was playing Gershwin’s “S Wonderful” on the recently refurbished Harry S. Truman piano as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld looked on approvingly.

This wasn’t the first time that jazz had visited the seat of American political power. Bill Clinton celebrated his first inauguration with a jam session on the White House lawn; he even joined in on saxophone. In 1969, the Nixon White House hosted a star-studded 70th-birthday salute to Duke Ellington during which Ellington performed a short blues-based improvisation dedicated to the president’s wife Pat; Vice President Spiro Agnew sat down at the Marine band piano to play his favorite Ellington tunes, “In a Sentimental Mood” and “Sophisticated Lady”; and Duke danced with presidential secretary Rosemary Woods.

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Jazz and American identity have been engaged in a strange dance of metaphor, patriotism, aesthetics and politics for the better part of the past century. When I began writing about jazz in the 1980s, I found myself thinking a lot about what jazz was or wasn’t, and what it had to do with my life in Brooklyn, N.Y. The music was just being resuscitated, as far as American popular culture was concerned. Record companies began investing once more in jazz artists. Two quintessential jazz labels, Blue Note and Verve, began signing artists again

after years of releasing only reissues of older recordings. *Time* magazine put Wynton Marsalis on its cover in 1990, trumpeting a “New Jazz Age.” Yet there was something different about this latest embrace of jazz: It was unlike that of the 1920s and ’30s, when jazz was “Negro music” or “race music” born of speakeasies and whorehouses; different from the heyday of swing, in the 1940s, when jazz was truly a popular music in this country—a danceable, sociable phenomenon that crossed lines of color and class (and an American export trotted out to counter Nazism, and later, Communism); different still from the bebop revolution of the 1950s, with its cultural heft and black consciousness; or later, dawn of avant-garde and free jazz, with their postmodern implications.

The big press story of the 1980s was that musicians were playing jazz once more, and we Americans were at long last honoring a precious resource that we had nearly squandered—one that was uniquely and exclusively ours. Jazz was entering the realms of high art, while preserving its status as folk music borne of slavery and oppression.

48 It was not coincidental that Wynton Marsalis, the popular harbinger of the ’80s reawakening, was, like Louis Armstrong, a black trumpeter from New Orleans and, like Ellington, an educated, refined man who sought to connect the nightclub bandstand with the concert-hall stage. In 1983, at the tender age of 22, he won Grammy Awards in both jazz and classical music categories. The broad-based status this feat afforded helped him to push for jazz to be enshrined in the canon of American culture once and for all. Then in 1989, Congress passed Resolution 57, declaring that: “Jazz is hereby designated as a rare and valuable national American treasure, to which we should devote our attention, support, and resources to make certain it is preserved, understood, and promulgated.”

I found myself troubled by contradictions in this newfound allegiance to jazz, cloaked as it was in patriotism. For starters, jazz seemed to mean so many different things to so many different Americans; the community of jazz musicians and listeners had splintered into several mutually exclusive categories; and beyond that, the American public still hadn’t exactly rallied ’round the flag

of jazz. Despite its newfound popularity, jazz in the ’80s and ’90s was a ghetto within the music world. (Even today, it’s estimated to account for just 3 percent of the United States’ compact disc sales.) Yes, we agreed that jazz was good, and it was ours. We seemed to like the idea of jazz. We just didn’t buy or listen to it all that much.

Beginning in September 2001, when President George W. Bush, Colin Powell and others began preaching about “the American way of life” that needed defending, I found myself questioning that rallying cry too. What “way of life,” precisely? We like the idea of being “American,” but how many Americans—or foreigners—buy into the Bush administration’s, or any other particular, notion of our national identity? In the wake of Sept. 11, it became clear that American identity was open to interpretations at home and abroad; in fact, it seemed as splintered and as threatened as that of jazz.

My discomfort with the concept that “jazz equals American” had begun to take shape during a star-studded, hour-long network television special for the Monk Institute’s 10th anniversary in 1997, held in Washington, D.C.’s Kennedy Center. Vice President Al Gore and his wife Tipper were seated prominently in the first balcony. A banner that said “Jazz—America’s Classical Music” stretched above the stage. The slogan didn’t sit right with me. Soon, Billy Dee Williams was at the microphone telling us that jazz was “America’s only indigenous art form.” It was America’s classical music and its indigenous music—both, at the same time (which would be a pretty neat trick).

49 At that time, I was editor of what I liked to believe was a serious and broad-minded jazz magazine. I knew the purely semantic (and subjective) pitfalls of the word “jazz.” But all this patriotic fervor made me squirm in a new direction. “It’s the music of more than one America,” I muttered to no one in particular. Although its story and its character may be basically American, jazz has to do with musical and cultural developments throughout the African diaspora. And what about that “classical music” part? If we build a jazz canon, if we “classicize” it, does that shatter jazz’s core—its improvisational, progressive essence?

It seemed as if policy was at stake—jazz was being groomed to serve as a

cultural export and a point of national pride. There was something uniquely American about jazz, that seemed certain; it was born of our soil. Still, the relationship didn't strike me as proprietarily as the phrase "Jazz is America's Classical Music" implied.

Two months later, I watched the ABC broadcast of the Kennedy Center presentation. It was the first network primetime hour devoted to jazz in my lifetime, and it was an oddly unsettling 60 minutes. First, there was the title: "Nissan Celebrates America's Music." "Jazz" was a four-letter word permitted by Federal Communications Commission standards but not, apparently, by the network brass. They feared—and rightfully so, I'm sure—that the word would turn most viewers away (in fact, the producers admitted that the special was a tough sell to the network). In his opening monologue, master of ceremonies Bill Cosby underscored this lack of mainstream appeal: "This show wasn't paid for by Detroit. It isn't supported by our government. It's funded by a Japanese car company." The televised hour also demonstrated how out of sync the American mainstream was with the jazz world. At each turn, Las Vegas showgirl-style dancers cavorted about the stage as if the music needed dressing up. Cameramen seemed to struggle desperately to find the next shot—thrown off perhaps by the subtle, organic interaction that jazz requires.

Nevertheless, jazz boosters saw the special as a windfall. "Remember the Reagan years and all those pictures of the president in his cowboy hat, on his horse?" one music industry executive asked me not long after the program aired. "There were all those country music TV specials at the time, and country music kind of entered the mainstream. Now it's happening for jazz."

The conflation of jazz with American identity is nothing new. Ralph Ellison wrote frequently on the connection; one could argue that Louis Armstrong is the real hero of his classic novel "Invisible Man." In a 1970 article in *Time* called "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," Ellison characterized the "Negro" contributions to American culture as "jazz-shaped," which "serve to

remind us that the world is ever unexplored, and that while a complete mastery of life is mere illusion, the real secret of the game is to make life swing." The "secret of the game" clearly had something to do with improvisation and adaptation—the "jazz-shaped" spirit Ellison presented was an inherently mutable property.

During the past 20 years, a jazz canon has begun to take shape. Repertory groups have popped up at institutions of high culture. This is a positive development in terms of establishing icons (Ellington, Monk, Armstrong, Miles, et al). But the creation of a canon may simultaneously pose a threat to jazz's fundamental aesthetic, not to mention the fact that it often leads to the exclusion or obscuring of some of the best and most innovative musicians on the scene.

Increasingly since the 1980s, jazz has come to be defined in strict terms of blues and swing and structure. In some cases, the aesthetic borderlines of jazz have been defended like those of a nation-state. "I think this whole preoccupation with abstraction, which is inherited from European critics, is a mistake," Wynton Marsalis told me in an interview a few years ago in reference to some American critics' concerns about stifled innovation and freedom. "Our music is not going to go in that direction. The whole concept of abstraction as a modern statement is something that's a misguided concept to begin with, across all the arts." Jazz was "our music," went the logic, and it was to be defended from aesthetic incursions from abroad.

The nationalist fervor surrounding jazz (and the nostalgia it induces) reached an apex in 2000, with the airing of Ken Burns' "Jazz," a ten-part, 17-1/2 hour flotilla of a PBS documentary. The third in Burns' trilogy, it was inspired by the words of scholar Gerald Early—that 2,000 years from now, the three enduring American contributions to civilization will be the Constitution, baseball, and jazz. Burns had a clear agenda: to tell biopic stories of jazz's Great (and mostly black) Men, and link them to a limited discussion of race relations and modernity in the United States.

Burns' thesis was compelling, and the coalition it sparked was impressive: Two major jazz labels, Columbia and Verve, joined forces to release a boxed set



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of reissued music, and a publisher signed on to provide the required coffee-table reading. His strategy was effective. But his approach also reeked of American exceptionalism (there was little discussion of jazz's African and Caribbean influences, or of the music's life beyond our borders), and its retro focus (there was scarcely any coverage of jazz post-1965) left whole schools of musicians on the cutting-room floor. Burns' film presented a monolithic story of jazz, within a monolithic concept of America that seemed, well, undemocratic. And the story Burns told was frozen in time, which is anathema to anyone's concept of swing.

In spite of these weaknesses, Burns' program was fodder for discussion, not only among critics but in the academy, where jazz studies centers began to take hold in liberal arts schools in the 1990s. Robin D.G. Kelley, who held Columbia University's Louis Armstrong Visiting Professorship for 2001-02 and teaches courses like "Jazz and the Political Imagination," spoke of the Burns film as a jumping-off point when he discussed it at an April 2002 symposium at the Village Vanguard:

You don't necessarily have to attack Burns to use it as an opportunity. When my class deals with that series, our question is: "Yes, he tells a story, but why a story of jazz as a metaphor for liberal democracy? Freedom is defined one way, and one way only. So we try to figure out what the other stories are about jazz and freedom. We talk about jazz as a metaphor in lots of ways—why the Surrealists were interested in jazz, for instance. We talk about [what] freedom meant for the Black Liberation movement, which Burns deals with for a moment, and I give him credit for that.

But why this story, especially around World War II? We get a story of jazz musicians as patriots, as pro-war, going to fight. But another way to tell the story is of jazz musicians as basically anti-war, refusing the draft. Does that mean they're unpatriotic?

Chris Washburne, a professor in Columbia University's music department and a working jazz trombonist, picked up that theme:

There are many different histories of jazz, and it's up to scholars and critics to write from those different perspectives. What about the internationalization of jazz? What about contributors to jazz's history that didn't originally come from the United States? That came from Africa, South America, Europe, Asia? A lot of times, the discussion gets bound by this black/white dichotomy of racial politics in the U.S., and when you start to throw in a third or fourth ethnicity or culture, it gets too complex. We end up missing a huge portion of the story.

54 Stories about the reach of jazz's influences and its exponents are many: Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington were cultural ambassadors for much of their careers. The "expatriate jazzman in Paris" is a well-known image. Cuban and Brazilian composers have begun to work their way into many a jazz player's repertoire. The ways in which jazz has been understood abroad, especially how the music itself has served as an agent of change, reinforce the notion of jazz as uniquely American. And it says a lot about the American identity abroad.

Consider the back-cover promotional copy for "Swing Under the Nazis," written by Mike Zwerin, who has been a music critic for the *International Herald Tribune* for 20 years, and a musician who has recorded with, among others, Miles Davis:

For a brief time in a Europe threatened and then occupied by Nazi Germany, jazz was heard as ubiquitously as rock-and-roll is today. In a personal search for the story of that time, Mike Zwerin spent two years traveling across Europe talking with those singular and unlikely individuals who performed and enjoyed jazz in Hitler's dark shadow. They included the Ghetto Swingers, a Jewish jazz band that 'toured' Auschwitz and Theresienstadt; the Luftwaffe

pilot who listened to Glenn Miller while bombing London; the Berlin swing gangs and Zazous (Parisian jazz enthusiasts) who risked persecution and imprisonment for the opportunity to dance openly to prohibited swing records; Django Reinhardt, the brilliant guitarist who refused to flee Nazi-controlled France.... "Swing Under the Nazis" also explores Zwerin's confrontation with a past that still has claims on the present, as he recalls his own encounters with contemporary oppression.

When I assigned one critic to cover a jazz festival in Istanbul five years ago, he wrote, "In Turkey, jazz is perceived as the music of an oppressed, misunderstood and angry African-American minority." He talked to a professorial man at one of the festival's seminars who wondered why jazz didn't develop in Turkey during the Ottoman Empire, since there were Africans in the Ottoman Empire.

And the experiences of saxophonist Charles Lloyd in Estonia would fit well into a Cold War primer:

55 Days before a 1997 performance at a festival in [the Estonian city of] Tallinn, the saxophonist's mood was darkened when a couple of kids in the lobby of the Hotel Virtu laughed at him. It's possible that they were just surprised or confused by his looks: Lloyd is big man, in his 60s, tall and willowy, with white hair, copper-colored skin and a face made distinctive by an exotic mix of ethnicities—African, Cherokee, Mongolian, Irish. He felt tempted to upbraid the teenagers, to say something like, "Maybe I had a little bit of something to do with your freedom, young man!"

Maybe he did. Thirty years earlier, when Lloyd's quartet was one of the hottest tickets in American jazz, the group was booked to play in Tallinn, much to the distress of Communist officials. The Russians, opposing the American military escalation in Vietnam, tried to cancel the show. But Lloyd played a potent trump card: "Are you practicing racism?" he asked within earshot of reporters. At which point, the Soviet guards replied: "You play tomorrow."

Lloyd told one interviewer, “When we played there, it was like the shackles were removed, and they could not go back.”

Back in the United States, many jazz musicians see the music as a window into their own hybrid identities. Yet their expressions are often cause for controversy among jazz insiders.

Jason Hwang is a violinist whose parents were born in the Hunan province of China. He first encountered jazz musicians at jam sessions in Manhattan’s Chinatown. He was inspired by the players’ imperative to have their own voices and by the democratic ideal he sensed operating within most jazz bands. Hwang realized that his own voice would draw not only on the legacies of swing, blues and bebop, but on, as he put it, “how my body language or my sneeze is like my father’s: Chinese.” Eventually, he formed the Far East Side Band, tapping Japanese- and Korean-born musicians and drawing from both American and Asian influences.

“There’s a lot of talk about multiculturalism here, but there’s only a surface idea of ethnicity in the American identity,” Hwang says. “I want to make poems about my identity. And to make a poem, the form needs to be flexible.”

Uri Caine is a Jewish pianist from Philadelphia who trained in both jazz and classical music at a young age. Over coffee one day, he excitedly related a story from Henri de la Grange’s biography of Gustav Mahler. “Mahler got together with this opera singer who had gone to cantorial school. The singer did Hebrew prayers and then began to improvise on them. Mahler dug it. He played the same improvisations, and then began to clothe them in different harmonies.” Caine has since recorded a series of daring and impressive recordings of jazz-based interpretations of the music of Mahler, Bach and other European composers, some involving a cantor. Earlier in his career, Caine played in a klezmer band led by a black, dreadlocked clarinetist, Don Byron. They see their work as squarely within the jazz tradition.

Singer Cassandra Wilson, who is among Blue Note Records’ best-selling artists, has been vilified of late by critics for her choice of repertoire, which includes pop songs like Jimmy Webb’s “Wichita Lineman” and the Monkees’

“Last Train to Clarksville” alongside jazz and blues standards. In December 2001, when a newly formed industry association mounted “Made in America,” a benefit concert for World Trade Center victims at Manhattan’s Town Hall, Wilson was on the bill. She performed “The Waters of March,” written by Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim, and Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land.” “I’m not a jazz singer based on what songs I sing,” she once told me. “I’m a jazz singer based on how I sing them.”

Celebrating and preserving jazz is a good thing, but to honor its aesthetic, the music’s structure must be flexible and mutable—that’s a large part of what makes it American. And if the face of America continues to change—and it will—than the sound of jazz will, too. To me, that’s the only way the “jazz is American music” logic can apply. The rigidity with which some have defended jazz’s supposed borders has bothered a lot of us who love jazz, and it belies the spiritual connection with our national identity. The meaning of “jazz” or “America” cannot simply be expressed in black and white. And jazz musicians have been masters of the manipulation of gray.

In the weeks that followed Sept. 11, I found myself fearful that all of us were dividing into camps, drawing hard lines, denying the shades of gray in our histories that led us to this point. Jazz is American in a fundamental way; it is a vehicle for change built on a tradition of spiritual allegiance that does not turn into fundamentalism.

Marsalis, Burns and others are right in insisting on an inseparable connection between the identities of jazz and America. How those identities evolve—or not—and how they are received will hinge on the resolution of tensions that have arisen in both jazz circles and in the world at large: ancient against modern; global against local; tradition against innovation. But jazz is built on tensions: one rhythm against another; tonalities colliding in surprising ways; existing music reconceived in new ways. The jazz musician builds on an American tradition but, more importantly, uses the materials at hand to construct a way that speaks to his or her contemporary world. It’s the process that matters most.

The skyscraper, an iconic emblem of American ingenuity to many, has often been seen as a metaphor for jazz. In “Jazz and the Cadence of American Culture,” a collection of writings compiled by Robert O’Meally (an English professor who created Columbia University’s Center for Jazz Studies) there are quite a few references to skyscrapers. Wynton Marsalis is quoted as saying, “Duke Ellington’s music is based on a skyscraper and on conceptions that come out of the American experience.” Scholar Ann Douglas devotes several pages to the topic, writing, “It is important to note that skyscrapers did not become the dominant form of architecture in England or Europe.” There’s a mention of French architect Le Corbusier describing New York’s skyline as “hot jazz in stone and steel.” The skyscraper’s form—a strong, vertical skeleton which invites variations that can rise up to greater and greater heights—has been related to both the experience of American ingenuity and the structure of jazz improvisation.

As an architectural achievement, I’m not so sure I’ll miss the Twin Towers. And I wonder if, today, the skyscraper signifies the same thing it once did. And before there’s a rush to rebuild the Towers in the same shape and dimensions as before, maybe we should consider one of several improvisations on the theme, so to speak—to think long and hard about how the new structures will resonate here and abroad.

It was in the shadow of the Twin Towers that I had occasion to interview Charles Lloyd myself in the summer of 2001. He lamented what he felt was a “pervasive coldness” in the world, especially as it relates to culture. “There’s a hunger that I can sense in the audiences I play to today,” he said. “People are searching for some beauty in a world that seems like it wants to shut beauty out.” The meditative calm of Lloyd’s recent recordings has drawn some negative reviews; critics have written that in search of tenderness, Lloyd has belied the fire of his tradition.

Lloyd returned to New York a month later, for a week at the Blue Note that was to begin on Tuesday, Sept. 11. His group eventually took the stage that Friday, in the midst of a city struggling to come to grips with a new reality. The room was understandably half-empty, and audience members had the nervous grins of folks looking for something, but just not sure what.

In an e-mail to me a few weeks later, Lloyd recounted watching footage of the first airplane striking the towers, and witnessing the second attack from his window.

“I went out onto the street,” he wrote, “which was quiet and surreal. As the days went by, the walls of buildings became filled with photos and names of loved ones lost. It was heartbreaking to see all the doctors and nurses waiting ’round the clock for survivors who never came.”

Lloyd wrote of “feeling spun out” and admitted that, on that first night back at the Blue Note, “I couldn’t find my sound. Now, as I write you from Europe,” he signed off, “I know that we are still in need of tenderness.”