

generation who have practised their ideas and beliefs at a time and in a place where it matters.

JOHN TACKABERRY

Note. The addresses of the organizations, which are open to women as well as men, are as follows:—

International Voluntary Service: 72 Oakley Square, N.W.1.

National Union of Students of England, Wales and Northern Ireland:
3 Endsleigh Street, W.C.1, and

The Scottish Union of Students: 30 Lothian Street, Edinburgh.

United Nations Association: International Service Department, 25
Charles Street, W.1.

Voluntary Service Overseas: 18 Northumberland Avenue, W.C.2.

Heard and Seen

JAZZ AT THE CROSSROADS

When it is considered that jazz is but half a century old, that it was only the spontaneous means of self-expression of a repressed minority, it is then that one wonders at its international acceptance. Surely, it must cater for some deep-seated hunger, for otherwise how could it have achieved such an acceptance?

Jazz, today, can be divided into three rough categories – traditional, mainstream, and modern. The traditionalists maintain that the old times were the best, and to persuade us that this is true they not only use the line-up of instruments fashionable earlier this century (banjo, cornet, even tuba), but also dress in the style of a bygone era, eras which have nothing at all to do with the genesis of jazz. One band dresses up in Confederate uniform, another as Mississippi gamblers, and one of the best known bandleaders, Acker Bilk, dons bowler and striped waistcoat. In the effort to project the potential listener back into the period, posters and advertisements are executed in a pseudo-archaic typographical style that often antedates all jazz by as much as a century.

The mainstreamers eddy midway between the traditionalists and the modernists, borrowing from both. No one has yet successfully defined mainstream. It uses a harmonic vocabulary more advanced than the traditional variety, more down to earth than the modernists. Mainstream is ideally suited to the middle-brow jazz listener. There is not so much of the plink-plonk of trad, nor the muffled profundities of the modernists. Essentially this group is the most modest of the three, fairly unpretentious, but apt to amble along at a luke-warm

temperature, so that their playing, commonly most efficient, often tends to lack impact and intensity. The Humphrey Lyttleton Band is a good example of the mainstream group.

Lastly, the modernists. Modern jazz came into prominence in the '40s in the United States when able musicians, many of them from the big bands then in vogue, got together for experimental sessions, strictly for kicks. Musicians totally alien to the then contemporary scene, in technique and temperament, rose to the surface, including figures who today are treated with reverence and awe quite out of proportion to their achievements. Modernism progressed in fits and starts through a variety of phases. It passed through a strange epoch called bop, and now it is modern jazz on which the hopes of the connoisseurs rest, mainly because it is pursued on too ethereal a plane to be overtaken by show-biz, a fate, alas, traditional jazz has fallen to.

The basic jazz tree has, to now, been trad. Like all art forms it has had to provide nourishment to the public in a simplified form, and as traditional jazz is simple anyway, this has been no difficult task. Branches have been stripped away from the trunk – skiffle, rock 'n' roll – until precious little is left. Those who were aware of what was going on, and had no desire to be incorporated in show-biz, contracted out, and this has led to a revival in this country of the folk song movement, a movement which has, in terms of music, hardly more than a sociological interest, though the presence of a folk-singer in many an edition of the BBC TV programme 'Tonight' (obligatory viewing for all Us) has given folk-singing a degree of respectability.

Until quite recently, modern jazz has been the province of small coteries of intellectuals, acutely conscious of the fact that they were the chosen few. Modern jazz, it was believed, could never be commercial, and could therefore never be subjected to the pressures of big business. It was considered too rarified to be understood or appreciated by the general public, and the connoisseurs of the genre were only too happy at this state of affairs. Then there came one of the most startling events in the history of jazz, a phenomenon that has yet to receive the investigation it deserves. Modern jazz suddenly became popular. Dave Brubeck, the high priest of modern jazz, became a name everyone knew. He played a part in a serious film, a modern version of Othello, and two of his compositions, 'Take Five' and 'Raggy Waltz', became best-sellers. 'Take Five' is the first music in 5/4 time to achieve a position in that criterion of worldly success, the Top Twenty.

To those outside, there cannot appear to be much difference between success with the jazz loving public and the adulation of the teenager (the chief buyer of 45 r.p.m. records and therefore the regulator of popularity), but there truly is an immense gap.

A few of the factors which led to the new status of modern jazz might be mentioned. First, the listener had been indoctrinated to the moderns by film music, by television background music, by chance hearings in record shops and at friends' houses. Secondly, in both the two groups responsible for the break-

through – the Dave Brubeck group and the Modern Jazz Quartet (the MJQ, as it is known to millions), the lead instrument was the piano, and never has this instrument enjoyed a wider popularity. Thirdly, the mass listener had at last caught up with modern harmony.

It would be unwise to underestimate these Brubeck pieces which, now a year ago, made the Top Twenty. Musically they are far and away the best things that have appeared in this list over the last five years, equivalent in form and content to the charming piano pieces Poulenc and his colleagues were writing in France in the 'twenties and 'thirties. The harmonies were gently acid without being harsh, the rhythms were crisp and off-beat without being tortuous, qualities omnipresent throughout the entire world of modern jazz, qualities which, however, may sound its death knell, for with its success, jazz in its form is trying to be respectable. That is why jazz is at the cross-roads.

Writing of jazz on the Third Programme, Johnny Dankworth says: 'One of the great joys of jazz is the immense field of operation which it has won for itself. It can be found flirting with symphony orchestras and poetry readings only a step or so away from its more familiar cellar-club home.' The key admission here is the word 'flirting'. Serious composers, such as Ravel and Lambert, flirted with jazz in the 'twenties and 'thirties. From this quotation from one of the leading executants in the current jazz scene, one would suppose that the boot is now on the other foot. However, this is hardly true. The hard basic fact about jazz is that it is an art of improvisations. In traditional jazz, these are variations on a melody; in modern jazz, variations on a chord series. What was once the central feature of jazz, its syncopation, is not now to the point, so far ahead is serious music in creating excitement with rhythmic devices. Without improvisation there can hardly be jazz. This has been realized by many talented jazz musicians, and they have sought to by-pass the issue by calling their music Third Stream Music; in this music, improvisation is reduced to a minimum. The result is charming, the tunes are often delightful, but it is hardly more than pleasant salon music.

The question of improvisation is an interesting one, and stretches across the entire field of music. In the age of Bach and Frescobaldi it was considered an integral part of the musician's craft, and the desire to extemporize freely on stated themes was recognized up to and including the time of Beethoven by providing towards the end of the first movement of concertos (and often also in the finale) space for the executant to play his own cadenza. With the nineteenth century came the decline of improvisation, and it is only in jazz that the talented extemporizer has been able to find a niche for his talents. This applies with particular force to the pianist, and it seems unquestionable that certain pianists, without any true feeling for jazz, chose a career in this rather than serious music because of the greater scope offered for improvisation. In this connection it is instructive to note that in several avant garde works, provision is made for a player to extemporize, or (a nice point) it is a matter of indifference as to what notes the player actually plays.

Whereas classical music is an art of composers, jazz is an art of performers. The player is always in the limelight. When an evergreen is being dealt with, the composer's name is rarely mentioned. The originator of a series of chords for a modern jazz number is commonly one of the participants. The player is thus encouraged to display unique mannerisms, and a solo is usually greeted with prolonged applause, much to the performer's gratification. An audience therefore means a lot to a jazz group. Playing 'cold' can reduce an excellent group to utter dullness. In consequence, the jazz performer plays up to his audience in the same way great virtuosi of the past did – pianists such as de Pachmann, violinists like Paganini. One of the doyens of far-out modernism, Thelonius Monk, has any number of interesting mannerisms, quirks which are basically his, and not publicity grafts, features introduced into the act for popular appeal.

The audience at a jazz concert, or anywhere where jazz is played, expects to be excited. The waves of applause that constantly interrupt the flow of the music are therefore only a token of appreciation to a degree. Partly it is a release of suppressed excitement. However, it does do a lot for the performer, and is often the reason for a display of technique one would not believe possible from a particular player. From this has come the hypothesis that jazz musicians are more gifted than serious musicians, a fact, however, quite untrue.

Any musician who has improvised and who has played straight will agree that it is easier to improvise. In playing straight, a series of notes must be hit in a definite order in a strict time. The performer who improvises has none of these shackles. He can experiment, and wherever he lands, whether he is hitting a high piercing C on an alto sax or involved in a new chord sequence on the piano, that can be a new starting point. 'Wrong' notes can be incorporated into the pattern without undue effort.

Thus the performer has set the tempo of jazz progress. After the performer comes the codifier. The records that are made are studied, analysed. Budding saxophonists play in the style of Stan Getz (brusque, rather hoarse) or Charlie Parker (far-out, hysterical). Pianists use as models Shearing (smooth, urbane) or Powell (far-out, single-notes, wild).

The achievements of jazz, immense considering the small insignificant beginnings, could only have been possible with the assistance of the record player and the radio. The number of people who have listened to live jazz is relatively small. But where now?

Traditional jazz, one must agree, is a question of dressing up in outlandish costumes and playing in a self-consciously old-fashioned way. Mainstream is a cautious middle of the road movement generating no great heat. Modernism, almost completely divorced of its roots, is tentatively trying to join the band-waggon of serious music, a Jekyll to the Hyde of serial music, for its more serious disciples have been most concerned by its foray into popular music. The next ten years should be most interesting.

RONALD PEARSALL