

Jazz Lessons

Mark J. Hanson, KUFM Commentary

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Maybe it's time for what jazz bassist Milt Hinton called a "breakfast dance."ⁱ This term derives from the early days of jazz, when black and white musicians were not allowed to perform together on stage. So after the clubs closed in the early morning hours, they would come together and play jazz.

Jazz is the American art form. And even during the racially segregated days of the 1940s, jazz expressed the best of what democracy means. Critic Gary Giddins notes that in the struggle against Nazism and its racist ideology, it was no accident that America projected the values of freedom and individuality through the faces of African-Americans like Count Basie and Duke Ellington and Jews like Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman.ⁱⁱ Ironically, jazz was the expression of the best of our values abroad at a time when many Americans were still struggling against injustice and harmful ideologies at home.

Our time is different, and yet old problems are taking new forms. Despite President Obama's election, racism persists and even grows. Hate groups are on the rise. The gay and lesbian community, women, and various minorities still face discrimination. Fear and division define our culture. And despite slow economic recovery, the public mood is souring. Nearly two-thirds of Americans believe the nation is in decline.ⁱⁱⁱ We seem to have lost all confidence in our political system to solve significant problems.

Much of our pessimism may derive from the way in which all issues are forced into partisan and ideological frameworks. Political parties worry less about finding the best solutions than they do about advancing their political interests. And those interests are increasingly defined by divisive ideologies. A Pew Research Center poll found that a plurality of Republican voters were less likely to vote for candidates who would compromise.^{iv}

Ideologies threaten democracy because they define the world in terms of absolutes, often in spite of the facts. They do not accommodate difference. And a central point of difference in America today is the welfare of the collective in relation to the freedom of the individual.

This week, Montana celebrates the final days of jazz appreciation month, culminating in the Buddy DeFranco Jazz Festival in Missoula. It would be easy to take in the music merely as an escape from our troubled world. But as our history shows, jazz can be more than that. As musician Earl Hines once said, "Jazz expresses the hope of a free people who hunger for a better life."^v

But not only that, jazz gives us clues as to how to make that happen. Improvisational jazz seems like it is primarily about the values of creativity, freedom, self-assertion, and individualism.^{vi} Each player takes a turn, soloing without being confined to notes on a page. There *are* no absolutes.^{vii}

But as scholar Paul Rinzler argues, jazz is ultimately about relating these characteristics to their opposites.^{viii} Musical *creativity* is not random, but is ultimately built on the *tradition* and its rules. *Freedom of expression* is tempered by *responsibility* to the ensemble and to the audience. *Self-assertion* is balanced with *openness* to others and to the unknown. And *individualism*, found in the personal expression of the solo, is set in the context of the *interconnectedness* of the ensemble.

Jazz critic Martin Williams writes, “Jazz not only exalts the individual, it also places him in a fundamental, dynamic, and necessary cooperation with his fellows.”^{ix} A good jazz musician listens to her fellow musicians. Philosopher Steven Fesmire suggests that a jazz musician must clue into the attitude and cadence of the group.^x In this way, he argues, jazz is very much like the morality of interpersonal relationships, in that people must “respond empathetically to each other instead of imposing insular designs, and they must rigorously imagine how others will respond to their actions.”^{xi} When pianist Bill Evans was reflecting on the group improvisation on Miles Davis’s famous recording *Kind of Blue* he said, “Aside from the very weighty problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social need, of sympathy from all members to bend for the common result.”^{xii}

It would be hard to imagine a better lesson for us in our times. No wonder critic Gerald Early called jazz a “kind of lyricism about the great American promise.”^{xiii} And if you want to be part of fulfilling that promise in difficult times, don’t come to play unless you’re ready to stay up for breakfast, and dance.

This is Mark Hanson, guest commentator for the Center for Ethics, at the University of Montana

ⁱ *Jazz* (A film by Ken Burns), Episode Seven.

ⁱⁱ *Jazz* (A film by Ken Burns), Episode Seven.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Nation’s mood at Lowest Level in Two Years, Poll Shows,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/22/us/22poll.html>, accessed April 26, 2011.

^{iv} Charles M. Blow, “The Great American Cleaving,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2010.

^v *Jazz* (A film by Ken Burns), Episode Seven.

^{vi} Paul Rinzler, *The Contradictions of Jazz* (Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008).

^{vii} Martin Williams, *The Jazz Tradition*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 262.

^{viii} Paul Rinzler, *The Contradictions of Jazz*.

^{ix} Martin Williams, *The Jazz Tradition*, p. 266.

^x Steven Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 94.

^{xi} Fesmire, *John Dewey*, p. 95.

^{xii} Fesmire, *John Dewey*, p. 94.

^{xiii} *Jazz* (A film by Ken Burns), Episode Two.