

WHAT IS JAZZ? by Loren Schoenberg

Prepared for Downers Grove North High School, March 5, 2006

What is jazz? That's a question that has stymied the best and the brightest jazz writers since the music's inception. To some it has a distinctive musical profile with its basis in swinging 4/4 time with the blues as a touchstone. To others it's a musical reflection of defiance or at least of antagonistic cooperation. Then we have the oft-paraphrased definition supposedly uttered by an early jazzman (usually cited as Louis Armstrong or Fats Waller) as "if you have to ask, you'll never know" which is enough to drive an inquisitive mind to Nietzschean-like despair.

Jazz is a music that evolved in New Orleans in the early part of the 20th century. It is an African-American idiom that has become truly international over the course of the last century, and has been malleable enough to be refashioned to fit any number of cultural imperatives. While its roots are indelibly vocal, it evolved into a primarily an instrumental genre, with its long series of innovations coming from instrumentalists. It is a music in which theme and variations play a large role, and in which each player has the potential role of composer. While it is not essential to know the tune a jazz band is playing, it helps. In a jazz band, the musical baton can be passed to any of its members, and, like in a relay race, they have the responsibility of carrying the musical burden to the next signpost where they can hand it over to someone else. There is a rhythmic essence to jazz known as swing that has its roots in 19th century African-American churches where the music that accompanied the prayers took on an urgency fueled by the emotional state of a people with few other outlets for their humanity. This swing was spread throughout the country via the minstrel shows that were so enormously popular – the tambourine rhythms spawned many of the basic beats of jazz, including the famous "back beat". The degrading spectacle of minstrelsy was accompanied by a new and vibrant music that would have profound consequences on world culture and led directly to ragtime, jazz and rock and roll.

Jazz can be played on any instrument and by any sized ensemble. Jazz, being a product of American culture, shares with it a protean quality that drives some to distraction and others to ecstasy. This has made jazz a music that inspires a great passion and one that has yet to be definitively defined with any specificity, although there have many brave attempts at it.

Perhaps the best way to arrive at a workable definition of jazz is to use music of Louis Armstrong as a benchmark. This is not to say that his music and only his music qualify as jazz – far from it – or that our understanding of jazz must always relate to its past. But in trying to define what is still a relatively new art form (compared to most of its peers, 100 year-old jazz is still in swaddling clothes), Armstrong provides the relevance to both the music's genesis and to where we are today, and therefore, functions better than anything else in evaluating new music in jazz's total context. His influence was, and remains, so seminal that relating whatever jazz-related query you may have to the many facets of his genius is your best bet for making your own judgments as to whether something qualifies as jazz. This makes it necessary to understand that the essence of Armstrong's art was his willingness to use anything and everything available to him for artistic fodder, and not to be constrained on what others felt were clearly defined boundaries that could not be crossed. Don't focus on the world-famous Armstrong of media fame, but on the young man who arrived in Chicago in 1923 from his native New Orleans and within a decade had turned much of the world's music upside down – upside down in the sense that the basic compositional strength of his music was

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already being perceived as relevant to anyone who encountered it within their own musical spheres. And this is what the greatest jazz musicians have continued to do – Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane have been pounced upon for decades now as vital inspiration across what are to most art forms uncrossable aesthetic borders.

What makes most jazz music different from country, classical, rock and the other well-known genres is its basic malleability. It is fair to generalize that when you hear a pop band or a symphony orchestra night after night, their performances of the same pieces remain relatively the same. Sure, there are subtle differences, but they are usually within the parameters of interpretation of a given text. With jazz, we encounter something fundamentally different. The great majority of it is not, as most think, spun out of the air, but is a highly organized and (hopefully) spontaneous set of theme and variations. And it is in the variations that the new and the dangerous can be conjured, and this is what gives its special *frisson*. And even when jazz is highly composed, as it is in most big bands, there can still be holes for improvisation that in the right hands can alter the context of the written sections so that no two performances are similar.

It's essential to remember that the word itself was problematical from the beginning. "Jass" evolved into "jazz" in the years surrounding World War I, and though its precise provenance has yet to be definitively resolved, it seems to have a clear link with sex and brothels and other things that aroused the interest of some and the condemnation of others. Though recent historical research has shown the majority of early jazzmen in New Orleans did not play in whorehouses, the music has had great difficulty shaking its associations with the red light. We know that Johannes Brahms, to cite just one example, played in houses of ill repute during his teen years and that these experiences colored the rest of his life, but that is where it ends, in terms of musicology. But reams have been written about the continued relevance of jazz to where some of its early practitioners played. This has a lot more to do with the vestiges of racism in our society than it does with the music itself. Jazz is usually said to have had "humble" origins, in that it was not conceived in the rarified precincts of "high" art, but in this regard it is no different from many others genres that have evolved into fine arts. Indeed, it is in the music's relevance to the common experiences of the culture of which it was borne that its appeal to the rest of the world was born. But the word jazz had and still has negative qualities as reflected in the saying: "Don't give me any of that jazz", which explains why as early as the 1920s some folks were already trying to disassociate themselves from jazz. Duke Ellington and others wanted to call what they wrote American Negro music. But all of this came to naught, the word stuck and a lot of great music came of it.

In more strictly musical terms, jazz is essentially defined by its rhythmic qualities. Its melodies and harmonies came from Europe and were then filtered through the myriad strands that constituted the American experience. But its rhythmic profile was unique. The African component that survived through the years of slavery merged with the more evenly quantified nature of European rhythms to create a blending of the rhythmically irrational and rational figures that define "swing." Jazz is not alone in not being able to be captured on the written music page. To pick one example, the push and pull inherent in Chopin's music, the way it surges in the hands of a good interpreter, is the result of a musical technique known as *rubato*. One hand (usually the left one, playing the accompaniment) plays in strict tempo, while the other hand rushes and drags the beat, creating a tension that is resolved on a subsequent downbeat. Of course, this effect is not limited to the piano. The jazz player becomes in effect the right hand, with the implied beat, usually stated by the rhythm section, being the left. Then there are rhythm section players who themselves become the element of rhythmic counterpoint against the others. You can hear this rhythmic dynamism throughout jazz – three handy examples where this *rubato* is manifestly tangible are:

- ◆ Louis Armstrong's statement of the melody on his 1927 version of "12th Street Rag."

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- ◆ Pianist Erroll Garner's left and right hands throughout "I'll Remember April" from his classic recording *Concerts by the Sea*.
- ◆ Drummer Elvin Jones on "Village Blues" from *John Coltrane Plays the Blues* - listen for how he widens the beat against the bass player's quarter notes

In each instance, try and tap your foot along with the basic quarter note rhythm, and feel the swaying back and forth that these players achieve against it. But what is it that makes the jazz *rubato* different from its other variants? The catalytic nature of African culture is a given, and it was in the African American church that this rhythmic elasticity was nurtured into the swinging rhythms that became an indispensable element of jazz's creation.

Jazz, the music and the word, continues to change day to day, and given its protean nature, that is its great strength.