

JAZZ IN ACADEMIA: ANOTHER LOOK

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By Hal Galper From an interview with David Udolf

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While the African oral tradition is by no means extinct, it's meaning has gradually been transformed over the past twenty-five years as jazz achieved more respectability as "serious" music. Within academia this oral tradition has unfortunately been subordinated to a romantic cliché that typifies the process as a colorful history of the idiom and a vestigial mythology rather than a useful methodology for learning how to play. While a proliferation of formalized university-level programs have done much to validate the artistic integrity of jazz in the public eye, it has also distorted many truths that lie behind the notes. As jazz becomes more homogenized with the times, it faces the danger of losing touch with this personal spirit that still survives in the anecdotes of the experienced players". (David Udolf)

"I think it was Chicago. I was playing with Chet (Baker) and he was singing a ballad. The place was really packed and everyone was quiet. Chet's into singing and playing in the soft dynamic range, so I'm comping with my foot on the soft pedal, hardly hitting the keys at all. Everything was fine until I hit that one chord a little bit too loud. Then Chet just stopped. He turned around and screamed, 'You got it!' I mean you either learned how to play soft, or he was going to embarrass you to death."

"This was the real school where I learned my craft...on the bandstand, in the heat of things, playing behind band leaders such as Baker, Sonny Stitt and Cannonball Adderley. Treading water in the deep end, the real world of jazz where people demanded that the music sound the way they heard it and nothing less would suffice

With Chet the lesson was volume, control and drama. But there have been many other lessons on the road to experience. And all came with stories and maxims...little devices that glow with the revelation of scripture that keep the music alive for the next generation. This is the true method of jazz education, initiation and experience. This is the way it has been since the very beginning when jazz was still a disreputable folk music played in Storyville whorehouses and street markets of turn-of-the-century New Orleans."

As a dedicated teacher for over twenty years, I hope to offer a unique historical perspective on the problems that the jazz instructor faces, provide some solutions and address the deficiencies common to university music departments that seem to churn out players who often are more technically proficient than expressive.

One of the primary difficulties in educating people for careers in the arts is trying to come to terms with what can and cannot be taught. Creative activity is ultimately personal and demands a certain amount of originality. A teacher must work within parameters dictated by the talent and potential of the student. (In jazz, the important things you learn aren't passed along like famous dates in history class. It's more a process of self discovery.) What are the benefits of a formal music education? Art is basically a self-taught process. No matter how much education you have, the final result is always due to a process of trial and error--working things out on your own. A good education gives you a way to teach yourself. A good teacher will coach you, making sure your direction is on-line so you can evolve a disciplined and logical approach to develop your own way of playing, painting or whatever. A teacher coaches someone about how to teach oneself, then keeps track of the student to make sure he is using the process correctly. Eventually this becomes ingrained and automatic so you can use this system to learn any new information for the rest of your life.

No matter what the medium, there is always a projection of an illusion. This is the basic, built-in problem with any art. If you are learning by yourself, solely from observation (listening to music or looking at paintings), you are subjected to the illusions that the artist is projecting and may not learn what is going on beyond the surface. The craft or skill that makes art work is not always readily apparent. A good teacher can show you what goes on behind the scenes. He can help reveal all the assumed processes only alluded to in the work itself. And these are the important aspects to know, since they give the work its logic, breadth and strength...the things that make it project in the first place.

These considerations, however, beg two questions: 1) What kind of education are we talking about? 2) What distinctions are to be made in arts education? If you are lucky enough to have ears like Charlie Parker, great. But what if you're not? Although pure talent is a valid consideration, the formula of perspiration versus inspiration must be considered. The formula varies from person to person. I've seen sixteen-year old kids who had great time-feeling that would take other people fifty years to learn--yet their notes weren't together. There are others the same age who have great notes, but no time. There is no hard and fast rule here--everyone has strengths and weaknesses. It is the job of the teacher to point them out. Education thus becomes more a matter of coaching than teaching. To bring out the best in a young player a teacher must reach beyond theoretical information and also contribute to the psychological development of a player. Attitude, perception and a cogent approach to oneself during the performing experience is more important than mere acquisition of theoretical information.

Most great jazz musicians that I have had the good fortune to apprentice with could demonstrate but not always tell you what they were playing. This brings two more questions to view: 1) What kind of "knowledge" is required to be a successful, creative improviser? 2) What is the best way to impart this knowledge? There is a bias in contemporary jazz education toward theoretical knowledge. But there is more than one kind of knowledge! Technical information is the smallest body of "information" that needs to be acquired--it can be absorbed within a year's time of concentrated study. The knowledge that comes from the intuition, the hearing, the heart and the soul of the player--the "experiential" knowledge comprising "information" which cannot be notated--is more difficult to acquire and, through trial and error, takes a lifetime to learn.

This educational bias must be put into historical as well as economic perspective in order to be fully understood. A street music that has grown more and more sophisticated with the years, jazz emerged from a tawdry background--the whorehouses of New Orleans. Even the word "Jazz", a euphemism for the sexual act, is disreputable. Social pressure to legitimize it has always existed. The older jazz masters (who admittedly suffered and endured social and musical prejudice that I didn't experience) have played great music all their lives yet still feel a need to justify jazz as a "serious" music. The established approach to teaching music since the early decades followed a classical academic model that has recently propelled many jazz musicians to the ivy halls of academia in order to fulfill a desire to legitimize jazz as serious music. Here in the 90's jazz still suffers from a vestigial lack of self-esteem. I would postulate that the music never needed validation.

By embracing neo-European classical methodology, the development of a true, historically valid "jazz methodology" based upon African oral teaching concepts has never developed. Many of the early musicians were well-educated musically, studied with a lot of different people and knew what they were doing. While it's always wise to study and improve yourself, it's absurd to use a degree in music to justify the validity of the art form. The institutionalization of teaching jazz in the university has been most destructive. From 1900 on, jazz already had a methodology ("Faking It") for learning how to play and improvise but this was not considered a legitimate process. "Faking It" had a negative connotation as if somehow, as the classicists would have it, it was 'cheating' to play by ear. Yet "Faking It" is just another way of saying one is using a well trained, highly sophisticated inner-process to compose music "of the moment" freely on the bandstand. We're all fakers...eventually you learn how to do it so well that no one knows you are doing it. I've been faking for thirty-five years but I'm not going to tell anybody. I'm going to go up there and pretend that I "know" what I'm doing.

So many times I've met students and teachers who have been misled by a Western, classical approach to learning and elevate the importance of a theoretical background over knowing how to play intuitively. The most important methodology for learning jazz distinct from Western tradition is epitomized by the African way of imitation, copying, studying with a master and playing in a

coached group. The master tells you, "make it sound like this," and he plays something on the drum, and you copy it. Then you play with other musicians while the master supervises your performance...this is completely different from a Western classroom teaching mode that is entirely out of context with the reality of playing improvised music.

The problem with Western education is that it is purely analytical, breaking things down to their smallest components and putting them back together again like an auto mechanic. This is completely opposite of African methodology which deals with things as a whole. You are always in context, working within the sound of the music itself. You become organically involved with the music. When an African hears a group, he hears one sound comprised of different components. When a Westerner hears a group, he hears different components that comprise the one sound. This is not semantics...it's a very important distinction of attitudes.

Western education can be used quite successfully in conjunction with African methodology. Each has its limitations. Imitation is very one dimensional. By learning how to analyze things you develop freedom to expand upon what you copied and can understand on a deeper level. What I object to is an overemphasis on theory and analysis that is much too formal. Academically useful as a learning technique, it is virtually useless on the bandstand. Western theory and analysis should be taught as an adjunct to the African oral tradition and not the other way around.

Economically, vested interests in jazz academia are making a lot of money. Just look at the figures! Berklee College of Music gets 30,000 applications a year, of which they accept only 3,000. Those turned away go to other schools with an average annual tuition of \$10,000 per student as the jazz education industry grosses an estimated \$300 million per year. If we are generous and estimate that a University that has 100 students for four years and matriculates one front line, practicing jazz player, the projected costs to produce that player is \$4 million. And the other students and their parents are paying for that one player's educational career. What would Prez and Bird think of that! I suspect that it didn't cost them that much to learn how to play!

I might suggest as an alternate educational concept the establishment of a two track educational system. For truly promising musicians, the creation of music guilds and an apprentice/master structure that would be elitist, not democratic, and smaller in nature (similar to the eastern Guru system of musical education) wherein talented students are guided and shepherded from grade school up through higher levels by personal recommendations of the masters on each level. Students on the other track remain within university music programs to study related areas of arts education and jazz industry business including music education, arranging, composing, recording, musicology, marketing, advertising, computer technology, business management--areas of endeavor all key to the jazz community. Training students that eventually becoming part of a vast and varied support system necessary to keep front line players functioning in the business, the current educational system is left intact to service the industry, to sustain valuable educator positions and to develop a framework wherein individual commitment to the art form need not be sacrificed.

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