

The Social Contract: Presentation And Creativity

By Hal Galper (Originally published in Down Beat Magazine December 1994)

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When it comes to audience communication, presentation and creativity are sometimes thought to be mutually exclusive. Depending on the situation, one seems to take precedence over the other. However, although both sides of this issue are worthy of consideration, they need not be thought of in an either/or context. You do not have to sacrifice artistic integrity to communicate with an audience

There is a precarious balance that artists must achieve between the honesty of their art and the needs of their audience. Musical integrity is a necessary component of an artist's psychic survival. Developing a musical conception that can stand up to the rigors of nightly performance and still offer joy and surprise to performers and listeners alike will always be the performers challenge.

The Contract

A mutual social contract is unconsciously agreed upon between artist and audience. The conditions of this contract must be fulfilled by both performer and listener and entail emotional risk for both parties.

Contrary to popular belief, most people are afraid of freedom, of "letting go." Suspension of the sense of self is a rare, pleasurable experience that is not an everyday occurrence in most people's lives. Audiences gravitate toward live performance situations because they offer a safe way to let go. However, letting go can suggest the possibility of emotional risk because the listener's defenses are let down.

Listeners, by showing up paying and paying an attendance fee, have willingly entered into an agreement with the performers. They feel comfortable with the fact that, along with other members of the audience, they've agreed to open themselves up to any influence the performers may exert upon them. As suspending ones sense of self creates a unique sense of freedom, the listener can then derive pleasure from this experience allowing themselves to be swept up by a musical performance without emotional risk. The audience has, for that moment, put the state of their emotional well-being into the hands of the performer, a responsibility the performer must accept with care.

Artistic Honesty

Being honest as an artist carries with it a certain amount of personal courage as well as emotional risks.

It's a common belief that an artist's motivation for becoming a performer is, in part, not so much a compulsion to be creative as an artist's psychic need for massive amounts of approval from large groups of people. This may or may not be true. To put it in a slightly different perspective, it is possible that performer does unconsciously recognize their sense of responsibility for the listener having put their state of emotional well-being into the artist's hands.

Performers cannot express themselves if they don't also let go and approach the performance situation without defenses. Agreeing to be artistically honest, they have accepted the risk of possibly failing to honor their part of the contract which is to affect the listener emotionally and intellectually and involve the listener into the performer's musical life. They have committed themselves to take the listener safely outside of themselves for a few moments of the listener's life, to "take them on a trip."

Involve The Listener

Cannonball Adderley once advised me to "Make sure you have a good, strong beginning and ending to your solo because the listener doesn't hear what's going on in the middle." Acting on his advice, I started to pay attention to how different players started and ended their solos, and I developed about a dozen different ways to do so myself. This created a marked increase in the audience's responses to my solos.

Although Cannonball's advice may appear cynical at first, it is founded on the most basic principles of performance psychology: It is the performers responsibility to get the listener's attention and involve them in the performance, to "take them on a trip," then release them from that involvement so the next soloist can do the same. It would seem that the "trip" is more important than the content of the solo.

I have always considered the attitude that "the audience doesn't know what I'm doing" as presumptuous. In order to enjoy a jazz performance, the listener doesn't have to understand what a musician is doing or thinking. After all, no matter how much a musician knows about music, when it comes to playing on the bandstand, they cannot explain what they are doing either. If the player doesn't know, then why should they insist that audience does?

Another interesting facet of playing with Cannonball was the fact that the band didn't leave it's audiences any chance to be uninvolved with their music. The intensity of the band's emotional output took over the attention of the listeners, thereby honoring its social contract with the audience.

Term Fulfillment

If the terms of this mutual contract are not fulfilled by both parties, mutual dissatisfaction will result. The artist will feel the audience is not interested in them, and the listener will feel the same.

The key to successful audience communication, then, is not dependent on the kind or content of what one plays, but the honesty of an artist's music and the depth of their desire to communicate. It is not considerations of presentation that motivate artist's to present their music in a manner that is accessible to the listener-it's their commitment to honor the social contract between themselves and their audience.

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