

# The Jazz Scene in America

Frank Kofsky

1966

A few weeks ago the *New Yorker's* man in jazz, Whitney Balliett, went out to the Coast to catch the Monterey Festival. While he was there he spoke with some of the "workers' aristocracy" of jazz, the white musicians who make their living primarily from studio gigs.

Like all aristocracies, this one has worked out a complete ideology which "justifies"—in its own collective mind, at least its privileged class position. Thus Balliett:

"Los Angeles, like New York, has its share of starving jazz musicians, but they appear to be mostly Negroes..." according to white saxophonist Bud Shank, whom Balliett interviewed, this poverty is entirely merited. Ah, Social Darwinism! In terms reminiscent of William Graham Sumner, Shank informs Balliett that black musicians are not proficient enough to work in the studios: "The Negro saxophonists just play saxophone, and the trumpeters trumpet. In the studios, saxophonists have to double on everything from flute to oboe, and the trumpeters have to play in three or four styles. So, in spite of all the screaming and crying, it's not racial."

Bullshit—pure bullshit.

Doubling on instruments has about as much to do with the dispensation of studio work as North Vietnamese "aggression" has to do with Johnson's napalm Great Barbecue. Just dig it for what it is.

First of all, a dozen or so years ago, when Shank began working the studio scene, he did not "double on everything from flute to oboe." In fact, he played just two instruments—flute and alto saxophone. If he learned any other instruments, this took place after he secured his position in the studios. If true for him, then why not a similar arrangement for a black musician?

Secondly, there are any Number of colored cats around, like Buddy Collette or Jerome Richardson, who play at least as many instruments as Shank but who don't get the studio calls that Shank does. You figure out why not.

More importantly, even if what Shank says about doubling were true—which it emphatically is not his whole line of argument is still dead wrong. Doubling could apply at most to read players; nobody ever heard of asking a guitarist to double on piano, a bassist to play violin, or a trombonist to work out on trumpet. (Or does Shelly Manne really get all those studio dates because secretly he's a harpist?) The point I am making is that doubling, for the great majority of studio players, has no relevance whatsoever. What counts is what's up front—a white skin. As for being able "to play in three or four styles," Shank must have a pretty low estimate of Balliett's (and our) intelligence, or else he must not be listening to young black musicians like Joe Henderson, Bill Dixon, John Handy, Freddy Hubbard, Marion Brown, the late Eric Dolphy (who, by the way, played saxophones, clarinets, and flutes, and still never worked the studio scene), Archie Shepp, Grachan Moncur III and a long list of others. These men can play in so many different styles that they can leave your head spinning just from trying to keep track. For that matter, what about Cecil Taylor? I suppose Shank would have us believe that Andre Previn cuts him!

No, what is actually involved in obtaining studio work (for all but a few exceptions like Harry Edison and Clark Terry) is nothing more than passing the color test: if you're white, you're all right. Indeed, the studios have simply become a haven for all those ofay jazz musicians, such as Bud Shank, who have been displaced by technological obsolescence. After you've heard Coltrane, who can stand those stale and watery imitations of Lester Young? Ironically

enough, for all the blubbing they do over the “extremism,” “separatism,” “reverse racism,” and all that blab blah regarding enraged young black musicians such as Cecil Taylor and Archie Shepp, the big-time “jazz critics,” like Martin Williams and Leonard Feather, have nary a word to spare about the blatant discrimination in the way that studio money is being parceled out. (As far as that goes, neither have the supposedly hipper underground organs, like the LA FREE PRESS, which are on the scene and have fewer excuses.)

A few weeks ago in DOWN BEAT, for example, Williams was outraged because a “black supremacist” (Williams’ term, natch) had the nerve to demand that Ornette Coleman fire David Izenzon and hire a black musician instead. But if Williams had just once devoted this much energy to exposing the studio situation in New York, maybe his “black supremacist” wouldn’t have been quite so concerned about the color of Coleman’s bassist. Yet for all the ranting they do about “black supremacy,” “reverse racism” and “Crow Jim” in jazz, the Feathers and Williamses seem to be unable to move a muscle when it comes to making integration more than a pious slogan on the all-important economic level.

What it all boils down to, as Bill Dixon pointed out to me in the course of a long interview, is that if you want a certain jazz sound, you will get the man who makes it—regardless of whether or not he can double on 15 or 20 other horns. The Europeans, of course, are miles ahead of the Americans in realizing this. Men like Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, and more recently Sonny Rollins have been used there to provide the scoring for films; while all that comes pouring out of Hollywood is that same pallid Shorty Rogers-Shelly Manne-Bud Shank bullshit that has been boring us ever since *The Wild One*.

Just in case you think I’ve exaggerated the shape of the studio status quo, I’ll end with a quote from L.A. alto saxophonist Sonny Criss which nicely illustrates what Bill Dixon meant when he said if you want a sound you have to get the man who plays it. Speaking to a reporter from that jive publication *Down Beat*, Criss complained: “...talk about Los Angeles, I lived here since I was 25 (i.e., for 20 years) and never saw the inside of a movie studio. In France, within six months, I was on the Riviera playing in and for a high budget film...with Tony Perkins—making \$200 a day!”

Well, maybe for \$200 a day you’d have Bud Shank’s ideology too.

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