The Jazz Scene

The End To Jazz Clubs?

Frank Kofsky

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When Cecil Taylor spoke at a panel discussion at the University of Pittsburgh prior to his concert there, it apparently came as a shock to his collegiate audience that he and his fellow musicians no longer wish to undergo the demoralizing experience of presenting their music in nightclubs. How could the musicians not want to play in nightclubs? the students wanted to know. What was going to happen to jazz then?

This naive attitude illustrates the propensity of white middle-class Americans to view the artist, particularly the Negro jazz artist, as some kind of disembodied entity who has no existence except at the moment of artistic creation. If you are a jazz musician, you are expected to get up on the stand and create on demand, simply because the audience has paid its money for the purpose of seeing you do so. You may have to go home to rats, roaches, and poverty, but that won't bother your listener in the least, for as far as he is concerned, you cease to exist the moment you lay down your horn. Such narrowness would be inexcusable with regard to any group of artists, but it is downright insane in the world of jazz. Much more so than the painter, say, or the sculptor, the Negro jazzman is attuned to the needs and aspirations of a specific community—the black ghetto community. This, in fact, is what imparts such overwhelming vitality to his art. So with what logic do we ignore the circumstances with which, every day, he must contend?

Which brings me back to the nightclub situation. "Crude stables where black men are run until they bleed, or else are hacked up outright for Lepage's glue"—Archie Shepp's totally accurate description of a jazz nightclub. Amazing that, for all the years he has been going to them, the average jazz fan will never once step outside of his own frame of reference for a moment and try and see the club as it must appear to the working musician. All he knows, all he cares, is that the nightclub is there whenever he has some spare cash and wants to take in some jazz. The musicians? They're gettin' paid, ain't they? What more do they want?

What more, indeed! Suppose we start this particular Cook's tour with the Village Vanguard in New York. In the course of interviewing about two dozen musicians for a book on the Jazz Revolution, I had occasion to spend several sets in the back-rooms of the Vanguard, so I suppose that I can speak with some authority. The first thing that struck me was that there was simply no place for the artists to go when they weren't playing—an all too typical condition. What this means in more precise terms is that the musician has his choice of spending his between-set breaks in a variety of unsatisfactory ways: 1) he can take a table and drink—if he doesn't mind having the drinks, at regular prices, deducted from his wages; 2) he can amble about in back, either rubbing up against a greasy stove in the kitchen or lounging on an equally dirty staircase while watching the traffic into and out of the men's room; or, finally, he can go sit in his car or, weather permitting, wander outside. Of course, in this event the musician may end up, as Miles Davis did when he was playing Birdland a few years back, by having one of New York's finest trying out his nightstick over his skull. What happens, I keep wondering, when John Coltrane works the Vanguard? Coltrane's sets consume so much of his energy that he likes to sleep during his breaks—obviously impossible within the confines of the Vanguard.

Or consider this instructive tableau, observed at the Vanguard in the course of a vain attempt to obtain an interview with Charles Lloyd. Lloyd has just removed a bottle of soda from the refrigerator, stage right; in from stage left strides a tuxedoed and bow-tied waiter, a particularly vicious martinet who would make Mussolini appear a libertarian by comparison. The following dialogue ensues:

Waiter ("jokingly"): I see you're at it again, eh, Charles?

Lloyd (in earnest): That's right. Nigger's in the refrigerator, again.

Above and beyond their lack of even elementary facilities for the performers, nightclubs are just not suitable for artistic creation. The white jazz audience may not be aware of this—may not even consider that what they are privileged to hear is art—but black (and some white) musicians are. In the same series of interviews that I've already mentioned, tenor saxophonist Pharoah Sanders told me that he didn't like working in clubs because he didn't want to see his music utilized as an adjunct to the sale of whiskey. John Coltrane, Pharoah's present employer, objected to the noise ("Who needs that cash register rung during Jimmy Garrison's (bass) solo?") and to having himself hustled on and off the stage at the convenience of the owner. Besides the indignity of being ordered to shape his creations to the whim of some cockroach capitalist who probably knows less about music than I do about scuba diving, Coltrane was upset because he realized that it was costing his listeners a small fortune to see his group, and he wanted to make sure they went away well satisfied.

Yet it is inherently part of the present nightclub scene that Coltrane is not allowed to play as his muse dictates; that the things I have been discussing are not the fortuitous "abuses" of a basically sound system, anymore than the suppression of a social revolution in Vietnam is an aberration of American foreign policy, blundered into in a fit of absentmindedness. No, these episodes are inextricably part of the day-to-day business of operating a jazz nightclub.

For instance, that matter of forty-five minute sets. No accident is involved here. Almost all clubs have a certain minimum number of drinks that must be consumed by each member of the audience every set; hence the shorter the sets, the more drinks sold. It's as simple as that

Bassist Buell Neidlinger, who used to be with Cecil Taylor a few years ago, explained this in great detail to poet-writer A.B, Spellman, in a taped interview that Spellman includes in his marvelous new book, "Four Lives in the Bebop Business":

"Trying to make a living playing with Cecil is absolutely unbelievable (Neidlinger told Spellman), because there is no economic advantage to playing music like that. It's completely unsaleable in the nightclubs because of the fact that each composition lasts, or could last, an hour and a half. Bar owners aren't interested in this, because if there's one thing they hate to see it's a bunch of people sitting around open-mouthed with their brains absolutely paralyzed by the music, unable to call for the waiter. They want to sell drinks. But when Cecil's playing, people are likely to tell the waiter to shut up and be still."

In a system based on production for profit—which means production of art for profit, as well as anything else—it's the profit that counts; everything else can take the hindmost. And it is profitable, rest assured of that. Some estimates I made on one of my New York trips should indicate just how profitable the business side of jazz can be—if you happen to be an entrepreneur, that is, and not a musician. Buell Neidlinger mentioned the Five Spot in the interview with A.B. Spellman. By coincidence, I was there this summer and had the invaluable opportunity to observe the workings of the system from its heart, so to speak. There is a THREE-drink (3) minimum per person per set at the Five Spot, with each drink $1.20. Assuming 150 people per set and five sets a night (conservative estimates on both counts), this means that the owner, Joe Termini, grosses an amount equal to 3 x $1.20 x 150 x 5—$2,400 in a single evening.

What do musicians take home for their night's work? On the Monday evening that I had the inestimable privilege of being robbed by the Termini brothers, Elvin Jones, McCoy Tyner, Frank Foster and Paul Chambers were playing. It would have been nice to believe that the musicians received $500 for the night; I suspect that $300, however, is considerably closer to the mark. Now for Termini's other expenses. Payroll for two bartenders, two waiters ("mustachioed niggers," Archie Shepp called them), and a cook—$250 at the most. Cost of liquor and food consumed, utilities, and rent $250. Total expenses are then as follows:

Musicians $300

Payroll $250

Other Overhead $250
TOTAL EXPENSES $800

Net profit—gross income expenses—$2400 -$800 — $1600. Even Joseph Schumpeter would have to agree that $1,600 (or even $1,000) is a pretty penny for one night's entrepreneurship!

There are some interesting implications that emerge from this analysis. First and foremost, it can be seen that the biggest obstacle to expanding the audience for the music, especially the new music, is the structure of the music business which delivers such enormous profits to the likes of Termini (the man who, be it recalled, told Archie Shepp that he didn't think jazz musicians were artists, and then compounded injury with insult by having Shepp ejected from his club). As long as prices continue at this astronomical level, the people who are most interested in the new music—blacks, students, artists, political radicals—are precisely the ones who are least likely to be able to afford it. Ordinarily, two sets are the absolute minimum if the listener wants to get an adequate exposure to a particular artist; but who has $7.20 (exclusive of tips) to spend on a single evening? And should one wish to take a wife or girl… well, I presume you can do the addition for yourself.

But even if one were willing to pay the $7.20 for two sets—and for two sets of Coltrane or Cecil Taylor it would be a bargain these are not the men who Termini is about to hire, because they are unwilling to accept his restrictions and he is unwilling to allow the requirements of their act to take precedence over his un quenchable thirst for profits. On this point Buell Neidlinger has given ample testimony.

The conclusion, then, is that so long as the present situation is maintained intact, so long will both the audience and the musicians suffer at the hands of the nightclub capitalists. Private ownership has always been implicitly incompatible with the creation of art; but it is now becoming (or has already become) absolutely intolerable in the realm of jazz. Something must be done to enable the musicians and their followers to re-capture the music from the hands of the Terminis and their ilk.

As a first step, it is time to begin discussing the formation of organizations like the Jazz Composers Guild, which could utilize boycotts and other appropriate tactics to bring these exploiters to their knees. Simultaneously, we should be exploring the potential for co-operatives like the Detroit Artists' Workshop. If carried out on a large enough scale, co-operatives could provide support for the newest and most impoverished musicians by promoting a series of concerts, happenings, poetry readings, etc., at the same time undermining the oligopolistic position of the club-owners by presenting the music at prices that non-Madison Avenue people can afford to pay.

Heretofore, the jazz enthusiast has had the best of two worlds:

he has assumed that he has a god-given right to enjoy the music without assuming the least responsibility for its continued production. The moment for a change in this particular status quo is long overdue. It remains to be seen if the enthusiast can translate his often-professed love for the music into something more tangible and useful. What we need now are not words but a weapon.

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