

# Jazz Scene

Frank Kofsky

1966

**Editor's note:** Frank Kofsky's byline was inadvertently left off his piece, "End of Jazz Clubs?" in the last issue. Joseph Jarman, whose picture ran with the article, is a young altoist from Chicago.

It always comes as a distinct pleasure to be able to recommend an outstanding jazz recording. Particularly so with the new music, since, as we shall see, the obstacles in the way of artistic creation for the men of this persuasion are especially severe. Because of these obstacles, the new music, when finally it does get set down on record, is often not presented as advantageously as it might be.

On the other hand, when the barriers are ultimately overcome, the music produced is formidable indeed—the most moving that I, for one, have ever experienced. Three recordings in particular which, during the past few months, have exerted this kind of very strong pull on me are: "The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra, Vol. II," ESP 1017; John Coltrane, "Meditations," Impulse 9110; Don Cherry, "Complete Communion," Blue Note 4226.

This grouping is more than fortuitous, there is, in fact, an underlying consideration which makes the connection an extremely logical one. In each of the three records, the group that is playing has been able to maintain itself intact sufficiently long so that there is a common ethos, an empathetic unity, that imparts an overall coherence to the music.

The importance of this shared experience can hardly be overestimated, regardless of the type of music being created. But it is of overwhelming significance in the new jazz, where so few of the ground rules are worked out explicitly in advance, where collective improvisation plays such a predominant role, and where a long period of playing together is thus all the more requisite.

A.B. Spellman makes the point quite nicely in his book "Four Lives in the Bebop Business" (endorsed unequivocally by this writer). Speaking of Cecil Taylor, Spellman observes that:

"The problem with not working on a regular basis is not merely financial; it seriously inhibits the musical development of a band. Buell (Buell Neidlinger, "Cecil's bassist for many years") goes on: (Being fired from the Five Spot) was too bad, because Dennis (Dennis Charles, the drummer) and I had been with Cecil on and off for a number of years and we had never figured out until that period what he was up to. We were just getting to the point where we could relax on the bandstand to really make music with Cecil instead of just following along...If we'd been together for the whole summer, the results would have been fantastic...

"For Cecil (Spellman continues), the breakup of a band is a far more serious matter than it is for any other leader, with the exception of such similarly individualistic composers as Thelonious Monk and Ornette Coleman. Most of his sidemen admit that it takes a minimum of three years of steady rehearsal to fully assimilate his music. Cecil's approach to group improvisation is so demanding that it usually requires a thorough re-evaluation for the musician. One like Buell Neidlinger, who had no appreciation for any kind of modern music when he started with Cecil, may be said to have been trained from scratch."

What is true of Taylor is, increasingly, true of the other jazz revolutionaries as well: continual playing time together is absolutely mandatory if a group is to attain the maximum of its artistic potential. That is why Coltrane's "Meditations," even though it lacks some of the majesty and energetic grandeur of his previous "Ascension" album

(which supplemented his quartet with six leading new musicians), offsets this deficiency by a tighter organization and a more pervasive sense of unity.

Ultimately, if this level of aesthetic integration can be consistently achieved, the flow of energy can be recaptured. One is hardly permitted to doubt this, in a group that contains both Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders!

The issue, then, comes down to this: the band that plays together, stays together. This is one of the things that musicians are continually referring to when they talk about getting their thing “together”—the usage is literal as well as metaphorical. The tragedy is that being together is made so difficult, if not downright impossible, by the principles of capitalist merchandising as applied to artistic “commodities.”

I have already written copious amounts describing the way in which capitalist control of the jazz “business” persistently frustrates the impulses of the music’s most imaginative figures; there is no need to reiterate that here. Let it suffice that none of the new groups that I know of—and that includes several not-so-new ones, such as Cecil Taylor’s—are able to work steadily in the appropriate surroundings. And of course the music (not to mention the musicians) suffers because of this.

Recording sessions, moreover, provide but slim compensation, financially or aesthetically. All you have to do to verify this is to listen to some of the new music albums recently released by Blue Note.

The bulk of them sound exactly like what they are: a group of very intelligent and talented musicians hurriedly assembled without much prior planning, and then instructed to create on the spot. But even jazz musicians are not superhuman; who can blame them if they succumb to these unfortunate circumstances? (An exceptional recording, like that of Don Cherry’s quartet, only proves the rule, I might add.)

The blame belongs on the shoulders of the system, not on those of its victims. (I include as victims even the recording company executives themselves. Most would prefer to produce art rather than crap. It is the profit system that, by compelling them to keep rehearsal time and costs to minimum, encourages the production of crap.) Once again we are brought up short on the same hard fact: art and capitalism coexist only with the triumph of the latter at the expense of the former.

Vietnam has done a great deal to make artists and their fellow-travelers aware of the system in which they exist (living is reserved, in my mind, for a higher form of social organization). This awareness must be broadened, until it is recognized that capitalism is inherently anti-human, whether in Vietnam or in the East Village.

Freedom for man to realize himself as man will never be ours as long as all human and creative urges are chained inside this destructive and basically anti-life framework. Most of the jazz artists that I have interviewed have already come to this conclusion. The problem now is to translate this knowledge into effective political terms—so effective that the Johnsons and the Joe Terminis will never again be able to control our lives.

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