The Jazz Scene

Frank Kofsky

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Why the critics?

That is a question I get asked fairly frequently, by friends and correspondents who want to know why I expend so much energy on this particular aspect of the jazz Establishment.

The answer is really quite simple. My point of departure is to analyze what services the jazz critic might be performing for the music (which means for the musicians and their audience). I then compare this with the actual accomplishments of the critics. Since the balance thus struck is so wholly unfavorable to the major critical figures—Leonard Feather, Martin Williams, Dan Morgenstern, Michael Zwerin and the entire editorial staff of DOWN BEAT—I conclude that it is my duty to the jazz community to expose (a good 1930s leftist word) their failings, to prevent them from leading their readers even further astray.

The place to begin the discussion is with an inquiry into the power of the jazz critic to alter the present state of the jazz scene. Some musicians believe that, collectively, the critics hold the keys to economic success. For better or worse this is simply not so. The critics' ability to obstruct the flow of history is fairly narrowly limited, as the recent surge in popularity of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor should demonstrate.

What then CAN the critics do? For one thing, they can muckrake—they can lay bare the sordid conditions that prevail within the jazz milieu. Should they so choose, the critics could probably bring about a fairly substantial degree of integration in the recording, TV, and movie studios, simply by a consistent public assault on the existing policy of the whies-preferred [sic]. The same methods might also be employed to remedy the ghastly situation in the nightclubs, where exorbitant charges to the clientele are coupled with hyper-exploitation of the artists.

A second and related task critics could undertake, were they so minded, is that of relating the present revolution in jazz to the changes in society that have helped shape it. In the long run, of course, the success of any radical movement in the arts depends on its reception by the community of practicing artists, especially the younger ones—which is, by the way, why the triumph of the jazz revolution is assured (assuming my observations in the East to be correct).

Nonetheless, the critics have it in their hands to smooth the way for the innovators, by mediating between them and their public. This in turn would require that the critics abandon their own preconceptions and biases in the attempt to comprehend what motivates the youthful iconoclasts, how their art has been molded by the social and aesthetic environment.

When we go to score the leading critics on their performances of these two tasks, what we find is a record of almost total negligence—or worse. I have yet to read a column by Leonard Feather, Martin Williams, Dan Morgenstern, Michael Zwerin, or any of that crowd, which makes the least attempt to decry the virtually total segregation of the studios; nor has there been any protest on their part regarding the abominable practices of nightclub owners like the Termini brothers of New York's Five Spot cafe.

If their performance as journalists of the expose is dismal, the way in which these men treat the social components of the jazz revolution is nothing short of criminal. There is, in fact, a certain logic involved here. The easiest

way to summarize the status quo in jazz is with the two words WHITE SUPREMACY. Themselves being the beneficiaries of the existing order, the foremost critics, all white, are blind to its inequities; they accept them, that is, as natural and even inevitable. But the jazz revolution, in its social aspect, is an indictment of the very inequalities of class and race that have given these critics their privileged position.

Hence it would be genuinely astonishing were they able to offer their readers an objective account of the revolution and the conditions that provide it with its fuel. Need I add that the critics make no such attempt? (The only exception to that rule worth mentioning is San Francisco CHRONICLE columnist Ralph J. Gleason, whose constant pressure on union officials provided much of the impetus for the abolition of segregated locals in the Bay area not too many years back. But Gleason is, as I 'say, the EXCEPTION).

The title of champion "misleader of the people," to invoke another old-radical phrase, no one can take a back seat to Leonard Feather. A year ago he asserted in DOWN BEAT (16 December 1965) that musicians weren't interested in discussing such things as black nationalism and Vietnam—it was all a plot of certain white writers (guess who?) who were trying to convince Negro musicians that they too were soul brothers. (He really did say this; I have not taken it from a HUAC publicity release.)

Later, however, he had an eyeball-type confrontation with Archie Shepp, when the latter played Shelly's Manne-Hole in Los Angeles. Apparently, this was enough to convince Feather that musicians WERE involved with those questions that he felt should be placed off-limits. Far from revising his opinions after discussing them with Shepp in his abode in the lily-white Hollywood Hills, however, Feather took another tack: he sought to convince his following that Shepp and those who thought like him were racists.

In the first of what I am afraid will not be a short-lived series of CAVALIER (December 1966, p. 16), Feather, in rapid succession, implies that: 1) Shepp is a phony who plays and dresses one way in public, another way in private; 2) that his poetry is part and parcel of Shepp's efforts to "find more work and sell more records; and 3) that he is anti-white.

What is the truth? Need you ask? When I visited Shepp at his home last spring, he was wearing the same "eccentric outfits and Benjamin Franklin shades" that are, Feather would have us believe, "a part of his stage shtick." (Thanks for the Yiddish, Len—-it lets us know you're hip. Too bad your hipness doesn't extend to familiarity with East Village dress mores.)

Only Shepp can fathom the motivation behind his poetry; but somehow Feather leaves me unconvinced that versified dedications to Malcolm X and the late black Marxist intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois are the best way to go about securing increased employment from Joe Termini and the likes!

As for Shepp's alleged anti-white proclivities, here Feather's unscrupulousness surpasses the credible. Shepp has always had at least one white member, trombonist Roswell Rudd, in his group since he started working semi-regularly (none of the new musicians work regularly). When he played Los Angeles, where Feather resides, another white bassist Charlie Haden, had been added: since then, Haden has flown east to work with Shepp.

None of which, however, is of the least importance so far as Feather is concerned. Articulate and militant black radicals like Shepp threaten Feather and his ilk, psychologically and socially. For that reason, they must be destroyed. Or so Feather hopes.

Marx was right. "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their social existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social existence that determines their consciousness" (CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY). One can hardly expect that those who benefit from an oppressive order will take the lead in destroying it; all their ingrained reflexes point in the opposite direction. Thus Leonard Feather & Co.

Having surveyed some of the more prominent purveyors of critical reaction above, in my next column I want to discuss the INSTITUTIONAL basis for white supremacy in jazz—namely, DOWN BEAT magazine—and talk about a phalanx of young writers who, with the artists who play the new music, are attempting the creation of a humane and non-exploitative society by their challenge of the Establishment.

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