

The Jazz Scene

Frank Kofsky

1967

Critics (II)

In my last column [FE #21, January 1–15, 1967] I enumerated some of the more outstanding malfeasances on the part of the leading representatives of the jazz critics' Establishment. In what follows I intend to go beyond mere individuals, to make clear the pivotal institutional role played by DOWN BEAT magazine in helping to perpetuate the reign of white supremacy in jazz.

As a handy rule of thumb, you can estimate the stature which any art enjoys in a modern nation by the caliber of the journals devoted to it. Such being the case, you would never have to hear a single note of the music to be made aware that the powers-that-be are convinced of the inferiority of jazz; all you need do is glance at a few issues of Down Beat. If the art it purports to discuss were considered "serious" (i.e. European, i.e. white), there would be no room for the existence of the periodical like *Down Beat*. That the magazine not only exists but has far and away the largest circulation of any of those dealing with the music offers the weightiest evidence I know of for the continued second-class artistic citizenship of jazz.

If jazz were the movies, *Down Beat's* name would be Silver Screen—that's the quickest way to convey the essence of the magazine to the non-reader. And yet for all its blatant triviality, it has a greater degree of influence than any rival periodical. Owing to its aggressive sales of advertising, it has been able to outlast and outstrip all its competitors. *Metronome*, *Jazz Review*, *Record Changer*, *Jazz Quarterly*, *Sounds & Fury*—all these and others whose names I have forgotten have come and gone, while *Down Beat* has hung on since the late '30s, riding out each new development in the "music business."

Its very long-livedness in a field where failure and quick demise is the dismal rule has made *Down Beat* a force to be reckoned with. Musicians like to pretend (with good reason, I might add) that they are indifferent to what these days passes for "criticism" and therefore don't read the magazine; but secretly they all do.

Hence the views which *Down Beat's* editorial staff and conservative publisher John J. Maher disseminate are a subject of more than passing importance.

Censorship and all that Jazz

"There hasn't been one time where I have been prevented from saying what I wanted to say—or has anyone, for that matter, been prevented from expressing his opinion."

That pious sentiment came from the mouth of *Down Beat's* New York editor, Dan Morgenstern (*Down Beat Music* '66, p. 110). Unhappily, it is a prescription honored more in the breach than in the observance. In point of fact, Down Beat is quite cavalier in its mishandling of the truth, and is more than eager to suppress dissenting opinions. Since this is a basic aspect of its modus operandi, it is worthwhile to establish the point at the outset.

ITEM. In 1960, Ralph Gleason wrote a column for *Down Beat* drawing a favorable comparison between the political winds of change, as represented by Fidel Castro, the musical ones, as represented by Ornette Coleman and others. Though the column somehow managed to see the light of publication, the publisher and advertisers were aghast, and the word quickly came down to Gleason from On High: no more of that Commie shit. Next, Gleason's columns and record reviews (both signed) began to be subjected to persistent censorship, leaving him no choice but to resign.

Shortly thereafter, my own reviews for *Down beat* were altered without my consent, and I followed Gleason within a matter of months. This, however, did not bring the issue to a close. When Gleason related these incidents in the pages of the San Francisco Chronicle, Don DeMichael, the editor of *Down Beat*, had the insufferable gall to write the Chronicle denying the whole thing and accusing Gleason—one of the few honest writers in the field of jazz reportage, incidentally—of “scrambling... facts and truths”! (A copy of this letter, dated 13 August 1963, is in this writer's possession.)

ITEM. In its December 16, 1966 issue, *Down Beat* carried a scurrilous column by Leonard Feather, in the course of which Feather denounced “two or three white critics” for “trying desperately to prove ... to Negro musicians ... that they think just like soul brothers,” by, among other things, “rail(ing) and rant (ing) about the white power structure” and “shedding crocodile tears for Malcolm X.” Though Feather's insulting polemic was evidently directed at yours truly—my name was mentioned twice in the column—*Down Beat* refused to allow me even one line to reply. So much, I trust, for Morgenstern's contention that “there hasn't been one time” when “anyone” has “been prevented from expressing his opinion”!

If You're White, You're Alright

The editorial staff of *Down Beat* is thoroughly ingrained with the precepts of white supremacy—so much so, indeed, that they are an integral part of the magazine's frame of reference which can be taken for granted without continual reiteration. That is why black nationalism, as well as other forms of radicalism which threaten to disrupt the status quo, are anathema to its editors, why they are at such pains to discredit all radical ideologies. (Archie Shepp has related that when he submitted an article to *Down Beat* declaring himself a compatriot of Fidel and Ho Chi Minh, he received a phone call from the editor, who told him: “This article frightens me.” One can be certain of that!)

Before going on to describe *Down Beat's* systematic attack on nationalism and radicalism, however, the nature of the magazine's anti-black bias should be elucidated. A representative incident will serve.

ITEM. In the same discussion from which I've already quoted editor Dan Morgenstern's sanctimonious disclaimer of censorship at *Down Beat*, Cecil Taylor made a quite explicit accusation of racist practices on the part of Morgenstern and the magazine which employs him (1. 31):

“I refer to you, Dan Morgenstern (Taylor said), in your selection of artists representing the new music in the Museum of Modern Art garden series just last summer (1965), when you knew very well the creators were ready, at whatever terms you suggested, to play. And what did you do? You ignored us and hired a former (white) sideman of mine, a man named Roswell Rudd, who was never heard of in the modern musical context until the record I made for Impulse in 1961.”

How did Morgenstern deal with this accusation? Did, he attempt to clear himself of the charge of racism by concrete deeds? Not in the least. First, as permanent consultant to the Jazz in the Garden series—which is, according to Morgenstern's employer, “cosponsored by *Down Beat*” (28 July 1966, p. 10; see also issue of 20 October 1966, p. 9)—he once more refused to extend an invitation to Cecil Taylor or any of the other seminal black artists involved in originating the new music. Second, he enhanced this sin of omission by rubbing salt in Taylor's wounds with the following bit of hypocrisy, incorporated into a review of the pianist's 1966 Town Hall concert:

“This is music that, for lack of better venue, belongs in the concert hall. Yet, while academic hacks and fashionable modernists reap the necessary grants and fellowships without which no ‘serious’ musician can sustain himself in our time, Taylor, regarded by the establishment (!) as a ‘jazz’ musician, is left to shift for himself...”

“Given his rightful opportunity to create and perform with that minimum of security that our society now grants talents much lesser than his, there is no telling what Taylor might accomplish, considering what he already has achieved in spite of the unfair odds against him” (ibid., p. 14).

What crap! While Morgenstern throws around all this “radical” language about “the establishment,” “our society,” and “unfair odds,” he fails to do the one thing within his power to aid Taylor—provide him with a job. Actions speak louder than words.

Morgenstern’s actions in excluding radical black artists like Taylor from the Jazz in the Garden Series drown out his devout protestations about the pianist’s talents and make manifest the white supremacist preconceptions on which he—and the magazine for which he writes—operates.

I see that, with the bill of particulars against *Down Beat* only half drawn, I have exhausted my space. I invite any readers who are sufficiently interested to add to my collection of jazz “atrocious stories” to send me the relevant information at the History Dept., University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15213.

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