

The Jazz Scene

Frank Kofsky

1967

Nothing demonstrates more clearly the intertwined nature of politics and the new music than a concert that I had the good fortune to be able to attend over the recent holidays. The concert was in New York's Village Theatre, and it featured, besides the artistry of Jackie McLean, Marion Brown, Archie Shepp, and their respective groups, a short speech by none other than Stokely Carmichael.

What Carmichael had to say has already been reported and would be stale now, so I need not go into that. And in one sense, the content of his brief remarks were of secondary importance to the mere fact of his presence at the concert: the leading advocate of black nationalism being publicly united with some of the leading figures in the new music. One could hardly ask for a more vivid instance of the relationship that joins the two.

At least as fascinating as Carmichael's appearance in tandem with the new jazz was the way in which the presentation came about. Poet A.B. Spellman, who served as master of ceremonies, made it a point to announce that the idea for a jazz benefit for SNCC had originated with Jackie McLean, who wanted some way to put his work at the service of the black liberation movement.

McLean's decision to take the initiative in sponsoring a benefit for SNCC and Black Power is of particular significance because heretofore, as far as anyone knew, he was simply another one of the Establishment's good niggers in jazz. Though his playing had been tinged lightly with some of the ideas of John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman, McLean's roots were still in bebop, and he had not committed himself wholeheartedly to the Jazz Revolution. More important to the Establishment, he had never given any indication of "unreliability"—never, that is, taken to seasoning his discourse with talk of exploitation, nationalism, radicalism, Vietnam, boycotting the jazz business, organizing musicians' cooperatives, or any other contemporary Establishment heresy.

That makes his desire to be of value to SNCC and the cause of Black Power so much the more notable. After all, no one would have been particularly surprised had the benefit been planned by Archie Shepp or Cecil Taylor or Marion Brown or Bill Dixon. But Jackie McLean?

That Michael Zwerin could review the concert without mentioning this salient fact is, in its own way, a significant social act: it reveals, even if the omission were merely "accidental," Zwerin's unwillingness to put jazz—and I mean all jazz, not just the new music—in its proper social perspective.

But Zwerin's "sin" is at least only one of omission. What can we possibly think of this distorted account of the Bebop Revolution, given us by Leonard Feather in the article cited earlier:

"Neither in the sounds produced by Gillespie, Parker, Kenny Clarke, and their contemporaries, nor in the titles or the arrangements, is there a relation to the brutal conditions that persisted through the bebop years."

One wonders. Jackie McLean was one of the musicians to be in on the ground floor of developments in the music during the bebop period. If jazz were really as removed from social reality as Feather would like us to believe, is it conceivable that McLean would be in the Black Power camp today? Apparently Feather finds it easier to "forget" that Charlie Parker—McLean's earliest mentor—wrote a blues with obvious social implications called "Now's the Time," to "forget" that Parker himself said: "Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live

it, it won't come out of your horn." (Ironically, this statement is quoted by Nat Hentoff, attacking the proposition that "jazz can somehow be insulated from life," on the page following Feather's warped version of bebop history!)

Feather and Zwerin or no, jazz has always flowed out of the circumstances of the musicians' existence. In this respect, the critics could well stand to absorb a few lessons from Charlie Parker, not to mention his latter-day descendants. It is neither tenable nor realistic to assume that the black men and women of this century who have given us the music called jazz were any more unaware of the oppressive environment than the slaves who in the last century produced the spirituals, work-songs, and other protestations against their condition.

Nothing could be more vain than to hope to sunder jazz and politics; the two have continually been wedded; and the closeness of the union must grow rather than shrink. For that reason, Jackie McLean's concert for SNCC is only the beginning.

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