

Rock and Jazz

From Ray Charles to Dylan

Frank Kofsky

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Talk to almost any parent with “teen aged” children and you can hear the same litany endlessly chanted: rock is tasteless (American society being so notable for its good taste!), rock is loud, the only thing that counts is the beat, why can’t they listen to good music (meaning Montovani), and more, always more, of that.

Ten years ago, maybe even five, when there was such a high proportion of “dreck” to be found, this attitude had a certain justification. But the music has changed while the put-downs have not.

This simple fact breeds suspicions about the motives of all the jazz people who are so ready with their condemnations of rock. The unmistakable stridency in the tone of the anti rock diatribes only cause the suspicions to grow. There is a sense of *deja-vu*: it is all so familiar—haven’t we heard it all before?

You bet. The ludicrous notions about rock that pass for truth in jazz circles are dismayingly similar to the things which “legitimate” and/or “classical” (read: white middle-class) musicians began saying about jazz in the ‘20s and after.

The jazz community has always been eager, pathetically so, to proclaim the “serious” status of the music—as if it couldn’t stand as well on its own merits or needed Establishment approval in order to continue! And what better way to establish your own virtue than to call your neighbor a whore? So the denunciations of rock in the jazz press mount, the unspoken assumption being that if only rock is put down hard enough often enough, the position of jazz is bound to improve. Except that that sort of silly social climbing is not at all where it’s at.

For one thing, so long as jazz is widely associated with black artists, you might as well forget about making it acceptable to the Establishment (can you call a man “Nigger!” out of one side of your mouth while praising his aesthetic genius out of the other?) And for another, there is a more intimate relationship between jazz and rock than many of the jealous but misguided jazz purists would like to concede.

At one end of the spectrum, jazz shades off imperceptibly into rhythm and blues; men like Ray Charles have in fact built careers which draw about equally on both. And what is rhythm and blues if not the black sire of white rock and roll?

Granted that rock and jazz have until now evolved in different directions, they still share a common ancestor in the blues and gospel music that has also given birth to contemporary rhythm and blues. (Rock also derives from white country and western music, but the degree of influence is small compared to that of r & b.)

Prior to around 1965, rock was admittedly pretty banal. Mainly this was due to the “whitening” that the music underwent in the course of being transformed from r & b to r & r, a process that drained off most of the soul, energy, vitality in order to render the final product palatable to a white middle — class public terrified to death of its few remaining healthy instincts.

The Beatles changed all this. By drawing quite openly on American Negro singers such as Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, Little Richard, the Beatles force fed white Americans on a steady diet of the popular black music of the day (a diet that, ironically, went down much more readily in a racist society when administered second-hand by white Britishers than by the black American originators).

The Beatles set off a veritable revolution in rock that shows no sign of coming to an end. Just as they were able to prove that white American young people—less thoroughly indoctrinated than their parents and therefore more sensible—were starved for music with some substance, Bob Dylan demonstrated that it was possible to attract and hold a mass audience for contemporary poetry set, as poetry was originally set, to music.

Groups such as The Byrds took it a step further, wedding Dylan's lyrics to electronic amplification. At that point the breakthrough had occurred. Soon there were rock bands that used Indian raga patterns for their guitar leads (the Byrds are big on this, witness their *Eight Miles High*; others like the Left Banks that drew on baroque harmonies and even instruments (harpsichords, dulcimers, recorders); still others like The Yard birds that began fooling with electronic feedback as a means of expanding the standard rock structures.

Now, it isn't unusual to hear rock groups begin a number with what I suppose could be called a baroque riff, then shift into a series of jazz/raga oriented solos that suggest John Coltrane, Ravi Shankar, and everything in between, ending with the same riff, perhaps with a smidgin or two of feedback thrown in the pot for good measure. A far cry from Bill Haley and "Rock Around the Clock."

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