

No Rock-Jazz Merger Seen, but Close

Frank Kofsky

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In effect, rock has become the white man's jazz. Bob Dylan, had he been born black, would surely have found a place somewhere in the jazz revolution; and a white Archie Shepp (the mind boggles!) would feel quite at home in a rock group like the Mothers of Invention (who have, by the way, a composition dedicated to Archie in their book). Not that the two musics are actually merging.

Such an outright musical miscegenation is improbable, if for no other reason than because rock (or most of it) is still closely tied to a regular and heavy beat with strong accents on 2 and 4—just what the younger generation of jazz musicians are trying their damndest to get away from.

But while a jazz and rock merger is not in the cards, it is true that there are strong parallels between the two. Both are trying to push their way outside the confines of traditional European musics, though naturally in different ways; and in a broader sense, both are saying the same things about the necessity for overhauling American society (why do you think the Jefferson Airplane calls their music Love Rock?).

One of the most arresting of the new rock bands as well as one of the ones that should be most accessible to listeners with a jazz background is "The Velvet Underground & Nico" (Verve 6-5008). As befits a group which provided the centerpiece for Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable, the lyrics of the Velvets (by lead guitarist and vocalist Lou Reed) run heavily to the macabre. Richard Goldstein, the *Village Voice's* always provocative rock critic, describes the group as "the product of a secret marriage between Bob Dylan and the Marquis de Sade."

What I hear sounds closer to William Burroughs than to the Marquis (after all, de Sade was never a junkie), but Goldstein is otherwise right on the nose. You have to be able to belt down a menu that consists largely of spikes and smack, whips and degradation, if you plan to dig the Velvets.

But you shouldn't let that stop you; the music ultimately makes you overlook the squalor (which sometimes is in incongruous contrast to the rock framework). The Velvets for me hit hardest on the seven-minute forty-second "European Son to Delmore Schwartz", where by an adroit use of feedback and electrified viola, they manage to suggest a cross between raga, a science fiction torture chamber, and Pharaoh Sanders' upper register.

Lou Reed's long solo remains tied too close to the tonic and too dependent on a few repeated figures to be completely satisfying, but the overall effect is still exhilarating, exciting, exhausting. The Velvets are also near unique in being willing to risk dispensing with the steadily pounding two and four backbeat that characterizes most of the music, so if there is any chance for a fusion with the new jazz, it's got to be groups such as this which point the way. At any rate, it's the only rock unit I've found where it wouldn't seem incongruous for Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Marion Brown, or Pharaoh to sit in.

One way you can tell there is a revolution brewing within the rock scene is by the increasing frequency of albums with tracks longer than three minutes. What this means is that rock is now undergoing the transition from a music for radio air play and the mass market to a music for a smaller but more critical and dedicated audience.

As a part of this transition, dancing is becoming less important and listening more though the tendency is, as I already said, for most rock bands to fall back on a hard backbeat, there are some who are daring to record selections which mute the drums or leave them out altogether (the Jefferson Airplane's "Today" and "Comin' back

to Me” on their “Surrealistic Pillow LP,” RCA 3766, as well as any number of Donovan’s compositions are good examples). No longer geared exclusively for the teenage dancer or the Top 40 stations, rock is proceeding to define itself in categories that are aesthetic rather than utilitarian or commercial—just as jazz did starting with the bebop revolution of the ‘40s.

Two related groups that reflect the transition from dance to listening music are Love and The Doors. Even more than with the Velvet Underground, these two draw openly on jazz sources. Beyond that, the similarity between them probably stems from their common origins in the fertile Los Angeles freak/hippie soil; certainly they share what seems to be the dominant L.A. passion for the Rolling Stones.

This is most noticeable with Love, whose long track “Revelation” (“Da Capo,” Electra 4005) derives right from the Stone’s “Going Home” (“Aftermath,” London 3476), in its turn a British working-class version of such shouting blues performances as Ray Charles’ “I Got a Woman.”

What rescues Love from being only a fossil of the Stones is their jazz predilections. Smack dab in the middle of “Revelation” what should emerge but a groovy soprano saxophone solo that carries you right back to John Coltrane’s “My Favorite Things,” 1961 vintage, and all that.

None of the soloists are identified in the non-existent notes, but Leslie Reed in the July, 1967 issue of Hit Parader states that the saxophonist with Love is Tjay Contrelli. In general, Hit Parader is an invaluable source of information—and just about the only one—on the rock scene.

You can almost see the rhythm section shift gears from 4/4 to 6/4 when the soprano solo begins—I wonder how the dancers reacted to that?—but so what? As long as the beat doesn’t hang up the soloist, using jazz sidemen in a rock context is as valid a way of making good music as using raga or baroque.

One thing Love will have to work on, though, is how to integrate (!) the jazz horns into the rock framework without disrupting the continuity, something they haven’t quite licked on “Revelation.”

But for a beginning, Love deserves all praise.

fifth Estate

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