

The Jazz Scene

Frank Kofsky

1967

In his recently published book *FOUR LIVES IN THE BEBOP BUSINESS*, A.B. Spellman relates that Buell Neidlinger, former bassist with Cecil Taylor, told him: "I think Cecil Taylor is potentially the most important musician in the Western World ... And I'm basing this," the "legitimately" trained Neidlinger went on, "on my experience with some of the very best of the new composers and the new orchestras ... Cecil has it, to my mind, clearly above all of them."

After having had the incomparable experience of hearing some of Cecil's latest work at his September concert at the University of Pittsburgh, I'm inclined to think Neidlinger is right (though I would amend his judgment to include John Coltrane at the same level with Cecil). Talk about psychedelic music! If my consciousness had been any more expanded than it was that night, I don't think I could have survived it.

The music was so overwhelming that there is little chance of my being able to describe it, except for the most superficial aspects. That was why, as I told drummer Andrew Cyrille on the way to the Greyhound station (you can deduce how ardently universities support jazz from the fact that the round-trip from New York had been made by all five musicians on the bus), I could never hope to review that evening's concert. Can one "review" Niagara Falls or the Sistine Chapel?

The unfortunate corollary, however, is that what Cecil is doing is so devastatingly energetic and such a radical departure from conventional procedures that it has left the poor benighted recording industry far behind. His art requires some new type of media, or perhaps a mixture of some of the existing ones, before all of its facets can be captured. At best, about 50 percent of the music gets pressed into the grooves, where it becomes available to the (non-New York) listener (New Yorkers are lucky enough not to have to depend on recordings, though only a handful seem to be aware of their good fortune).

Still, 50 percent of genius is genius nonetheless. Cecil's new Blue Note album *UNIT STRUCTURES* (BLP 4237), while it suffers from the inability of the recording moguls to comprehend what he is about, is bound to mark a milestone in the evolution of the new music. More than that, it makes us aware of the criminal malfeasance of the recording industry under private ownership, for having deprived us of Taylor's creations for so many years by its unwillingness to pay him a decent price. A painter or a sculptor can perhaps exist for a while without exhibiting. But a jazz musician without a recording is no musician at all—he simply doesn't exist.

One thing that should be readily audible from *UNIT STRUCTURES* is the tight organization that Cecil, by virtue of constant rehearsals and training of his musicians, has achieved. If you want a tangible definition of what it means for a band to be together, this is the place to begin. Excepting Sun Ra, none of the new music groups that I have heard have been able to attain this degree of unity. Who knows? Maybe even some of the "critics" will deign to listen to this album with unbiased ears, so they can learn just how baseless are those canards they are endlessly repeating about the new music's being "chaotic," "formless," and similar inventions.

In any event, it can only be gratifying to see how a man like saxophonist Jimmy Lyons has progressed under Cecil's tutelage from a fairly ordinary disciple of Charlie Parker a few years ago to a powerful and unique voice today. Good god, let's hope it won't be another three or four years until Cecil records again!

By the way, it is a joyous and by no means unimportant coincidence A.B. Spellman's book has been published almost simultaneously with the release of UNIT STRUCTURES. Spellman's essay on Taylor -the high point of the volume—complements and clarifies the music like nothing else I have read. It's rather saddening that the publishers, Pantheon (i.e. Knopf-Random House) have not seen fit to advertise the book as it deserves, for without a heavy promotional campaign, your book might as well not be published. But Pantheons dereliction will not, I presume, prevent sincere devotees from getting their hands on FOUR LIVES IN THE BEBOP BUSINESS. Believe me, it's a must.



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Fifth Estate #23, February 1-15, 1967

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