

Has Jazz Gone Classical?

After years of seeking respectability, jazz is finally winning recognition as “America’s classical music.” But the transition to the concert hall—and musical adulthood—has not been all to the good, our author writes.

by Clive Davis

One unmistakable symptom of old age, we are told, is the habit of picking up a newspaper at the breakfast table and turning first to the obituaries page. If that is the case, then jazz long ago passed the stage when it first began to sense its own mortality; each week, it seems, brings more melancholy news. The death last year of Ella Fitzgerald, who had been in retirement after years of ill health, furnished yet another reminder of how many of the giants have departed. Recent years have also seen the loss of the irreplaceable Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Art Blakey, Sarah Vaughan, Carmen McRae, Gerry Mulligan, and Stan Getz, to name but a few of the pioneers of the last half-century. Of the swing music masters, of course, even fewer remain: the octogenarian vibraphone pioneer Lionel Hampton has gallantly shuffled onto the concert stage for choruses of “Airmail Special”; the former Count Basie trumpeter Harry “Sweets” Edison celebrated his 81st birthday last October in the way he

knows best, blowing a languid blues solo on a bandstand.

The iconography of jazz is arguably more fashionable now than at any time since the days of *The Great Gatsby*. Donna Karan supplied the outfits for a recent tour by the hip young saxophonist Joshua Redman; no glossy magazine is complete without a bourbon advertisement depicting some artfully photographed tenor player, eyes shut, perspiration glistening on his brow. Yet the media hubbub is counterbalanced by an undeniable mood of unease. Though the Basie orchestra, for instance, continues to win magazine polls, the Count himself, possessor of the most inimitable of piano signatures, has been dead for 13 years. The Mingus Big Band’s raucous weekly sessions at The Fez, a New York watering hole, have become a chic attraction. But Charles Mingus himself passed away nearly two decades ago. His most admired albums—*Mingus Ah Um*, *New Tijuana Moods*, *The Black Saint*



Wynton Marsalis has led the movement to make jazz a music of the concert hall.

and the Sinner Lady—are more than 30 years old.

When, last autumn, New York's Town Hall played host to an all-star tribute to Oscar Peterson—now 71 and still performing in spite of the effects of a stroke—it was impossible to overlook the fact that so many of the musicians paying homage to the pianist belonged to his age group, a generation edging inexorably toward retirement. As Peterson embarked on a vibrant duet with his

excellent protégé Benny Green, a soulful pianist some four decades his junior, I doubt that I was alone in wondering whether Green and his peers would be able to fill the venue when they, in their turn, attain the status of grizzled elder statesmen.

But then, as one wag has put it, if jazz is dead, the body is in remarkably good condition. Walk into the average branch of a large record chain in any

major city, and you are likely to find the racks crammed with enough reissues to satisfy all but the most esoteric collectors. Recordings that were all but impossible to find when they were first issued on 78 rpm or LP discs can now be scooped up by the handful on compact discs replete with alternate takes and voluminous historical notes. The most sought-after purchase of 1996 was a sumptuously packaged, six-disc collection of trumpeter Miles Davis's historic orchestral collaborations with the Canadian arranger Gil Evans—the jazz world's answer, if you like, to the great Frank Sinatra-Nelson Riddle swinging sessions of the 1950s. Not content with reissuing the original albums—including the sublime version of *Porgy and Bess*—accompanied by three extensive essays, Columbia Records also threw in fragments of overdubbed solos, rehearsal sequences, and desultory studio conversation. To some skeptics it was a case of corporate overkill, but for Davis's many admirers, the box set was the next best thing to entering a time machine and sitting in a corner at the recording sessions themselves. More Davis memorabilia are due to follow.

Other record companies, taking their cue from the extraordinary success of Columbia's 1990 retrospective devoted to the blues guitarist Robert Johnson—which sold in excess of 300,000 copies—have plunged into the box set business. The Atlantic/Rhino Records tribute to John Coltrane, aptly entitled *The Heavyweight Champion*, outweighs even the Davis set, devoting no fewer than seven discs to a mere 18-month phase in the prolific saxophonist's career. Another recent arrival, on the Blue Note label, is an effervescent, four-disc compilation of traditional music, *Hot Jazz on Blue Note*, performed by the likes of Sidney Bechet, George Lewis, and Bunk Johnson. These fascinating recordings from the 1940s and '50s were reissued under the aegis of America's Jazz Heritage, a program organized by the Smithsonian Institution and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation. The foundation is also investing several million dollars in jazz programs run by Lincoln Center and National Public Radio,

music databases, and a fledgling touring and recording network.

If America's inheritance seems in safe hands at last, the contemporary agenda looks rather more ambiguous. Identifying a modern classic, the 1990s equivalent of, say, Miles Davis's 1959 masterpiece *Kind of Blue*, is difficult. Plenty of interesting albums are still being made, but none that herald any dramatic advance beyond what has gone before. What are we to make of the fact that perhaps the most publicized album of last year was the soundtrack of Robert Altman's film *Kansas City*—swing music played by Joshua Redman, James Carter, and other young saxophonists in fedoras and baggy suits, all doing a wonderful job of pretending to be Ben Webster and Coleman Hawkins?

The problem, some would contend, is that renovation and restoration are not sufficient on their own. According to this view, we are simply witnessing the repackaging of a dynamic art form as little more than a collection of museum pieces, a sanitized theme park bereft of that crucial element of spontaneous inspiration—what *New Yorker* jazz critic Whitney Balliett famously described as “the sound of surprise.” Even among those who abhor the prolixity of John Coltrane's “sheets of sound” solos—frenzied epics of improvisation that could last for 30 minutes or more—it is generally agreed that the tenor saxophonist remains the last major innovator. The 30th anniversary of his death, this coming July, will no doubt be marked by another bout of reissues. Yet if nobody has taken his place after three decades, so the argument runs, then jazz can hardly hope to compete with an all-pervasive rock culture, the musical equivalent of McDonald's, or the exotic temptations of so-called world music.

The respected critic Francis Davis summarized the concerns of many observers in a provocative essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* last July. Noting the record industry's propensity to seize upon the latest youthful talent at the expense of older and more expressive artists, Davis complained that the musicians who have been receiving the most attention over the last decade or so—the so-called young lions—lack the individuality of authentic



When jazz was young, bands such as Carroll Dickerson's Orchestra, shown here in Chicago around 1922, attracted large popular audiences with entertainment and dance music.

leaders: “There are no Thelonious Monks or Ornette Colemans in this bunch—no innovators or woolly eccentrics among those we’ve heard from so far. In setting craftsmanship as their highest goal these neophytes remind me of such second-tier stars of the Fifties and Sixties as Blue Mitchell and Wynton Kelly—players whose modesty and good taste made them ideal sidemen but whose own record dates invariably lacked the dark corners and disfigurements of character that separate great music from merely good.”

In a subsequent interview, Davis made a particularly striking observation. Whereas critics have historically been cast in the role of guardians of the canon, sternly measuring new work against the timeless standards of the old, their role has now been reversed, he pointed out. Now it seems to be the musicians who are most interested in clinging to tradition, while critics chafe at the perceived dearth of fresh, adventurous voices.

Who is the new Miles, the new Charlie Parker? After all, the history of jazz traditionally has been presented as a series of Great Leaps Forward initiated by towering individualists: the urbane New Orleans

polyphony of the pianist and bandleader Jelly Roll Morton gave way to soloist-led, small-group music championed by Louis Armstrong; Basie, Benny Goodman, and the swing bands then took center stage before being supplanted after World War II by Dizzy Gillespie and the beboppers. Frustrated with the predictable harmonic framework of bop, Ornette Coleman and Coltrane led their followers into the inhospitable, atonal realm of Free Jazz during the 1960s, while another faction headed by Miles Davis headed for the broader—and much more lucrative—pastures of jazz-rock, otherwise known as fusion music. Bearing in mind that the first jazz record, *Livery Stable Blues*, by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, was made in 1917, and that the first waves of the avant-garde crashed into the public’s consciousness by the end of the 1950s, the pace of change has been astonishingly rapid. The novelist Kingsley Amis, an aficionado of the raucous speakeasy music of the 1920s and ’30s, spoke for many a bewildered member of the old guard when he reflected on his lost love in his *Memoirs*: “Good going in a sense, to have got from Monteverdi to John Cage in—what? Forty years? The Hot Five to Ornette Coleman?

Nothing makes me feel more thoroughly old than to realize that there is nothing but a bloody great hole where quite an important part of my life once was. I mean, poetry, the novel and much more besides have gone off all right, but they have not *vanished* (except as it might be for pastiches of bygone writers)."

The 1970s were, it is fair to say, the bleakest period of all. (Given the quadruple blight of rock "supergroups," disco, punk, and Andrew Lloyd Webber, it was hardly the brightest era for popular music in general.) The following decade saw the rise of what has been called a "neoclassical" movement, a school of twentysomething, conservatory-trained musicians who have sought to counteract what they saw as the lowering of standards wrought both by the self-indulgences of the avant-garde and the crowd-pleasing posturings of the jazz-rockers.

Wynton Marsalis, a trumpeter born in Louis Armstrong's native New Orleans, emerged as the unchallenged fig-

urehead of this austere, high-minded band of suit-and-tie revivalists. Beginning with frighteningly precise evocations of the Miles Davis Quintet, circa 1964, Marsalis has worked his way back through the canon, trying his hand at olde-worlde New Orleans and the sleeker lines of Ellington's big band scores. As a star of Columbia's roster and artistic director of the fast-expanding jazz repertory program at Lincoln Center, Marsalis is now, at 35, the most influential figure in world jazz. By last summer *Time* was listing him, with a touch of hyperbole, as one of "America's 25 Most Influential People." Hailed in a *Washington Post* profile, with the faintest hint of sarcasm, as "the Leonard Bernstein of jazz," Marsalis has led a frenetic one-man campaign to restore the music to its former prominence in American culture. Thanks to an extended series of albums, tours, television appearances, and high school clinics—and above all through the mixture of revivals and new works presented at Lincoln Center—he has become inextricably linked with the notion

of jazz as an indigenous classical music.

The link between the classical and jazz traditions has been a thread running through Marsalis's career. When he signed with Columbia in the early 1980s, he made a point of dividing his energies between the classics and recordings by his group (which at that time also featured his elder brother, Branford, on saxophone). In 1984, he became the first musician to win Grammy awards in both the classical and jazz categories. Indeed, the disc that brought him the classical accolade—a performance of the Haydn, Hummel, and Joseph



A man of "dark corners": Thelonius Monk in New York City, 1949

Haydn trumpet concertos—finds him playing with more abandon and exuberance than can be found on any of his early jazz albums.

Marsalis subsequently retreated from classical concerts. However, he is due to return to the stage this spring in a Lincoln Center touring program that will include Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*. Meanwhile, with his Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra in tow, he has launched a major international tour, presenting his composition *Blood on the Fields*, an oratorio inspired by the history of slavery in the United States. Plans for the 1997–98 season, unveiled in January, include a celebration of Cuban jazz and concerts marking the birthdays of Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk, as well as the centenary of Sidney Bechet.

Marsalis's eminence as a classical interpreter is unquestioned. But his pronouncements on musical tradition and his activist role in New York have aroused resentment among performers and critics alike. Even in a domain renowned for its petty internecine warfare—jazz has endured almost as many sectarian disputes as the average Trotskyite sect—the controversy surrounding the man who would be trumpet king has been unusually acrimonious.

The issue of race has stirred the most rancor. In short, Marsalis and his advisers (who include the outspoken critic and polemicist Stanley Crouch) have been accused of indulging in “Crow Jim”—a term minted in the 1940s by critic and composer Leonard Feather to describe reverse racism. By 1993, there were repeated rumblings that the programming at Lincoln Center consistently neglected the legacy of white performers such as Bill Evans and Benny Goodman, and that too many of the new commissions stayed in the hands of Marsalis himself or his inner circle of friends. Marsalis consistently denied any improprieties, but the fact that, during a television interview, he once referred to control of the music industry being wielded by “people who read the Torah and stuff” hardly helped his cause. The combative writings and remarks of Stanley Crouch, who routinely supplies manifestolike liner notes for Marsalis's

records, and claims to have provided him with a grounding in jazz history and literature, have inflamed matters further.

Marsalis can usually count on a favorable (some would say, fawning) press in New York, but as one newspaper commentary followed another, matters came to a head in the summer of 1994, when he challenged one of his principal antagonists, the writer and historian James Lincoln Collier, to a public debate. The immediate cause of what amounted to a bare-knuckles fight was a letter Marsalis wrote to the *New York Times Book Review* in response to a positive review (by the British journalist Russell Davies) of Collier's latest book, *Jazz: The American Theme Song* (1993), a collection of highly readable essays.

Collier combines an interest in social commentary with a passion for the trombone that he indulges in lunchtime Dixieland sessions at a Cajun restaurant on New York's Eighth Avenue. In 1978 he published *The Making Of Jazz*, which remains one of the best single-volume surveys of the subject. As his friends would agree, he also relishes an old-fashioned set-to. It therefore did not come as a complete surprise that, in an intriguing chapter on racial divisions in his book, he took a swipe at Lincoln Center for its decision to “turn to blacks as authorities on the music simply because they are black.” Not content to rest there, Collier followed up with a chapter devoted to the inadequacies of critics which included a blunt attack on Stanley Crouch.

The Marsalis-Collier bout, held at Lincoln Center in front of an audience mostly predisposed to favor the trumpeter, proved to be as entertaining as any concert. Fighting on his own turf, with the venue's audio-visual resources set up at his disposal, Marsalis was obviously looking forward to administering what he promised in his opening remarks would be a “whipping.” Some newspaper accounts agreed that Collier was “trounced,” but although Marsalis scored numerous points by noting technical inaccuracies in the author's controversial and unflattering 1987 biography of Duke Ellington, the older man appeared the superior debater. Some members of the audience,

hissing at his remarks and occasionally trying to shout him down, had clearly come with the intention of taking part in a politically correct public execution. Collier cheated them of that dubious pleasure.

It was an ugly but undeniably entertaining occasion from which Marsalis emerged with less dignity than his opponent. For all the theatrics, though, it would be a mistake to overestimate the significance of the various Lincoln Center skirmishes. In some respects this was a classic New York insiders' story of large egos battling in an enclosed space. Some of the resentment directed at Marsalis arises from a perennial problem: the city plays host to too many dedicated, poorly paid musicians chasing too little work. Besides, Marsalis and his repertory formula are just one segment of the fractured mosaic of international jazz, which ranges from the ephemeral dance-floor rhythms of the fusion style called "acid jazz" to the stark, New Age ambience of recordings on the German ECM label, or the vibrant South African township rhythms of the pianist Abdullah Ibrahim.

Marsalis's record sales, it should be added, have also been in decline—partly because he has issued too much honorable but undistinguished material. The sprawling, double-album "sacred" suite, *In This House, On This Morning*, was a case in point, a distinct anticlimax after the vigor of another two-disc set, *Citi Movement*, a hyperkinetic score composed for the choreographer Garth Fagan. Like George Eliot's Mr. Casaubon, Marsalis has long seemed to be burrowing his way toward a magnum opus. He has not reached it yet—Casaubon never did—and the New Orleans prodigy has reached an age at which many musicians find their best work is already behind them.

Cynics who believe he never will create anything as inspired as the music of the masters he so admires should also ask themselves where jazz would be without his high-profile campaigning. Moreover, from his bully pulpit on Manhattan's Upper West Side, he is making important points about the health of popular music. (And he is listened to with greater respect than any critic: through his ex cathedra comments, his endorsements of

other performers, his media appearances, and his dispensing of commissions, he has robbed the critical fraternity of a good deal of its power.)

Marsalis's basic argument—one with which I sympathize—is that popular music has for some time been subject to an ever-accelerating process of infantilization, epitomized by the irresistible rise of Michael Jackson and Madonna. Jazz musicians, he insists, have a duty to resist the erosion of standards rather than contribute to the pace of "dumbing down" in music. Many column inches have been devoted to Marsalis's weary denunciations of rap music; as he pointed out in an interview, the genre is only one symptom of a malaise: "My feelings are not just about rap, but about the whole direction of American popular music. Once it switched from an adult base to an adolescent base, that was a major step backwards. Pop music used to be adult music, with adult sensibilities. But since pop made that switch to an adolescent base, it has never been able to return, as music, to what it was. And I guess it's understandable, because in terms of commerciality, it becomes more successful every year."

Marsalis and Crouch affirm that jazz can flourish only if new generations of musicians, students, and audiences are introduced to the treasures of the past and learn from them—just as the classical listener learns to appreciate Bach or Mahler. Hence the need for the Lincoln Center program and similar projects at Carnegie Hall and the Smithsonian, where the saxophonist and arranger Bob Wilber (who skillfully recreated the sound of the Ellington band on Francis Ford Coppola's 1984 film *The Cotton Club*) founded a repertory group nearly 20 years ago.

The objection is often raised that the unfettered spirit of jazz withers away in the formal setting of a concert hall. My own experience is that sitting in the best seat at Avery Fisher Hall or London's Royal Festival Hall is no substitute for the intimate acoustics of a club. Yet it would also be foolish to ignore the resources made available by institutions such as Lincoln Center. Repertory music, with all its copyists and rehearsals, does not come cheap. The ultimate

implication of all this is that the tradition has in fact reached a terminus of sorts: as Marsalis has expressed it, an adult evolves and grows more slowly than a six-year old. Interestingly, his archenemy Collier arrived at a very similar conclusion in his epilogue to *The Making Of Jazz*—published, remember, two decades ago: “We have to divest ourselves of the idea that the history of jazz has always been toward better and better. In no art has this ever been the case. . . . Jazz has always been obsessed with the new, with experimentation, and the result has been that it has rarely paused to exploit its discoveries before leaping out to make fresh ones. . . . Jazz needs, at the moment, a respite from experiments. It needs time to consolidate the gains, to go back and re-examine what is there. There is enough work left undone to last many lifetimes.”

Of course, the strategy carries risk. Too much church-like solemnity, too many overblown pseudoclassical suites, too much reverence for old standards, could well alienate new listeners. Yet, in view of how much damage the worst excesses of fusion and the avant-garde have caused over the past quarter-century, the gamble is worth taking. Who knows, we may also be witnessing the beginnings of a return to an emphasis on arranger-led music rather than music structured around the supposedly superhuman faculties of the soloist.

Certainly, the neoclassical reaction has produced an over-emphasis on technique for its own sake (a problem compounded by the narrow, homogenized curricula of many music schools). But in new arrivals such as Joshua Redman and the percussionist Leon Parker it is possible to detect musicians who put emotion and that indefinable quality we call “soul” ahead of merely following the rules. Just as encouraging is the flourishing of a clutch of young vocalists—chief among

them the superb Canadian singer-pianist Diana Krall—who are reminding us of the simplicities and virtues of unadulterated melody.

To wish for the return of Louis Armstrong or Count Basie’s original, raw Kansas City orchestra is to long for the magical return of a combination of social conditions that have gone forever. Even at the height of the swing era, in the 1930s, when big bands embodied the popular music of the day, the amount of interesting music being played was relatively small: what most people enjoyed was dance tunes tinged with the jazz idiom. For better or worse, bebop’s coterie aesthetic severed those fragile ties with the mainstream; henceforth, jazz tended to be produced and discussed as a branch of “art music.” If the music faces a crisis of confidence today, it is not too different from the predicament that confronts so many of the arts in this febrile era of postmodernism. Are the novel or the visual arts in a much better state? Can the cinema be in the best of health when the film-school antics of Quentin Tarantino are the height of fashion?

If jazz has been pushed further toward the margins, that is a fate it shares with classical music and other art forms. As MTV culture seeps deeper into the social fabric, embracing the baby boomers as well as their children, cultural horizons shrink further. When I opened my newspaper this morning, I read another article reporting the calamitous fall in classical music sales. The business section, by contrast, announced that the rock singer David Bowie had collected \$55 million from the issue of bonds on future royalty payments on his music. You do not have to be as pessimistic as Allan Bloom to detect a connection there.