

THE ONE VERY BIG QUESTION: What Makes Great Jazz?

My new record is out – you can get it at my website, SamSherry.com – and I dropped a copy off for a friend. He's new to the world of jazz but deeply swept up. As he started listening he asked a question that stopped me cold. "What," says my pal, "makes Herbie Hancock's CD better than yours?" After a minute of incoherent stuttering, I thought about how to frame a serious answer.

What makes great jazz different from good jazz? How can my friend distinguish the finest from the merely competent? It's an easy question to gloss over. I'm reminded of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart discussing obscenity: There was no need to define it because, he said, "I know it when I see it." But although it is tempting (and easy) to resort to solipsism or subjectivity, the question deserves a serious answer.

Dangerous Curves Ahead: This is an attempt to bring a semi-objective eye to a topic which has a deep subjective component. Obviously my boundaries are not yours; for example, I don't think that great jazz is limited to swing, blues, bossa and ballads (and you might). But I believe that there is, or could be, a near-universal basic foundation for discussing excellence in the music even if we differ on the details. The reason I think so is because all jazz fans agree that there is great jazz. There is *Kind of Blue*. There is *A Love Supreme*. There are those few masterworks which move us time and again. The bar is set so high that only a few ever reach it but it is still close enough for most to see.

I simply cannot imagine great jazz which omits any of these qualities:

Intention and Cohesion: Intention is the quality that invests each note of a piece with solidity and finality. Great jazz has nothing surplus – each note is a critical portion of the music as a whole. Intentional playing does not mean pre-planning the music. Instead, it means that you play each note with real purpose. Intention is more than intensity; an artist can play with intention and humor or light-footed grace. Whether it's the spare charcoal line of Miles Davis playing Flamenco Sketches or Chick Corea's sonic pointillism on Matrix, when we hear great jazz it is impossible to imagine the music with even one note changed. That is so because the artists convey to us that each note, however fleeting, was the precise one which they felt belonged in that setting at that point in time.

The group form of intention is cohesion. For me (and all bassists) music is a collaborative art. Great music happens when players work together to accomplish as a unit what they could not accomplish alone, and that challenge is particularly daunting in the jazz world. Because a jazz composition is an outline rather than a script, the players have no more than a good clue about where the band is going. Lesser performances show players groping across unknown territory or resorting to formulaic approaches and minimizing the moment. Great jazz captures players coming together from different places to create something unique.

Virtuosity: A steady diet of chops is as bland as any other steady diet. That said and meant,

great players dominate their instrument. Great jazz does not need to be loud, fast or tricky but great players remind us that they can pull all that out whenever they wish. Consider John McLaughlin's Thelonious Melodious from *The Promise*. On this piece, the legendary guitarist answers twenty-five years of criticism by playing a straight-ahead swinging, grooving organ-trio blues with nothing quicker than an eighth-note. At the very last phrase, having concluded the out-head and waiting only for the final drum-kick, McLaughlin sprays a torrent of notes across the fretboard – just to say, “I could have done that before but I didn’t want to.” Bill Evans’ brand of virtuosity was very different: Rather than shredding notes, Evans had (among other things) the skill to shade certain notes within a chord to emphasize musical qualities. Each master constantly shows an extraordinary talent, developed through diligent work and thoroughly in harness to the music.

Surprise: Each jazz musician develops a personal lexicon and there is an understandable tendency to gravitate toward that vocabulary often. Competent jazz meets expectations. Great players surprise themselves, band-mates and listeners by developing the unexpected in ways which are further unexpected. Great jazz avoids the obvious choices to find options which are perfect but unique and personal.

Great jazz composers can accomplish the same goal. As I study and arrange small-band works I often think, “What note would I have written next?” Frequently the great jazz composers pick a note I would not choose and make it sound beautiful and unavoidable. A critic related a conversation in which Duke Ellington said that he was stuck trying to resolve a G7 chord. The critic suggested C; Ellington replied, “Db would be a lot hipper.”

Range and Passion: As with all great art, great jazz covers the full range of genuine human emotion. There are countless competent musical performances presenting deeply-felt expressions over a sharply-restricted emotional range. Consider how many competent jazz are built around the message, “Damn, I’m pretty good!” Great jazz performances bring other messages to the table, too.

Great jazz portrays and evokes deep feeling but emotional display alone is not enough to separate the mundane from the unforgettable. Sometimes careful listening reveals that a musician who appears to be playing with his heart on his sleeve is actually working his way through a set-piece. Similarly, there are hundreds of passionate bar-walking-tenor tunes that sound indistinguishable from hundreds of other bar-walking-tenor tunes. They are competent; they are fine; they are better than mine. They fall short of the bar of great jazz.

Innovation: There are always jazz innovators and followers. Followers can certainly make beautiful music, but we are concerned here with the distinction between the “merely beautiful” and the timeless. Today’s musicians use the same twelve notes as J.S. Bach and the best of them still find new things to say. Great jazz boldly goes where no-one has gone before.

The X-Factor – Call It Risk Or Call It Courage: The pianist Herbie Hancock once said, “Risk is what moves us all forward. If you’re playing in your comfort zone that ain’t jazz.” Great jazz artists confront their discomfort, explore it, harness it, express it and yet never lose touch with it.

Great jazz reaches deeper and farther than good jazz. That is the Hall-of-Fame quality which makes me prefer Woody Shaw to Donald Byrd, or Branford Marsalis to Rick Margitza, or Wes Montgomery to Barney Kessel.

Coda: Fundamentally, great jazz is about the grace to bring new music to life in the moment and make it “right.” Great jazz always has that. Take the time to think carefully about what matters most to you in this music. It will only bring new depth to your playing and listening.