

The View From the Catbird Seat

New York Times Jazz Critic Ben Ratliff: Jazz in the 21st Century

Thomas Memorial Library, Cape Elizabeth

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When I fall asleep I get to have Ben Ratliff's job. Mr. Ratliff is the jazz critic for the *New York Times*. He gets to listen to jazz all week long: On records, in clubs, at festivals, on the street. And this happens, mind you, in New York City, which I hear has even more great improvised music than we've got here in Maine. To cap it off, not only does Mr. Ratliff go *gratis* into all the places which I would love to pay handsomely to enter, he actually gets paid to do it. In short, Mr. Ratliff enjoys the rare – perhaps unique – opportunity to develop a perspective on the music which we love. He recently shared his thoughts as part of the Thomas Memorial Library's "Diverse Perspectives" lecture series.

The topic, broadly, was, "How is jazz doing?" And the answer, equally broadly, was no news to the three dozen Capers in attendance: Jazz is going to take care of itself indefinitely, but big changes have come and bigger changes are coming still. Mr. Ratliff proceeded to examine in more detail themes which are no doubt familiar to readers of This Fine Publication. Noting that each of these points generates substantial debate in the jazz community, he took pains to present facts and perspective rather than to advocate for one side or the other.

The Rise and Effect of Jazz Education: Jazz programs in college (and high school) are growing at a tremendous rate – "through the roof" in Mr. Ratliff's words. This phenomenon has brought about a level of basic competency among people seeking to perform the music which differs from the "bandstand school" that was the principal educational mode in the past. The fact that more people, with more different backgrounds, achieve this competency means (among other things) that more points of view are available for the perusal and consumption of jazz fans.

This has also played out in an increased complexity of current jazz music, harmonically and rhythmically. Many of the better bands can turn on a dime in complex meters. As players from around the world congregate in New York, music from around the world seeps into their jazz and vice-versa. Among other things, this has brought about the increased use of authentic Latin rhythms and the corresponding decline of the American rock-bossa (which is only distantly related to its Latin American and Caribbean sources).

Technology and Declining Media Support: For years, the big record companies considered it "appropriate" to maintain some support for jazz even though it didn't make the bulk of their money. In part this was due to the perception that jazz was "catalog" music which would make money over time, in contrast to pop-music which is essentially a 'momentary' product. Over the past decade, as more people have gained the technical means to make and distribute their own music, the big labels have retrenched and jazz has been one of the genres which got buried in the trench. There is a bare minimum of serious marketing support for jazz today, so we find key records by leading artists commonly sell less than ten thousand copies. Ironically, this occurs at a time when there are more fine musicians making more fine records and enjoying more

independent opportunities to attempt to distribute those records.

This same phenomenon plays out in Mr. Ratliffe's own corner of the media business. Only a few years ago, there were full-time jazz critics on staff at *The Times*, *The Village Voice*, *The New York Post* and frequent coverage by Long Island's *Newsday*. Now, for one reason or another, Mr. Ratliffe is the lone full-time staffer covering jazz in The Big City – the other publications use stringers or part-timers. The result is that it is more challenging than before to cover the music in the depth it deserves.

The Rise of the “Historical Viewpoint”: For most of its history jazz was exploratory music. The rise of jazz education has led to a general retrenchment, which is positively phrased as “a willingness to examine and explore the lessons of the past.” The positive aspect of this phenomenon is that (at least in New York) all points of view are viable, theoretically without prejudice. Musicians have the freedom to explore whatever aspect of jazz' past moves them without having people look askance at them (again, at least in theory). Young jazz musicians are coming to see jazz' “whole history as equally venerable” and to draw on it accordingly.

Jazz is increasingly being performed by repertory organizations. For example, the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra is “a repertory organization analogous to the New York Philharmonic.” The potential cost, of course, is the possibility that jazz permanently becomes museum-piece music. That jazz is now old enough to have a history is beyond debate, and it is now ‘venerable.’ Jazz is not popular in any meaningful sense: It is “art” music as opposed to “popular” music. Jazz is well on the way to becoming a “fringe” art-form like poetry.

Why Do We Care? Because we love this music. Because youngsters who learn the language are heroes. Because the music is so deep, demanding and rewarding.

The questions from the audience revealed both the breadth of the audience's taste and the depth of Mr. Ratliffe's knowledge of jazz past and present. Among the points made: “Stan Kenton's *Artistry in Rhythm* was certainly a landmark in its time, but it is not a major influence on the current scene.” On a high-profile performer who recently appeared in Portland: “Sometimes he is brilliant; sometimes, you know, jazz players have their ways of phoning it in” On musicians too old to be ‘lions’ and not old enough to be ‘icons’: “Given the decline in coverage opportunities it is a challenge to devote adequate attention to emerging artists. To be honest, in times like these, mid-career jazz musicians are going to fall through the cracks.”

For more from Mr. Ratliffe, consult *The New York Times* or look for his recent book, [The 100 Most Important Records In Jazz](#).