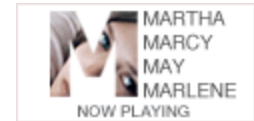


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MUSIC

MUSIC; Jazz Solos As Sonic Wallpaper

By BARRY SINGER

JAZZ is a music of unmistakable personalities. Though ensemble interaction between these personalities remains one of the music's glories, the expression of individual identity has always been the essence of jazz, with players cultivating solo sounds as singular as fingerprints.

Increasingly, though, classic recordings by these consummate individualists are being deployed as a sort of mood music, background noise for everything from Broadway drama to television hucksterism to coffee bar drinking. Some view this as a sign of jazz's mainstreaming, its wider dissemination. Still, how distressing it is to hear music conceived as the purest distillation of individuality rendered so anonymously.

Sampling technology in the age of hip-hop has, of course, already breached the foundations of the jazz solo, recycling many notable ones into mere riffs behind raps. The ethics of this electronic borrowing have been debated endlessly. Some established players, like the hard-bop trumpeter Donald Byrd, have in fact willingly collaborated with rappers. No doubt, for those artists who have not, or their heirs, financial compensation mitigates the implicit sense of theft. Yet it's hard not to view such dispossession as, at the very least, an indignity.

The increasing fondness evinced by advertising agencies for classic jazz performances is an even more confounding blessing. Song bites sung without attribution by Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Sarah Vaughan and Nina Simone have of late turned up as sonic wallpaper in commercials. John Coltrane, once regarded as among the most inaccessible of avant-gardists, has become a Madison Avenue favorite, with his questing saxophone sound accessorizing national television campaigns for Jeep Cherokee and Burger King.

Coltrane, who died in 1964, was an almost ascetically spiritual musician. The posthumous use of his music as a commercial sales tool really adds quite an ironic subtext to his life and work. Arguments that any of these jazz performers are also being promoted by these commercials collapse before one simple fact: none are ever identified.

Why is the history of individual accomplishment in jazz so easy to disregard, even in the face of seeming obeisance? Moreover, is this unattributed use of jazz any worse than the anonymous

employment of classical music or country music or rock 'n' roll?

It is. Classical music focuses more on a codified, structured perfecting of individual expression than on the individuality itself. Country music is consumed with making the simplest of individualistic statements, and individuality for rock 'n' roll is mostly a self-dramatic posture. Only jazz exists solely as a conduit for the expression of individual personality, in its full range. To disassociate jazz from its specific individual creators is to disrespect its essence. This applies on stage, too, whether the classic jazz recordings are being used in straight plays as a kind of mood-setting shorthand or in an "original" musical like Lincoln Center Theater's "Contact," whose score is made up almost entirely of such recordings.

Nowhere is this dissassociation more egregious than in the ostensibly respectful, jazz-infatuated drama "Side Man," which won the Tony Award last year for best play and recently opened in London's West End.

"Side Man" champions jazz's unsung laborers, those largely anonymous musicians who backed up star soloists and filled out big bands. The playwright Warren Leight, whose father Donald Leight was a sideman, gives audiences a saga of family dysfunction set against the post-World War II white jazz world of his father, with many of the main characters former sidemen from, as Mr. Leight puts it, "the legendary, completely forgotten Claude Thornhill big band of the 1940's." Tracing the ebbing arc of these lives through a trumpeter idiot savant of sorts named Gene Glimmer and his neglected son Clifford, who narrates the piece, Mr. Leight invokes his protagonists' world with a "soundtrack" of classic jazz recordings. "I hear him before I see him," Clifford says of his father at the outset. He adds: "You could play me a hundred trumpet solos and I'd know which one was his. My father's voice."

FAIR enough. The marvelous musicians of the under-rated Thornhill band did in fact record a rich lode of music. The saxophonists Lee Konitz and Gerry Mulligan and the trumpeter Red Rodney were among the band's more distinguished alumni. Certainly Rodney could have easily been represented here.

Yet, whenever Mr. Leight's fictitious trumpeter Gene is said to be soloing, recordings of either Lee Morgan, Miles Davis or, most often, Clifford Brown are heard, except for one instance when the audience is presented with a big band identified as Woody Herman's. Then the trumpet heard is Roy Eldridge's, recorded with the Gene Krupa orchestra.

Alongside Dizzy Gillespie, Morgan, Davis and Brown were the titans of postwar jazz horn playing, with Eldridge their symbolic prewar father. Each man was a player of commanding individuality, even genius. Their instrumental voices remain among the most indelible in jazz history. To employ any of them as offstage stand-ins for onstage sidemen is misleading. To suggest, even with dramatic license, that their playing might be anyone other than themselves is absurd, tantamount to offering up a Sinatra recording as a theatrical character's singing voice

or a passage from Hemingway's "Old Man and the Sea" as the work of a fictional author.

MOREOVER, all of these musicians were black. In the context of the jazz life that Mr. Leight purports to portray, blacks and whites created their music under significantly different conditions. Blacks were generally the innovators and whites the followers in jazz. Additionally, from a business standpoint, black musicians, in the period Mr. Leight writes about, were still often discriminated against.

Mr. Leight does, in passing, acknowledge the point about black innovation, however disingenuously. "Just do not mention me and Dizzy in the same sentence," Gene Glimmer insists to his future wife, after she has done just that. "I am not worthy."

Later, in the play's finest moment, Gene and two of his sidemen pals are literally transfixed by a bootleg tape of Clifford Brown recorded in a Philadelphia jam session on what may have been the last night of his life. (The hugely influential Brown died in an automobile accident on June 26, 1956, at the age of 25.) Mr. Leight's depiction of his characters' veneration of this recording is pitch perfect.

"Side Man," nevertheless, cavalierly blurs jazz identity in a dangerous way. And yet, to complain about Mr. Leight's misappropriation of jazz history somehow seems churlish. For the presence of jazz in "Side Man" and on television commercials and even in hip-hop is better than no presence at all.

Perhaps no one understands this more poignantly than Larue Brown Watson, Clifford Brown's widow. "The first 15 minutes I was about to have a heart attack," Ms. Brown Watson said recently, recalling the first time she saw "Side Man." "I thought, what is this? But then something clicked for me. Because you know what? All these young kids came to 'Side Man' not knowing anything about jazz. But they left saying they had to get some of this music. And I said, ah hah. I get it. Because, to me, if you can just get one person to listen to jazz, well, it's all worth it then, isn't it?"

Unquestionably. And yet, as this quintessential music of the 20th century filters into the 21st at an increasingly distant remove, it is more important than ever that we keep the names of the players and their achievements straight. Because the men and women of jazz's first century gave their lives over to making their sounds and souls indivisible. To lose those connections would be a crime.

Photo: Clifford Brown in 1953. Recordings of his solos are used in the play "Side Man." (Ross Burdick/Frank Driggs Collection)

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