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THE FORMALISATION OF JAZZ

The latter half of the nineteen fifties saw the rise of a new development in jazz; musicians weaned in the idiom of bebop under the inspired wing of Charlie Parker, like John Coltrane, Archie Shepp and Ornette Coleman, set up the frontiers of avant garde jazz. Theirs was a stunning move at the time; a complete break with the chordal structure of bebop and mainstream into the limitless area of music unrestricted by key or chord progression.

This avant garde movement began nearly twenty years ago and since then has seen practically no development. We still refer to the avant garde as if it were still something new and revolutionary, though the remarkable exploitations by the, now dead, Coltrane are already accepted into the pages of the few recent jazz "histories". It is as if the atonal free form concept of the avant garde allowed everything to be said in the first instance and was thus a complete non sequitu in terms of direct development.

With the avant garde presenting a deadlock to any insight into the future direction of jazz, one must return to bebop as the possible key to the problem. The jazz we hear today seems to be either a hangover from bebop or else, with the avant garde, a complete reaction against it. Bebop is the final and most perfect result of a mode of music which was from its very beginning perfectly stylised in its form. The whole of jazz up to bebop, and partly after it can be traced back to the simple and rigid structure of the three chord, twelve bar blues. With this an infinite variety of numbers can be constructed simply by changing the time, melody and individual players over a basic structure that remains unchanged. Whatever particular historical style of jazz one chooses whether "trad", "classical", "mainstream" or "bigband" there is very little change in the basic structure, except that as time went on the chord progressions became

slightly more complex and the use of rhythm more subtle. Thus within each style everything is predictable; a melody is played around a partiular chord progression in which the key note occupies an obvious place, solos follow from members of the band individually and to end up there is a restatement of the melody. The whole history of jazz up to the avant gardists is one of a rigidly formalised idiom.

Bebop came as a surprise. It seemed at the time to be a revolutionary step in the development of jazz. In fact it did no more than develop in a single move what would have happened anyway given the natural slow course of innovation in any creative art. Charlie Parker and his compatriots stretched the limits of the formalised chord progressions and time patterns to their logical breaking point. They also introduced an artistically sophisticated move. Bebop, as firstly formulated, was intended to give the musicians freedom to play to, rather than with, their audience. The players of the time, performing mostly in night clubs in New York and the other jazz meccas of America, were annoyed at amateurs from the dance floor sitting in with the band on numbers of their own request. That anyone could sit in with any band speaks clearly of the rut of stylisation that jazz existed in. The music itself had no individuality from one band to the next; variation lay entirely in the hands of the soloists. But bebop did not change this; audiences were stunned for a while at the complexity of the music, but then it became merely a matter of time before the crowd caught up, learnt the numbers, and could again join in. The basic formula for a jazz number remained unchanged. Bebop has a distinctly jagged jumpy sound. It is compact and uncompromising. The soloists problem of following and interpreting the chords is a very taxing one.

The all important aspect of any form of jazz is that it ultimately relies for its value as living music on the individual interpretation of the soloist and his ability to "swing" or "play with soul". In this respect Charlie Parker is justifiably one of the godheads of jazz. He alone has so far been able to do justice to the complexity of bebop. With a unique feeling for the music and an extraordinary technique he was able to play bebop as it demands to be played; fast, soaring and intricate with all possible "swing". Technically his compatriots were always bogged down too much by the chord structure to play at the speed required.

That there will only be one Charlie Parker signifies the end of bebop and consequently the end of the whole concept of jazz formalised into a series of chord progressions. The question still remains as to whether anything from the avant garde provides comprehensible paths for renewed development and a chance for faith in jazz as a valid living musical form.

It is a prevalent view that jazz is like pop music in that it is open to anyone with any musical ability. Yet jazz relies entirely on the soloist; unless he has something more than merely a good technique and a musical ear the result is only mediocre jazz. Improvisation requires the spirit of creativity as much as any other work of art. John Coltrane developed a style of free form jazz of a unique sincere quality that has aroused the admiration of people with an equal respect for Charlie Parker or Lester Young. The fact that avant garde jazz appears to be nothing more than a directionless reaction against bebop and all formalisation is important if one sees jazz

as directed not by the idiom but by the style and feeling for individual interpretation by single players. Thus, since jazz is perhaps not just a meaningless concept, there is hope that it will continue to develop, though slowly, through the varying qualities of single unique improvisers.

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