

Thinking Outside the Musical Box

by Donal Fox

What is Jazz? It is a state of mind, a spiritual quest for true unfettered artistic expression, a human expression of individual freedom, social freedom and love. Jazz is also about diversity. Diversity is important, isn't it? We expect it in our social lives. We demand respect and honoring in our society as artists and as human beings, because we need to help maintain equality and social justice among all the people of the world. In our music and in the jazz community, we must strive to honor and respect our musical diversity as well.

What is jazz? Improvisation is definitely an essential element. Remove creative improvisation and we don't have jazz. Jazz has a strong improvisational quality that has developed into a very sophisticated art form. The skill that a musician needs to play their instrument in order to successfully render and navigate the music's rhythmical structures and melodic designs with the utmost of virtuosity is nearly unparalleled in other music.

Swing is another important element of the music, but if it doesn't "swing" does that mean it is not jazz? Sometimes focusing on swing and the periodic rhythms of swing can interfere with the poetic expression and flow of the sound and structure of the music. Some of the greatest jazz ballads have been most soulful when not swung.

What about dynamics, musical narrative, textual variety, harmonic colorings, rhythmical counterpoint, etc? Jazz is an art form, and clearly distinct from today's popular musical forms in its emotional and harmonic complexity, instrumental virtuosity, structure, and architectural exploration. We know this. The petty arguments and in-fighting among various factions among colleagues and in the jazz music industry must stop. United we stand and divided we fall! The proverbial pie is too small to be split up any more than it already is. We must all learn to truly think "outside the box". We need diversity. Free jazz, straight ahead jazz, Latin jazz, experimental jazz, hip hop jazz, jazz electronica, soul-jazz, post-bop jazz, European jazz, etc. the list goes on. As Duke Ellington said, "there are only two types of music: good music and bad." Or as my friend and colleague Oliver Lake likes to say, "Put all my food on one plate! What kind of music do you play? The good kind!"

I've heard great pop and I have heard completely uninspired bad jazz. Jazz is not immune from mediocrity and the mundane. Playing jazz technically well doesn't exempt you from faltering into the world of mediocrity. Beware, music needs unfettered imagination. Don't let the genre police and the jazz police influence or dictate your expressive desires. As musicians and artists, we must maintain our quest for spiritual and dialectical truth. I call on all artists and musicians to reach deep into your creative souls and imagination and find and nurture your individual voices. We need to share these inner voices with the world. The world needs our voices! If a musician has searched and developed a concept and sound that you don't particularly agree with or like, make sure that you show respect for his sincere and skillful need for expression and diversity of thought.

We are all one musical family: Wynton Marsalis and Henry Threadgill, Jason Moran and Marian McPartland, Cecil Taylor and Brad Melhdau, Bob Belden and Butch Morris, Joe Lovano and John Zorn. Support and cherish our musical diversity and honor our differences and be joyous in the abundance of creative imagination that jazz brings to the cultural, artistic, musical and social landscape. We need it in our art, and we need it in our lives.

Swing is a relative thing. Remember most music critics didn't think John Coltrane was swinging when they first heard him. "Sheets of sound" they would say, or Elvin Jones' polyrhythms were incomprehensible to the straight-ahead cats. To them it wasn't swinging. What do they know? Most critics tend to be behind the eight ball anyway. We create. They follow. A follower cannot lead. Think outside the box. Express your musical thoughts with sincere conviction. Don't worry about critics and the status quo constantly imposing a type of conformity upon our creative impulses. All artists, young and old, search for the unknown. Strive to find the artistic truth that lies within you, and once determined, create without fear.

Donal Fox is a composer, pianist, conductor, arranger, and educator. His numerous awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship in music composition. He was the first jazz composer in residence with the St. Louis Symphony. He is presently touring with his "Blues on Bach" and "Monk and Bach" projects for jazz trio. Mr. Fox has recorded for New World Records, Evidence Records, Music & Arts, Yamaha's Original Artist Series, Passin Thru Records, and Wergo Records. He has collaborated with John Stubblefield, Quincy Troupe, David Murray, Oliver Lake and studied with Gunther Schuller.

This article first appeared in the December 2002 issue of All About Jazz: New York.