

Explaining jazz to prog-rockers. For Martin Hudson: Classic Rock Society 2006

You have just said something significant on the telephone is as much as the jazz scene is a global thing, but sadly you spend more time out of the UK. Maybe an easy start or maybe a difficult one but what does "jazz" mean, and why does the music seem more popular elsewhere?

I'm not sad about playing outside the UK at all! I love playing anywhere! This is going to be tough--how the heck do you "explain" jazz to anyone? .

We'd better approach with caution. My following remarks are going to deal with something called "jazz" and something called "rock " in the most general of terms, and immediately there will be exceptions, but broadly the distinction is primarily to do with how you see your function as a musician, and the music that stems from that.

Simply put, the rock musician is involved in making a product, the jazz musician is involved in a process. The rock musician devises a music that he thinks the audience will like, or may be persuaded to like. The jazz musician is involved in a life-long process which the audience is warmly invited to observe. If they like the process, great; if they, don't, fine, the process is going to continue that way anyway, not out of sheer obstinacy, but because the jazz musician can only play it one way. It must be that way, otherwise he can't sleep at night. He's a man of more or less complete conviction.

The rock musician is involved in a more dangerous game. He needs audience approval to validate his efforts. Without their appreciation as reflected in the market, (big sales, chart places etc) his music is literally invalid. It has no value in and of itself. The jazz musician is on safer psychological, if not financial grounds, because the process he's going through may/should / usually does have value for him personally, irrespective of outside approval. He's not guessing what the audience wants-an attitude he would find patronising. If he guesses wrong, then no-one is happy, neither artist nor listener.

The UK is demon at the rock thing, music fashion leader, etc etc, but rather more suspicious of music that doesn't buy into the commercial world. It may be that Europe is less sneering of notions like "improvising", "contributing", "fashioning a personal voice on your instrument", the sort of things jazz musicians do instinctively. In Earthworks we would consider ourselves European based musicians who occasionally visit the UK or the US.

Historically jazz goes back a long way whereas rock and prog-rock in particular is more recent. Could it be that jazz is seen as something for the older guy whereas the rock scene is seen as cool and for the younger listener.

Happily, what jazz is "seen" as is not of my making, and none of my concern. In fact, I seem to be surrounded by balding, sclerotic, late middle-age prog rockers and whippet-sharp twenty-something jazzers, so the way I see it is the opposite to the way you suggest it's seen. All the young guys I know would give their eye-teeth to play piano like Gwilym Simcock or tenor like Tim Garland. Interestingly when the Young Impressionable Ones do wander in off the street to hear a band like Earthworks, they are always astonished by the sheer velocity of the music--the way acoustic music can leap off the stage and hit you. Same as when I was young, there is a mystery to the way the music is boiling along, but nobody seems to put a foot wrong. How do they do that? In a pre-packaged computerised world, the mystery thinking-on-your-feet music can be very powerful.

As you said earlier you are the token prog musician who moved to jazz and with hindsight you know where you should have been in the first place but why do you believe you ended up with Yes before your preferred genre?

Because I didn't think in terms of "preferred genres", or any genres. We were the first generation to like it all, and some of us could even play it all. I thought Yes was going to be a jazz group--you can hear me determinedly swinging away on the first record. Shows what I knew. When it turned out it wasn't heading exactly that way, I changed perspective. No big deal. Jazz in the late 60s anyway had been appropriated by the political left, and was enjoying its "squeaky-bump-free-jazz" phase. In other words it had come out in an unpleasant rash, and Hendrix and Vanilla Fudge were more interesting than the Spontaneous Music Ensemble. There was a time when this whole music thing wasn't a career option, you know, with people ticking little boxes which said "jazz" or "electric-folk". You got stuck in, got your hands dirty, and either spent your time profitably with interesting people, or wasted it with stupid people. I only marginally cared what instrument they played, and I didn't give a monkey's about what genre they were supposed to be in. No worthwhile musician does.

There are several different methods or styles of jazz, have you a preference and maybe you can identify them for the uninitiated, i.e. pure jazz, jazz, fusion, jazz funk etc.

As you can probably tell by now, I hate all this boxes business, and I certainly can't identify them. You'll have to ask a bloke in a record company. There are honest musicians and dishonest ones, same as all other walks of life. Seems perfectly straightforward to me. There are play actors, charlatans, and people who have a grain of truth in them--and I can tell right away. Can't you? Usually by the way he / she approaches or carries his / her instrument. Does he spend a lot of time simulating ecstasy while playing something tedious and unimaginative by rote? Or does he appear to be alive to possibilities on stage, sympathetic to what his colleagues are trying to do, and generally awake to the collective endeavour going on around him? I've seen all the worst and best, in both jazz and rock, trust me. Basically, there's what's called "hot-tub jazz" which is a lot of people pretending, on a major label, and there's the other stuff. Tread very carefully if its got a singer.

For the person that reads this magazine Bill and is curious about what jazz is about then how should they approach it. is there one album maybe you would recommend to begin with.

Approach it with respect. "Kind of Blue" by Miles Davis. It's slow music. Fast music scares people. And its sold more copies than "Close to the Edge".

Who are the jazz icons as far as you are concerned. Thelonius Monk is a name that crops up regularly.

Sorry, you've caught me on a bad day. I don't do "icons" either. Popular music in its broadest sense is frequented by no more or less fascinating people than in any other walk of life, altho' they may live lives that appear to be larger than life. That's usually hyped up for sales purposes, and usually after they're dead. If Miles Davis changed the face of popular music, I say " Good for you, Miles" and he earns my undying respect. But I don't ask him for autographs or signed drumsticks, I just get on trying to make my own contribution a little more focussed in the hope that one day I might be 100th as good. There are musicians that send shivers down your spine just by the way they approach a microphone, let alone before they've played something. But that's personal to you as an individual. A list of icons is probably available at W.H.Smith.

Jazz has many lead instruments and you yourself have proved that the drumkit has much to offer but are people like Winston Marsalis coming from a different angle at all. Indeed, is American jazz an alternative to British jazz?

Happily it didn't need me to prove that a drumkit-the physical manifestation of rhythm-has much to offer. There were thousands of players well before me who got that point across. I'm not sure British and American jazz are quite "alternatives". There is Jazz--America's only indigenous art form. For many years it was thought by many on both sides of the racial divide that only black folk could play it, but everybody knew Europeans couldn't. Then gradually we accepted that white guys could play it, then white women could play it, and then Cannonball Adderley hired a white guy from Vienna called Joe Zawinul. Next thing you know Koreans are playing it. Jazz is a welcoming, inclusive music that's been on a long path of de-segregation. Marsalis is dangerous, goes the argument, because he wants to fossilize the way it was done - what he perceives to be the "correct" way-- and put it in a museum. Europeans, and probably Koreans, tend to think that it is by their input, drawn from local cultural experience, that will assure jazz's future. How did I get into this?

The venue for a jazz gig of any description is 'intimate' and not right for a aircraft hangar 'arena' set up. Is this one of the ingredients that makes it special for you?

Well, yes. Music in an aircraft hangar isn't much fun, you know. You have the distinct feeling, since all the musicians are so far apart and physically separated, that if you just downed sticks and left the stage, nobody would notice. Jazz is an agile music that is not designed for aircraft hangars any more than Pink Floyd is designed for Ronnies. If you want to have an intimate conversation with some one, and that's what jazz involves, then you can hardly do it shouting across 25 yards of Wembley Arena. But you knew that.

Prog rock is known for its time changes and varying moods but is jazz moodier.

Blimey. What does moody mean?

Up to just I have dwelled on the instrumental side of jazz but I guess we should remember that the vocal side of jazz has a part to play although I guess people like Cleo Lane would be a bit too left field for a rock fan of any description. Do you agree?

No. Vocal music is overwhelmingly the most popular of popular musics. Its traditionally the draw-bridge that you let down to ensnare people and drag them into the inner sanctum just when they are not ready for it. That's why we had a singer in King Crimson; it meant, rightly, that we were a "popular" group, as opposed to being confined to the "New Music" circuit and safely hidden out of the way at Wigmore Hall, along with all the other "difficult" musics. Females also tend to identify strongly with female vocalists, as any analysis of Ronnie Scott's ticket sales by gender would, I'm sure, tell you. Book a female singer, and you increase female attendance. And, Lord knows, jazz needs it.

Finally Bill bring us up to date what you are doing for the rest of the year ... and beyond? .

I've been spending much time with my two babies-Summerfold and Winterfold Records. Winterfold does what you would call the "Prog" stuff with electric guitars, Summerfold does the jazz stuff with saxophones. Between them they have, incredibly, some two dozen titles already, with the next three on the slates. Next up is the sizzling DVD of the BBC TV show "Rock Goes To College", with Allan Holdsworth (guitar), Annette Peacock (vocals), Dave Stewart (kbds) and Jeff Berlin (bass), the group I ran in the late 70s. More info on all this at www.billbruford.com . Earthworks will be in Poland, Scandinavia and the U.S. for the rest of the year, and I'm dovetailing in some clinic appearances in the north Eastern US and Canada up to December. Then Glasgow, December 16th! All dates on the site, of course.

