

Music Labels

- Sid Jacobs

It is my feeling that labels destroy music. Conceptually they contain, they pigeonhole and they limit. To paraphrase the Tao, if you can name it, then you don't have it. If it is indescribable, that's what it is.

Musicians in the Middle Ages didn't get together and say Hey lets play some Medieval music. They just called it music. Bach, Beethoven, Handel and Mozart were all best known in their time as improvisers. Musicians were expected to improvise. When scholars put the label classical music on it, music performance became formalized and the art and skill of improvisation declined to the point to where it was frowned upon. It's sad to think that Bach and Mozart would not be welcome in the institutions dedicated to their memories.

Think of the great masters whose followers started religions. The inspiration of their words and their life had a direct impression on their disciples. So that these truths would not be forgotten, their words and stories were put to paper, and eventually the paper itself became deified and narrow interpretations of the paper became the Gospel truth, undiluted by rational thought and context. In fundamentalist religions we see rigid adherence to dogma often mocks the very truth it expounds. They like to take the fun out of the fundamentals. Stupidity happens when people blindly follow what they believe and not what they know. A believer ceases to be seeker.

The same thing has happened with so-called classical music. Up until the time it became classical music, it was just called music and all musicians improvised. Soon after the label went on the improvisation was abandoned. And music was now performed "correctly". The European schools had successfully formalized the craft and the book was closed. The ancient art of improvisation and the craft of music had been stifled to the point of extinction. Not in America. America still had no tradition and no label.

Now these historic exalted musical geniuses didn't just stop being born. It's just that artists with the need and ability to spontaneously create instead of merely perform an already realized program were no longer welcome in the European tradition. What happened to the artists who were in tune with the creative force and involved in the music of the moment? to improvisation?

It ultimately found a home in America in the simple music of the brothel and the field hand, which did not exclude any tradition that would take root. Jazz was not born in America but more correctly reborn in America. Embracing freedom is what America stood for at its core. This ancient musical language of improvisation once again took root in the humble soil of America. There is the analogy in eastern mythology of the beautiful lotus flower that grows from the muck, not to mention the biblical god born in the stable.

The soul has a need to create. Creativity is our nature. God is called the Creator. Can you separate creativity from inspiration? Can you separate inspiration from the moment? But

man, wrapped up in his mind and its machinations, becomes obsessed with the desire to re-create. The idea of a “perfect” performance, what does that mean? What can it mean? There are groups of people who get together, dress up, and do “authentic” Civil War re-enactments. No blood is shed and no one gets hurt.

I believe what we love in jazz is the spontaneity, creativity in the moment. And we enjoy hearing a song and the changes. The craft of spontaneous improvisation in what is called jazz (unfortunately, also a label) is the same craft we see in the written music of Bach. We call something jazz if it has improvisation and a certain feel. The Sarabande, the Gigue, the Gavotte, the Courante, the Bouree are all dances. But when is the last time you went to a classical music recital and saw the people get up to dance? History tells us Bach liked to stamp his foot when he played. The European tradition had successfully cleansed improvisation and dance from music and reduced the art of music performance to the craft of playing the notes as they appeared on the paper. Uneven eight notes were also frowned upon and a literal interpretation of the paper became the ideal. Classical music had become orthodox.

A great musician once told me, “If you play Bach and it doesn’t swing, you’re playing it wrong.” And the similarity between the baroque technique of Bach and the bebop of Charlie Parker is not only allegorical, it specific. The same technique is used in both; the embellishment of the guide tones and triads makes melodies where the progression is understood. We only need the simplest tools. Once we have this concept clear we are ready to play (great word).

When you look at the Bach sonatas and partitas for solo violin you see the same grammar of musical language as you do in the transcribed solos of Charlie Parker. Guide tones and triads are beginning tools for any musician. In schools unfortunately, instead of putting this immediately into *play*, we have a tendency to sharpen, polish and expand the tools before we even know what to do with them. We end up with musical exercises that are anything but musical. It’s as absurd as buying a shovel and studying shovel technique and maintenance. I never did find much of a use for practicing things I wasn’t going to play. Dazzling displays are nice feats I guess, if you are into feats. Jim Hall once said after some show of excess, “If I could do that... I wouldn’t.

There is the difference between a performance and a shared experience. An audience can be a separate entity, judging a performance from a distance, or it can be involved in a shared experience of inspiration, the spontaneity of the creative force channeled through an artist who has trained to do that. You don’t have to understand it to enjoy it, and vice versa.

Like Monk said, “You have to dig it to dig it.”