

Free Jazz / Punk Rock

In a New York City nightclub, a skinny little Caucasian whose waterfall hairstyle and set of snout and lips make him look like a sullen anteater takes the stage, backed up by a couple of guitarists, bass, horn section, drummer and bongos. Most of his back-up is black, and they know their stuff: it's pure James Brown funk, with just enough atonal accents to throw you off. The trombone player, in fact, looks familiar, and sounds amazing: you look a bit closer, and of course, that's Joseph Bowie, bother of Lester, both of them avant-garde jazzmen of repute. But then the anteater begins to sing, in a hoarse yowl that sounds more like someone being dragged naked through the broken glass and oily rubble of a back-alley than even the studied abrasiveness of most punk rock vocalizations. The songs are about contorting yourself, tying other people up and leaving them there, and how the singer doesn't want to be happy. After a while he picks up an alto sax, and out come some of the most hideous flurries of gurgling shrieks heard since the mid-Sixties glory days of ESP-Disk records. The singer/saxophonist's name is James Chance, and you have been watching the Contortions.

Across town in another club, what looks like the standard rock 'n' roll lineup saunters onto a stage set right in the floor, making it impossible for anybody in the room except those at the very front to see. The group consists of two guitars, bass and drums. Then their lead singer wanders out from in back, casting a baleful imperious eye over the crowd. She is short and chubby, filmily dressed with waxy black hair and a ring in one nostril. Her name is Lydia Lunch; she used to play guitar in a way that has been compared with Chilean torture chambers. Now she just sings, and surprisingly enough, what was once confined to a banshee wail to match her guitar work has now broadened, from Ilse-She-Wolf barks to little-girl mewlings and back to banshee wail again. They open with "Diddy Wah Diddy" and run through a contemptuously short set of originals and carefully chosen covers like Nancy Sinatra's "Lightnin's Girl." Interestingly enough, the sound of the band is a lot closer to the jungle than that of the Contortions, less strained and more sensual; one of the guitarists doubles on sax and guitar-synthesizer, and the jams are short and to the point. The name of the group is Eight-Eyed Spy.

Finally, back home at CBGB's, original spawning ground of the late Seventies punk revolution, Richard Hell and the Voidoids are running through one of the final sets of their career. Ironically, where the group used to put on sloppy sets in front of small but adoring audiences, now they're playing incredibly tight, slashing rock 'n' roll to a packed house consisting mostly of rubbernecking tourists and suburbanite teens who have heard about all this punk stuff and finally found the courage to come down and check it out, and for whom it wouldn't make much difference which band was onstage. But for those who are there to listen, it's obvious that the Voidoids have something more than the usual punk engine-gunnings going for them: in the dense mesh of guitars are, unmistakably, quotes from and elaborations on Miles Davis lines off albums like *Agharta* and *On the Corner*; if you listen and look closely, you can tell that this incredible stylistic melding is emanating mainly from the guitarist over stage left, a quiet, balding guy in sunglasses named Robert Quine. When the Voidoids break up, he will make an album of instrumental improvisations with guitarist friend Jody Harris (ex- of the Contortions) and a rhythm machine.

Just what is all this stuff? Well, guess what, folks -- the end of the Seventies, with its apparent exhaustion of forms and general disgust with what has come to be known as "fusion music," has brought us what seems at first glance to be the unlikeliest fusion of all: punk rock and free jazz. But it's been a long time a-borning, and it has antecedents. If you want to know how we got to such a strange common ground, or perhaps if you just want to be pissed off, read on.

But before we get into this thing, I think it might be good for writer and reader to have a little eyeball-to-

eyeball chat, if only to clear the air. As a probably regular follower of this magazine, your musical tastes I'd imagine are a little more refined, at least in certain directions, than the average person's. Not trying to butter you up; it's just that, let's face it, for most people the whole subject of music and its relative importance in one's life can be summed up by the sales figures of the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack. For most people, music, if it's thought about much at all, is thought of as an underscoring for the far more important concerns of day-to-day living: music of any kind is a good thing, as long as it knows its place and stays there.

That leaves the rest of you, or us, depending on exactly what and how much we are going to be able to agree upon. Now, without getting too snobbish about it (snobbery being an affliction unfortunately endemic to a great many jazz fans), I think we can assume that in general good or great jazz is music of a higher caliber than a good deal, if not most, of the more pop-oriented stuff coming out. Duke Ellington was better than Paul Whiteman. Thelonious Monk was better than Roger Williams, comparing John Coltrane to Boots Randolph would be making a bad joke, and so on down the line. The music these figures produced, I further submit, was better not because it was any more technically complicated, or because Ellington and Monk and Trane had the greatest chops of anybody who ever lived (even if they might have), but because of some rare wellspring of feeling inside them that caused them to create art that moved mountains, changed history, has endured and will continue to.

I'm discounting chops and the technical end because as far as I'm concerned that sort of thing has basically nothing to do with what's in a player's heart, and expression of passion was basically why music was invented in the first place. A lot of people don't see it in quite those terms, of course; their absolutism takes another form: they think you have to "know how to play" your instrument according to some preset and as far as I can see arbitrary standards before anyone can even begin to take you seriously. They further think that the more technically proficient a player you become, *ipso facto* the better music maker, or let's say maker of better music you become. Why do they nurse this curious notion? Probably because they have been brainwashed, but who picked up the first bar of soap? It seems to me that this kind of thinking is by definition quantitative rather qualitative: you can sling arpeggios all over the place, you can freeze the baby in the bathwater and mail the ice to Siberia, but the fact remains that if you take one note, any note, and let two different people play it, what comes out of one's axe just might be nothing more than the note, whereas through some magic the other's note might be just a little more expressive, probably because there was something, a kind of inner urgency and yearning, behind it. And all the conservatories and theory books and virtuoso chop-flashings in the world aren't gonna make one iota of difference in regard to that one humble note.

A good example of this dichotomy is the old argument (which never should have been an argument in the first place) about who was better, Miles Davis or Dizzy Gillespie. Now, I would be the last person in the world to say anything against Dizzy Gillespie. I will concede that technically Dizzy from the starting gate could wipe the floor with Miles and everybody knew it, but Miles has always had something so emotionally compelling in his playing that he changed our lives in ways that Dizzy, magnificent as he is, never really did. I'd say put it down to the fact that they must make two different kinds of music, both valid, but it has been observed more than once that, at least until *On the Corner*, Miles' playing never seemed to change so much as its context; Miles likes the middle register, apparently because it's where he can best summon his quiet fire, and has seldom gone for cascades of notes where a few with optimum soul would suffice. But let it be remembered that when Miles first appeared with Charlie Parker in the late Forties, a lot of people said he couldn't play, was a downright embarrassment to Bird. And you know something? If you listen to some of those old sides, you *can* hear Miles flubbing up here and there, an adolescent fumblingly finding his way. Obviously Bird heard something in Miles that all those detractors didn't, and obviously he was right. What's perhaps even more interesting is that when John Coltrane, the "sheets of sound" man himself, first joined Miles' band about ten years later, people said the same thing about *him*: "Coltrane can't play."

Maybe it was because he had a bit of R&B in his background, and for a lot of people into jazz that was strictly anathema at the time: you could hear them imperiously snooting about the presence of Chuck Berry

and Big Maybelle in the movie *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, things like that. Hell, Coltrane used to walk the bar in, I believe it was Philadelphia: can't you just see him, the author of *Om* and *A Love Supreme* and *Meditations*, Ohnedaruth Himself, strutting the length of that thing kicking over whiskey glasses, probably sloppy drunk himself, driving the crowd to a frenzy with those raw, fartlike, obscenely loud and unquestionably tasteless and vulgar "HONKS!" and "SQUEEEs!" immortalized by Flip Phillips and Illinois Jacquet in the old Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts? And people called Phillips and Jacquet "tasteless" and "unmusical" too. But the way I always saw it, all that honk-squee stuff was just one part of rock 'n' roll getting ready to be born, a great cry of freedom from the constraints of "good" music, perhaps even the cerebral conceits of bebop. And a decade later you could hear that same gutbucket approach resurrected in things like Roland Kirk's solo on "Hog Callin' Blues" from Charles Mingus' classic *Oh Yeah* album. It's great that Kirk and Mingus had all the technique to let their eruptions slide on through, but as far as I'm concerned all the technique in the world is never going to make somebody like Al Dimeola or Stanley Clarke or Chick Corea or Herbie Hancock at this point, or almost *any* of those fusion cats matter a damn once their latest little space opera slides off the charts, 'cause if they ever had any soul they lost it by now. So now you know at least part of my prejudices in front.

Another part is that I love rock 'n' roll in its basest, crudest, most paleolithically rudimentary form. That's right, I love punk rock, and I'm not apologizing to anyone. As far as I can see, what Philips and Jacquet were doing on those Jazz at the Philharmonic sides was kind of the punk rock of its day. What's more, I don't give a good goddamn if somebody can barely play their instruments or even not at all, as long as they've got something to express and do it in a compelling way. Because to me music is any kind of sound made by one human being that moves another one. I suppose that validates a lot of stuff I consider total rubbish, like the aforementioned DiMeolas, Clarkes and Hancocks of the world as well as all the Jethro Tulls and Emerson, Lake and Palmers. But any musician is only as good as his attitude, chops be damned or fall where they may, and rock 'n' roll is *all* attitude. It was originally conceived as an outburst of inchoate obnoxious noise and that's what most of the best of it has remained. In other words, punk rock is as venerable as Little Richard. Admittedly, there have been some people over the years who have made rock that was technically (more often technologically) complex and musicologically erudite and still not be worthless -- the Byrds come to mind -- but trying to turn the blare of the outcasts into something arty and thereby respectable is as sick as the attempts made over the years to "upgrade" jazz by polluting it with all sorts of European classicist elements (the efforts of John Lewis and Gunther Schuller, few others, excepted).

Okay: by any standards of "good" music, rock 'n' roll is just a lot of garbage noise, always has been and always will be or it's not rock 'n' roll anymore (*cf* Billy Joel). Great jazz is great art. But I submit that, when it's not *arty*, garbage noise can also be great art. Because great art is anything that stirs the human breast in profound ways that may even have deeper psychological and social implications, and that's just exactly what, say, the Sex Pistols did. You may despise them, but they can't be denied their impact. Who cares if they had no talent (a contention I consider debatable anyway)? Their talent was for [aural carnage and rabble rousing](#).

The reason for all this blather is that I'm just about to try and convince you that punk rock and the very best jazz can not only coexist among one group of musicians performing together at one time, but that successful examples of said mutant hybrid already exist in abundance. That's right, Iggy and the Stooges were every bit as good as Archie Schepp, and John Coltrane could have played with the Velvet Underground. (I more or less proved this contention the other night when I went on WPIX-FM in Manhattan and simultaneously played "Race Mixing" by Teenage Jesus and the Jerks on one turntable and the short version of "Nonaah" by Roscoe Mitchell on another, saying "Get ready all you tape hounds, because we have here a vintage unreleased take of Roscoe jamming with Lydia Lunch and the Jerks at the last Montreux Festival," and most people apparently believed it.) It's all music, and has more qualities in common than many fans of either genre might at first think.

For instance, both free jazz (which, with rare and minor exceptions, is probably the only kind of jazz which

should ever be mixed with rock 'n' roll -- things like Blood, Sweat and Tears were Vegas lounge acts) and punk rock are musics with no explicit existing fundamental *rules*. That's why Ralph Gleason once more or less admitted to me that he had no idea whether Archie's *Three For a Quarter, One For a Dime* was a great album, a good album or an abortion, and that's why we currently have the highly laughable spectacle of punk partisans from all over the map claiming that this or that favorite group of theirs is *great*, while the other guy's is obviously *garbage*, and hardly anyone can ever seem to agree on which is which.

Also, beyond a certain point both punk rock and free jazz give up all sense of structure. Result: atonal anarchic spew. Now if somebody told me that some new group was nothing but a bunch of horrible atonal noise, I'd be the first in line for tickets, but like everybody else I have my own highly subjective places where I finally draw the line. I love Teenage Jesus and the Jerks but can't stand Siouxsie and the Banshees (their classic fourteen-minute version of "The Lord's Prayer" excepted). I lived for *Africa/Brass* and *Ascension*, never could quite make up my mind about *Meditations*, and found *Om* totally unlistenable. I told old Ralph that on sheer quality of a fairly easily perceivable emotional authenticity, *Fire Music* can be recognized as a masterpiece and *Three For a Quarter, One For a Dime* as masturbation. On the other hand, since we had that conversation, it has become common knowledge if not conventional wisdom (*The Hite Report*, etc.) that masturbation is good for you, so if I still owned a copy I might re-audition *Three For a Quarter* now and discover that Archie was up to a wank there ten years ago I wasn't experienced enough to appreciate yet. I do know that I put on *Om* the other night for the first time in about a decade, and found that I actually liked it, but I suspect that this may be due to my conditioning by all the punk rock I've listened to over the past few years having broken down my resistance to welters of squawl.

What fascinates me, has in fact since the late Sixties, is the points of intersection. That you could take a bunch of guys who had just held guitars in their hands for the first time in their lives yesterday, put them together with someone who'd mastered tenor saxophone over a 25-year span of rigorous discipline and dues-paying, and come out with something that was not only not oil and water, but aesthetically valid and emotionally compelling.

I'll be the first to admit that I know next to nothing about music technically, but the way I always looked at it, it made perfect sense that you could take one guy playing two moronic chords over and over again, let one other guy whoop and swoop all around him in Ornettish free flight, and if the two players were blessed with that magic extra element of conviction and the kind of inspiration that produces immense energy if nothing else, then hell, they could only *complement* each other. Because, to get just a little cosmic about it (any free jazz critic has a right to at least once in each article), the two principles of metronomic or even stumblethud repetition and its ostensible converse of endless flight through measureless nebulae should by the very laws of nature meet right in the middle like yin-yang, etc.

All of this, of course, relates intimately to the search for new forms and absolutely open-ended freedom of expression that all the arts were undergoing in the dear, dead Sixties. I can recall my own shivers of delight when, in early 1965, I first heard the Yardbirds and the Who unleash their celebrated deluges of searing feedback. It struck me immediately that this was one element which perhaps more than any other gave the rock renaissance of the day a full-fledged shot at matching the experimental forays that jazz had been experiencing since the turn of the decade.

Of course, the Yardbirds and the Who were, almost from the beginning, relatively accomplished musicians in the rock arena, which was increasingly falling prey to the sort of chops-mania which would eventually give us such abominations as the worship of guitar players who got compared with jazz giants just because they had the stamina to play scales for an hour or two at a time (in other words, to hell with Duane Allman and the Grateful Dead).

No, what I wanted to hear was "Louie, Louie" with Albert Ayler sitting in (which should not be confused

with Ayler's own rather pathetic attempts at crossbreeding/crossover like *New Grass*; he had the right idea, but went about it all wrong).

Again, since a lot of you probably think I was out of my mind then and have obviously degenerated even more by now, let me remind you of two things. Number One is that for the first couple of years he was playing sax, Ornette Coleman was misreading the bar clef by a third, mistaking C for A, which many people feel accounts for his "freaky" sound then and now. (It might also be instructive for those who think the whole idea of punk rock a hideous upchuck in the face of all musical values held by right-thinking citizens to recall that almost exactly the same things were said about Ornette, Cecil Taylor, *et al.* when they debuted: *Downbeat* critics regularly slagged off classic albums like *Africa/Brass*, *Coltrane Live at the Village Vanguard* and *Eric Dolphy Live at the Five Spot Vol. One*, and one of them called Ornette's *Free Jazz* album "psychotic.")

The second little story I'd like to dig up comes from A.B. Spellman's beautiful book *Black Music: Four Lives*, wherein Cecil Taylor recalled jamming once with a schized-out bassist who just happened to wander into the club one night, played a set and then ran out in a typical paranoid spasm after the set but before Cecil could ask him who he was, where he lived and maybe get his phone number. Cecil said that this guy didn't really know how to play the bass at all, but that *because* of that he did things that more schooled musicians wouldn't even think of trying because they had been taught that there were immutably fixed "right" and "wrong" ways to do everything. Which Cecil felt was a crock -- he said that if this guy had stuck around, he might have had a shot at being one of the great free bass players.

A quantum leap in terms of rock 'n' roll freedom occurred in the late Sixties, with the appearance of the aforementioned Velvet Underground. Building on the possibilities opened up by the Yardbirds and the Who, the Velvets, perhaps even more than someone like Jimi Hendrix, redefined the meaning of noise in rock. Lou Reed's solo in "Heard Her Call My Name" in 1967 was so ahead of its time that even I found it a little abrasive, whereas now it sounds right up to date and totally fresh; and the collective improvisation that he and the rest of the Velvets (who were all musical primitives except for a conservatory-trained Welshman named John Cale who studied under Cage and Xenakis before abandoning "serious" music to form the Velvets with Lou) laid down in the 17-minute "Sister Ray" is probably the finest example of extended jamming anybody in rock has put on record to this day.

One band they inspired was the Stooges, who in their 1970 album *Funhouse* (still available on import, as are the Velvets' experiments in repackaged anthologies) let a young Ann Arbor saxophonist named Steve McKay honk and squawk and shriek his way through a whole side of the most primitive, grinding fuzztone-feedback punk. Obviously McKay had been listening to people like Ornette and Ayler, and other rock 'n' rollers of atonal bent have not been shy about crediting their influence. Captain Beefheart, Tom Verlaine and the Contortions' James Chance have all attested at one time or another to the effect on their playing of Ayler specifically; around the time he was cutting things like "I Heard Her Call My Name" Lou Reed said in interviews that he'd been listening to Ornette and Cecil a lot, and he's recently returned to jazz-rock amalgams in a big way, collaborating with Don Cherry on last year's *The Bells*.

As for Beefheart, the Ayler influence is unmistakable in tracks like "Hair Pie: Bake One" on his monolithic masterpiece from the late Sixties, *Trout Mask Replica*. When Beefheart put together his Magic Band for that album and its successors, he taught everyone else in the group how to play their instruments according to the logic of his own revolutionary musical conception: some he taught from the ground up, others he had to force to *unlearn* everything they had ever been taught. Drawing equally on Delta blues, Howlin' Wolf, free jazz and the whole gutbucket rock 'n' roll tradition, Beefheart created a unique new musical language. In a way, he stands outside not only styles but time -- I saw him a year or so ago in New York, and his approach, while it has not changed startlingly in the last decade, remains as uncompromising, unduplicated and unduplicatable as ever. It swings, it rocks, it's filled with wildly unpredictable hairpins turns through blues, dissonance,

atonality and sonic dada, yet through all this it remains so distinctively earthy you can *dance* to it. But then, you can dance to an awful lot of Ornette's stuff, too.

If Beefheart still seems to stand alone, he has spawned a whole generation of musicians who credit him as a major influence: the Ohio art-school conceptualist group Devo, Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols (now back to his real name John Lydon in his new band Public Image Ltd.) and the Clash have all credited him as a major formative factor in each of them finally stepping out to make that godawful racket. From the same neck of the woods as Devo come Pere Ubu, who combine Ornette/Ayler sax flurries, synthesizer murk, guitar distortion, and a deep industrial rhythmic force somewhere between clank and drone. They claim to be heavily influenced as well by the sounds issuing from the factories all around their native Cleveland/Akron grounds. Probably because of that, Pere Ubu's music has a rhythmic quality that doesn't *flow* in the sense to which most rock and all blues-derived musics have accustomed us. When you first hear them, what they're doing may well sound upside down and backwards, and it may keep on sounding that way. For my money, their best work is their earliest, on the import EP *Datapanik in the Year Zero*, though if you like that you might want to check out their three albums, *The Modern Dance*, *Dub Housing* and *New Picnic Time*.

Almost certainly the most interesting experiments at what I like to think of as the real fusion music have occurred in New York City. A lot of people credit the late Television and their leader Tom Verlaine in this department, although for my money Verlaine's guitar playing always sounded more like John Cipollina of the old San Francisco acid-hippie band Quicksilver Messenger Service than anybody else. The first real-deal punk-jazz mix I heard around this town came from the recently disbanded Richard Hell and the Voidoids, and mainly from their lead guitarist Robert Quine, a brilliant musician who has somehow figured out a way to combine what Lou Reed was up to in "I Heard Her Call My Name," James Williamson's [guitar] work on Iggy and the Stooges' *Raw Power*, and a heavy dose of the Miles Davis sound that began with *On the Corner* and grew into something genuinely new.

In the past couple of years there have been almost too many experimental bands in New York to keep track of. The one that's gotten the most publicity is the Contortions, led by Ayler/James Brown devotee James Chance, who plays what is, according to your taste, either the most godawful or most interesting new sax around. Certainly at its best his playing, primitive as it is, has an edge and fury that's missing from the recent work of most of the holdover "free" players from the Sixties. Unfortunately recently he's cut back on his sax work to concentrate on perfecting his James Brown imitation, which isn't too convincing. He's released two albums, *Buy Contortions* and *Off-White*, under the name James White and the Blacks, the former more interesting than the latter, but the best work by the original Contortions (who were canned last year, owing to certain unfortunate aspects of Chance's temperament) is still on Brian Eno's 1978 anthology of Lower Manhattan "no-wave" bands, *No New York*. And come to think of it, his sax work has a precursor in James Brown, too: that guy who stood up in the middle of the title cut on Brown's *Super Bad* album and took that horrible raggedy solo which probably got him fired.

The last time I saw Chance he seemed to have paled (no pun intended) considerably, though his new band had a trombone player who was an absolute motherfucker. Later I found out that this was Joseph Bowie, brother of Lester Bowie, and *he* has been leading a somewhat more funk than punk group of his own called Defunkt around the New Wave clubs recently. Also more on the jazz side, though he plays some of the same venues, is the much-publicized James "Blood" Ulmer, a musician who obviously has lots of ideas that in my opinion he hasn't worked out to their fullest yet. (Though maybe that's the point with all his stuff.)

More interesting than Chance's current work is Eight-Eyed Spy, led by former Teenage Jesus and the Jerks lead singer/guitarist Lydia Lunch. This time she's just singing, and her band, which includes some ex-Contortions, is probably the most interesting group in town right now -- certainly they're the closest thing I've heard to what Beefheart was up to. You can also hear Lydia singing with some entertainingly Kenton-like charts behind her on her recent album *Queen of Siam*, which also features several guitar solos by Robert

Quine.

I don't know if Arto Lindsay of D.N.A. and the Lounge Lizards has learned a C chord yet, but I do know that he's listened to "I Heard Her Call My Name," and that D.N.A. (also on *No New York*) carry that particular form of aural sandpaper to new extremes, which is a compliment. The Lounge Lizards, a group also featuring horns, play what they call "fake jazz" -- i.e., they don't really know the changes in the traditional sense, but they maintain a beatniky cool that never comes off camp and their instrumental explorations are interesting and refreshingly free of the oppressive solemnity that mires so many experimental groups.

There are more new bands of this ilk forming as I write these words, and where all this will end up is anybody's guess. Me, I keep nursing this suspicion that since almost nothing new has been going on in the American popular arts in general for a good while and a nostalgia-addicted nation keeps cannibalizing its own past (*cf. Grease* etc.), free jazz just might be the next big mass produced, promoted and consumed musical fad. I have distinctly mixed feelings about that, but as far as I'm concerned almost *anything* is better than the kind of fusion music we've been served endless courses of the past few years. And I do know that from Frank Zappa to Pere Ubu is not so vast a step, that experimental music has never been more alive than at the beginning of the Eighties, and that if I were you I'd waste no time in getting the hell out there and checking all this stuff out.

-- Written by Lester Bangs, published by *Musician Magazine* towards the end of 1979, and included in neither *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (edited by Greil Marcus and published by Vintage Books in 1987) nor [Mainlines, Blood Feasts and Bad Taste](#) (edited by John Morthland and published by Anchor Books in 2003).

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To Contact Us:

Info@notbored.org

ISSN 1084-7340.

Snail mail: POB 1115, Stuyvesant Station, New York City 10009-9998