

Philosophy, Jazz, Hate, Love

The *All Music Guide to Jazz* is essentially a massive collection of short reviews of jazz albums, with each one given a star rating. You can look up an album you know to see if you agree with the reviewer, perhaps being pleasantly reassured, perhaps being pleasantly outraged – that they only gave two stars to *that one*, for example. You can use the book to look up an album you heard about on the grapevine to see if you think it is worth a listen, or browse to discover new ones. In format and function, it is very similar to the *Halliwel's Film Guide*. Philosophy could do with something like that. It would cause plenty of outrage, of course – the jazz and film ones do too – but it would help to open up the field and might improve it. The time-investment involved in reading a philosophy book is far greater than listening to a jazz album or watching a film. If some were of the opinion that this trivialised philosophy, their books arguing that case could be reviewed too.

The *All Music Guide to Jazz* also contains short essays and in the third edition (dropped from the fourth) the authors provide a 'basic definition of jazz' as 'music that emphasizes improvisation and always has the feeling of the blues'. Jazz aficionados will already be thinking of counterexamples. But then, does a chair have to be something you can sit on? You cannot sit on a chair in a doll's house, or on one with six-inch nails sticking out of it in an empty room in an art gallery. The game of proposing definitions and thinking of counterexamples can get silly quickly, the authors have at least identified two very distinctive features of paradigmatic jazz, and everyone knows that you only really learn what jazz is when you hear it. I first heard jazz (or paid attention to it) when I was eleven years old and from that point onwards could recognise it without any trouble. And yet if you got all of the best jazz writers in the world to work on a detailed description of jazz to pass to a race of extra-terrestrials, the music they might produce solely on the basis of the linguistic description would surely be hilarious. Even if musical notation was allowed, the result would still be, at best, a very pale reflection of jazz. If you tried to notate one of Sonny Rollins' saxophone solos from 1963 (when he was really out there) then capturing those rhythms precisely would be one hell of a task, resulting in a score no human being could read. And then how would you notate his distinctive timbre and all the little expressive twists and turns he inserts into it? The most accurate way to reproduce one of those solos would be to take a time-machine back to 1963, hand a recording of the solo to Rollins, and give him the pointless and very difficult task of learning to play it exactly as on the recording. Even then he would not get it quite right, and the feel and significance of the original would have been replaced by absurdity. In Japan they have made a robot that can play John Coltrane's legendary solo on 'Giant Steps', to what purpose I cannot imagine – to demean the human spirit is my best guess, although I doubt this consciously occurred to anyone when all that effort was being poured into the project. You can watch it online if you want to be dismayed.

Just like jazz, definitions of philosophy are hard to come by and are always controversial. And also just like jazz, philosophy is easy to recognise once you have had some minimal exposure to it. Another notable parallel is that both jazz and philosophy arouse strong passions: love or hate. In light of the latter passion, rather than anything resembling intellectual insight or grasp of the relevant facts, both jazz and philosophy have been famously declared to be 'dead'. Now in the case of people who hate jazz, I think this must primarily be because they fail to understand it. Hating jazz is different from not liking it. You can appreciate something, and thereby understand why other people like it, without much liking it yourself; I feel that way about a lot of classical music and rock. This kind of lack of understanding of jazz is easy to understand at one level, because jazz has evolved a complex language used to express great passion, sometimes at great length. Imagine a non-Russian speaker hearing Russians having a heated conversation that goes on and on, growing in intensity. That might well be incredibly annoying – and if they started screaming with passion, and you had no idea what led up to that, then you would probably want to get out of the room pronto. You might laugh or express your derision if you knew the Russians were expecting you to appreciate their performance, because you thought it was just meaningless noise and did not realise it had a meaning in another language.

At a deeper level, however, this lack of understanding is harder to understand, because the understanding seems to be one which some people have without trying. I doubt that the kind of musical understanding that allows you to follow an improvised solo from start to finish, or even just grasp a jazz melody as a melody, can have much to do with theoretical knowledge. This is partly because I remember when I first heard jazz (Cannonball Adderley) and was immediately swept away with something I thought would change my life, as indeed it did – the excitement and emotion flowed through me as I hung on every note. I could play some keyboard at the time but basically had no idea what those guys were doing musically. Now I do know, but I doubt those tracks sound much different as a consequence; I doubt my ability to say things like 'he's using a tritone substitution there' alters the listening experience very much. Jazz enthusiasts who are not musicians must surely be getting the full experience without being able to identify scales and chords by name, otherwise they would not devote so much of their lives to going to concerts and listening to recordings. When I listen to a jazz solo I am not usually thinking theoretically. I might occasionally wonder, 'what was he doing there?', and only *then* will I start to think about it in that way – but only because I was taken by the sound of it, as others who do not know any theory could also be. I find that a puzzling kind of understanding: an attunement to a universal language.

There may be many other contributing factors producing inappropriate passion against jazz, such as the thought that it should not be taken more seriously than the music you really like, for some rock fans, or that it should not be taken seriously at all, for some classical fans. But simply not liking jazz is no bad thing, everyone is different. Not liking philosophy, on the other hand, is indeed a bad thing, and hating it is a worrying and dangerous phenomenon which has been growing in recent decades. In the current edition of Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow's *The Grand Design*, in which they declare that 'philosophy is dead'

before setting out their own preposterously ill-considered philosophy, a cartoon has been printed opposite the notorious statement. It shows a scientist writing some science symbols on a blackboard, with the caption underneath '...And *that* is my philosophy'. I feel sorry for that guy, although I guess that was not the intended reaction. Perhaps the intended reaction was this: isn't it funny how some stupid people fail to realise that scientific theories that hardly anyone can understand are now so predictively powerful and useful for the development of new technologies, that philosophical reflection on how we want technological development to affect human life has become embarrassingly obsolete? Perhaps that was the joke. You could do a sequel, set in the future, where an artificially intelligent robot writes the same symbols on the blackboard with the caption: 'And that *was* their philosophy'. The causes of anti-philosophical sentiment are multifaceted, deeply irrational, and the reason philosophy is culturally peripheral at a point in history when, because of accelerating technological development, we need it more than ever. But that is another story that would take us far from jazz; although there is a connection.

Apart from being hard to define and supposedly dead, are there any more significant parallels between jazz and philosophy? Many jazz musicians have thought so – I first took note of the word 'philosophy' when I saw it on the sleeve notes which Ornette Coleman wrote for one of his records. Some philosophers think so too. There is a website, philosophyofjazz.net, run by David C. Ring, and he and his contributors certainly think there is a big connection; they connect jazz to practically every area of philosophy, which is quite some feat. However the connection I have in mind, the one which relates jazz to the peripheral status of today's philosophy, is one that remains alien to most philosophers. I once attended a lecture by Cornel West, who said he would not talk to a philosophy student unless they had read A.N. Whitehead, adding, after a perfectly timed pause, that he might talk to them 'a little' if they dug John Coltrane. That was just a moment of light relief in a lecture that otherwise had nothing to do with jazz as far as the content was concerned (it was about Richard Rorty's pragmatism) – but it had everything to do with jazz in terms of *presentation*. The presentation of that lecture was a revelation for me: West's tone of voice, his hand gestures and full bodily movements combined to produce some real high drama, seriousness and passion. I felt like I was at a jazz gig. At philosophy lectures I usually feel, at best, engaged by the ideas, and at worst, excruciatingly, maximally bored – never excited, rarely and only fleetingly entertained. Presentation has never been irrelevant to philosophy, but many have come to take it for granted that it is. Parmenides wrote a poem, Socrates engaged people in conversation, and the materialist / naturalist philosophy which has so much of a hold over people these days (and is the main factor in producing philosophy's peripheral status, in my view) first started to gain influence, as Mary Midgely has pointed out, through the effect of Lucretius's poetry. The content of West's lecture was great, I thought – I certainly learned some things and was inspired to think – and it was not compromised, but rather accentuated and made memorable, by the virtuosic presentation. He gave that lecture like a great jazz musician doing his thing. There was plenty of improvisation and even some blues feeling.

Maybe philosophy is a kind of art-form, one that fades when it tries to be something else, namely something like mathematics or science. Both jazz and philosophy revolve around a historical, progressive pantheon of immortal figures who always remain relevant, just as art-forms generally do. Plato is a bit like Louis Armstrong, Descartes is a bit like Charlie Parker, Heidegger is a bit like Ornette Coleman; if you know both jazz and philosophy, then you will immediately know what I mean, even if you disagree with my choices. Wittgenstein once said that, 'If you wrap up different kinds of furniture in enough wrapping paper, you can make them all look the same shape.' But who cares about that? I think philosophy needs some wrapping up at the moment if it is to fulfil its vitally important social function of guiding us to rational, properly thought-out decisions, both individually and collectively. And in any case, this hardly seems like an area where we are in danger of covering over some deep fact about reality with our wrapping paper.

Improvisation and the feeling of the blues are the distinctive features of jazz, they say. Improvisation is considered a marvel, a kind of magic, to many non-jazz musicians these days, even though J.S. Bach probably improvised some spellbinding variations in his time. But really, nothing could be more natural. You improvise every day when you talk to people; reading a prepared speech is a considerably more unusual and consequently unnatural thing to do. Only materialist philosophy, and the determinism which has infected it since its renaissance through Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century, makes this seem puzzling. It is simply an expression of our freedom, one of the most important things about being human, which we all understand perfectly well in everyday life, and which only starts to seem confusing when you try to think about it in terms of atoms following a deterministic course initiated by an incomprehensible Big Bang that happened billions of years ago. Avoid the confusion by not thinking of it in that way, then, at least not until you have investigated the possibility that this is the wrong way to think about it. What is strange is not that jazz musicians can improvise in their musical language, as we can improvise in English. Rather, what is strange is that Western music developed in such a way that improvising came to seem strange. Similarly, what is strange about freedom is that people have come to think they must officially find it strange in order to be philosophically respectable; officially, that is, but never ordinarily.

Blues feeling is something you could not express in symbols on a blackboard, not if you wanted a human being to understand – even if you could do it, the blackboard would be too big and the person's life too short. Words are not that helpful either, especially when Billie Holiday, who knew what she was talking about if anyone ever did, said that the blues could be either happy or sad. It is easily recognisable, however, if not so easily producible with the genuineness it deserves. It originated in free market forces combining with racism to transport the musical genius of Africa to a United States of America which was about to transform the world with technology. That genius expressed itself among an oppressed people as the definitive art-form of the century, scandalously still not widely recognised as such, which was energised by an intangible feeling that can be expressed endlessly while retaining its essential core, and which quickly spread beyond its creators to loosen up the way we all

live from norms of behaviour that had outlived their usefulness and were becoming an impediment to newly created living conditions. It spread so quickly, because of technology, that whereas the gap between Plato and Descartes was over 2000 years, the gap between Armstrong and Parker was only 20. In that fact alone, make of it what you will, jazz provides serious cause for philosophical reflection.

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