

Discussion contributions on :

# What is Jazz?

*Alfred Corum*

**T**HAT jazz has broken into *Marxism Today* is proof either of its importance or of a disproportionate estimate somewhere. Speaking purely for myself and not as editor of *Music and Life*, I would say the latter.

Laurie Green says jazz is "the improvised music of the Negro working class". In this it would be comparable to the folk music of Andalusia, Hungary, Scotland, etc., none of which would pretend to world influence such as is claimed for jazz by its devotees. But by the end of his note Green speaks of "this stirring contemporary music", thus showing that it has not developed in essentials over the past fifty years. In fact, some of the most successful people today are the parodists (Acker Bilk, the Temperance Seven).

We can agree that concert-hall music is in a dilemma, some of it dull, much of it incomprehensible to most (I speak of new music), yet I can give many examples of "stirring contemporary music": most of Bartok, the finale of Bush's Byron Symphony, Britten's *Peter Grimes*. The average jazz fan has probably never heard of them, let alone heard them, so is, therefore, not in a position to compare. And does he know Schoenberg's Five Orchestral Pieces which, fifty years ago, exploited many of the instrumental devices since used in jazz?

Which brings me to my main criticism. Jazz musicians are so concerned with the way it is done that they neglect to ask what it is that they are doing. The range of feeling expressed by jazz is so restricted, principally physical exuberance and teenage love (usually frustrated), that the only way to get variety is to change the treatment. I would go so far as to say that practically no other human emotions can be expressed in jazz and all the anti-racist sentiments of the jazzman show precious little results in the actual music.

This concern with the way it is done is what is known as formalism and has been condemned in principle many times by Marxists when discussing art. If a jazz musician, or any musician, has something important to say, or even something not so very important, but of interest to him and to other people, the way it is said should result from what is to be said and, dialectically speaking, is part of it and yet can be separated from it. The idea

should clothe itself in the appropriate garb. But when clothes become all important we have the situation in so much art today, and this, I am afraid, is the case with jazz. To illustrate my point I take Britten's *War Requiem*. The form of this is the Catholic Mass, with additions, but this fact is of relative unimportance compared to the anti-war message he wished to convey and the over-all impact.

As to the "hundreds of thousands of youngsters interested in jazz", Francis Newton came to the conclusion from his studies that jazz is now and has always been a minority interest, and, paradoxically, in the U.S.A. is practically non-existent in his sense. Pop music, now, with all its debased standards, is another matter and it is interesting to note that Soviet critics speak more often of pop or light music than of jazz in their discussions.

After a fairly long attempt to come to terms with jazz, including a good deal of listening, I am forced to the conclusion that most jazz discussion and criticism shows plain musical illiteracy. It is as if someone set up as an authority on English literature on the basis of an intense study of Edgar Wallace and Denis Wheatley, both highly professional writers but no Shakespeares. This illiteracy is understandable in a society where culture has been largely a perquisite of the "cultured" classes and where large sections of the working class still suspect it as something to do with the bourgeoisie. While in an agricultural and sea-faring society folk song arose as a spontaneous expression, in our industrial society we are subject to so many commercial influences that our "spontaneous" expression is largely determined by what other people provide us with.

If imitation Schoenberg and jazz were the only end products of two hundred years of musical development under capitalism, I would certainly say they were evidence of the end of the capitalist era. Luckily, the seeds of the new are in the womb of the old and for those who have ears to hear the era of great music is by no means over. But jazz can have only a minor part, by its very nature, to play in this rebirth.

My forthright views here expressed must not be taken to mean that the subject shall not be further discussed in the pages of *Music and Life*.

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