
In my opinion

It's last's month cover subject, Michael Janisch, in a mini-test on some loudly trumpeted recent issues and a curious pre-echo from 1972

PORTICO QUARTET

Dawn Patrol, from *Isla*

Jack Wyllie (s, loops); Milo Fitzpatrick (b); Nick Mulvey (Hang); Duncan Bellamy (d, Hang). 2009.

Real World CDRW174

I think I know who it is, based on the instrument I hear. Is that Portico? I'm not familiar with them but I know that sound is a Hang. The thing with Portico is ... I went to their MySpace and I heard ... everyone was telling me – well, not musicians but the media – that this was the future of jazz and all this stuff, and I didn't hear any improvisation. Once I hear a band that's not focused on improvisation and they call themselves jazz, well, I can appreciate it as music but maybe it's better called "acoustic pop" or something. I listen to all sorts of stuff but this didn't push any buttons for me so I haven't pursued it. If something's gonna be cutting edge jazz I want to hear improvisation and I didn't feel that was part of their ethos. The tracks I heard were, like, through-composed.

ZED-U

Showroom Dummies, from *Night Time On The Middle Passage*

Shabaka Hutchings (cl, ts); Neil Charles (elb, synb); Tom Skinner (d, kyb, v). 2008.

Babel BDV2982

Good sort of dub groove. Is that ZED-U? I don't have their record either but I know Neil Charles and I know it's clarinet, bass and drums, so I just guessed. This is the kind of thing that gets reviewed in some jazz magazines and newspapers under jazz but I have a problem with that. It's something I've noticed in the UK a lot. It's bizarre. It's like they're really into finding stuff that's new and fresh. I'm coming from such a place, in the States, where if it's jazz the central idea is improvisation. It seems like here, a lot of times, a lot of these bands that are supposedly the new thing, especially in the last couple of years, don't focus on improvisation at all. As music it's cool, nothing wrong with that, but if it's jazz – whether it's European jazz, free jazz or anything jazz ... Look at Evan Parker. You go to Evan Parker's gig – that is all about improvisation. I consider a lot of the stuff that's coming out under "jazz" to be instrumental pop or instrumental indie. I think it's a shame when the media propagates this sort of thing as jazz.

All the musicians I play with, improvisation is the essence of why they play jazz. When you lose the improv, it dumbs down the art form. If you want to play punk rock with jazz instrumentation that's great but don't tell me it's cutting-edge jazz. That's one of my personal high horses, and amongst jazz musicians this is a real hot topic right now, totally. We talk about it all the time but I think people are afraid to pipe up about it.

Also you can hear, by their harmonic structures, if composers have really dealt with jazz music, and you can also hear when they haven't. With a lot of this stuff, when critics start writing oh, it's so accessible I think they could use a few harmony classes. Not that everything has to be complicated but jazz music is so rich and colourful, why dumb all that down just to try and get famous? I might be purist and people might think I'm pig-headed but I don't care because the musicians that I play with and the ones I aspire to be like practise their art every single day and they play round the world and audiences come to see them. When I hear this stuff that's like a punk rock song but with a trumpet or a saxophone doing what a punk rock voice would do and there's no improvisation, that's a rock band to me. Just because they have a saxophone as lead voice doesn't mean it's jazz, in my opinion.

THE BLESSING

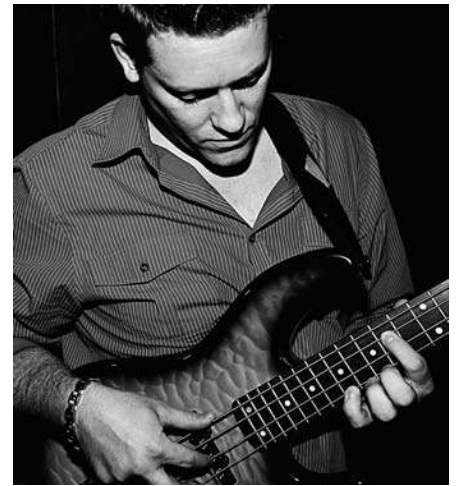
Cake Hole, from *BBC Jazz Awards 2008*

Jake McMurchie (s); Pete Judge (t); Jim Barr (b); Clive Deamer (d). 2008.

Specific SPEC010

This is exactly what I'm talking about! I saw those guys at some festival recently and the few songs I saw, there was no improv. I heard an energetic ska horn band with rock bass and no harmony really over simple sort of hooks. Nothing wrong with it but I wouldn't consider it jazz. I like to hear master improvisers who are really working on jazz as an art form. When you lose the improvisation you lose the right to call yourself a jazz musician.

I'm on the scene that's dealing with jazz music as an improvisational art form and that's all I'm concerned with. I wanna do this for the rest of my life and I'm never gonna water down anything I do to make it accessible. I believe there is an audience for jazz as an art form that doesn't need to be compromised. And you can still use today's influences – my music is rooted in jazz but draws on other stuff



– like *Sofa Stomp*, that's a breakbeat drum'n'bass tune, but the highlights are still the improvisations. So I've taken a modern form but put it in 7/4 and put the old notion of jazz over the top of it. I haven't compromised anything. I played that at some of the more traditional jazz clubs around the country and people, some of them 70-80 years old, came up to me and told me that was the favourite tune of the set. If you wanna be a pop star play pop music. This whole thing is like a jazz X-Factor – it's all publicity driven.

BACK DOOR

Catcote, from *Back Door*

Colin Hodgkinson (elb); Ron Aspery (as); Tony Hicks (d). 1972.

Warner Bros 936 247 759-2

Is that trioVD? I've never heard of Back Door, but that was a good composition. That was pretty killing. But I heard trioVD and they had a lot of improv and really creative lines and breaks. Sonically it's rocking in nature but they're dealing with composition at a real high level.

But I read an interview with John Goldsby, the bass player that lives in Germany and he made a real good point which was that he noticed in Europe a stress on being your own artist even if you might not have your stuff together yet. In the States it's the other extreme – you have to learn where you came from, you have to learn the tradition. So you can get all these people coming out of Berklee sounding the same. Then over time they become individual voices. Whereas in Europe it's like boom, I'm out of college now and I've already got my own thing. The press jumps on that and it gets touted as the next new thing. Then you hear it and think that sounds like a kid just out of high school. That could be the British problem – too much obsession with innovation. I show my friends from the States some of these bands and say this is what they're saying is the future here. They say those guys wouldn't get a gig in the States.

'You can hear, by their harmonic structures, if composers have really dealt with jazz music, and you can hear when they haven't.'