

The History, Myths, Values and Practices of Jazz Journalists by Howard Mandel

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Jazz journalism is a challenging but worthwhile profession. To do the job well, one must have some or all of the following qualities: nuanced critical sensibilities; musical, social, and psychological insights; well-honed skills of immediate recall as well as long-term memory; personal literary, photographic and/or broadcasting style; business acumen, and the imaginative flexibility of a good improviser. A jazz journalist has to know how to (and be able to) write on deadline, should be something of an anthropologist, and have at least basic chops as a researcher, entertainer, teacher and traveler. A jazz journalist—by which I mean writers and photographers publishing principally in periodicals, as well as broadcasters and web-professionals, all concerned largely, if not exclusively, with jazz—should be able to hang with the cats and be as conversant, if not expert, with the totality and trivia of contemporary culture as anyone else in the room.

What makes this work worthwhile? It isn't the pay, and rarely is it the social status conferred by one's position. There are very few staff positions in newspaper, magazine, and website journalism which focus on jazz, so the majority of jazz journalists are multi-tasking freelancers. Those who dedicate themselves to covering the music of spontaneous invention close to its moment of conception have necessarily struggled with issues of esthetic judgment, racial politics, conflicts of interest, and populism vs. elitism, as well as their own sheer economic survival. Jazz journalists, however, can have the satisfaction of witnessing from a privileged perspective and reporting on some of the most genuine, fervent, and significant, if all too often little known or understood, creativity of their day—and nights.

Jazz journalism as a self-defined entrepreneurial pursuit was arguably established by British-born Leonard Feather (1914-1994), who discovered jazz the way nearly everyone does, via recordings. Feather, who studied piano and clarinet during his school years and (according to the *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, Second Edition) taught himself arranging, did a bit of everything: artist booking, record and concert producing, venue publicity, composing, lyric writing, radio and television broadcasting and college teaching. More than anything else, though, he was an indefatigable writer—indeed, an encyclopedist—with a principled, progressive point of view.

Feather was a proponent of African-Americans as the original purveyors of jazz and its main innovators, but he also recognized talent among his own countrymen (notably, George Shearing), and farther-flung talents (he sponsored the early efforts of Japanese pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi, among others). He believed in bebop during its developmental post-World War II years (after he'd emigrated to the U.S., and taken up citizenship), and defended the new music against the first rear-guard action in jazz, when the moldy figs reared their presumptuously purist heads. Besides writing scores of essays, reviews, and articles, collected in several books, and also the first *Encyclopedia of Jazz*, he instituted the practice of playing unidentified music for jazz people and soliciting their reactions to it. *Down Beat* magazine won the rights to Feather's concept in a legal battle, and has protected its ownership of the "Blindfold Test" with a service mark (akin to a

trademark). However, there is no doubt that it was Feather's idea, and that he first put the concept into practice for *Metronome* magazine before he was associated with *Down Beat*.

Of course, Feather was not alone in jazz criticism back in early years; his pre-eminence accrues by virtue of his dedication to the day-to-day occupations of a journalist, rather than a historian or academically-associated scholar. Jazz criticism in America had its origins in record collecting, fandom and, to a much lesser extent, ethnomusicological analysis. Despite the field's primordial manifestation in the pretentious, largely uninformed and misconstrued theories of Hughes Panassie, thanks to the down-to-earth approaches of Marshall Stearns, Frederick Ramsey, John Hammond, Alan Lomax, and George Avakian the U.S.-born branch of jazz documentation concentrated on oral histories from the musicians themselves, and documentation of their works that was intended to promote their commercial successes. As a consequence, jazz criticism in its journalistic guise has only grudgingly been accepted—by musicians, editors, readers, and other writers, alike—as anything other than outright promotion or parasitic opportunism. In my highly biased opinion, based on my 30 years of tilling this dry field, it is a much more honorable activity that deserves greater due.

It's worth noting, too, that the first review of a jazz performance is not, as has long been thought, Ernst-Alexandre Ansermet's piece in the October 1, 1919 issue of *La Revue Romande* extolling the music of Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra and the band's clarinetist, Sidney Bechet, on the basis of their five-month engagement at Philharmonic Hall in London. No, the first review, as was I learned from Canadian jazz journalist Mark Miller's article "Frank Withers: A lost voice and lost review," in *Coda*, no. 310 (July/August 2003, pp. 5-6) was written by the U.S.'s own Olin Downes, who later became a classical music critic for *The New York Times*. Reporting on the Clef Club orchestra under the direction of William H. Tyers (Frank Withers was the ensemble's trombonist), Downes filed 1100 words for *The Boston Sunday Post* of August 4, 1918, and had the piece republished in the African-American weekly *The New York Age* of August 24.

The Clef Club was, in Miller's words, "a professional association-cum-union that flourished in New York during the 1910s." Its 16-man, one-woman band had recently ended a six-week booking accompanying the vaudeville team of William Rock and Frances White at Boston's Wilbur Theatre when Downes' review, headlined "Stirring Achievements of Orchestra of Colored Musicians—Greatness of Musical Future of the Black Race," hit the newspapers.

Wrote Downes: "If they [the Clef Club orchestra] played in one production, in one theater, to one audience, for 20 years, their performance would have the fire, the sensuous emotion, the pathetic and sometimes mysterious quality that they have had every night during the past week. Nor would one or several hearings deprive the hearer of the ability to react to them. Why? Because of the utter sincerity, the emotional abandon, the endless feeling with which these players endow the most commonplace tune." In that one, prescient paragraph, this music critic asserted the touchstone value sought by serious jazz listeners ever since: honest, free-flowing passion that endures despite the repeated performance of its vehicles.

Why do jazz journalists look for authenticity and fervor, among all other possible attributes of music? Why aren't they (we) interested in (or are less interested in) music's formal complexities, its consciously fabricated sensuality or grandeur, its surface polish

or explicit message? For the answer, we might best turn to the musicians themselves who abjure the standards promulgated by, say, music of the Western classical tradition. We can ask these musicians why they endeavor to express themselves without the benefit of long accepted, fully commanded techniques, without an excess of deliberate plan, careless (though not entirely) of well-honed craft, preferring oblique suggestion or subtle inference to flat-out declaration of intents. We might also think about those people who are drawn to jazz rather than competing forms of music, and inquire about what they hear in the fast, loose, hot, or cool collaborations of rather idiosyncratic companies. We can wonder what excites and inspires the musicians and makes their auditors swing along with them, moving with their bodies or dancing in their heads, rejecting certifiable traditions or conventions in favor of experiments and explorations of the now.

In fact, that's what we jazz journalists do: ask, think about, wonder, and offer our conclusions, which, if we're honest about them, can never be proved conclusive, and should always be offered humbly, tentatively. We are obligated to be modest about our judgements and hypotheses because we journalists don't really know what makes jazz tick, any more than do the musicians who make this music or the people who love it. None of us really know exactly why jazz holds our attentions so fiercely; we just know it does. That knowledge may suffice for musicians, who then act on it directly, and for listeners, too, who can enjoy the music regardless, but it doesn't satisfy jazz journalists. No, we want to know, and so we keep asking the journalistic questions: Who? What? Where and when? How? Why?

Does that mean that jazz journalists (and critics, the difference being that critics can contemplate the music at considerably more length, possibly more depth, and often from a greater remove) are merely frustrated jazz musicians, who can't get themselves behind the impulse to master an instrument and actualize our creativity? Does it mean we have unhealthy or even selfish relationships to the sounds we immerse ourselves in, to the individuals and communities we study and address, to the subjects of our observations?

Not at all. I believe it means that jazz journalists (and critics, too) are so struck by the glories and multiple dimensions of the art as to need to struggle to describe what we perceive, and to understand our reactions to the sensations. Our efforts are all about better comprehending and organizing, if only for ourselves (though by definition we don't stop there) our experiences with the music that reflects our immediate circumstances.

As jazz journalist and critic Francis Davis has said, "Jazz journalists aren't frustrated musicians; the best ones are frustrated novelists." By that I think he means that if those of us who write about music could, we would take on writing about *all* of existence with the acuity we try to level on music alone, because just such comprehension and abstracted recreation is what novelists do with the much more diffuse and variegated stuff that, all together, constitutes life itself. Jazz journalists, at least those I know, tend not to be so confident about their grasps of everything, or their capacities to encompass the cosmos in narrative, as fiction writers from Homer to James Joyce have done. But because we respond so acutely to jazz, and are confident enough about ourselves to ask questions of those who create it, we allow ourselves the license to report on what we learn from them, and on what we independently hear. And some of us even try to connect the dots—taking the music as just one loud and clear signal about contemporary lives and times, and translating it into words that might reach those without the vocabularies, parameters or patience to put the pieces together.

Whoa—what big claims I’m making. Didn’t somebody authoritative say that writing about music is like dancing about architecture? Words and music—aren’t they apples and oranges? Well, no, the jazz journalist won’t accept that analogy. We spit back: Isn’t all dance about architecture? About the relationships of shapes and forms, still or moving? And so, then, isn’t all architecture about dance? Furthermore, isn’t all music a form of communication, just like writing? Music echoes speech,—doesn’t it?—and doesn’t written language, at its best, strive for the mellifluous effects of captivating music?

Well, that formulation still seems a bit grandiose. Let’s consider more concrete questions, like, “Can mostly white writers working for general circulation newspapers or specialist publications possibly understand music made by black people and rooted in the codes of their culture?” The simple but earnest response is we damn well better try.

How about, “Are American jazz journalists biased against jazz developments in foreign lands?” Answer: Very possibly so, but that may just be how their ears are tuned, to expect and embrace the accents with which we’re familiar, which we’ve elevated as representing the good and true. Fortunately, jazz is almost universally understood by jazz journalists to be a fluid music, and we hold the faith dear that it is a meritocracy, so we allow our ears to be attracted to the new, the fresh, the exotic, and (when we can get the assignments) we do not hesitate (most of us) to voice our opinions about all that (whether we really know what we’re talking about or not).

Now a related question, and a big one: “Is New York really the center of the jazz universe?” Duh . . . why do you think it’s called the Big Apple? But maybe (certainly) jazz is no longer a centralized phenomenon, if it ever was. In the 21st Century, jazz has spread ‘round the world. Jazz’s characteristic musical tactics and strategies have traveled as swiftly as any virus, and its hosts have adapted its characteristic modalities and tonalities (I’m not speaking of pitch here) to please themselves, to fit their own purposes. That’s one of the beauties of jazz: the music can be radically reconfigured, without losing its essence. That *is* its essence.

Back to jazz journalism: those of us who do embrace, to some degree, these truisms. We succeed or fail at our endeavors to the extent that we understand and accurately reflect just what is real, central, and enduring about the music and musicians we study. We don’t listen to the music or consider the musicians from any very great distance—as journalists, we go as close as possible to where our subjects are, and send back dispatches from that front.

Sometimes we just have to slip a new CD, received in the mail, into a slot in our computers. Sometimes we have to go to underground dens in dangerous cities and imbibe powerful brews while exposing ourselves to discordant noises. Sometimes we are treated like royalty by producers of jazz festivals in lovely climes who hope to win our appreciation, get us to admire their happenings in print, and thereby attract enthusiastic new audiences who will actually buy (rather than accept as a condition of covering their jazz journalistic beats) the tickets.

It can be a tough job, jazz journalism, but somebody’s got to do it. Volunteers will end up fighting over the details in public in print or broadcast media—and the music will continue as if the fights never happened. That does not mean, however, that we jazz journalists only ply our trade to amuse ourselves.

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