

► *Boogie woogie and Beethoven  
are only distantly related.*

## IS JAZZ MUSIC?

BY WINTHROP SARGEANT

EVERY twenty years or so the intelligentsia regularly rediscovered the popular music of the American Negro, gives some manifestation or other of it a new name (ragtime, jazz, hot jazz or swing) and begins hurling gauntlets and breaking lances in its defense. As a rule the type, or facet, of jazz that causes this flurry is soon absorbed into the main body of commonplace, commercial popular music and is imitated and repeated *ad nauseam*, until the intelligentsia itself gets tired of it. But while the flurry lasts, jazz takes its place among the most talked about cultural issues of the day. Phonograph records are collected. Jazz concerts are held in the most impressively conservative American concert halls and highbrow critics discuss them, a little self-consciously. Books and magazine articles are written about the aesthetic significance of jazz and about the artistry of the popular virtuosos who play it. It is

even argued that the great musical issue of the day is that of jazzism *vs.* "classicism," that jazz is in some way the American successor to the venerable and complex European art of concert music, its tunesmiths and improvising virtuosos the latter day equivalents of so many Beethovens and Wagners. Bach, after all, used to improvise too.

Considered merely as a social phenomenon, jazz leaves its unfriendly critics in the position of King Canute. You can't ignore an art that makes up 70 per cent of the musical diet of a whole nation, even if its primitive wails and thumps fail to fit the aesthetic categories of refined music criticism. Jazz has often been innocently described as a "folk music." And, considered purely as music, it is one. But its powers over the common man's psyche are not even vaguely suggested by that term. No other folk music in the world's

---

WINTHROP SARGEANT is music editor of Time and formerly held the same position on the New York American. He is the author of Jazz: Hot and Hybrid.

history has ever induced among normal people such curious psychopathic aberrations as the desire to wear a zoot suit, smoke hashish or jabber cryptic phrases of jive language. None, probably, has ever produced waves of mass hysteria among adolescents like those recently associated with the swing craze. Nor has any folk music ever before constituted the mainstay of half a dozen nation-wide publishing, recording and distributing industries.

Jazz, even from the aesthetic point of view, is a mildly interesting form of music. Its curious hybrid musical dialect — a mixture of European syntax and Negroid inflection — is richer and more expressive than that used by many a contemporary highbrow composer. The best of it is fresh, exuberant, insinuating, even to musically educated ears. Its less commercially stereotyped forms — notably the so-called “New Orleans style” recorded by uneducated Negro bands early in the century — have something of the directness, sincerity and naïve charm of primitive painting.

Yet when you try to approach jazz from a critical point of view, you are immediately struck by a curious split which divides almost every aspect of jazz from any real

correspondence with so-called “classical” music. For all the spectacular attempts of Benny Goodman and others to bridge the gap, it still remains generally true that jazz players can’t play “classical,” and that “classical” players can’t play jazz. Not one jazz fan in a thousand has any interest in “classical” music, and very few serious concert-goers feel anything more cordial than mild irritation when they listen to jazz. Attempted mixtures of the two idioms invariably act like oil and water. Jazzed classics and symphonies with jazz themes have a tendency to ruffle tempers in both camps. Even the impartial critic is stumped for any scale of similar standards in the two arts. Though many a jazz aesthete has tried to, you can’t compare a Louis Armstrong solo to a Josef Szigeti sonata performance, or a Bessie Smith blues to a Chopin nocturne. There isn’t any common ground.

## II

It is fashionable in intellectual quarters today to ignore this gap between jazz and “classical,” and to write and talk about jazz in the loftiest of musical jargons. The result has been a flood of the most amazing aesthetic double-talk ever penned in English. Even since the

pundit Hugues Panassié discovered *le jazz hot* in a French chateau full of phonograph records, the world of intellectual jazz addicts has been calling a spade a *cuiller à caviar*. The ebullient, hit-or-miss ensemble of a New Orleans stomp is reverently described as "counterpoint;" the cheerfully thumping art of boogie woogie becomes a type of "improvised variation form" comparable to the classical *chaconne*; the jazz trumpeter's exuberant and raucous lapses from true pitch are mysteriously referred to as "quarter tones" or "atonality." To dance to jazz (which is just what its primitive Negro originators would do) becomes a sacrilege.

Highbrow composers have also tried bridging the gap. The idea that an amalgamation of jazz with such traditional forms as the sonata or the symphony might result in an American style of concert music is too attractive to be ignored. American composers have repeatedly written jazz symphonies, jazz concertos, jazz rhapsodies and jazz fugues. But they usually discard the idea after a few experiments, and they never succeed in using jazz as anything but a superficial, ornamental embellishment, as they might, say, use a Balinese or Algerian tune for local color. Their

so-called jazz composition is not jazz at all — as any jitterbug can tell from the first note. Its rigid, highbrow musical structure prohibits the very type of improvisation that makes jazz fun to listen to. It remains a "classical" composition with jazz-style trimmings, about as American and about as homogeneous as a Gothic cathedral with a shingle roof.

Why does this peculiar split exist? The answer, I think, will be found by clearing away the pseudo-classical verbiage of the jazz critic and looking at the aesthetic nature of jazz itself. Jazz, for all the enthusiasms of its intellectual fans, is not music in the sense that an opera or a symphony is music. It is a variety of folk music. And the distinction between folk music and art music is profound and nearly absolute. The former grows like a weed or a wild flower, exhibits no intellectual complexities, makes a simple, direct emotional appeal that may be felt by people who are not even remotely interested in music as an art. It may be pretty to listen to, but it is not subject to intellectual criticism, for it lacks the main element toward which such criticism would be directed: the creative ingenuity and technique of an unusual, trained musical mind.

The latter (art music) is an art as complicated as architecture. It begins where folk music leaves off, in the conscious creation of big musical edifices that bear the stamp, in style and technique, of an individual artist. Its traditions — the rules of its game — are complicated and ingenious. They are the result of centuries of civilized musical thinking by highly trained musicians for audiences that are capable of judging the finer points of such thought. Art music is no weed patch. It is a hothouse of carefully bred and cultivated masterpieces, each one the fruit of unusual talent and great technical resourcefulness. You may prefer the open fields of folk music to the classical hothouse. That is your privilege. But if so, you are simply not interested in music as an art. And it is no good getting snobbish about your preference, and pretending that your favorite musical wildflower is a masterpiece of gardening skill. It isn't.

Thus, the remarks "I prefer early New Orleans jive to *Tristan and Isolde*," or "I prefer Kirsten Flagstad to Ethel Waters" are not really critical or evaluative statements, though they may express perfectly sincere feeling. They are like saying, "I prefer Texas steers to race horses" — an understandable pref-

erence, but one that has little relevance to the game of horse racing. "But, after all, hasn't jazz got melody, rhythm and harmony, and aren't these attributes of concert music?" Of course. But the uses to which these materials are put differ greatly in the two arts. Harmony, in jazz, is restricted to four or five monotonous patterns which support the florid improvisations of the soloist like a standardized scaffolding. These patterns never differ, never make any demands on creative ingenuity. Virtually every blues, for example, uses precisely the same harmony as every other blues, which incidentally is the identical harmony used for every boogie woogie improvisation too. Rhythmically, jazz is somewhat more ingenious, but not much more varied. It is limited to four-four or two-four time, and its finest effects are the result of hysteria rather than thought.

Melodically, jazz is often strikingly beautiful and original. But jazz melody, like all folk melody, is of the amoebic rather than the highly organized type. Jazz melody, unlike highbrow melody, consists of tunes rather than themes. These tunes are as simple and self-contained as one-cell animals. They can be repeated, sometimes with

embellishments and variations, but they are incapable of being formed into higher musical organisms. Cell for cell, or melody for melody, they often compare favorably with the themes of highbrow music. The melody of Bessie Smith's *Cold in Hand Blues*, for example, is a much more beautiful tune than the "V for Victory" theme of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. But when you have played it, that is all there is—a beautiful self-sufficient amoeba. Beethoven's crusty theme is a cell of a different sort, almost without significance by itself, but capable of reproducing itself into a vast, intricate symphonic organism with dramatic climaxes and long range emotional tensions.

The jazz artist, like all folk musicians, creates his one-cell melodies by instinct and repeats them over and over again, perhaps with simple variations. The composer of art music, on the other hand, is interested in one-cell melodies only as raw material. His creative mind begins where the instinct of the folk musician leaves off, in building such material into highly organized forms like symphonies and fugues. It is the technique and ingenuity with which he accomplishes this job that is the main subject of music criticism. And that is why music criticism sounds pompous

and misses its mark when it is applied to a folk art like jazz.

Having no intellectual principles of structure, jazz is incapable of development. Aside from a few minor changes in fashion, its history shows no technical evolution whatever. Boogie woogie pianism, for example, has recently come into a tremendous vogue among the long-haired jazz addicts. But it differs in no structural particular from the blues that were sung in New Orleans at the turn of the century. This lack of evolution, which is an attribute of all folk music, is another of the outstanding differences between jazz and concert music. The history of art music shows a continuous development of structural methods. Such variations as do occur from time to time in the style of jazz are usually merely the result of trial and error, public demand, or changes in the types of instruments it is played on. The basic idiom of jazz is the same today as it was two generations ago.

### III

From the performance standpoint, jazz has its own type of excitement, but it is not the type one gets from listening to a performance of concert music. In the concert hall or opera house, music is not only an

art, but a kind of game, too. The soprano singing the most hackneyed coloratura air (or the conductor leading the profoundest symphony) sets about overcoming certain pre-arranged obstacles of which the audience is well aware. There is a purely objective exhilaration in noting the accuracy and ease with which the soprano hits her high notes, or the suavity and polish with which she turns her melodic phrases. It is like watching a crack shot on a complicated target range, making an extraordinary number of bull's-eyes. All this is virtually absent from jazz. The hot jazz player "improvises," that is, merely shoots exuberantly in all directions, and occasionally, by the law of averages, manages to hit something.

The much-discussed element of improvisation, too, has been greatly overrated in most recent writing about jazz. A false impression has been given that the jazz artist, when he is "in the groove," creates an entirely new musical composition on the spur of the moment. Actually this is never the case. Only an infinitesimal portion of the jazz heard today is improvised. And even in that small portion the improvisation affects only a few elements of rhythm and melody. The two most intellectually

complex features of music — harmony and form — are never improvised even in so-called improvised jazz. The harmonic and formal patterns of jazz are, on the contrary, highly standardized, rather unimaginative and exceedingly monotonous.

Perhaps the most striking peculiarity of jazz as opposed to "classical" music, however, is the extremely limited nature of its emotional vocabulary. As a musical language, jazz is graphic and colorful, but, in poetic resources, it is about as rich as pidgin English. A great deal of it makes its appeal exclusively to the motor impulses without affecting the emotions at all. When it does affect the emotions it is limited to the expression of a few elementary moods — sexual excitement, exhilaration, sorrow (in the blues), and a sort of hypnotic intoxication. Its vocabulary does not encompass religious awe, tragedy, romantic nostalgia, metaphysical contemplation, grandeur, wonder, patriotic or humanitarian fervor, profound grief, horror, exaltation, delicate shades of humor — all of them more or less stock-in-trade expressions of high-brow symphonic or operatic music.

The mistake of the fashionable jazz aesthetes has been to take jazz out of the simple sidewalk and

dance hall milieu where it belongs and pretend that it is a complex, civilized art. In its own surroundings, jazz need make no apologies. It is the most vital folk music of our time; it is distinctly and indigenously American, and it speaks a new, infectious dialect that is fresher than anything of the sort Europe has evolved in centuries. It is, I think, something of a pity that, in a watered-down commercial form, jazz has virtually drowned out every other form of American popular music. The flood of musical bilge that emanates from Hollywood and the commercial dance band business has practically swamped the creation of more light-hearted and elegant types of entertainment music. Curiously enough, the mass-produced, commercialized product is also tending to swamp what is left of real, improvised jazz. It is already obvious that the fresh, ingenuous type of jazz the Negroes of New Orleans and Chicago played a generation ago is unlikely ever to be heard again except in phono-

graph records. Thus, the original spring of jazz has run dry — and for very logical reasons. The musical dialect of jazz, like verbal dialects, owes its development to its remoteness from standardized education. One of its most important ingredients has been the rather colorful awkwardness — the lack of technical polish — with which it is played. And that awkwardness, when genuine, is the fruit of ignorance.

Jazz appeared in the first place because the poor Southern Negro couldn't get a regular musical education, and decided to make his own homemade kind of music without it. His ingenuity has proved him to be one of the world's most gifted instinctive musicians. But as his lot improves, and with it his facilities for musical education, he is bound to be attracted by the bigger scope and intricacy of civilized concert music. Give him the chance to study, and the Negro will soon turn from boogie woogie to Beethoven.



Our Common-Wealth is much crazed, and out of tune. Yet have divers others beene more dangerously sicke, and have not died.

—MONTAIGNE

► *How one American broke  
the quinine bottleneck.*

## WE NOW HAVE QUININE

BY J. LACEY REYNOLDS

WHEN the long-smouldering Henry Wallace-Jesse Jones controversy flared into the open last summer, one of the most serious charges made by the Vice President was that Jones had obstructed the quinine program. On every tropical front, malaria is our worst enemy — there are two malaria cases to every battle casualty flown out of the South Pacific area. Demand for anti-malarials is so enormous that even with the new synthetics, atabrin and plasmochin, we need all the quinine we can get, and probably always shall, for the Surgeon General estimates that 800,000,000 people — two out of every five persons in the world — are stricken annually with malaria.

When the Japanese conquest of Java cut off our supply, Wallace, as head of the Bureau of Economic Warfare, set out to get cinchona bark, the raw material, and quinine, the finished product, where-

ever he could, and damn the expense. The chairman of the RFC, he charged, delayed and obstructed him at many points — in particular, held up for seven months the project of planting *Cinchona* trees in Costa Rica so that now we shall get no quinine from them until 1946, instead of 1945.

The story of those trees began long before Wallace brought it to public notice. It is largely the story of one man, and it begins on Bataan.

On March 4, 1942, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur F. Fischer, Military Intelligence Reserve, lay in a field hospital stricken with malaria. His chart read, "Condition, grave."

A nurse came near and he weakly grabbed at her uniform.

"More quinine, please," he mumbled.

"Sorry," the nurse responded, "we're running low on quinine."

---

J. LACEY REYNOLDS is on the Washington staff of the Chicago Sun and also writes for the Nashville Tennessean, Chattanooga News-Free Press and other papers. He was born in Tennessee, was graduated from Vanderbilt University in that state, and started his newspaper career in Nashville.