Music of the Common Tongue

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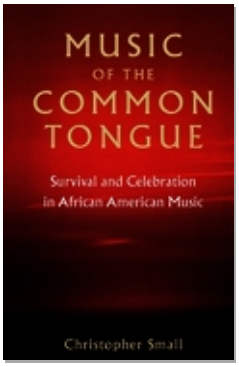

Chapter 11

STYLES OF ENCOUNTER III: A LOT OF LOVING GOING ON

Of all the styles of Afro-American music, in so far as they can be separated out from one another, that which is known as jazz is the one with which white intellectuals and classical musicians today feel most at ease. They manage to assimilate the values and the aesthetic of jazz to those with which they were brought up, and they feel able to accord to its artists a status and a respectability denied to other Afro-American musicians, and not far beneath that accorded to classical artists. This almost classical status is illustrated neatly by the fact that the British Broadcasting Corporation devotes about four hours of a total weekly airtime of some 120 hours on its classical-music channel to jazz. Among intellectuals and classical musicians the names, and the work, of Brubeck, Basie and Beiderbecke are almost as familiar as those of Boulez, Beckett and Bergman, and there exists a literary tradition of jazz scholarship, criticism and exegesis, not shared by any other Afro-American style, going back fully fifty years to the pioneering writings of André Hodier and Hugues Panassié. All this suggests that jazz has affinities with classical music that other Afro-American styles do not have.

Of all Afro-American musicians jazzmen, and jazzwomen, have always been the most eclectic; everything they hear, from blues to symphonic music to Anglo-Celtic folksong, from gospel to opera arias to the post-war avant garde, is grist to their mill. It may even be possible to propose a definition of jazz as that aspect of Afro-American musicking that has closest links with classical music. It is not a satisfactory definition, but it does have the merit of drawing attention to

the fact that a major source of creative energy for the artist in jazz has come from the tensions between European, or Euro-American, and Afro-American values.

These tensions can be perceived in a number of ways. We can see them as between, on the one hand, the literate culture of western industrial society, with all its tendency towards centralization and standardization, and on the other the orality and decentralization of black American culture. In musical terms this can be heard as, on the one hand, composition through notation, the separation of composer from performer and the authority of the written text, and, on the other, improvisation, non-literate composition and the autonomy of the performer. As we have seen, the composition-improvisation antithesis has important implications for the kinds of relationship that are brought into being by a musical performance — how close to or distant from one another the participants are, how active or passive the listeners, and so on. We have seen, too, how the classical tradition has abandoned improvisation, and it is interesting to see how whenever that tradition has become dominant in jazz the space for improvisation has become curtailed; one could use the extent to which the musicians are obliged to rely on notation as a yardstick for determining which of the two cultures is dominant at any point in the history of jazz performance.

It is important to bear in mind that these two tendencies, or orientations, are not mutually exclusive, but exist side by side in most western people, white and black. We have seen that even the most literate of western people still acquire some of their most important cultural attitudes and assumptions through the oral-aural mode, from parents, elders and peers, even if in our society the superiority of the literate mode is assumed without discussion. Conversely, it should not need to be pointed out that black Americans are just as much at home in the literate mode as are their white compatriots — but they continue to place a higher value on orality, and tend to be more proficient and imaginative with the spoken word, than whites. The fact that a literate society is a centralized and hierarchical one, which Africans and Afro-Americans have traditionally resisted, is also important.

If the fundamental concern of all music is human

relationships, the problem in group music making of all kinds, from symphony orchestras to Balinese *gamelans* to heavy-metal bands, is the establishment of workable relationships between the participants, which will allow room for the individual player to make full use of his or her musical skills and imagination to explore, affirm and celebrate an identity, while preserving that over-all order which is essential if the musicking is to generate any meaning either for performers themselves or for whoever is listening. Those relationships incarnate ideal human relationships as imagined by the participants, and both the technical problems encountered and the techniques used to solve them are metaphors for the problems, and the methods, of maintaining an acceptable social order. In a symphony orchestra those problems have been solved, once and for all, by the evolution of a hierarchical structure and centralized authority vested partly in a composer and partly in a conductor, each of whose authority in his own area is absolute — an uneasy combination at best, at least when the composer is around to make his views known. Those who have worked in or with professional symphony orchestras know that while an orchestra's power structure may, in theory, be precisely defined and static, the actual day-to-day relationships are as edgy as those in any other industrial organization, with the players constantly challenging the conductor's authority and subjecting each new piece to the most merciless scrutiny. But, grumble and smoulder as they may, they make no serious attempt to depose either authority from his (it is rarely *her*) position, not surprisingly since without a conductor and a score they would be at a complete loss for anything to play or for how to play it. In a symphony orchestra, then, as in other kinds of classical performance today, the question of order has been settled in the way most contemporary governments would like to be able to settle it. The performances that are made possible by this centralized and authoritarian order can be of an indubitable splendour and brilliance, but they are bought at the price of the players' autonomy and of creative satisfactions that ought to be commensurate with the skills and the musicality that are demanded of them. The players are rewarded for this sacrifice in other ways, with a social status and a degree of financial

security that is denied to their colleagues in vernacular musicking.

That there is necessarily an antithesis between individual freedom and social order is a notion that Europeans, and those who have absorbed European and Euro-American culture, have interiorized so completely that they scarcely even notice that they are thinking in that way, still less consider the possibility of alternatives. The notion is implicit in the activities of all contemporary governments, who take it for granted that considerable sacrifices of individual freedom are necessary to preserve a social order in which it is possible to live free from the fear of rape, pillage and robbery — and of conquest by the forces of other, like-minded governments. It is implicit in the writings of some of the greatest of European thinkers; the whole line of thought that is descended from Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* is based on it, while even Freud, in his last writings, mused despairingly on the repression that seems to be necessary if civilization is to exist at all. It is noticeable also in the whole organizational structure and the teachings of the Christian church, even if it is less in evidence in the recorded words of its founder. But in traditional African culture such an antinomy is by no means self-evident. As the Ewe proverb has it, 'Man is man because of other men'; individual and society live, not in antagonism but in mutual dependency, the individual coming to fullest development only within the social framework, and the society flourishing only on the basis of fully realized individuals whose individuality is necessary for social health. The elaborate rituals of traditional African societies, the musicking, the dancing, the masking, the cult ceremonies, are all designed ultimately to mediate social and individual necessity, to bring them into harmony rather than merely to effect compromises between antagonists. We have seen how the Africans brought their social attitudes with them on the Middle Passage and how those attitudes became a powerful factor for survival in the terrible conditions of slavery and its aftermath, and I have suggested that Afro-American musical performances in this century, especially in blues and gospel, have been rituals that have continued to affirm and to celebrate the mutual support of individual and community.

To play jazz, for a black musician, is to go beyond such rituals into a more complex and even dangerous task; it is to move out from one's base in the community (that is, from blues and gospel music) and to engage oneself with the values and the assumptions of white society, going to meet them and to play with them, and trying on roles in symbolic fashion in relation to that culture and society through its musicking, discovering what is of use for oneself and for the community. Black jazz musicians are thus no less the ritual representatives of the community than are bluesmen and gospel singers, and their task is in many ways even more important. Conversely, when white musicians play jazz, they are in almost a complementary situation in exploring the values of the black culture. How deeply they are able to do this will depend on the extent to which they are able to submit to the social and musical values they find there; it is in a sense even more difficult for them than for their black confrères, since as members of the socially dominant culture they have more to unlearn, and more intellectual baggage to dispose of, before they can enter fully into the engagement.

But both are also engaging with that most pressing of twentieth-century problems: that of the relationship between freedom and social order, and they are empowered to do so by a style of musicking which does not assume that there is any necessary antithesis between the two. In jazz a soloist appears at his or her best (which is not the same as 'most virtuosic') when collaborating with equals, the composer realizes his or her compositions most fully when they are taken up and developed by fellow musicians, the individual realizes his or her gifts best in the company of a committed group. Thus the notion found in many histories and other studies of jazz, of the great individual artist-hero — Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Miles Davis for instance — creating out of his own nature and genius, has to be treated with great caution.

Of course, there have been many outstanding artists over the history of jazz, but we should beware of treating them as great isolated originators, as the classical tradition today treats Beethoven, Mozart and J.S. Bach (it is strongly arguable that the way they are treated is a gross distortion of the real nature and achievement of *those* artists also) or indeed, as the world of

commercial entertainment — showbiz — treats its stars. In so far as the jazz musician's world perforce overlaps with and partakes of the nature of both those worlds it is understandable that this should happen — and of course it does pay the musicians, who after all have a living to make in that world, to go along with it as far as they can — but it should never be forgotten that those who stand out as the 'great names' in histories and other studies of jazz are no more than first among equals, and owe at least a part of their eminence to the labours of many other musicians. To say this is not in any way to detract from their gifts or their achievements, but simply to point out that the nature of jazz performance requires that performers, whether famous or obscure, function in skilled and close collaboration, and that they depend on one another in everything they do.

The words 'composer' and 'composition' therefore have a very different significance in jazz from classical musicking; in jazz, as in the great age of classical music, to be a musician is primarily to be a performer, and those who compose regard composition simply as the creation of material for themselves and their colleagues to play. It is rare, though not unknown, for what is created to be a fully worked-out composition; more usually it is a springboard, which may or may not be notated, from which all the musicians may take off into collaborative creation. Many of these 'compositions', such as Thelonious Monk's *Round About Midnight*, Charles Mingus's *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat* and Charlie Parker's *Parker's Mood* are beautiful in themselves, but they reveal, and are meant to reveal, their full character only when the composer and his colleagues have played with them, in all seriousness and all fun (the two are not incompatible). The composer's gesture to his fellow musicians is one of love and trust in giving them a part of himself to make of it what they will, and it calls from those musicians a greater sense of responsibility and involvement than does the realization of a fully notated score. And in so far as there can be as many versions of the 'piece' as there are occasions of its performance, the place and the listeners also make their contribution, just as in African musicking.

All too often, of course, the place is a sleazy nightclub with a minuscule bandstand, a tinny beat-up piano and a dressing

room that is no more than a cupboard next to the gents' toilet, while the listeners are a crowd of drunken businessmen and their wives on a night out, but the musicians' loyalty to one another and to their musicking can still make the performance transcend the limitations of the occasion. And when the place is suitable (not necessarily either grand or luxurious), the listeners committed and the dancing skilled (for does not dancing reveal a deeper involvement with the musicking than just sitting still and listening?) the performance, for as long as it lasts, can transform the participants into a society of mutual love and responsibility, of deep and multi-valent relationships, that reveals the poverty of the affluent European society of a concert hall.

For a jazz performance is not as much about the *rejection* of European values as about *transcending* them, and about the incorporation of the oppositions of classical music into more realistic unities. Jazz musicians have always been concerned with classical music, not as representatives of an inferior culture trying to latch on to the superior, but as natural heirs who are claiming it as their birthright — or, rather, as a part of their birthright — and building it into their own synthesis. It is a dangerous game; the musician is constantly on both a musical and a social tightrope in attempting to reconcile the two sets of values. It is for this reason that, for all the excitement that can be generated by a jazz performance, the quality most valued by the musicians themselves is 'cool' — that coolness of mind and clarity of musical judgement which together enable them to keep their balance while on the tightrope. The history of jazz is littered with, on the one hand, fine and even great musicians for whom the responsibility was too great, and, on the other, with musicians who have given in to the pull of one or the other culture.

There is a stereotype of a black jazz musician who, brilliant as he or she may be as performer, is nonetheless inadequate or worse in everyday relationships and the business of life, who is killed by drugs, alcohol and the appurtenances of high living; Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday are two often-quoted examples. They could not, we are led to believe, live out the ideal relationships which they brought into being with their music. This dissonance between the actual world and its

relationships, and the ideal world which they have not just imagined but actually experienced, has always placed highly creative musicians in danger; Mozart, who died only two years older than Parker, was clearly overwhelmed by it, while even the archetypal artist-hero, Ludwig van Beethoven, managed somehow to survive twenty years more without ever coming to terms with the world in which he lived, or even being able to form a mature relationship with another human being. In the case of black artists the dissonance is intensified, only they know how deeply, by the racism of the society which they are obliged to inhabit, and for which they are creating their model of a community held together, not by coercion, but by love. The marvel is not that some succumb, but that so many survive, and survive triumphantly, with that ideal still alive, if not unscarred by their experiences. And that even those who, like Parker and Holiday, did succumb, continued to affirm their 'philosophies of beauty and ethics' for as long as they were physically able.

The relative pulls of the two cultures spanned by jazz are not symmetrical, owing to the far higher social and financial rewards which the classical culture is able to offer to most musicians. A musician who accedes to the pull of the Afro-American culture will be found playing blues or gospel, in a musical ritual of a community that remains largely isolated from the mainstream of American society, and which continues to find within itself the resources for survival. For black musicians such a step is to move back into the maternal culture, a recharging of the batteries perhaps, which many, if not most, seem to do from time to time, while for white musicians, on the other hand, it is a venture not merely into a culture that still remains exotic and mysterious, not merely an adventure, but almost also a homecoming, an acknowledgement of one's real ancestors. For the musician playing jazz, it is the pull of the European classical culture that represents the greater threat, since as the dominant and socially superior culture it has more to offer. It can co-opt musicians almost without their realizing what is happening to them — a not infrequent happening in the history of Afro-American music as a whole. For the black musician it tends to be a no-win situation, as the guardians of the classical culture are liable to

pat him on the head and make it clear to him that he is getting ideas above his station. Every so often there appears on the scene a young lion who is intent in storming the classical-music citadel; I cannot help wondering whether what is in that citadel — the approbation of white middle-class audiences and critics — is really worth his effort.

The history of jazz can be seen as a struggle between the two sets of values, expressed in musical terms as a to-and-fro between solutions to the problem of freedom and order. Unlike the situation in classical music, the struggle presents us with no final solution, only with a constantly changing series of accommodations; perhaps the only conclusion to be drawn is that no conclusion is possible — something with which Africans would no doubt concur. It should, of course, not be assumed from this that relations between white and black musicians within jazz have been of hostility or even of opposition; the history of the art abounds with shining examples of amicable, even loving collaboration. But it is easy to understand that because a black musician is staking more on his musicking than a white one, it has been black musicians who have been mostly the leaders and innovators, since genuine musical innovation, as we have seen, is a matter not just of new sounds or techniques but of new forms of relationship. This has been a more urgent quest for blacks than for whites — though, God knows, the white majority is in more desperate and urgent need than it knows of what it can learn from its black compatriots. Albert Murray expresses it memorably when, writing in praise of certain white musicians, he says that they 'eagerly embrace certain Negroes not only as kindred spirits but as ancestor figures indispensible to their sense of romance, sophistication and elegance as well. Negroes like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Chick Webb, Coleman Hawkins and others too numerous to mention inspire white Americans like Woody Herman, Gerry Mulligan and countless others to their richest sense of selfhood and their highest levels of achievement.'[1]

'Ancestor figures', we notice — that is to say, models not only of music but also of values and conduct, and it can be said, not only that the most creative periods in the development of jazz have been those in which black musicians moved

to throw off white domination of their art, but also that those same musicians have at those times quite consciously and deliberately chosen to re-assert the traditional social as well as musical values of their culture. At such key moments, it has been to the sources of black music, much of it outside the experience of whites, that they have turned for renewal; if, as is sometimes said, jazz should be called 'Afro-American classical music', it is in the sense that Haydn, who was well in touch with the vernacular sources of his art, would have understood, while Boulez or Cage, to whom such nourishment seems to be inaccessible, would probably not. Murray does in fact, in his book *Stomping the Blues*, refer to the major figures of such moments — Louis Armstrong, Ornette Coleman, Charlie Parker and others — as bluesmen *tout court*, which is fair enough in a way, and does enable us to recognize the vernacular roots of their art but at the same time it ignores the important factor of cultural tension, which is far stronger in jazz than in blues and is not only a principal source of its creative energy but also a key to its human importance in our time.

For jazz is not a comfortable form of musicking to live with; as Frederick Turner says: 'It is as if we hear an interior sound in jazz that prevents us from embracing it in the ways we obviously have its derivatives, pop music and rock. Jazz, we obscurely sense, is hard to take at the level of pure entertainment, because however little we may know of it, of the history that went into its sound, we know enough to feel that it cuts too deeply into some unresolved national dilemmas to be casually accepted or lived with comfortably on a daily basis. We hear in the interior sound an intensity of purpose and aspiration that fends off easy familiarity . . . Jazz is the sound of life being lived at its limits, dangerous as an element that can burn.'[2]

It is true that there is in jazz a quality of sound that is unique in western music; it is not exactly austerity, but a lean, stripped-down quality that makes no concession to conventional notions of beauty, and certainly resembles very little the smoothly blended sound of the symphony orchestra. But there is also a playful, ironically teasing quality about most jazz performances, which by no means negates their intense

seriousness but has misled many, who are accustomed to the solemnity of classical performances, into dismissing it as frivolous. The tensions that fuel the performance are real enough; the humour is one way, not only of rendering them bearable, but also of subverting the values of the dominant society. It is probably for reasons such as these that jazz has been a really popular music (by which I have to mean, popular among whites, for that is where the purchasing power lies that determines popularity in today's society) for only brief periods, and it is significant that those were periods in which white cultural values were dominant, and the tensions resolved, at least for the time being.

Rather than attempting an historical survey of jazz, I intend to examine some phases of that history, to see how these accommodations between black and white values have taken place at specific points. It is proverbially difficult to say just when jazz first emerged as a recognizable style. It is possible to imagine a number of ways in which it might have taken place, and the prehistory of jazz, as of many cultural styles (style being defined precisely by Charles Keil as 'a deeply satisfying distillation of the ways a very well integrated human group likes to do things')[3] contains many such distillations, taking place in many different parts of the United States, according to the cultural mix of influences that happened to be around at the time. Ragtime was one such distillation, as we have seen, black minstrelsy and vaudeville were others, established on well-organized circuits by 1900. It is possible to see, even in the work of musicians as early as Francis Johnson, a similar cultural work taking place, while the very large number of black, and the smaller number of white wind bands in which European marches, dances and entertainment music were 'ragged', all over the United States, testify to the continuing experimentation that was taking place. In New York, for example, we know that James Reese Europe, conductor of the famous orchestra of the Clef Club, the centre for black musicians in the years before the first world war, and of the Hellfighters Band in France during the war, had a difficult task keeping his black musicians to the written notes: 'I have to call a daily rehearsal,' he wrote, 'to prevent the musicians from adding to their music more than I wish them to. Wherever

possible they all embroider their parts in order to produce new, peculiar sounds. Some of these effects are excellent and some are not, and I have to be continually on the lookout to cut out the results of my musicians' originality.'[4] Despite Europe's keeping the lid firmly on the improvisational pot, the Hellfighters caused a sensation when they were sent to Paris in August 1918 to give a single concert and stayed for eight weeks. As Europe said later, 'Had we wished we might be playing there yet.' It might have been instructive, and perhaps chastening, for some of today's virtuoso conductors and orchestras to hear how the Clef Club Orchestra handled those works of the classical tradition which their repertory included as a matter of course; but, alas, no records were made of them.

But these and countless other ways of musicking, fascinating and rewarding as they were, did not add up to a single and unified way of doing things. The one exception, ragtime, paid for its undoubted coherence with a narrowness of range, too close an identification with European classical techniques, too complete a reliance on notation, too highly developed a set of technical procedures, all of which left little room for a contribution by the performer, to make it usable as a vehicle for further developments. A style is a curious affair; it is like rain, which needs, in addition to a saturation of water vapour in the air, a focal point on which the vapour can begin to condense. The 'vapour' was heavy in the air between 1900 and 1905 everywhere in the United States where there was a sizeable black population, but only in one location were there conditions where the blackest of black musicking were brought into contact with the whitest of white; that was New Orleans.

New Orleans is unique among the cities of the United States. Its French origins, its cession to the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, its wealth and corruption, its cosmopolitanism and devotion to pleasure and the arts at a time when other American cities were still dominated by Puritan influence, are all part of legend, and the legend, for once, is substantially true. By 1840, for example, there were three more or less full-time opera companies in the city, whose population, including blacks, was a mere one

hundred thousand. These companies, moreover, were no third-rate colonial imitations of metropolitan French culture but were described by knowledgeable European visitors as the equal of all but the finest European houses, and they performed works by the greatest names of the day, from Mozart to Rossini, Donizetti and Meyerbeer, as well as by competent local composers. Blacks as well as whites attended; even slaves could sit in the amphitheatre of the opera, and we have already seen that the Negro Philharmonic Society had its own orchestra and engaged visiting soloists. And of course blacks dominated the city's bands, for which the citizens had a passion; the famous slow march to the graveside at funerals and the return, playing lively music, was a feature of the city's musical life which a visitor noted as early as 1819.

The interplay was thus two-way. As blacks heard and used white styles, so the musicking of the blacks was picked up and used by the whites; the lower classes, as we have seen, picked it up directly, while the upper classes did so through the medium of the ubiquitous minstrel shows. That was only an extension of what was taking place wherever blacks and whites encountered one another musically. But there was another factor: miscegenation. Since the days of French sovereignty, it had been a custom among the old Creole (that is, of French or Spanish descent but born in the New World) aristocracy to keep a black mistress in a separate establishment. Unlike those who were fathered by Anglo-Saxon Americans, the offspring of these unions were generally acknowledged by their fathers, and often well provided for, some even receiving a Parisian education, so that there grew up in the city a class of 'Creoles of colour', who regarded themselves as to all intents and purposes as white, and who absorbed European rather than Afro-American culture.

With the racial blacklash after Emancipation, however, the Creoles of colour found themselves, along with all who had the slightest known or visible trace of African ancestry, reclassified under the city's notorious Legislative Code 111 of 1894 as black, and subject to all the legal and social disabilities of that status. Try as they might to hold on to their European ties, they found themselves driven out of employment in white areas and forced to associate, willy-nilly, with the despised

blacks. A large number of professional and semi-professional musicians, trained in some cases in Europe but anyway in the European style, found themselves forced, if they were to earn a living at all, to play in the company of Afro-American groups, with their ragged rhythms, their blues-like melodic inflections and their 'dirty' and highly individual instrumental tone. As the Creole musician Paul Dominguez said, many years later, 'They made a fiddler out of a violinist — me, I'm talking about . . . If I wanted to make a living I had to be rowdy like the other groups.'[5] It seems that it was this forced association, with all the hardship and real suffering that it caused, that brought about exactly the right combination of social and musical interaction to cause the condensation of a new style of playing among the large number of musicians who were capable of playing in any style that was asked of them.

The versatility of black and Creole musicians was another specific feature of the New Orleans scene that was a consequence of the large number of Creole musicians who, in an attempt to retain their European standards, became teachers of music. Frederick Turner tells of one Professor Jim Humphrey who would take the train out of the city once a week in the 1890s to teach talented plantation children, always in the 'correct' European style; his pupils later formed the nucleus of New Orleans' famous Eclipse Brass Band.[6] Many of the early 'greats' of New Orleans jazz passed through the hands of such teachers, having become skilled not only in playing, in the European manner, more than one instrument but also in reading and writing music; Bunk Johnson, Freddie Keppard, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet and Jelly Roll Morton all had a training of this kind, or something like it. The legend of 'primitive' or 'unschooled' jazz musicians does not stand up to close examination; indeed, the nature of jazz would have been very different had they not had contact with European as well as Afro-American styles.

It seems to have been between about 1900 and 1905 that the new style crystallized. As it developed, it gradually absorbed into itself the diverse elements of other 'proto-jazz' styles, and its eventual naming as 'jass' around 1910 (the word seems to come from the same source as 'jissom', revealing a dis-

approving attitude to the music's assumed sexual content) showed that the dominance of the new style was recognized; as Charles Keil says: 'the very naming of musics . . . is a declaration of consolidation.' Keil goes on to describe exactly the kind of process that must have taken place in the early years: 'An exclusion principle or focus on a sharply limited set of forms marks the beginning of a style, but it grows by inclusion, assimilating to its purposes the instruments, techniques and ideas of significant other styles within earshot.'[7] To see this process at work it is instructive to examine the work of two important figures in New Orleans music between 1900 and 1905.

The cornettist Charles 'Buddy' Bolden (1877–1931) is generally regarded as the first major performer and bandleader of New Orleans jazz. He was taken to a state mental institution in 1906, in circumstances that remain obscure, and never emerged alive, so that it is not surprising that legends proliferate around his name. No recordings of him or his band exist, but he was by all accounts a phenomenally powerful player (the phrase 'five miles on a clear night' was coined to describe his carrying power) and, if not the originator, at least an early protagonist, of jazz horn sound. He is usually thought of as the archetypally rough 'gutbucket' player, and, indeed, it is clear that he could play wildly exciting blues and other black-style dance music, but, on the other hand, those who heard him attested to his ability to play very sweetly also; as one player said in later years: 'When it came to playing sweet music, waltzes, there was nobody in the country who could touch him . . . Everybody was crazy about Bolden when he'd play a waltz, schottische or old low-down blues.'[8] And he could not only read music, as could most of his sidesmen, but he could write it too. His early professional experience had been in a small band for society dances and parties where he would have had to play in a 'refined' style. As his biographer Donald Marquis says: 'Bolden played both by note and by ear, and he liked to please the audience. Having a good ear he could hear another band play and . . . was able to duplicate it by the end of the evening. As he matured musically, he would listen to a number, memorize it instrument by instrument, and then teach the

part to the others.'[9] Clearly no 'primitive' cornet player, then, but a musician whose skills and imagination were considerable, and whose rough and riotous playing was the result not of unschooled technique but of self-identification and of conscious artistic decision.

Bolden's chief rival in that period of headlong development and consolidation, John Robichaux, was, as his surname suggests, a Creole of colour. He had received a formal musical training, and his band, playing always in the literate mode, had, before the advent of Legislative Code 111, been employed in some of the most elegant halls and ballrooms of the city. After they found themselves forced to associate with black musicians, Robichaux adapted his style and held the band together in the rougher environments where they had to work; some of his players even moonlighted with black street bands. And, as Marquis says, 'The two pioneers cared enough about music to recognize the skills the other possessed and the contributions each was making. Bolden was known to have used ideas from the Robichaux band; some of Buddy's fans remembered seeing Robichaux seated by himself at the back of a hall where Bolden was playing . . . And the two bands, Bolden's and Robichaux's, provided the earliest and most clear-cut examples of the two types of music, Uptown and Downtown, that simultaneously borrowed from each other and hastened the development of jazz.'[10]

The Bolden band was essentially one of improvisors, whose performances were held together by a minimum of pre-arranged material which may or may not have been written down, while the Robichaux band based its performances on written arrangements which allowed minimal space for improvisation. Borrow from each other they may have, but finally it was the Bolden style that expanded at the expense of Robichaux's, assimilating the latter's ideas and techniques into the kind of synthesis which the community, who were the final arbiters, required. It was Bolden's, rather than Robichaux's, solution to the problem of musical, and thus of social, order that the community wanted. But then, as far as those musical solutions were concerned, we need not imagine that the community of listeners and dancers were unaware of the problems, or of the solutions arrived at, then or later; there

is a transparency about the procedures adopted by jazz musicians which make it quite clear to those who care to notice it what is going on within the performing group, both as a musical and as a social entity.

The early New Orleans bands set a pattern for musical order which was to be followed for over half a century of musicking, through the simple expedient of using the harmonies, the 'changes' of the tune being played, whether popular song, blues or original composition, as the unifying element over which each musician was able to improvise as he liked provided he observed the changes and remained faithful to the idiom, that is, to the community. As with those seventeenth-century Italian orchestral musicians whom I discussed earlier, playing 'as he liked' meant for a good musician not only performing his part with idiomatic correctness but also taking due regard both for what the other musicians were doing and for the over-all effect; despite the power of the rules and the skill of the individual players, it was, finally, mutual human care and consideration that would enable the ensemble to give a performance that would satisfy the community of listeners and dancers. Behind the wild and often dissonant interplay of melodic lines in those early New Orleans bands, there is a deeper human harmony which still appeals, an informal collaborative society whose model is more African than European. We can never recapture the atmosphere of those early jazz performances, of which present-day 'traditional' or 'Dixieland' bands give only the palest shadow; I sometimes wonder if the present-day popularity of 'Dixieland' among white audiences, especially in Britain, is not in part due to its evoking the society of that time in which blacks were kept firmly in their place and entertained the whites. Those who took part in those early jazz performances left little record of their thoughts on such matters, but it is hard to believe that performers, listeners and dancers had not, in that time of brutal repression and seemingly endless economic deprivation, given some thought to their relationship to the dominant Euro-American culture. The gaiety of the music we can still hear today is *not* mindless but that of serious and thoughtful musicians exploring their identity within the larger society and affirming and, above all,

celebrating that identity in a way that was to make the whole world listen and dance.

The dispersion of the musical style from New Orleans took place partly through riverboat musicians on the big rivers, partly through the migration of blacks to northern cities in the years after about 1915, and partly, after 1917, through phonograph records. New Orleans, for all its French origins and relatively relaxed racial atmosphere, was still a southern city, and had its population of poor whites living close to the blacks; these would have been the first whites to absorb the new musical style and make it their own as part of everyday experience, rather than being filtered through the dance halls and brothels in a way which coloured the perceptions of those upper-class whites who heard it on their low-life excursions into the fabled Storeyville (and which continue to colour white perceptions of jazz even today). It was a band of those white musicians, mostly of Italian immigrant stock, the Original Dixieland Jass Band, who happened to be on the spot in New York when the chance to record came, and seized it. Their first two sides were an immediate success, selling over a million copies — probably as much for the animal imitations of *Livery Stable Blues* as for any genuine jazz quality.

As the first jazz band to record and to become widely known both in the United States and in Europe, the ODJB, as it has been known to succeeding generations, did much to set the climate for jazz as far as its wider, white public was concerned. In the first place, they simplified the idiom of the black musicians, substituting crude melodic formulas for their often subtle and flexible improvised melodic lines, and mechanical patterns for their vigorous rhythms. As Gunther Schuller says: 'In its rigid substitution of sheer energy for expressive power, of rigid formula for inspiration, the ODJB had found the key to mass appeal.' And, secondly, the members of the band promoted assiduously the idea that they were all untutored musicians who just played whatever came into their heads. Schuller tells us that the leaders even 'kept bombarding the public with provocative statements such as "I don't know how many pianists we tried until we found one that couldn't read music."' 'But,' says Schuller, 'their playing belied the myth of total anarchy such statements were

designed to create. Contrary to being improvised, their choruses were set and rehearsed, and they were unchanged for years.'[11] The ODJB, in fact, solved the problem of order by pretending that there was no problem, and like all such solutions, it could not last; the band was defunct by 1924. But the fiction of total anarchy served its purpose for them and for their successors and imitators; even today it remains an important factor in the public perception of jazz musicians and of their mode of performance. There is a sizeable proportion of the public who sees jazzmen as jolly, irresponsible fellows, not over-intelligent, who have a good time playing the first thing that comes into their heads. The fiction continues to be encouraged especially among the musical 'establishment', serving as it does to defuse the challenge posed by jazz.

That jazz served well enough the spirit of revolt in the 1920s is clear from the electric effect that bands, both black and white, had on the young (black bands did not get to record until 1923 and did not until much later gain the amount of exposure offered to white bands, while racially mixed bands were unthinkable until the 1930s), especially on young middle-class whites and, perhaps even more explosively, on young middle-class blacks such as Edward Ellington in Washington DC, Fletcher Henderson in Georgia and James Lunceford in Fulton, Missouri. As the carrier (one might say, the embodiment, since the values were embodied in the ways in which the music was played and responded to) of values which called into question those of white American culture of past and present, jazz was the natural medium of rebellion against the standards of prosperous middle-class America which had given the young everything except what they really needed: communality, warmth and emotional honesty. James Collier describes the differences in the attitudes of black and white musicians towards jazz in that period, differences which have not completely disappeared today even if the two groups are not quite so separate as they were then: 'A black jazz musician was among his people a star, a hero, who held a place something like the place held by a basketball star today. But for the young white players, playing jazz meant entering a hidden world . . . As a result, these [white] youngsters, most of

them teenagers when they started, came to jazz with the sense that they were a group of elect outsiders who had devoted themselves to a high truth.'[12]

What is implied here is that what attracted the young white musicians, and their equally young audiences, to jazz was not just new sounds and rhythms, but new relationships, those of the hitherto inaccessible culture. It does not matter too much that the whites' perceptions of black culture were coloured by a great deal of romanticism and wishful thinking (we must remember that the society that was brought into existence in a jazz performance was, for blacks no less than for whites, an ideal, a potential rather than an actual society); what people believe affects what they do no less than what actually is, and the important thing was the view that jazz seemed to offer of an alternative set of values and relationships. Their elders, who remained apparently satisfied with white America as it was, felt otherwise, and social leaders — politicians, clergymen, teachers and medical men — thundered about the mental, physical and moral damage inflicted by jazz (the fulminations against rock 'n' roll in the 1950s had a familiar ring to those who had lived through the 1920s). The vehemence of the denunciations suggests an appreciation, even if it was not fully conscious, of the challenge offered to conventional assumptions about the nature of human societies by the music and the manner of its performance, but, given the preoccupations of white culture at the time, it is not surprising that most of the alleged dangers of jazz boiled down to the usual brew of sexual and racial fears. As in the 1950s, the outrage at the flouting of familiar values was compounded by fear disguised as contempt for the mysterious foreigners in their midst, who seemed to have access to pleasures and to sources of power denied to themselves. 'The consensus of opinion of leading medical and other scientific authorities,' wrote the medical officer of a leading Philadelphia girls' school, 'is that its influence is as harmful and degrading to civilized races as it has always been among the savages from whom we borrowed it'[13].

There is a sad little story which illustrates for me the gulf that existed at that time between respectable white society and jazz. It is said that Bix Beiderbecke, who is generally regarded

today as the first major white soloist in jazz, used to send proudly home to his parents, prosperous German-American merchants in Davenport, Iowa, copies of all his records as they were issued; on a visit to his home he found them all stowed away in the back of a cupboard, their postal wrappings still unbroken.

Beiderbecke spent a large part of his brief career in the big orchestra of Paul Whiteman, the self-styled 'King of Jazz'. The orchestra, excellent as it undoubtedly was, only intermittently even sounds anything like jazz as we would recognize it today. In the 1920s — notwithstanding its nickname, the 'jazz age' — not many people had even heard those artists who today figure as jazz masters of their time, since their performances were generally in small night clubs and speakeasies where relatively few people went, and their records were mostly available only on the 'race' labels aimed at the black market and sold only in ghetto shops. The high performance standards of the Whiteman orchestra were achieved at the cost of a denial of that freedom within the ensemble which had been the essence of jazz performance up to that time. Although a number of later-to-be famous musicians passed through the orchestra in its fifteen-year history, between 1920 and 1935, they were permitted only the briefest of solos, and improvisation was practically nonexistent. Authority was centralized in the arrangers, who were often brilliant by any standards, and in the conductor; the problem of freedom and order had been not so much solved as closed off. It was the first, but by no means the last, attempt to produce the sounds and rhythms of jazz through the techniques and disciplines of the symphony orchestra. The closeness of the link with contemporary symphonic music is emphasises by the use not only of 'symphonic' dramatic introductions, often leading, anticlimactically, into perfectly ordinary dance tunes, but also of harmonies and orchestral devices derived from the 'impressionist' composers of the time, notably Ravel and Delius. It is easy to sneer at the Whiteman orchestra today, but Whiteman was undoubtedly a good musician who did his best for the music as he perceived it; if his aim was, as he once put it, to 'make a lady out of jazz', and to make jazz accessible to those white Americans for whom in its undiluted form it was

too alarming, then in that aim he succeeded. It was he, too, who as part of that aim commissioned *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924 from George Gershwin, for which we can be grateful. But the fact that he should have thought it necessary in the first place to make jazz respectable has much to say about the social and cultural divisions in our society.

The tendency to drift into easy solutions, based on imposed authority, to the problem of musical order was to recur frequently in the ensuing years, and, indeed, is still with us. The temptation to do so grew greater over the 1920s as the size of bands increased in response to the need for bigger sounds to fill the ever-larger ballrooms without the aid of electronic amplification, and to the desire for a greater range and variety of instrumental colour. We see it occurring to various degrees in the big white, and some black, swing bands from Benny Goodman and Fletcher Henderson to Artie Shaw, and culminating in the relentlessly rehearsed arrangements of the Glenn Miller Band, whose ideals of instrumental blend are remarkably similar to those of the symphony orchestra, and whose working practices allowed no room for the uncertainties of improvised solos. There were other pressures on those bands, too, not only the demand by audiences in the big ballrooms and, from the 1930s, in the radio shows with which they lived symbiotically, to hear the songs 'just like on the record', but also the need of a large and expensive organization to cater for the paying white audience and its desire for comfortable and not too demanding entertainment music. This was the same audience that the Broadway Masters catered for in musicals and individual songs, and, indeed, it was the latter who wrote most of the songs which arrangers arranged and the bands played, in ballrooms and nightclubs (places into which, since the end of prohibition, respectable people could go), on radio and records and in film and stage musicals. Jazz became during the 1930s and 1940s a popular music for the first and last time; the big bands appeared regularly in Hollywood films, and bandleaders were stars whose activities, and especially their sex lives, were reported and commented on as avidly as those of film stars — or, indeed, of rock and pop stars today. Jazz and jazz musicians had been co-opted to serve the values of white

society, and its challenge had been defused.

This kind of jazz survives today, in showbands and backing bands, its style changed remarkably little since the 1940s. It survives also, interestingly, in educational institutions, whose 'Jazz Ensemble', 'Jazz Band' or 'Showband', usually under the baton of the Director of Music, can form a showpiece for the school's or college's progressive image. Such ensembles, however, are generally dependent on scores, usually commercial arrangements, which leave little room for either individual or group improvisation (they sometimes include fully notated 'improvised' solos) and leave the conductor firmly in charge of everything that takes place. There is no conflict here with the values of the school, or of the centralized industrial state whose interests, as we have already noted, the school is designed to serve.

That such a solution is not inevitable even when a large number of musicians are involved can be seen from the history of jazz in the midwest and southwestern United States, especially in those blues-based bands, climaxing in the long-lived band of Count Basie, which sheltered from the Great Depression in the relative prosperity of the corrupt but freehanded Prendergast administration in Kansas City. Basie, like many of the Kansas City bandleaders of the day, led from the piano; as one commentator has said: 'He sat at the piano, smiling modestly, giving out the occasional tinkle with so little fuss that a stranger might have asked what he *did*. Yet he was the leader of a band full of brilliant, individual soloists who swung together with a unique lift and power, a rhythmic unity that seemed like second nature. And almost all of those individualists would have agreed that Basie was a great leader, though none could explain exactly why.'[14] The same writer said of the band: 'The standing repertory consisted of head arrangements worked up at rehearsals from . . . the store of sketches and rough charts. In the main the band's style depended on its collective spirit and the flow of ideas from soloists, brought about to a singular degree of unity by Basie's quiet, musicianly leadership and orchestral deployment of the piano.'[15]

The Basie band consisted of individuals each of whom was in his or her own right a musician of superb skill and musical

intelligence, who realized those qualities to their fullest by placing them at the service of the common enterprise. It was a remarkable social, no less than musical, achievement, not the least of which lay in the realization that the problems can never be solved once and for all but must be solved again and again every day and require constant vigilance and diplomacy to keep the need for order and the need for freedom in harmony with each other. But the rewards were commensurate with the effort; judging from their recordings, I do not know of any of the major bands of the time, not even that of Duke Ellington himself, that could play with such power and such delicacy and with such evocation of the spirit of joy and of love as the Count Basie Orchestra. Those fifteen or so musicians, constantly free to create something new, must have felt most fully themselves when building their commonwealth of the spirit in collaboration with their listeners and dancers (we recall that it was Lester Young, the band's great tenor saxophonist of its peak years, who liked to play for dancers because 'the rhythm of the dancers comes back to you'). Even if a large proportion of those listeners were just the proverbial tired businessmen on a night out, all but the most insensitive must have perceived, however faintly, the outlines of that commonwealth and have been touched, if not fully knowing why, by its values. In its later years, it is true, the band succumbed to some extent to pressures for a more smoothly complete product and became more dependent on written arrangements, with a consequent loss of the players' improvisatory freedom, but it remained a powerful and beautiful group right up to Basie's death in 1984.

The group which perhaps shows most clearly how delicate is the balance between improvisatory freedom and audible order is that of Duke Ellington. When the orchestra began playing, in 1923, it was a co-operative group, of which Ellington gradually assumed command, more, it seems, through a talent for leadership than through his musical skills, which were at that time somewhat sketchy. The orchestra's performances initially evolved on a collaborative basis, with all the musicians making creative contributions, and as Ellington began to take control it became simply a matter of his having a veto over those suggestions and ideas as they were

tried out. The conditions under which they worked from 1927 to 1933, at Harlem's Cotton Club, where they were required to provide music not just for the patrons to dance to, but also for the lavish and often fantastic floor shows, demanded a type of composition that could be co-ordinated with choreography and repeated on successive nights — which meant using notation. It was under these conditions that they developed a way of working in which ideas presented by the leader, or by one of the sidesmen, were tried over, added to and placed within a framework in such a way as to allow a considerable degree of improvising freedom to the various brilliant soloists in the orchestra. Only after this process had been gone through would the arrangement come into being and be written down — and even then it was possible for it to go on developing as it was performed. This way of working still left the soloists with considerable responsibility for the performance, and there are instances in the orchestra's recorded legacy, for example in the *Black and Tan Fantasy* where, as Gunther Schuller says, 'Through the dominance of one soloist, [the trumpeter Bubber Miley] the collective equilibrium that was such an integral part of jazz was temporarily disturbed.'[16] That such a disturbance was possible, however, shows the vitality of the idiom and its openness to whatever may happen.

We are told that Ellington was not very interested in contemporary classical music, that the 'impressionist' harmonies which abound in his orchestra's performances come not directly from Ravel, Delius or Stravinsky but rather from other black arrangers, notably Will Vodery, who was chief arranger for the Siegfeld Follies, and Will Marion Cook, as well as from the big orchestras such as that of Paul Whiteman. But although over the years the balance between improvisation and composition remained remarkably open (the orchestra was always capable of making superb improvised performances from simple 'head' arrangements) we find Ellington in later life being increasingly drawn to the kind of fully composed large-scale work for his orchestra that is usually thought more appropriate for the concert platform than for the bandstand — pieces such as *Black, Brown and Beige, Liberian Suite, Deep South Suite* and the three *Sacred Concerts* intended for

performance in church. These works have been variously praised and damned, the former often by those who like to hear something they can recognize as compositions in the classical sense, the latter equally often by those who say that they are not jazz (neither verdict has much to do with their real qualities); an interesting comment is that of the critic Francis Newton in the London *New Statesman*, quoted by Schuller, that Ellington had 'solved the unbelievably difficult problem of turning a living, shifting and improvised folk music into composition without losing its spontaneity.'[17] That a musician of Ellington's kind, and his proven stature, should want to do such a thing testifies to the continuing attraction exerted by the respectability of the concert stage. He lived to perform the Sacred Concerts in London's Westminster Abbey, where English monarchs have been crowned for centuries, and one cannot get much more respectable than that; the pieces are to my ears less immediate, less involving than the less formally composed pieces, and can perhaps be heard as the work of a musician who has lived dangerously and now feels the need to relax from the tension of reconciling two sets of values. But they can also be seen as representing a victory for 'classical' respectability.

The Ellington Orchestra always stood aside from the rest of the history of jazz, paying only superficial tribute to successive styles as they came and went. I referred in a previous chapter to the renewal of the encounter between values, after the closure brought about in the era that was dominated by the big white swing bands, that took place with the style which was known as bebop in the 1940s and 1950s. As with many stylistic revolutions, the passing of time enables us to recognize the continuities as well as the breaks, and we can now see that these musicians were returning consciously to a reaffirmation, in a new and sophisticated way befitting the generation of the reopening of the civil rights struggle, of the values that had animated the older jazzmen. This continuity is emphasised by the fact that not only did many of the principal musicians of that revolution came from the midwest, where the older musical values had survived better than in the very commercial New York scene, but also that the rhythmic revolution that underlay bebop was a development of what

the Kansas City bands, notably Count Basie's, had been doing for a long time.

Thus the dialogue was reopened and has continued undiminished over the subsequent years. A reaction in the 1950s towards the forms and techniques of classical music was led by a number of classically-trained white musicians, who attempted a fusion, by the use of classical forms such as fugue and of asymmetrical rhythmic patterns (Dave Brubeck's *Take Five* is a famous example) and by the cultivation of the refined atmosphere of a chamber-music concert. None of this had much lasting effect on the art itself, but, as James Collier says, 'Cool music . . . was popular for the simple reason that the European elements in it made it comprehensible to audiences raised in the European tradition . . . For the white majority, before 1950, jazz was a hobby for a handful of eccentrics; by the 1950s, especially on college campuses, it was an accepted part of the cultural scenery, something one knew about in the way that one knew about Freud, Beethoven and Van Gogh. For jazz, before rock swept everything away, the 1950s were a relatively good time.'[18]

For white musicians with a college degree, at any rate; I shall leave the reader to ponder the implications of that paragraph in the light of the earlier discussion. For the rest, things were not much different from what they had always been. The succeeding generation of musicians, coming to maturity in the 1960s, brought, as we saw in the previous chapter, a renewal of concern for the enduring resources and values of black culture, in folk music, the music of the churches, and of course the blues. This renewal was, wrongly, dubbed by certain critics 'the new thing' or 'the new jazz', since it was neither new nor a thing, but an attempt to shake off the restraints imposed by European harmony and even those of the tempered scale, using instead an interplay of melodic lines built often enough on ancient modes — an old idiom representing an old community. Those same critics also attempted to set up a rivalry along Brahms-Wagner lines between certain musicians of the time, but there was in fact no necessary antithesis, rather a different approach towards a common cultural pride and a common desire for independence of European cultural norms. Today there seems a more

cautious spirit abroad, and a move towards European high culture and the avant garde — which may represent not a capitulation but simply a striving to take possession of its forms and to turn them to the musicians' own purposes. The danger of capture has never retreated, however, and is indeed perhaps even stronger than ever in the social and political climate of the 1980s. We can only, from a distance, wait and hope.

None of this, I hope, should suggest that jazz as a way of musicking, or the issues that it raises, concerns black Americans only. For generations now there have been white musicians for whom jazz is a natural way of playing, who are motivated by nothing more or less than a need to affirm, explore and celebrate values to which they feel closer than to the official ones of western society as embodied in classical music, and more profoundly than popular music permits. On the other hand, jazz will in all probability never again be a popular music; it is too uncomfortable for that. But those who are prepared to allow themselves to go with the tensions generated by that way of musicking can be rewarded with some of the most heartening musical experiences possible in western society today. Players and listeners are taking part in a process which at any point can end in disaster; the musicians have chosen to place themselves in the most delicate, subtle and dangerous relationship with their listeners, while the listeners have the responsibility of feeding back to the players the energy which they have received from them, so that when the performance is going well it resonates back and forth, to create a community in which at the same time all can feel fully realized as individuals. Contrary to what is often said, the excitement generated by a good jazz performance is not just physical, although the part played by bodily response and bodily movement must not be denied; it is the exhilaration of finding oneself, to use Albert Murray's words once more, raised 'to the richest sense of selfhood and to the highest level of achievement.' There is no product, no final solution to the problems, only the unending process of exploration, affirmation and celebration. The magic does not happen with every performance, even with the finest and most devoted performers and the most sympathetic of audiences and the most

skilled of dancers; there are too many workaday pressures which militate against it, not least of which are the pressures on the musicians to produce a saleable and consistent product and to ease tension by submitting to routine. But the ideal remains, and is realized sufficiently often to make the enterprise worth while for both players and their listeners ('Once a year, if I'm lucky,' said Dizzy Gillespie.[19]).

I conclude this chapter with some remarks by musicians, all quoted in Nat Hentoff's *The Jazz Life*, which illuminate the musicians' task better than any words of mine. First, the drummer Jo Jones to a beginning professional musician: 'You're a musician. Don't ever forget that. You can do what very few other people can do. You can reach people, but to move them you have to be all open. You have to let everything in you out. And you have to be in a condition to play what you hear.'[20] Second, Charles Mingus, 'I play or write *me*, the way I feel, through jazz or whatever, whether it's hip or not. Music is the language of the emotions. If someone has been escaping reality, I don't expect him to dig my music . . . my music is alive and it's about the living and the dead, about good and evil. It's angry, and it's real because it's angry.'[21]

And, finally: 'Some years ago, a quartet had just completed a particularly exhilarating set, and its young Negro drummer came off the stand grinning with satisfaction. "You sure sounded good," said a listener. "Yeah," said the drummer, "there was a lot of loving going on up there."[22]

NOTES

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14. RUSSELL, Ross: *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971, p 258.
15. *ibid.*, p 135.
16. SCHULLER, Gunther: *op cit.*, p 350.
17. *ibid.*, p 350.
18. COLLIER, James Lincoln: *op cit.*, p 436.
19. quoted in WILLS, Geoff: 'Under Pressure', *International Musician*, October 1984, p 46.
20. HENTOFF, Nat: *The Jazz Life*, New York, Da Capo Press, 1978, p 24.
21. *ibid.*, p 45.
22. *ibid.*, p 74.