

MARGINS OF MUSIC 3

Earthjazz

The brooding empty textures of many ECM recordings, draw the listener into the relationship between sound and place. David Rothenberg explores this common ground with the natural world.

When I started listening seriously to jazz music, I sensed there was a tradition back there, a music I grew up on, whose future and currency I didn't doubt. However ambiguous the music was that I seemed to produce, I never doubted that it was destined event-ually for the jazz sections of those record stores. Why was I so sure? Because jazz is the genre of music that most openly welcomed many kinds of improvising influences together. It was the music made and identified by the virtuosity of the player. The audience heard people, not instruments, people stretching their instruments to the limits, always looking for new themes to improvise on, new standards, new musical cultures to welcome into the mix. My favourite jazz was based on Norwegian folk songs, Indian Rajas, or Balinese rhythms and repetitive overlapping time frames, rather than the show tunes of 1940's musicals that I could not resonate with.

It is true that Indian and Arabic music also have complex systems of improvisation. But they have careful rules, exact rules that must be followed closely lest the music stops being faithful to the tradition. Jazz has many traditions as well, but it has evolved only by breaking these traditions, having rules flexible enough to be bendable and fluid, increasingly welcome to influences from the outside. The more open it has become, the more it has been able genuinely to evolve.

Consider the earliest fusions of jazz with Asian music. The early 60's found the peripatetic wild man Tony Scott playing with Indonesian musicians. The result is a Gamelan orchestra with a swing beat on trap set and a clarinet soloist floating above it. Clearly, the jazz conventions rule over the exotica. But a decade later you have guitarist John McLaughlin combining rock pyrotechnics with the complexity of Indian music in the Mahavishnu Orchestra, and later in Shakti. The music plays on the virtuosity of both traditions, even if

it is detached from the conventions of either. The rhythms blend the Indian with the incessance of rock. What makes it work is the unstoppable pulse of the groove, an honest groove that ties a sound to the place it really comes from. It doesn't sound like the swing of Tony Scott in Java sound but a whole new kind of swing that unites disparate cultures. That is the openness of jazz – always able to look somewhere new. Established traditions are not prepared to do that. Jazz always evolved by never being sure of its boundaries.

But how far can boundaries be stretched, or how many new sprouts can come from experimental branches? Consider a favourite band from my teenage years, Oregon, known for a peculiar fusion of guitar, oboe, rubber-band bass, a sit-down worldwide percussion kit, and piano or guitar into a uniquely chamber kind of improvised space. What set Oregon apart from similar fusions of jazz with classical or worldwide influences was a series of four very distinct musical personalities dedicated toward truly expressing themselves as they play. Here is how writer David James Duncan describes one of their tunes, played live in the Oregon woods on Cascade Head:

'The music begins, like everything else on this planet, with the water: Walcott's tablas dripping a steady, assonant stream of drops, Moore's bass tok-tok-tokking in high, percussive overtones, Towner's Prophet also pouring out something percussive, quiet and wet. It sounds as though there is a seep, a tiny spring, hidden in the scorched rocks and warm shadows. And when McCandless kindles a little tin whistle we realise there's a bird, too ... The bird cries go frantic. And finally it comes: resolution ... Again and again the four tremendous bass notes. Again and again the ecstatic birds, swirling round their lost brother in a cloud that finally vanishes, with a beautiful echo, back into the cavern.

In Duncan's memoir the band soon rustles up a real live thunderstorm and seems to play an entire headland and sky. Music in nature indeed!

There are real jazz solos in the group, where individuals play uniquely over interesting chord changes that could come out of Debussy or Hindemith – more so than from 30's and 40's pop tunes. In their heyday of the late 70's and early 80's this was a remarkable and original band, composed of four people playing together rather than a set of four instruments. No scores for this group, no pieces that any other ensemble could emulate. A unique mix, instant human creativity in action.

There are many musicians who grew up on the spirit and energy of Oregon and the ECM pantheon who have become inspired to follow up on this jazz openness. But where has it gone? What music has grown from these roots?

'World Music'

Over the last fifteen years there has been a burgeoning interest in something called 'world music', a bit of an ironic title, since is not all music of this world? The epigram to the compendious encyclopaedia *The Rough Guide to World Music* might say it best. The words come from the pseudonymous Hijaz Mustapha, of the band 3 Mustaphas 3: 'Four fifths of the world cannot be wrong.' What can this mean? I have an idea about it:



pre-world Codona in corporate discussion

movement, or on songs with AABA forms. It is based on a single tonality throughout the whole piece, and, more importantly, a driving rhythm that never lets up, be it slow or fast, seductive or danceable, easy or relentless. Put it simply, the groove.

We can learn grooves from all over the world and adapt them to our purpose, but so often this turns into mush. Music ends up slipping into familiar characters whether we want it to or not. The listeners – perhaps we should say the consumers – wants to know what they are getting. The problem here for world music is that it is usually sorted by country, and any musician or group who blends the African or the Celtic, the Zen and the Islamic, the north and the south has no place to hide and be found. How is the result of intercultural fusion distinct from pop music, jazz, or classical when it comes down to looking for it in the shop? Doesn't each example share enough with one of these older categories so that it could be accurately placed there?

I used to think it was jazz if the individual improvising style of the players was the core of the sound. Now I am not so sure. It is not pop music if it's not aimed at the masses. It is not classical if it doesn't bow to the rules and structures of that social world. So where is it?

The world music that I play cannot be saved by identity politics. It does not exist to represent any particular ethnic group, country, or part of the world. Instead, it reflects a particular aspect of many of the world's cultures, the result of my individual trip through them: walking, listening, travelling, joining in while still maintaining some aesthetic distance. It is from the jazz tradition that I want my individuality to be known; this may be a form of egotism but it is one which does ally me to this one genre of music. The individual player comes first, making the music out of the materials collected and assumed. The playing must be more distinctive than the composition, the situation, or the rules.

Most world music lapses into the expected bank-

technologically enforced new age aesthetic of relaxation. Neither approach asks for surprises. At least not too many surprises. Too much art pleases us enough to keep us complacent, or else screams as an affront to the complacency. Not enough offers a navigable way from the expected into the forest of the new.

The best example of a figure who used the music of the world to bolster his own jazz sense of expression would have to be trumpeter Don Cherry, who came out of the raucous but R&B based experimental exuberance of the Ornette Coleman band at the end of the 1950's. Here was a trumpeter with quirky technique, but an imminent joy in every note he let loose. When he began to travel the world and pick up new toys – whistle-flutes from India, doussouniguini guitars from Africa, Indonesian scales and all assortments of bells and gongs – he did not let it all dissolve into ornamental exotica. Every note he plays you know to be his, there is such love and surprise, such groove and discovery, such a presence of the individual man, following the beats and breaking all the rules with a careful but sudden escape of the expected and the clear. When Don hit a wrong note he would not let his playing apologise, he would use the mistake, explore it, show us how hard it really is to know wrong note from right as long as you have that feel. Cherry took the same openness to accident and placed his personal voice in all kinds of musical contexts. If you listen to his work that consciously tries to blend the influences of many cultures, it may at first seem easy to figure out or plan to imitate. Why is it then that so many imitations of his approach lack his lustre and immediacy? I think it is because they lack the emotional availability of good jazz soloing. A solo must be based on love, it should be played outward, to the audience, also reaching from the past to the future, pushing the music forward while not coming out of nowhere. The music is still jazz if this soloing, this