Jazz on Record: Three Perspectives

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Strictly on the Record: the art of jazz and the recording industry

The invention of recorded sound has revolutionized all forms of music and the way music is used. A little more than century ago, people bought sheet music and made their own music. Today, recorded music is digital, portable and serves as the soundtrack to every aspect of a person's life.

Jazz was fortunate enough to evolve into existence during roughly the same period as Emile Berliner's and Thomas Edison's first attempts at capturing actual sound. The art of jazz and the craft of recording have had a long and sometimes rocky relationship.

If a Tree Falls in the Forest …

But documenting sound is essential to jazz. Without it, jazz history would exist only as scraps of evidence and hearsay. The first chapter of jazz development in New Orleans went unrecorded. Decades later, scholars scrambled to capture oral histories by witnesses to reconstruct the sound, style and content of Buddy Bolden's music. The accounts by fellow musicians do little to bring this music to life; it is unrecorded and therefore lost forever.

For centuries, the principal conveyance and archive of European classical music was the written score. Even if all the subtleties of various interpretations of a piece were lost to history, the survival of a score ensured the survival of the piece itself.

A Duke Ellington or Fletcher Henderson arrangement can survive on paper, but without aural evidence of how a band swings and blends and how its soloists render the piece whole through their improvisations it is merely a map to nowhere. Hearing pieces like the Brandenburg Concerti played on original instruments give us some insight into how many nuances are lost without a recorded example.

Jazz in New Orleans began as an ensemble art (and in certain respects, all jazz still is), but Louis Armstrong's seminal Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings shifted the focus to the soloist. The improvisation became the most important aspect of a performance regardless of its composed framework. The distinctive tone that a jazz artist produces, the weight he or she puts on each note, the inflections and bending of notes and the internal rhythm from which his or her phrasing develops are that musician's voice or artistic identity.

A written transcription of a solo is an effective teaching tool that can give insight into an improviser's methods and thought process. But it cannot convey the heart and

spirit of the music. A transcription will never lead one to produce the sound and phrasing of the solo's creator without hearing the actual recording of that solo. I doubt this dilemma is confined to jazz; just imagine what amazing music we'd have today if Johann Sebastian Bach had a tape recorder by his organ.

Getting Out of the Neighborhood

To preserve sound is one thing; to disseminate it is quite another. Enter the record industry. Fortunately, Berliner's flat disc surpassed Edison's cumbersome cylinder and became the industry standard.

By the second decade of the Twentieth Century, the record industry was growing at a fast rate. Anyone in the world with a phonograph could hear such icons as Enrico Caruso and John Phillip Sousa in their own homes. In 1917, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band had made its way from New Orleans to Chicago and New York. During their successful engagement at New York's Resenweber's Restaurant, this all-white ensemble made the first recordings of this African American art form with the novelty-laden 'Livery Stable Blues' which became a tremendous hit and popularized the genre that had only started to travel beyond New Orleans and the riverboats in 1914 when Freddie Keppard ventured to Los Angeles. Keppard had an offer to record in 1916, but passed up the opportunity for fear other musicians would steal his work.

The record industry grew at a phenomenal rate. Mamie Smith's 'Crazy Blues' in 1920 was said to have sold a million records within the first six months of its release, insuring that Black music would no longer be ignored.

In November 1925, Louis Armstrong began his series of Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings for OKeh, a succession of performances that topped the national charts and revolutionized the jazz world. These were followed in a short time by Duke Ellington's equally influential 'jungle' orchestra recordings.

Unrelenting Technology and its By-products

Technologically, the industry was growing as well. In September 1925, electrical recording with microphones was introduced, though not immediately in widespread use. It freed musicians tremendously to play in a more natural set-up. With the acoustic recording process, musicians had to gather around the recording horn in a cumbersome configuration in relation to the amount of sound their instruments would produce to get a proper balance. Tuba had to substitute for the string bass and violinists had to attach a little amplification horn to their instruments.

Sound came to film in 1928 and soon the recording industry lagged far behind the film industry. Records were recorded directly onto a 78 rpm shellac disc from which a metal negative could be created so that records could be pressed in quantity.

In the meantime, Hollywood was recording music directly onto film which had discreet tracks of information that allowed an orchestra to be recorded on one track while the vocalists could be dubbed in on another track at a later date. (Just think

what an MGM Musical would have sounded like if Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers had to sing live while they flew around a sound stage.)

Film was also a much cleaner and more lasting process on which to record, but an expensive one. Overdubbing as a technique for sound recordings would, with a few exceptions, have to wait. One fascinating exception was the April 19, 1941 Victor session by Sidney Bechet at which he recorded 'The Sheik Of Araby' and 'Blues Of Bechet.' Bechet played all the instruments: clarinet, tenor sax, soprano sax, piano, bass and drums. He accomplished this by playing one part that was recorded onto a disc on one lathe. Then the engineer would play that back to him as he added another part; both the playback and the new part would be sent to another cutting lathe. This process was repeated until the performance was completed.

Around 1940, the 33 1/3 acetate was introduced. It had two advantages: better fidelity with a quieter surface and larger size. It was 16" in diameter rather than 10" or 12" so one could record up to 12 minutes of music on it. At the time though, consumer equipment could only handle 10" and 12" 78 rpm singles which restricted the playing time to 3:30 and 5:00 respectively.

This limitation was particularly annoying for classical music listeners who had to continually change discs to get through a single concerto or symphony. But it might have been a disciplinary blessing for jazz soloists.

In the '40s, the average jazz ensemble was a big band or a six-to-eight piece ensemble and the average performance was a mere three minutes. Musicians had to learn to develop the skill and internal editing process to nail a great solo in one or two choruses. Part of the genius of Charlie Parker, for example, was what he could accomplish under such circumstances.

For musicians born after World War Two and raised in the world of 12" long-playing albums with 20-minute sides, there were no such time restrictions placed upon them. If it took four or five choruses to work up to that great one, well so be it. This is an oversimplified generalization, but this illustrates one way in which technology affected the musician's art and the listener's expectations.

By 1956, the majority of jazz recordings were made by trios, quartets and quintets and the average time of a performance was six to seven minutes. To be sure, this extended playing time allowed many masterpieces to be created and documented, but it also spawned many dull or uneventful choruses on albums that would have benefited by better planning and discipline.

I remember a Sunday afternoon jam session at the Five Spot around in 1965. For the last set, pianist Barry Harris looked up wearily at the three saxophonists and two trumpeters at the front of the stage; I overheard him say, "Gentlemen, for God's sake, please tell short stories."

Working on a Mosaic boxed set of the '40s small group swing recordings of the HRS label, I marveled at how much playing and writing can be packed into three minutes by capable hands.

Every advance in the recording process has proved a double-edged sword for the musical purist. The introduction of ¼" tape in 1949 gave us the ability to edit music freely. In the era of the acetate, a great take with a flubbed ending would go unheard. With tape, that take can be transferred and a good out chorus from another take can make it whole and releasable. And in the decades since many a great take has been saved by the ability to record an insert ending to rescue an otherwise outstanding take.

This development was seized upon immediately by the classical music industry. For the past fifty years, it has become the norm to record pieces – solo piano performances as well as symphonic or chamber works – four-to-eight bars at a time. The result is a perfect performance, but is it a real performance?

Jazz producers, for the most part, used tape editing judiciously to save a take by editing out a bad chorus or replacing an ensemble section that contained a musical clam. But there were excesses. The released version of 'Jumpin' At The Woodside' from Buck Clayton's Jam Session series for Columbia Records ping pongs between two different takes recorded six months apart with different personnel and instrumentation!

Multi-track recording eased in around 1956 with two-track and three-track tape machines that allowed for discreet tracks of audio information. This paved the way for stereo. The better engineers approached three-track recording as stereo with information on the left, in the middle and on the right. On Miles Davis's *Kind Of Blue* for example, Fred Plaut put the tenor sax and piano on track one, the trumpet and bass on track two and the alto sax and drums on the right. The placement was much like the group would appear on stage. This was an improved version of live-in-the-studio recording. It did not allow a bass player to punch in to his track to correct a note after the fact because he was on the same track with the trumpet.

It was with the advent of eight-track tape machines, which used one-inch wide tape, that multi-track recording began to change how music was recorded. All sorts of overdubs done after the fact were now possible and often a vocalist or instrumentalist had his or her own track on which he or she could later punch in to correct a mistake or improve a phrase. Multi-track tape also enabled the producer to concentrate on the performance and worry about the balance of all the elements of the music later when the tape was mixed down to mono and stereo.

These were all good developments to be sure, but these luxuries (made even more facile today in Pro Tools) can erode the musical disciplines of accuracy and dynamics. When I listen to recordings like Frank Sinatra's classic mid-fifties albums with arrangers Nelson Riddle or Billy May, I marvel at the precision, blend, shadings and swing that were achieved by one singer and two dozen musicians recording live in one room to a mono tape machine. A three-hour recording session yielded four perfectly performed and beautifully mixed masterpieces. Could that be done today by a generation raised on options?

In the jazz arena, one downside to multi-track recording, which later grew to 16, 24 and finally 48 tracks, was the tendency for engineers to separate the musicians so

their tracks would not have a lot of bleed from other instruments if they wanted to make repairs or change a part. Suddenly the drummer, the bassist and the vocalist were put in enclosed booths and horns were positioned far away from the piano. As a result, everyone needed headphones to hear their fellow musicians and their line of sight was impaired. This made many musicians feel isolated and uncomfortable and eroded the spontaneity and interaction of the performance. [For this reason, among others, many musicians and engineers have shifted back to recording acoustic jazz live in a room to two-track stereo.]

Recorded music of any genre is frozen in time and meant to be heard repeatedly. So the pursuit of perfection is a natural course of action. It is also a sensible one as long as the feeling and development of the music are not sacrificed in the process.

Living in the Past can have its Rewards

With an art form that so depends on individual sound, improvisation and interplay, the recorded legacy is all we have to hear and experience the richness, diversity and evolution of jazz. In that light, reissues are extremely important and not just for jazz collectors and historians. New generations of listeners and music students are continually discovering jazz; it is important to have the best that all eras of this music have to offer available all the time.

Reissues date back to the mid-thirties when Commodore and HRS, two of the earliest independent labels, began licensing and reissuing great but unavailable jazz 78s from the major labels. With the advent of the LP, labels naturally began to gather viable material from every musical arena to create an LP catalog quickly. But once sessions for long-playing albums began to roll at a regular rate, reissues became something of a rarity.

When Columbia embarked on a series of 3-LP boxed sets with scholarly booklets in the early ‘60s (it included titles focusing on Swing Street, Jack Teagarden, Mildred Bailey, Woody Herman, Billie Holiday and Duke Ellington among others), it was big news. It was also short-lived; these reissues, which were expensive to produce and manufacture, were selected for historical reasons and aimed at the serious listener. RCA revived its Bluebird label to issue LPs on Coleman Hawkins, Ellington small groups and be-bop among others, but these too disappeared rather quickly.

Albums of music recorded in the LP era were either still in print or deleted and seemingly gone forever. That changed in the early seventies, when the independent San Francisco label Fantasy acquired the Prestige, Riverside and Milestone catalogs. To maximize their purchase, they coupled the best albums in these catalogs into attractively packaged and reasonably priced double albums. Suddenly these great recordings had a new life and were being bought by a new generation.

The larger labels like Columbia, MCA (which owned Decca), ABC (which owned Impulse and United Artists (which owned Blue Note and Pacific Jazz) followed suit, but soon lost interest because the sales volume did not measure up by major label standards.

It was not until the introduction and acceptance of the Compact Disc in the mid '80s, after a severe slump in the record business, that labels discovered that it could be highly profitable to use this new configuration to resell one's catalog all over again. And then the flood gates opened!

In 1987, catalog departments were popping up everywhere and reissues in every possible genre poured forth and continue to do so 17 years later. It was a dream come true for the jazz fan; hundreds of rare deleted titles became available again. And all the acknowledged masterworks were available in cleaner sound in a longer lasting format.

Looking Back and Missing the Future

When Bruce Lundvall reactivated Blue Note Records in 1984, he asked me to oversee reissues and produce new recordings. In 1985, we issued roughly ten newly recorded albums and 40 reissues. Today the ratio remains the same; roughly 20% of our jazz releases are new recordings.

This brings up the issue of new versus old. If there were no reissues, would Verve or Blue Note increase the amount of new recordings they would produce and release. The answer is an unequivocal no. The time and resources required to produce new recordings – especially within the structure of a major label – keeps the number of releases fairly finite.

In fact, without reissues the number of new recordings might decrease. Most reissues make money. Even in these times where artwork and remastering costs are higher that the entire cost of making the original albums, a reissue will most likely break even within six months of release and become profitable. An uncomfortably high percentage of new pure jazz recordings do not make a profit.

The income from reissues allows us the freedom to record a lot of worthy projects that don't necessarily make back their money. Without the cushion of catalog, the corporate pressure to record only albums with a good possibility to cross over to a larger, more commercial market would be tremendous.

But reissues also have a troubling effect in the marketplace. Each time a contemporary tenor saxophonist like Joe Lovano or Mark Turner puts out a new album, that title goes head-to-head in the record shop with scores of established masterpieces by John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young. And those proven classics usually come with a lower selling price than new recordings. So if you are 22-years-old and on a limited budget, will you try out two new CDs or will grab three indisputable classics that you have yet to own?

Therein lies our Catch-22. We keep mining catalog for its historical importance and because the income continues to justify recording new artists. Yet that same catalog proves irresistible competition for the new music it enables us to record.

The labels have tried many ways to break that cycle. Lowering the price of new recordings doesn't sell more units; it merely makes it harder to break even and

continue with that artist. Subsidizing new music samplers to the consumer at little or no cost doesn't seem to translate into more record sales for the artists represented. Press and advertising seem only to help an artist hold on to his fan base rather than expand it.

In the '50s and '60s, when modern jazz was at the peak of its popularity, most major American cities had 24-hour commercial jazz stations on the FM dial, giving new recordings constant exposure. When someone's record became popular, there would jazz clubs in those cities that would bring that artist. There were a wealth of professional booking agencies handling a hefty roster of jazz groups. Those networks have been irreparably eroded, and new jazz recordings are woefully underexposed.

What Now?

The music business in general is shrinking. And when there is trouble in high-grossing pop world, the big record labels usually start their cost-cutting with small divisions like jazz and classical music even if these divisions are showing a modest profit. That might not sound logical, but when a corporation is operating in panic mode, short-term thinking dictates that one get rid of anything that cannot solve your problem. And, I'm afraid, this is where we are headed yet again.

The good news is that the major label mentality need not dictate the career potential of a creative musician or composer. Just as artist-run lofts appeared all over New York in the '70s when many established clubs were closing or moving away from a jazz policy, more and more young artists will find self-determination as the most satisfying route to purse. That route may mean more work and acquiring more skills, but determining one's own destiny and retaining ownership of one's own music is certainly worth the price.

With desktop publishing, pro tools and the internet, technology is at a point where creating the means to record, package and sell one's own music is a very real and attainable alternative. Websites that offer bios, photos and music to audition offer a new artist worldwide exposure and some ability to market him or herself.

Consider a CD that costs $20.000 to make. If a record company pays for the master and gives the artist a $5000 advance, all of that is recoupable against his or her royalty of $1 per CD. Artists only start to receive royalties after 25,000 copies are sold.

Let's look at another scenario with the same project. An artist can raise or borrow $20,000 to make the record and another $10,000 for modest artwork and a run of 5000 copies. The artist then sells those 5000 copies off the bandstand and via the internet for $16 per CD. Approximately one dollar goes to the composers and publishers whose work is performed.

After 2000 copies are sold, the loan can be paid off and the artist can keep the rest of the gross income from the remaining 3000 CDs ($45,000). It may take more time

to sell those 5000 copies than it would a label and sure as hell will take a lot of effort, but rewards of eliminating all the middlemen speak for themselves.

Some artists will find homes at established record labels, large and small. And if the fit is right, both parties will benefit. But I believe more new artists will create their own streams of marketing and delivering music.

Regardless of the path taken, documenting one's music is the only way to say you've been here.