

Saints Marching In: Meditations on Jazz

by

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The cool middle-register existential notes of trumpeter Miles Davis, the savage Hammond organ of Jimmy Smith, and the richly colored chords of guitarist extraordinaire Kenny Burrell made up my alternate world, one without words that took me to an ever expanding labyrinth of mental and emotional lands the past forty-five years.

My early exposure to jazz I attribute to my mother, who ironically was a professional classical singer and whose life-long love was medieval church music. I still remember the names of jazz legends like Charlie Parker and Philly Joe Jones and the empty wine bottles on the cobalt blue cover of my first Miles Davis album, a gift from my mother. She also took me to hear folksinger Pete Seeger at the Berkeley Community Theater when I was six or seven. It wasn't jazz, but I was imprinted into the joy of Pete's spontaneous playing, improvising and story-telling. I also recall watching New York Philharmonic conductor/composer superstar Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts and his What Is Jazz? program. Another gift from my mother that shaped my tastes was Brazilian guitarist Bola Sete's collaboration with San Francisco pianist Vince Guiraldi called From All Sides. Guiraldi's playful piano style became known world-wide as the joyful, playful sound of Charles Schulz's Peanuts cartoon television specials. The plaintive, soulful samba rhythms of Bola Sete led me to other Brazilian-influenced jazz musicians like Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd, and native Brazilians like Joao and Astrud

Gilberto, Airto Moriera, Baden Powell and Flora Purim all of whom I later saw in concert. I probably played the Guiraldi/Bola Sete album over two thousand times.

After sneaking up late at night to watch the 1962 movie Walk on the Wild Side, I developed an interest in New Orleans and New Orleans jazz. Reinforcing my fascination with New Orleans style jazz was Norman Jewison's classic movie The Cincinnati Kid with its five-card-stud showdown in the Big Easy between Steve McQueen as "The Kid" and Edward G. Robinson as the urbane worldly gambler. I was intrigued by the opening long range shot of a rain-soaked New Orleans funeral march and the subsequent scene of people dancing in the streets to the catchy syncopated rhythms of an upbeat tune. I later learned that this was one of the essences of the black experience – pain, and grief, and yet joy that the dead were going to a better place than this. And, at the age of thirteen in 1969, I experienced New Orleans jazz first-hand when I traveled with a group of eighth grade honors students for six weeks around the United States. I still can feel the steamy hot June evening and smell the musty cramped tiny room where I listened to musicians play New Orleans jazz, all of whom were 75 years of age or older and had grown up in the now-famous Storeyville section of New Orleans. The trombonist was Big Jim Robinson and the pianist they called Sweet Emma. I got a record album there for a five dollar donation and wore the grooves into troughs.

A final early influence on my love of jazz and eventually blues was my mother taking a friend and me attend a San Francisco Symphony Pops concert with the Corky Siegal/Shep Schwall Chicago Blues Band in 1970. The alchemic admixture of society sophisticates, hippies and hipsters, young people, the college-crowd and the hard-driving electric driven Chicago blues style set backed by the full symphony was a thrilling

experience. Years later a local musician drummer and I discovered that we had attended the very same concert almost forty years earlier. I have since become fascinated in the history of the blues, too, and attended many performances of great blues musicians including BB King, Albert King, Buddy Guy, Taj Mahal, Elvin Bishop and Robert Cray.

As a sophomore in high school I happened upon radio station KDIA out of Oakland, California. The disc-jockey's at KDIA. played Motown out of Detroit, Stax Records out of Memphis, Curtis Mayfield, Tower of Power, and also soulful R&B/jazz cross over performers like Jimmy Smith, Idris Muhammad and George Benson. My best buddy Marshall Thompson and I listened religiously to KDIA. Later we discovered an extraordinary jazz station, KJAZZ on the FM dial. We compared notes every morning at school and Friday and Saturday evenings we raced up Bayshore Freeway to San Francisco to hear our favorite artists perform at the Both/And Club and the Keystone Corner. I've forgotten how many greats we saw, but I remember a sweaty intense Dexter Gordon, a moody Bobby Hutcherson, a surreal rap-infused and soulful Rashaan Roland Kirk (who played three saxophones at one time), slick-sounding Ernie Anderson, a fiery Freddie Hubbard, Hubert Laws, Donald Byrd and many, many more. We later saw pops concerts with pianist George Shearing and keyboardist George Duke. As junior, my high school English teacher, a Detroit native, introduced me to Detroit jazz legends, Dinah Washington and Kenny Burrell. I had always like Billie Holiday, but learned to love Dinah Washington's tough, distinctive style as well. And, I've never since heard richer, more beautiful chording than Kenny Burrell played – a real artist. My English teacher also introduced me to the nuances of the Miles Davis' classic of classic albums, Kind of Blue.

The summer of 1972 after graduating high school I returned to New Orleans as an assistant on a small film crew filming regional cooking styles throughout the United States. I spent every evening drinking Jax beer an old saloon called Crazy Shirley's during our one week stay in New Orleans. At the end of each night, I put a couple dollars in the basket in front of the stage and the band played my favorite ballad, Since I Fell for You.

My first year at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), I took a history of jazz class. My girlfriend and I drove to Los Angeles and interviewed Duke Pearson President of Blue Note Records, for our class project. Our jazz history instructor, who had played with John Coltrane among others, told us: "The test of a great artist is not speed, but the ability to play a ballad".

I went to many memorable jazz concerts in San Diego. I attended a manic performance by drummer Buddy Rich and his Big Band at the Catamaran at Mission Bay. Rich drove the band like a stampeding herd. He allowed no breaks between songs, just one frenetic hard-driving uncompromising chart after another followed by a frenzied drum solo at the end of each one. Herbie Hancock came to UCSD when he was transitioning into his Headhunters funk era, vibraphonist Gary Burton played there, Billy Cobham, John McGlaughlin and many, many more.

The summer of between my sophomore and junior year I moved to Los Angeles, worked in a printing factory, and got an apartment down the street from Warner Brothers studios in Burbank. After my shift, I rode horses in Griffith Park and in the evenings and went out to the clubs and the Hollywood Bowl summer concerts series. I saw Count Basie, Joe Williams, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and pianist Oscar Peterson among

others. Oscar Peterson was astounding in his absolute command of the piano – a colossus. And, I heard the most memorable concert of my life at Dante’s club in North Hollywood. Trumpeter Maynard Ferguson and his band played with chaotic, Dionysian abandon. I have never seen, heard or felt such musical energy, power and virtuosity. Every member of his band could solo with brilliance. Ferguson played all over the register, hit double high C’s and seemed to be on another planet. The band was loose, wild, on the verge of exploding, yet musically masterful. Two years later Ferguson’s cover of the theme from the movie Rocky called Gonna Fly Now hit the top of the charts.

In the early eighties I studied for my doctorate in Physical Education at University of Northern Colorado. By coincidence the UNC Jazz Studies Program led by Gene Aitken, received more Down Beat magazine awards and more National Endowment for the Arts grants than any institution of higher education in the United States and was the only university jazz group ever nominated for a Grammy Award in vocal jazz. Drummer Louis Bellson who played in the big-bands of Duke Ellington and Count Basie came to UNC to give a master’s class and said, “The drummer is the athlete of the band,” and proceeded to explain the astonishing complexities of playing polyrhythms with hands and feet, all the while keeping time. Ramsey Lewis and Bobby McFerrin, both of whom were jazz educators as well as dynamic performers were among many, many memorable guest teachers and performers.

As faculty member at Humboldt State I took voice classes with Harley Muilenburg and sang in the vocal jazz group for two semesters. Harley was absolutely delightful, always patient, ready to laugh, and took time he didn’t have to work one-on-one with me. As the semester went on his office papers and music scores climbed higher

towards the ceiling and increasingly more errant students stopped by to ask for his help on some class or project. Still, Harley made time for me. I took another history of jazz class with faculty colleague, Gil Cline, who helped me understand the structure of jazz and its ninths, thirteenth chords, the mysteries of “swing” and the subtleties of form. I still analyze structure and form out of the text and enjoy it! I took up guitar, taught myself to play old 50’s and 60’s rock and roll songs shamelessly, but I am only beginning to learn to play anything that remotely sounds like jazz. Humboldt State’s Center Arts has had a remarkable program of jazz greats including Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Dave Brubeck, McCoy Tyner and countless others.

I read a story recently about Wynton Marsalis that to me, truly illustrates jazz. Marsalis was in the middle of a contemplative solo at a small club in New York when he was interrupted by a patron’s cell-phone. The person answered his phone, started talking, and walked right in front of Marsalis and continuing to converse as he went out the door. Marsalis stopped playing. Everyone in the club fell silent. There was a long, long awkward pause. And then Marsalis started to play again, first mimicking the ring of the cell phone. He improvised a melody, changed key, moved back into the solo he had previously abandoned, and finished up. Now that is jazz. You deal with what you’ve got, change it, recreate it, and make it your own. I also remember Marsalis saying on many occasions that no matter how complicated jazz gets, that it “always comes back to the blues”. And the blues is about pain, suffering, riffing on your own woes, but with imagination and feeling.

Other impressions of performers I saw live include the sheer joy of Cal Tjader and Cannonball Adderley, the moody perfectionism of Keith Jarrett, the still powerful

stride-piano mastery of old warrior Albert Ammons, and the palpable humanity and innovation of Dave Brubeck. I also will never forget a 1:30 AM performance by Ray Charles in the Oakland Coliseum at the Oakland Jazz Festival. The festival host announced that the Oakland City Fire Marshall had informed him of his decision to enforce a curfew ordinance, and that the festival was concluded. Ray Charles was the last on the program and had yet to perform. The crowd was on the verge of a riot. Then all the lights all went off. There crowd was in a panic. All of a sudden, a lone spotlight illuminated a golf-cart careening in from the right-field bull-pen towards the stage. Next to the driver sat sequined-bedecked man in sunglasses. The cart stopped, and the driver led him to the piano, still without stage lighting. "It's Ray!" people were yelling, like they were heralding great country preacher into the tent before a revival. The lights suddenly came on in the ballpark, and Ray Charles hit the first chord of What'd I Say. 30,000 people erupted. It was jazz, blues, soul, and incredible theater. It WAS a revival.

Some of individual recordings that I treasure the most include: Herbie Hancock's I Have a Dream, Horace Silver's Song for My Father Kenny Burrell's Midnight Blue, Stanley Turrentine's Sugar, Herbie Mann's Coming Home Baby, Miles Davis's So What and Blue in Green, Dave Brubeck's Take Five, Lee Morgan's Since I Fell for You, Stephan Grapelli's Ain't Misbehaving, Eddie Harris and Les McCann's Swiss Movement, Buddy Rich's West Side Story, Freddy Hubbard's Mirrors and Red Clay, John Coltrane's Blue Trane, Ramsey Lewis's Wade in the Water and the In Crowd, and Jimmy Smith's Blues in the Night.

For forty-five years jazz has been a constant. But what was it about New Orleans jazz? I realized only recently my attraction to New Orleans jazz and that it

held the secret to my own personal jazz odyssey. New Orleans jazz embodied the contrast of sadness and joy – an expression of life, and death. This was the kernel of truth within my own love of jazz. I listened to jazz in proportion to my own personal pain and hard-times. Jazz was and is a salve, an almost religious respite and renewal when times are the hardest. I find great joy in the rhythmic, musical and emotional complexity of jazz. But Wynton Marsalis was right - it always comes back to the blues.

Dick Stull, September 4, 2006