

JAZZ: A FORM FALLING FREE?

by Lynden Barber*

This article appeared in The Australian on July 31, 1999. Its introductory spiel read “Jazz was born this century. Will it survive into the next? Lynden Barber looks at its recent history and future prospects”.

A startling thought. Is contemporary jazz playing the role of postscript — a beautifully scribbled epilogue to a great literary work? The music has shown an extraordinary capacity for reinvention and renewal during its 100 or so years. Yet so inextricably bound is it to this century that it is sometimes hard to imagine how it might survive the next.

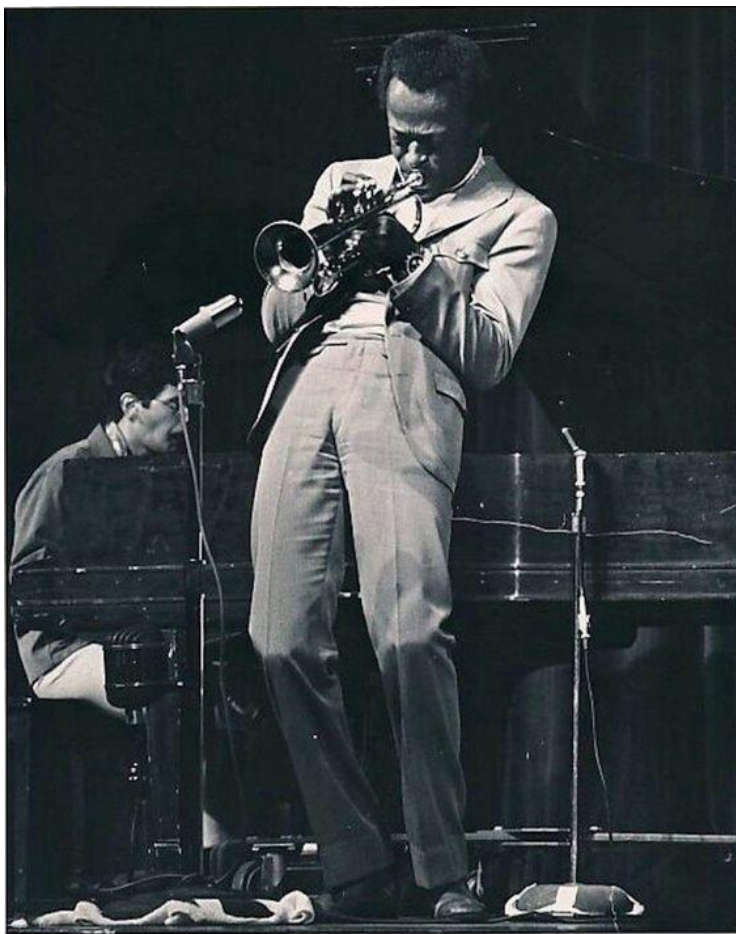


Lynden Barber: a film writer with also a special interest in world music and contemporary jazz...

**When this was written in 1999 Lynden Barber was The Australian’s film writer who also had a special interest in world music and contemporary jazz.*

Will it transcend the curious status it has routinely had to weather — its falling between the stools of pop and art — to be finally recognised as one of the century's great, original artistic contributions? Will it be seen in relation to the 20th century as, say, baroque was to the 17th? Or, too-long starved of the hothouse atmosphere that nurtured the emergence of genius after genius in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, will it fade into fustiness, appreciated by only a dwindling number of fanatics?

If we cannot know the answer, we can speculate about where the music has left to go. Since the 60s, jazz has spun in numerous directions: most obviously the freeform explosion, whose once revolutionary grammar has now been absorbed by much of the mainstream; and the infusion of rock and funk rhythms and textures popularised by Miles Davis, Chick Corea and co.



Pianist Chick Corea (left) pictured with trumpeter Miles Davis: they popularized the infusion of rock and funk rhythms and textures...

Following Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie's Cuban excursions in the 40s has been the incorporation of non-American ethnic influences. So vast is the phrase "world music" in its implications — a vague umbrella term covering all non-western music from the traditional to pop — that jazz players have only so far scraped the surface of the possible mutations. Global travel and recordings of ethnic music are now widely

available. While historically rooted in the black American experience, jazz has become an international music. For an idea of how diverse the benefits are, you only have to hear the township inflections of South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (aka Dollar Brand) followed by the hair-raising interplay of Russia's Ganelin Trio.



Jazz has become an international music, its diversity shown by artists such as South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (above) and Russia's Ganelin Trio (below)... IBRAHIM PHOTO CREDIT GRANT SMITH



If the routine nature of some of the music released these days on American labels can disappoint, the number of exciting recordings from Australia alone makes up for them (The World According to James, the Trevor Griffin Sextet and Clarion Fracture Zone spring to mind —there are others). Many of the strongest players of the future will continue to originate from outside the US.



Exciting recordings by groups such as The World According to James, led by trombonist James Greening (above) and Clarion Fracture Zone (below) make up for the routine nature of some of the music released these days on American labels...



A version of Clarion Fracture Zone, L-R, Andrew Dickeson (drums), Steve Elphick (bass), Sandy Evans (saxophones & flute), Alister Spence (keyboards), Tony Gorman (reeds)...

In this respect, the chamber jazz explorations begun by the German ECM label during the 70s have been vital. A vast array of music most famously pianist Keith Jarrett's blend of jazz and neo-classical impressionism — has emerged from Manfred Eicher's Munich operation to form a significant movement of its own. A mark of the label has been the habitual introduction of players from different countries and traditions and, if some of the music is arid, the label has covered sufficient bases to ensure that nothing about it is ever stable or fixed.



Keith Jarrett: his blend of jazz and neo-classical impressionism has contributed to the vast array of music on ECM...

In counterpoint has been the US movement led by trumpeter Wynton Marsalis to establish jazz as 20th century black America's classical music. If only Wynton would take a cue from his saxophonist brother, Branford, and go easy on the shirt starch. The school has had a deadeningly conservative influence, both outside and inside its borders. To bemoan the kneejerk habit of a seeming majority of contemporary performers to include at least one Thelonious Monk composition on their CDs is far from criticising that astonishing pianist.



The Marsalis brothers, Branford (left) and Wynton: Wynton's school has had a deadeningly conservative influence, both outside and inside its borders... PHOTO COURTESY DEFINITIVE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ & BLUES

Reversing into the future may have some mileage in it, however. It depends on where you reverse and how. Of the possible directions available, one has already tentatively begun: a reconsideration of the pop songbook of the past 30 years. Earlier jazz musicians routinely turned to their era's popular music. The songwriting was sophisticated, the standard exceptional. But is this no less true of Tom Waits, Elvis Costello, Brian Wilson, Joni Mitchell, Ron Sexsmith or Jeff Buckley? It's as true now as it was in the 1940s that audiences often like to hear original material leavened with more familiar tunes. If Count Basie could cover the Beatles, Gil Evans record Jimi Hendrix songs and Woody Herman turn to Steely Dan, why do so many contemporary musicians behave as if decent popular writing ended circa 1955?

Today's jazz tends to shroud itself in nostalgia for its golden age and, while much is highly enjoyable, one senses a closing in, a fear of deviating from the script. It might help if more improvisational musicians stopped thinking of themselves as tied to the tradition and instead viewed themselves as explorers using jazz as a jumping-off point. For example, ambient music has had an extra ordinary flowering in the experimental corners of the pop world while being largely ignored by jazz. One exception is The Necks, whose adherence to strict minimalist principles is

revolutionary in a music historically distinguished by virtuosity and individual expression.



The Necks, L-R, Lloyd Swanton, Tony Buck, Chris Abrahams: their adherence to strict minimalist principles is revolutionary in a music historically distinguished by virtuosity and individual expression....

Few jazz players have realised the extent to which jazz-inflected rhythms have invaded the progressive end of pop with the tricky, electronic patterns of jungle and drum 'n' bass — though UK guitarist Derek Bailey has explored the area. As for

sampling, it's true that the essence of jazz is live interaction. Yet German experimentalists Heiner Goebbels and Alfred Harth prefigured digital sampling with the live use of tape recordings in group improvisations at least 15 years ago. More recently, funky New York organ trio Medeski Martin & Wood has successfully recorded with an experimental DJ, as has American John Zorn —whose late 1980s, postmodern meltdown of Ennio Morricone film music remains a visionary achievement.



Medeski Martin & Wood (above) has successfully recorded with an experimental DJ, as has American John Zorn...

In a century divided by the tension between high culture and low, between modernism and pop (with postmodernism a self-conscious dialogue between the two), jazz has never really found a comfortable slot. It lacks the snob appeal of opening night at the opera but also the hip, happening cachet beloved of the mass media. This may be its strength — it enjoys the dedication and extreme skill of art without the pretensions.

Jazz's development has been — one might say gloriously — out of step with the century's defining art movements. Modernist composers made a fetish of difficulty while jazz was at its most approachable (though it moved towards modernist

principles in the 40s with bebop). Jazz captured the ears of serious composers including Igor Stravinsky early on, yet its New Orleans brothel origins combined with subtle racism to deny it respectability. Somehow jazz's visionary scrambling of "high vs low" distinctions —supposedly a postmodern trait — has gone largely unrecognised.



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Much of what jazz becomes may turn out to have only a tenuous link to the music that began in New Orleans. Much music that doesn't sound much like jazz has taken virtuosic and improvisatory principles straight from the jazz tradition, such as the electric Indo-western fusion of John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra in the 1970s. Jazz, rock or neither? In the end it's a question for pedants.
