

ALL THAT JAZZ ISN'T ALL THAT GREAT

by Justin Wm Moyer*

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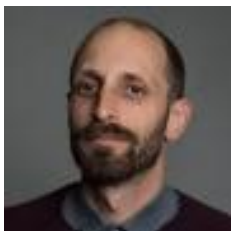
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/opinions/wp/2014/08/08/all-that-jazz-isnt-all-that-great/>

Jazz is boring. Jazz is overrated. Jazz is washed up.

Unlike a poorly received *New Yorker* piece purportedly written by jazz great Sonny Rollins, this is not satire. “Jazz might be the stupidest thing anyone ever came up with,” read “Sonny Rollins: In His Own Words” — actually written by Django Gold of the Onion. “The band starts a song, but then everything falls apart and the musicians just play whatever they want for as long they can stand it. People take turns noodling around, and once they run out of ideas and have to stop, the audience claps. I’m getting angry just thinking about it.”



A piece purportedly written by jazz great Sonny Rollins (above) appeared in the “New Yorker”... PHOTO COURTESY ILLAWARRA MERCURY



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Though Gold's piece elicited [an angry response from Rollins](#) and outrage under the Twitter hashtag [#rollinstruth](#), it was, as they say, funny because it was true. Jazz has run out of ideas, and yet it's still getting applause.

I studied jazz while an undergraduate at Wesleyan University and had the privilege of learning from, at varying distances, some of the genre's great performers and teachers, including Anthony Braxton, Pheeroan akLaff and Jay Hoggard.



Some of the genre's great performers and teachers, including Anthony Braxton (left), and Pheeroan akLaff (below), deigned to share their art at a quite white New England liberal-arts school...



I appreciated that these generous African American men deigned to share their art at a quite white New England liberal-arts school. But I just didn't get their aesthetic. Like cirrus clouds or cotton candy, I found jazz generically pleasing, but insubstantial and hard to grasp. Some of my problems:

1. Jazz takes great songs, and abandons the lyrics that help make them great.

Music minus words is one of jazz's favorite tropes. Many versions of jazz standards — including *I Cover the Waterfront*, *How High the Moon* and *My Funny Valentine* —

jettison poetry to showcase virtuosity. The result is a net loss. Compare two renditions of *Take the 'A' Train*. Though Duke Ellington often played the song without words, his version in the 1943 film *Reveille With Beverly* features this charming lyric: "Hurry — take the 'A' train to get to Sugar Hill, way up in Harlem." Sugar Hill, of course, had been home to prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance. So those 14 words establish the song as an African American anthem. Just three minutes long, Ellington's version is a joy to listen to.

About 20 years later, jazz legends Charlie Mingus and Eric Dolphy played an overlong version of "A' Train" on tour in Europe. It clocks in at more than 13 minutes, and the lyrics are replaced by an atonal bass-clarinet solo. I play the bass clarinet, and I like atonal bass-clarinet solos. But I'd trade one for a legendary American lyric any day.



Charlie Mingus (left) and Eric Dolphy: they played an overlong version of "Take The 'A' Train" on tour in Europe, clocking in at more than 13 minutes...PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER

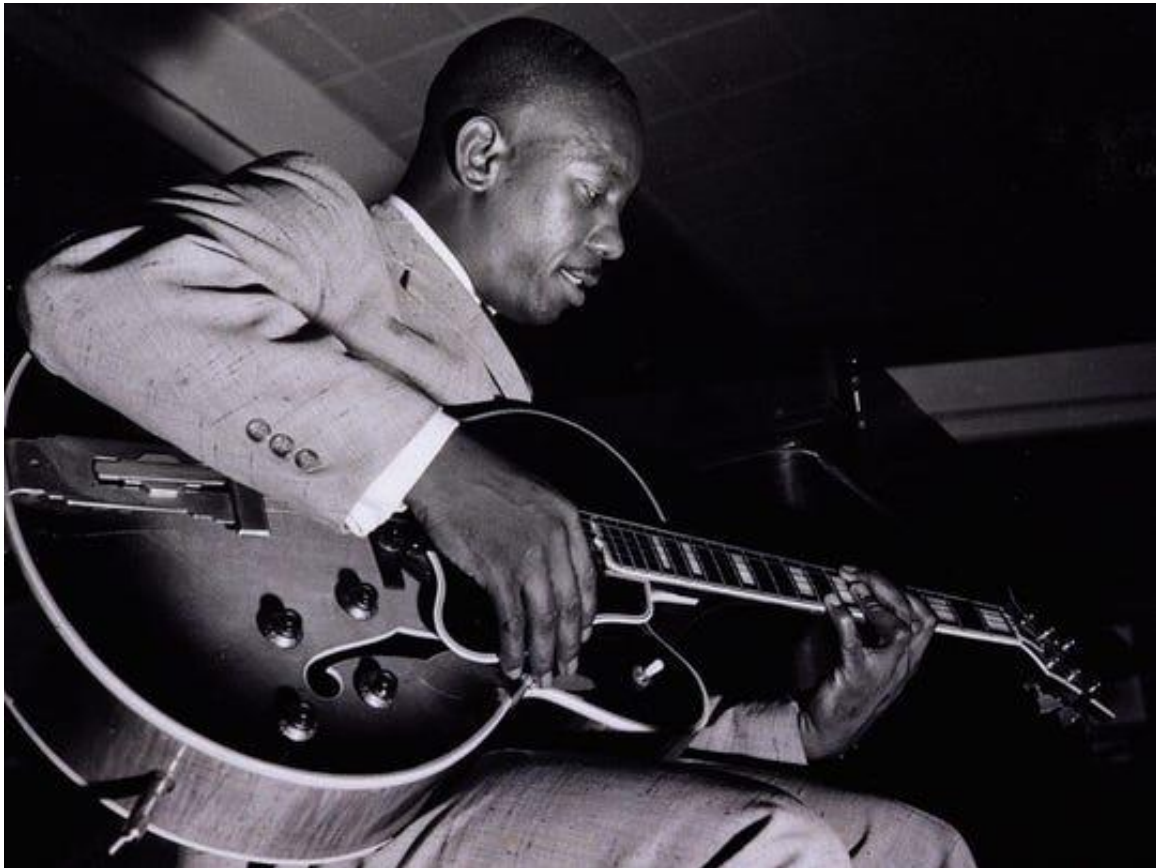
2. Improvisation isn't all it's cracked up to be.

The knowledge that great music is improvised makes it more remarkable. But the fact that music is improvised doesn't make it great. If it did, Phish and the Grateful Dead would be better than they are.

"Even when they are not soloing, members of a jazz band have to be intimately attuned to the music at all times because they never know what direction it might take," according to Loren Schoenberg, a conductor and saxophonist writing in

conjunction with the Ken Burns documentary *Jazz*. “If you don’t, you may, as John Coltrane once put it, feel as though you stepped into an empty elevator shaft.”

Unfortunately, rather than providing the thrill of standing at a precipice, improvisation by the likes of serviceable, forgettable, uncontroversial players such as guitarist Wes Montgomery is perfect for browsing at Barnes and Noble — or piping into elevators.



Improvisation by a forgettable, uncontroversial player such as guitarist Wes Montgomery (above) is perfect for browsing at Barnes and Noble... PHOTO COURTESY DOWNBEAT ARCHIVES

3. Jazz stopped evolving.

Ornette Coleman released *The Shape of Jazz to Come* in 1959. Coleman’s singular vision — which included atonality, a lack of traditional time signatures and uninhibited solo improvisation — anticipated free jazz and what’s called “new music.” A lot of new music sounds like an uncoordinated mess. In some ways, that’s the point. To borrow Gold’s phrase: It’s “noodling” in the value-free sense.

And by now, that sound has gotten pretty old. There’s not much difference between a screechy performance by avant-garde saxophonist Peter Brötzmann from 1974 and one from 2014. It’s as if jazz, music premised on aesthetic liberation, no longer has anything to push against.



Avant-garde German saxophonist Peter Brötzmann: there's not much difference between a screechy performance by him from 1974 and one from 2014...

For the most part, jazz is being kept alive by nostalgic Americans, such as Coltrane associate Bill Cosby, unwilling to embrace the music of a more alien, more controversial 21st-century African American underground — music like Big Freedia's sissy bounce. Younger artists such as pianist Vijay Iyer — a MacArthur fellow and Harvard professor — may write their own music, but they garner more attention for covering MIA. Jazz needs a reset that doesn't involve Us3 or Digable Planets, tame crossbreeds of jazz and hip-hop that briefly captured the popular imagination more than 20 years ago.

What does this reset look like? I have no idea. My flirtation with jazz was inglorious and short. But I know this once-vital genre will disappear if it continues to coast on its history.

4. Jazz is mushy.

“To many people, any kind of popular music now can be lumped with jazz,” jazz giant Wynton Marsalis complained in 1988. “As a result, audiences too often come to jazz with generalized misconceptions about what it is and what it is supposed to be.

Too often, what is represented as jazz isn't jazz at all." Though he's known for his musical conservatism, the problem Marsalis identified is real. Louis Armstrong is nothing like Kenny G. Charlie Parker and John Zorn do not seem to occupy the same sonic universe, let alone belong in the same record bin or iTunes menu.



Louis Armstrong is nothing like Kenny G (left, pictured with Miles Davis)...

And this lumping together happens beyond the music. President Obama once said his speaking style is sometimes "like jazz." Apparently, so is Jackson Pollock's painting and Ralph Ellison's prose. I find such blithe comparisons of jazz to non-musical art forms infuriating, particularly when nouns and verbs are involved. Jack Kerouac — progenitor of

"spontaneous bop prosody" who, as the legend goes, gobbled speed and vomited up *On The Road* in a three-week fit of improvisational typing — may be the closest thing we have to a "jazz writer," whatever that means. But Kerouac's unparalleled accomplishment has nothing to do with the pentatonic scale, the Mixolydian mode or tritone substitution.



Jack Kerouac (above), as the legend goes, gobbled speed and vomited up "On The Road" in a three-week fit of improvisational typing...

Marsalis implied that jazz's ubiquity is a result of money men taking advantage. That's certainly the case when jazz is used to sell Grey Goose. But we should also scrutinize the amorphous nature of the music itself. Unlike, say, rockabilly or Arnold Schoenberg's 12-tone music, jazz is plastic. It's a genre loosely defined by little more than improvisation, sunglasses and berets.

5. Jazz let itself be co-opted.

Marsalis's critics say that he gives "too little attention to innovations in the form since the 1960s," as the *New York Times* put it. But the main innovation since that era has been jazz's business plan. Jazz has staked out a comfortable niche as America's music, fetishized by the select few who actually listen to it — and many who don't. Ellington is a postage stamp. Ella Fitzgerald is a Google Doodle. Burns's jazz documentary is almost twice as long as his documentary about the Civil War.



Ken Burns: his jazz documentary is almost twice as long as his documentary about the Civil War...

This music has retreated from the nightclub to the academy. It is shielded from commercial failure by the American cultural-institutional complex, which hands out grants and degrees to people like me. Want to have a heated discussion about *Bitches Brew* or the upper partials? White guys wielding brass in Manhattan and New England are ready to do battle.

I'm getting angry just thinking about it.
