

YOU DIG ME? IT'S JAZZ THAT TELLS A STORY

by Ian Muldoon*

“It’s been hard goddam work, man. Feel like I spent 20,000 years on planes and railroads, like I blew my chops off I never tried to prove nothing, just always wanted to give a good show. My life has been my music, it’s always come first, but the music ain’t worth nothing if you can’t lay it on the public. The main thing is to live for that audience, ‘cause what you’re there for is to please the people.”

-Louis Armstrong, 1969 (*Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong*, by Terry Teachout, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York, 2009, p 371)



Louis Armstrong: the music ain't worth nothing if you can't lay it on the public...
PHOTO COURTESY TERRY TEACHOUT

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour.*

“Music is one of the great mysteries. It gives life. It is not a career, nor a business, nor a craft. It is a gift... and a great responsibility. Because one can never know where the creative spark comes from or why it exists, it must be treasured as Mystery. For the most part, I believe that creativity chooses you, not the other way around.”

-John Zorn, 2004



John Zorn: creativity chooses you, not the other way around... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ FROM NEW ORLEANS TO NEW AGE JAZZ

“In Ulm, John (Zorn) spits on a big burly guy talking in the front row. The guy doesn’t seem to notice. His friend sees it and cracks up. Band continues.”

-Dave Douglas in notes to *Sanhedrin - Masada 1994-1997*.



US trumpeter Dave Douglas, who is part of the quartet Masada...

“I do think that history has showed us that when times have been rough, they’ve produced some of the greatest music, movies, plays and whatnot from artists who feel it’s their duty to comment on, or hold up a window to, the evil that’s going on.”

-Spike Lee, June 2020



Spike Lee: artists who feel it’s their duty to comment on, or hold up a window to, the evil that’s going on...

Music is a mystery, true, but its skill in telling a story may be more powerful, more resonant, than any other art form, and perhaps the greatest storyteller is “jazz”. Its origins from the African diaspora in sub-Saharan Africa, revealed how language and music are intermingled. On the one hand there is the variation in pitch of the voice to indicate meaning; on the other there is African drumming which uses patterns and pitch variations to “speak”. In African Botswana music is so ingrained in their life that there is no word for “performance”.

In our modern world, a world of Freud, Marx, Einstein, Fascism, totalitarianism, Andy Warhol, Twitter, Hungry Jacks, COVID-19, and Children of God, “speaking” is much more complicated but its goal remains the same, which may be summed up in the phrase “you dig me?” It has a double meaning: do you appreciate me, and do you understand what I’m telling you?

The challenge of the artist, whatever his or her chosen art might be, is to effectively communicate feelings and insights and responses to the internal and external world they experience. This might be better said this way: Tell us your story! Tell us our story perhaps? Tell it like it is! Many listeners prefer escape, and much music is appropriated by corporations to provide that escape in shopping centres and department stores, on airplanes and in advertisements. Louis Armstrong may be heard being piped in to my local Fresco store to make me feel better about spending money. John Zorn isn't piped in.

In Louis Armstrong and John Zorn we have two artists who are at opposite ends of the artistic jazz spectrum, in that the former “just always wanted to give a good show” whilst the latter is fully engaged in responding to the world he inhabits emotionally, intellectually, politically. John Zorn is telling us our story, and telling it like it is, not just putting on a good show. Jazz is not just music and it's not just entertainment: it's the voice of freedom and more.

Some of the great responsibilities of the artist are to prevent the destruction of memory. Another is to reveal us to ourselves. Another is to bring us a range of feelings - joy as well as anger. Another is to inoculate us against stupidity. For the audience, and for an artist, art may be an escape or an experience.

A popular musician who took on some of these responsibilities was Bob Dylan, and he did it well. His Nobel Prize in Literature is justly deserved.



Bob Dylan: His Nobel Prize in Literature is justly deserved...

In modern art, Munch's internal world, as one example, is potently evident in his paintings. Picasso's *Guernica* is an artist's response to an external event as are Tracey Moffat's striking documents. Some argue, like Spike Lee, that the artist's role is to enlighten and inform and to inspire and move. In theatre Sam Shepard dedicated his life to telling his story and responding to the times he found himself in*.

**The One Inside, Shepard, Knopf, NY, 2017*)

I directed Sam Shepard's play *Icarus' Mother*, which opened inauspiciously on Friday, 13th May, 1988, at Mullumbimby Town Hall, in Northern NSW. It played to packed houses for three nights. On one level the play is about a group of three men and two women on a picnic waiting for a fireworks display. The group is American. They overeat, argue, play mind and word games like spoilt children, as they watch a jet aircraft in the skies overhead perform loops and at one stage skywrite $E=Mc^2$. The play ends with one character staggering off in confusion, and two holding hands and staring at the audience whilst the fireworks explode.

I chose to direct the play as a metaphor for the childlike inability of humans to respond effectively to impending nuclear catastrophe. The gap between humanity's unrefined primitive feelings and the sophistication of its creations seems unbridgeable. Shepard to me is one of the dramatists of the 20th Century who, in his writings, addresses some of the problems the artist has, in addressing existential issues in that astonishingly destructive and creative period.



Sam Shepard: the greatness of a Shepard play is that he makes you feel the mystery, the misunderstandings, the confusion of being human... PHOTO CREDIT JAKUB MOSUR

The greatness of a Shepard play is that he makes you feel the mystery, the misunderstandings, the confusion of being human. Just to take two dramatic devices used by Shepard in *Icarus' Mother*. One is the characters belching loudly following their gorging of the food. The second is the pilot of the jet fighter skywriting $E=Mc^2$. Those two images symbolise the gulf between the sensitive, vulnerable, flawed human and the Frankenstein of "perfection" he has created. The poetic elements of Frank's long poetic monologue which is the climax of the play, makes you feel the beauty of the flawed human and the ugliness of that perfect aircraft. If there's a sentence which seems to sum up much of Shepard's dramatic work, it's "there's a vague kind of terror going on, the people not really knowing what is happening." And it's true for audiences as well, that not a few felt, after attending my production, that they couldn't fathom what it was really about, even though they were guided to some extent by the programme notes.

The James Guppy poster for my production of this play is based on an iconic photo by the artist Diane Arbus. It's a potent image of the 20th Century - the child with the "weapon" of "mass destruction". We see mirrors of this visceral symbol when we consider President Truman clutching the Atomic Bomb (Hiroshima); President Nixon clutching a B52 (Cambodia); President George W Bush standing on an aircraft carrier in front of the sign "Mission Accomplished" (Iraq); or Prime Minister Scott Morrison brandishing a lump of coal in the House of Representatives in the Australian Parliament (Climate Change). These elected leaders are like the Arbus photo *Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, NYC 1962*: they are children with no apparent understanding of what it is they clutch. They are all white privileged male children in the richest countries, with their "toys" prepared to play their "games". Donald Trump may well turn out to be the most potent manifestation of the image of all - the most spoilt, with the least understanding of any.



Diane Arbus's "Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, NYC 1962"...

Diane Arbus - nee Diane Nemerov -was born in 1923 of Russian Jewish immigrants and in 1971 committed suicide aged 48.

Whether it was the limitations of science alone to provide solutions for humanity, (cf Hiroshima), or the industrial extermination of a people who held different beliefs to those temporarily in power, (cf The Holocaust), the artist's ability to respond to these calamities is a monumental if not impossible task, seemingly outside the capacity of the human soul to imagine. A major problem is the means of production; words cannot convey the horror, language is inadequate to the themes, because words are premised on reason and logic and structure.

T S Eliot's *The Wasteland* is memorable because of its music, not because of its "meaning", which requires major scholarship to unravel. The Italian Jewish chemist Primo Levi may be one of the finest writers, but even his words in such works as *If This Is A Man*, even with their moral potency, their analytical rigour, cannot match that which he attempts to describe, cannot generate the feeling in the reader. Levi committed suicide at age 67.

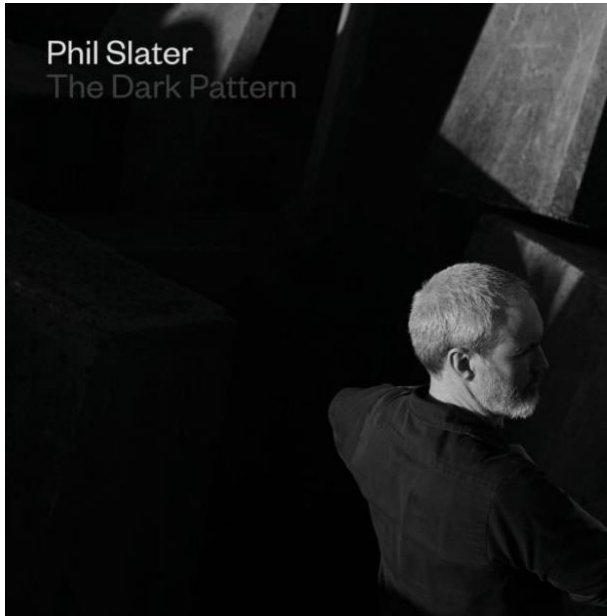


T S Eliot: his "The Wasteland" is memorable because of its music, not because of its "meaning"...



Primo Levi: he committed suicide at age 67...

Art's most potent response to life may be music, because music connects directly to the heart and is Art's great communicator. And the most potent music of all is improvised music called "jazz". Phil Slater's document *The Dark Pattern*, with its meditative and elegiac, bittersweet tone is one musical response. But there are thousands more by musicians immersed in this art, making us feel their response to the world, directly. Joy and pain, horror and delight, sometimes *in extremis*. Louis Armstrong communicated life's joy and energy almost like pure feeling.



Phil Slater's document "The Dark Pattern": a meditative and elegiac, bittersweet tone...

Louis Armstrong was born in 1900 of slave grandparents. His father worked as a labourer in a turpentine plant and his mother as a servant and as a casual prostitute. This was normal amongst the desperate poor of New Orleans in those times, and in the higher "classes", prostitution would go by some other name. Louis has stated that his mother's funeral was the only time he ever cried. It was "when they put that cover over her face." He sang in a quartet of street urchins and at 14 took up the cornet. Four years later he was the cornetist with the leading jazz band in New Orleans. Before he was 23, he was considered by his peers to be the best jazz musician alive.



Louis Armstrong: before he was 23 he was considered by his peers to be the best jazz musician alive...

*James Lincoln Collier, "The Making of Jazz", p 142, Granada, NY, 1978.

Rousseau believed that people in the state of nature were innocent and at their best, and that they were corrupted by the unnaturalness of civilization. The industrial revolution, where millions left the rural villages of farming communities where they had “lived off the land” for generations, and worked in mines and factories, witnessed an artistic reaction which depicted man as being torn from the web of nature and unnaturally set to work with and amongst machines. Sociological studies talked of *anomie* and *alienation*. Marx wrote about man being a “unit of labour” in the means of production. Psychologists wrote about personality constructs. Asylums for the insane flourished. Emile Durkheim wrote a defining book about suicide in Western society. It seemed Rousseau may have had a point.

When the distinguished pianist and composer Jaki Byard first met Louis Armstrong, he remarked: “As I watched him and talked with him, I felt he was the most *natural* man. Playing, talking, singing, he was so perfectly natural the tears came to my eyes.”



*Jaki Byard: As I watched Louis and talked with him, I felt he was the most natural man...
PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

Was Louis Armstrong the uncorrupted man that Rousseau envisaged? A brief timeline of Armstrong’s life against events of the day may be revealing of the gap between the “natural” and the world created by “civilization”.

1914 Louis takes up the cornet.

The European monarchies embark on World War I attempting to determine who has the biggest. 40 million perish.

1915 Louis gets a gig at a honky tonk called Matranga's in Storyville.

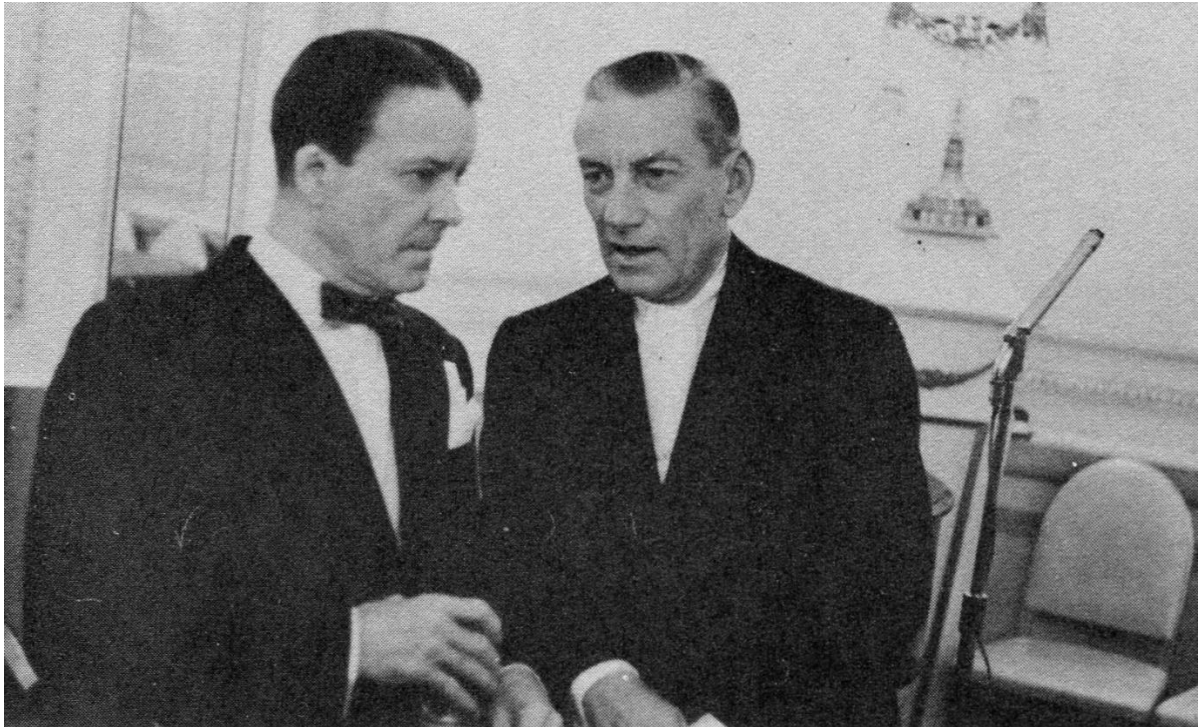
A three-hour film called *The Clansman*, later retitled *The Birth of a Nation*, is released on 8th February, 1915. It shows the Ku Klux Klan as valiant saviours of a post-war South, ravaged by Northern carpetbaggers and immoral freed blacks molesting innocent white girls. The Klan was there to save the South from savage black men raping white women. President Wilson views it in The White House and remarks: "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."



American President Woodrow Wilson on "The Clansman" later retitled "The Birth of a Nation": my only regret is that it is all so terribly true...

1923 Bix Beiderbecke and Hoagy Carmichael hear Louis Armstrong play with King Oliver, prompting Carmichael to later write: “Something as unutterably stirring as that deserves to be heard by the world.”

In Levy County, Florida, Rosewood town is destroyed and blacks massacred in a racially motivated act.



Hoagy Carmichael (right) pictured here with Eddie Condon: on hearing Armstrong play with King Oliver, Carmichael later wrote “Something as unutterably stirring as that deserves to be heard by the world”...

1925 Louis writes, and his Hot Five record, *Gut Bucket Blues*.

1925 35,000 Ku Klux Klan members march in Washington, DC.

1926 In February, Louis records *Heebie Jeebies* at his third session for Okeh where instead of singing the words to the second verse he sings: “Eeeff, goff, oomff, deebuht, deedle-la-bahm, rrrrip-bip-di-doo-di-doot”.

The US Supreme Court rules that selling a house to a black buyer is illegal where white residents have established a covenant over their street or suburb. This ruling leads to such covenants flourishing throughout the country.

1927 Louis’ Hot Seven record *West End Blues* and eight other sides.

1927 *The Jazz Singer*, the first sound film, opens with the star played by a white actor in black face. In 1998, the film was chosen, in voting conducted by the American Film Institute, as one of the best American films of all time, ranking at number 90.



Al Jolson, in the first sound film, 1927, "The Jazz Singer"...

1929 Between September 1929 and the end of 1930, Louis records 28 different songs in 18 different recording sessions, including *Body and Soul*, and *Blue Turning Grey Over You*. He also appears in the Broadway Show *Hot Chocolates* which introduces the song *Black and Blue*.

The Wall Street crash occurs on October 29th when billions of dollars are lost in a single day.

1933 On 26/1/33 Louis records Harold Arlen's *I Gotta Right To Sing the Blues*.

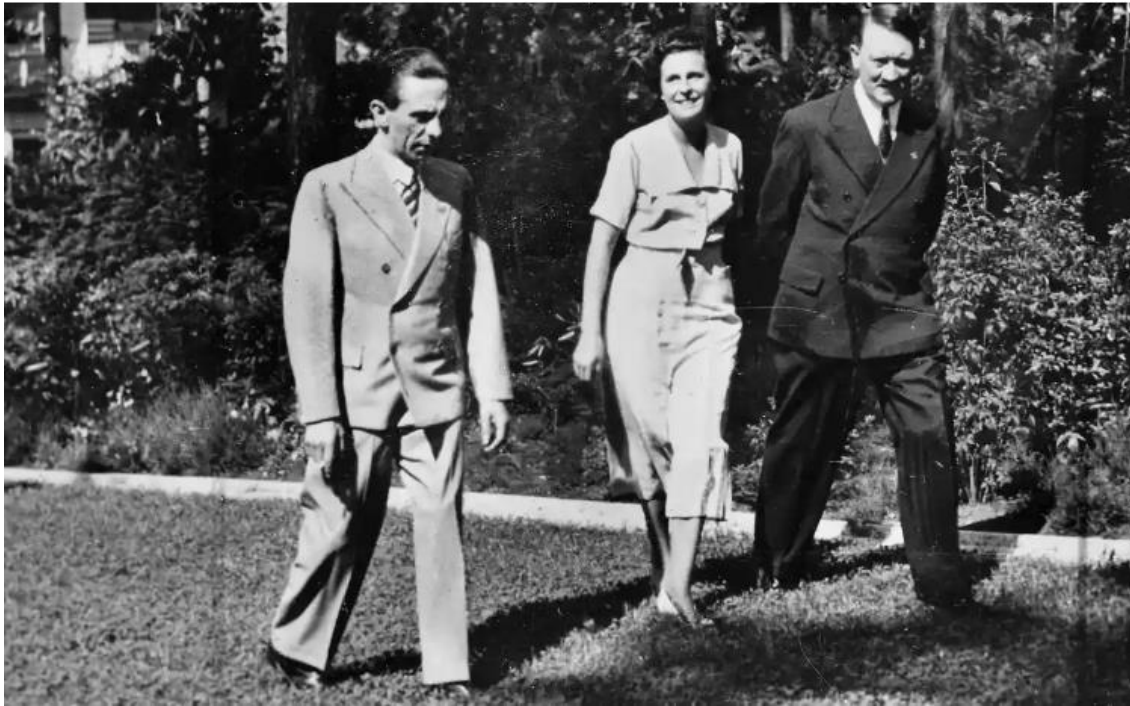
On 5/3/33 the German general election is held and Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party receives 43.9% of the vote. The Enabling Act is passed on 23rd March and Hitler assumes complete control of the Reichstag.

1936 Bing Crosby and Louis record together. Louis plays the character Henry in the film *Pennies From Heaven* with Bing Crosby and Lionel Hampton.



Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong together...

The Berlin Olympics are held and stand as a propaganda victory for the Nazis. A film of the event is made by Leni Riefenstahl, and is released in 1938, intending to reveal the superiority of the “white race.”



Filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl (centre), pictured here with Joseph Goebbels (left) and Adolf Hitler (right)...

1942 In November, Louis records *I Used To Love You (But It's All Over Now)* (Brown/Von Tilzer), gets divorced and marries Lucille Wilson.



Armstrong with his wife Lucille, whom he married in 1942...

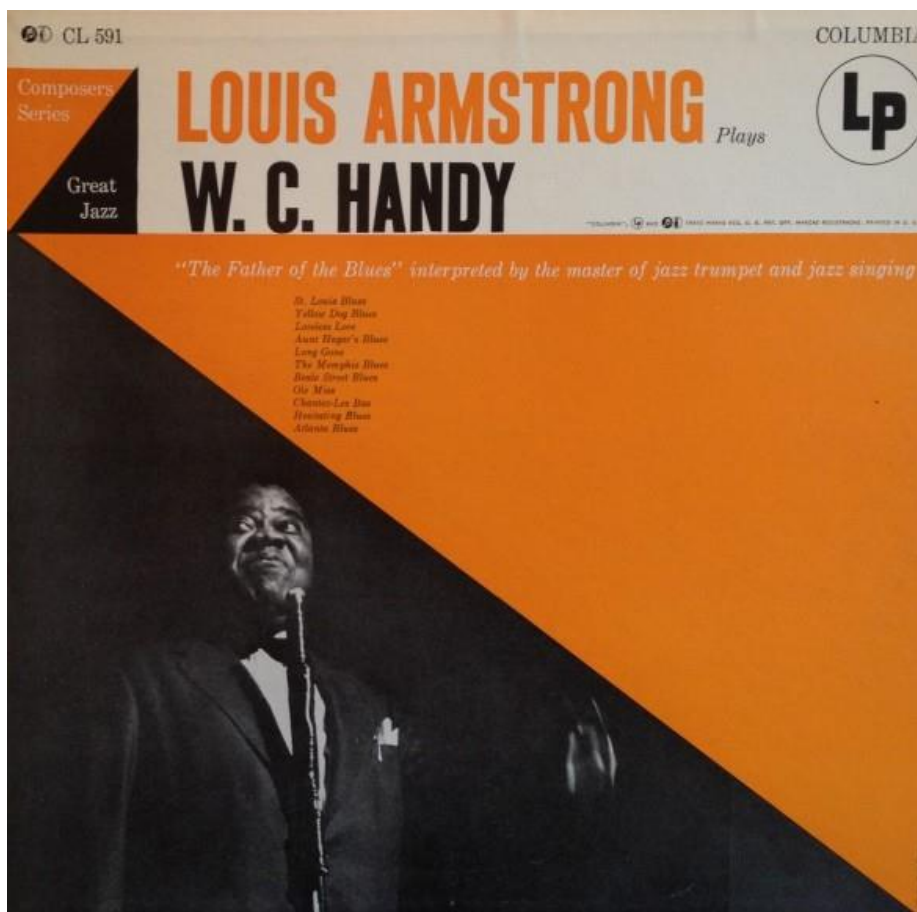
More than 2.5 million African Americans register for the draft when World War II begins; one million serve in segregated units. Military units are not integrated until 1947 under President Truman.

1947 Louis and his All Stars perform *Black and Blue* (Waller, Brooks, Razaf) in Boston, which includes the following lyrics:

*How would it end? Ain't got a friend
My only sin is in my skin
What did I do to be so black and blue?*

The Green Book is published for African Americans which, like an NRMA tourist guide, lists which motels, hotels, gas stations and restaurants will serve them.

1954 The film *The Glenn Miller Story*, a film of sentimental mush, is released on 10/2/54. It is redeemed because of the seven minute 21 second appearance of Louis Armstrong and His All Stars performing *Basin Street Blues*. On 12th July his All Stars begin taping *Louis Armstrong Plays W C Handy*, perhaps his greatest album.



“Louis Armstrong Plays W C Handy”, perhaps Armstrong’s greatest album...

The US Supreme Court in *Brown v Board of Education* rules racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. "White flight" makes the decision mainly ineffectual. Many Southern white Americans view *Brown v Board of Education* as "a day of catastrophe—a Black Monday—a day something like Pearl Harbor."

Post WW2 the USA has a firm anti-colonial policy to support independence of countries on the US model, to counter the perceived rise of communism. Despite this, the USA funds the French colonial power in its conflict with the Vietnamese who have been part of the French Colonial Empire since 1874. French military action climaxes in a humiliating defeat of France at Dien Bien Phu on 7/5/54.

1955 Louis releases *Louis Armstrong at the Crescendo Volume 1*.



An African American 14-year-old boy Emmett Till is killed for allegedly having wolf-whistled at a white woman. He is badly beaten, one of his eyes is gouged out, and he is shot in the head before being thrown into the Tallahatchie River, his body weighed down with a 70-pound (32 kg) cotton gin fan tied around his neck with barbed wire.

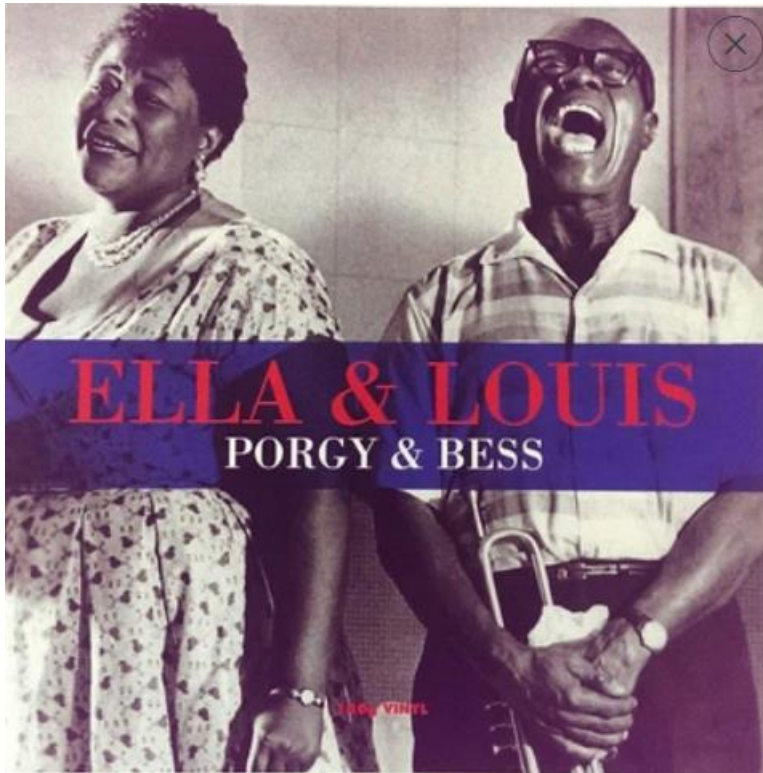
1956 *Ella and Louis*, a justly celebrated vocal duet studio album by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, accompanied by the Oscar Peterson Quartet, is released. The Irving Berlin song *Isn't This A Lovely Day* is included which includes these lyrics:

*The change in the weather
Will keep us together
So as far as I'm concerned,
it's a lovely day and everything's okay*



During 1956, a group of Southern senators and congressmen signed the “Southern Manifesto,” vowing resistance to racial integration by all “lawful means.”

1957 Between August and October, Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald supported by a 31-piece orchestra conducted by Russell Garcia, record *Porgy and Bess* (G & I Gershwin) with arrangements by Garcia. In 2001, it was awarded a Grammy Hall of Fame Award. It may be the finest of all versions of that opera.



In September, after a federal court ordered the desegregation of Central High School, located in the state capital of Little Rock, Governor Faubus calls out the Arkansas National Guard to prevent nine African American students from entering the school.

1961 Louis records *Black and Tan Fantasy* with Duke Ellington, on the Impulse release *Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington*.

In May, seven African Americans and six whites go on a “freedom ride” on two buses from Washington, DC. Bound for New Orleans, the freedom riders are attacked by angry segregationists outside of Anniston, Alabama, and one bus firebombed.

1971 July 6th Louis dies of heart attack.

The Congressional Black Congress is established in February.

The genius Louis Armstrong may have contributed more happiness to the world, both through his own artistry and through the influence he had on music generally - from the most popular such as Bing Crosby to the most cutting edge artists such as Leo Smith or Stravinsky - than any other single artist. He was a survivor who learnt

early on what he needed to do to draw the punters in to make a dollar. From street busking pre-WW1 in New Orleans, to Town Hall performances, to performances for Royalty, his modus operandi remained the same: laughing Louis the brilliant entertainer. This did not sit well with the leaders of the “new” music of the 1960s who were much more alive to the political climate of the time which included the assassination of Martin Luther King.

Louis was beloved by all perhaps partly because he shielded us from darkness. The 25-year-old Iowan born pilot of a B52, who helped rain 2.7 million tons of bombs on Cambodia whilst listening to The Beatles or *It's A Wonderful World* sung without irony by Louis Armstrong during the Vietnam War, is a stark arresting image to bear in mind of how wide the gap can be between the advertised world and the world we inhabit.

Charlie Haden was a great artist also from Iowa (born 1937), who responded to injustice by creating his *Liberation Music Orchestra* album. Haden noted that at the 1968 National convention of the Democratic Party the last song on the album *We Shall Overcome* (Zilphia Horton, Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan, Pete Seeger) was being spontaneously sung by some delegates but was drowned out by others singing *Happy Days Are Here Again* (Agar/Yellen). The great Charlie Haden was a colour blind, gender neutral, big-hearted artist with some of the biggest ears in the business. He was a potent role model for the likes of Dave Douglas and John Zorn, and a living instance of the truth that, if the world is to survive, it will only survive if everyone is political, if everyone makes everything their business. The artist can be especially powerful in this revelatory role. Haden is one of the great artists.



Charlie Haden: a living instance of the truth that if the world is to survive it will only survive if everyone is political... PHOTO COURTESY LOS ANGELES TIMES

At first blush Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) and John Zorn (1953 -) may seem to have little in common. Louis' grandparents were slaves, and he grew up in slums, sometimes picking through garbage for food, and was schooled in part when interned in the Colored Waif's Home of New Orleans. Zorn was born in the richest city on earth at a time when the USA was at its peak, economically and culturally and (possibly) morally, as it bathed in the social and economic victory over the Fascists of WW2. The American factories that were mainly instrumental in winning the war, now turned their work and machines to producing cars and houses.

As Zorn grew up the arts were going through a profound revolution. Minimalism and Bebop and Pop Art were the zeitgeist. But as Zorn came of age in the cultural epicentre of New York City, the external events that would have informed if not inflamed the consciousness of his teen years, would have been the Atom Bomb, the Korean War, detailed revelations of the real extent of the Holocaust, Vietnam, the McCarthy hearings and in 1968, a four-day period of civic uprisings following the assassination on April 4th of civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr.



Martin Luther King (centre) with Rev Jesse Jackson (left) and Ralph Abernathy (right) on the balcony of the motel where he was assassinated the following day, April 4, 1968...

Armstrong was a genius. Some believe that he was the single most important cultural figure of the 20th Century. Poet Philip Larkin CH CBE FRSL, was of the opinion that Armstrong was more important than Picasso (*Pops*, *ibid* p 373). John Zorn may not be a genius, even though the October 2013 edition of *Downbeat* on its cover so described him, but he may turn out to be one of the most influential cultural figures of the 21st Century, not through his playing alone, but because he is a true *compleat* artist of music, not just “jazz” music.

Zorn has something that the great Duke Ellington also had: sensitivity, artistic leadership, organisational talents, musical talent especially composition, and a powerful creative drive, a need to express himself through music. In addition, and significantly, he has control of his means of production which is a vital, sometimes elusive, element of an artist's life. Louis Armstrong had no such control. The pianist

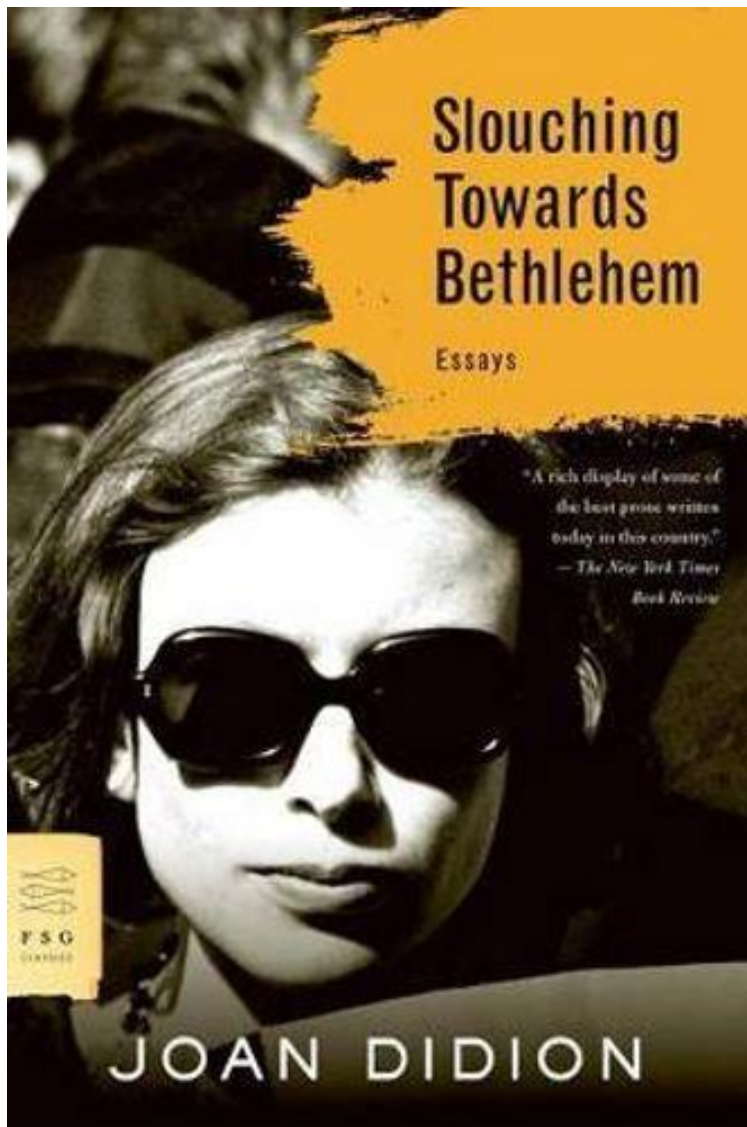
Lil Hardin whom he married, was ambitious for him and pushed him to assert himself against Joe Oliver. Joe Glaser, his long-time manager died with \$2 million dollars in the bank and left nothing to Armstrong, with whom he'd had a 50/50 contract split on earnings.



Armstrong (left) with his manager Joe Glaser, who died leaving nothing to his client...

And the similarities with Armstrong? Both artists resemble magpies and bowerbirds because they have been relentless collectors of musical sounds, natural or otherwise, of the culture they inhabited, to shape and fashion their artistic creativity. Armstrong was influenced by opera, ragtime, blues, military music, spirituals, Bach, Rachmaninoff, cornet jazz players, gospel, barbershop quartets, and waltzes. Zorn was influenced by free jazz, klezmer music, punk rock, cartoon music, film scores, and contemporary classical music.

Slouching Towards Bethlehem by Joan Didion, which title symbolises a Sphinx that is coming to ravage the world, is published in 1968 when John Zorn turned 16. The world, according to American icons such as Walt Disney, or President Nixon, Madison Avenue, or National Geographic, or the film *Hello Dolly!*, in which Louis Armstrong has a role, is pretty darn rosy. To sensitive young aspiring New York Jewish artists, like Joan Didion or John Zorn, there are glaring contradictions in this rosy picture. Not the least of which to Didion is the chaos attendant on



the Haight-Ashbury scenario playing out in California, and not the least of which to a young American adult male is the continuing consuming tragedy of Vietnam. How does one artistically respond to these alternative world views? Some say it's the artist's responsibility, even duty, to respond as best they can beyond the role of providing entertainment.

Louis Armstrong's approach to music was to him as natural as breathing. But traditionally musical artists have responded to their times more directly, whether it was Beethoven and *Eroica*, or Shostakovich and his *7th Symphony*, or Archie Shepp and *Attica*, or John Coltrane and *Alabama*. In sunny Australia and its suburbs, the jazz has been mainly upbeat, and mainly entertainment, but not always and not in every instance.

Lloyd Swanton directed his talents to the experiences of his Uncle Stuart who suffered as a Japanese POW. The work *Ambon* refracted the music of the period - Church music, popular music, military music, improvised music - through the prism of his Uncle's life and his war experiences. Other contemporary music, like Sculthorpe's, is hauntingly dramatic and focussed on landscape, its beauty, its emptiness, its terror, its mystery.

John Zorn has responded perhaps as much as any artist alive to his times, our times. Even more than Ellington or Mingus, or Coltrane, one area in which Zorn has excelled is as a producer.

In its beginnings, Otto K E Heinemann (Okeh) phonograph distributor, gave the world King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Joy of Cooking, Gene Autrey, Bix Beiderbecke and Screamin' Jay Hawkins.



Otto K E Heinemann, who gave the world King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Bix Beiderbecke, Screamin' Jay Hawkins and others...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Rich jazz enthusiast John Hammond gave the world *Spirituals to Swing*, a concert of African American musicians to an integrated audience at Carnegie Hall at a time when such an occurrence was, if not unheard of, extremely rare. The Count Basie Orchestra featured along with Albert Ammons, Sonny Terry and many others.



Rich jazz enthusiast John Hammond gave the world "Spirituals to Swing", a concert of African American musicians to an integrated audience at Carnegie Hall... PHOTO COURTESY DEFINITIVE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ & BLUES

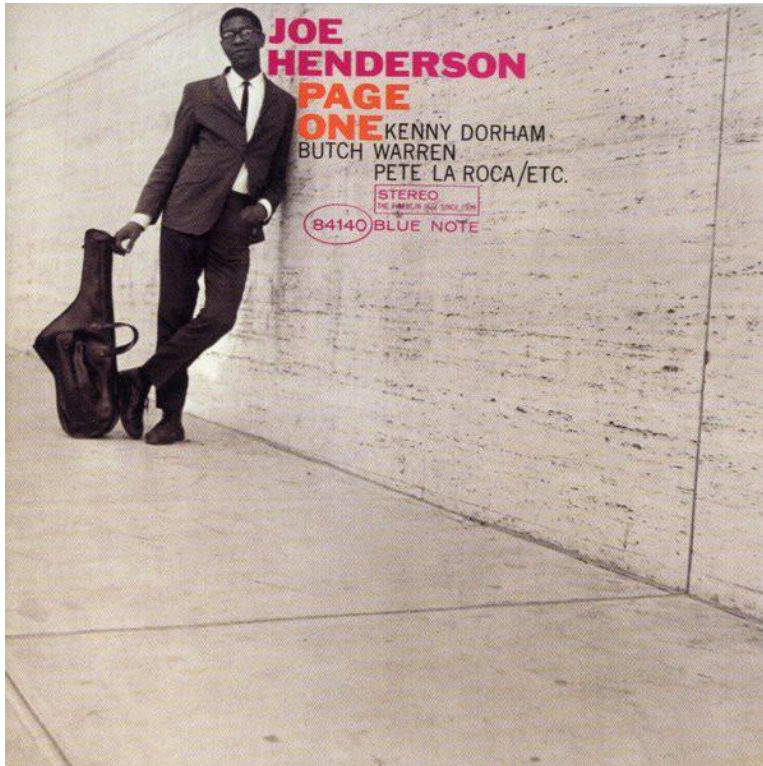
Norman Granz borrowed \$300 and began the influential Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts (1944-1983) which were notable for the coming together of different musicians of different styles, swing and bebop as well as unusually in 1944 "racially" integrated performances (Clef, Norgran, Down Home, Verve and Pablo); Ahmet Ertegun (Atlantic); Alfred Lion and Max Margulis (Blue Note); George Avakian (Columbia); Manfred Eicher (ECM); Leo Feigin (Leo); Orrin Keepnews and Bill Grauer (Riverside); Bob Weinstock (Prestige); Giacomo Pellicciotti (Black Saint and Soul Note); Milton Gabler (Commodore) and Eric Bernay (Keynote) were also notable producers of jazz. Some lovers of the music allowed artists free reign in what they played: Alfred Lion, Manfred Eicher and, in Australia, Kieran Stafford (Birdland) among them. Very few companies actually employed major jazz artists as producers. One that did was Naxos where Mike Nock produced over 60 exceptional, sometimes brilliant, albums featuring major artists such as Marty Erlich.



Norman Granz: he borrowed \$300 and began the influential Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts (1944-1983)...

But through clever marketing some labels stood out to the extent that the name of the label itself made the musical contents self-recommending. Riverside was one, but the gold standard was established by Blue Note records. First was the name which a blind man would realise was related to jazz/blues. Secondly was the presentation, in well-designed laminated cardboard packages fronted by either a contemporary art

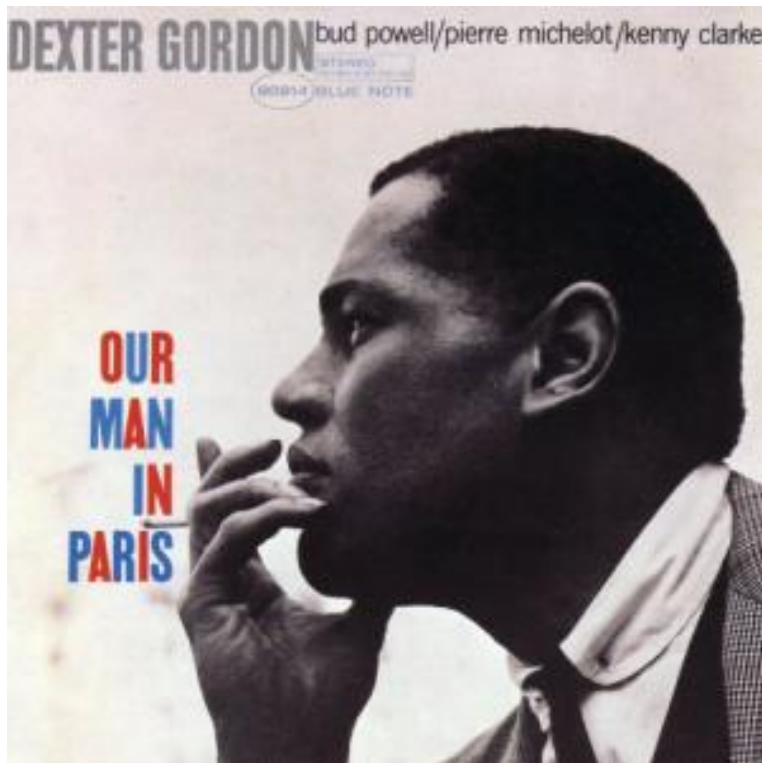
design - Andrew Hill's *Black Fire* (1963) for example - or a photo which brilliantly matches the mood of the contents and is the centre of a fine design: *The Ornette Coleman Trio at the "golden circle" stockholm volume one* is one example with the photo black and white, and the words in red, orange and grey respectively. Or *Joe Henderson Page One*, which is a simple photo of the album's eponymous musician in a suit and tie no less, leaning against a blank white wall with the pinky on his left hand gently holding or steadying - like it's his child - the upright tenor sax black gig bag - he is the essence of cool, you dig me?



Or the artist and his wife in dark blue moody mystery with a red lipstick kiss mark above the photo in which the foreground face of the wife is just out of focus and the solemn face of the artist Wayne Shorter looms in the left corner behind some spare branches and leaves - *Speak No Evil* is the album. Thirdly, the musicians made their music - not music required by an A&R man or by the producer. It was music of the "now" - mainly contemporary jazz that was the currency of the time - hard-bop. Finally it was very well recorded and engineered, often by Rudy Van Gelder. The consistently high standard of these elements of the Blue Note brand meant the consumer/listener had a very high degree of confidence in the product, even before you played the music. Even the label on the disc itself was well designed and distinctive.

When you bought a Blue Note album, you were also buying an idea and an attitude. The Blue Note heydays were the 1960s. A Blue Note album represented contemporary improvised music at its challenging best - including Cecil Taylor, Andrew Hill - as well as groovy blues/soul artists - including Big John Patton - and masters of popular instruments such as the guitar - Grant Green, Kenny Burrell, and Charlie Hunter among them. It also represented "black power" and "black pride"

where images of African American artists depicted on Blue Note albums depicted well-dressed, confident and stylish African American artists unsmilingly looking direct to camera. Cool. Album title *Lietmotifs* included optimism: *Blown' the Blues Away* (Horace Silver, 1959); pride: *Let Freedom Ring* (Jackie MacLean, 1962); motivation: *GO* (Dexter Gordon); the future: *A New Perspective*, (Donald Byrd 1963); journeys to cultural capitals: *Our Man In Paris* (Dexter Gordon, 1963); hope: *Search For the New Land* (Lee Morgan, 1964); and joining together: *Unity* (Larry Young, 1966).



To what extent the optimism of the election of President Kennedy in 1961 fuelled promise of a new beginning, we can only speculate. The four major civil rights Acts from 1960-1968 must have played a part. Notes to albums were often thought-provoking and a valuable source of insight into the musicians' artistic journeys. Such a practice is still superbly realised in the AUM Fidelity Double 2020 CD document, Whit Dickey - Tao Quartets, *Peace Planet* and *Box of Light* with notes by Clifford Allen.

So when the jazz lover bought a Blue Note album, he or she was buying not just music but an artefact which mirrored the values and attitudes admired by that person. The ownership of Ken Done kitsch, Robert Klippel sculpture, or a framed tea towel bought on a visit to Scotland, explains to others, to some extent, who you are. Sometimes a record album was just an album but usually it was a sign to others: to be seen with a Miles Davis album in the 1950s was hip. Australian jazz musicians who had taken up post-WW2 bebop also tried to emulate the image - Bernie McGann standing loosely alone on an empty rubbish strewn stage, gazing down and to his left wearing a black open-necked shirt, black shoes and trousers, with his alto sax draped across his chest is a post-performance, post-coital image perfectly suited to cool, and was used for the poster of the film *Beyond El Rocco*. Better that, than Bernie in his Post Office uniform unmarketable as an ordinary worker who played the

saxophone. That was then, now it is Shannon Barnett in a slip and black topcoat sans makeup or hairdo, holding a trombone in a new post-feminist image of cool. And cool she is.



Shannon Barnett in a slip and black topcoat sans makeup or hairdo, holding a trombone: a new post-feminist image of cool...

Finally, certain jazz albums in and of themselves are *objets d'art*, at least in the eyes of the owners and consumers, and sometimes even in the eyes of cultural commentators. They are also repositories of important memories of significant cultural events and personal experiences that Spotify can in no way suggest or replicate, which is why some artists, Linda May Han Oh among them, prefer to release their music on objects still, like the CD complete with cover art, design and notes. Andrea Keller CDs also incorporate the visual arts - including children's drawings - to good effect.

The minimalist *Bauhaus* aesthetic of Manfred Eicher (ECM) does not exude cool, but it does exude the idea of pristine excellence or quality in the way Mercedes Benz does. To the consumer, ECM represents quality: in recording, in knowing the artist had control of the work, in design with contemporary art featured, and in the quality control of the manufacturing of the product.

In the 21st Century, Greenleaf Music is an independent music company directed by American trumpeter and composer Dave Douglas. *ArtistShare* is the internet's first crowdfunding website featuring such artists as Maria Schneider, Jim Hall, Elio Villafranca and Requite Trio Honey. Sam Rivers' Rivbea Orchestra helped produce one of the finest documents of the “new” music with *The Wildflowers Sessions* (1976) produced by Alan Douglas and Michaul Cuscuna in co-operation with Rivbea.

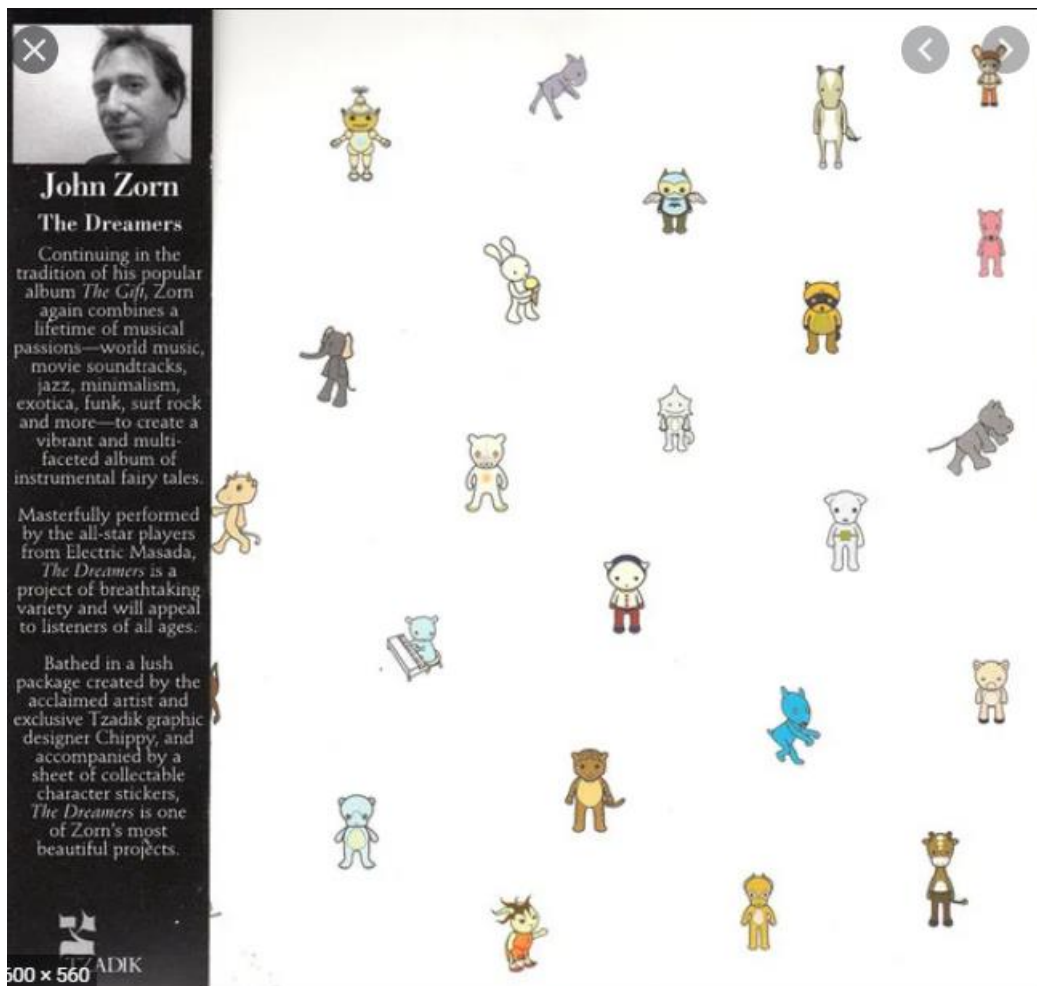


But John Zorn is unique. And he's unique in two ways. Firstly, in Tzadik (established in 1995) he became the first major jazz artist to own the means of production. Tzadik is a not-for-profit co-operative over which Zorn has complete control of design and other aspects of production, including choice of artist, and recording engineers. Tzadik is Hebrew meaning a very righteous person, especially a spiritual leader. Secondly, he determines the artistic program which covers a wide range of contemporary music based around improvisation: avant-garde, experimental, modern jazz, klezmer and noise included.

In 25 years Zorn has produced over 400 albums, which have included artists such as Uri Caine (classical and jazz pianist, composer); Greg Cohen (bass); Alvin Curran (composer, performer, improviser, sound artist); Dave Douglas (trumpet, composer); Mark Dresser (bass and composer); Trevor Dunn, (composer, bass guitar, bass); Marty Ehrlich (composer, saxophones, clarinets, flutes); Jesse Harris (guitar, voice, composer); Annie Gosfield (composer); Henry Kaiser (guitar, composer, ethnomusicologist, film score composer); Mono (Japanese instrumental band); Mike Patton (voice, composer, instrumentalist); Basya

Schechter (voice, multi-instrumentalist, composer); and Evan Parker (saxophones). Many of these artists are leading world figures in their field.

The Tzadik product is an *objet d'art* in itself with great attention paid to the visual. Two examples are *The Dreamers* (2007) which has Cyro Baptista, percussion; Joey Baron, drums; Trevor Dunn, bass; Marc Ribot, guitar; Jamie Saft, keyboards; Kenny Wollesen, vibes; and John Zorn, alto saxophone. The music is uplifting and light, almost Hawaiian in parts, with guitars and simple rhythms featured significantly. *Anulikwutsayl* has echoes of rock guitar over a gentle keyboard melodic vamp at slow tempo. The white cream cover is peppered with tiny doll creatures, kittens with wings, tiny bears wearing jackets, etc, and when opened reveals some pencil drawings on a white background including a tiny juggling frog. Enclosed with the CD is a laminated piece of paper with these somewhat enlarged figures which may be detached and adhered to a book perhaps or the fridge. On the translucent papers there are wispy pencil drawings along with difficult to read small printed words about the production and participants.



Painkiller (1991) has Zorn, alto sax, voice; Bill Laswell, basses, samples; and Mick Harris, drums, samples, voice plus special guests. The music is described as “grind core” and is not for casual listening. Some may describe it as noise. Titles include *Scud Attack*, *Handjob*, and *Guts of a Virgin*. *Scud Attack* begins with a very

high-pitched scream and the words *Oh My God!!!* followed by rock rhythms and extremes of guitar, voice, and electronic noise. Some tracks - like *Handjob* - are 11 seconds of noise. *The Toll* begins with very low rumblings punctuated by loud cymbal splashes, and proceeds to feature high pitched voice/screams with guitar distortions and echo effects.

The Dreamers may be a work canvassing a general human positive condition, hope perhaps; whilst *Painkiller* may be canvassing another general human condition, hate perhaps.

The design and artwork of *Painkiller Collected Works 1997* 4CD (see photo) includes inter alia black and white photos of Hiroshima victim's face; handcuffed arms extracting buried human skull; and a lynching. Zorn draws upon the photojournalism of Weegee, Man Ray and Hans Belmer surrealism as well as medical photography from the *Burns* archive. Just as I do not wish to have classical paintings by Goya - *The Europeans No 14* for example - in my dining room, so I do not listen to *Painkiller* for pleasure. Nevertheless I have listened to it number of times to remind me. And the photo art also reminds.



Kristallnacht (1992) from early in Zorn's recording career, features Anthony Coleman, keyboards; Mark Dresser, bass; Mark Feldman, violin; David Krakauer, clarinet, bass clarinet; Frank London, trumpet; Marc Ribot, guitar; and William Winant, percussion. The track *Never Again*, the longest piece in the program and perhaps the most memorable, opens with an intense crystal screeching sound like a million-bird flock of starlings overlaid with the sound of fingernails drawn across a blackboard lasting about a minute, followed by a scraping sound, incoherent noise and rhythmic throbbing. At three minutes a sudden stop, with an interlude of throbbing rumblings, and at 3:30 screeching returns with garbled speech interrupted at 4:15 by arco bass. A background of shouting voices in disjointed repetition

increases in volume and pace and intensity. Chanting, deep bass and electronic sounds dominate then, at 7.30 mordant low, slow violin enters overtaken by percussive sounds and plinking. Crystal sounds, electronic plinks, and pulsing are joined by a drum figure, building to a climax and an abrupt end. In contrast *Tzvia (Looking Ahead)* is much more musically interesting, being nearly eight minutes with discernible rhythm, powerful guitar playing, engaging double bass and structural logic. This was Zorn's musical response to the Nazi troops attack on Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues on 10/11/38 historically known as Kristallnacht. It was preceded by what some see as more horrifying: book burning symbolising the destruction of creative humanity itself - the destruction of memory which Zorn is helping to keep alive in his works.

Zorn is also an alto saxophonist who leads a pianoless quartet called Masada, comprising himself on alto; Dave Douglas, trumpet; Greg Cohen, double bass; and Joey Baron, drums. To lovers of "conventional" improvised music aggregations this quartet has special relevance. Its format is based on Ornette Coleman's quartet. Its inspirations include the progression of jazz from King Oliver to Cecil Taylor which Zorn wanted to mirror in a similar progression for Jewish music based on Klezmer's 17th and 18th century amalgam of gypsy, Balkan and Arabic music but, through the prism of the Quartet's playing on the hundreds of tunes he composed inspired by Burt Bacharach, Thelonious Monk, Kurt Weill, and Ornette Coleman.



The Masada quartet, L-R, Greg Cohen (bass), Dave Douglas (trumpet), John Zorn (alto saxophone) and (obscured) Joey Baron (drums)... PHOTO CREDIT TONY LEWIS

The name Masada comes from the story of the warriors of Masada, an ancient fortress in southern Israel's Judean Desert, used as a base where, for three years 960 Jewish rebels held out against a siege by 8,000 Romans, and committed suicide in 73 AD rather than surrender and live as Roman slaves.

Some very fine live albums by Masada include *Live at Tonic 2001*, *Live in Sevilla 2000*, and *Live in Middelheim 1999*. Notably these albums, the covers, the discs themselves, are all beautiful artefacts in their own right, but like all Tzadik albums, there are no liner notes providing guides to the music, or the musicians, or the source of the music, even the precise recording dates. All the compositions are by Zorn. To consider the *Live in Middelheim* album, on the external edge of the golden paper CD insert in very small printing are these words: *thomas and laura's cat makeup...the diamond suite...belgian chocolates...the mummy...mother's day...business class...lee konitz's fax...blond drivers...gaslight party...half-baked lasagna...toots...flea-market*, but no liner notes. These words probably refer to the band's travel, reception and welcome, and are a kind of thank you acknowledgement to those involved. Bizarre *bon mots*.

To take two tracks as representative, the first is *Piram*, which is a little over 12 minutes. It's noteworthy for the fiercely energetic drumming of Joey Baron throughout, who opens proceedings and has another solo after the horns. It is an up-tempo piece with tight harmony and extended improvisation taken in turn by the horns. *Kedusha* is a ballad whose theme may be characterised as a sad cry of tenderness, and features a long melodic and powerful acoustic bass solo by Greg Cohen. The alto sax has elements of Klezmer music and there are some fine moments of playing by Zorn which is echoed by Douglas. All the music on the document are very well recorded with the acoustics in fine balance.

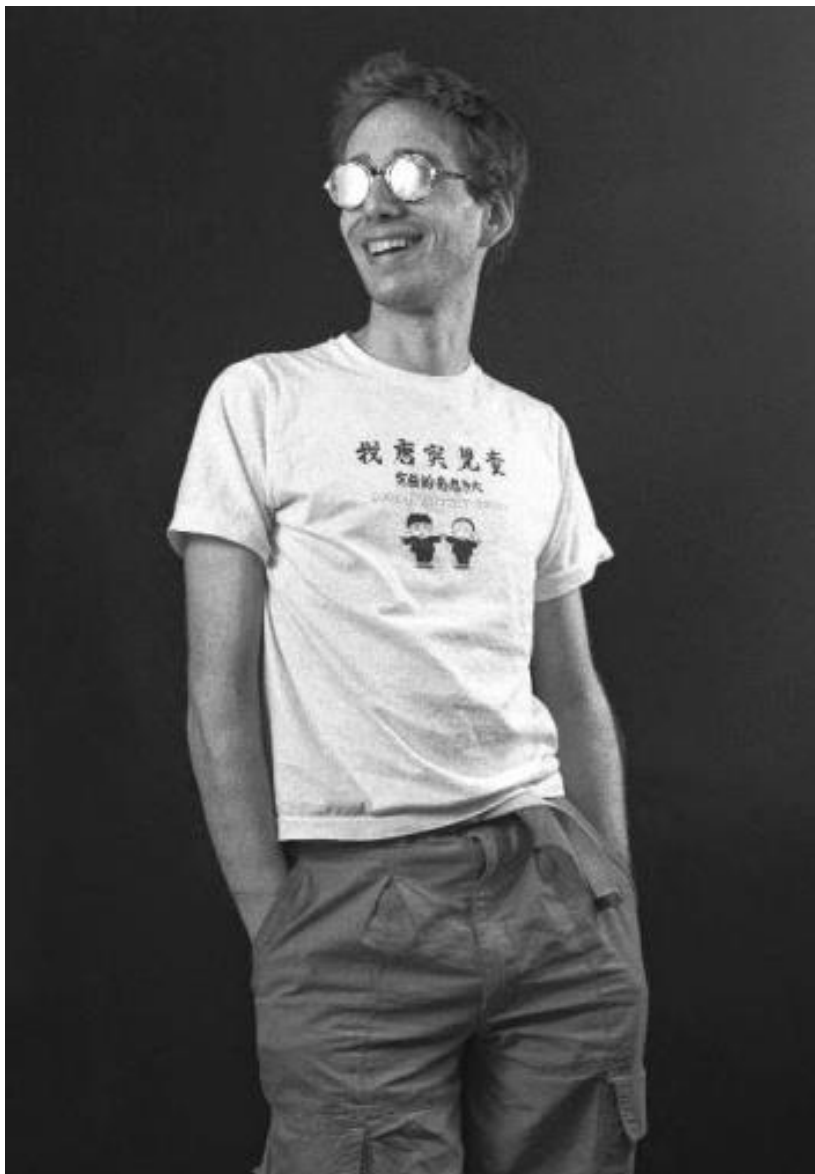


Joey Baron: fiercely energetic drumming...

The *Live at Tonic* double-album is perhaps representative, as the quartet had been together a decade at this point. There is a recognisable consistency in its performance. Instrumentally, there is a clear equality of contribution by the players; indeed, the listener is conscious of the driving force of the drummer Joey

Baron (sometimes Kenny Wollesen in other aggregations of the quartet). Baron's rhythmic and melodic contributions and support during solos by other instruments are powerful. On the slow-tempo *Shamor* for example, where there is an extended bass solo, Baron enters at climactic moments with some dramatic percussive statements, like an ecstatic shout. The quartet does not have a singular soloist or prominent leader like, say, the Dave Brubeck Quartet where the piano and saxophone dominated, or even the Ornette Coleman Quartet where Coleman's saxophone *seems* to dominate.

The Masada Quartet has been a major force in the music scene over the 1990s and beyond, partly because of the instrumental brilliance of Dave Douglas whose playing is up with the finest of his career, and of the powerful contributions made by the outstanding acoustic bass of Greg Cohen, and the stunning energy and art of Joey Baron. But the major reason must be the leadership, vision and compositional drive of John Zorn.



Zorn: leadership, vision and compositional drive...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

In this regard one cannot help seeing relevance or a connection with the goals and opinion of Stefon Harris (born 23/3/73, age 47) who said: "The vibraphone, in my opinion, is just a bunch of metal and wood. It's not that important. Instruments are just tools. What's important is the mission behind the individual who's utilizing the tool. My ultimate passion is about the proliferation of empathy. I want my audience to feel the connection between human beings — five brothers who are on the stage who've known each other for a long time, who've had ups and downs but who love each other. Who are vulnerable, who are willing to take chances in the moment to discover beauty." (Stefon Harris, 30/3/2020).



Stefon Harris: His ultimate passion is about the proliferation of empathy...
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

It should be no surprise that the document *Sanhedrin 1994-1997* (2005) which title refers to the trial of Jesus, a compilation made by Zorn of unreleased studio recordings of the Masada Quartet, may be established as a classic of the genre, representing an extension and advance on the groundbreaking Ornette Coleman Quartet 1960 Atlantic recordings. Some Masada pieces are a direct nod to the melodic and structural nature of Coleman, but the variety, and brilliance of the 29 pieces reveal a rare contribution to jazz music. It sings, it swings, it stimulates, it absolutely grooves, and is a document to live with and return to for life. Zorn composed 613 pieces for Masada and chose 26 of the studio pieces for *Sanhedrin*.

Other groups he has produced include The Masada String Trio, comprising Mark Feldman (violin), Erik Friedlander (cello), and Greg Cohen (acoustic bass); and the Bar Kokhba Sextet with Marc Ribot (guitar); Mark Feldman (violin), Erik Friedlander (cello), Greg Cohen (acoustic bass), Joey Baron (drums), and Cyro Baptista (percussion) (cf *Live at Tonic* recording 3CD, 2003).

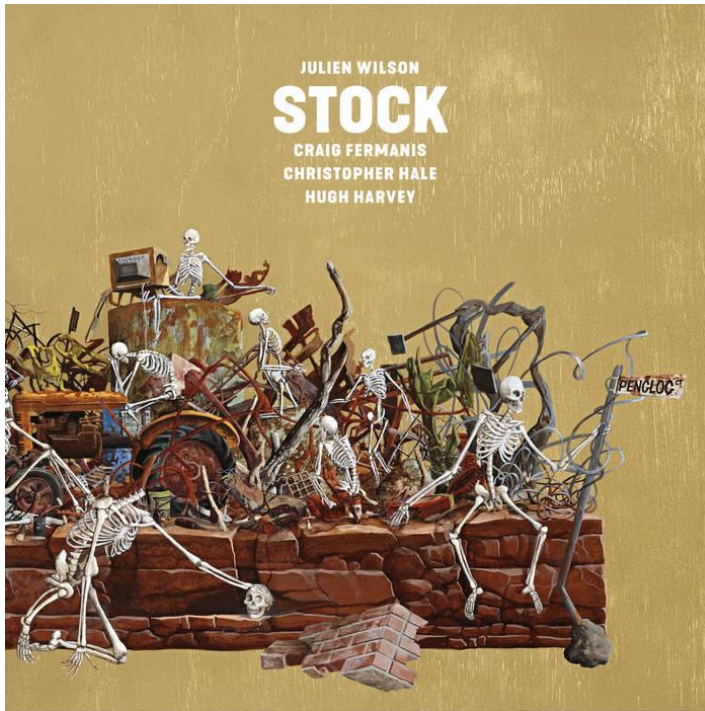
Other albums include *Masada Recital* (2004) with Mark Feldman (violin) and Sylvie Courvoisier (piano); *Naked City* (1989) with John Zorn (alto saxophone), Bill Frisell (guitar), Fred Frith (bass), Joey Baron (drums), and Wayne Horvitz, keyboards; *Yamatsuka Eye*: vocals, consisting of 26 short pieces, some 11 seconds long, in a pastiche of styles referencing rock, punk, Ornette Coleman, grind core and more; *Hemophiliac* (2004) with Mike Patton (voice), Ikue Mori (laptop electronics); and Zorn (alto saxophone). He also has composed and produced many works for film, involving such musicians as the late Robert Quine on guitar.

Barney McAll and Julien Wilson are artists who have many things to say. Regarding his compositional suite *Zephyrix*, performed by the Monash Art Ensemble in May, 2016, McAll notes that it is intended to symbolise "the bridging of tensions between our mundane struggles and the evils of life". He leaves to our imagination what these struggles might be, and what evils might assail us. Nevertheless here is an artist actually recognising, in his own way, that music may be a bridge, not merely a passing of some time. It's an outstanding piece of work by 15 musicians including, amongst others, Jordan Murray, trombone; Eugene Ball, trumpet; and Philip Rex, double bass.



Barney McAll's 2016 compositional suite Zephyrix: intended to symbolise "the bridging of tensions between our mundane struggles and the evils of life"...

Julien Wilson released his album *Stock* (2020) concurrently with *This World* (Nock et al), and comments in part in the notes that, "we hope the music here helps take you on an adventure far from the mundane and often mind-numbing realities that this modern world throws up on a daily basis; we hope it provides a small escape hatch for sanity". More than escape, which is sometimes music's role, I appreciate *Stock* as revealing some truths, including four stimulating group improvisations; and a beautifully structured transportive piece *I Believe This Belongs To You*. This album features fine bass clarinet, guitar solos, light and shade, some lyrical tenor, and a variety of fine rhythm support. It's a short but consistently fine improvised music program with considerable variety.



Julien Wilson's Stock: a small escape hatch for sanity...



John Zorn, musician, aged 67: "Music is one of the great mysteries. It gives life. It is not a career, nor a business, nor a craft. It is a gift... and a great responsibility. Because one can never know where the creative spark comes from or why it exists, it must be treasured as Mystery. For the most part, I believe that creativity chooses you, not the other way around".