

CAN JAZZ BE SAVED?

by Terry Teachout*

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GRANT ROBERTSON

In 1987, Congress passed a joint resolution declaring jazz to be “a rare and valuable national treasure.” Nowadays the music of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker and Miles Davis is taught in public schools, heard on TV commercials and performed at prestigious venues such as New York’s Lincoln Center, which even runs its own nightclub, Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola.

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Here's the catch: Nobody's listening.

No, it's not quite that bad—but it's no longer possible for head-in-the-sand types to pretend that the great American art form is economically healthy or that its future looks anything other than bleak.

The bad news came from the National Endowment for the Arts' latest Survey of - Public Participation in the Arts, the fourth to be conducted by the NEA (in participation with the US Census Bureau) since 1982. These are the findings that made jazz musicians sit up and take notice:

- In 2002, the year of the last survey, 10.8% of adult Americans attended at least one jazz performance. In 2008, that figure fell to 7.8%.
- Not only is the audience for jazz shrinking, but it's growing older—fast. The median age of adults in America who attended a live jazz performance in 2008 was 46. In 1982 it was 29.
- Older people are also much less likely to attend jazz performances today than they were a few years ago. The percentage of Americans between the ages of 45 and 54 who attended a live jazz performance in 2008 was 9.8%. In 2002, it was 13.9%. That's a 30% drop in attendance.
- Even among college-educated adults, the audience for live jazz has shrunk significantly, to 14.9% in 2008 from 19.4% in 1982.

These numbers indicate that the audience for jazz in America is both aging and shrinking at an alarming rate. What I find no less revealing, though, is that the median age of the jazz audience is now comparable to the ages for attendees of live performances of classical music (49 in 2008 vs. 40 in 1982), opera (48 in 2008 vs. 43 in 1982), nonmusical plays (47 in 2008 vs. 39 in 1982) and ballet (46 in 2008 vs. 37 in 1982). In 1982, by contrast, jazz fans were much younger than their high-culture counterparts.

What does this tell us? I suspect it means, among other things, that the average American now sees jazz as a form of high art. Nor should this come as a surprise to anyone, since most of the jazz musicians that I know feel pretty much the same way.

They regard themselves as artists, not entertainers, masters of a musical language that is comparable in seriousness to classical music—and just as off-putting to pop-loving listeners who have no more use for Wynton Marsalis than they do for Felix Mendelssohn.



Pop-loving listeners have no more use for Wynton Marsalis (above) than they do for Felix Mendelssohn (below)... MARSALIS PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST





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Jazz has changed greatly since the '30s, when Louis Armstrong, one of the supreme musical geniuses of the 20th century, was also a pop star, a gravel-voiced crooner who made movies with Bing Crosby and Mae West and whose records sold by the truckload to fans who knew nothing about jazz except that Satchmo played and sang it. As late as the early '50s, jazz was still for the most part a genuinely popular music, a utilitarian, song-based idiom to which ordinary people could dance if they felt like it. But by the '60s, it had evolved into a challenging concert music whose complexities repelled many of the same youngsters who were falling hard for rock and soul. Yes, John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* sold very well for a jazz album in



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1965—but most kids preferred *California Girls* and *The Tracks of My Tears*, and still do now that they have kids of their own.

Even if I could, I wouldn't want to undo the transformation of jazz into a sophisticated art music. But there's no sense in pretending that it didn't happen, or that contemporary jazz is capable of appealing to the same kind of mass audience that thrilled to the big bands of the swing era. And it is precisely because jazz is now widely viewed as a high-culture art form that its makers must start to grapple with the same problems of presentation, marketing and audience development as do symphony orchestras, drama companies and art museums—a task that will be made all the more daunting by the fact that jazz is made for the most part by individuals, not established institutions with deep pockets.



Anyone suggesting to under-30 listeners that they should like Stravinsky (above) has already lost the battle...

No, I don't know how to get young people to start listening to jazz again. But I do know this: Any symphony orchestra that thinks it can appeal to under-30 listeners by suggesting that they *should* like Schubert and Stravinsky has already lost the battle. If you're marketing Schubert and Stravinsky to those listeners, you have no choice but to start from scratch and make the case for the beauty of their music to otherwise intelligent people who simply don't take it for granted. By the same token, jazz musicians who want to keep their own equally beautiful music alive and well have got to start thinking hard about how to pitch it to young listeners—not next month, not next week, but right now.