

Cynicism, the Decline of Music and of “Jazz” Culture

By Postliterate

Source: <https://medium.com/@postliterate/cynicism-the-decline-of-music-and-of-jazz-culture-cec90829bda4>

The dominance of participatory forms of mass media and its now unavoidable infusion into daily life via advanced technology in the current age has produced a general social malaise of jaded cynicism, detached irony, and rootless hedonism. It is quickly becoming impossible for many to physically and/or mentally engage themselves in a passion, or to even realize that such a thing can exist, because the “average subject” that is gradually being formed is most fit to either (1) constantly and vigorously participate in the new forms of mass media, or (2) passively consume the world of this media with as little external interruption as possible. Generally, the two aspects of this subject intertwine: the neuroticism exhibited by a subject most fit for aspect #1 will reproduce itself in a subject generally fit for the mindlessness of aspect #2, and vice versa.

Ignoring the dichotomy for a moment, it can be said that the result of the formulation of this average subject, as the unintended ideal of humans of the “super-middle class,”* is a culture largely incapable of engaging in passions external to the media. Social responses of jaded cynicism or mindless indifference become commonplace reactions to the prospect of engaging in such external passions. The average subject is programmed to suit the participatory needs of the media with *no external constraints*, that is, without pause and without a world outside of it. Of course, this essay is not to suggest that such an average subject has fully taken hold of all people, nor is it to suggest that it may ever will. But the subject is there and its symptoms are spreading, making it necessary to speak about. In this essay I

want to relate this concept of the average subject to jazz, both because the latter is to me a somewhat familiar social arena, and because in doing so more general abstracted aspects of our culture can be elucidated.

But first, a note. “Jazz,” of course, does not exist — hence the use of quotations in the title. I wish to use the term here in the way that peddlers of the term themselves would, not merely for convenience, but to illustrate the poverty of the term itself. In trying to consecrate “jazz” we inevitably run up against cultural and musical barriers, and in this way the term — and the world which claims to abide by it — is always impoverished. This is, therefore, the significance of the title of this essay: that “jazz” *itself* is the declining culture, not external aspects of it that are changing it.

It is impossible to be sensitive in a culture exhibiting rapid increases of fundamental insensitivity. To be more specific, it is impossible to play sensitive music *in a sensitive way* when music in general is becoming dominated by a fundamental crassness and hedonism.

It was once said that the music of Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg require one to be in a “meditative” state in order to appreciate their music — such a thing could not be farther from possibility today. Music today must provide instant gratification for the consumer traveling from one location to another, and this is only because additionally consuming visual media in such situations is (as of now) impossible. The steady stream of hedonistic media, for which the modern consumer is actually willing to stop and focus their attention on, requires engagement of as many senses as possible — hence the ubiquitous phenomenon of watching movies or shows (sight and hearing), while eating (taste and smell). Even then, one’s patience is often too short for *even this*; therefore one must also consume other forms of media *at the same time* — a far cry from the “meditative” state required to listen to a solo piano piece by Schoenberg.

But it is not merely that multiple senses must be engaged at once for today’s consumer to keep their attention. The use of auditory media itself requires lyrics to an unprecedented degree — this allows one’s mind (in processing language) and one’s emotions (in responding the more explicit

messaging of lyrics) to be also engaged as quickly as possible. As a result, a lot of music has to tell the consumer what to feel in order for them to feel it; hence individuals who profess an inability to relate to music that lacks lyrics — the context for the auditory sensations has to be *given* to them. Similarly, an increasingly extreme use of sound (or more specifically, a general complete and utter lack of subtlety or quietness) is taking over music production.

These phenomena, while important to talk about, have not affected jazz in quite the same way because jazz now has a long-established “tradition.” Individuals who get into the style are inculcated from all sides about what is “right” and what is “wrong” in playing the music. This establishment, as it turns out, has arbitrarily decided that most jazz needs not lyrics. Problem solved.

But the problems mentioned affect the music in a different way. Individuals learn “correct” jazz to a small degree, and then infuse that superficially understood tradition with the irony and crassness typical of the rest of media culture. The concern of individual musicians in this tradition then becomes the on-command production of media that can be immediately enjoyed by jazz’s microcosm. Musicians today are striving to play individual lines that instantly produce effect, play in ironic and careless ways, and with a general vibe of rootless hedonism. The only difference between the hedonism apparent in today’s “jazz” and the hedonism elsewhere is that in “jazz” there is a minor barrier of entry — some knowledge and appreciation for that tradition which is no longer mainstream. Of course, due to general laziness (itself the result of such hedonism), the barrier of entry is comparatively low. Beginners in “jazz” are a massive demographic and are the target audience, possibly because advancing beyond this stage requires a level of passion which contemporary culture is attempting to rapidly make impossible to realize.

I set out to write this essay largely because it occurred to me that what I believed to be the solution to the above problems in jazz was not a good solution at all. Initially, I believed that the solution was to promote a cul-

ture of “hipness” and encourage people to become tired of the traditional ways of “jazz” and embrace increasingly “hip” music. I realized this solution would have the opposite intended effect — it would fit itself right in with the general social malaise of cool, detached indifference, and exacerbate the problem of an increasing lack of subtlety. In other words, it would cause people to reproduce crassness in new forms; in this case, crassness in the form of constantly trying to “out-hip” the last guy.

The real solution, I believe, lies in trying to escape the dynamic of progressionalism altogether. Music should not have to be “more” than the last music, and the creation of music over time should not be viewed as quite so linear a process. Also, the irony and cynicism typical of today should cease. We should not be so quick to denounce things as “corny” and should stop trying to chase after “the new thing.” Music of any kind and of any era should be appreciated for its maturity, and not for its ability to satisfy a desire to constantly seek “hip” music. We should treat old and tired musical standards as tender things to be treated with respect, and not as either useless parasites to stomped out, or as trivialities to be subjected to our desires for constant hedonism and irony.

Two records come to mind — both old — that perfectly realize my ideal: the first is *Ben and “Sweets”* with Ben Webster and Sweets Edison from 1962, and the second is *Nancy Wilson/Cannonball Adderley* from the same year. These albums, despite being recorded in the thick of it, have no desire to be “hip.” They are not too complex musically, they use very old songs as their basis for musical expression, and most importantly, they have no sense of jaded irony. There is nothing flashy or in-your-face about them; they are extremely subtle, highly mature records. Furthermore, these records were made by top musicians in their class who were willing to subjugate their egos — they do not show off. Instead, their immense talent shines through only in the most subtle ways. They do not leave the pocket, and in doing so produce truly high art.

My ideal, despite how it may seem, both opposes traditionalism and “jazz” as an idea altogether. Moreover, it has no quell whatsoever with the avant-garde — in fact, my own “jazz” music and “jazz” listening tastes are almost exclusively avant-garde. The point I am trying to make, rather, is that art should be treated with a maturity and tenderness that has been severely lacking in music and culture as a whole. I do not want a generation of second-rate, self-obsessed experimental musicians *just* as I do not want another generation of Julliard “jazz” musicians who believe they’re “doing everything right.” I want a generation of sensitive, creative musicians who use their strength to overcome past norms, instead of using the abolition of such norms as an excuse for not learning them. The music should not be either “corny” or “cool” — it should be mature.