

# The functionaries: jazz as the lowest “high” art - Postliterate - Medium

By Postliterate

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The notion of the enlightened, intellectual jazz musician is dead. Charlie Parker had a “complex mind,” Coltrane was spiritually perfected, all of the AACM musicians were downright geniuses, and Sun Ra, and Cecil Taylor... but what musicians today reflect this tradition? The average jazz musician today, far from exhibiting the physiological characteristics of “high art,” lies on a character spectrum ranging from stale humanness to crass idiocy. It is completely evident, given this generation and the last’s empirical results, that a total moron can become “good” at “jazz.” There no longer seems to be anything magical about the process, speaking in terms of the musician as a person herself.

I believe this reflects a fundamental shift in the way “jazz” has moved from generation to generation, and this is reflective of a larger issue: “jazz” musicians today are not artists, but *functionaries*. Speaking practically, they do not exist to create art, but to execute the already decided commands of the jazz establishment. This not only does not *require* artistry, it *forbids* it. To become a “jazz musician” today entails a long process of regurgitating all of the “correct” information handed down by the jazz establishment. Listen to this, learn this, play this, transcribe this, avoid the wrong notes, play in time, have good tone... Then when you’re ready, spend the rest of your life rotting away in New York playing the same shit night after night.

Coltrane famously said that his music was a total expression of who he was. Anthony Braxton said the same thing. For the vast majority of “jazz musicians” on the market today, I neither care to hear what their selves are in their music, nor do I think they have any selves to express — *nor would they even know how to express them!!* To express a self one first has to cultivate one, then to express that in music one has to approach the music very differently, and finally, to create the music itself out of this process, one would have to play very different music than everyone does now.

Jazz was always a cultural cage, constructed either for the 50s white men who governed the establishment from the economic position, or for the dominant contemporary Lincoln Center’s political-purist ideology. While the heads of state loved to claim “jazz” as “America’s art form,” Charlie Parker did not even believe in the word. These same two mentalities simultaneously resulted in Bird’s desire to compose classical music, and for the racist jazz establishment to prevent him from actually doing so.

Where are the artists today? I only see *functionaries*.