Some Theoretical Reflections on Jazz in Postwar Japan

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Some Theoretical Reflections on Jazz in Postwar Japan

Akiyoshi Toshiko, the renowned jazz pianist, composer, arranger, and band leader, once said in reply to a question about combining Japanese and Western musical forms in her compositions that it was like mixing oil and water since the two were completely different elements. Nonetheless, they can be made to mix, she said, and she tried in her work to unite them.¹

Japan and jazz — even at the end of the century these two words still seem to be almost a contradiction in terms. For many years the image of oil and water summed up about everything that needed to be said about these two cultural traditions. The common-sense feeling persists that Japanese culture and jazz do not really mix, that they are somehow opposites in the same way that Japan and the West are essentially different in nature. That is, Japanese culture is uniquely harmonious and group oriented and simply does not contain the contentious individualism fundamental to American society. In such an approach, culture is isolated as a determining factor and treated as if it possesses an internal logic of its own quite separate from its social and historical context.

The insistence upon irreducible cultural uniqueness has led to curious results for those attempting to account for historical change. The main recourse that seems possible theoretically from that vantage point is to interpret change in Japan as either imitation (that is, superficial change without creativity that concedes superiority to the culture of the other) or Westernization (total change that destroys tradition and identity). One way out of the dilemma is to sidestep and posit a unique Japanese gift for assimilation of outside knowledge and practice even while preserving the essence of Japan's cultural tradition. Thus the old chestnut of combining Eastern ethics with Western techniques. The result is supposedly a new, creative synthesis that would seem to be unattainable by outsiders since they cannot truly comprehend Japanese culture in the same way that Japanese can comprehend that of outsiders. Of course, this have-your-cake-and-eat-it solution gives away the game by admitting to the possibility of the short-term historical mutability and malleability of Japan's culture.

At least since mid-century, writers ranging from Princeton-school modernization theorists to Marxists have questioned the construct of national cultural uniqueness and have attempted to locate Japan in the contemporary capitalist world and in world history as an object for comparative analysis according to universal trends and patterns applicable to any other country or society. Then, more recently, postmodernist deconstruction has posited a radical relativism in which knowledge is always conditional and fragmentary and, denying the validity of universal ideas and patterns, has rejected their use in the analysis of human society and culture. The accompanying trend of cultural relativism has, ironically, buttressed the "essentialist" notion of Japanese uniqueness, the grasp and interpretation of which is now more easily taken to be the exclusive preserve of "the Japanese" themselves and beyond the reach of outsiders who have no right to judge or criticize.

Jazz, too, has been interpreted by means of culturalist assumptions and referred to, for example, as a "uniquely American" art form beyond the ken of outsiders who can only copy, but not create. In its American homeland, jazz, too, has been separated from its social context and analyzed as a self-contained set of ideas following an internal (in this case musical) logic of its own. And it has been subjected to postmodernist deconstruction that denies to jazz any

essential nature as a distinct musical form, rejects judgements of quality, ranking, and historical progress as illegitimate reference points for establishing a spurious musical canon for jazz — in the process, erasing the boundaries between jazz and other types of music.

Whatever Akiyoshi Toshiko might think about these theoretical issues, I do not know. It is clear that the primary point of contention about jazz in Japan is still whether or not it can be compatible with Japanese "tradition" and at the same time true to the African-American cultural traditions which nurtured it. In short, can this cultural import into Japan claim originality or authenticity as a means of Japanese artistic expression? The search for authenticity troubled Japanese musicians attempting to play jazz in cabarets and military clubs after World War II and has continued to preoccupy those who have had contact with or been part of the world of Japanese jazz.

That was certainly the case for the members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, a group of African-American musicians who came together out of concerns common to the black power movement and committed themselves to the most formidable kind of experimental, jazz improvisation, when they toured Japan in 1977. Soejima Teruhito, who was at that time editing a special edition of the journal Jazz Hihyo (Jazz Critique) on Japanese jazz men (sic), relates that they told him that only the music of black people had progressed with the times, that only black music could claim to move together with the world. Japanese jazz musicians could never be original, could never comprehend the deeper, creative impulses of jazz because they had not been through a 500-year history of slavery and oppression as had the black people who created the music and sustained it. The Art Ensemble of Chicago had listened to Japanese groups. They capably performed this music standing in the black tradition, but they were not original.²

Soejima, deeply offended by the implication that Japanese jazz musicians were doomed to be no more than imitators, wrote an angry editorial in the special issue of Jazz Hihyo³ in which he charged that these views were nothing less than fascism. Yes, Soejima conceded, it was painfully true that the great majority of Japanese jazz groups were copying the styles of black players. And that the most amazing and creative jazz musicians continued to be black people. If that is all that can be said, then why do Japanese listen to jazz? And attempt to play it? Furthermore, what is jazz itself? Why did jazz come into Japan and spread? Confronting questions like these was the only way, Soejima said, "to throw off the 'black-man complex' that has for many years haunted and eaten into the consciousness of jazz fans and musicians."

Soejima went on to give a thumbnail sketch of the history of Japanese jazz. Jazz started out originally in Taisho Japan as a kind of "foreign goods dandyism," but gradually became part of a challenging tide of cultural change coming from outside. This in turn brought on a nativist suppression of foreign culture and ideas during the war that targeted jazz as part of an effort to wipe the slate clean. After 1945, when the native tradition came up wanting, Japanese culture fell into a "burnt-out ruins" demoralization, while the American occupation pursued a policy of coerced Americanization. In Soejima's words, "The Japanese, who had lost their spirit in the sudden overturning of every value and who led desolate lives in the ruins, greedily ate corn meal; and the desiccated, sandy soil of their hearts was steeped in jazz and Hollywood movies." Nevertheless, as Japan began to reconstruct itself and get beyond the "burnt-out ruins" mentality of the immediate postwar days, Japanese jazz groups multiplied, star players appeared, and from about the end of the occupation in 1952, a jazz boom took place.

Jazz had had its ups and downs since, wrote Soejima, but reached the point in the late

seventies where it was about to experience a second flowering, this time as Japanese jazz. Nonetheless, the appeal of the "real thing" (hon mono) remained powerful, and Japanese jazz musicians had to think hard about the fix that they were in where cultural copying and ersatz still ruled the Japanese jazz world. Soejima concluded,

Certainly America gave birth to the splendid music that is jazz. America is the homeland of jazz. Jazz is the language of black people. This is as it should be. However, America is not the only country of jazz. Jazz is not only the language of black people. . . . Japanese jazz clearly exists. . . . In this time of taking in all kinds of music, expressions, ideas, a new Japanese jazz can be born that is the real thing.⁵

Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Nationalism exhibits surprising energy at times. It is good to defeat the enemy; however, nationalism that springs from exclusiveness is no more than stunted self-neglect." This seemed to be acknowledgement that creativity in Japanese jazz could only be attained by walking along a narrow road between cultural copying and cultural nativism. 6

Soejima asked searching questions about what jazz is and why Japanese listen to it and attempt to play it, but gave no conclusive answers. Answers to his questions, if they are to be persuasive, must surely come from exploration of the connections between jazz and class, race, gender, and nation, as well as analysis of jazz as a musical art or a form of culture.

Basic issues are still not settled about the social and cultural role of jazz in its American homeland. It is still an open question why an African-American form of improvised music was taken up by middle-class American whites in the first instance and then by people all over the world. Should jazz be regarded as an art form? Or is it a fleeting part of popular culture? If an art form, is jazz progressing from folk art to classical status as high art, with all that such a category implies about universality? Do such distinctions even make sense in this era of high capitalism and cultural commodification? Or, the most basic question of all and the one that lies behind the Art Ensemble of Chicago's disparaging comments about Japanese jazz to Soejima, can white men play the blues? That is, can non-blacks play authentic jazz never having known the blues, the heart and soul of African-American jazz? Their answer — based on a radical view of history that reached out to incorporate art, race, class, and culture — was no.

Akiyoshi Toshiko has made the point more than once that jazz, for all that it was born in America, is itself a mixture of African rhythm with Western melodic and chord structures. Most attempts to define jazz highlight the same points and note that jazz emerged as an improvised music around 1900 out of a merging of African and European musical traditions that took place in 19th century America through such forms as the blues, ragtime, spirituals, and brass-band music. Although jazz uses European musical conventions in harmony, melody, and rhythm, it simultaneously subverts them through improvisation incorporating such means as dissonant intervals, blue notes, microtones, playing ahead of or behind the beat, pulsating rhythms (swing), personalized (impure) instrumental sounds, polyrhythms, and other musical practices that have African musical roots. More important than specific musical practices is the fact that jazz developed out of the same historical experiences of African-Americans that gave rise to the blues. That is, jazz and blues began as a music that united composer, player, and listener in direct emotional expression reflecting everyday life.

As for the social or cultural significance of jazz, the range of views is extreme. Eric Hobsbawm characterized it positively in his 1975 book on jazz as a folk art of the people and counterposed it to the elite art of the bourgeoisie. Theodore Adorno in his writings on popular music distinguished classical culture from both bourgeois and mass culture, and consigned jazz to the realm of commercially appropriated popular music which had become an ideological means of social control of the masses in capitalist society. Thelonious Monk said "Jazz and freedom go hand in hand. That explains it. There isn't any more to add to it. If I do add to it, it gets complicated. While Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) wrote in *Blues People*, "Blues is the national consciousness of jazz" and "Without blues, as interior animation, jazz has no history, no memory." Billy Taylor, the jazz pianist and educator, always makes a point on his nationally broadcast radio programs on jazz to call it America's classical music.

Edward Said expresses his views on the relation of music to life in Musical Elaborations, his book on the social and cultural dimensions of classical music.

What I want to assert is the intuitive conviction I have — and I think most of us have — that what we are dealing with [in music]... is not the separation between art or theory and life but rather the already powerful, commonsensical, and experiential connection between them. There are reasons for, and there is an interest in, separating them but, I maintain, these two spheres of human effort exist together, they live together, they are together... ¹¹

Although many would agree with Said about the unity of music and life, not many in the West or, for that matter, in Japan would go along with the idea that jazz is the equal of classical music as an art, despite its evident ability to unite the two spheres of human effort, perhaps more intimately than classical music. Said's analysis is not especially helpful in addressing this question, but it is quite helpful in clarifying the equivocal social and ideological role that classical music has played by virtue of its widely recognized cultural status as high art.

The first chapter in Musical Elaborations explores the way that the two spheres of art and life have been separated as transmission of classical music has come to rely on "performance as an extreme occasion." The extreme specialization of all aesthetic activity in the contemporary West has, on the one hand, had the effect of splitting off performing from composing, has separated the public performer from the private composer who is placed in shadow. On the other hand, specialization has created a gulf between the performer possessing "staggeringly brilliant technique" and the listener at home or in the concert hall who, more than likely, cannot compose, read music, or play an instrument. Said points to "the listener's poignant speechlessness as he/she faces an onslaught of such refinement, articulation, and technique as almost to constitute a sadomasochistic experience." Concert performance is an "extreme occasion," "something beyond the everyday, something irreducibly and temporally not repeatable, something whose core is precisely what can be experienced under relatively severe and unyielding conditions." Although that might be seen as equally true for jazz in light of the virtuosity of great players like Charlie Parker, the technical shortcomings of, for example, Miles Davis (weak high register, cracked notes, fluffs) or Thelonious Monk suggest that technical perfection in performance is secondary to the ability to communicate rather than being an absolute necessity for communication.

What is interesting about Said's perspective if applied to jazzis the way that it highlights

what almost everyone concedes is one of jazz's core elements — improvisation. It is not just that the jazz performance is eminently repeatable (though never in exactly the same way); the characteristic small group performance is unencumbered by the massive superstructure that surrounds the classical concert, especially orchestral or operatic performances. importantly, composer and performer are united in the jazz musician performing in the small group setting, where there is a premium placed upon the player's being able to express his/her creativity in improvisation and in extemporaneously supporting or responding to the improvisations of others. Moreover, the jazz listener is closer physically (in the club, though not in the concert hall) and perhaps closer as well in understanding of what the jazz performer is attempting, though there is no way to measure this. The listener who has ambitions to play jazz may well have some technical knowledge of the music beyond being able to read and follow a score. He or she might well be mentally analyzing the structure of the performance in order to play it, might even be playing along if at home. Although jazz is increasingly learned in the classroom like classical music with its formal methods of instruction, one of the major roads to mastery of jazz has been and still is listening to recorded and live performances with the intention of reproducing them.¹⁴

By the particular test of unity between art and life that Said poses, jazz comes off rather well, though I imagine he too would balk at equating jazz and classical as art forms. The test for that, Said intimates, lies in the undefinable realm of emotions or feelings communicated, something "irreducibly unique, contrary to everyday life . . . [that] feels like a clear aesthetic alternative to the travails of ordinary human experience." Mainstream jazz, on the contrary, has tended by and large to reach for its emotional pitch by communicating feelings expressive of everyday life or by voicing a critique of the travails of ordinary human experience, a la Billie Holiday, Charles Mingus. That is its practical purpose in a social sense. This is quite distinct from what Said sees as the practical uses to which classical music is put in ratifying and maintaining the existing structure of capitalist society.

Said examines the way that music as public spectacle invades "the family, school, class and sexual relations, nationalism, and even large public issues" by eliciting such emotions as patriotism, religious awe, romantic love, and imperial pride. (The Brahms German Requiem or Madame Butterfly or a Wagnerian opera come to mind.) Said notes how music making serves authority and social control as in the case of "music as enforcing class and gender divisions, music as deepening class differences, music as enhancing the prestige of male overlords." (Ratifying class position by learning Mozart, attributing gender characteristics to musical instruments, and the exercise of power by the male maestro might be some examples.) Said argues further that the act of defining the "essence" of "classical music" projects upon it a presumed superiority and universality that is used to defend the West against cultural challenge and contamination and to "freeze the Other in a kind of basic subjecthood." 18

It is clear from Said's analysis of classical music that boundaries, rules, and canons are imperative for maintaining its social and cultural role "as a mode of dominance in sustaining the structure of the status quo." Clearly, classical music with amorphous boundaries where all has been appropriated and all is permissible has no utility, for it can no longer serve in the Gramscian sense as a cultural means for sustaining the hegemony of bourgeois civil society in the capitalist era.

Said is surely walking a tightrope between seeing classical music as a mode of elite dominance and at the same time as a (universal?) art with irreducibly unique ability to communicate emotion and unite art with life. The implication seems to be that classical music is a better kind of music, not because of its association with elites, but because of the qualitative superiority of the emotions communicated when compared to other forms of music, such as pop, folk, or jazz.

Eric Hobsbawm's view of jazz, as laid out in his first edition of The Jazz Scene, accords neither with Adorno's characterization of jazz as an utterly corrupt, commercialized mass music of capitalist society, nor with Said's dualistic analysis of the role of classical music as art and as a means for the reproduction of social authority and class hegemony. Instead, he places jazz as part of the culture of class resistance in capitalist society, as a folk art close to everyday life both in conception and performance which is in fundamental conflict with the minority culture of elites. Jazz is a music of protest and rebellion "because it was originally the music of an oppressed people and of oppressed classes." Jazz is "democratic music," "a musical manifesto of populism" and represents "a conquest of popular over minority culture." At its best the democracy of jazz produced an ideal of art in society wider and socially sounder than that of the orthodox minority culture." In short, it is a better kind of music than classical because of its social purpose.

For all that, if it is true, as Amiri Baraka has argued, that the blues is black music and is integral to jazz and if Japan has no counterpart to the blues, the Art Ensemble of Chicago is surely right — neither Japanese nor white men can play creative jazz. But if the blues can be seen as a particular historically defined social and cultural manifestation of protest and resistance against elite hegemony, as Hobsbawn suggests, then surely creative jazz may arise outside America and draw from other springs for its inspiration. As Hobsbawm notes in passing in Age of Extremes²³ about the art of social protest (for example, the novels of B. Traven or the paintings of George Grosz), such works rely for their effect upon the conviction that there are intolerable injustices in the world as it is. Without that driving passion, all that remains according to Hobsbawm is mere technical competence and sentimentality. It could be argued that the same holds true for jazz. Without that sense of the injustice of the world most clearly seen in its connection to the blues, jazz runs the danger of declining into technical brilliance or sentimental celebration of the world as it is, which may amount to the same thing in the end.

The general picture Said and Hobsbawm leave with us is of two musical arts with social roles counterposed to one another, one the defender and prop of elite hegemony, the other the expression and weapon of popular discontent. What complicates this nice neat picture is that jazz has also played a part as a defender of elite interests. In surprising ways, jazz fits well in this respect with Said's analysis of classical music.

Many bands have toured the world since the forties and fifties as U.S. State Department "ambassadors" carrying the message of American freedom and equality to peoples vulnerable to contamination by the evil of communism, a mission heartily endorsed in jazz magazines like *Downbeat* by such critics as Nat Hentoff and even Ralph Gleason. Moreover, jazz as social practice has taken part in enforcing gender divisions by discriminating against women players and in "enhancing the prestige of male overlords" on widely publicized ceremonial occasions, for example performances at the White House for conservative administrations carrying out reactionary social policies. Jazz is hardly immune to cooptation by the elite as means for

reproduction of social authority and class hegemony. Furthermore, jazz as music has moved some distance away from being an easily accessible musical language of popular social and political protest. As the larger jazz community has become ever more solidly anchored in the middle class, it has at the same time moved toward musical classicism and apparent affirmation of things as they are. If that trend continues, then it may well come to pass that not much will be left of jazz but technical competence and sentimentality.

As for the question of whether Japanese musicians can play original and creative jazz, surely that has long since been settled by such players as Akiyoshi Toshiko on piano, Watanabe Sadao on alto sax, Hino Terumasa on trumpet, and Miyazawa Akira on tenor. Yet, cultural stereotyping is still central in shaping the attitudes of North Americans toward Japanese jazz players. Onishi Junko, one of Japan's leading young jazz pianists, who has gained recognition among jazz musicians in New York for her trio and solo work in the post-bop tradition, was invited to play at the 13th Annual Jazz Fest International in Victoria in June 1997. In providing publicity for her performance, the festival brochure and the local paper both used the phrase, "Japanese jazz stars are rarer than North American sumo wrestlers," a condescending remark at best and an absurd comparison given Onishi's slight build. Few Victoria jazz fans turned out to hear her all-Japanese trio play; nor did local jazz reviewers comment on her performance afterward. At about the same time Jessica Williams, the post-bop woman pianist from the U.S., played to packed houses in Victoria and was lionized.

A quarter century earlier, when Akiyoshi Toshiko was struggling just to get a hearing for her straightahead style of bop inspired jazz piano, Hara Nobuo, leader of one of Japan's best bands, the Sharps and Flats, made a huge hit at the 1972 Newport Jazz Festival bringing Yamamoto Hozan to perform with them on shakuhachi. They came on stage in kimono and crested haori to give a performance featuring such jazz standards as "Sakura, Sakura" and "Soran Bushi." Oddly enough, the band was following Akiyoshi's advice that focusing on something Japanese was the best way to gain approval.²⁴ Clearly, the Western audience for jazz seems to be most receptive to Japanese jazz when the performance includes "uniquely Japanese" elements. Perhaps the audience sees this as an obligation of Japanese jazz musicians and the one truly creative act available to them. If so, this might help explain why Western audiences and critics often react with indifference to Japanese players performing squarely within the American-European tradition, seeing them as merely Westernized or, at worst, imitators. This could not be clearer than in Richard Cook & Brian Morton's massive work, The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD, LP & Cassette. Its 1,500 plus pages give ample room to European jazz musicians, but virtually ignore Japanese musicians who are the subject of only about a dozen of the 3,500 plus listings. Nor are the other guides any better.

It's too pat to reduce this problem to Western cultural and racial stereotyping, since stereotyping has been at work in Japan as well. The "black-man complex" that Soejima deplored conjures up the long-standing "creative savage" stereotype that has had wide currency in the West and enduring power in Japan. Before W.W. II, critics in the West explained jazz as a spontaneous, non-intellectual music of natural man that wilts if cut off from its roots by incorporation of too much European rationality and classicism in music making. Culture and nature were seen to be mutually exclusive. This ambiguous but racist cultural explanation of creativity in jazz in the prewar West surely abetted the transfer of other American cultural/racial stereotypes about the African-American musician to Japan. There is evidence that, in the absence of any extensive contact with African-Americans before W.W. II, Japanese drew upon

Western racist conventions about the African-American's innate musicality, closeness to nature, and disposition to live for the moment to supplement already existing notions about racial purity and cultural exclusivity. It would not have been too far of a stretch from there for Japanese enemies and partisans of jazz to come to the conclusion that Japan was too civilized and therefore too distant from the Afro-American sensibility ever to be able to produce "authentic" jazz — if that was accepted to be a worthy goal in the first place — but could achieve "authentic" status in the world of classical music.

Even if that could be proven to be so, it hardly disposes of the problems the Art Ensemble of Chicago and Soejima raised about the authenticity of Japanese jazz. One way out, of course, is to argue that jazz has progressed from being a primitive/improvisational kind of music (the twelve-bar blues) to a sophisticated/compositional music and that the criteria for authenticity has changed accordingly. Indeed, Soejima seems to be saying as much in his description of the late seventies as a time of "taking in all kinds of music, expressions, ideas" that was creating conditions for the birth of a genuine Japanese jazz that would not have to be anchored in Afro-American blues. But that raises more questions than it answers about where the boundaries might be between jazz and other kinds of music and about the idea of musical progress in the first place.

In fact, Soejima was quite right about the fusion of different kinds of music with Japanese jazz in the seventies (such as bossa nova, rock, European art music). He may not have expected, however, that the main current of the Japanese jazz tradition would lose headway and spread out over the landscape into a host of meandering and increasingly disconnected streams (e.g., fusion, funky revival, European oriented experimental jazz, free improvisation, swing, straightahead bop). On the surface, these changes appear to confirm the post-modernist cliche that the end of the 20th century is a time of exhaustion of forms, a time when all the possibilities within the boundaries of an art like jazz have been explored so thoroughly that within the form all that is left is either recapitulation and nostalgia, or transgression of boundaries by borrowing, pastiche, and quotation. Indeed, two French writers on the history of American jazz have argued that jazz itself is bursting into pieces.²⁶

Bergerot and Merlin argue that by the end of the eighties, "the different forms of improvised music — still conveniently collected under the label of jazz — [were] not, of course, the exclusive property of black musicians at this time." Other musicians, foremost among them whites, have "appropriated the heritage of jazz." Because these new musicians have as well appropriated literally all that is musical, the "pretexts and the standards of classical jazz are no longer required." What is emerging is a real fusion music encompassing "a much larger heritage — classical music, urban and rural traditions, academic music and music of the streets, rock and country, free jazz, and various other sounds." ²⁸

In this decompartmentalized, cosmopolitan, and multicolored space, the standard- bearers of jazz have disappeared. They have left room for a permissiveness and a wild variety of individual styles, all carried by the impulse that was called swing in the thirties, which, in diversifying, has lost none of its power.²⁹

Note well the anchor that Bergerot and Merlin throw out in the last line, "the impulse that was called swing," as if that word borrowed from jazz sufficed to differentiate real fusion

music from any other kind of music.

Since there is not yet a book available in English on jazz in Japan, it would be foolhardy and presumptuous to jump off the cliff into the decompartmentalized space of post-modern analysis. The greatest need right now is to provide basic information about the music and its social context in Japan. Therefore, it is time to end these theoretical reflections by noting that Akiyoshi, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Soejima, Baraka, Monk, and many other jazz players — not to mention the scholarly and critical establishment — have thrown out all sorts of anchors for themselves over the years when trying to answer that old question: What is jazz? Japanese jazz musicians and listeners are far from being the only ones searching for a way to define the boundaries and distinctive traits of jazz. As a practical matter, more or less coherent definitions of jazz have existed, for it has mattered to most jazz players and listeners that there be a common understanding of what jazz is all about, even if only intuitively. Jazz, too, makes no sense as either art or social critique if deconstructed so that all can be appropriated and all becomes permissible. In the case of jazz in Japan, the first need is for a social history that, however tentatively, begins to set out the jazz scene since its reemergence in the aftermath of W.W. II.

Footnotes

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