

What's Wrong With Stella by Starlight?

by Con Chapman

It was one of those moments when you realize you are hopelessly out of date, out of step with the current generation.

My girlfriend had declined to move to Boston with me and so I was looking for roommates. I happened to mention it to a guy named Phil, a philosophy major whom I knew shared an interest in jazz. He said *he* was moving to Boston to go to graduate school too. “That’ll be great!” I said, assuming too much. “What with your record collection and mine, we could . . .”

He cut me off, and rather sharply I might add. “Uh, thanks but no thanks,” he said.

“But . . .”

“No offense, but you probably listen to ‘Stella by Starlight.’”



I didn't have to speculate as to what I had done to deserve my reputation as a moldy old fig, the term beboppers used to refer to musicians of Louis Armstrong's generation and their fans. I couldn't have whistled the tune to "Stella by Starlight" on a bet, but I knew what Phil meant. William Thomas McKinley, a musician and composer, had said that the only proper moods left for jazz to express by the 1970s were violence and introspection, and I was definitely a member of a retrograde faction. I believed, in flat earth fashion, in melody.

McKinley had once invited one of his *protegees*, a young saxophonist, to perform for the undergraduate class in jazz he taught at the University of Chicago in the 70s. The fellow proceeded to honk on his horn for perhaps fifteen minutes, producing sounds that recalled a man stomping on a bag with a goose in it. When the guy stopped—I won't say "concluded" because the thing he produced seemed to have no beginning or middle, although it thankfully had an end—he spoke a bit about his, uh, art. "I could go on like that for hours," he said after McKinley praised him.

I had the temerity to put my hand up for the first question. "Why on earth would you want to?"

In a historical sense, Phil and McKinley were right; jazz had devolved to a point in the 1970s where your choices were pretty much limited to angry musicians, who sounded like they were having arguments with their instruments, and neurotic depressed ones, like Miles Davis. Those who had no allegiance to melody fell into step; those who felt that jazz had fled from a city in the midst of its Golden Age—the Jewish/African-American renaissance of music that has come to be known as the Great American Songbook—to a desert plain where all was arid and lifeless, were bereft.

Kingsley Amis, one of the funnier novelists of his generation, once said of the neurotic mode that "if you really feel that life could not possibly be gloomier, try any slow Miles Davis track. It will suggest to you that, however gloomy life may be, it cannot possibly as gloomy as Davis makes it out to be."



Miles Davis, before he wised up and got depressed.

I was then a member in good standing of several circles of jazz listeners; one connected two Poles, a guy named Ed and another named Richard, both from the Polish neighborhoods of Chicago and both into heavy chaos in their music. The axis on which their favorite music extended was, in cosmological terms, made of dark matter, those modal solos that make the room spin even when you're not high. The only representative from the neurotic camp I knew was a woman named Suzie who went on to become an anchorwoman in Los Angeles after college. She had little bruises on her feet where she'd shoot heroin since she didn't want tracks to show on her arms, where they'd ruin the effect of a little black cocktail dress. Junkies favored Miles since, if all you can do with your body is nod your head, his music provides the perfect tempo.

But above and beneath this two dimensional plane there were entirely different realms composed for want of a better term of light matter. Beneath, there was the jazz of the 30's, sometimes hot, sometimes sweet; Joe Venuti, Eddie Lang, Django Reinhardt, played by a friend of mine from New York. At some point he'd hit a rip in the space-time continuum, slipped into the past and never returned. He played the sort of music that one associates with the sound track

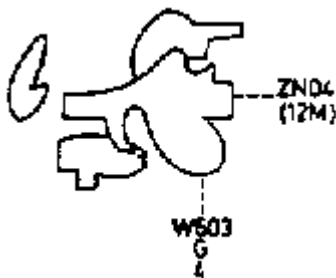
of Max Fleischer cartoons—Betty Boop, Popeye, *et alia*, as the lawyers say.

Above it, and reaching to the heavens, were the be-boppers and their precursors; Lester Young on tenor sax, Charlie Parker on alto, Dizzy Gillespie on trumpet, Bud Powell on piano, Boston's Roy Haynes on drums. Their music was filled with the same sense of joy but was more complex harmonically and rhythmically. They had a firm home base in the blues but weren't embarrassed to use popular songs as the basis for improvisation. It was Parker, the most gifted of them all, a man who couldn't breathe without creating wildly inventive figures, who heard "Stella by Starlight" in its original format—as a recurring theme in the ghost movie "The Invited"—and decided to use it as a vehicle for his protean flights of fancy.



Roy Haynes: Still alive, catch him if you can.

Which is why I say, in the manner of an old Broadway musical *segue*, what's wrong with "Stella by Starlight"? I mean, after all: if it's good enough for Parker, the greatest jazz soloist of the latter half of the twentieth century, if not the entire span of jazz's first hundred years, why isn't it good enough for wannabe hepcats like Phil?



The graphic title to Anthony Braxton's Composition No. 65: "Baby, I love you like a quadratic equation!"

Part of the reason is pure snobbery; if a song first hits the public's ears from the loudspeakers of a movie theatre, how cool can it be? For part of the pose of the avant-garde is always to define one's self by what they don't want to be—the schmucks who suck up popular culture. Members of this school of thought, those two Poles being exemplars of it, like their art obscure and irritating; you “enjoy” it as a show of strength, like the guy at the health club who has to grunt to let others know how hard he's working while you're just—cruising.

Thus instead of a song you could actually sing along to, you get the likes of Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp and Anthony Braxton, who named his compositions with graphic formulae, anticipating the androgynous R&B artist Prince who took a break from ordinary orthography when he changed his name to an unpronounceable symbol. Progress in this world view is represented by exiling emotion from music and replacing it with empty virtuosity, in much the same way that aliens in science fiction films are depicted as having oversize heads and aetiolated hearts.



Charlie Parker and trumpeter Red Rodney

The problem with this sort of music—now they've got *me* doing it!—is that not all change is progress, especially self-conscious change, and not every musician is a composer. There's a reason why jazz musicians have a strange affection for chestnuts such as “Stella by Starlight,” “When Sonny Gets Blue” and even, God forbid, “Danny Boy.” They have pretty melodies, and long lines on which to hang your musical ideas.

Before Davis decided that he was incapable of making mistakes and slowed down to a tempo at which they were *almost* impossible to make (I can point out a few flubs to you even during this phase of his development), he had also played tunes taken from movies, most notably “Green Dolphin Street” from the movie of the same name, and even “Someday My Prince Will Come” from—good Lord—a Disney movie, “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.”



Those who fret about the smallish audiences that jazz attracts these days must eventually face this fact: an art form that turns its back on patrons, the way Miles Davis did both literally and physically in his dotage, can't complain when the paying customers turn around and walk out. If you start with music people like to hear, and not the self-indulgent meanderings of a musician out to prove that he's a genius, you might persuade them to come back.

