

Keith Jarrett, Miscegenation & the Rise of the European Sensibility in Jazz in the 1970s

Gerald Early



By the late 1960s, when pianist Keith Jarrett was establishing his international reputation as a pro-

progressed after Duke Ellington?² Had not Ellington in fact already done everything that the modernists were claiming was so progressive or free? Since jazz prided itself on the originality of its great soloists, the questions by the end of the 1960s were: Had originality and virtuosity reached its limits in this form of music? Was there anything new to be mined? Was jazz, like so-called classical music, which many felt faced the same problem, dead to its own future, condemned to mere virtuosic variations of its past? Jazz could continue to produce styles and forms of musical fusions, its own type of artistic sectarianism matching the sectarian fury of Protestantism, but had the music reached an endpoint? Protestantism had not really come up with any concept better than the Trinity; was jazz going to come up with anything better than Parker, Ellington, or Louis Armstrong?

As pianist Paul Bley put it in 1974, “If you accept the fact that everything left to be done has been done and been done well, then in terms of improvising in the jazz idiom, there are only a few little corners that were overlooked that are still workable.”³ What were these “few little corners”?

The second aspect of the crisis facing jazz was social obsolescence. Was the music still relevant to the audiences that made jazz matter in the past? The answer was not quite no—there were still students and counterculture, antibourgeois-yet-affluent types who enjoyed it—but certainly jazz was tending toward being an art form that was no longer popular, particularly with large swaths of the young.⁴ Indeed, the fact that jazz was considered art music at all posed a problem for a music that had once been played by dance bands and enjoyed a period of astonishing popularity during the big band era.⁵ Swing music may have been a distortion, an aberration, a mistake. Was jazz not supposed to be popular music? Was it not

classified by record companies and record stores as popular music? If jazz ceased to be popular music when it ceased to be primarily dance music, then what did it mean to be art music?⁶ Was jazz now mood music used for background, whether for romance or for film? If jazz artists in the 1960s were striving to be literally as noisy as possible, with ever-increasing experimentation with dissonance, atonality, and, ultimately, electronics, then surely many jazz musicians did not wish their music to be relegated to the background. But inasmuch as it aspired to art, jazz was increasingly becoming an art form that was no longer relevant.

As philosopher Theodor Adorno has pointed out, one of jazz’s strongest claims as the music of the twentieth century was that it was modern, even that it defined the sound, the aesthetic of modernity. Jazz was, above all else, the sound of the new. After all, it was jazz musicians, record companies, and critics who used terms like “progressive jazz” and “modern jazz” to characterize how current, how much in the vanguard, certain styles of jazz after World War II were supposed to be. But with the rise of rock music and

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Frankie Trumbauer, Eddie Condon, June Christy, Mildred Bailey, Joe Venuti, Django Reinhardt, Eddie Lang, Harry James, Benny Goodman, Jack Teagarden, Artie Shaw, Stan Kenton, Bill Holman, Charlie Barnett, Woody Herman, Gene Krupa, Chris Connor, Lennie Tristano, Stéphane Grappelli, Jimmy Giuffre, Chet Baker, Bud Shank, Dave Brubeck, George Shearing, Stan Getz, Paul Desmond, Lee Konitz, Louie Bellson, Lee Konitz, Shelly Manne, Shorty Rogers, Bob Brookmeyer, Jim Hall, Gerry Mulligan, Buddy Rich, Gary Burton, Ran Blake, Zoot Sims, Dodo Marmarosa, Bill Evans, Chick Corea, Helen Merrill, Carla Bley, and Steve Swallow, among others. Indeed, whites have always made up a significant portion of jazz's audience, often the majority of the audience (a common observation made today), and whites have always played this music. It can, in fact, be safely said that probably more whites have played this music than blacks, simply because there are many more whites in the United States than blacks. (Certainly, during the swing era, there is no question that there were more white than black swing bands.) One could argue that the roots of jazz are just as much in marching band music, American musical theater, American vaudeville music, and Jewish Klezmer music as they are in African American culture. But while this argument could credibly be made, it is not likely that anyone in jazz criticism or scholarship circles these days would make it.⁸

It has been, however, a common belief among both black and white musicians

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when he started gyrating and moaning. It clearly made Jarrett distinctive, whether one liked the gyrations and groans. This combination of factors probably led many of his peers and many in his audiences, especially during the early days of his career, to think that he was black.

The most obvious way for jazz to avoid becoming a marginal music was to appeal to the young. And despite losing a good share of its audience in the 1960s, it must be remembered, first, that jazz was still being played on the radio at this time; second, that jazz was still being featured in movie and television soundtracks; and third, that jazz was still capable of producing commercial hits like pianist Vince Guaraldi's "Cast Your Fate to the Wind," Ramsey Lewis's "The In Crowd," Jimmy Smith's version of "Walk on the Wild Side," Eddie Harris's "Listen Here," Richard "Groove" Holmes's version of "Misty," Hugh Masekela's "Up, Up, and Away," and Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man," to name only a few. These jazz hits were enjoyed not only by adults on record and on jazz radio stations, but also by young people who heard them played on top 40 or pop radio, then the main source of music for young people in the United States and parts of Western Europe.

There were also certain jazz bands that appealed to teenagers who thought of themselves as particularly hip. Among those bands were the mid-1960s ensembles of black West Coast drummer Chico Hamilton. Hamilton, who had led an integrated "cool" jazz quintet in the 1950s that featured a cellist, was always interested in being cutting edge. (The cool quintet was featured significantly in the 1957 film *Summer of '42*, starring Tony Curtis and Burt Lancaster.) Among the young players featured in Hamilton's 1960s bands was electric guitarist Larry Coryell, who would become one of the

leading figures in the jazz-rock revolution of the 1970s. Another was Hungarian guitarist Gabor Szabo, whose tunes "Gypsy 66" and "Lady Gabor" would become popular among college and high school students of the period, both black and white. But the Hamilton band member who developed the largest youth-

piano or electric guitar. But soon, with albums like *Watermark* (1969) and *Water* (1970), the latter the most commercially successfully record Davis would release after *Watermark*, Davis was employing several electric keyboardists, an electric guitarist, and an electric bass player. Eventually, Davis would amplify his trumpet as well. Davis had become the father of the jazz-rock movement, regularly playing rock venues with bands featuring a new generation of international musicians of racially diverse backgrounds interested in electronics and rock.

Among those players was Keith Jarrett, whose stay with Davis in the early 1970s was not very long: less than a year between 1970 and 1971. Davis had been after Jarrett to join his band for some time. “The main reason I joined the band was that I didn’t like the band. I liked what Miles was playing very much and I hated the rest of the band playing together,” Jarrett said in an interview in 1974, a few years after he left Davis.¹⁷ Davis’s band spawned most of the major jazz-rock groups of the period: Chick Corea’s *Return to Forever*, Herbie Hancock’s *Headhunters*, *Weather Report* with Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter, the *Mahavishnu Orchestra* with John McLaughlin, and Tony Williams’s *Lifetime*. Williams, McLaughlin, Shorter, Zawinul, Hancock, and Corea all played with Davis during the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the time, everyone thought electronic music was the way of the future and that rock was the best vehicle not only to use electronic instruments but to make jazz modern again by attracting young people with the sound young people liked. But Davis’s various bands of this period were modern also because they were integrated. Remember how startling and edgy was the debut of the *Jimi Hendrix Experience*, a trio with two white English musicians, drummer Mitch Mitchell and bassist Noel Redding. And remember how significantly

both the sound and the reception of Hendrix’s band changed when he replaced Mitchell and Redding with Buddy Miles and Billy Cox, both black. White players like McLaughlin, Jarrett, Zawinul, Corea, Dave Holland, Mike Stern, Dave Liebman, and Steve Grossman all played jazz-rock with Davis.

The fact that Davis’s jazz-rock bands featured gifted young white players made it seem that much more cutting edge, while also making it even easier for Davis to cross over to young white rock fans. Davis had already associated with white musicians at critical points in his career: his *Kind of Blue* recordings in the late 1940s made use of mostly white bands; his collaborations with arranger Gil Evans produced some of his most impressive orchestral albums; and his relationship with pianist Bill Evans was central to one of the most famous albums in post–World War II American jazz, *Bill Evans Trio*, in 1959.

It was out of this moment of crisis, change, and opportunity that Keith Jarrett emerged as a star. But unlike his Davis bandmates, he would renounce electronic instruments and would avoid the jazz-rock movement entirely. On his early opposition to electric music, Jarrett explained,

It’s not going to change because for me it’s the answer. It may not apply to somebody else, although I could go into the philosophical aspects of it and make it almost an objective argument whereby playing electric music is bad for you and bad for people listening, which I do believe. I don’t feel any strong emotional thing about electric music being offensive, and I am certainly not afraid of electric instruments because I think there’s something unknown and vast about them. I don’t think they’re any more vast than a flute, but they give you the feeling that you’re dealing with something vast.¹⁸

Keith Jarrett, Miscegenation & the Rise of European Sensibility in Jazz Jarrett distinguished himself in the rattle and hum of jazz-rock and amplified jazz by becoming the rather petulant patron saint of acoustic jazz music as concert art music.

Between 1971, when Jarrett recorded his first solo piano record, *Portrait of an Artist*, for the European record label

mean music that “swings,” music that has a driving 4/4 pulse, a groove, something akin to the big band music of Count Basie or a bebop-oriented small group like Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers, or something like Ahmad Jamal’s or John Bunch’s mu

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proved that the public was willing to take such records seriously and, as a result, the record companies flooded the market with solo piano records, some good, many bad. The advantage for the record company was that solo piano records were cheap to make. They required only a competent pianist and a well-tuned piano. But the rise of the solo piano record in the 1970s and 1980s also did much to turn young jazz audiences away from electronic instruments and jazz-rock and to accept jazz as an acoustic art, much in same way audiences accepted classical music. This occurred before trumpeter Wynton Marsalis came on the scene as a major force; he is often and I think wrongly given credit for this turn in jazz music.³² If anything, Marsalis was following the retromodernist movement that Jarrett had started. Third, Jarrett made the marriage between classical and jazz more viable than had any other jazz musician before him: not by trying to blend classical and jazz in his playing and composing, although he did do this with varying measures of success, but by marrying jazz and classical music together as a seamless, common sensibility of acoustic art. Jarrett gave jazz a true feeling of being concert hall music, not simply because it was being played in a concert hall, but because of the stature of the performer and the sacred act of his performance. In short, Jarrett did much to solidify jazz's reputation as, to use an old-fashioned term, a middlebrow art that validated both the middlebrow critics and audiences who adored him. It was jazz that made you feel good and listening to it was elevating, good for you. Jarrett momentarily solved some issues pressing jazz in the late 1960s, but ultimately, because he was white, he could not become jazz's hero or redeemer. He did not intentionally pose as a black, but once his audience came to recognize his whiteness in the late 1970s, he had in some ways reinscribed the problem

of authenticity coupled with the notion of *Gerald* privilege. Was being white an am0 -1.1t kbrow aru Td [(er a bo3 Tw -16.301 -1.136 Td (but.006 Tw 0 -1.136 Td [(a)0.5 (b

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that has a special, mythologized place in Western art-making.) Inasmuch as Jarrett's audience became devotees, listening to his music, particularly the solo concerts, as if they were a religious experience, something transcendent, Jarrett became both a preacher and a therapist.³³

As Elsdon points out, Jarrett made jazz a truly trans-Atlantic phenomenon, opening new and young audiences throughout Europe to the music.³⁴ But perhaps Jarrett did something more. He made a European-sounding jazz something hip and even profound for audiences. Perhaps he made it easier for a considerable segment

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