

Jazz as Disagreement

(2011)

- Thesis 1.** (–) Genre is not, as is widely held today, a set of contrived labels applied to the infinite expanse of musical difference functioning solely as a convenient form of conventional reference, ultimately and harmfully engendering false questions of boundary and essence.
(+) Genre is an orienting and productive organization of ideas that informs the perception of a music, its creation and comprehension.

Genre is often misunderstood as a purely limiting, descriptive and outdated system of music classification. It is said that genres do not respect the infinitely diverse varieties of music. The increased awareness of and access to different musics from around the world and their subsequent syntheses into new forms of contemporary expression encourage our distaste for definitions of musical kinds. Today, we find that genre's function has been reduced to directing the consumer toward like-sounding music. Occasionally, it will be used as a marketing ploy to feign the arrival of some supposedly new music. Against this type of understanding, we should restate its foundational and productive place in the arts.

A genre is a historical organization of ideas that acts as a basis for and gives context to a developing musical creativity. It is broad enough to allow for stylistic differences, while still forming a tradition of musical thought. Without the different orientations or perspectives given to us by genres, we are left with a musical universe composed solely of quantitative difference – music is reduced to noise variations; taste is reduced to media and market manipulation; and artistic value becomes vague. Our dismissal of genre neutralizes the meaning of a work by depriving it of a context and history of ideas. I emphasize this not to limit the musician's individual creativity and idiosyncratic pursuits, but to stress the importance of strong musical concepts and the necessarily divisive programs of thought and perception they entail. Genre does not provide the means to identify or categorize any given musical example. Nor is it a cookie-cutter that is used to divvy up what already exists. Instead, genre is more like the core of an expanding constellation of musical thought as it fills a universe of silence. The comparison breaks down, however, in that there are no universal laws that govern all musical genres as there are laws for all of the stars in the sky. Instead, each comes with its own set of ideas, the spirals of which we unravel as we see fit.

- Thesis 2.** (–) Jazz is not *defined* by any stylistic requisite (i.e., swing or blues), by the use of improvisation, or as a music of democratic communication.
(+) The genre of jazz and the ideas expressed therein are oriented around the concept of disagreement.

A musical idea must always escape its literary description. In avoidance of being reduced to a language, it asserts itself as a different mode of thought altogether.

Nonetheless, the poet encourages us to endlessly improve our failures of expression, if only to inspire a new way of knowing.

By disagreement, I mean a division of individual interest and feeling coexisting within an ensemble. I believe that the jazz musician, though always informed by his band members, practices a musical form of tolerance by maintaining a certain amount of calculated indifference to the other members' individual approaches. This is not to say that there are no complementary practices in jazz. Rather, on a fundamental level, each player has a different sense and understanding of the musical object and by accepting this, makes something productive of the experience. I would suggest that jazz thrives when every musician in an ensemble recognizes each other as an independent voice who can and will assert their resistance to being absorbed by the whole. The 'big picture' is, in this way, antithetical to jazz. Instead, the jazz musician strives to find the productive moment of difference. This idea founds an aesthetic that, beyond being theoretical, becomes intuitive and of great musical motivation. I find this idea, whether consciously held or tacitly understood, to be essential to an understanding and appreciation of the spirit of the music.

Further Considerations.

The idea of disagreement, as I have expressed it, may be understood to imply that jazz is necessarily a social music as it involves multiple viewpoints. The argument could also be made that an individual is capable of imitating this through strong technical and mindful independence. However, disagreement is not a description of jazz, but a theory of its genre. No one would deny the greatness and importance of the tradition of solo jazz piano. It is, perhaps, what I cherish most in music and is indispensable in understanding the jazz tradition as a whole.

The concept of disagreement does not explain the history of jazz and it is not intended to provide the means for a definitive critique. It acts as a point of orientation that is itself never entirely distilled in an actual musical example. But, in perspective, it opposes itself to the unity of action, feeling, and purpose involved in the classical music tradition and forms of ritualistic music.

Jelly Roll Morton is a figure with whom my view can find a historical reference. Jelly Roll once said, "Jazz happens when two marching bands walk through each other". These marching band battles were a common occurrence in New Orleans around the time of the birth of jazz. Though this is not a completely accurate or exhaustive illustration of the concept of disagreement, it does speak to its spirit as a motivating idea since the music's beginning.

I do not believe that music will solve political problems or alleviate social, religious or ethnic conflicts. However, the concept of disagreement in jazz embodies an attitude toward living together in conflict and difference that is of utmost importance today. Not surprisingly, some of the earliest forms of successful social integration in the U.S. were found in jazz ensembles. We cannot go on trying to create a single unified

humankind, nor is this desirable. Difference is pervasive and there is no single ideology or set of institutions that will prove suitable for all.

A great deal of contemporary music is influenced by genres across the board: jazz, classical, rock, Indian music, gamelan, etc. I am often surprised by the beauty and originality of such expressions and this sort of creative synthesis is undeniably important in the development of music. Nonetheless, this approach can also wind up trivializing the different musics by depriving them of their productive frameworks. I cannot help but find a sort of misguided fashion in some attempts whose goal seems limited to retaining the superficial 'emotional image' of each participating music. Clearly, all music does not belong to a specific genre, nor should it. Some styles are derivative, some are combinatorial, and some are absolutely original; most are likely a combination of all of these. However, I do believe that the most profound musical works that have been created (and sustained by musicians choosing to give them continued life in performance and study), involve themselves with a strong tradition. It is this rich context, within which the work deliberately situates itself, which can illuminate and bring to life the nuance inherent in the construction of the work itself, adding a depth of meaning and value otherwise not had.

Though there are many varieties of pop music, it seems to me that a common goal uniting them is to propagate. Though I fear pop music has been losing ground to more stimulating (or numbing) audio-visual-tactile forms of immersive entertainment experiences, it is interesting to note the evolving tactics it has employed in its pursuit of reproduction. One such strategical transition has been from the easily memorable and transmissible melodic 'hook' to the creation of sound environments that allow the listener to dissolve into the background, providing a pleasurable release from the ego, an experience we then seek to repeat. This trend developed in parallel with the emergence of the drug culture during the 1960s and culminates in today's ambient musics, sound installations, and electronic music's MDMA culture of total immersion. It is tempting to relate this fairly new trend in pop music, the attempt to merge self and environment to simulate a feeling of plentitude and oneness, to our vanishing habitat that may soon be unable to sustain us.