

# Putting jazz in perspective: some authoritative analysis by **BARNEY KESSEL**

*Jazz is always put into an esoteric, cult kind of slot — does it have to be a cult thing?*

**I**T doesn't have to be — but in my estimation, after playing fifty-two years, jazz, as far as I can see, has never been big. Never. The most successful big band that ever existed was Glenn Miller, and it was not a jazz band. There are musicians who played in there, and they were ensemble players; they played together, they got a beautiful orchestral sound, and they concentrated on the arrangements. The solos were not all that heavy and meaningful — not like Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman or Artie Shaw's band at all — but as far as appealing to the public, this was the band.

When we hear that Glenn Miller sound, we think of a time when the world was at peace and rested and quiet; there's a serenity, and there's a feeling that, even though there've been so many chaotic times in the world, that was a good time.

*(talking to  
Les Tomkins)*

And many of us didn't really know how good it was — we didn't appreciate it for what it was. It was really a time when things were at rest, when there were still families together, instead of everybody out on their own, and there weren't people looking for women's rights and gays' rights and blacks' rights. We were pretty much at peace — and that's what Glenn Miller stirs up. I like it, as far as a happy memory, because it's peaceful — but I don't entertain it as being jazz.

They're good commercial arrangements — "Little Brown Jug" and all those things. There are some lovely things, like "Serenade In Blue" and "At Last" — some very wonderful orchestral items. But my feeling is that jazz itself has never been big. Every so often I read about the resurgence of jazz, or it's coming back, or it's going to be big — it

never has. I'm not saying it never will, but it never has. Here's what I do think, Les — jazz right now is not a big item, but certain individuals in jazz are successful. Like Stan Getz, Oscar Peterson.

*Yes, these are artists who command a big audience . . .*

**T**HEY command a lot of money, and they are very, very popular. But not just anybody who plays jazz piano or plays the saxophone is going to be able to be a big success. Not just because you play an instrument — but these people are big. Miles Davis draws.

*Doesn't the success of such people show that, with the right promotion, good jazz can consistently draw a crowd? You referred to the Benny Goodman band as being a more creative operation, and you surely saw the crowds for yourself when you were with that band.*

**Y**ES — but, for instance, I played a concert at the Barbican Hall, where a wide variety of music is performed. There may be very few people that understand the music, but almost all of them understand the talk, and if I come through as a nice person, as friendly, as mildly humorous, even if they don't understand the music they find it acceptable. They've accepted it because of the talk, and because I don't thumb my nose at them or turn my back on them — I acknowledge them. Most of the people appreciate individuals in jazz, but not just jazz itself.

And one of the sad things today: if I say necktie or bow tie, you know what I mean; if I say glass, if I say wine, we know what we're talking about — if I say jazz, we don't know. If I said that next door there's a guy playing jazz trumpet, it doesn't tell you whether he's playing a very old style, a modern style or what. There's so many things that today have been slotted into the category of jazz, and some of it . . . it's not even whether to call it bad or good — besides that, it's not even jazz. Then there's other things that's terrible jazz. Record companies will call





something jazz when it isn't. Certain people that play jazz — they have no jazz background. Their background is academic — it's in the university; it's playing in a rock/fusion band. They're not jazz players. And that doesn't mean that they have to play old style.

To me, the most alive jazz that is current today: although Bill Evans is no longer with us, his style of playing is fresh and beautiful; Stan Getz — coming out of Lester Young; Phil Woods — coming out of Charlie Parker. He's his own branch, but he's from the tree of Charlie Parker.

*Well, it's the same relationship as that between you and Charlie Christian.*

THAT'S exactly right — a latterday person, expounding and influenced by those roots, and having been blessed by those roots, and having been blessed to live long enough, because some of these people didn't live that long. As far as I'm concerned, Charlie Christian was my musical father — but we have to keep in mind that we are our fathers' sons, and yet we are still ourselves; we are both at the same time. My idea of living life musically is not to perpetuate Charlie Christian; I respect him, because he's the one that I learned from — and at times, in the right situation, if I'm playing the right kind of songs, in the right groove, I can go into that feeling, and I like it very much. But I have to remember that if I'm going to do anything in the world I've got to be Barney Kessel, because I have no choice. I have to be my own man, but it's subject to that.

In a sense, you are very much your father's son. You may say things he said, you may walk like him, you may stroke your beard before you talk, the way he does, but at the same time you are yourself.

*It's the language of jazz that can be regarded as a controversial subject. When I listen to you, I'm hearing the peak of improvisation — someone who is an innate improviser. Whereas I listen to another guitarist and I cannot regard him as an improviser — and yet people are applauding him.*

THEY simply may not know. They just may feel that they're there, and it's a festive occasion, and they're sort of going with it. Whether he's improvising or not, maybe he looks happy on the stage and maybe he communicates a feeling. I mean, even when people listen — unless you really know, you don't know whether anyone's playing well or not. Then here's another thing, that's the rarest of all — you don't know if the

*Crescendo International*



*“So many things today have been slotted into the category of jazz — and some of it is not. Other things are terrible jazz . . . and there are very few individuals”.*

person is being original in any way. Somebody will play, and they sound like other people. You say: “Gee, he played very good” — “Yes, he played very good because he copied someone else.” They don't know the original. With all due respect, and God rest his soul, Gene Krupa was not an innovator — Gene played mostly things he learned from other drummers. But when the public saw him they didn't see the other drummers; he was with Benny Goodman — so he was exposed. When the public saw certain things happen, Gene Krupa was the first person they ever saw do it; therefore, in their minds he originated it. They don't know that he got it from Baby

Dodds or from Sid Catlett. If you'd heard somebody that sounded like Frank Sinatra before you heard Frank himself, you'd associate that style of voice with him. If you heard Dean Martin before you heard Bing Crosby, you would think that Bing Crosby was copying Dean Martin. It's that kind of thing. Then there was Perry Como.

*Well, you could say they were brothers in a form of art. There's been a whole brotherhood of Charlie Parker followers, also of John Coltrane followers, Wes Montgomery followers, whatever.*



**B**UT the thing about it is that very little is going to happen for these people unless they find their own voice. This is where they misuse a word; they say: "I was influenced by Wes Montgomery." They weren't influenced at all; they just sat there and copied the records. Imitation is different than influence. If all my life I've been wearing bow ties, and I see you wearing a necktie, and I see how nice it looks, I go out and I buy a necktie, but I don't buy one that looks like yours; it gets a bigger knot, and yours isn't silk but I decide to get a silk one, and yours has a pattern, but I decide to get one with a single colour — I've been influenced. But if I were going out to get the very same tie you wore and the same suit you wore, then I am copying. Most of the musicians who claim to have been influenced by John Coltrane — they've plagiarised him, in fact, because it has been an out-and-out copy. Now, you could give them A plus for having the talent to be able to do that; also, while they were copying, they could have been copying someone that was very bad. They copied someone that had some substance; that's all commendable, but they're not coming up with anything of their own. This is the rarest commodity in jazz, I find — there are very few individuals.

*What gets me about that whole thing is that people get hyped up and praised to the skies for nothing original, and even, in some cases, nothing particularly artistic.*

**N**OW, I've heard a lot about a young man called Courtney Pine — not good or bad; I've simply heard the name. He's on a lot of important scenes; he's fashionable — just like David Sanborn is in the United States. But David Sanborn is the first one to come out and say he doesn't play jazz saxophone — he admits that. But what's Peter King doing — is he working like Courtney Pine?

*The problem is: how do we define the criterion for saying that one man is a jazz player, while another man is not? Is it merely a matter of what the ears you're listening with tell you?*

**H**ERE'S another thing about it — I don't regard improvisation and jazz as being synonymous. You might be improvising on polkas or mazurkas or country and Western songs. Jazz is one form of music, and the most popular and most prevalent form of music, in which improvisation occurs, but it doesn't mean that you can't do it on Greek folk songs.

Most people are into bags — they look at specific things. Along the way they

become enamoured with certain elements in music, and they don't look at the totality. All of a sudden they get taken with the blues, or with bossa nova, or with jazz in three-four time, or playing a modal style, or jazz-fusion, and they immediately dissect a part of music and go with that. I think about music in its totality; for me to be otherwise is like being an artist who only paints hands or only uses the colour blue. It's limiting. Art is art: one day you draw an apple, the next day you draw a horse, the next day you draw a child with a sailboat in the water, and the next day you draw an owl in a tree by moonlight. You're an artist — if you just sat around and drew ear lobes,



"No synthesiser is going to produce a Charlie Parker"

it would be very confined.

People say: "I'm into the blues." Well, I'm into *music*, and blues are part of music; therefore, if I'm into music I would touch on the blues, but not only that — it's lopsided.

*You've got to have the whole vocabulary. There's also the lure of commercialism, of course — some artists are lured into a commercial bag.*

**W**E have a nice word for selling out, for losing your integrity — it's called cross-over. It's a nice way of saying: "I've abandoned my principles."

*Well, a kind of cross-over that goes on is the mixing of classical music with jazz — players who divide their time, even, between the two. Is this a good thing, do you think?*

**T**HERE are some interesting things that have come out of that. It's good; I think that when they do a performance that part of it which comes through as the spirit of jazz will be there, if it exists. And if they also have the capacity to play classical music — fine. Actually, my favourite music in all the world — of all the music that I've ever heard — is Ravel and Debussy. Then Lester Young. That's the way I hear it. The first records I ever bought was the Budapest String Quartet playing the Debussy String Quartet — I saved up my money and bought that first.

I'm not trying to sound like an old-timer that says: "Bah — humbug" to all these new things, but I don't think the electronic/synthesiser scene is helping jazz at all. People are getting used to hearing real rotten synthesised sounds in place of the real ones. And no synthesiser is going to produce a Bunny Berigan or a Jack Teagarden or a Charlie Parker or a Lester Young.

*Have you a few words in summation of this enjoyable conversation?*

**A**CTUALLY, Les, life is very good for me, and I'm very grateful that I can make a living from playing — and I mean that; it's not false humility — in a world today with so many people playing, and so many of them very accomplished in what they do. I feel fortunate to be working, to be in good health, and to be satisfying enough people to earn a living and to play. If it were not the way of the world that each young person that comes up wants to do his own thing, then I would never have had a chance to become active in music — there wouldn't have been a way to do it. We all want to have our moment on the stage, and do what we do.

Although I respected greatly what had gone before, I did not want to be like the people that preceded me — I had other thoughts. For one thing, most of those people before me had come to the guitar from the banjo; they were banjo players who were forced by the musical conditions to become guitar players, and they had to make the most of it. George Van Eps, Allan Reuss, Dick McDonough and Carl Kress all started with the banjo; therefore their orientation was different than mine — I started with the acoustic guitar.

That's a funny thing too; people ask me: "Can you play the acoustic guitar?" Same guitar, just without an amplifier. They seem to be amazed; someone says: "Well, I don't play the electric guitar like you do — I play the acoustic guitar." It's the same thing.