

Music today—from the BARNEY KESSEL viewpoint

LOOKING at the present era of music, as far as new things that are coming out today—in my estimation, qualitatively there is not as much good music as in earlier eras I've known. There is certainly a lot of what is called music—what appears on the records is certainly played by musical instruments, rather than being speeches or plays or opera; it is clearly instrumental music. This is a very general statement, and, of course, it does not apply to every record that comes out. But if I go into a record store, or listen to the radio, or go into clubs to hear people, most of what I hear does not please me very much. It doesn't make me angry—it just doesn't please me. It's like a meal that you eat, and you're no longer hungry, but it has not been a gastronomic delight.

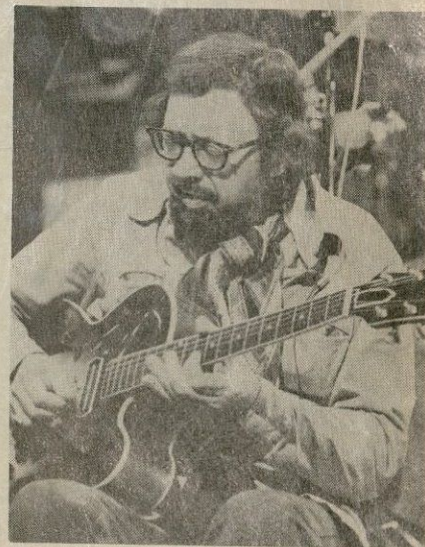
It relates to the state of the world itself. Without sounding overly pessimistic, I feel that, in all the countries

that I travel in, there's no question in my mind that the qualitative state is constantly being lowered—year to year. Fewer people are coming up that are really educated, that have a sense of discernment, that have taste and refinement in cultural pursuits. However — I'm speaking now in terms of collective societies — I think, as far as individuals in this world, there's never been a better time for a person, viewing himself as an individual, to grow and develop himself. There are more tools available, more opportunities than ever before for one person in the world to work towards a state of excellence.

Superficial

Regarding the guitar, I think it is probably enjoying the greatest popularity it's ever had. It's a good time for the guitar, as far as acceptance by the public. There are more people playing the guitar well than ever before; that is, more people pick up the guitar and they can draw something from it. However, there are very few musicians—they are simply playing the guitar; they're not making music. Maybe it's a matter of semantics; an analogy would be: there's more people putting paint to the canvas, but not many are painting pictures.

And it doesn't have to be old, or swing. It's the idea that, first of all, I can feel that many, many people that I hear playing are not really in touch with their essence. They're playing strictly in a superficial way—in the periphery of themselves. They're playing to feed the ego, to make money, to please the opposite sex—for many, many reasons, but not to tap what is in their soul. And this comes out. The reason it comes out is because the very few that *do* play from within themselves produce such a rare quality of music that it's easily discernible when it comes out, because it touches the hearts of everyone. When that honesty, that genuineness comes from the soul of a developed person, the music they make speaks so loudly that it can't be missed. Whereas the other people may possess a certain amount of cleverness, skilfulness, they have studied their lessons well, but there is really no depth in the playing.



I'm not particularly referring to jazz or rock or disco or anything. It's just that many people each year are making music—or rather, they're playing musical instruments; few of them make music. It's the same in books, in motion pictures, in all of the arts. Just because a person desires to express what's in his soul, it doesn't mean that soul has any depth. It doesn't mean that he has made any effort to develop himself as a person. So, when you say you're expressing yourself—that may mean something, or it may not, depending on what it is you've done *with* yourself. Have you developed to the point that there's something to *express*?

Geniuses

I try to say this as objectively, as honestly as I can, without bias, but I cannot readily think of any significant up-and-coming people. With the exception of very, very few people that I've heard in my life, not even limited to the guitar, you cannot get this kind of profundity at a very young age. It takes a time. First of all, you can't really do very much like that without getting your life in order. And those particular geniuses that *did* come along, that have been able to be that prolific in their twenties, and *have* actually produced this kind of music, have usually made a total wreck of their personal lives, so that they're now totally in limbo or they're dead. They did produce

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this music at a very young age, but the price they paid was that the rest of their lives was in shambles. What I'm talking about is on a broader range: not only playing well, but using that same kind of brilliance in your life—so that when you take the horn out of your mouth there isn't total chaos in your existence.

I think many young musicians today are pressured into going for the money. Record companies would not have it otherwise; everyone is looking for a new instrumentalist that'll make them a lot of money, and they've got an idea of a certain kind of formula to follow. I don't think many record companies are around trying to capture the essence of a particular player's productivity. Rather, they're finding this person, and trying to shape him to work within a given structure that'll make money for the record company. Which are two different things. The young people are very impressed with the idea of making money, getting a golden hit, having a big record appear to allow them to make more money for less time. And they will follow whatever needs to be done to achieve that end. As to whether they *could* make music or not is a different story; maybe some of them might be able to make music if they could only get their lives in order, so that they could see each thing in its proper value and perspective. But when you think that music equals a hit record, and getting that means wearing any kind of suit, dying your hair purple, appearing in the nude, having a tattoo on your navel or two gold rings in your nose, then there is really very little consideration being given to the music.

Weirdness

This is not only in the pop field—there's an awful lot of it in jazz too. There are any number of people wearing funny clothes, changing their names to Mohammedan and East Indian names when they're not genuine members of that religious society, maintaining an air of weirdness, taking a simple harmonic exercise and giving it such titles as "Cosmic Consciousness" or "Kharma". It's a sham—it's charlatanism. If you view it as theatre, in which music is one of the items used to produce it, along with make-up, costumes—then there's nothing wrong with it. I could accept it as a theatrical venture—but they're using theatre and calling it music. It's not just punk rock or disco; it's afflicting jazz. And many, many strange things are being *called* jazz; I don't question the right of the people to play it or to want to listen to it—I only feel that somewhere along the line someone labelled it wrong. To

me, jazz has a certain amount of integrity; it has a basic desire to give honestly of yourself. It has nothing to do with facing Mecca before you play your concert—especially when you're really not part of a religious order that faces Mecca.

Tension

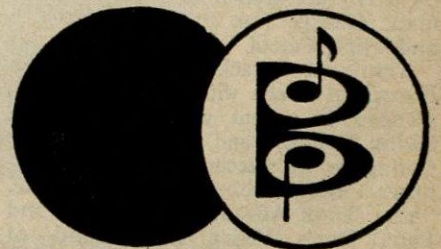
I don't really know whether the excessive use of electronics is a good or bad thing. The minute you begin to look at anything and call it either good or bad, you lose your sense of objectivity. I can only say that for many, many reasons most of it that I've heard does not make me feel good. It doesn't sustain my pleasurable sensations. It's as if a doctor told me to take two spoonfuls of castor oil, and even though I hate it, it's good for me. It doesn't *seem* to be good for me. And yet I don't feel any hostility towards the people involved in making this or buying it. It's just not my cup of tea. I feel that there's too much preoccupation with the electricity, and not enough with the music. And the music doesn't have the kind of musical flow I'd like to hear; it's not pretty. It suggests a tension that I see as being something that's not good for my human soul. I don't *need* dissonance or cacophony—there's enough of it in the world. Neither do I want to be lulled into a Victorian sort of romanticism, and close my ears to the realities of the world. But the realities do not have to be harsh and cacophonous; they can be beautiful too—and that's the reality that I'm interested in. I'm not interested in things that make my heart pound fast, disrupt the flow of my blood, and cause indigestion. As

for the bland, sugary use of electronics—that, to me, is equally without validity.

As I see it, there are very few people playing where they're honestly giving an account of themselves without intimidation—by other players and by the pressures of the record companies. Consequently, it's very difficult to know what people really *feel*, since what they play is not what they feel, but is the result of being intimidated. They feel coerced into playing a certain way, because other people are playing this way. You hear a group like Weather Report, and if you have a group of your own, and you want to work, you feel that you've got to play like them. Yet you may not *like* Weather Report; or you may like it, but not feel that it's something you want to do. But you feel that, in order to work, you must have a group that looks like this, and has this instrumentation. Look how many rock groups came up after the Beatles, consisting of four people, all with long hair. When you talked to them, very few of them would admit that they were copying the Beatles; yet where were they six months before the Beatles arrived?—they had short hair, and they were not working in a four-man group. A player may feel that his *own* style is rather inadequate, but if he plays like a supposed "poll winner", someone who is popular, he'll be accepted. In the meantime, individuality goes out the window, and conformity comes in. I remember one time, I played a record for Lester Young, of someone who was trying to play like Lester. I asked him what he thought of it, and he said: "Well, he's trying to be *me*. If he's going to be *me*—who can I be?"

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