

The End of Jazz?

A response to Benjamin Schwartz's article in *The Atlantic* on the future of jazz

BY LEE EVANS

For the November 2012 issue of *The Atlantic*, writer Benjamin Schwartz provided a provocative column – with whose basic argument I strongly disagree – entitled, “The End Of Jazz: How America’s Most Vibrant Music Became A Relic.” His screed is based upon Ted Gioia’s useful new book, *The Jazz Standards: A Guide To The Repertoire* (Oxford University Press.)

Essential Jazz Repertoire

Gioia’s volume consists of a listing and analysis of 250 pieces that, in his opinion, form the most significant, as well as the most requested and most often performed, jazz repertoire of the current working jazz musician, including such songs as Billy Strayhorn’s “Lush Life,” Duke Ellington’s “Sophisticated Lady,” and others that constitute what is often referred to as “The Great American Songbook.” In Gioia’s words, “my choices...the cornerstones of the jazz repertoire as it exists today... reflect the jazz idiom as a vibrant, present-day endeavor.”

Functional-Harmony Logic

What I believe jazz musicians find particularly appealing

about most of the songs that constitute The Great American Songbook, apart from their memorable melodic lines, is the internal functional-harmony logic of each, such as circle-of-fifths (ii7 – V7 and ii7 – V7 – I) chord movement. (Think of “All The Things You Are” and “Gone With The Wind” as two such examples.) This harmonic-progression feature makes it easier for jazz improvisers to remember such chord patterns by feel. In fact, it was this aspect of many popular songs that made them excellent candidates for re-composition. (Think, for example, of Charlie Parker’s “Ornithology,” based on the chord structure of “How High The Moon,” and Lester Young’s “Lester Leaps In,” based on the chord structure of “I Got Rhythm”; plus a great many other examples.)

Omissions

An interesting sidelight in Schwartz’s *The Atlantic* article deals with his complaint that Gioia in his *Jazz Standards* volume has omitted four of Schwartz’s favorite songs: Rodgers and Hart’s “Where Or When”; and three by Cole Porter: “I’ve Got You Under My Skin,” “In The Still Of The Night,” and “Begin The Be-

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guine." While all four are gems, I would hardly call the latter two essential jazz repertoire, due both to their unusual length and because the somewhat untraditional chord structure of those two songs make them less conducive to facile improvisatory treatment. For example, "Begin The Beguine" contains 108 measures, and "In The Still Of The Night" almost 80, instead of the usual 32 bars and AABA form that characterize many of the songs of the big-band swing-era period from which Gioia's essential jazz repertoire is drawn. (In this connection, while "Lush Life" is indeed a uniquely beautiful song, it too features a somewhat untraditional length and chord pattern that make jazz improvisation based upon it more of a challenge. Moreover, it is always played with both verse and chorus, while most American Songbook songs are ordinarily performed by jazz players with chorus alone, without the verse if one exists.)

A Paucity of New Jazz Song Material

Writer Schwartz bemoans the drying up of "the crucial wellspring of jazz" – The American Songbook. He believes that without replenishing this essential Songbook repertoire, jazz is doomed to disappear as "a living and evolving art form." And he furthermore maintains that "jazz is a relic." Both Schwartz and Gioia are troubled by the paucity of recent jazz compositions suitable for employment in a jazz context. Schwartz, in fact, views this as a contradiction to Gioia's belief that jazz continues to be a vibrant idiom. Schwartz maintains that without the writing of new song material appropriate for jazz performance, the jazz idiom is a dying art form, an assertion with which I strongly disagree.

A similar argument has been made in the realm of classical music. For example, there are those who maintain that much of 20th and 21st century classical music – say music composed after Debussy, Ravel, and early Stravinsky – has been rejected by most concert-goers. There may be some truth to that, but the enormous existing canon of Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Impressionist, and early modernist music such as the music of Richard Strauss and Gustave Mahler

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continues to form the guts of today’s classical-music concert and recording repertoire; just as the songs of Gershwin, Porter, Berlin, Rodgers, Arlen, and many others of their ilk, not to mention the songs of such preeminent pure-jazz composers as Parker, Gillespie, Monk, Shorter, and Mingus, constitute the ground-floor repertoire of today’s educated jazz musician – and will, I predict with confidence, continue to do so far into the future.

End Notes

In conclusion, I believe that Schwartz’s prediction of doom for jazz is completely off base. The early combo jazz and hard bop eras featured non-Songbook original repertoire that formed the basis of those two vibrant jazz periods. I’m secure in the belief that new jazz genres will evolve in time, along with new and appropriate repertoire for each. It already occurred to a degree with the advent of bossa nova and its repertoire’s incorporation into the canon of standard jazz repertoire.

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are still with us. The music of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart is still with us. The music of Gershwin, Porter, Rodgers, and Monk is still with us. One may similarly rest assured that jazz will still be with us in the decades and centuries to come.



Lee Evans, Ed.D., is a professor of music at NYC’s Pace University. His most recent books include *Starter Classics* (Stipes Publishing), a collection of 32 essential solo piano classical repertoire at the late beginner to early-to-late intermediate levels, compiled, edited and/or arranged by Dr. Evans; the solo-piano books *Opera With A Touch Of Jazz* (Hal Leonard) and *Classics With A Touch Of Jazz* (Hal Leonard), and the acclaimed foundation performance/theory workbook *Crash Course In Chords* (Hal Leonard). For additional information, visit www.leeevansjazz.com.

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