

THE MUSIC WILL STILL BE THERE

After everything else is gone, the music will still be there...

—Duke Ellington

PROLOGUE (This essay was first written in 2002. There have been minor revisions since then).

It has been suggested that when Black people in America were cut off from their ancient spiritual sources in Africa, they were left with only one real outlet: music. So the cry of the spirit - irresistible, ineluctable - welled up out of them into and through music, bringing into being startling musical forms which today seem have swept over the entire world. The most developed, most expressive, and most influential of the musical forms that burst out of the spiritual genius of Black America was jazz. Much has been written about the genre and its long-term impact is still being assessed...

PART I: Thoughts on Ken Burns's Jazz

Let's deal with the carping first. As with one voice, nearly all of the reviewers of the film documentary *Jazz* returned a remarkably favorable verdict. Burns is clearly the contemporary master film documentarian; *Jazz* was, if anything, a more accomplished, more viscerally powerful work than Burns's previous treatments of the Civil War and baseball. But the film maker clearly has a bias in his jazz taste; for him, jazz music had said all he wanted to hear from it by 1958. The supreme icon in his pantheon of jazz deities is Louis Armstrong and indeed, there are times when the viewer is under the impression that he is really viewing a 17½-hour film biography of Louis Armstrong. There are ten segments in the documentary and Louis is in every one. No one else is.

Burns has been roundly criticized for this slant in the documentary and his reply says, in spirit if not in actual words, "It is my film. Anyone who doesn't like it should

make his own jazz documentary;” translation: “if you don’t like it, you can lump it.” It is a typical auteurist reaction and of course just a bit disingenuous. There might not be another film-maker in America capable of attracting the level of funding that Ken Burns can for a documentary on a subject of his own choosing. He could say that he has earned that kind of leverage by the dint of sheer hard work, talent, and luck and there would be no arguing the point. However, critics could easily respond that when you are, in effect, writing the history of 20th century America’s most pivotal cultural phenomenon, all aspects of it should be treated equitably. The 40-year period of jazz since 1960 is crammed into 1½ hours. Clearly, Burns is far less interested in the recent history of jazz.

Still, *Jazz* is a signature film document, unique for the depth and scope of its treatment. It stands alone; nothing like it has ever been attempted and may never be again, at least not in America. Burns does, in the end, accomplish what he set out to do—depict the driving power of a music that almost by itself transformed 20th century American cultural life. It is difficult historically to ascribe a similar impact to any other art form. Even the Renaissance painters of five centuries ago, who have exercised a permanent influence on Western art, worked for a rather narrow social stratum, that of petty kings, aristocrats, and high church officials. There were no museums then, or posters that could be plastered everywhere; the *Mona Lisa* would not have been seen by masses of people, nor would have Michelangelo’s *Pieta*. Western art was transformed by Renaissance painters and sculptors, but their impact on the society of their time, from top to bottom, was fairly indirect.

It could be argued that cinema has also transformed American society in a manner analogous to jazz, but cinema has always been a capital-intensive, corporate enterprise

with only limited access for potential artists. Clearly, important film artists did emerge but there has never been, nor could there ever be, a Louis Armstrong or a Charlie Parker of film, i.e., a young man who, with nothing to declare but his genius, could penetrate into that world on his own initiative. In the film world, a special entree has always been required. However, an emergent jazz musician needed only his instrument and other like-minded musicians to play with and learn from to prove his talent and find an outlet for it. From the beginning, jazz was participatory and improvisational, where individual musical statements could emerge on the spot in the context of group creation. The phonograph was certainly the major catalyst for the rapid spread of jazz in America but the existence and development of jazz was not solely dependent on it. In any case, the public appetite for jazz was so great that every important artist was able to record during his (and her) career.

A word about Louis Armstrong since he is the centerpiece of the entire documentary: it is impossible to deny or overestimate what Louis Armstrong meant to jazz. As the film makes clear, he practically invented the musical language that dominated jazz after 1920. He was a genius among geniuses, so musically incandescent that it is said that even the symphonic trumpet was affected by his playing. Accordingly, the film is properly worshipful, showing that not only did Louis transform nascent jazz instrumental music, he, with his impromptu scat singing, invented jazz vocal music as well. Burns is so taken by Louis that he follows his career through every segment of the documentary until his death in 1971. However, by 1935, Louis Armstrong's creative influence on jazz had come to an end. The power of his playing seems to continue

undiminished until the end of his life, but he exerts no real influence on the development of the music itself after 1935.

In truth, an element of minstrelsy that had always been a part of his stage persona becomes more pronounced, making him wildly popular among white audiences who never tired of seeing him bug out his eyes, flourish his handkerchief, slur his speech and generally act the part of the coon. Burns and his commentators valiantly try to put this aspect of Armstrong's career in a less damning light and, to a limited extent, succeed. There is, in the eighth segment of the documentary, a detailed exposition of Louis's public stand against Orville Faubus, segregationist governor of Arkansas, during the school integration crisis in Little Rock in 1957. Armstrong apparently refused to participate in a state department tour abroad while the crisis persisted. But the coonin' and clownin' on stage continued and there was an increasing number of black Americans in the 1950s and '60s who were not amused.

Clearly the film means to "rehabilitate" Armstrong's reputation which suffered badly from the Satchmo persona—the minstrel persona—permeating his later performing career and obscuring all his early musical achievements. So who was Louis Armstrong really, the "Father of Jazz" and one of the greatest musicians the world has ever produced, or the grinnin' coon seen regularly on TV in the 50s and 60s? The answer is both, though even this does not complete the picture. There seemed to have been a side to Louis almost never revealed in public, a side that felt deeply the tribulations of Negro life in America and, consequently, the contradictions imposed on his own life by those tribulations. Louis appears to have been a little haunted by it all which may partially explain why he stayed on the road up to 300 days a year virtually until the day he died.

But it is risky to psychologize too much. Louis Armstrong was, through and through, a musician and entertainer; it was all he was and all he cared to be. At the end of the day, all one can really say is that he was doing exactly what he wanted to in life.

The verdict of the documentary was that Louis Armstrong was the greatest jazzman whoever lived. What does one do with such a verdict? In the face of contributions of men like Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Art Tatum, and John Coltrane, how can one reduce jazz and its evolution to this somewhat facile judgement? Duke Ellington is recognized as jazz's greatest composer and historically, the great composer has usually had a more lasting influence than the great instrumentalist. Charlie Parker is said to have single-handedly transformed jazz from entertainment to high art and a whole generation of musicians copied his every move, musically and in personal habits. He was the only jazzman ever to have a club named after him—Birdland. John Coltrane can be said to have been the first jazz musician to inspire religious awe and no one before him played so many notes on the tenor saxophone on so many solos extending so long. Art Tatum, some have judged, was the greatest piano virtuoso in the 20th century, period. In a famous incident, Tatum walked into a club where the inimitable and iconic Fats Waller was playing, whereupon Waller stopped playing, stood up, went to microphone and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am just a piano player, but God has walked into the house”! Such was the reverence Tatum inspired in other jazz pianists. Borrowing classical comparisons, who was the greatest, Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven? Brahms or Stravinsky? At a certain level of attainment, hierarchical ranking of the elite practitioners of any art form becomes meaningless.

The film does justifiably explore the dark undertones of jazz life. In truth, many musical lives flamed out prematurely, often under sordid and/or tragic circumstances. Fats Waller, Charlie Parker, Charlie Christian, and John Coltrane all died by or before their 40th year; Art Tatum and Billie Holiday by their 45th year. There is a sense watching the film that these musicians literally gave up their life force to the music. In a slightly humorous but jolting anecdote told on film by Branford Marsalis, when Elvin Jones was asked what it was like playing with John Coltrane, his reply was “You had to be ready to die with the motherf-----.” Elvin apparently didn’t so much as crack a smile with this rejoinder. No one who ever saw John Coltrane and his quartet play live, as this author did, could doubt the utter authenticity of that assessment.

In the case of Charlie Parker, it was almost as if he felt alive only when he was on the bandstand playing his alto sax. The other part of his life seemed to be an endless round of self-destruction. Indeed, for most jazzmen, nothing in ordinary life compared to the music, at least partially explaining the routine indulgence in alcohol and drugs by most of them. Those artificial highs may have been a way of compensating for the empty feeling of “crashing” when the music was over. Art Tatum was said to eat and sleep just a few hours a day; all of the rest of his waking life was spent at the piano. Moreover, when you look at the lives of the great jazz masters, no human relationship ever compared to their relationship with the music. Duke Ellington spoke for most of them when he said quite simply, “Music is my mistress and *she has played second fiddle to no one.*”

The musicians gave up their lives as a sacrifice to jazz; a willing sacrifice, it might be added. It is not too fanciful to suppose that they were channeling an energy—a

spirit—that came from beyond the ordinary human realm. Whether any of them, apart from Coltrane, were conscious of the fact is beside the point. The way in which jazz made its impact on America and the world cannot be explained simply by the notion that it was just great music. For example, it was said that in certain cities, radio stations stopped playing Billie Holiday's rendition of *Gloomy Sunday* because the suicide rate invariably rose whenever that song was played. Moreover, the author knows of one listener who confided that when he found himself falling into depression, would put on Coltrane's *Blue Train*. The opening chorus of that piece literally banished the gloom.

However it may be, a sacrifice represents an exchange of energy and those musicians gave up their life energy to and for the music because the spirit of something thought to be lost demanded it in order to be given new life in our world. African-Americans had forgotten that we had forgotten, but the Spirit from which we emanated never left us, revealing itself through the music. However, nothing can be created or re-created anew without sacrifice. And it does not matter whether they died at age 35 or 95 (Benny Carter's age at the time of his death in 2003), those musicians paid for the music with their lives. Yet today we do not even have sense enough to be grateful. Give Ken Burns credit for that at least; he seems to know enough to be grateful...

One may quibble with Burns's decision to filmically short-change the latest 40 years of jazz, but there is something in the notion that the development of jazz as we know it today can be encapsulated in that remarkable 60-year period between 1905 and 1965. All the major elements and iterations of the music emerge and reach definitive form in that time span. Fusion—that hybrid of jazz and pop—whatever else may be said about it, did not break new musical ground. It merely syncretized two streams of

American music into an “accessible,” hence better-paying, musical form. Since the fusion artists in the 70s were the ones getting the work, there was a veritable exodus into it from straight jazz, though a few “traditionalists” such as Betty Carter, McCoy Tyner, Art Blakey and Dexter Gordon remained in the straight jazz mode. The fusion trend was especially noticeable on the West Coast, particularly exemplified by the Jazz Crusaders who dropped the word “Jazz” from the group’s name and henceforth were known simply as the Crusaders. Their sound became a kind of higher-brow R&B and typically, they toured and recorded all through the 70s. But fusion aside, the intense, rapid development of jazz between 1905-1965 seems to have been without precedent. It would be like compressing the development of Western music from Bach to Stravinsky, which spanned 200 years, into a period less than one-third as long.

Elsewhere, the author has proposed that the development of jazz during the period under discussion could be said to exemplify Chaos Theory. In Chaos Theory, dynamical systems, such as weather, economic boom-bust cycles, and the changing cycles of natural populations actually follow a progression from order to chaos that can be mathematically modeled. For example, following the population patterns of a species, it can be observed what happens when, say, food sources are steadily increased. The population growth will show two spikes at different times, then four spikes, then eight, then 16 until the pattern of population growth becomes completely chaotic and unpredictable, following no measurable parameter. But even these chaotic patterns seem to be limited in such a way that they fall into a kind of “figure-of-eight” or “butterfly-wing” configuration on a graph. The opposite poles of this configuration are called “attractors,” or “strange attractors,” because they attract the chaotic patterns toward them like iron filings to the

poles of a magnet. The main point about Chaos is that it is intrinsic to any dynamical system, i.e., any system in motion. It cannot be avoided, removed, or factored out. Also, the progression by which a dynamical system changes from order to chaos follows a binary or “2ⁿ” configuration. The doublings and bifurcations start from unity (1), which is 2⁰, and continue to increase by doubling or the increasing powers of two, e.g., 2 (2¹), 4 (2²), 8 (2³), 16 (2⁴)...Chaos. It may be noted parenthetically that this 2ⁿ progression is geometrical, the only geometrical progression that generates every possible integer.

So what does this 2ⁿ progression, and Chaos Theory, have to do with the development of jazz. From the early 20th century, until the 1920s, jazz in its New Orleans birthplace flowed to a large extent out of marching band music, characterized by playing in full and ½ notes. Buddy Bolden was the great early New Orleans innovator who, however, had succumbed to madness by 1907 and spent the rest of his life institutionalized. Jazz literally picks up tempo in the early 1920s when Louis Armstrong burst on the scene and his explorations, in addition to those of Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, and a handful of others, led to “Swing.” In the big band music of Swing, the tempo and solos were built around more rapidly-played ¼ notes. Nearly twenty years after Louis Armstrong exploded onto the wider musical scene in Chicago in King Oliver’s band in 1922, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonius Monk at Minton’s in Harlem set in motion the “Bebop” revolution, featuring smaller combos with increasingly more complex solos, usually played by one or two lead reed men or trumpet players utilizing an even denser, more rapid series of ⅛ notes. Then, about 1957, John Coltrane began to set the jazz world on fire by playing incredibly long solos on the tenor saxophone, with so many notes cascading out of his horn that the

music critic Ira Gitler dubbed the technique “Sheets of Sound.” With Coltrane the veritable river of $1/16$ notes flooding out of the tenor saxophone came so fast that they sometimes sounded like they were being played together, as if chords could actually be played on a saxophone (which they can’t). Two years (1959) after the “sheets of sound” technique emerged from Coltrane’s saxophone, Chaos descended on jazz, in the person of Ornette Coleman, who entered the music scene playing his alto saxophone without any definable rhythm, apparent form, or recognizable tone in what became known as “Free Jazz.” He and a handful of others like Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, and Albert Ayler created Jazz Chaos.

The progression in the music from the early 1900s to the 1960s may be noted: full notes → $1/2$ notes → $1/4$ notes → $1/8$ notes → $1/16$ notes → Chaos. Every 15-20 years, the music becomes more rapidly and densely played, stretching the boundaries of musical order, until at last—after it seemed with Coltrane that it couldn’t be played any faster—Chaos ensues. Note also that the dynamics of the process always meant that the music was being speeded up by progressively doubling up the number of notes by, as it were, “cutting them in half.” The process obeyed its own internal logic; one could even say that the musicians themselves did not control it. They could only play what they were hearing and what was being pushed out of them. Coltrane once said that there were times when he wanted to drop his horn and beat his chest to get the music out. When playing those 45-minute solos, Coltrane was not, in any ordinary sense, himself. *He* was just the music. For a brief space, he had merged with the music almost in the way in which the Buddha had merged with eternity. Not coincidentally, the last years of Coltrane’s life are marked by a deepening preoccupation with the religions—and music—of India.

Calling the free jazz of Ornette Coleman chaos, is not a value judgement. Just as Stravinsky showed in 1913 with the production of his ballet, *Rite of Spring*, there comes a time in the evolution of a dynamic music when the boundaries are not only transcended but shattered as an inevitable outcome, Chaos, it could be said, is necessary to the music. Not surprisingly, Stravinski was much admired by jazz musicians everywhere, especially the bebop musicians. Still, there is an order discernible in the chaos because the dynamical transition of order to chaos itself obeys a mathematical principle, e.g., the binary geometric progression (2^n). This progression exemplifies the Pythagorean dictum—learned in the temples of Egypt—that “Because Number is universal it is divine, because it is divine, it is universal...”

Jazz after about the mid-1960s seemed to have gone into a psychological fugue, its cultural presence diminishing so markedly that none other than Miles Davis himself could, in 1975, pronounce that “Jazz is dead.” Perhaps it was merely egoistic posturing by Miles, the so-called ‘Dark Prince of Jazz’: since *he* had abandoned jazz for fusion, jazz could be said to no longer exist. However, it became apparent that the death of jazz had been greatly exaggerated. Old masters such as Art Blakey continued to record, perform, and recruit talented young musicians into jazz. The most outstanding of these later Blakey “apprentices” was Winton Marsalis, who with his brother Branford, became the most identifiable of a newer breed of late-century musicians determined both to keep jazz alive and revive it. What is noteworthy is that the Marsalises were clearly jazz ‘classicists’, inheritors and purveyors of a jazz music from an earlier time.

The truth of the matter is that a certain “cocooning” period, a kind of extended “down time” for jazz was necessary to allow for an assimilation, integration, and re-

synthesis of all that had come before in jazz's development. If one sits through the 17½ hours of Burns's documentary, one begins to become overwhelmed by the sheer profusion of jazz music created during those seminal 60 years. And it must be remembered that Burns's *Jazz* could only sample and highlight the major musical developments. Many fine instrumentalists and vocalists—Dinah Washington, King Pleasure, Eric Dolphy, Oliver Nelson, and Joe Williams—to name a few, were not so much as mentioned. Nonetheless, musical masters and masterpieces seemed to abound in every decade of that 60-year period. No sooner was one musical style elaborated than the music would make a quantum leap into a new orbit. Beginning with Buddy Bolden and the archetypal New Orleans jazz sound which started it all, there were no fewer than four, or even five, complete musical forms within the framework of jazz that were born, nurtured, and brought to fruition in those remarkable six decades. Imagine the cantatas of Bach, the symphonies of Beethoven, the operas of Wagner, and Stravinski's *Rite of Spring* ballet all emerging and maturing in just a little over a half-century instead of the two centuries it actually took. One could have come away with the feeling watching the Burns film that there was almost “too much music” being created, given the time span in which it happened. However, one of the sharpest insights came from Winton Marsalis, the lead commentator for the documentary, who said that at a certain point, “the music doesn't come to you, you come to it.”

A lot of listeners found that they couldn't follow jazz through its permutations. A few early Dixieland musicians from New Orleans wondered what the hell the young Louis Armstrong was doing. Not a few Swing enthusiasts—including Louis himself—could not or would not follow Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonius Monk into

Bebop. Bebop aficionados often found it difficult to comprehend Coltrane's dense 45-minute solos. Many listeners and critics professed to hear only "white noise" in the free jazz recitals of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. And yet it was all jazz. We are still trying to sort it all out, get a handle on it, and fit it into the context of our cultural, psychic and, yes, spiritual life. However, jazz showed us, and continues to show us, that art does not imitate life, art is life.

A question that has been asked repeatedly in the last 30 years is "Is jazz a historical and cultural anomaly, igniting with the brief, white-hot intensity of a supernova for a space, but burning itself out in less than a century?" Though there is, as yet, no definitive answer to the question, Ken Burns's documentary would suggest that, in the end, it is a resounding "no." An assimilative process is going on which is leading to a rejuvenation of the form. Certainly more different kinds of people are playing jazz. Some of the most distinctive new artists now come from Japan, for example; jazz is soaking up, as it always has, disparate influences. Though some have worried that jazz as a definitive musical form may become veiled over by these influences, the truth is that something in jazz's essential core seems inviolable so that no matter what direction it goes in or what influences it absorbs, it remains recognizably jazz. In the past, many, including jazz musicians, have wanted to rebel against the label, to insist that "it's just music." This attitude seems analogous to the viewpoint that denies the conceptual validity of "race" by saying that all people are merely human beings. While there is a kind of banal truth to that assertion, it does not address the irresistible human tendency to create categories for things to identify and contextualize them. This need for categorization is so ingrained and unconsciously reflexive that intellectually disavowing

it is almost always self-delusive. Similarly, the music we call jazz will always be what it is by that name and there need not be any strain in accepting that fact.

Ken Burns has performed an invaluable service for the cultural history of America. Indeed, there seems to have been at least some renewed interest in jazz that has been kindled by the documentary, seen, at least in its parts, by over 40 million people. In some ways, Burns's film seems, like his others, to be part of a continuing catharsis for him, more or less on behalf of America as a whole. He has resolutely faced the fact that America can only come to terms with itself—if it ever does—through addressing deeply and searchingly the race question, a truism not negated by Obaman presidential victory but brought into sharper relief by it. He knows that this Question is deeply entwined in the history and evolution of jazz, the paradigm, really, for the history and evolution of America in the 20th century. Black music generally represents in some intangible way the Soul of America and through jazz, America got a glimmer of its highest possibilities. To the extent that America turns its back on jazz—which has already happened to a large degree—it has turned its back on its own soul.