

The New Popularity Of Jazz

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did not live apart from the people who heard their music. Many players had jobs that brought them into the life of the community. They lived with their neighbors, played and drank with them; they were not a class apart, seen only when performing. During the twenties, too, there was relatively little separation between the performer and the listener, especially when compared with the gap that is apparent today in the contempt many "name" band leaders and musicians have for the teen-agers and moon-struck older people who idolize them.

In the relations between jazz and commercial music in the twenties and the thirties we can see an interesting example of the interaction between original and imitative types of culture. Commercial "jazz" owes its extreme popularity to a simple characteristic: it combines the features of easily comprehended music with something of the vitality of genuine jazz. It is a medley of light classical, chamber, ragtime, and jazz music. Requiring little concentration and evoking no deep emotional reaction (except on the part of jitterbugs, in whose case the reaction is the product at least as much of the advertising and publicity work as of the music itself), it appeals to a wider audience that is not stirred by it but accepts the music mainly as background for dancing, reading, parties, and theatrical acts.

The claim that jazz has passed a Golden Era and is in the period of decline simultaneously exaggerates its popularity in the past and belittles its place in the music of the present. Actually, jazz was never very wide-spread. In a period when musical taste was varied, however, and not yet forced into certain patterns by the radio, television, and recordings, jazz was able to live alongside its predecessors and imitators.

Until mass culture standardized all popular music, jazz could be found in many places. But the wide distribution of radios, television, recordings, and juke boxes

led to the monopolization of the field by commercial music—the palatable simple music in which most people could find something they liked, since there were so many styles and techniques blended in it. Other types of music suffered. Jazz would be heard in fewer places during the thirties, while commercial music was dinned into the ears of radio listeners and moviegoers. When, in the mid-thirties, commercial music reached another dead end in its standardized and lifeless arrangements, it reached again into the jazz tradition and tried to capture the lilt and freedom it saw there. This was the birth of "swing" music, in which the bands led by the late Glen Miller, Benny Goodman, and Tommy Dorsey excelled. It is noteworthy that all these three most popular swing band leaders got their early training in jazz.

The gradual but almost total elimination of other kinds of music by the growth of commercial jazz was chiefly a matter of indoctrination and custom, not of any natural or instinctive traits of the people who liked it. Since it requires little concentration by the listener, it achieved a measure of popularity which grew as the dispensers and financiers of entertainment found it profitable, through radio and the movies, to reach the lowest common cultural denominator.

Our discussion of the notion that jazz is a child of the twenties, and its related to commercial music, has revealed that jazz is a product of the cultural impetus of an earlier era. For many years, in fact, it looked as though jazz could attract no young musicians, but during the last five years the situation has improved. Jazz has also made an initial penetration of the academic world, not (as might have been expected) through the universities, but through the secondary schools, which are apparently much less tradition-bound. If the popularity of jazz continues to grow, it will be able to compete with commercial music from the standpoint of remuneration for the musician, and will certainly accord him more prestige at the same time.

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