

## Sidestepping the Mainstream: (Beboppers Say No to "Hi-De-Ho")

*by Richard Vogel*

"For years they were telling me, 'play commercial, be commercial.' I say play your own way. You play what you want, and let the public pick up on what you are doing -even if it does take them fifteen, twenty years."

-- Thelonious Monk, 1959. <1>

In two sentences, Thelonious Monk set forth the gospel of bebop. The fact that Monk's music is now generally viewed as being outside the "mainstream" of bebop only emphasizes the point. Of course, during the formative years of this new music "mainstream bebop" did not yet exist. Bebop was itself a rejection of the American mainstream, in music and in culture. The fact that, in his most productive years, Monk was often rejected or ignored, even by those members of the public who embraced the new jazz style, demonstrates his role as a champion of the bebop ethic. Like Monk, many young, forward-thinking musicians in the forties were tired of playing commercial (and everything that it entailed), and were determined to play what they wanted. In doing so, they fractured the music scene, repulsed many jazz fans and non-fans alike, and eventually changed the course of America's music altogether.

Bebop is generally regarded as a post-World War II phenomenon and, indeed, 1945 was the pivotal year in terms of the new music's introduction to the public at large. Both Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker left Billy Eckstine's band in 1945 and recorded albums of their own. The impact of these albums was indicated by the fact that both musicians took second place on their respective instruments in a 1946 Metronome magazine readers' poll. In a similar poll two years earlier, Gillespie received only six votes while Parker received none. <2> By 1945, Fifty-second Street in Manhattan was littered with clubs featuring small bebop groups, many of which were being recorded by Savoy Records. <3> Musicians returning from overseas, especially to New York, confronted a changed scene. Small groups were everywhere. The tempos were fast, sometimes furious. Improvisation was emphasized over composition and arrangement. Few of the tunes were new, but they sounded new. Popular songs were reharmonized with substitute chord changes and added passing chords, making the harmonic rhythms faster. New melodies were often composed for standard hits which, in conjunction with chord substitutions and stylistic changes, made them unrecognizable to the nonmusician. Rhythm sections did not stomp on the beat as they had during the Swing era, but propelled the music with a more subtle pulse while, at the same time, playing more accents and disjunct rhythms which added tension and excitement to the music. Soloists played long eighth-note runs which outlined the quickly passing chord changes. New notes were employed in improvisation - notes that sounded "wrong" to less progressive players, including the upper partials of the chord and dissonant intervals, particularly flatted fifths.

From the public's perspective in 1945, bebop appeared to come from nowhere. The seeming suddenness of this new style's emergence was exaggerated by a recording ban, enforced by the musicians' union during the war years. <4> This left the two most important proto-bebop big bands -- those of Earl Hines and Billy Eckstine -- out of the public ear. In reality, of course, bebop did not emerge suddenly. Both Gillespie and Parker developed their new musical ideas in the Hines and Eckstine bands and, indeed, all of the pioneers of bop, including Monk, Kenny Clarke, Oscar Pettiford, Bud Powell, and several others, were veterans of the swing bands. To understand the origins of bebop, then, one must examine the state of swing in the early forties and the constraints it placed on the young, progressive musician.

In the thirties, swing music embodied the ultimate expression of youthful optimism for both blacks and whites. In his article "Things to Come: Swing Bands, Bebop, and the Rise of a Postwar Jazz Scene," Lewis Erenberg states:

To understand the bitter musical battles of the 1940's, and their relationship to the culture created after World War II, one must first grasp how swing music had become synonymous with personal freedom, important national values, new cultural hopes, and Depression-era dreams. <5>

Erenberg, like many commentators on jazz music, interprets jazz as, among other things, a musical expression of the ideals of democracy, particularly the sanctity of individual expression within the organized group. But if jazz itself is an expression of democracy, then big-band swing was, more specifically, an expression of New Deal democracy. The value of improvisation was still recognized, but in a context of tighter arrangement and more thorough composition. Like the workings of New Deal democracy, the musical intricacies of big band swing were more thoroughly planned by an authority (the composer or arranger) than in preceding styles. Yet, along with this increased orchestration came a hopeful vision - a vision of a more fulfilling future and a more secure and inclusive society. Erenberg states:

In hindsight, it is not hard to see that swing was the music of the Great Depression because it offered this dream of a more abundant life, with its possibilities of freedom in the group, a more pluralistic society, and the ecstasy of romantic love. <6>

The inclusive connotations of swing existed in the music even when the bands and audiences were strictly segregated, for the integration of African American and European musical elements in swing was undeniable. In many ways, American integration began with swing music. White bands often hired black arrangers and, by the late thirties, many hired black musicians. Erenberg notes that Metronome magazine often evaluated white jazz musicians by comparing them to black musicians and that, in New York, swing brought black musicians downtown to the mid-city clubs of Fifty-second Street. Thus, swing music offered black musicians more participation in mainstream society and more reward (if not due reward) for their musical contributions.

However, the youthful optimism which embraced both swing and the New Deal was cut short by the outbreak of World War II. By the war's beginning, swing was an established and accepted part of the American mainstream, no longer viewed as a radical or rebellious music particularly in such white-washed versions as the Glen Miller Band. Therefore, swing went to war with the rest of American society, and it like the rest of society, grew more rigid and more bureaucratic. Erenberg uses the Miller Band to illustrate this point:

Miller became an officer, his band a military orchestra, and his style an 'arranged' one, where the coordination of the group meant players' roles were laid out from on high and improvisation was severely diminished. <7>

Meanwhile, a crop of serious-minded young black musicians was growing increasingly discontent within the confines of commercial swing. Even far removed from the military and the Glen Miller Orchestra (of which no blacks were members), these musicians found the big bands to be rigid, sometimes even hostile, to musical innovation. In the late thirties, the young Kenny Clarke began experimenting beyond traditional swing drumming, fitting short solo phrases in spaces left by horn rests or "dropping bombs," as it came to be called. Clarke remembers the initial reaction of his fellow musicians in the Edgar Hayes band: "They thought I was crazy. They said, 'Oh, that little guy is crazy. He's always breaking up the tempo.'" <8> From 1938 to 1942, Clarke played in Teddy Hill's band, and it was during this job that he developed a style of playing which was to become the basis of modern jazz drumming. He did so, according to Clarke himself, by a sort of a happy accident. He explains that, on a particular gig, the band played a tune at such a fast tempo that he simply could not continue to play four beats per measure on the bass drum. His quick solution to this dilemma was to play a steady rhythm on a cymbal while only playing the bass drum on various beats to accent the music and propel the fast tempo. He discovered that this technique not only allowed the bass player to be heard more clearly, but also freed up his bass drum leg to play the accents and "bombs" of which he was so fond. Clarke was sold on this new style, but many members of Hill's band were not:

The trombone-Henry Woode, Jimmy Woods' uncle-was Teddy Hill's right hand man at the time. He hated that way of playing. He hated it so much I got fired. He said, 'Kenny keeps breaking up the time. Why doesn't he play four beats on the bass drum?' . . . I didn't care, I was young. I could play the way I wanted to play. I got fired for playing that way, but I kept on playing. A month later, Woode left Teddy, and Teddy rehired me! He liked my playing! <9>

Another member of the Hill band who liked Clarke's playing was the young trumpeter, Dizzy Gillespie, whose playing was also offending traditionalists. In fact, Clark claims that, after he was drafted, "Dizzy, who plays the drums well, taught all the other drummers my way of playing." <10>

However, Teddy Hill's support of progressive musicianship was not typical of big band leaders, particularly the better paying ones. Gillespie eventually found himself in Cab

Calloway's band - a band which could be particularly frustrating for the progressive musician. Bassist Milt Hinton recalled that, prior to Dizzy's arrival, saxophonist Ben Webster had leaped at his first chance to leave Calloway and join Duke Ellington's band because "he only got eight bars [to solo] every now and then." <11> As Hinton tells it, Calloway had little interest in either advancing the music or encouraging the self-expression of his musicians:

It was just showcase for him, and we just sat there. We kept ourselves together academically by rehearsing ourselves, because he didn't care. All he was concerned with was that we play this music and it was all "hi-de-hos." <12>

In many ways Calloway and his zoot-suit showbiz embodied everything which the bebop musicians rejected. They were interested in musical innovation, not crowdpleasing, and they were tired of sacrificing the former for the latter. They were serious about music. They wanted to practice, innovate, and play -- not sing "hi-de-hos."

For the pioneering bebop musicians, the Depression era dreams which swing expressed had been dashed. Swing had been embraced by the American mainstream but, to the bop musician, the mainstream did not appear inclusive nor supportive of personal expression. In the war effort, they noted the hypocrisy of fighting a racist regime with segregated troops. While Glenn Miller became an officer and a war hero, many bop musicians were evasive or outwardly hostile towards the draft. On the homefront, they were leary of an entertainment industry, almost entirely controlled by whites, which they felt both promoted and demanded a stereotyped image of black musicians. The image was that of a sort of musical noble savage -- a smiling, unsophisticated, and unrepressed Negro whose musical abilities were somehow more "natural" than those of whites. Progressive young black musicians, such as Gillespie, despised this image, for they wanted to be seen as what they were -- serious, practicing musicians. The beboppers placed some of the blame for this stereotype on older musicians who they felt had willingly played the part. Gillespie was explicit on this point:

We didn't appreciate that about Louis Armstrong, and if anybody asked me about a certain public image of him, handkerchief over his head, grinning in the face of white racism, I never hesitated to say that I didn't like it. I didn't want the white man to expect me to allow the same things that Louis Armstrong did. <13>

Thus the beboppers rejection of "that showbiz shuck and jive" was both a statement of musical seriousness and a foretelling affirmation of black pride. Many black musicians followed Charlie Parker's lead and refused to straighten or "conk" their hair, as was standard with black entertainers and hipsters in the swing era. <14> Bebop musicians were also some of the first black Americans to reject Christianity and embrace the Islamic religion in one form or another. Yusef Lariff and Ahmad Jamal were Arabic names taken by two young black musicians while Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam was still in its infancy. <15>

On all fronts the pioneers of bebop rejected the American mainstream -- in politics, race relations, appearance, even in religion, but, most importantly, in music. Years before writers such as David Riesman and William H. Whyte voiced their concerns about the conformist nature of modern American society, a new generation of jazz musicians voiced their own concerns in dissonant intervals and advanced harmonic movement. They rebelled against the rigidity of orchestrated swing and the society which embraced it. Through their radical music they reaffirmed the value of free individual expression. This individual expression still took place within the confines of a group, but it was a more responsive group -- not one enslaved by the predetermined plan of an orchestrator, but a group which had the freedom to react to the individual, moment to moment, as it saw fit. This group did not fear, but actually encouraged, the new and unorthodox. It was a group with an open mind and open ears.

### Notes

1 Grover Sales, *Jazz: America's Classic Music* (Englewood Cliffs: PrenticeHall, 1984), p. 127.

2 Leonard Feather, *Inside Jazz*, (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1977), p. 32.

3 Ibid.

4 Ira Gitler, *Swing to Bop: An Oral History of the Transition in Jazz in the 1940's* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 95.

5 Lewis A. Erenberg, "Things to Come: Swing Bands, Bebop, and the Rise of the Postwar Jazz Scene," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, ed. Lary May, (Chicago: University Press, 1989), p. 222.

6 Erenberg, p. 235.

7 Erenberg, p. 236.

8 Gitler p. 54.

9 Gitler p. 55.

10 Ibid.

11 Gitler, p. 57.

12 Ibid.

13 Dizzy Gillespie, with Al Fraser, *To Be or Not . . . To Bop* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1979), p. 195.

14 Sales, p. 133.

15 Sales, pp. 133-4.

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