

Sunday, July 8, 2007

Blue note

Don Cherry on pocket trumpet. Jazz is improvisation, spontaneity, feeling, being in the moment, tight interaction, entertainment, pushing the limits of excellence, creativity, expanding into new frontiers, fun, inspiration, and discovery. That also is what my criminal defense work is about, albeit with frustration frequently challenging the fun part. Moreover, my countless live trumpet performances with various bands helped make it more natural for me to perform before audiences in the courtroom. Perhaps, then, it was no accident that I took to jazz with a fury over thirty years ago -- long before I had any inkling I might become a lawyer one day -- with the added good fortune of experiencing live (and sometimes meeting) some of the then-living jazz legends dating back to the bebop era and before. At the end of great jazz musicians' long evening on stage, my older brother came up with the idea of offering to help as load-up volunteer stage crew a couple of times. I was floored when one of Dizzy Gillespie's band members welcomed our offer, after Dizzy and the band floored me in 1977 at a local nightclub just twenty feet away. For too long, jazz still has not reached its rightful place in musical appreciation in the country of its birth, to the point where jazz musicians consistently have gotten bigger and more appreciative audiences in Europe. The only silver lining for me about this situation is the many times I have been able to experience jazz legends sometimes as close as twenty feet from nightclub stages, including Dizzy, McCoy Tyner, Ahmad Jamal, Ron Carter, Horace Silver, and Woody Shaw. These intimate surroundings with jazz greats sometimes fostered some amazing face-to-face interactions. For instance, in 1985, I met Horace Silver at the Blue Note after his performance finished. When I mentioned having recently relocated from Boston, he said he wished someone would arrange a performance for him there; to this day, I do not know if he was exaggerating. Two years earlier, I went to experience Woody Shaw on the Boston Harbor jazz boat. Arriving too late to easily find a seat with a stage view, my friend and I took a seat slightly behind the stage. A kindly man encouraged looking harder for a seat seeing the stage, to hear the music better. We finally found seats where he recommended. Woody Shaw came onstage, and I was floored that he was the man recommending seeking better seats (by then, he unexpectedly looked much different than the pictures on his albums). During intermission, I told Woody how much he and his music had meant to me. I asked him about his trumpet, and he handed it to me, which I had not sought nor expected. I pretended as best I could to be calm with his priceless Yamaha trumpet, and handed it back as quickly as I could like a hot potato. Woody's official website says: "Like many geniuses, however, Woody's journey would involve periods of prolonged struggle and hardship, yet through his sacrifice and dedication to the evolution of Jazz music, he added to the vocabulary of the trumpet and created a musical language which was all his own." The same month as my law school graduation, Woody died of kidney failure at age forty-four, which is my current age. He accomplished so much in such a short time. Only recently did I learn that another jazz great, Don Cherry, passed just a dozen years ago, from hepatitis. Cherry first drew my attention over twenty-five years ago through Old and New Dreams's performance of his "Guinea" composition. Three years later, I was floored by Cherry and the rest of Old and New Dreams when they performed at the now-defunct Jonathan Swift's in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His son Eagle-Eye Cherry carries on the musical tradition. Flash forward to 1999, when my close friend Trudy Morse told me about her close friend Cecil Taylor's then-upcoming concert at the Library of Congress. I went along with a criminal defense lawyer friend who had so much trouble getting into the music that he graciously bowed out at intermission. On first hearing him, Cecil may sound "out there", and he certainly did not disappoint in that respect at this amazing concert, when at one point he started plucking a few of the piano strings, and at another point was dancing around at the piano bench. We went to an after-concert reception with Cecil at the Library of Congress, and I was floored by this eclectic giant, who spoke not only of music, but about his fascination with the architecture, design, and function of bridges, and who later spoke of the relationship between music and dance. He is a night owl and very sociable, which gave me the opportunity to join with him later on at his hotel room with Trudy and several others close to him. This artistic genius even watches pedestrian television, and can distill the gold from there. He seems to be like Duke Ellington in terms of saying there are only two types of music (and Cecil likely would add art to the phrase): good and bad. My friend Trudy -- whom I discuss here as to our first meeting -- says "never an accident." Imagine my surprise that just three days after blogging about never-an-accident Trudy and about jazz great Andrew White, that I bumped into Andrew for just the second time in my life, and only because I got stuck in so much traffic returning from northern New Jersey. Andrew passed by me as I was strolling our fifteen-month-old son to our table at a restaurant that had a branch in Washington closer to his home. He was sitting just two tables away, and by the time he and his wife finished eating, I spoke with them, and told Andrew how I had blogged about him just three days before. As his wife focused on my son, I found out about two of Andrew's then-upcoming performances, which were yesterday at the Coltrane tribute in Lausanne and this October at Twins Jazz in the District of Columbia. Particularly after hours, as I finish preparing for the next day's trial or a midnight online motions filing deadline, I mine a treasure trove of great jazz music, sometimes finding on Pandora.com the same gems that would help me get through a night of studying as a student, together with many other musical eye poppers. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Persuasion at 00:15