

Will Rock 'n' Roll Take Over From Jazz?

By NAT HENTOFF, *Author and jazz critic*

IN the past, the lines between jazz and pop music were sufficiently clear to provide true jazz believers with a firm sense of their superiority in taste. There was a corollary faith that their music would survive recurrent periods of economic blight because it was so distinctive it must continue to attract nuclei of supporters among the more discriminating and venturesome young. But the times, they have changed. The new pop music, the varieties of rock—from acid to raga—bristle with an inventiveness and unpredictability that have conquered the snobbishness of all but the most rigidly righteous jazz sectarians. Down Beat now covers the pop scene, Jazz magazine has become Jazz & Pop.

Amid this heady ecumenicism, there are growing doubts among some in jazz as to whether that music can long

survive as an unmistakably distinct language. Frank Schifano, who plays electric bass with Dizzy Gillespie, has speculated in *The Hit Parader*: "It's possible that in the next year or two jazz and rock will be so close, you won't be able to distinguish between the two. In fact, it has to happen. These rock and roll musicians are getting good enough to handle jazz. They have a lot of ideas that we incorporate into our things, but unknowingly most of the time. It just happens. You suddenly find yourself playing things you heard in a rock and roll song."

And even if, as I believe, Mr. Schifano's prediction vastly underestimates the amount of jazz that cannot be fused with the new pop music, will there, in any case, be more than a minuscule audience for just jazz among the young in the years ahead?

A junior, white, at Cornell speaks for many in her generation. "We were pretty much turned off jazz in the beginning of the sixties. The cult was always too exclusive. The guys in the cult always made sure you could never be part of something. Folk music and the subsequent rock renaissance welcomed everyone—and everyone forgot the little about jazz that they knew."

I see her point. The new pop is so boldly heterogeneous that one need no longer look to jazz as a refuge from manufactured monochromes. The options are extraordinarily diverse—the reverberatingly evocative lyrics and electronic experimentation of the current Beatles, the crackling blues of Big Brother and the Holding Company and The Canned Heat, the piercing psychedelia of The Doors; the densely textured love rock of The Jefferson Airplane,

and the range of troubadours chronicling our parlous times, from Bob Dylan to Janis Ian to the picaresque Arlo Guthrie.

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There is, moreover, a new breed of musician—usually white—that moves easily between advanced jazz and the new rock. Guitarist Larry Coryell, for instance, was not too long ago part of The Free Spirits, a rock combo, and is now a member of jazz vibist Gary Burton's unit. Jeremy Steig first became known as a formidably inventive jazz flutist and now heads The Satyrs, an electrified group which swirlingly blends not only jazz and the new pop but old blues, Hindemith and Bartók. Gabor Szabo, a Hungarian-born jazz guitarist, has come to include new pop songs, including those of the Beatles, in his repertory while doubling on sitar and proclaiming the obliteration of all

past musical boundaries of ethnicity and national heritages.

And yet there still are jazz musicians who are operating on the conviction that the center of jazz can hold, even though some dividing lines between jazz and pop are falling apart. Certain similarities of emphasis, to be sure, do exist between these exponents of the new jazz and some rock practitioners. As the later work of John Coltrane and the continuing explorations of Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler and Pharoah Sanders demonstrate, a prodigious expansion of the possibilities of collective improvisation is occurring among the jazz avant-garde at the same time as rock groups are creating unprecedentedly dense vectors of sound which propel the listener into the center of the music so that

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Guitarist Larry Corvell

He moves easily between jazz and rock

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the music becomes a total environment. (Just as it is impossible to listen to the new jazz as foot-tapping background music, so, part of the attraction of rock for the young is the sense they have of experiencing it, as one of them says, inside a space capsule)

In addition, there is a parallel thrust among both experimental jazz groups and such rock combos as The Cream and The Doors toward what can be called action music. Described by musician-critic Don Heckman in terms of jazz phenomena, the term is also applicable to much of rock. Action jazz, Heckman has written, involves a change "from conclusion to process, from the acquiring, molding or alteration of materials toward a predictable end to the concept of the act no matter how unpredictable it may be—as a justifiable end in itself." In both areas of music, denotatively as well as connotatively, these are the sounds of now.

But there are differences, and they are differences of musicianship and of tradition. While there are improvisers of singular skill and inventiveness in the new pop—guitarist Eric Clapton of The Cream, for example — the general level of musicianship so far is not nearly so high nor so sustainedly resourceful as it is in jazz. The group impact of rock, electronically driven, is often powerful, but there are very few rock players who can approach the complexity and originality of statement—in ensemble work as well as in color—of Ornette Coleman, trombonist Roswell Rudd, or Miles Davis's drummer, Tony Williams. In terms of individual instrumental creativity, jazz does remain distinct from most of rock. Similarly, if you want to hear a sitar really played, you turn to Ravi Shankar rather than to George Harrison of the Beatles. But Shankar cannot give you Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Band. *There too, lines remains*

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In all likelihood, however, more rock players will develop instrumentally; but in that case, the crucial difference in tradition, and thereby in language, between bedrock jazz and the exuberant catholicism of rock will continue to be present. Jazz, despite its white influences and its occasional white creators of distinction, is rooted in the black experience. To the present, the basic innovators remain black. Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, Sunny Murray, Sun Ra, and others. The heritage of that music is long and deep. In Coleman and Ayler, for instance, there are echoes of field hollers. And the changes in the music—as LeRoi Jones has pointed out in "Blues People," and in his new book, "Black Music" — reflect the

changes in the American black man's conception of himself and the changes in his ways of reacting to the world around him.

Admittedly in other countries, non-black musicians are trying to adapt their own backgrounds and experiences to the music, and some may succeed as brilliantly as did Django Reinhardt. But so long as there is a black consciousness—and clearly that consciousness is on the rise in America—jazz will essentially be a medium for that consciousness. That is at the core of the future of jazz for a long time to come.

Rock, on the other hand, celebrates a vision, a world music. And within that open-ended gestalt, it offers a chance for those within it to do their own thing. Significantly, the Beatles in particular, followed by the Rolling Stones and Eric Burdon and the Animals, have developed their own material and their own ways of shaping that material, after an apprenticeship of uneven eclecticism. And I expect that in time Big Brother and the Holding Company, The Canned Heat and other rock groups still trying to emulate black bluesmen — as the Rolling Stones and the Animals used to — will start expressing themselves. The heterogeneity and unpredictability of influences will remain in the new pop music, but individual groups and singers will be more individual—a development already also illustrated by Dylan, Donovan, Tim Buckley and Tim Hardin.

In the meantime, however, so long as black people are kept within boundaries, there will be those among them for whom rhythm and blues is not challenging enough and for whom the new pop music is too loose to hold the black identity they want to hone. These black musicians will continue to nurture and be nurtured by jazz. Who will listen to them? More of the black young who, in colleges and in the ghettos, are using the separatism of their condition as a way to unite themselves. And always some whites who, like the white musicians who have gone into jazz, have somehow identified with that music in a way that perhaps makes them visionaries too.

In any case, Frank Schifano of the Dizzy Gillespie band is quite wrong. In the next year or two, and for years to come, it will still be possible to clearly distinguish between Ornette Coleman and The Grateful Dead, between Albert Ayler and The Jefferson Airplane, between Cecil Taylor and The Cream. "I can't get into a jazz musician's head," Eric Clapton of The Cream told Richard Goldstein. "That music has a whole tradition we're not into." Mr. Clapton, in sum, although he knows a great deal about black blues guitar, also knows where he's at. And where he's not.



Bob Greene

Janis Ian will sing at Philharmonic Hall on Dec. 8

She is one of the new pop breed chronicling our times

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