

American music is 'your own experience'

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By NAT HENTOFF

Sidney Bechet, the moon-faced soprano saxophonist from New Orleans who was among the first to introduce American jazz to Europe, once explained why he had to play: "Me, I want to explain myself so bad. I want to have myself understood. And the music, it can do that. The music, it's my whole story."

Bechet's credo has been at the core of American popular music from its vigorously diversified beginnings. "Art music" or "serious music" was for the relatively few. It was predominantly shaped by European dictates and required specialized and expensive training.

But popular music, starting with folk songs, was unabashedly homemade and invited democratic, communal participation—whether in a barnroom, a logging camp, or an Appalachian hollow.

And for the singer or player of this proudly indigenous music, it has always been a way of getting himself understood. Not only himself but also the ways of life, the priorities, the complaints of the particular segment of the American grain that nurtured him.

IN THE ISOLATED mountains and backwoods of the South, for example, transplanted and transmuted Scottish-English ballads spoke from the beginning for the stubborn independence of the people there and buttressed their sense of identity, of specialness.

In the East, folk tunes—self-celebration and topical songs, roisterously vocalized in the taverns and hawked on the streets as cheap broadsides, flourished during the Colonial period.

Even Puritan ministers could not eliminate the desire of settlers in the new world to explain and celebrate themselves through music. One such minister spoke bitterly in 1720 of the sounds of the common man:

"Left to the mercy of every unskilled Throat to chop and alter, twist and change, according to their odd Humours and Fancies, they sound like Five Hundred different tunes roared out at the same time."

Through the American centuries, similar jeremiads have been directed at various genres of popular music by clergymen, educators, and others fervently convinced that music which is not "serious" or at least "respectable" can corrode the spirit and numb the mind.

SO, IN THE EARLY 1920s, jazz was accused of being a direct cause of crimes of passion.

And in the early 1970s, Richard Nixon, among others, was so concerned that rock lyrics were inciting antisocial behavior—from draft resistance to marijuana consumption to profligate sex—that the Federal Communications Commission tried to censor rock recordings. Not for obscenities, which were, in any case, forbidden on the air; but for heresy.

The rock musicians, however, were actually doing—for a much larger, nationwide audience—what Appalachian songsters, New England seamen, western wranglers, and other popular bands had been engaged in long before.

They were explaining themselves through their music, and they were also forging links of communication with others who shared their priorities, hopes, fantasies, ways of wit, and ways of coping with loss.

AMERICAN POPULAR music has not, of course, always been controversial.

The music of Stephen Foster, for instance, was an extension of a significant mid-19th century development, the advent of "gentle" songs. These, as American music scholar H. Wiley Hitchcock points out, "were aimed at the home—at the typical American parlor, with its little square piano or reed organ, its horsehair-stuffed sofa, its kerseane lanterns and candlelight."

Music for ordinary amateurs, its texts were "generally one step removed from ordinary American speech."

This "gentle" music also expressed the values—somewhat sentimental and idealized—of a particular group of



As Louis (Satchmo) Armstrong serenaded his wife and a sphinx during one of his trips abroad, he symbolized how jazz has been exported from America throughout the world.

Americans.

So did the American phenomenon of vaudeville that grew in the "concert saloons" of the 1880s, went on to flourish in theaters, and expired when the movies permanently distracted its audiences.

Vaudeville and saloon songs were



the popular music of the burgeoning city folk, who liked their fun in over-flowing portions and preferred expansively romantic ballads, along with rickety novelties, bawdy and otherwise.

For those in places far from "live" vaudeville, there were sheet music, and in time, recordings. A national popular music was being created.

WITH THE ADVENT of radio and the movies, the nationalization of the pop song was greatly intensified.

While parts of the population held on to and kept regenerating their own musical heritages—white country and western music, black sounds, and rural regional ballads—Tin Pan Alley, the Broadway stage, the Hollywood studios and the radio networks were fashioning what most Americans now define as popular music.

These mass-production sources also shaped and reflected certain popular values. Romance overshadowed all. Rather sanitized, dream-like romance, however, by contrast with the direct, nearly palpable expression of earthly love in black music.

Optimism was another basic ingredient. Even during the Depression, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" was a rarity. In this music, America was still the land of infinite possibility where, over the rainbow, one might find a million-dollar baby in a five and ten cent store.

Departing from the sounds and rhythms of the Hollywood and Broadway stage, the songs of the 1960s, broadly called "rock," encompassed elements of blues, country and Hispanic music.

ROCK WAS AND IS in defiant opposition to the polished, skillfully crafted music of Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein, Richard Rodgers, Harold Arlen, and others who had previously set the standards for American popular song. Often raw and pounding, rock rebelled against both the music and the values of the older generations. In these songs, sex, while not pornographically depicted, was much more openly experienced and enjoyed. Optimism was also much tempered. Life was no longer an upwardly mobile crystal staircase in a land of unending plenty. Ecology came into popular music, as did a steady electronic indictment of unexamined materialism.

The music itself was ebullient and became a common language, a way of mutual identification, for hordes of the

young denouncing the herd instinct of their elders.

The main directions of our music will change again—as always, unpredictably. In the meantime, while mass popular music remains within the flexible confines of rock, a growing number of younger musicians are exploring older musical roots.

A number of country players, such as Willie Nelson, are discarding string sections and complex recording techniques, opting instead for simpler songs and backgrounds with more traditional sounds.

BLACK MUSICIANS, such as trumpeter Leo Smith, while forging ahead with avant-garde jazz, are simultaneously studying the heritage available to them from the work of Louis Armstrong and other patriarchs of jazz.

And Randy Newman, among other popular balladeers, is exploring a conversational, story-telling style that picks up the way a wide range of Americans actually talk and think.

Wherever American music goes, it will continue to be created in a multiplicity of idiomatic tongues, and the best of its makers will keep on exemplifying the dictum of jazzman Charlie Parker: "Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom."

"If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn." Or your guitar. Or your voice.

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Next week: the role of sports in our popular culture.

TV news: Drama doesn't find truth

By JESSE PITTS

Oakland University

In the last issue of Playbook, which I was contemplating—and reading—while waiting in a hip lawyer's office, I found an interview of the famed Gerardo Rivera, the "sob brother" of ABC. Rivera is known for the delicacy of his interviews in the Son of Sam affair and for the accuracy of his presentations on "20/20."

He once said on "Good Night, America": "If push comes to shove, I'd feel more comfortable about allowing Patti Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army into my home than the FBI."

He avows today that this was an irresponsible statement. Anyway, it does not seem to have hurt his career. Today he has reached the same level of the Playbook interview, and this is what he had to say about his line of work:

"I AM VERY appreciative of the power of the media, even if people don't admit it. They're not benign observers. . . ."

"In my coverage of Panama, I felt that, regardless of my own personal or political feeling, or of the identity I felt with the students on the Panamanian left or with the whole sense of Panamanian nationalism versus U.S. imperialism, the treaty was the best possible compromise. . . ."

"The day the treaty was signed in Washington, the Panamanian National Guard came down on the students and started belting them with rubber hoses. That was also the day that I got arrested. . . . But we downplayed the whole incident."

"That was the day I decided that I had to be very careful about what I said, because I could defeat the very thing I wanted to achieve. Later I had dinner with some people from the New York Times and the Washington Post, and we all felt the same way."

"That kind of influence is certainly open for abuse. I don't think I have abused it, though. I think I am responsible. . . ."

THIS INTERVIEW is interesting because it gives the rational rationale for advocacy journalism, i.e., the concept that the purpose of journalism is not to give the public the "facts" but to guide it toward progressive social change.

It shows how a second rate journalist, who has the power of television at his disposal, feels the necessity to cover himself with the approval of his journalistic superiors, his colleagues of the New York Times and Washington Post.

Finally, it shows the motivation behind advocacy journalism, which is self-aggrandizement. An advocacy journalist is essentially a man who tries to resolve the contradiction between the information function and the entertainment function of the news by transforming his craft into an opportunity for political influence. Let us see how this works.

IT IS ONE of the major problems of news writing that nothing compels the reader or the watcher to stay "tuned in." Hence the news must be presented in such a way as to catch and hold the public's attention.

People are not interested in the "truth" except in affairs which concern them immediately—their family, their jobs, their friends and neighbors. Why? Because knowing the truth in human affairs is never a passive process. Information is incomplete, tendentious, contradictory. Truth is elusive, made of all sorts of shades of grey. Often it is in the middle, but sometimes not.

And where is the middle? Truth is rarely dramatic and exciting, unless you are directly involved.

Let's face it: Truth is often boring,

and if it is not boring, it is often disturbing, and the first reaction to something disturbing and/or boring is to turn it off.

TV NEWS is a highly competitive business.

Its audience comes in from a hard day's work. It is less educated than the audience of the elite newspapers and newsmagazines. Its interests are more parochial than those of professionals and employers.

To keep its interest and the ratings, news networks transform the news into theater. Reeves Frick, when executive producer of NBC News, wrote a memo which put it well:

"The highest power of television journalism is not in the transmission of information, but in the transmission of experience. . . . Joy, sorrow, shock, fear—these are the stuff of news."

"Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama."

THE TROUBLE is, such an approach is bound to sacrifice probity and responsibility, because that is not how most reality is.

And yet, depicting it as if "that's the way it is" has a great deal of persuasive power because the watcher is not aware of the manipulation of the film by the cameraman and the editor.

The TV newsmen are not creative journalists. They do not originate their stories but follow the lead of the wire services and of the New York Times. They have few minutes per story.

To entertain their debauch because people are often pleased to find that those who command them, govern them, are more stupid and dishonest than they are.

Any day, drama, they stage "spontaneous" action, they pay people to act and ask soldiers to shoot, even if there is no enemy within miles. They edit, they change their questions after the interview is gone.

Often enough, their very presence excites the natural clowns and shovels to more extreme behavior.

IN TERMS OF the "real" functions of journalism, they are more constrained than the police reporters of small town newspapers.

Although they have vast media exposure—an exposure that often creates envy in their colleagues of the elite newspapers—the latter condescend to them because TV newsmen are mere slaves of an uncultured audience. They resolve the contradiction, between their conception of themselves as journalists and the reality of their role as entertainers, by becoming political guides.

Instead of whoring to an audience which they do not really respect, they lead it on and con it. They have recuperated their pride by creating a sharp political "truth" out of a nonpartisan and shadowy truth, which would not sell anyway.

The pungency, the distortions, are not secondary because it is all for a good cause. The wham-bang of good men and bad men, the multi-nationals, the army, the government, the poor, the black, the women, the Indians, the fires, the bodies—all keep the audience from switching channels, and from there the Pled Pipers of the networks hope to move them to the world of uplift.

OF COURSE there are newscasters who struggle better with the demands of drama and probity, and they are not the only journalists who suffer from the contradictions between the need to entertain and the duty to inform.

Furthermore the distinction of uplift is less certain today than it was 10 years ago. The weakening of ideology is a shortcut to objectivity.

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