

JANUARY 18, 2006**HOWARD MANDEL**

SHOULD JAZZ BE POLITICAL?

“S—O—S!” John Moon intoned emphatically, fronting pianist Andy Milne’s Dapp Theory band in sets at Sweet Rhythm and also at the International Association for Jazz Education conference last week. His hands pumped and cut the air in front of him like big fish bucking stiff currents, in time but with willfulness of their own. “Emergency on planet number three! It’s up to you, it’s up to me. Change the time, change the wave. Ship is sinking! S—O—S,” he repeated insistently but helplessly, like the messages beaming from an ancient radio on “Lost.”



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According to Moon, whose wild-style

“percussive poetry” makes explicit Dapp Theory’s claim to be a hip-hop/jazz hybrid, the world’s a mess. Our government’s agenda demands scrutiny—“Is it our agenda?” he asks, incredulous. And he’s driven nearly mad, in another tune, by the jerk he meets in the mirror.

“I’m not you,” he says that the jerk tells him in no uncertain terms. “You’re me!”

Dire warnings and Kafkaesque psychosis—music to my ears, which aren’t often drawn to jazz ‘n’ polemics, though there have been other exceptions. Years ago, when jazz and related varieties of free-funk improv were assumed to be the expressive forms of the culture of resistance, I found the Last Poets (“The white man/Has a God complex”), Defunkt (guitarist Vernon Reid roaring through little ditties on topics like “Thermonuclear War”) and Jayne Cortez’s Firepitters (“If your drum is a woman/Why do you beat your woman?”) pretty damn bracing. But that was then. Now jazz, like everything else, is considered little more than a bauble in the culture of consumerism. Or so the talk went during an IAJE panel on “Jazz, Politics and the American Identity,” in which South Asian-American pianist Vijay Iyer and New Orleans trumpeter Irvin Mayfield presented different points on the range of what players believe their proper roles should be.

Iyer, whose work with an extended circle of genre-defying collaborators has been characteristically provocative if not outright subversive, suggested that in the ‘60s jazz musicians (like rockers and blues people and certain salsa progressives—Eddie Palmieri, for one) believed that they were part of the solution or part of the problem, and that maybe musicians should consider that distinction again. Mayfield, who has recently been acclaimed for his wrenching slow rendition of “Just a Closer Walk With Thee” during the Jazz at Lincoln Center “Higher Ground” concert (now on CD) benefitting Hurricane

Katrina victims, respectfully said that he's not an activist, not a marcher, just a trumpeter: "That's what I do." He did indeed have serious things to say about the treatment of New Orleans, but he declined to take action other than blow his horn.

I believe that's his perfect right, and a defensible viewpoint, even though jazz history is rampant with its contradictions. One example even Mayfield alluded to with high regard was Louis Armstrong's mournful "What Did I Do To Be So Black And Blue?" But he also reported that in New Orleans, jazz is considered to be a music of celebration and ceremony (as in funeral parades). That kind of marching isn't for or against anything—it is an act of life, not a statement demanding response.

The music of Dapp Theory, though ostensibly pointed, seemed to have it both ways. Saxophonist Loren Stillman came up with hard lines in his solos, like John Moon having something urgent to say; yet leader Milnes' piano chords were harmonically rich—beautiful—and flowed smoothly, even over odd-metered and off-kilter rhythms. The effect was Brechtian, an ironic tension between form and content. That's so 2006, isn't it? Jazz reflects, sometimes first and more clearly than other arts, exactly what's happening all around.

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