

Playing Changes for Change

Guest Column

Saxophonist Tim Ries has a song called “What Happened to Ya?” with lyrics that cite a lack of political resolve among the aging ’60s generation. Some would extend this critique to the jazz community itself, arguing that protest jazz—what Archie Shepp once called “fire music”—has fallen by the wayside, and today’s musicians are as disengaged as anyone else. A close look at jazz expression in the Bush era reveals this to be false.

Appearing late last year in Philadelphia, the cradle of liberty, Ries prefaced his song with an admonition: “We’re in dire straits in this country.” Not only is he far from alone in that view; he’s far from unusual in

stating it publicly through music. Albums released in recent years with a political thrust include Charlie Haden’s *Not in Our Name*, Doug Wamble’s *Bluestate*, Bobby Previte’s *The Coalition of the Willing*, Chris Washburne’s *Land of Nod*, Ben Allison’s *Cowboy Justice*, World Saxophone Quartet’s *Political Blues*, Terence Blanchard’s *A Tale of God’s Will (A Requiem for Katrina)*, Kenny Werner’s *Lawn Chair Society*, Andrew Rathbun’s *Affairs of State*, Vinson Valega’s *Awake* and the Vijay Iyer-Mike Ladd multimedia projects *In What Language?* and *Still Life with Commentator*.

You could say this is a small percentage of CDs overall, but the list is partial, and today’s politicized mood isn’t evident from recordings alone. When Barack Obama delivered his landmark Philadelphia speech on race, saxophonist Matana Roberts responded on her blog with an impassioned “Dear White America” letter—just one sign of the jazz blogosphere becoming a political as well as a musical arena. The medical travails of saxophonist Andrew D’Angelo and the late bassist Dennis Irwin sparked an outcry (reported in the *New York Times* by Nate Chinen) over musicians’ lack of access to health insurance. And soon after the 2007 demise of Tonic in downtown Manhattan, a coalition called Rise Up Creative Music and Arts was formed to oppose gentrification and agitate for subsidized performance spaces, art in the schools and affordable musicians’ housing.

Pressing practical concerns like these, and the cumulative outrages of the Bush years, have bolstered a view that was put to me pithily in an e-mail from Gregg Mervine, leader of the West Philadelphia Orchestra: “Jazz is people struggling to live and preserve their integrity on the outskirts of the modern world, expressing the cry of horror and injustice that they, unlike the rest, can’t seem to digest.” It’s a feeling widely shared, from the grassroots to the highest rungs of achievement. Pianist Danilo Pérez sums up his still-evolving tenure with the Wayne Shorter Quartet as “eight years of the total opposite of what’s been happening with the government.” Yet in Shorter’s case there’s no overt message; the politics are implicit in the freedom of the music, in keeping with Ralph Ellison’s notion of jazz as democracy. As Shorter recently told me, “I’m trying to do music that echoes the need for human beings to say, ‘Hey, it’s time for us to evolve.’”

In the wider pop world, if you look at the influence of will.i.am’s

pro-Obama “Yes We Can” video (featuring Herbie Hancock), or the clarifying force of Kanye West’s post-Katrina attack on Bush, or the launch of the Russell Simmons-associated Hip-Hop Team Vote campaign, or the numerous singers and bands (Bruce Springsteen, R.E.M., Arcade Fire, Elvis Costello) who lined up to endorse candidates during primary season, it’s fair to ask: If this is a fearful, defanged, apathetic period in music and the arts, what would an activist period look like? True, we may not be reliving the ’60s, but we’re not in a true political wilderness. And it’s easy to paint the ’60s in romanticized tones.

Years ago at the CMJ Music Marathon, singer-songwriter Robyn Hitchcock told a panel that he doesn’t write political lyrics, and someone shouted, “Well, start!” Hitchcock fired back that no one tells him how to direct his creative energies. The exchange spoke to a perennial tension between individual will and communal striving (or coercion), but what struck me most was the heckler’s tacit assumption: that if Hitchcock suddenly started to address politics, he’d say something the heckler wants to hear. The appalling grind of the Bush years has only deepened this idea: that protest comes in one flavor, and artists are doing their jobs if they’re preaching to the choir.

It’s also taken for granted that a radical stance is always a progressive one. Amiri Baraka, jazz’s favorite firebrand, argues that Stanley Crouch has “a backwards view politically,” and yet one of them (guess which) boasted to *JazzTimes* in an @Home profile that he reads Lenin and Mao every day. Who’s backward? For that matter, the last time I visited Sistas’ Place, the Brooklyn jazz club and cultural space, there was a large poster of Zimbabwean tyrant Robert Mugabe on the rear wall. Sistas’ Place has close ideological ties to the December 12 Movement, a fringe group that does Mugabe’s propaganda bidding in the U.S. So here we have a jazz organization aligning itself politically, not to help the beleaguered people of Zimbabwe, but to shill for their oppressors. And no one objects. (The club’s representatives did not respond to a request for comment.)

In sum, political engagement in jazz is a great thing, except when it’s not. Jazz may be, at its core, a vital avenue of dissent, but jazzers don’t have privileged access to political wisdom. Critics, when reviewing political work, can do better than to lean on the empty crutch term “thought-provoking.”

Of course, the jazz world only mirrors the strengths and weaknesses of the broader left with which it identifies most readily, and this is one of many reasons it’s important to push hard for an Obama presidency. (For one thing, he’s reported to be a jazz devotee since junior high.) Not only could Obama start to clean up Bush’s mess; he could also change the political temperature and help foster a new culture of liberalism. In the creative arts, the vogue for radicalism may never fade. But with effort and luck, come 2009 we all might need to find new licks to play. **JT**

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