JAZZ

by Terry Teachout

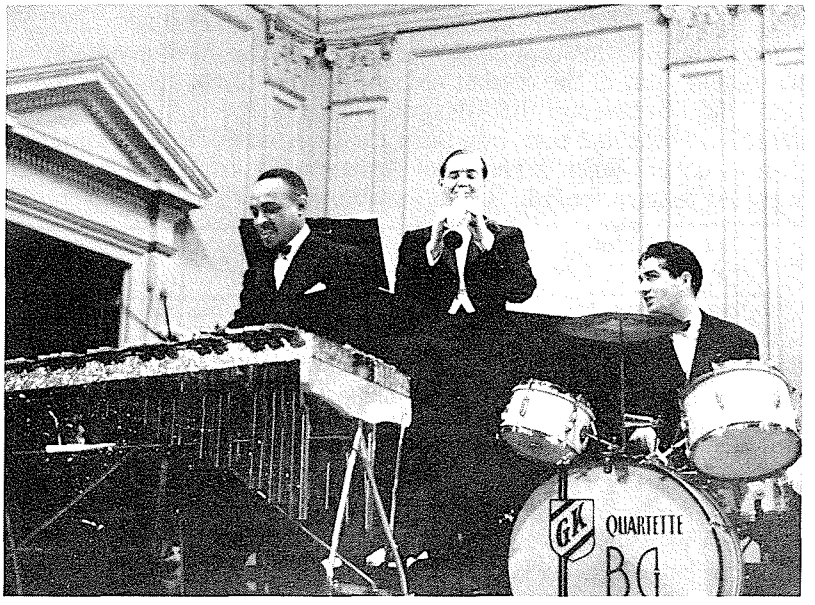
Trumpeter Harry James was uneasy as he warmed up backstage at New York's Carnegie Hall on the evening of January 16, 1938. "I feel like a whore in a church," he told a colleague. He had every reason to be nervous. Benny Goodman's swing band, with James on trumpet, was about to play a full-length concert—the first such performance ever given in America's most prestigious concert hall by a jazz group.

If anyone was prepared to bring jazz to Carnegie Hall, it was Benny Goodman. Known from coast to coast for his recordings and radio broadcasts, the King of Swing, the eighth of 12 children from a Chicago family of Russian immigrants, was also an accomplished classical clarinetist. (Three months after his Carnegie Hall debut, he recorded Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet* with the Budapest String Quartet.) Even so, Goodman was as nervous as Harry James that evening. At one point, he had even considered adding Beatrice Lillie, the English comedienne, to the program. "The stage shows we played in theaters," he explained, "always included comics."

As it turned out, Benny Goodman did not need any relief, comic or otherwise. A recording of the concert released in 1950 shows that the crowd was with the Goodman band from the moment it kicked off with "Don't Be That Way." After "Sometimes I'm Happy," the band swung into "One O'Clock Jump," the theme song of Count Basie. The famed Kansas City jazz pianist was waiting in the wings with four of his sidemen to join forces with Goodman, James, and drummer Gene Krupa for a 12-minute "jam session" on Fats Waller's "Honeysuckle Rose." Already on stage with the Goodman band were two saxophonists from Duke Ellington's orchestra. The whole history of jazz, it seemed, was being replayed before the audience that night.

For jazz, the road to Carnegie Hall had been a long one. At the time, most Americans saw jazz not as an art form but as dance music—with a scandalous black pedigree to boot. Whispered tales of alcoholism, drug abuse, and sexual promiscuity (some accurate, some scurrilous) followed jazz musicians, especially black ones. After F. Scott Fitzgerald published *Tales of the Jazz Age* in 1922, the word "jazz," at one time an obscure piece of ghetto slang with sexual overtones, became universally recognized as the emblem of "flaming youth."

A music grown up in such dubious circumstances, it then seemed, could hardly be respectable, and those who played it were not regarded in polite society as likely role models for the young. For Benny Goodman to have played jazz at Carnegie Hall—with a racially integrated group,



Onstage at Carnegie Hall in 1938, Benny Goodman plays clarinet; Lionel Hampton, vibraharp; and Gene Krupa, drums. The concert LP is still Number One on the list of all-time best-selling acoustic jazz recordings.

no less—was thus an extraordinary achievement.

"New Orleans is the cradle of jazz," pianist Jelly Roll Morton told Robert ("Believe It or Not") Ripley in 1938, "and I, myself, happened to be the creator in the year 1902." Though Morton was exaggerating his own role in its birth, jazz did emerge as a recognizable musical idiom in New Orleans around the turn of the century. "Pie man used to swing something on the bugle and the waffle man rang a big triangle," Louis Armstrong, born around 1900, later recalled. "The junk man had one of them long tin horns they celebrate with at Christmas—could play the blues and everything on it. There wasn't a person in New Orleans that didn't have rhythm."

Armstrong remembered going to the Funky Butt Hall on Perdido Street to hear jazz bands play when he was only about six years old. The music he heard was instrumental folk music played by and for a relatively small circle of New Orleans Negroes and black Creoles in and around Storyville, the city's red-light district. Early jazz appears to have been a hybrid musical idiom descended partly from ragtime,* partly from such earlier forms of Afro-American folk music as the blues, and partly from European hymnody and light classical music.

*Ragtime, exemplified by Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag," was a turn-of-the-century precursor to jazz, syncopated and often musically complex, which was fully written out rather than improvised.

What early jazzmen brought to this stylistic mishmash was "swing," a special kind of rhythmic excitement based on the opposition between the regular beat of the rhythm section—usually piano, guitar or banjo, bass, and drums—and the syncopated lines of the horn players who improvised over that beat. Like many things in music, it is easier to hear than to define. When a fan asked Armstrong to explain swing, he is supposed to have replied, "If you have to ask, you'll never know."

Jazz Becomes a Lady

Jazz was spread first by the riverboats that cruised up the Mississippi to Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, and other inland ports, with New Orleans musicians employed to provide entertainment on board. Of equal importance was the invention of the phonograph, which became an effective medium after the turn of the century. In 1917, an all-white New Orleans group called the Original Dixieland Jass Band* made the first jazz recordings, sparking a nationwide dance craze (one of their first recorded tunes was "Dixieland Jass Band One-Step"), and introducing hundreds of American musicians to the new music. By 1920, writes historian James Lincoln Collier, jazz "was widely known and badly imitated throughout the United States."

From the beginning, jazz was a *popular* music, not an art music. The members of the Original Dixieland Jass Band always stressed their musical ignorance in interviews. ("I don't know how many pianists we tried," one ODJB member claimed, "before we found one who couldn't read music.") Yet, while jazz musicians were forced to work as commercial entertainers, some of them also thought of themselves as artists.

This dichotomy between the "entertainer" and the "artist" is central to the subsequent history of jazz. Every major artist in jazz has had to place himself, whether consciously or unconsciously, at some point between these two extremes. Few great jazz musicians have been altogether comfortable with the choice, and fewer still have fit neatly into either category.

The difficulty is exemplified by the careers of Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton. Millions of listeners around the world remember Armstrong as the gravel-voiced singer, with handkerchief in hand, of "Hello, Dolly" and other pop tunes. But he was also a musical genius of the first order, revolutionizing virtually every aspect of jazz. During the 1920s, with his Hot Five and Hot Seven bands, he established the solo as a

*The modern spelling of jazz had not been established at the time.

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primary form of jazz expression. His utterly natural sense of swing served as a model for many of his contemporaries and all of his juniors.

"Through Louis Armstrong and his influence," composer and critic Gunther Schuller has written, "jazz became a truly twentieth-century language. And it no longer belonged to New Orleans, but to the world."

Armstrong's genius, however, was purely intuitive. A phenomenally gifted improviser on cornet and trumpet, Armstrong did not compose, showed little interest in classical music, and spent much of his career after the 1920s playing familiar tunes accompanied by mediocre big bands. He saw himself as an entertainer first. "You have to use a little showmanship," he said in 1965, "or they call you deadpan. If they ain't sick of it, I ain't."

Jelly Roll Morton (1885–1941), on the other hand, was a New Orleans jazz pianist and composer of considerable sophistication. Influenced by the multithematic musical structures of classic ragtime, Morton composed and recorded dozens of short pieces in the New Orleans jazz idiom (e.g., "Black Bottom Stomp," "Grandpa's Spells") that are the earliest successful examples of jazz as a self-conscious art music.

To most popular musicians during the 1920s, however, the epitome of musical sophistication was not the New Orleans jazz of Jelly Roll Morton but the quasi-symphonic "sweet" jazz of Paul Whiteman. Whiteman's big band performed at concerts as well as dances. Its audience was almost exclusively white and middle class. Some sense of the kind of music the band played can be gleaned from the fact that George Gershwin wrote *Rhapsody in Blue* at Whiteman's behest; the Whiteman band premiered the composition in 1924 at New York's Aeolian Hall. Duke Ellington later said, with a characteristic hint of irony, that Whiteman "made a lady out of jazz."

Europe Applauds

Not surprisingly, many white jazz musicians of the 1920s were attracted to classical music. They were challenged by its harmonic and structural complexity and, in many cases, comforted by its greater social acceptability. Whiteman's band offered the closest jazz equivalent to a symphony orchestra—Whiteman himself had been a violinist with the San Francisco and Denver symphonies. Though Whiteman's band was rhythmically "square," it was also, as Gunther Schuller notes, "overflowing with excellent musicians and virtuoso instrumentalists. Its arrangers . . . wrote complex, demanding scores that took everything these musicians could give."

Among the many talented musicians drawn into Whiteman's orbit was Iowa-born Bix Beiderbecke. In 1928, Beiderbecke fulfilled the height of the "artistic" jazzman's musical aspirations when he played the cornet solo on Whiteman's recording of Gershwin's *Concerto in F.*

He also set the pattern for most white jazzmen of the next quarter-

century. While the great innovators invariably would come from the ranks of black jazzmen, their white contemporaries (some of whom, like Beiderbecke, were also first-rate talents) would generally avoid the risks and rewards of radical innovation in favor of relatively conservative, "respectable" playing styles.

As big bands became "jazzier" after Louis Armstrong's short but pathbreaking stint with Fletcher Henderson's band during the 1920s, they began to attract the attention of black jazzmen who dreamed of their own brand of musical "respectability."

The most important of these musicians was Duke Ellington (1899–1974). Like Beiderbecke, Ellington was largely self-taught and a rather poor reader of music. His knowledge of classical music was sketchy at best. But Ellington, a man of exceptional sensitivity and imagination, was determined to turn the dance band into a medium for serious musical expression. As the leader of the house band at Harlem's storied Cotton Club during the late 1920s and early '30s, he began to write and record such now-famous original works as "Mood Indigo" and "Creole Rhapsody." The recordings attracted the attention of European commentators. In 1934, the influential British critic and composer Constant Lambert described the Cotton Club star as "the first jazz composer of distinction and the first Negro composer of distinction."

The Big Bands Go Bust

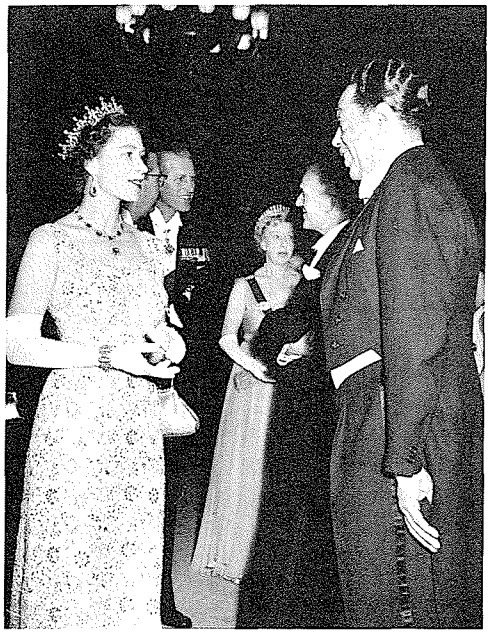
Ellington eventually went on tour in Europe, as did Louis Armstrong and several other important performers of the 1930s. They were stunned to find there a small but passionate community of jazz fans—and a comparative absence of the racial prejudice that burdened the black jazz musician's life in America, where black bands were not permitted in many white-owned nightclubs and concert halls. European acclaim convinced many American jazzmen that their work merited serious consideration as an art music.*

The first important step toward recognition in the United States came, ironically, with the resurgence of jazz as a truly popular music.

The initial jazz craze, which had started in 1917 and continued through the '20s, was stifled by the Great Depression. As the market for music of all kinds shrank, radio and phonograph executives shied away from jazz in favor of blander, safer forms of popular music. By the mid-1930s, however, a new generation of young people, born during the post–World War I baby boom, had reached late adolescence and were looking for a music of their own. Benny Goodman, soon to be acclaimed the King of Swing, supplied it.

Swing was not really new: It was a slicker, more polished version of

*It also convinced a number of American jazzmen, mostly blacks, to remain in Europe as expatriate artists, as depicted in the film *Round Midnight* (1986). Several important American jazzmen still live in Europe, including trumpeter Art Farmer, who lives in Vienna, and saxophonist Steve Lacy, a Paris resident.



Gifted with musical talent and personal flair, Duke Ellington was widely honored at home and abroad. In 1958, he was presented to Queen Elizabeth II in Leeds, England. Ellington's celebrity helped increase public acceptance of jazz as "serious" music.

the big band style originally worked out by Fletcher Henderson during the 1920s. But Goodman popularized it, and thus set the tone for an entire era. For the first and only time in the history of jazz, in the words of jazz photographer William P. Gottlieb, "the most widely acclaimed music was the best music."

Even after his 1938 Carnegie Hall concert, Goodman continued to perform mostly on the radio and at dances, as did most of his contemporaries. Jazz remained a utilitarian dance music, and for every Benny Goodman, with his increasingly serious artistic ambitions, there were 10 Louis Armstrongs who were temperamentally incapable of seeing themselves as anything other than pure entertainers. But Goodman retained his interest in classical music, commissioning works from such composers as Béla Bartók, Paul Hindemith, and Aaron Copland, and studying with the classical clarinetist Reginald Kell.

Furthermore, Goodman's appearance at Carnegie Hall inspired other jazzmen to follow in his footsteps. Duke Ellington made his Carnegie Hall debut in 1943, performing *Black, Brown, and Beige*, the first of a long series of multimovement concert works on which he hoped to stake his claim to be a serious composer. Three years later, Woody Herman brought his famous Herd to Carnegie Hall to perform Igor Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto,* which the Russian émigré had written especially for the Herman band. ("Their instrumental mastery," Stravinsky later said of Herman and his musicians, "was astonishing.")

Unfortunately, the musical advances of these bandleaders were wiped out by the collapse of the big band movement in 1946. The bands had begun to weaken during World War II, as many musicians went off to war and the costs of city-to-city touring rose sharply. The American Federation of Musicians made matters worse when it decided during 1942–43 to order its members to stop making records in an attempt to force a drastic restructuring of the system of royalty payments—in favor of the artists and at the expense of the record companies. Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, and other singers, stepping into the recording void left by the AFM strike, captured the nostalgic mood of wartime America with romantic ballads. The big band leader of the hour was Glenn Miller, who de-emphasized swing in favor of a sweeter, more commercial sound.

The final blow was delivered by the Depression-era baby bust. The birth rate in America had dropped to 21.3 per 1,000 in 1930. Sixteen years later, with their youthful core audiences shrinking, the big bands of Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Woody Herman, Count Basie, and Louis Armstrong went under.

A Bird Flies

With the sudden death of the big bands, jazz was reincarnated in the new "bebop" movement. Bebop flowered in popular night spots such as the Three Deuces and the Onyx on Manhattan's legendary "Swing Street," West 52nd Street. It stressed small groups and performances in nightclubs and brought a further increase in musical sophistication and artistic self-awareness. A brittle, fast-paced music, harmonically complex and melodically oblique, bebop was far more suitable for listening than for dancing. Jazz traditionalists, like much of the listening public, generally disdained the strange, new, seemingly disjointed music. "These young cats now," said Armstrong, "they're full of malice, and all they want to do is show you up and any old way will do as long as it's different... people get tired of it because it's really no good and you got no melody to remember and no beat to dance to."

The key innovators in the movement, both black, again provided a vivid dramatization of the dichotomy between the "entertainer" and the "artist." Trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, for all his immense musical gifts, presented himself as an entertainer, clowning on stage and, later in his career, fronting a long succession of musically mediocre small groups. Most listeners remembered his stage antics and the trademark upturned bell of his trumpet rather than the flashing virtuosity of his solos.

From the beginning, Gillespie's sometime partner, alto saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker, saw himself as an artist. A revolutionary musical innovator comparable in significance to Louis Armstrong, Parker fused the nervous electricity of bebop with the deeper emotional content of the blues to unforgettable effect. But, like Bix Beiderbecke before him, Parker eventually chafed at the constraints of small-group improvisation.

Parker was also interested in classical music, enjoyed playing with a string section, and longed to study composition. "Take me as you would a baby and teach me music," he once told composer Edgard Varèse. "I only write in one voice. I want to have structure. I want to write orchestral scores." But Parker, a heroin addict who seemed to do everything in excess, gradually destroyed himself, dying at age 34 in 1955.

The 'New Thing'

As before, the white jazzmen, with their better schooling and social advantages, made the first decisive moves of their generation toward musical respectability. Among them were baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan, a founder in 1949 of "cool" jazz, a bebop-derived style that stressed lyricism and subtlety. Another leader of the cool jazz movement was Lennie Tristano, a blind Chicago pianist who introduced completely unstructured, atonal improvisation to jazz with his 1949 recordings, "Intuition" and "Digression."

The hero of the new cool school was pianist Dave Brubeck, a student of French composer Darius Milhaud. Together with the alto saxophonist Paul Desmond, Brubeck founded a long-lived quartet that made use of such classical techniques as counterpoint, bitonality, and compound time signatures. But the Dave Brubeck Quartet was perhaps most notable for discovering jazz's most important audience of the coming decade: college students. Brubeck's long string of live on-campus recordings made him a national star, won him a place on the cover of *Time* (1954), and signaled the increasing dominance in jazz of the concert stage over the nightclub.

Back in New York, in 1952, four black beboppers who had played together in Dizzy Gillespie's short-lived big band started the Modern Jazz Quartet. The MJQ played off Milt Jackson's warm, expressive vibraharp against the elegant piano and attractive (if occasionally precious) compositions of John Lewis, a gifted blues player who was also strongly interested in classical music. Under Lewis's leadership, the MJQ performed in tuxedos, gave out printed programs and stuck to them, and even showed up on time for performances.

When not playing in clubs and at concerts, the group worked closely with Gunther Schuller, whose "third-stream" movement attempted to create a new fusion of jazz and classical music.

Not everyone was impressed by the Modern Jazz Quartet. Miles Davis, the dominant figure in jazz during the 1950s, rejected its fancy trappings outright, although he respected the musicianship of its members. "Polished Negroes," Davis said, leaving little doubt as to whom he was talking about, "are acting the way they think white people want them to act, so they can be accepted."

Although he had received some training at the Juilliard School of Music, Davis saw no need to pay homage to the ideals of classical music

Jazz giants Charlie Parker (saxophone), Charles Mingus (bass), and Thelonious Monk (piano), in a rare appearance together in 1953. On drums is Roy Haynes. No comparable group of jazz innovators has appeared since this jazz "generation," which also included Miles Davis and John Coltrane.

in order to establish his artistic credentials. He shunned rehearsals and avoided elaborate written arrangements, preferring to emphasize spontaneity. He also bucked a trend by playing whenever possible in clubs rather than concert halls: "Nobody can relax at concerts, the musicians or the people, either. You can't do nothing but sit down, you can't move around, you can't have a drink. A musician has to be able to let loose everything in him to reach the people. If the musician can't relax, how's he going to make the people feel what he feels?"

Other innovators of the era included pianist Thelonious Monk and bassist Charles Mingus, the leading jazz composer of the 1950s and '60s ("Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," "Pithecanthropus Erectus," "Better Git It in Your Soul"). But Davis, an alumnus of the Charlie Parker Quintet and a founding father of cool jazz during the late 1940s, overcame a heroin habit and established himself as the dominant figure in 1950s jazz. One of the most intriguing, abrasive personalities in jazz, he was the first of its players to transcend the artist-entertainer dichotomy. Unlike Armstrong, he behaved in public as though he took himself seriously. "He was the first one," Dizzy Gillespie said, "that came along in our business and figured he didn't have to smile at everyone, didn't have to tell no jokes or make no announcements, didn't have to say thank you or even bow. He figured he could just let the music speak for him, and for itself."

The result was a swinging, uncluttered music. Davis was willing to

try anything, moving fearlessly from bouncy show tunes, such as "The Surrey With the Fringe on Top" (from *Oklahoma!*), to sophisticated modal compositions, and he brought his public along with him at each stylistic turn.

By the early 1960s, one of Davis's protégés, tenor saxophonist John Coltrane, had taken the lead in developing the "new thing," a jazz idiom characterized by frenzied, turbulent collective improvisation and solos of unprecedented length. Sometimes brilliant, sometimes merely incomprehensible, Coltrane's style, which enthralled the jazz avant-garde long after Coltrane's untimely death in 1967, alienated much of what remained of jazz's popular audience.

Once again, the coup de grâce was provided by a demographic shift. As the first children of the post–World War II baby boom turned 16 in 1962, they ignored the increasingly inaccessible music of Coltrane and his contemporaries and turned instead to simpler, more immediately appealing sounds. Young whites tuned into rock-and-roll; young blacks to rhythm and blues and soul music.

Paying the Price

This rejection by younger listeners is the principal reason why an influential group of jazz musicians, led by Miles Davis, began during the late 1960s to incorporate elements of rock and soul into their music. The results were mixed. Some players, notably vibraharpist Gary Burton, were able to combine elements of jazz and rock in a genuinely creative way. Pianist Herbie Hancock and guitarist George Benson, among others, achieved great commercial success by merging jazz and black popular music during the 1970s, but their music became merely formulaic. Davis's attempts at "fusion," as the new brand of jazz was called, were more complex but generally less successful. After releasing a handful of provocative fusion recordings during the late 1960s, he ceased to be an important figure in jazz.

The abdication of Miles Davis left jazz without a major innovator to set new artistic directions for the next generation. As a result, jazz has entered a phase of eclecticism in which new players, instead of breaking fresh ground, pick and choose from a musical palette of the great players of the past.

Trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, the best-known of these younger musicians, is an exceptionally gifted technician whose style is almost completely derived from the playing of Miles Davis. Marsalis has also recorded several critically acclaimed albums of classical music. The World Saxophone Quartet, an avant-garde ensemble, has recorded a Duke Ellington album for Nonesuch, a classical music label. Tenor saxophonist Scott Hamilton and cornetist Warren Vaché pack nightclubs by playing an updated version of swing-era combo jazz.

This period has not been without its gains. While jazz was never, as

Grover Sales and other jazz critics claim, "America's classical music," it is now nonetheless generally recognized as a true art music.

The price of this status has, however, been high. As it became an exotic art music, jazz lost much of its popular audience. Commercial radio stations long ago stopped playing new jazz. The major record companies, which were still recording jazz 20 years ago, no longer have much time for it. While a Wynton Marsalis can still sell enough records to attract the attention of a major label such as CBS Records, most jazz artists, young and old alike, now record for small, independent firms—many of them based in Europe. Nor are recordings the only relevant measure of the shrinking market for jazz. Ask any middle-aged jazz musician how much work he gets today and how much work he got in, say, 1962, and you will hear a sad tale of slow and inexorable decline.

The crisis of expression in contemporary jazz is identical to that now being experienced by classical composers, who lost their audience by embracing avant-garde compositional techniques during the late 1950s and '60s. Perhaps jazz may follow the example of such contemporary "minimalist" classical composers as Philip Glass and Steve Reich, whose music, whatever its aesthetic weaknesses, at least seems to have some potential for attracting a larger, younger, and more enthusiastic audience. "New age" music, with its simple, repetitive instrumental textures, may well turn out to be the minimalism of modern jazz.

Today, jazz has achieved "respectability." It is played regularly in concert halls, analyzed by scholars, taught in universities, enshrined in archives, and celebrated in the Smithsonian and other museums. The typical young jazz musician now studies his art at Boston's Berklee College of Music or some similar institution, carves out a fairly conventional middle-class existence by recording jingles or teaching high school band (playing jazz on the side), and dreams of getting a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to start a big band, or perhaps an avant-garde combo.

It is difficult for many of today's listeners not to feel nostalgia for a time when jazz was still fundamentally popular music, a vital part of American life. Now it is a branch of high culture. Yet, by its very nature, jazz is unsuitable for preservation by such state-supported artistic endeavors as the museum or the symphony orchestra. It is a way of life as much as a form of art, a unique musical idiom handed down from individual to individual. Now that the culture that sustained it has withered away, who knows whether the jazz tradition can be preserved?