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Rock vs. jazz

For just the second time in 50 years, the top award at the Grammys went to a jazz album. Do the two genres have anything to say to each other?

By Gary Kamiya



AP Photo / Jim Cooper

Joni Mitchell and Herbie Hancock in New York on Sept. 26, 2007.

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I rarely pay much attention to the Grammys. But this year I noticed that something unusual happened: The album of the year award went to a jazz album, only the second time this has happened in *50 years* (if you don't count Frank Sinatra). The legendary jazz pianist Herbie Hancock won for his album "River," a tribute to the equally legendary singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell (who has also never won the top award). As the New York Times jazz critic Ben Ratliff pointed out, the choice could be seen as "a celebration of the academy's more high-minded pop impulses," a kind of makeup call to atone for all those Celine Dions and Whitney Houstons. But the Grammy for Hancock's fine album doesn't change the painful reality that it sold only 55,000 copies, or that jazz sales make up only 3 percent of all music bought in the United States.

Choosing a career as a jazz musician is a little like choosing a career as a painter, poet or dancer -- you'd better get ready to wipe off table four. My cousin and best friend is an instructive example. He's a top-notch jazz and salsa pianist in the Bay Area. He's been playing music much longer than I've been writing, and I can't help but compare our respective careers. I know it's apples and oranges,

but there is no doubt in my mind that he's at least as good at what he does as I am at what I do, and probably much better. Certainly if artistic achievement is measured by discipline, he's exponentially better. I didn't start learning Latin and Greek at age 6 (the equivalent of studying classical piano for ten years, as he did), and then take up calculus for a couple more years (the equivalent of learning the jazz vocabulary, with its harmonic complexities and technical challenges) and then have to master organic chemistry (not really a good equivalent of learning the salsa clave, but there isn't one -- suffice it to say that it's really, really hard). He plays with great musicians, occasionally heads his own group at big-name clubs, writes great tunes, is widely respected on the scene -- and has been working at the post office for 25 years. Like 99 percent of jazz musicians, he simply can't make a living at what he does.

It's bizarre, going to some of his gigs. The band is smoking, playing what you just know is the hottest, most advanced, interesting, intense music being performed anywhere in the city that night, and there will be 20 people in the audience. And there's no reason to believe this will ever change. Yes, there are some signs of life -- a sleek new San Francisco version of the longtime Oakland jazz club Yoshi's just opened in the city's revitalized historic Fillmore Jazz District, featuring top artists like Chick Corea, Roy Haynes, Mike Stern, Cedar Walton and Pat Metheny, and it has been drawing good audiences. But when you drop below the big-club, big-name level, times are hard. Most local jazz musicians I know bitch that it's harder than ever to get gigs.

I don't want to write yet another jeremiad about America's cultural illiteracy. They're boring and they don't do any good. For non-jazz fans, being told you should listen to jazz is the equivalent of the bourgeois philistine of yesteryear being dragged to the opera by his "cultured" wife -- it ain't going to make you love the music. Besides, jazz in all its magnificent variety is going to survive. It'll never be as popular as pop music, true, but while that may not be good for my cousin's bank account, it's not the end of the world.

What interests me is the relationship between jazz and the music that helped push it permanently to the margins -- rock. And the strengths and weaknesses, virtues and blind spots, of each genre.

The first album I ever bought was "Meet the Beatles." My first experience of the mysteries of the opposite sex, at age 16, was accompanied by Miles Davis' "All Blues," which happened to come on KJAZ that long-vanished Berkeley night. I sometimes wonder if that bittersweet, half-buried memory is the reason that Miles has been the soundtrack for most of my adult life.

But rock was my first love. Growing up in Berkeley in the late '60s, I had a front-row seat for the amazing electric explosion of those years, Jimi and the Stones and Cream and all the rest. I probably took 20 years off my hearing at a Who concert at the Berkeley Community Theater, sitting near the stage as Pete Townshend windmilled those monstrous suspended chords from "Underture"

through a giant stack of Marshall 200-watt amps. A new Beatles or Hendrix album was a major event, to be immediately listened to and endlessly torn apart: I can mark my high school years by the "White Album" and "Electric Ladyland" and "After Bathing at Baxter's" and "Blind Faith."

The jazz A-train took longer to arrive. In high school I had a few Miles and Coltrane albums, and as a budding guitar player I listened a little to the great Grant Green and the ridiculous Wes Montgomery, using his supersonic thumb to play octave lines faster than most guitarists could play single notes. The little I knew, I liked, but as I flipped through the LPs in Moe's Books and Records on Telegraph Avenue, the jazz universe seemed daunting and enormous. I didn't know where to start. Unlike rock, enjoying jazz didn't come naturally to me: I had to learn how to listen to it.

And I wasn't always sure I wanted to. Part of me secretly thought that jazz was a little, well, square. At its worst, it just seemed to be a bunch of technically proficient middle-aged men taking turns soloing on schmaltzy old tunes. Where was the drama, the storytelling, the creative compression, I was used to in rock? It could seem rambling, indulgent, a mere vehicle for an expertise whose sophistication had a faintly musty air. Compared to the supernova Rimbaud rush of Hendrix, the nasty sneering lust of the Stones or the miraculously protean Beatles, jazz felt like yesterday's drug, one that might be able to get me high if I knew the password, but whose shelf life might have permanently expired.

But there was another side to jazz that wasn't square at all. It was too hip. It was dangerously dark. My dad, who's no music critic but whose intuitive comments on all sorts of things I've learned to pay attention to, once mused, "Jazz has a lot of death in it." I think he meant entropy -- the apparent disorganization that made a lot of jazz feel a little scary.

So jazz was daunting. But the the difficulty was also what drew me to it. I wanted to find the password. I admit that some of my persistence derived from a half-conscious desire to seize hold of the bottom rung of the ladder leading to high culture before it was pulled up so far above me I'd never reach it. It sounds as though there may have been a whiff of snobbery in this, but I don't really think so: It was more earnestness, intellectual curiosity, a sense that some art was just hard, like a foreign language, and it might be worth learning it.

Luckily, around this time the rest of the high-culture spinach on my plate started to taste better, which encouraged me to stick with jazz. I had known, in a dutiful art-history way, that Cézanne's landscapes were better than pretty ones by some officially accredited hack; now I started to actually see them and like them. As a sophomore in high school I had bought an old 78 rpm set of Debussy's "Iberia" because I thought it was an antiquarian ticket to cultural gravitas; now I realized that you got an incredible rush out of the end of the first movement. The kicks started getting easier to find.

The same thing happened with jazz. The dusty old high-culture drugs kicked in there too. I might have started out listening to jazz because it was good for me, but the more I did, the more I realized that I liked it. Those schmaltzy tunes turned out to conceal beautiful modulations -- quieter, less obvious than those in rock, but with a complex logic that grew on you. As I learned to follow the mathematics of jazz, I started to be able to listen without so much interior strain.

Little by little, I started to venture out from the familiar genius of "Kind of Blue" and "My Favorite Things." I started listening to Dexter Gordon and Art Blakey, Lee Morgan and Bill Evans. My cousin and I haunted one of America's greatest jazz clubs, San Francisco's late, lamented Keystone Korner, where all the heavies passed through, from Rahsaan Roland Kirk to Ornette Coleman to Cecil Taylor. Eventually, jazz started to become as natural to me as rock. And for decades now, I've listened to each genre about equally (classical is a distant third).

I don't know how much my love of rock affected my relation to jazz. But a lot of the jazz I truly love, that I listen to the most, has a certain odd kinship with rock. I don't specifically mean fusion, that hybrid form in which jazz musicians play fast and loud, usually using a more limited harmonic palette than they would on jazz standards. I definitely went through a fusion phase, and the seminal albums by Weather Report, the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Return to Forever and Tony Williams' Lifetime still hold up. No, I mean, for the want of a better term, *dramatic* jazz -- jazz that explicitly foregrounds an audacious musical concept, a concept or feeling that informs both the tune itself and the soloing. It's jazz that somehow escapes the technicians-soloing-over-the-chord- changes trap that prevents so many jazz tunes, no matter how proficient, feel less autonomous, less monumental, and more like exercises.

For me, the master of this kind of jazz was Miles Davis in his middle period, roughly from "Kind of Blue" through "Bitches Brew." (Herbie Hancock was in Miles' great second quintet of those years, and his bandmate, the tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter, joins him on the Joni Mitchell tribute.) Miles' epic achievement in these 10 years, 1959 to 1969, was to somehow hold in perfect, crackling, high-wire tension two opposing impulses, the new and the old. He took a scalpel to the bebop tradition of virtuoso soloing, and cut out of it sharp and amazing new shapes. He reinvented the music from inside. It was the musical equivalent of James Joyce's journey from "Dubliners" to "Portrait of the Artist" to "Ulysses" -- one of the great artistic achievements of the 20th century.

I love all jazz, but I'm addicted to the jazz that has this kind of edge. Of course, Miles isn't the only one to have pulled it off: In their radically different ways, artists as different as John Coltrane and Pat Metheny and Chick Corea do the same thing. A lot of Brazilian music, too, does it in a different, softer way. What they all have in common is a dissatisfaction with the received jazz idiom, and a passion for framing improvisation in new ways, so that it feels less noodly and more permanent.

But before the purists come after me, let me say that I know that this isn't the only road to jazz heaven. More traditional players, ones who would never dream of embarking on Miles' modal and minimalist experiments, can make music so flawless and beautifully executed that it feels just as chiseled in granite as Miles'. Grant Green's "Idle Moments," to choose just one of countless examples, is an utterly conventional post-bop album. But it also happens to be an utterly flawless record, every solo perfect, and I'll be listening to it until my ears fall off. Swinging really does make up for everything.

Still, I must confess to sometimes feeling a bit of non-purist guilt about my predilection for what I've clumsily called dramatic jazz. I sometimes wonder if rock, with its powerful simplicity and aura of authenticity and transcendence, was too powerful a drug, if it made it hard for me to appreciate the quieter virtues of less conceptually ambitious jazz. Besides, conceptual ambition can be seen as a limitation on the most essential thing about jazz: freedom, exploration, improvisation. If permanence is a virtue, so is the transience of improvisation.

In the end, though, drama and freedom aren't mutually exclusive. In fact, they strengthen each other. And the best jazz and the best rock prove that.

Rock is all about drama. It's one climax after another. While jazz musicians' personalities disappear behind the music, rock puts those personalities front and center. It derives from the ancient tradition of the troubadour, while jazz draws both on that and on the classical tradition, with its emphasis on mastery and formal exploration.

This doesn't mean there's no mastery or formal exploration in rock -- it's just usually in a different place. As great artists like Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen demonstrate, the troubadour's persona can be as complex as a Sonny Rollins solo. But only rarely is the complexity found in the music. Most rock eschews advanced musical knowledge or technique. It's both voice-centered and communal, which limits its range: Songs that can be easily memorized or sung are not usually musically complex. This gives it a greater immediacy and accessibility: Unlike jazz, most rock does not make you work to understand what's going on.

If simplicity can be a virtue, it can also be a stultifying limitation. Not every rock musician is blessed with the native melodic gifts of the Beatles, Stevie Wonder or Joni Mitchell, or is so compelling as a performer or a personality that their musical shortcomings are irrelevant. The lack of knowledge and technique can result in boring music. Mere style, the more or less decorative tweaking of surface elements, replaces deeper and more satisfying musical explorations.

But jazz, too, has its aesthetic blind spots. Because it flirts with chaos, opens itself to a dangerous freedom that can only be mastered with technique, it can force the listener to engage in a kind of double response. To understand jazz, especially advanced jazz, from the inside, you have to simultaneously follow

every note of a solo and relate it to the melodic and harmonic background -- but that can start to feel strenuous, non-sensuous, almost mathematical. To fully enjoy the music, you sometimes have to switch to a different set of ears, stop trying to think inside the music, pull back and let the mood sweep over you.

They're both legitimate ways of listening, but going back and forth can be taxing. At its best, though, jazz allows you to do both at the same time. It simultaneously takes you on a slalom ride down a steep and exhilarating musical course, while evoking a romantic world -- city streets in the neon-haunted night, endless possibility, the deep soul of America. In the same way, at its best, rock possesses a passionate authenticity that also reveals a rich ambiguity.

Rock and jazz both mirror certain aspects of our lives, express certain parts of ourselves, that the other one can't. In some ways, they simply reflect eternal dualities: mind vs. body, process vs. stasis, freedom vs. solidity. And who would want those opposites to be diluted? A world without a 16-year-old boy screaming out the words to "Satisfaction" in the shower would be as tedious as one without a woman listening over a glass of wine to Bill Evans' "Very Early."

Jazz can become an endless set of footnotes; rock can dissolve into a scream. But when they get it right, the genre distinctions vanish, the math and the mere gesture disappear, and what's left is that old black magic: the unfolding of human passions in time that we call music.