

Recorded 5/15/53

JAZZ AT MASSEY HALL

PERDIDO
SALT PEANUTS
WEBB
HOT HOUSE
NIGHT IN TUNISIA

Charlie Chan ♦ Dizzy Gillespie ♦ Bud Powell Max Roach ♦ Charlie Mingus



GENERATION AGO, before the Cultural Explosion showered us with paperbacks, LP's, art movie houses and jazz festivals, the discovery of an enduring artistic masterpiece was a much simpler matter than it is today. When young Hemingway and Faulkner arrived on the literary scene, the excited word got out immediately to a devoted coterie who cared deeply about such things. Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, Eliot and Pound shouted "This is it—the real stuff!" in little magazines like *The Dial* and *Criterion* whose influence far exceeded their tiny circulation.

Such a mechanism for the detection of major writing talent no longer exists. The sheer, staggering output of books, magazines, articles and reviews has befuddled the reader and overburdened the serious literary critic who seeks another "The Sound and the Fury" or "The Sun Also Rises" among the awesome mountain of rubbish touted as Great Literature by the *Saturday Review*, *Life*, *Time* and other members of the Establishment.

In the twenties, a new recording of Beethoven's A minor Quartet was such a cause for rejoicing and *te deum* among music lovers that Aldous Huxley wrote a crucial chapter of "Point Counterpoint" about this event. Today, record companies are undertaking the *complete* works of such remarkably fecund composers as Haydn and Vivaldi, while uncut versions of Weber's opera "Der Freischutz" were issued on three major labels during the same month. What critic has time to listen?

With jazz, whose history is linked to that of the phonograph record industry, the same conditions apply in an aggravated form. So important has the phonograph been to the development of jazz, that a unique and fresh approach to this music could be written in terms of the outstanding records—Louis Armstrong's "West End Blues," Coleman Hawkins "One Hour" followed a decade later by his "Body and Soul," Ellington's "Jack the Bear"—that made an immediate impact on a generation of practicing jazz musicians who bought them, played them, endlessly discussed them, committed them to memory and finally incorporated them into the structure of their own music.

These discs, of course, were 10 inch, 78 rpm with an approximate playing time of three minutes. It has often been written that this time limitation, of incalculable importance to the development of jazz, imposed a benign discipline upon the soloist or arranger-composer. A few, like Ellington, strained at the bonds of this restriction, but with the exception of "Black, Brown and Beige," (a monumental work that has no real parallel and one that, ironically, has never been recorded in its entirety) the incontestable recorded masterpieces of Ellington rarely exceed 200 seconds.

Part of the Cultural Explosion, the long playing record brought mixed blessings to jazz. As in the world of books and "classical" music, the market became swollen. Every sideman got his own record date—or three—whether he was artistically ready or not, and he quite frequently was not. Worse, a

musician with precious little to say in one chorus now had the freedom to say nothing in a dozen choruses. It was like Cinemascope, with all that space to be filled up. It was becoming as difficult for the jazz musician and critic to separate the gold from the dross as it was for the literary man.

Following a cultural pattern outlined by Dwight MacDonald in "Masscult and Midcult," a middle-of-the-road brand of cocktail jazz was marketed for the collectors of Judy Garland and Bob Newhart records. At the other end of the spectrum was the "hippie," slavish pursuer of every fad from West Coast through Hard Bop and Soulfunk, whose fetish was the "new sound," the "new Bird" the latest disc. Presided over by the hippie Disc Jockey, the Jazz Station (a new phenomenon) endlessly played the most recent derivation. One never heard Bud Powell, only the legions of his ineffectual one-handed idolators who would be lost indeed without a Ray Brown or Charlie Mingus behind them. Lester Young was rarely heard—only tedious imitations, twice removed.

Jazz magazines bestowed four bells or five and a half bunnys on the most obvious sort of ephemera whose reviews always ended with the statement: "This record belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in jazz." Recording companies reissued third-rate tracks packaged as "The Essential," "The Quintessence," "The Definitive."

Now that "Jazz at Massey Hall" is available to us, what is there left to say except that it is unmistakably essential, indispensable, definitive? A record that, in every literal sense, belongs in the library of anyone interested in any aspect of jazz.

Not merely another "blowing session," this is probably the greatest blowing session ever recorded. The personnel reads like a critic's dream and it is indeed fortunate that the five giants most closely identified with the development of modern jazz could have assembled in Toronto's Massey Hall early in 1953.

Here is a blowing session which is enhanced, rather than smothered by the long playing record, and we can be grateful that Charlie "Chan" and Dizzy Gillespie can go on and on, chorus after unforgettable chorus.

To analyze these "tracks" in literary terms is pointless. As Miles Davis has said, "I don't want no album notes. The music speaks for itself." It is enough to say that "Jazz at Massey Hall" presents a quintet of the most fertile talents in modern jazz at the height of their creative and emotional powers. The fevered excitement, reaching unbearable levels, is communicated to the audience and for once you are moved to yell with, rather than at them.

"Jazz at Massey Hall" is more than a great record. It is a landmark in the history of recorded jazz that can take its place with the Louis Armstrong Hot Fives and Sevens, the Ellington Victors of 1940-42 and the Billie Holiday-Teddy Wilson sessions.

—GROVER SALES, JR.

June, 1962

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