

Straight, No Chaser: No Giant Steps When It Comes To Gigs & Opportunities

I write the piece as a huge straightahead Jazz fan, and a great admirer of all Jazz artists for their dedication and artistry to their craft. I do not claim to be critic nor a musician; but rather, just a great supporter of America's original 'classical' music – Jazz! As an example, in 2010, while living in the Bay Area (for 12 years), I made 24 weekend trips to New York City (NYC) to see 12 Jazz shows over a span of three nights at various venues before jetting back to the west coast (total ~275). And when I returned to the east coast in mid-2013, I saw nearly 500 shows over the next 2½ years primarily from weekly Saturday trips to the Big Apple by car. I also began sending out to several Jazz buddies my monthly NYC Jazz schedule of Saturday performances (4 total) that I planned to see or highly recommended. Nowadays, I see as many straightahead Jazz shows as possible in the Baltimore and WDC areas (“If they book them, I will come!”), with occasional Greyhound trips to the Big Apple to satisfy my Jazz appetite. All this to say that I've seen more than a few great Jazz shows and that I feel confident in my keen observations.

However, one nagging concern for me over the years that has continued to this day, despite the praise, reverence, and deference that is given to Jazz music's creators and innovators (e.g., Armstrong, Ellington, Parker, Gillespie, Davis, Coltrane, Monk, etc.), along with the world-wide acknowledgement that Jazz was started by African-Americans, is the seemingly lack of headlining opportunities ('gigs') for Black Jazz musicians at major Jazz venues and, to a lesser extent, at Jazz festivals. Most Jazz clubs in NYC and around the country are adorned with wall posters, framed

photos, instruments, memorabilia, and even venue names (e.g., Birdland, Blue Note, Jazz Standard, Jazz Alley) associated with the legendary Jazz masters and music styles. Some even feature wall murals or large posters of these Jazz giants outside their clubs.

In fact, in February 2016, after sending out my monthly schedule, I noted to a few (Black) Jazz buddies that, based on the Village Vanguard's all-white (week-long) bookings for that month:

“As a huge and loyal Jazz fan, is it just me, or has the Village Vanguard dropped a notch in who it books these days (for a whole week, I might add)? Or, tell me it ain't so, Joe, are its booking becoming exclusively white (e.g., March: Myra Melford, Bill Frisell & Thomas Morgan, Bill Frisell, Fred Hersch)? The same can be said for January and February, except for George Cables (January) and Ambrose Akinmusire (February). I still don't quite get its annual Christmas week booking of The Bad Plus, or, for that matter, Christmas week bookings at the other major NYC Jazz venues (e.g., Blue Note, Dizzy's, Birdland, Jazz Standard, Kitano, Jazz Gallery, and Iridium). In fact, Blue Note provides an annual month-long 'residency' to trumpeter Chris Botti. Where are the Black Jazz artists (opportunities) during Christmas? Seems that Smoke and Smalls continue to consistently book Black Jazz artists. Thanks, Paul & Frank (*Smoke co-owners*) and Spike (*Smalls owner*)!!! Just hope that we're not seeing a form of apartheid in Big Apple Jazz Clubs now that they've gotten rid of 'Stop & Frisk' (except Eric Garner). As Arsenio would say, “These are things that make you go ‘hmmm’.” Take care!”

New Year's Eve performances in NYC and other Jazz clubs in big cities (e.g., WDC, Oakland, S.F., Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Seattle, L.A.) are huge money-makers and

great exposure for Jazz artists. To Chris Botti’s credit, he’s always featured mostly all-Black musicians in his bands over the years.

Last year (2018), I completed a self-published book that chronicled the aforementioned nearly 490 weekend Jazz shows that I saw in NYC from June 2013 through December 2015. The book lists each Saturday’s itinerary (Jazz venues visited), headliners/groups and personnel, and a brief ‘Reflection’ of that evening’s experience. Friday and Saturday shows are the big attractions and money-makers for a Jazz venue, when they usually book marquee talent.

While my motivation for writing the book at the time was not at all to later use to generate statistics, but rather to share one’s passion (addiction!), what better way to measure and/or validate my suspicion. After all, from a financial or economic standpoint, the headliner or bandleader gets paid more than his/her bandmates, calls the shots, is the main attraction, and is good gauge to examine overall ‘opportunity’, and similar gigs themselves may lead to record deals, radio interviews, magazine articles, social media buzz, popularity, and additional gigs.

As a result of 124 Saturdays (mostly) and 490 straightahead Jazz performances at major NYC Jazz venues, including Smoke, Smalls, Village Vanguard, Dizzy’s @ JALC, Blue Note, Jazz Standard, Kitano, Iridium, Mezzrow, and Jazz Gallery, I derived the following results:

	<u>Black</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Other</u>
Headliners/Leaders	62%	33%	4%
Back-Up/Band Members	62%	31%	7%

Of course, there was a large variance between individual Jazz venues, as well as venue booking lengths (e.g., Tuesday thru Sunday (Village Vanguard), Tuesday thru Saturday (Birdland), Wednesday/Thursday thru Sunday (Blue Note), Friday thru Sunday

(Smoke), Friday & Saturday (Smalls)). However, the takeaway is that even though 'Jazz' is promoted as a Black art form, with historically great Black musicians (some of whom are still alive and well) and cool/hip lifestyles, the fact is that only 6 in 10 booked shows are headlined by Black Jazz musicians. At other popular Jazz venues outside of NYC, these numbers get worse since travel and hotel expenses are involved. The exceptions are the young 'superstars' and the older established greats. (For 'Smooth Jazz' and 'Jazz Fusion', these numbers are far worse!!!)

These numbers are despite the many, many outstanding, dedicated, creative, innovative, musically-educated, and technically-trained Black Jazz musicians wherever you go (especially in NYC). Although there are several very talented white Jazz musicians around, in general, when I see/hear a white musician on a gig, I can think of another 10 Black musicians just as competent who've I seen play on that same instrument. Again, I'm not hatin'; I'm talking about opportunity! I've often wondered about certain white Jazz musicians, "Is he good because he gets a lot of chances (gigs) to play, or does he get a lot of chances to play because he's good?" As a famous musician once said, you get better not by playing with others at your same level, but by playing with people better than you!

Speaking of great white Jazz musicians, I fondly remember the time back in April 2006, while waiting in line at Jazz Bakery outside Los Angeles before a Pat Martino Quartet concert featuring Eric Alexander, my favorite under-50 tenor saxophonist. The Black gentleman next to me, a huge admirer of Alexander's sound and style, admitted to me his recent shock when he discovered that Alexander was NOT Black! He was there to see, with his own eyes, Eric Alexander play and perform! To this day, when I hear any

young tenor saxophonist, I consider Eric Alexander the standard by which to measure him/her.

Another pet peeve of mine is how it seems that any type of weird, abstract, soul-less, or blues-less instrumental music (as well as 'Smooth Jazz') is anointed the great mantel or category of being 'Jazz' music. For some white fans, the weirder or farther out the music (not to be confused with Avant-Garde), the better it is and satisfies them. I don't know how many times I've listened to 'Jazz' played by white musicians and thought to myself, "Man, what is this??? It totally lacked Duke Ellington's primary Jazz ingredients: rhythm, melody, and harmony. And it also lacked any soulfulness or any connection to the Blues... This was especially true when I lived in the Bay Area (e.g., West Coast Jazz). I often imagined how many local groups or artists would be booed off the stage at Smalls playing what they played, Showtime at the Apollo-style!

For example, I recall when a young up-and-coming white Jazz pianist in the Bay area was asked during a concert which pianists were his inspirations. He quoted Bill Evans, Dave Brubeck, and a third white pianist. What!!! Really??? Of course, these two pianists were great, no doubt, however, I blame this omission of any Black pianist on the willful ignorance of his piano teacher(s) or the purposeful exclusion on their part. How can any serious Jazz piano teacher NOT introduce his/her student to the music, genius, artistry, and musicianship of Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson, Thelonious Monk, Duke Ellington, Red Garland, Teddy Wilson, Nat 'King' Cole, Horace Silver, Ahmad Jamal, Gene Harris, Erroll Garner, McCoy Tyner, Gene Harris, and Ramsey Lewis just to name a few?

Speaking of the Bay Area, next month (March 2019), Stanford Live (part of Stanford University) is presenting "Oscar, With Love: A Tribute to the Late Oscar Peterson" that will feature six pianists, only one of whom is Black (Gerald Clayton), and a white bassist. My question is, why not include any of the great Black Jazz pianists

on the NYC Jazz scene who also lead their own groups: Marcus Roberts, Cyrus Chestnut, Eric Reed, Orrin Evans, Eric Lewis, Robert Glasper, Xavier Davis, Christian Sands, etc.

This same pattern often exists at NYC Jazz venues for annual tribute concerts or birthday celebrations of the greats (e.g., Miles, Monk, Coltrane, Bird, Dizzy), where the line-up includes no or fewer than half Black Jazz musicians. I just have to shake my head... Really???

I specifically recall the initial episode of the 2006 “Legends of Jazz With Ramsey Lewis” television program, which featured trumpeters Clark Terry, Roy Hargrove, and Chris Botti. During the brief Q&A that Ramsey Lewis had with Roy Hargrove and Chris Botti, he asked them both about the frequency of opportunities to play on the road (gigs). Chris Botti responded first saying that opportunities came often and easily for him. Roy Hargrove reacted surprisingly and shockingly, expressing that it was quite the same for him. To the slightest Jazz enthusiast, there’s no doubt who the better trumpeter was or is, no doubt! Yet, talent doesn’t always transform into better opportunity (gigs).

I truly believe that there is a minority of opinion (no pun intended) among festival booking agents and/or curators who believe that Jazz was originally created or started by white folks, and who try their best to propagate that belief, and will go as far as booking mostly or exclusively white Jazz artists, if possible.

This is also true over the past several years with white female ‘Jazz’ singers who, at every turn, have been thrust upon us, many of whom are mediocre when compared to the legends: Ella, Sarah, Billie, Dinah, Carmen, and Betty. Yet, they’re still presented to us, getting opportunity after opportunity (gigs) to improve! Most of these

white female Jazz singers, eye candy for most men, can't hold a candle to these aforementioned 'real' Jazz singers, as well as to these current Black Jazz vocalists: Mary Stallings, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Dianne Reeves, Nnenna Freelon, René Marie, Carla Cook, and Sharón Clark, just to name a few. Among the young up-and-coming females, Cécile McLorin Salvant, 2010 Thelonious Monk International Vocal Competition winner, is also the 'real deal', worthy of all of the acclaim and opportunities that she is receiving!!!

Why and how white Jazz artists seem to eek out living over many years, while many Black Jazz musicians are relegated to the familiar 'starving artists' status, continually honing their chops, but getting very few gigs, Jazz festival invitations, and recording deals, and sometimes dying penniless, I'll never quite understand... Thankfully, many colleges and universities are now hiring Black musicians as part of their Jazz music faculty, and students are learning from real Jazz masters and practitioners.

Perhaps, with the country's changing demographics and moving on of older booking agents, many Jazz venues and Jazz festivals will change their practices and take giant steps when it comes to club gigs and opportunities for Black Jazz artists. We'll see and you best believe that I'll be there!

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