

Jazz Liner Notes as “Critical Responsa”

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Independent Research

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Overview

This paper is the result of a study of approximately 600 Jazz album liner notes written in the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. In the course of reviewing the notes a number of key observations were made. First, it was observed that a significant portion was written by relatively limited number of writers, many who also alternated as magazine editors as well as label executives. Second, the notes often had cross references, which came in two varieties: a) references to remarks about the artist that appeared on other albums. b) references to polls and criticism regarding the artist in major publications. Finally, it was observed that a limited number of themes dominated the notes and furthermore, it was not uncommon for specific discussions to follow given artists from album to album. Related to this, a specific style of liner note was identified which can be referred to as a *responsa*. This style of liner note addressed specific criticisms about the artist's playing and in doing so attempted to resolve some sort of controversy.

The aim of this paper is to understand *responsa* style liner notes, in particular as written by major Jazz critics such as Leonard Feather, Ira Gitler, Nat Hentoff, Ralph J. Gleason and Joe Goldberg in the immediate post-bebop to hard bop, cool and modern Jazz era. Within this context, it will attempt to define key *responsa* themes; identify the general ethos behind the common themes and lines of argument; and analyze the problem of seemingly contradictory lines of argument at times. Finally, it will demonstrate how the parameters of the critical ethos ultimately began to shift with the emergence of John Coltrane.

The discussion begins with a comparison between a liner note that served as an unreserved endorsement of an artist. It will be compared to a *responsa* style note in

which the writer, Nat Hentoff (the so called “Dean of the Jazz Critics” at the time) seems to deliver harsh judgement against Ahmad Jamal. It will be observed that the ambiguity of Hentoff’s language makes it unclear whether he is defending or attacking the artist; however, in further analyzing the “ethos” of the era, the logic of Hentoff’s *responsa* will become clearer as this paper progresses.

Paul Chambers, *Bass on Top* (Blue Note 1957)

Bass on Top serves as a rare example of a superlative endorsement of an artist. Even if the artist was held in high esteem, the schism between the critics, musicians and writers would often come into play. The note cited below is an anomaly in that it clearly conveys general consensus, and superlative language is used. What may also stand out as something peculiar to a person unfamiliar with liner note conventions is that despite the uniqueness of the session (the bass is literally “on top” on half of the tunes, playing the melody and is delivering horn like solos), the session and tunes themselves are not discussed until the very end of the liner notes. The focus, instead is upon Paul Chamber’s significance as a bass player. The liner note writer, Robert Levin also refers the reader to the liners notes from previous albums. (“Paul’s biographical data can be found in the liners to his first two Blue Note LPs (*Whims of Chambers*, BLP 1534, and *The Paul Chambers Quintet*, BLP 1564.”) Instead, Levin dedicate the bulk of the notes to discussing Paul Chambers’ importance. (The convention of saving commentary about the session and tunes itself suggests that the key task of the liner note is not to ask “What kind of session is this?”, but rather answer, “Why is this artist being recorded?” In the case of *Bass on Top*, the thesis of the liner note is that Paul Chambers is the top bassist of his generation.)

Robert Levin begins his argument by noting the death of Jimmy Blanton, then listing the bassists who rose in his wake and were strongly influenced by him.

Revealingly, the term “on top” (which can be taken to mean up front, in the case of a double bassist) is defined as meaning “influential,” and it is argued that Blanton was the most influential Jazz bassist until Chambers came on the scene.

Insofar as the argument for Paul Chambers goes, the notes explain that Blanton held the distinction of top bassist because he mastered the art of the “horn like” solo. Its impact is described as “evident” on every modern bassist who came after him. Oscar Pettiford, Percy Heath, Charlie Mingus, Ray Brown, Wendell Marshall, Milt Hinton, Al McKibbon and George Duvivier are named as Blanton’s most outstanding followers until Paul Chambers came on the scene. Levin refers to the significance of Paul’s bowed and pizzicato solos with Miles Davis.

Levin finalizes his argument by citing Miles Davis’s praise for Chambers. He lists the awards Chambers has won, and mentions that he received more than twice the number of votes of his closest “rival” in Leonard Feather’s “Musician’s Musician” Poll, listing eighteen major artists who cast ballots for him.

Citations of endorsements typically appear within the first column of liners, shortly after the introduction of the thesis or theme of the notes, and often serve as part of a supporting argument. After the thesis is presented, the basic argument is presented. The personnel and tunes are briefly discussed around the second third of the discussion (approximately the final column and a half), then the liner notes usually end with a conclusion that returns to the initial thesis statement. This form was observed on almost all of the liner notes reviewed. What sets one liner note apart from another is usually the specific thesis, theme or tone of the discussion.

***The Jazz Piano Scene of Ahmad Jamal* (Epic, 1959)**

Hentoff's liner note to *The Jazz Piano Scene of Ahmad Jamal* follows an almost identical form to *Bass On Top*; however, the tone stands in sharp contrast to Levin's liner note. Whereas "Bass on Top" implies absolute consensus among critics and musicians as to the greatness of Chambers, Hentoff's liner note to *The Jazz Piano Scene of Ahmad Jamal* (Epic 1959) draws to the surface the fact that sometimes critics, artists and fans did not agree with one another. *Downbeat Magazine*, in fact, had three separate polls for listeners, musicians and critics.

Disturbingly, in the liners to *Jazz Piano Scene*, Hentoff seems to exhibit animosity towards Jamal. Everything that was "right" about Paul Chambers comes off as problematic in regard to Jamal.

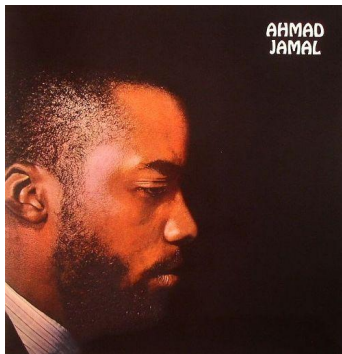


fig. 1 Ahmad Jamal, *The Jazz Piano Scene of Ahmad Jamal*, Epic 3631, 1959, LP

The note begins stating, "about three years ago, Miles Davis, Ahmad Jamal's most influential champion reacted indignantly to my mumbled opinion that Ahmad Jamal was 'mainly a cocktail pianist.'" Hentoff then explains how Miles praised his use of space and not crowding the rhythm section, quoting Miles directly as saying, "He lets it go so that you can feel the rhythm section and the rhythm section can feel you. It's not crowded."

After this, Hentoff dedicates half a column to Julian Adderley's impressions.

Quoting Adderley:

He has a potful of technique, but has learned restraint... Ahmad's left hand is unobtrusive but he establishes the groove with the left hand. Moreover, he doesn't allow a groove to become stagnant...

Having yet himself to offer any praise for Jamal, Hentoff then mentions that Jamal has a penchant for developing select repertoire that he keeps exploring over time. At first this seems to be praise, but based on Jamal's response, it seems that Hentoff is implying that Jamal's repertoire is boring or limited. Hentoff allows Jamal to defend himself through direct quotation explaining that tunes develop over time, and are never played the same way twice. (If the comment was meant to be praise, why would Jamal have been offering an explanation?)

Hentoff then mentions that Jamal recently converted to Islam, quoting Adderley as saying, "He seems always at peace... he still doesn't do anything he doesn't want to do, and he doesn't follow trends." This seems like praise at first, but then Hentoff goes on to say, "He also clearly has a strength of will that has made it possible – in fact – necessary – for him to find and go his own way through the years no matter what the critics wrote and no matter how apathetic some of the earlier audience were."

Hentoff continues: "There remains sharp critical controversy about Jamal, and even though more musicians than critics are beguiled by him, there is extensive debate about his place and value in Jazz among the non-civilians as well."

In other words, Hentoff seems to be really driving home that not everybody likes Ahmad Jamal. In fact, it was Martin Williams a year earlier in *Down Beat* magazine who first used the term "cocktail piano music" in describing Jamal's major hit album

Live At The Pershing (Argo 1958). In addition Ralph J. Gleason wrote in the San Francisco Chronicle that Jamal was “an effete Erroll Garner.” Countless other critics labeled him a sell out.

On the other hand, the exact opposite strategy is taken by other writers’ notes on most of Jamal’s Argo sessions. Norval Perkins describes him as the most commercially celebrated and successful pianist of his era (*Naked City Theme*, Epic 1964). Willis Conover dedicates the first several paragraphs of his liner notes to *The Ahmad Jamal Trio Volume IV* (Argo 1958) to quoting John Hammond’s praise of him, then attributing his distinct attributes to his commercial success. William Leonard of the Chicago Tribune describes him as having sold “a schmillion” albums and attributing his fan’s enthusiasm by saying “not only is his sound new, it’s good.” (*Listen to the Ahmad Jamal Trio*, Argo 1960). Jack Tracy speaks of Jamal’s “meteoric rise from comparative obscurity to the most sought-after and biggest-selling recording artist in Jazz” (*Happy Moods*, Argo 1960).

With all of this said, Hentoff does offer some praise for Jamal. For example, he discusses his “charm,” how he doesn’t “slash into the marrow” as some pianists do, concluding “In fact, the most attractive aspect of Jamal’s playing to his listener is that there is no trace in it of conscious posturing to be hip or “au courant.” His final argument is that Jamal is himself when he plays noting “that after all, that is what Jazz is supposed to be all about.” Hentoff concludes that Jamal is a relatively uncomplicated person who has found religion, family and calmness of spirit concluding, “He doesn’t pay any attention to negative reviews because he knows all too well that the worst reviews he ever gets are from Ahmad Jamal.”

On the whole, the notes to *Jazz Piano Scene* can be taken in one of two ways: One interpretation is that Jamal is misunderstood by many, but it is okay because he is playing himself. (This type of argument was prevalent with many controversial artists. Later it will be demonstrated how it was used with Coltrane.) Jamal is being presented as a “searcher” with an authentic voice who is not far from Miles’s concept. On the other hand, an alternative interpretation is that even though Hentoff is writing a clever defense of Jamal, it is being presented through a very negatively biased lens.

Deciding which interpretation to take becomes even more difficult when examining two contradictory pieces of evidence: first, several years later, Hentoff revisits Jamal, using a very similar line of argument to the former liner, minus much of the negative language (Ahmad Jamal, *The Roar of the Greasepaint—The Smell of the Crowd*, Argo 1965). Using similar language, he states that the album reflects the consistency of Jamal’s “firmly personal approach” and further states that “Jamal has experienced widening public delight in his work.” After praising Jamal’s “plastic use of space” Hentoff states that Jamal does not fall into any “conveniently categorical bag,” praising his “glowing lyricism” and his subtle sense of dynamics. “(Jamal) swings without strain and with both subtlety and sensibility.” While it may be possible to argue that his opinion changed, the key observation is that the language itself is almost identical. In contrast, previously writing of *Happy Moods* (Argo 1960) in his column in *Esquire* magazine (*Esquire*, September 1960) Hentoff was at his ambiguous best. First, he stated that Jamal with all his popular success “has the profundity of Elizabeth Taylor,” then immediately after noted that Jamal has brought a certain type of refreshing order and space to Jazz. Once again, he referred to the “quietude” that embracement of Islam brought to him, but then stated that it is “often

to the point of blandness.” He concluded that Jamal brought to the album a breath of “sunniness and delight” although he doesn’t recommend too much of a dose at once. Less ambiguously, however, he stated that Jamal is “frustratingly fragmentary” in too short pieces and frequently runs out of ideas if he plays the theme too short.

“Jazz: The Happy Sound Is Dying” (LeBlanc, 1962): Criticizing the Critics

The question remains, did Hentoff’s opinion ever change, or is it possible that critics were willing to write bad things about artists, then profit by being hired to write endorsements on the back of the album covers? Clearly in the *Esquire* magazine piece cited above, Hentoff views Jamal as “light.” The piece concludes by comparing him to another minimalist, Duke Jordan, who fares a bit better, then to Bill Evans. He likens going from Jamal to Evans like “going from Morton Gould to Elliot Carter” which is to say that he views Jamal as “light” and Evans as a heavyweight. (Morton Gould was a popular composer of light classical music, whereas Elliot Carter was a contemporary composer who had two Pulitzers to his name.)

Within the context of this debate, it is worth considering LeBlanc’s scathing critique of Jazz criticism, “Jazz: The Happy Sound is Dying” (LeBlanc, *Esquire* 1962). Key criticisms in the article include:

1. As soon as an artist becomes popular, the critics turn against him.
2. He specifically accuses writers such as Feather and Hentoff of writing scathing reviews of famous artists, then taking money to write warm and supportive liner notes to their albums, pointing out the corrupt nature of the “endorsement” system.

3. He accuses Jazz Critics of lacking a sense of humor and resenting those that do as well as having certain biases and dysfunctional beliefs. Furthermore, he describes Jazz Critics as “socratic sages” who say to artists in effect “Let me say exactly what was in your mind when you played that last passage.”

Ira Gitler’s notes to Bill Evans’ *Sunday At The Village Vanguard* (Riverside, 1961) shed some light upon this. Gitler opens the notes writing:

Just because I am a writer-critic in the jazz field doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy an album like any layman. It is true that when one is forced to listen to “x” amount of LPs every week, there are times when the spirit can become hostile toward the very thought of records. But, fortunately, the most effective antidote to this *malaise de vinyl* lies adjacent to the trouble source itself. There is nothing more healing than good music.

Taken by itself, this note may be taken to represent a type of tongue in cheek humor; however, the complaint of many albums flooding the market at once was found on many liners, suggesting a type of critic’s fatigue. While it might be argued that they were simply a clever sales pitch to draw attention to the importance of the album, Gitler’s use of the phrase “hostile towards the very thought of records” seems indicative of a genuinely negative attitude. In addition, the phrase seems to suggest that listening to Jazz, for the critic, is a type of work, therefore, simply admitting that an artist is good because his music enjoyable would represent a “layman” mentality. Interpreted as such, notes such as this would support some of LeBlanc’s assertions.

Dan Morgenstern, in turn, lambasts the dysfunctionality of the Jazz critics:

You have set yourself up as the arbiters of standards in jazz criticism. You are uncommitted to advertisers and payola. You have prestige and ipso facto authority. Your only business is jazz is the sine qua non of your being. But you are becoming so concerned with the problems of abstract critical and artistic ideals that you are rapidly losing sight of

the essential fact in jazz: the living, breathing, working jazz musician who earns his daily bread by performing jazz music.

(Gennari 2010)

So if the purpose of liners are to defend the ethos of the album, is there any way that Hentoff's line of argument can be defended? In sum, yes, but to do this it is necessary to examine the consistency of his ethos.

To begin, in *Blowin' Hot and Cool* Martin Williams contends that the idea of Jazz criticism was to discuss Jazz as if were an important music with an important heritage and to discuss musicians as if they were creative people rather than celebrities or colorful old characters. He argues that writers were attempting to create notions of high-art autonomy, rationality and depth, especially by distancing themselves from the commercial soul music of the 1950s (loc 2706). By the time *Jazz Piano Scene* was released, Jamal's commercial success may have stood for everything the critics abhorred. If this was the case, Hentoff may have had a huge task before him.

Along this line of reasoning, Hentoff's mission was to differentiate between Jamal's light style and his commercial success, hence he begins by admitting that even he sees Jamal as light, but then immediately turns to Davis and Adderley, who as musicians argue his music as spacious. While Jamal may very well come across as light compared to a Horace Silver or Bobby Timmons (i.e. Hentoff notes how he doesn't "dig down into into the marrow,") Hentoff in essence is arguing that were Jamal to simply copy their sounds, he would only be imitating other people's popular sounds, thus making him faddish and no different than all the soul Jazzers who were exploiting popular R&B hits to sell as many records as possible. In essence, Hentoff

can be interpreted as arguing that Jamal is eschewing a faddish sound in favor of a deeply personal one.

From here, a certain type of subtextual ethos can be seen driving the Jazz criticism of the era. The modern reader, unfortunately does not have full access to the full body of contemporary dialogue that was occurring in the magazines (including the columns of liner note writers such as Hentoff), as well as the gossip in a small but cliquish subculture. The listeners, after all, were expected to follow artists from album to album, read the liners, monitor their development and of course read *Downbeat*, *Metronome* and all the “hip” national magazines. In addition, in following an artist, a typical liner note might center discussion on how much the artist had changed in recent years, then describe in detail how the artist is evolving and developing, hence some liner notes served not only as *responsa*, but progress reports as well.

If it is to be acknowledged that a certain subtextual “ethos” drove Jazz criticism, the challenge is to identify what it was. Hentoff’s *Esquire* piece “Conversations Among the Elders” (Hentoff, 1960) sheds some light upon this by suggesting a possible realm of parameters. The piece begins by arguing that there are few jazzmen under forty who have not stopped developing, but whose records indicate that “they have created a rounded, integrated conception that is clearly their own and within which they can move with uncompetitive confidence.” Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk and Cannonball Adderley are cited as “strong examples.” (Adderley would soon after fall out of favor.) Hentoff then refers to new Jazz releases that are concerned with the “aggressively hot cooking of the young modern traditionalists who are consolidating the lessons of the Parkers and Gillespies” and also identifies

“plunges by more daring contemporaries into insistently personal but not yet wholly formed extensions of the language.” He then states that he does not mean to denigrate them or the “admirably stubborn and necessary explorers,” then names Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane, “among others,” as examples of explorers. Finally, he speaks of elders who have “run dry and substitute memories and bitterness for present urgency,” comparing them in contrast to those who “haven’t finished their stories and who have long since settled on way of self-expression that are as comfortable and natural to them as their speaking voices.”

In this discussion, Hentoff establishes an interesting parameter consisting “elders” (some still developing and others washed out), “cookers” and “explorers”. To truly understand the “cooker”/“Gillespie-Parker” nuance it is necessary to be aware of wider discussion at the time regarding the degree to which it was acceptable to just come into a recording session and blow and the degree to which a new production value was called for. Another “hot topic” was the modern-traditionalist debate and discussion of what constituted “the mainstream.”

Discussions such as these frequently played out on liner notes, but are lost on readers devoid of access to the wider body of liner notes and Jazz criticism of the era. Fortunately, Joe Goldberg’s liner to Mobley’s *Soul Station* (Blue Note, 1960) serves as an excellent window into the microcosm of discussions that were common in the era. The liner note begins with a discussion of the problem of blowing sessions:

Recently, it has become more and more incorrect to pass off a Jazz record as a ‘Blowing date’ (a term, by the way, that has become at least semi-derogatory) simply because there are only four or five musicians involved. The days of musicians coming into a studio and “just blowing” (a practice that only the very greatest Jazzmen have ever been able to get away with) are apparently over, for the most part. At

one time, you could safely assume than a forty-minute LP had taken, at most, an hour to put together. No More.

The gist of the *responsa*, as the argument develops, is that while it is true that the album being discussed has a casual feel, there are a number of points to consider. The first is that Hank Mobley is a “musician’s musician,” generally unknown to the public, and unique in his rhythmic concept. He is described as a “liability” because “as far as commercialism is concerned he is not easily classified.” Goldberg then criticizes the tendency of critics (unnamed) to pigeonholing artists, in particular through their use of terms such as “Hawkins-informed, Rollins-derived and Young-influenced”. He says that in doing so they “drop the musician under discussion into a hole and fill the dirt over him,” then concludes that it can not be done with Mobley.

Goldberg then discusses some labels that might be applied to Mobley, alluding to the fact that while he is not an easily categorizable traditionalist, he does not fall into the category of a restless searcher either:

He did not, in the manner of Sonny Rollins, in 1955 emerge from a long self-imposed retirement with a startling new approach. Nor did he, in the manner of John Coltrane, come almost completely unknown under the teaching influence of the great Miles Davis (for how many men has that recently been the key to success.) Instead, he worked slowly and carefully, in the manner of a craftsman, building the foundations of a style, taking what he needed to take from whom he needed to take it (everyone does that the difference between genius and hackwork is the manner in which it is done) and finally emerging, on this album, not with a disconnected series of tunes, but with a definitive statement to make.

Taken as *responsa* to wider debates of the era, the thesis is best summarized as: Just because Mobley is not hugely popular and cannot be pigeonholed as a modern-traditionalist or a restless explorer does not mean that he does not have something to say. He is a mature, developed player with his own concept, and the album does him

justice by allowing his style to come through via the relatively casual production style.

Liner notes such as *Soul Station* demonstrate how the LPs themselves served as “artifacts” to be discussed within the context of a larger series of debates. In contrast to *Jazz Piano Scene*, the Mobley liner note appears to be quite positive, but analyzed in a larger context it can be argued that Goldberg is anticipating that the album is going to be written off by some as a blowing session by an artist who does not have a distinct style as compared to a Sonny Rollins or John Coltrane. As suggested by Goldberg, a key problem was that the ethos of the era left musicians vulnerable to sometimes unfair and mixed-standard criticism and comparison. For example, it was implied that Jamal was light due to his spacious concept, but what about Bill Evans? Could not Evans too have been argued as “light” compared to some of his contemporaries? Also, what about Evan’s ability to cut into the marrow? Did his style have the energy or technicality of a Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell or Horace Silver? Why was it not necessary for Goldberg to argue him from the point of his weaknesses?

A possible answer can be found in Keepnews’s superlative treatment of Evans circa 1959. The album cover (*figure 2*) to *Everybody Digs Bill Evans* (Riverside 1959) is unique in that it consists entirely of text endorsing the artist and is “signed” by Miles Davis, George Shearing, Cannonball Adderley, and most surprisingly Ahmad Jamal himself.



(figure 2) *Everybody Digs Bill Evans* Riverside 1959, LP

The text reads: “I’ve sure learned a lot from Bill Evans. He played the piano the way it should be played” (Miles Davis). “Bill Evans is one of the most refreshing pianists I have heard in years” (George Shearing). “I think Bill Evans is one of the finest.” (Ahmad Jamal). “Bill Evans has rare originality and taste and the even rarer ability to make his conception of a number the definitive way to play it.” (Cannonball Adderley).

The liner opens by stating that the unusual cover of the album was designed to make completely clear that the still virtually unknown to the public pianist is already the object of a truly amazing degree of admiration and respect among some of the day’s most highly regarded Jazz musicians. Like many liner notes of the era, it mentions the crowded marketplace “in which it is difficult for the listener to avoid utter confusion, and all too easy for important talents to be lost someplace in the shuffle.” It concludes that the goal of the label is to arm Evans against the possibility of such a fate concluding, “In our enthusiasm for Bill, we at Riverside are merely part of an army. Not only are there the musicians (...) there are also the critics.”

According to Keepnews's notes on the follow up album, *Portraits in Jazz* (Riverside 1960), the listeners and critics had begun to catch up with him, and

Keepnews reflects back on the *Everybody Digs Bill Evans* cover:

Looking back on it, it now seems rather frighteningly dangerous to have pinned so extravagant a title on an LP by a comparative unknown. Actually the title was validly based on the fact that the album cover features strong pro-Evans comments (...)Nevertheless, we were surely leaving Bill wide open to all sorts of caustic remarks from clever-penned critics. But apparently the considerable talents of Evans overrode this danger: Although the album was extremely widely reviewed, not a single unfavorable reaction has come to light.

Perhaps a key comparison is that Jamal came to Epic as a commercially successful artist, whereas Evans was being touted as an important yet relatively unknown artist. Keepnews is making a case for a rising star. The audience of the Jamal and Evans liner notes are very different. The Jamal note is addressed to the "clever penned" critics who will be anticipated to pan the album upon its release. In contrast, the totality of the packaging of the Evans LP is addressed to the listening public, playing on the theme of why "everybody" (the critics and the musicians) believe that Evans is great.

Overall, in viewing liner note *responsa* and Jazz criticism of the era side by side, a constant discussion of parameters is seen in play; as a result, even though a direct stylistic comparison between Jamal and Evans could have been possible, the Jamal debate was about legitimacy and commercial success, whereas the Evans debate (like Mobley), was about critical versus commercial success.

The constant definition of parameters and limits is prevalent in many liners, and not just typified by one particular argument. Another parameter is the debate over the faddishness of Soul Jazz vs. the Blues and R&B as a type of traditionalism, and is typified by discussions regarding Cannonball Adderley. Although Adderley does not sound particularly commercial to the modern ear, by the mid-1960s he was clearly viewed so by many critics. Hentoff, for example, discusses Adderley's promise as a major soloist in his *Esquire* column (May, 1961) then sarcastically derides him by saying, "His problem now is to continue growing by trying continually challenging without disappointing the soul-buffs who made him prosperous and are disinclined to relieve him of his ministerial duties." As another example, LeBlanc quotes Ira Gitler as criticizing Adderley's constant repetitive phrases by saying, "If this is the road he is going to travel, he will only succeed in making money."

Interestingly, while Hentoff uses the term modern-traditionalism to refer to the "cooking" interpreters of the Parker/Gillespie, *Keepnews's* liners to Adderley's *Things Are Getting Better* (Riverside 1958) attempt to portray the Soul Jazz movement with a traditionalist argument. Speaking of Adderley's collaboration with Milt Jackson, *Keepnews* writes:

Bag's and Cannonball belong together for several reasons (...) Both are "modern traditionalists"; musicians with an awareness of Jazz roots and with, in both cases, a strong rhythmic sense and an emphasis on the beat as a basic part of their playing pattern. Above all, there is one other very fundamental meeting ground on which these two come together. Both are deservedly highly regarded practitioners of the blues: and it is the spirit, sometimes the specific form and always the soul of the blues that furnishes the prevailing mood for this album.

Likewise, Leonard Feather discusses Adderley's use of the Blues in his liner notes to *Somethin' Else* (Blue Note 1958), also addressing an *Ebony* article's complaints

alleging that “negroes are ashamed of the blues,”¹ viewing Adderley’s sophisticated interpretation of the blues as reflecting the roots of who he is:

The white author of the piece would doubtless be incapable, on hearing this Davis solo, of perceiving the porcelain-like delicacy of his approach to the blues. Certainly this is not the blue of a man born in New Orleans and raised among social conditions of Jim Crow squalor and poverty, musical conditions of two or three primitive chord changes; this is the blues of a man who has lived a little; who has seen the more sophisticated sides of like in midwestern and eastern cities, who adds to what he has known of hardship and discrimination the academic values that came with mind-broadening experience, in music schools and big bands and combos, in St. Louis and New York and Paris and Stockholm. This is the new, the deeper and broader blues of today; it is nonetheless blue, nonetheless convincing, for the experience and knowledge its creator brings to it. Far from being ashamed of the blues Miles is defiantly proud of his ability to show its true contemporary meaning.

Gitler uses a similar line of argument in his liners to Tina Brooks’ *True Blue* (Blue Note 1960) He argues that because the Big Band era is finished a valuable training ground for young artists is lost. He then asks where the young players are coming from and concludes that they’re coming from the towns and collegiate circles in increasing numbers, but then asks where they are getting the practical experience that is necessary to sustain the demands of playing in small groups. His conclusion is the R&B bands, which is the reason that “funk” has become such an important element of the music. He concludes saying that “it is not a type of commercialism, rather it's a commercial reality.” On the other hand, Gitler’s notes to McLean’s *Bluesnik* (Blue Note 1962) deride the commercialism of “soul Jazzers who use the blues as a gimmick.”

Del Shields offers *responsa* defending Lou Donaldson embracement of the blues as a type of traditionalism whose aim is to get Jazz back in touch with the listener:

¹ Wood, Berta. “Are Negroes Ashamed of the Blues?” *Ebony* 1957.

The past ten years has seen the Jazz world filled with anxious musicians experimenting with new sounds while peering over their shoulders at the critics, hoping for critical acceptance. Their musical message has been geared to the pseudo critics who have done everything possible to remove Jazz from its real roots. And in this craze to make jazz supposedly respectable, jazz was taken from the people.

(Lou Donaldson, *The Natural Soul*, 1962)

These are just a few examples of “crosstalk” between Jazz critics in the late 1950s and early 1960s that manifested itself in liner note *responsa* in regard to the parameters of the debate and whether blues and funk were a form of traditionalism, or simply commercial faddishness. Yet another debate over the establishment of parameters was that of the restless (presumably less mature) explorer versus the modern-traditionalist. A back to back comparison of McLean and Coltrane is particularly helpful in summarizing this discussion as McLean represented the modern side of modern-traditionalism, whereas Coltrane would eventually transcend modern-traditionalist debate itself and redefine the entire concept of the “mainstream” in Jazz overall.

As the parameters of Jazz were rapidly changing in the 1950s, adoption of the hard bop beat worked for some, whereas others opted to take the road of the “cookers.” In doing so, the latter would risk being doomed to the “new Bird status,” then (using Goldberg’s words) buried. Jackie McLean serves as an example of a young bebopper who had both the prestige and stigma of direct endorsement from Charlie Parker. His solution was embracing the modern side of the modern-traditionalist parameter, keeping a firm pulse on vanguard innovations of the era. In the liners to *A Fickle Sonance* (Blue Note 1961), Gitler states that “while McLean has made no concessions to any of the recent fads in Jazz, he has (...) kept his ears open, without radically altering his style.” Ira Gitler’s liners to *Capuchin Swing* (Blue Note

1960) quote Arthur Taylor as saying, “Talking about soul – That’s real soul, none of that imitation jive.”

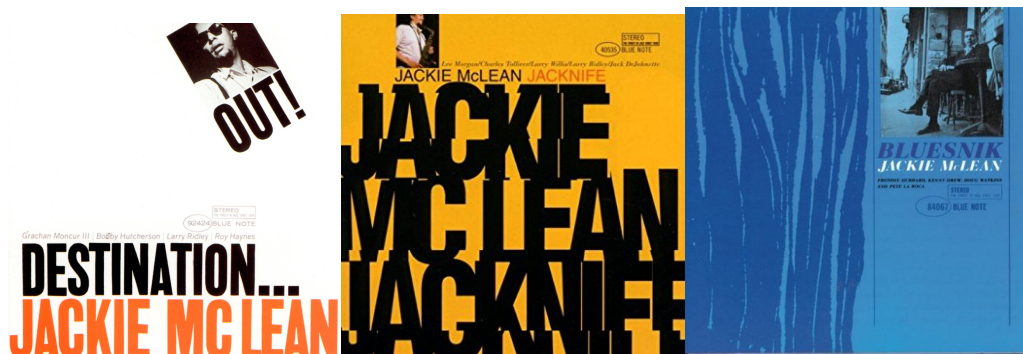
Concurrently, in embracing modernism critics would sometimes describe McLean’s sounds as harsh and angry. (This accusation was leveled against Coltrane as well.) Gitler’s liner notes on *Bluesnik* state how his playing was once described as “hurt, lonely and as a result angry” and acknowledge that this was once true but conclude, “Today he is still very much a hard swinger, but the anger has abated to a large degree.”

In turn, Hentoff’s McLean, is a modern-traditionalist who learned from Bud Powell, but is a product of the next generation. In *Action* (Blue Note 1964), McLean’s approach is seen as having “intriguing characteristics as he continues to explore new directions,” while noting that he is “clearly rooted in the fundamentals of modern Jazz.” In *Makin’ The Changes* (Blue Note 1957) the reader is told of McLean’s after school tutelage from Bud Powell. McLean explains that Powell taught him a lot about playing by ear, but that he was only 17 and too young to fully understand everything he was being taught.

Gitler’s liner notes also take a similar line of argument, but tie McLean’s mentorship into the present:

Currently he is concerned as most Jazzmen are doomed to be with the fight to stay as modern as I can be, and even more so. Jazz has really taken a change in the past few years, especially because of Coltrane, and Coltrane comes through Monk. “I go to Monk’s house quite often, and he’s helping me. He’ll play a chord, and then I’ll make a run through that chord. Monk will show me the other possibilities I overlooked.”

From the modern-traditionalist parameter, McLean’s associations with Powell as well as Monk make a strong argument that his sound meets the criteria of being modern as well as traditionally grounded. First, he is demonstrated to be a protege of the elders, then he is seen as being under the guidance of Monk; however, the purpose of studying with Monk is not to sound like Monk, it is to dig down deeper into the concept of Coltrane. It is interesting to note that many of his album covers and titles seemed to emphasize the outside and “beat” nature of his music (figure 3):



(figure 3) Assorted Jackie McLean Blue Note Covers

As demonstrated, it was relatively easy to argue that McLean was a searcher with firm roots in the tradition and an eye on the future. Initially, the same type of approach was taken with Coltrane, but whereas McLean was seen as being “rooted in the fundamentals of Modern Jazz,” Coltrane would eventually challenge the parameters of the mainstream, hence over time the liner note *responsa* shifts from trying to place him into the mainstream to defining him in his own terms. This shift of parameter becomes most evident when Joe Goldberg’s liners to *Coltrane Plays The Blues* (Atlantic 1962) are compared to Gleason’s treatment of *Coltrane’s Sound* (Atlantic 1964).

The liners to *Coltrane Plays The Blues* begin by reminding the reader of Coltrane’s days playing with Miles Davis, then mentioning how when Coltrane

played club he would play familiar tunes like *My Favorite Things* and *Greensleeves*. Taking his argument a step further, Coltrane is tied into the R&B and blues tradition noting that his last set would start at 2:00 in the morning, whereupon he would usually switch to tenor, and play a lot of blues. Goldberg notes that at these times Coltrane's affinity with rhythm-and-blues players in the local clubs across the country would be evident in the intensity and the similarity of feeling. This, he argues is where the roots for some of his occasional "honking" and "screeching" come from, not the angry *avant-garde*.

Listeners are also reminded how when Coltrane played with Miles the same tumultuous outpouring of notes that he is currently criticized for playing served as a "brilliant contrast to the sparse, classic styles of the leaders." The note concludes by saying that despite the "*avant-garde* controversy" raging around him, Coltrane is part of the same legacy that includes Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Monk, Mingus and the MJQ, "all who like him are modernists".

It is interesting; however, to note the abstract-modernist cover art, which almost runs paradoxical to the title of the album (figure 4):



(figure 4) John Coltrane, *Coltrane Plays The Blues*, Atlantic, 1961

In contrast to Goldberg's modern-traditionalist Coltrane, Gleason's Coltrane is presented as a sympathetic, but lonely searcher/anti-hero. Gleason's liner notes to *Coltrane's Sound* (Atlantic 1964, recorded in 1961), for example, discuss the burden of Coltrane:

When Ernest Hemingway died, Nelson Algren in a moving tribute from one great novelist to another assessed Hemingway's importance saying "No American writer since Walt Whitman has assumed such risks in forging a style... they were the kind of chances by which, should they fall, the taker falls alone; yet should they succeed, succeed for everyone. That is where I stand—a perfect description of precisely what is going on with the tenor saxophonist John Coltrane.

Gleason then goes on to list many of the common criticisms made against Coltrane, but concludes that Coltrane's aim is to "challenge the form of tradition while remaining loyal to its essence." He likens his endeavor to those of misunderstood counter cultural icons, such as Joseph Heller, Ken Kesey, Lenny Bruce, who are trying to change the world. He concludes with a poignant observation of Jazz musicians in general:

They perform this improvisation without the chance of revision, without the knowledge beforehand that what comes out may be good or may be bad; it depends. But in any case they can't change it, it must rest where it is and be judged as it came out. In the process of this striving, a creative jazzman such as John Coltrane may very well annoy and antagonize the same way as Joyce and Stravinsky and Bartok, in their times, have annoyed and antagonized.

With the eventual acceptance of Coltrane as the new norm, and Miles Davis's eventual abandonment of the modern-traditional ethos in favor of new types of experimental and electric Jazz, the critics would be left having to redefine what constituted the parameters of mainstream Jazz. Interestingly, by the late 1960s, liner notes were no longer a given on the back cover of Jazz albums. Sometimes they appeared in an abbreviated form, sometimes they did not appear at all. On an episode

of *Jazz Casual* featuring The John Coltrane Quartet, Miles Davis was quoted by Ralph Gleason as saying that albums should not have liner notes, to which Gleason added, "I endorse the position, even when I write them." (*Jazz Casual*, 1962)

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