un Ra’s recent visit to
Toronto has pushed me to think again about the breakdown of the classical
avant-garde and the sometimes confusing and unfortunate uses of the term
“postmodernism,” or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” In more specific
terms, whether we are talking about the novel or about music, why is it that
artists cannot simply continue to write and produce new music? Or, to put it another
way, why do some artists feel that they cannot continue to produce such works,
and why are others able to continue to reproduce and over again the same state-formulaic
works.

In the case of jazz since the second
world war, and in a simplifying
economy, the establishment of a
certain traditional awareness, which
today sounds like a “classical” avant
garde, is usually associated with the
names of Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman,
and John Coltrane. In that music,
precision and improvisation came to the
front (in the increasingly freer interpretations
of the classics, until) much jazz
playing cut itself free from any relation
to recognizable standards, passing from
interpretation through quotation to
sampling which the French refer to as
“écriture”: a stream of consciousness
which arises not from consciousness,
but from some potentially endless chain
of signifiers.

In contrast to such free flowing “écriture”,
there have been instances too of more
“constructive” styles, an especially extreme form of reinterpretation
of standards — as in much of the
work of Anthony Braxton. In opposition
to an avant-garde like that of the
experimental writing of the Tel Quel
group in France (particularly Philippe
Sollers), there was an important
political dimension to the jazz of
Coltrane and his followers, for these
artists were black, and the violent
rejection of tune and melody was
readily and increasingly associated
with black militancy in the 60s and 70s
(best exemplified by Archie Shepp).
But this was, finally, a formal or content-
free politics, then, which is why I made
the analogy with Tel Quel. For despite
the revolutionary claims of Tel Quel
during the 1960s, this was a politics
with no real or final political conse-
quences (as opposed to the Surrealists
— although I am in no way reducing
the struggles of blacks in this US with
the angst of some Partisan intellectuals
who, in the words of one critic, set out
for China only to find themselves on
the beach in California.

So what do we have? On the one hand,
an ongoing mainstream jazz tradition
(the playing of Dexter Gordon in the
Tavernier film, Round Midnight) with
its part of nostalgia (listeners whose
taste stopped changing at a particular
point), as in its citizens and its
corestream which continues to grow
and evolve, but whose bailiffs and
melodies are nonetheless recognizable
as such and whose survival could be
equated to that of the traditional novel.
And, on the other, an avant-garde
which keeps developing into more and
more abstraction and rigor (Braxton,
Cecil Taylor, or splitting off and
overlapping with more popular forms
(Miles Davis’s interest in rock — like
Bob Dylan’s colored switch from
acoustic to electric so many years ago).
This was the situation until recently,
and the equivalent would be fiction
writing in France where traditional
fictive (not to mention genre pure)
like science fiction, mystery, harlequin,
photography, etc.) continued to be
produced, but where “serious” writers
seemed locked into the confines of the
“nouveau roman”.

Let’s return to the Sun Ra concert.
Imagine fifteen black jazz musicians on
stage, dressed in something between
African traditional dress and Shriners’
costumes. But those musicians were
from Philadelphia, while the music
played had little to do with con-
temporary African music (King Sunny
Ade, Fela Kuti). Sun Ra and his “Ark-
esta” is a blend of pot-on and various
jazz traditions which has been around
for some time, but it is an interesting
example of a new aesthetics beyond
the impace of the traditional avant
garde (as outlined using the New York
and Paris art scenes in Gay Scarpato’s
recent Improvised), one which can
immediately be distinguished from the
more avant-garde use of African ideas
and black music traditions by a group
like the Chicago Art Ensemble.

The music included some instances of
free jazz, but hummed up (the players
standing on their chairs to play solos),
some classics sung by different mem-
bers of the band, and often in very modern
readings. But how do we — a white man
nervous perhaps about “correct”
politics — react to a group of cowed
blacks hamming it up in ways which
explicitly recall the racist stereotypes
of twenty or thirty years ago? How do we —
an audience with certain preconcep-
tions about the separateness of serious
jazz and jokes and bad taste — react to
some of Sun Ra’s original tunes like my
favorite, “This earth is not my
home”.

Or his whole scathing
outspoken social
complaint — to the
music. There are some
readings of the clarinet
solo in both tradition
and most of all, it’s the
cup of the first set
off stage and the
chanting over and on
of “Shining on Pho-
hanceous and east”
of their own vision of
North? And this
That the tradition has
reached a certain
breakdown of bari-
historical breakdown; and
increasing, and the
kinds of music “po-
rescues the music has
stage of modernism
begs the question of
explaining what is
makes the relative time
which Sun Ra is not
different and “acceptable
and perhaps even ”
Barthes’s distinction
posed to writing some
even more confusing.
The first reason why
cannot continue to be
old standards, to ask
with which I began,
everything disdained of
by Barthes in his W
self-written as a pre-
ise Literature”) The
that the artist chose
These forms are al-
various socially
they have a history,
whatever his or her
not come to this ma-
ents, these sound
materials. To choose
same old classics is
not to know, to
status quo. As the
repeated, the style of
lates a layer of inter-
meaning which rem-
butes those new int
historically occurrence
pushing all the artist:
the questions about
traditions, or about the
the musician is inac-
communication of
pre-packaged answers
covered whatever dis-
the artist always in
our modernity, the p
condition if you pref
Or his whole science fictional band from outer space schtick? This is not a complaint — to the contrary. I love the music. There are some wonderful readings of the classics, some great solos in both traditional and free veins, and most of all, it’s a lot of fun, as at the end of the first set when they paraded off stage and through the audience singing over and over again the verses of “Standing on Park Avenue,” a humorous and enthusiastic “swirling out” of their own visit to the push white North? And this is I suppose the point. That the traditional avant-garde has reached a certain impasse. That the breakdown of barriers, genres, forms, historical breaks and divisions is increasing; and that to label those new kinds of music “post-modern” recognizes that music has moved beyond the stage of modernism even as it evades or begs the question of describing and explaining what is happening; what makes the relative traditionalism with which Sun Ra interprets a clastic different and “acceptable” (“readable” and perhaps even “veritable”) to use Barthes’s distinction in SZ, as opposed to writing such music today, or even playing the standards “straight.”

The first reason why many artists cannot continue to churn out the same old standards, to answer the question with which I began, lies with the artist’s own dilemma and choice, (spelled out by Barthes in his Writing Degree Zero, itself written, as a gloss on Saussure’s What is Literature?) The language, the form that the artist chooses is not neutral. Those forms are already caught up in various socially inscribed meanings; they have a history, and the artist — whatever his or her intentions — does not come to this material, these instruments, those sounds, as innocent raw materials. To choose to simply redo the same old classics is to choose not to see, not to know, to acquiesce to the status quo. As the music is played and repeated, the style or approach accumulates a layer of interpretation and meaning which remains, and which buries those new intentions under their historically accumulated meanings, pushing all the artist’s anger and hope, the questions about music and its traditions, or about the world in which the musician is inscribed, towards commodification and cliché, towards pre-packaged answers which erase and conceal whatever disturbing questions the artist originally intended. This is our modernity, the post-modern condition if you prefer, a moment for which John Schaefer’s New Sounds provides not an analysis but a discography: the ever widening circles of exploration (the limits of traditional instruments, like playing the piano directly on the strings; other non-western musical traditions etc.), as well as a quickening pace of cannibalizing and quoting, and an increasing disregard for seriousness. All this could be seen and heard on stage at the Disc; all this should be understood, even if I have only begun to understand or explain it, as an attempt to resolve the impasse into which the classical avant-garde finds itself.

To answer and push deeper these questions, one does not have to go to New York. A few weeks spent following Toronto’s own various jazz scenes, where George’s and The Music Gallery might stand in, retrospectively (and only some of the time), for the mainstream and the classical avant-garde: and this other, alternate track — given so much play by CKLN, our “alternate” radio station — may be seen in a number of Toronto bands, from the easy hippie pose and antics of the Shuffle Demons through Gothic City, Tina Mee, Paul Craig Orchestra, Not King Fudge or White Noise. All this would provide more than enough raw material for a more complete and thorough study of jazz than the quick sketch I have made here.

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