

The Crusty Old Boys/Girls

Why listening to the oldest stuff may help inform the newest stuff.

An article by:

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As time goes on, my interests in traditional music continue to evolve (not "progress", just change). Somebody told me years ago "if you want to sound like Kevin Burke, don't spend much time listening to Kevin Burke. Listen to the people he listened to---that's the only way you're going to get his sound: by going through the process he went through to arrive at that sound." What I infer from this is the idea that arriving at a "sound" is a process. You can't imitate the final result with the same authority if you haven't been through the process that led to that result.

I don't think this means that everyone should listen to, or try to play, the styles as they were played a hundred years ago (though I do think you can learn an awful lot about the music by going back as far as recordings will let us). But I think that if you want to play in the style of influential players, you can't just imitate what they do, because you'll never be able to do it as well as they do. What you can do is go to the sources they did, work hard with those sources, and thus have a prayer of finding a way into the music that's as solid as those players who've inspired you.

By this I don't mean to argue that "old stuff" is better than "new stuff"; having played more different kinds of "new stuff" as well as "old stuff" than you can shake a stick at, I don't really care whether something is "new" or "old." I am interested in how the music got to where it has, and in how the players I admire so much got to sound the way they do. But something new is not something inherently better than something old, in my book. Or vice versa.

Similarly, I don't much care what is or isn't "traditional." I'm a jazz musician, and almost every jazz musician of any note has gotten shit for not "respecting" the tradition, even though 'most every jazz player of note has studied and built upon what came before. People who argue the merits of something based on its "traditionality" or its "newness" are often not engaging directly with the music, but with ideas about the music.

So debates over the question don't really interest me; they're inevitable, ubiquitous, and do not persuade me of their significance. If a critic, amateur or professional, says what I do is "traditional" and therefore good, or "not traditional" and therefore bad, or vice versa, it doesn't

mean anything. It's words expressing subjective opinion, that's all.

But various arguments about "tradition" and its relevance to music did once provoke me to an attempt to articulate some of the reasons why I might like and care for some "new stuff"-John Coltrane, the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Moving Hearts, Fairport Convention, Dervish, Hassan Hakmoun, etc., etc.,-and not care for other "new stuff." I've concluded this has something to do with said new stuff's relationship to musical traditions.

As a player, I'm interested in three things:

1) Artistic Expression.

Particularly the unique artistic expression which each permutation of roots music makes its own. One kind of roots music doesn't sound like another, and for my money, that's part of the individual styles' great joy.

2) Virtuosity.

I'm trying to be the best possible player I can be. I'm interested in learning from and listening to the best players, singers, and writers there are. Why listen to half-assed stuff, if the cream is also out there? That doesn't make me "conservative" rather than "innovative"; it just means I'm interested in the roots of things. James Kelly still listens to Michael Coleman. Branford Marsalis still listens to Louis Armstrong. That doesn't make them "conservative." V

3) Human content.

Music is made by people in specific circumstances in order to do specific things. That's one of the reasons I love it: not only for its musical impact but also for its human content, its ability to bring me closer to other human beings' experiences. Therefore, I operate from a conviction that learning to play the music right helps me understand the people who originated it. Conversely, understand why the contexts, histories, and biographies that shaped the "old stuff" help me, in my subjective experience, to play it better.

In my own listening and playing experience, the "new stuff" that I love the most, and that for me most successfully meets the above three criteria, is that new stuff which is made by people with strong roots in traditions. It's EASY to do "new stuff" if you don't first try to learn to play the "old stuff"; shit, you don't have any choice but to play "new stuff," because you CAN'T play the old stuff. But in the above-cited cases, who represent only a fraction of the "new stuff" people I dig, in every example most or all of the players are hard-core roots players as well, who are playing "new stuff" because they CHOOSE to, not because they have no choice in the matter.

Coltrane learned bebop first, before he went to playing free jazz; John McLaughlin was a bitchin' straightahead jazz player before he went to playing fusion; Davey Spillane, Donal Lunny, and Christy Moore (front men for original Moving Hearts) were all in their own ways deeply rooted in the traditions of dance tunes or traditional song; Sandy Denny, Dave Swarbrick, and Richard Thompson of Fairport were all immersed in English and Scots traditional music, song especially; Shane Mitchell, Shane McAleer, and Liam Kelly were all killer traditional players in the most

traditional settings before they became the supergroup Dervish; Hassan Hakmoun spent his whole life playing Gnawa music in traditional healing services before he ever put together his "Gnawa psychedelic" band.

I really love the "new stuff" these people play, and I suspect that one of the reasons I love the new stuff is because it's rooted in the "old stuff." There's a certain kind of authority, a way of playing with conviction, that I hear most clearly in those people who can play the shit out of the "old stuff," and bring deep insight from that experience into their version of the "new stuff."

Hell, even the Pogues had to recruit a "real" traditional musician, Terry Woods, before they started jerking around with the pub songs. And Roger Landes, to cite an example close to home, is a balls-to-the-wall traditional player on the most traditional Irish instrument (pipes), as well as an innovator on the bouzouki and the digital editor.

Everybody should play what they want. Everybody should study, or not study, and root themselves, or not root themselves, in what they want. Everybody has been lambasted or praised by nutball critics who think that judging the faux-objective "integrity" or "traditionality" or "innovation" or "progressivism" of their music somehow validates or invalidates it.

None of those comments really mean anything. You play the music or you don't. You listen to the music or you don't. You study, teach, and learn the music, or don't.

In my book, and for my purposes, that's all.