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Victoriaville
Eric Lewis

EXTRAIT (texte anglaise - English text)

What Price Criticism? Bill Dixon at Victoriaville

Bill Dixon, enters, sits down, and begins. The audience, having waited expectantly, slowly settles. At first what the musician produces is familiar, and the audience relaxes, clearly enjoying themselves. Then, at a moment that is difficult to pinpoint, things change radically. One is no longer in familiar territory. The audience has been caught off guard. They are confused. What they now hear throws into question what they have already heard. Some take offense, many stop listening. In the end the musician returns, with humor, to familiar ground, and many are relieved. Afterwards the performance provokes heated debate. Many try to fit what they heard into a conceptual schema that they are familiar with. Others dismiss the performance as an example of belligerentness, or, even worse, defensiveness brought on by declining chops. Some pause for reflection, realizing that a performance that forces one to radically reexamine ones preconceptions requires time for introspective analysis.

This may describe an experience familiar to many who attend performances of improvised music, and The Festival International de Musique Actuelle du Victoriaville has no shortage of such music. However the above describes not Bill Dixon's brilliant and thought provoking performance with Cecil Taylor and Tony Oxley, but his press conference with some 20 odd members of the (so-called) Jazz Press. It was, I think, the most interesting "performance" of the festival, one which spoke most directly to issues central to the production of music, particularly music in the Afrological tradition, and one the response to which points most clearly to problems, old problems, which still face all who are concerned with such artistic practices. The fact that these problems, long ago aired, are still not recognized or understood by those who purport to understand sympathetically such music is a travesty. Mr. Dixon's two performances, the press conference, and his contribution to the trio that evening, cannot be separated any more than his lived experiences can be cleaved from his art, and the two mirror each other in a manner both profound and, for those willing to make the effort, enlightening. At the press conference Mr. Dixon prepared the so-called jazz intelligencia for his evening performance, how many heeded, or understood, the message we must wait to see.

Mr. Dixon carefully crafted his press presentation, like an improvised solo—riffing on old themes and signifying on commonly used tropes. For Bill Dixon and many of his fellow afrological artists, music making is for a purpose, and the understanding and appreciation of such music requires a sympathetic enquiry into this purpose. Moreover, the purpose of music making is not merely the production of autonomous sound structures, but is integrated in complex ways into the lived experiences, thoughts, feelings, interests, loves and hates of the music maker. In opposition to the dominant trend in contemporary European aesthetics, intentions of the artists must be considered.

Mr. Dixon's suggestion that enthusiasts of his music should demand the release of his 1992 duo with Cecil Taylor elicited laughter from the collected group of "those in the know". Yet why such laughter? Mr. Dixon believes, quite rightly, that such duo performances would have been heard had they been by white musicians of similar stature working within a European art-music tradition. The duos should be released so they can "grace the ears of a generous, questing, public." Here we have a subtle use of a signifying trope. For as Mr. Dixon goes on to make clear, he does not believe that the assembled jazz press is either generous, or questing. That he here mentions the public lulled the assembled press into thinking that they cannot be Bill's target, and so the resultant laughter. But of course the trap has been laid, and the press has no idea (yet) that they are the prey. Bill is playing the role of the monkey to the press as lion as found in the signifying tales (which go back to ancient Fon and Yoruba oral traditions) that play such an important role in Afro-American literary traditions.

One might think that recognition of the many shortcomings of music journalists should hardly merit discussion, let alone diatribe. Yet given the long prevalent unequal power distribution within western

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society, where someone like Bill Dixon is multiplied cursed—for being black, for being an artist, for being an avant garde artist, and for demanding the respect and consideration such art deserves-- the power both invested in the (overwhelmingly) white press becomes the locus of injustices both social, political and aesthetic. For it is the press who can make or break one's career; insist on considering so-called jazz apart from serious music; almost universally refuse (and are usually unable) to employ any critical theory; and are content to categorize some of the most important artistic and cultural artifacts of the 20th century like so many used kitchen appliances ("well lets see, there are a lot of duo's at Victoriaville this year", "Why no bass tonight?", "Is this model self-cleaning?").

Bill's request of the critics to attempt to understand his music has long fallen on deaf ears. It was almost comical (were it not so dangerous to the development and acceptance of creative music) to hear Bill asked, "why just the three of you, why no bass players?", as if the questioner was asking of a new car why it lacks remote door locks. Bill immediately picked up on the inanity and ignorance of the question, commenting, "JUST the three of us — the pejorative!"

This demand on the part of (so-called) jazz musicians for understanding of their music is not a product of a recent realization on the part of afro-American creative musicians of the power of criticism, nor is it (as many think) the product of radical black politics of the sixties. In 1937 the fanzine *Metronome* published an article entitled "Do Critics Really Know What It's All About?" Here the saxophonist Benny Carter asked for improved critical standards, and for "a more objective viewpoint in the criticism of dance music," which would consider what the musicians were trying to accomplish. Two years later, in *Down Beat*, Duke Ellington claimed that criticism rarely addresses the merits of music, but merely reflects the ideological prejudices and financial interests of the critics. None of this would perhaps matter were it not for the perverse power that the press had, and still has, to make or break a musician's career, and to promote certain musical styles at the expense of others.

Bill, signifying on the intent behind the "Why no bass?" question, claimed, in a thought worthy of repeated consideration, that in much improvisational music one can hear the artist's negotiation of the economically driven situation, where the musicians in effect make things into how they wish they in fact were, "this is the acme, the highpoint of this music". Here the message is double; first, that much of the creative music he and others are involved in is, in effect, incomplete, small projects often hastily conceived, which would be larger projects (both in terms of the number of artists involved, the time and effort involved, and the aesthetic vision embraced) were the resources made available. "We don't talk about orchestras in THIS music, for whatever reason." Second, that improvised music is not, as it is commonly taken to be (both by the press and still by many theorists) impulsive, spontaneous, or purely instinctual, "as if no thought or nothing went into it, you know, making it up as you go along, that's absolutely not true." This long held myth of improvisation is a direct manifestation of the romantic/racist conception of the African artist as a being of pure instinct, held in opposition to the European artist, whose creative acts are intentional and rational. It is such thinking that consigns afrological art to the dust heap of popular art, and then goes on to criticize it as such. This is cultural murder of the most profound sort, producing such penetrating questions as "why no bass?"

Bill immediately moved on to a critique of the standards of criticism, and the harm that the high art — low art division continues to inflict upon artists. "There have been incredible changes in this music, I don't think that the people who write about it do enough to alert people [to this]. Is it an art form, or is it entertainment, is it music, or is it jazz, is it music, or is it improvised music — you understand?" The collected press still assumed it was OTHER journalists Bill was criticizing, for it cannot be them, they like his music! This reaction on the part of the assembled press makes clear the point of Benny Carter; critics think their work is done by merely claiming whether or not they like a work or artist. However this is actually of no interest. Yet if the seal of approval of a critic is not what is important, what is the role of criticism? It is this question that Bill then turned to.

"You have a responsibility, you have to elevate the level of the writing ... there is nothing [in what you write] that tells you WHY this musician does this music, what the musician is interested in besides music. Who cares how many records you make, you must ask why certain things have happened." With these comments Bill has introduced a number of pressing issues. First he suggests that critics do not report what it is that people need to know in order to better understand the music. At the same time he recognizes the power that the press has to mould public opinion, "they trust you." Yet he tells us more here, for he claims that what it is necessary to understand is the function of music making, if one is to understand, and so appreciate, the music. One must know why a musician engages in the creative acts that they do, and knowing this in turn requires knowledge of their extra-musical interests and concerns. Here Bill places himself squarely within a tradition that sees Afrological music making as essentially purposeful, that is to say, as a creative practice that is not just about the creation of an autonomous art work. By claiming that afrological music cannot be sympathetically analyzed by means of the formalist aesthetics that have been used with European (so called) art music, he demonstrates the need for an alternative aesthetic theory for coming to grips with afrological artworks. We are starting to see, in the writings of scholars such as Henry Gates Jr. and George Lewis, the skeletal outlines of a new aesthetic theory that takes Afrological artworks as its subject.

By signaling the importance of asking why "certain things happened" Bill alludes, however obliquely, to the socio-economic conditions under which afrological art is often produced. Why could not Mingus sustain a big band? Why have so many great Afro-American artists had to leave the U.S.? Why are their artworks, when made available to the public at all, shown in marginalized venues, under conditions European white artists would never put up with (imagine the Julliard String Quartet touring low-dive noisy bars with it always an open question as to whether their promised payment would materialize)? The jazz critic has an obligation to reveal and analyze factors such as this. When a recording or concert is criticized for appearing to be under rehearsed, or lacking a bass player, why this may be the case is what may be of importance, not the fact itself. Producing art under the conditions that presently exist (and have existed as long as the music has) forces one to improvise, improvisation is as much a social/political practice as it is an artistic one.

Critics themselves have been, and continue to be, one of the hurdles black artists must navigate. The power of criticism, particularly when addressing economically marginalized art forms, is so great that it, as opposed to the aesthetic vision of the artists, often sets the artistic agenda. "I want it my own way, I don't want you to tell me how to play the horn, and I don't want you to call my music something, and for me to call it something else, is that unreasonable?" This de facto interference into the creative process by critics and criticism, bad enough as it is, is directed most destructively at afrological artists. As Bill went on to report (now to a silent and uneasy audience) he is accused of being a militant simply for demanding artistic freedom and minimum standards of understanding from critics. "Elliot Carter says, 'I want it played this way', [and the response from critics is] 'listen to the precision, the dedication of this guy.'" The double standard here is particularly glaring, and does concrete harm to Bill and other like-minded artists.

At this point the collected jazz press, finally realizing that they were Bill's true prey, that they have been signified on, tried to defend itself. In response to Bill's report of a bad review of the book *Dixonia* in *Coda*, the main Canadian jazz magazine, and the lack of reader response to the review, Mark Miller, the most established member of the Canadian jazz press, attempted a rebuttal, "But *Coda* doesn't publish readers letters." It is hard to imagine a response that better manifests the critic's inability to comprehend the social/political aspects of their actions. This is akin to the chairman of Augusta's venerable golf club responding to a complaint by an African American denied the right to play golf there with, "But we simply do not allow black members." It is *Coda*'s policy that itself perpetuates the agenda setting power of the critic, by not allowing informed readers to question the proclamations of the press. Bill hammered this point home, "There is a difference between a bad review and an uninformed review...review means look at again, it has nothing to do with endorsing, it has to do with informing a readership. *Coda*'s policy should have been questioned by interested, informed creative writers."

The collected press attempted a parley, "You seem to be saying that we have to like your work, no matter what," exclaimed one of the sages present. Bill roared back, "No, I am saying that you should understand what my work is about before you decide whether you like it, and your liking it has nothing to do with it, your public wants to know THAT I have done it. I do not know anyone who does a work that they want someone to like overtly, that's not why I do what I do. Why do I do music, that's what they want to know about. It isn't that you should endorse what I do, but you should try to inform your readership what it is that I do."

Soon the press conference ended, with Bill summing up, "I am not speaking down to anyone, and I am not putting anyone down." This truth is also a classic signifying trope, since he has argued that the critic both speaks down to their readers, and puts down artists. With this comment Bill's solo, his improvisation, his navigation of the situation, the place, the audience, their responses and questions, comes full circle, returning to the theme it began with. Bill's initial signify trope, that an unreleased duo of him and Cecil Taylor should be allowed to "grace the ears of a generous, questing, public", is now neatly book ended with his self-referential claims about speaking down and putting down. The difference is that the first trope was met with laughter, the second with an uneasy silence.

This performance was in many ways a prelude to the evening's concert. In performance with the English percussionist Tony Oxley and Cecil Taylor, Bill produced tightly squeezed, carefully controlled microtonal lines, often with digital delay. These lines evoked the birth of a language, as if Bill was investigating the relationship between sound, music, and meaning, a subject with which Cecil has long been concerned. Bill's contribution to this group experiment was startling, causing me to rethink the many points of contact between music, meaningful expression, and language. At the same time Bill's often long drawn out tones contrasted brilliantly with the percussive nature of both Cecil's piano and Tony's kit. Bill's playing was invigorating, refreshing, thought provoking, and of course, dammed by the assembled critics, who seemed almost unanimous in their opinion that he had lost his chops, this being their explanation of his "morning tirade."

Bill's highly controlled delay enhanced lines evoked the song of whales. Many who listen to whale song experience the vertigo which follows from recognizing their song as meaningful, but with inaccessible meaning. It is as if the Rosetta stone could sing! This is an inversion of the standard aesthetic experience. Instead of trying to make sense out of the literally senseless, one is faced with the apparent

senselessness of that which one knows is redolent with meaning. One cannot but think that Bill's evocation of the whale and its song was purposeful, for the whale, apart from engaging in acts of communication via song, has been hunted to the brink of extinction, being at the total mercy of man. As man has almost destroyed the whale through a failure of empathetic understanding, so too has criticism marginalized and nearly destroyed creative music. Victoriaville is like one of those all too few nature preserves, where the whales can sing, just out of reach of the whaler's harpoons. Cecil and Tony did not hunt Bill, but engaged in song with him, and so the three presented to all an example of criticism at its finest, where those involved come to a greater understanding of the artistic practices of others and themselves. Understanding must precede aesthetic judgment, and once understanding has been achieved, the aesthetic judgment is like the missing bass player, whose presence can still be felt even in its absence.

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