

Mark Kusanovich, University of the Pacific

"Oh, she was just seventeen and you know what I mean;
And the way she looked was way beyond compare.
So how could I dance with another
When I saw her standing there."

Lyrics like this exemplify today's popular music. The authors of this piece are the Beatles, but the specific artists don't matter. It could be the Animals, the Searchers, Herman's Hermits, the Zombies, the Hullabaloes -- makes no difference. Well I suggest that this is a sensory form and not an art form. It is degrading to our music, to our youth, and ultimately to America and its culture. Today I come to the defense of an uplifting, not a corrupting, art form. A form that displays something today's so-called "music" cannot and does not possess: creativity, ingenuity, and yes, if you will, maturity. An art form that has meaning, reason, and offers hope for society.

It all began at the turn of the century. It started in a place called Louisiana, specifically in New Orleans. When or how no one knows, but that's not important. The important thing is that it's alive and growing today. What began on Basin Street is today known by all. What evolved out of conflict and discord yesterday, today revolves around harmony and truth. I speak of Jazz.

Jazz -- a word -- a very big word with many meanings. It covers a multitude of sounds all the way from the earliest blues to Dixieland bands to boogie woogie to coll., bop to mambo. It implies different things to many different people. It suggests disagreement, red beans and rice. Speakeasies of the "Roaring Twenties." Musicians playing in the haze of a smoke-filled room. Actually, it may be all and none of these.

Jazz really means creative imagination, individual expression, improvisation. Now you might be thinking that it has been played only in nightclubs and speak-easies. Then I would say to you that even more significantly, it has been played in Carnegie Hall, on the concert stage, in remote corners of the world, and even in places of religious worship.

It is simple -- easy to understand without having a course in music appreciation.

It is broad -- broad enough to suit any musical taste.

It is demanding -- so demanding that it would tax the ability of the world's greatest musicians.

It is colorful -- a fantasia of Rhapsody in Blue, Deep Purple, Mood Indigo. Perhaps more interesting, modern scholars even maintain that it is the only true American art form.

And yet, can you ever recall it being found on the front page of your hometown newspaper? No, I don't think you can. You see, Jazz is not part of the political scene. It is excluded from most community activities. No one writes orations on Jazz -- that is, almost no one.

So why do I find it important? In these days of national and international tensions, when most orators devote their time to the issues of world peace, Viet Nam, juvenile delinquency, and of course unemployment -- why do I find it necessary to devote ten minutes to a discussion of a musical art form?

I suggest that the answer can be found in the analogy that Jazz is a mirror, a modern mirror held up to the changing times. Today's jazz is different from last week's jazz. If it were not so -- it would not be jazz.

For instance, in the performance of classical music, the musicians strive for a set, pre-determined rhythm. They play the expected, established, the conventional. Jazz is exactly the opposite. It is a product of the instantaneous. It is built on belief of the present. It is always new, alive and changing. It is as modern as this very day. Let me illustrate:

It was the spirit of Jazz that motivated a young American participating in the English game of rugby to introduce the game of football, by disobeying the rules and picking up the ball and running with it.

It was the spirit of Jazz, this universal and compelling disdain of convention that influenced a young Negro professor that peanuts and sweet potatoes could be grown alongside "King Cotton" in the deep south.

It was the spirit of Jazz that led a tall ugly man to strike off the yoke of slavery and decree freedom for Uncle Tom.

Composer Lou Brown once wrote that jazz began:

"From a whipporwhill high on a hill, they took a blue note.
And pushed it through a horn until it was born into a new note."

A new note ... A new idea. Here is the most evident and most vivid exemplification of the spirit of jazz -- and the birth of our country. Our founding fathers, from somewhere high on a unique hill of ideals, heard what would later turn out to be a red, white, and blue note. They then pushed it through the mental and physical process until it was born into a new way of life. These men broke away from established convention. They built anew. They struck a new note and converted it into a divine human chord.

This is why jazz is important. This is why jazz is much more than a sensory art form or loud music. Jazz is a symbol -- of everything that has made man great. Can today's popular music make such a claim?

In the final analysis, then, jazz goes on finding new paths, sometimes reviving old styles or patterns, but in either case, looking for freshness. In simple and profound words, Leonard Bernstein pointed out this spirit and real meaning of the upgrading and real art form: "Jazz is a fresh, vital art in the present tense, with a solid past and an exciting future."