

Is it Jazz? Is it Rock? Should I care?

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There seems to be a growing feeling that in today's musical environment that the words "jazz" and "rock", along with the other creaking musical nomenclature of the mid-20th century—"rhythm section", "gig" (a one-night engagement), "charts" (the written music) and so on—are not only meaningless, but also patently misleading. The question now, surely, is not "Is it rock?" or "Is it jazz?", but "Is it alive? Is it dead? Is it Memorex?"

Next time you are listening to something, ask yourself a couple of questions. Were any human beings involved in the making of this musical endeavour? If so, were they in the same place at the same time, and thus able to adjust their performances in accordance with what they were hearing from someone else in the room? Was it a recording of their performance, or was it a recording of their performance as "source material" for later manipulation, otherwise known as post-production? If human beings interacted musically on some basis in real time, and the recording of that event is, broadly speaking, deemed to be the main point of the exercise, let us, for the sake of argument, describe the resulting music as "performance-based".

This could be distinguished from another kind of music whose essential characteristics tend to be "computer-based", in which the sound sources are predominantly pre-recorded samples, in which, if human performance is required at all, it is usually provided sequentially from one or more performers rather than simultaneously, provided in ignorance of what future or past contributors may or may not have played, and provided as musical "raw material" for later editing, manipulation, and insertion in to the fabric of the artifact, as deemed appropriate by the producer, who may well begin, continue and complete the entire project at his computer. The key word here is "control", and it tends to be used often. The producer has indeed got complete control over all aspects of the recording, which will be polished, enhanced, and "improved" until it is "perfect". Minor "blemishes" are air-brushed out over months of painstaking work, until the "product", polished and manicured, is revealed to the waiting public.

The position of the man who wants to make what we've agreed to call, imperfectly, "performance-based" music, is somewhat different. He has no interest in perfection, believing as he does that music in general, and himself, as both musician and human being, in particular, are both so riddled with imperfection that pursuit of the perfect becomes not so much foolish as irrelevant. His interest lies in the outcome when he and two, or three, or a hundred of his colleagues play something simultaneously. From unpredictable thousands of mis-intonations, uncontrollable hundreds of combinations of sound-colours, and uncountable variations in rhythmic phrasing, he derives meaning -and hence pleasure- from the music, and it is often called "expression". The beast to which he and his colleagues give birth might surprise them, as they meet it for the first time on playback speakers. It may well have ugly bits. It may not quite be as planned, if they had attempted to plan the music at all. But it will also have a kind of truth that cannot be denied, expunged, or enhanced. It is, simply put, what it is. You want something else? Do another take or get a computer.

If the one kind of music is characterised by acquiring and retaining control, and the other by surrendering it, then I am, by inclination, in the second camp. There is nothing perjorative in this little analysis—anyone is at liberty to find meaning in music in whichever way he or she can. “Performance music” is neither better nor worse than “computer music”, but the aims and outcomes involved in and derived from making it are qualitatively different.

For myself, the “computer” path, in its broadest use of the term, is one in which I can make no musical sense, from which I can derive little meaning, while nevertheless standing astonished at the practitioners’ technical skill. I have no frame of reference by which to distinguish indifferent from imperfect, truth from half truth, the artfully cosmetic from the downright dishonest. It’s probably just too new, or I’m too thick. “Performance” music, on the other hand, an idea that is millennia old, seems to have a simpler frame of reference. After several hundred years, we have a rough idea of what can be done on a piano, and violin, and more recently, drum set and saxophone—others have gone before. The world of live or recorded performance is one that resonates with unforced error, human accident, happy coincidence, missed chances, astonishing good luck, hidden intentions, oblique references and the full catalogue of happenstance that is mirrored in all human existence, and sounds like a place in which I can live and breathe and have my being.

All music was performance-based music until the very recent technical innovations of editing and multi-track recording. The brave new world of the current digital manipulators is perhaps too young to have produced its “Rite of Spring”, its “Love Supreme”, its “Are you Experienced?”, but just before we all give up learning musical instruments in favour of buying a computer-based recording system, let’s just take a moment to reconsider the remarkable mystery of music and the way it imparts its (multiple) meanings to both practitioner and listener. When we look each other in the eyes, count to four, and start hammering, we have more than simply you and I playing. We have the two of us playing *together*, and, if we are lucky, a third element will appear, and we’ll make something called music, at least the only kind of music I’m ever likely to know. Three of a perfect pair. Call it jazz, rock, or anything else you like.

(C) Bill Bruford, August 2004