

# Miles To Go

Some say jazz is dead—but a new generation of artists is proving otherwise

By Jeff Tamarkin

Jazz history was made on Sept. 10, 2010, when 80-year-old saxophonists Sonny Rollins and Ornette Coleman—both trendsetters for more than half a century—performed together on stage for the first time. The occasion was Rollins' birthday concert at Manhattan's Beacon Theatre, a sold-out affair that had set the jazz world abuzz even before a single note had been sounded. Coleman's surprise walk-on lasted for only one song, coming toward the end of a spectacular show that featured several other prominent guests, among them the 79-year-old guitar great Jim Hall and the 85-year-old drum dynamo Roy Haynes.

At the same time that these elder statesmen held forth at the historical 5,600-seat venue, jazz could also be heard filling the air at any number of considerably smaller clubs scattered around New York City—most of it performed by musicians for whom Social Security checks are a long way off and iconic status a pipedream at best. Despite doomsday proclamations from some who insist that giants like Rollins and Coleman are the last of their kind, jazz is actually thriving in the 21st century—artistically, at least. On any given night, in venues and recording studios around the world, innovative and exciting jazz is being created for those who make the effort to seek it out.

"Over the last 20 to 30 years, but especially within the last decade, there's been a real coalescence of smart ideas and new energy, and a freedom and fearlessness among musicians," says Nate Chinen, jazz critic for *The New York Times* and columnist for *JazzTimes*. "They're bringing to the table an open-minded way of hearing, experiencing and accessing music. We finally have a full generation of musicians who don't feel bound by orthodoxy, and that's something that can only be a good thing when you're dealing with a music as committed to the moment and innovation as jazz is." Todd Barkan, artistic manager at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola (part of New York's famed Jazz at Lincoln Center complex), agrees: "Jazz is doing extremely well on a variety of levels. I'm

hearing a lot of very inspiring things. I think we're going into a new era of the music, with a new generation ascendant."

That may be news to some. Jazz is a genre too often consigned to history, music still defined by the work of artists who have long since passed on: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Thelonious Monk and others. Those who follow the music's present progress closely may rave about the likes of Kurt Rosenwinkel, Hiromi, Brian Blade, Vijay Iyer or Christian McBride—the 38-year-old bass virtuoso who accompanied Rollins, Coleman and Haynes for their historic summit—but those

knows what the landscape will look like 20 or 30 years from now. But people have always said that jazz is dead, and it always keeps continuing." Rising star Gretchen Parlato, whose 2009 release *In a Dream* was voted Best Vocal Album in last year's *Village Voice* jazz critics' poll, is also among the faithful. "For those of us who believe it's living, breathing, growing and developing—it's great," she says. "So many people are trying all kinds of new ideas in jazz. The traditional path is still tread upon, but it seems much more open and honest now."

## KIND OF BLUE

Jazz, for much of its first half-century of existence, attracted a wide audience and produced numerous million-selling albums and singles. Jazz was hip, jazz was cool—digging jazz was a sign of intellectual acuity, refined taste and a willingness to embrace the abstract. But as rock, R&B and other genres came to the fore in the 1960s and '70s, jazz began to recede as a popular art form. The music maintained a respectable and dedicated following, but it was undeniably overshadowed. The most popular jazz of the early '70s was fusion, which borrowed ideas and technology from rock to move jazz to a new—and more commercially successful—place. By the mid-'70s, the "smooth jazz" subgenre had also risen to prominence, but purists loathed its watered-down sound. Within the past several years, smooth jazz too has begun to sputter, losing radio stations in major markets and the share of the overall music market it enjoyed at its peak.

The live music landscape has also taken a hit. While the rare artist of Rollins' stature can still pack a theater for a special event, and numerous jazz festivals still draw respectable crowds, jazz is no match for the Lady Gagas and U2s of the world. Most of the larger cities in the U.S. can still support at least one go-to jazz venue, but the downturn in the economy has caused many other clubs and even some festivals to pack it in. "There's definitely an audience, in spite of that," says Parlato. "The money may be lacking, but at every show that I've done there are people there enjoying themselves



Jon Irabagon

names will likely draw a blank stare from most listeners. Given that, does jazz have a future at all? If so, who will lead it there?

"The jazz industry doesn't create icons and stars anymore, but the music will continue," says Matthew Shipp, one of the most adventurous pianists and composers in jazz since the early '90s. "There will always be an underground to keep it alive. Will anybody ever be an icon in the way those legendary guys are? That's very treacherous. Nobody



Ethan Iverson, Reid Anderson and David King of the Bad Plus

and supporting the art."

However, those supporters are considerably fewer today than during jazz's heyday. A 2008 report by the National Endowment for the Arts charted a significant decline in jazz concert attendance: an overall loss of 18.8 percent between 1982 and 2008, with the greatest decline, 27.8 percent, occurring in the last six years covered by the survey. Those numbers are also reflected in jazz music sales, which in 2009 amounted to only 11.7 million albums. Those numbers are, of

course, not only indicative of the state of jazz in the past decade but of the beleaguered music industry as a whole. But jazz, like classical and some other non-mainstream genres, has been pushed even further into the margins. Artists are increasingly fending for themselves by releasing music on their own and selling it at gigs or via outlets such as iTunes. Those who survive are those who can swim in these uncharted waters, and that naturally means that technologically minded, social-network-savvy artists have a built-in advantage.

"The younger artists are the ones who understand what's going on," says Steven Bensusan, president of the Blue Note Entertainment Group. Bensusan runs the landmark Blue Note jazz club in New York City's Greenwich Village as well as club franchises in Milan and Japan. "It's very difficult to explain to some older artists that things aren't what they were," he says. "They don't understand how people obtain music through a computer. It's not easy to grasp if you're 80 and you expect people to buy the physical product. New artists have been very creative in trying to figure out how to use technology to their advantage."

#### FREE JAZZ

In spite of the downward shift in the overall fortunes of the music business since the turn of the millennium—or perhaps *because* of that shift—jazz seems to be enjoying a creative freedom missing from the two preceding decades. "When you think about how difficult it is to be a jazz musician and to have that life, why wouldn't everyone want to do it exactly the way they want?" asks critic Nate Chinen. And so a sense of liberation—something that should be endemic to jazz at any time—is pervasive among makers of the new jazz. "What we're seeing now is artists who are being set free to express

the way they always wanted to express, but didn't because maybe they felt they needed to fit into a radio format," says Mark Wexler, senior vice president and label manager of Concord Records' Jazz and Classics Group. "Artists are doing what they want to do from their heart. Music is a piece of art, and the only way that translates to someone who's receiving that is for the art itself to be heartfelt."

"We've never had better opportunities," says Grammy-winning musician, arranger, composer and producer Bob Belden. "The integration of what a musician is in the world is far better than it was in the past. We're no longer bound as musicians to be entertainers or academics. We can be social innovators, using music as a way to connect communities and using tools for what musicians do best, which is to tell stories. But you have to believe in yourself and you have to understand that it's a long road."



Matthew Shipp

success he's enjoyed over the past few years, he still takes the odd job as a member of a wedding band, has toured with the indie folk-rock band Bright Eyes and also teaches.

travel and get my music out there, and to play with as many different people as possible. It's very much a grassroots kind of thing." Pianist Ethan Iverson of instrumental trio

## 'I'm not in the least bit pessimistic about the future of jazz.' — Nat Hentoff

Jon Irabagon, winner of the 2008 Thelonious Monk International Saxophone Competition, is a young musician willing to travel that road. Despite the ballooning

"You have to take care of business," says Irabagon. "You have to pay your rent. You have to pay your phone bill. The model I'm following is trying to be persistent, trying to

the Bad Plus followed a similar route, building his reputation the old-fashioned way: by paying dues. "I worked odd music jobs in New York for 10 years before having

*The New Cats*

Meet the current artists who are helping to ensure that jazz has a bright future



#### MIGUEL ZENÓN

Miguel Zenón is a composer and alto saxophonist who has, in his most recent works, sought to find the meeting point of sophisticated post-bop jazz and traditional Puerto Rican folk music. Zenón began playing while still living in San Juan, enrolled in Boston's Berklee College of Music and was eventually signed by Branford Marsalis to the Marsalis Music label. Zenón's first releases under his own name established his talents as writer and player, but his trio of albums the past five years has made it clear that he has something vital and original to say.

**Start with:** *Esta Plena* (Marsalis, 2009)



#### REGINA CARTER

Even the most devoted followers of jazz might have trouble naming more than a few violinists who've made the genre their home: Stephane Grappelli, Jean Luc-Ponty and Michal Urbaniak spring to mind. Today it's Regina Carter who is most responsible for taking the instrument to new places within jazz. A player who welcomes complexity and nuance, but who also values accessibility, Carter is always on the lookout for a new direction. She used part of a \$500,000 MacArthur Fellowship "genius grant" to fund her latest album, *Reverse Thread*.

**Start with:** *Reverse Thread* (E1, 2010)



#### DARCY JAMES ARGUE

Someone forgot to tell Darcy James Argue that the big bands went out after World War II. That's a good thing, because Argue is presently leading one of the hottest new bands on the New York scene, Darcy James Argue's Secret Society. The 18-piece "steampunk" orchestra, as Argue calls it, sounds nothing at all like the old Tommy Dorsey-era big bands. Formed in 2005, Secret Society uses as its launching point the conceit that the great dance bands of the '30s and '40s didn't die out but continued to evolve, taking in all of the evolutions—both musical and technological—that have come along since.

**Start with:** *Infernal Machines* (New Amsterdam, 2009)



#### MARY HALVORSON

At age 30, Mary Halvorson is redefining jazz guitar. A ceaselessly inquisitive experimentalist, Halvorson is a boundary smasher who makes her idiosyncratic, self-described "slightly off" playing seem natural. Halvorson, who has been a professional musician for less than a decade, isn't about licks, riffs or conventional chords. The guitar to her is a tool for exploring a wide range of pure sounds and stirring up an emotional response—be it awe, distress, curiosity or outrage—in the listener. Her primary goal, she has said, is to "capture different types of energies with traditional instrumentation."

**Start with:** *Dragon's Head* (Firehouse 12, 2008)



#### CHRISTIAN SCOTT

At age 27, New Orleans-born Christian Scott is already considered by many to be the logical successor to Louis Armstrong, Wynton Marsalis and Terence Blanchard. He's a trumpet master who brings style and innovation to the instrument and to jazz. Although he respects the tradition that birthed him, Scott is not owned by it—his recordings burst with contemporary elements, drawing from rock, R&B and electronic music. Praised for his impeccable chops and the intensity of his playing, Scott is viewed by many in the jazz community as one of the music's brightest new arrivals.

**Start with:** *Anthem* (Concord, 2007)

any gigs," he says. "Worrying about a career is the worst thing you can do. You've got to keep your head down and believe. It's always been hard for jazz musicians, and it surely will be just as hard in the future."

Another way young jazz artists can try to get ahead is to obtain a solid education in one of the country's hundreds of excellent music schools, college and university programs. Despite the 2008 financial crash of the 40-year-old International Association for Jazz Education (IAJE), enrollment in music education programs has skyrocketed in recent years. "The first thing I would tell a kid who wants to play would be to follow your passion and get to the best place to keep learning about it," says venerated author and jazz critic Nat Hentoff, who at 85 has witnessed much of jazz history firsthand. "There are certainly a lot of remarkable players coming out of schools. I'm not in the least bit pessimistic about the future of jazz."

"With music education being so involved with jazz now, you've got a whole group of people coming out every year with a lot of creative ideas," adds Newport Jazz Festival founder George Wein,

**'There's no question we're in a transitional period, but jazz is always in transition.'** — George Wein

also 85. "Some of them are very talented, some of course aren't. The talented ones are coming to the fore. Every major school, not just music schools, has a music department with a jazz program now. Along with that comes a younger public interested in jazz." Most contemporary music schools and departments also provide a realistic primer on the ins and outs of the music business, an education that can prove as vital to an aspiring jazz musician as understanding how to improvise. "When I was coming up the only route to the big



time was you'd get in one of the big bands," says Bob Belden, who got his start in the late 1970s and early '80s playing with icons like Woody Herman and Donald Byrd. "Then if you made it to New York or L.A. you'd work as a studio musician. Now students learn how to make their choices in college."

**GIANT STEPS**

Whatever turns the economy might take or whatever new technology arises, jazz is not headed for the graveyard anytime soon. "The venues are packed with people of all ages wanting to hear the new music," says George Wein, who today produces the CareFusion Jazz Festival in Newport, R.I., and New York. "My audiences are growing every year—and it's a younger crowd. I find that very interesting. There's no question we're in a transitional period, but we're always in a transition in jazz. It never stops." One thing that can help boost new jazz is simply letting the public know that it's out there. "The paradigm in people's heads is that the golden age of jazz is over," says Matthew Shipp. "For us to get over that is going to take a lot of work. But we're going to continue to play and a lot of us have audiences, so it'll continue. And maybe once we get grey hair, people will want to put us up on a pedestal!"

Barkan warns that jazz can only survive if each new generation continues to respect the genre's future as well as its past. "I'm not a utopian character, but I am a bit of an idealist," he says, "and I have a corny saying: 'Take care of the music and the music will take care of you,' which is something I really believe." Those who are taking care of the music today are increasingly confident that it will continue to take care of them. "There are a lot of possibilities for jazz right now," says Jon Irabagon. "It's vital right now, and there's a lot of creativity. I feel like there's a revolution about to happen."

Perhaps George Wein—a man who has witnessed all of the greats over the course of seven jazz-filled decades—puts it best. "There will always be," he says, "that young man with a horn." **M**



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