

The Jazz Composers Guild An Assertion Of Dignity

By ROBERT LEVIN

BY NOW IT IS quite obvious that those of us whose work is not acceptable to the Establishment are not going to be financially acknowledged. As a result, it is very clear that musicians, in order to survive—create their music and maintain some semblance of sanity—will have to 'do it themselves' in the future."

The statement is Bill Dixon's, a composer and trumpet player and the organizer of the Jazz Composers Guild, a co-operative of avant-garde jazz musicians who want to play and make a living from their music, but who do not very often have the opportunity to do so in today's jazz scene.

What are the conditions that Dixon and Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Le Sun Ra, Paul and Carla Bley, Burton Greene, Jon Winter, Mike Mantler, Roswell Rudd, and John Tchicai—the guild's charter members—feel must be engaged in open warfare—not only as they exist externally but also internally, in the psyches of the musicians themselves?

Dixon, who has been on the scene for a number of years, who has scuffled and watched his friends scuffle, said he believes that jazz musicians, when they are not treated condescendingly or ignored, are exploited. This situation—and its "racial implications"—he said, has resulted in anxieties, distrust, and the deferral of the pursuit of a collective ideal to

the gratifications of personal avidity, which only further impairs the jazzman's progress both musically and socially "and which even the members of the guild—both white and black musicians—have not always proven themselves to be above."

"To say that the personalities of any group sometimes come into severe conflict with each other even when the participants are in pursuit of the same idealistic goal is a vast understatement," he said. "Jazz represents the epitome of individualism in the musical arts, and the guild has had its share of internal conflict. The guild was organized as an alternative to the conditions of apathy and exploitation, but the nature of some of our conflicts over how to go about things has served to clarify what and how bad the conditions really are and the insanities they have caused."

Dixon said there are complex racial aspects to the conditions that prevail, aspects that are sometimes subtle.

"For example," he said, "even in the guild, which is comprised of some very intelligent people, there has been a subtle, but apparent, indignation on the part of the white members (and this is something I think nearly all white men have in them) that a black man . . . myself, Cecil . . . could conceive and execute an idea that would be intelligent and beneficial to all."

"The multitudinous social changes

Guild members (l. to r.) Jon Winter, Burton Greene, Bill Dixon, Le Sun Ra, Paul Bley, Roswell Rudd, Carla Bley, Mike Mantler, Cecil Taylor, John Tchicai, and Archie Shepp.



IRWIN GOLDSTEIN



Bill Dixon

now in force—the Negro's fight for his rightful share of the American dream (or nightmare), and the fact that up to the present time the main creators in jazz have been Negroes with white men controlling the dissemination of their music, or using it in films and on television where Negroes have not been allowed to use it—represent vast problems of which very few people have any real awareness or even the desire to be aware."

But Dixon doesn't believe that white avant-garde musicians who play jazz enjoy a very superior situation. He said he feels they are treated better, "significantly better, but not much better—that's why they're in the guild—than are black musicians, and that is simply because they play jazz, which is looked upon as something 'primitive'—like what they really mean when they call the Chinese atom bomb 'primitive' is that yellow men created it. But it must be remembered that white musicians elect to play jazz; their musical horizons are not bound by an enforced social tradition that relegates them to one area of musical expression. The Negro plays jazz because that music is close to him—it's his way of life—and because, qualified or not, the other areas of musical expression are closed to him."

"White players have a leverage which Negro players do not. Many of them also play in symphony orchestras or work with other avant-garde white musicians in a nonjazz

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idiom and get grants and subsidies from that. Those cats may get criticized a lot, but they are recognized as artists."

Jazz musicians, Dixon has witnessed, are becoming increasingly aware of the world outside of the music itself, the business world.

"The knowledge has been gleaned through painful experience," he said. "But if it is commonly thought that we are all willing and able to fight for our ideals, that is, unfortunately, not always the case, because every man has his Achilles heel, is vulnerable to exploitation; and the business world takes advantage of this. They try to undermine psychologically."

"Many musicians have been made so unstable that if they see their names in print a couple of times, they begin to believe, and try to convince you, that the Establishment isn't really that bad. Cecil Taylor's received a lot of publicity lately, but he still can't make a living from his art."

Dixon has observed that many musicians desperate for recognition and the chance to play "will do anything to get a record or a club date. The major clubs are only interested in booking name groups—safe groups. So the avant-garde musicians have had to look to bars and coffee houses, where they are not paid a salary but by 'contributions' and 'donations' from the audience, while the management cleans up on the sale of food and liquor. And they do clean up because a lot of people are coming to listen. Musicians who work these places under these conditions only hurt themselves and their fellow musicians. They allow themselves to be used, to make money for someone else—under the pretext that their careers are being advanced—and help only to perpetuate their exploitation."

And Dixon has found the situation with most record companies to be no different.

"It is absolutely necessary," he said, "to have a record if anyone is going to know about you; so musicians are desperate to record. But even many record companies which obviously have money force the musician not only to accept minimum scale (and a leader may have to pay his sidemen out of his double scale), but very frequently to pay recording costs as well. You don't sell them your music, you give it to them. Even if you have a best-seller and the company is making a profit, you may wind up owing the company money! This has happened. And the people who control this aren't going to be quick to let it change."

DIXON'S DECISION to organize the Jazz Composers Guild was finally triggered by a series of avant-garde jazz concerts he arranged at New York City's Cellar Cafe—the October Revolution—that drew considerable response, proving, to him and others, that the music is capable of attracting a large audience.

"Soon after," Dixon recalled, "Cecil Taylor and I had talks about the formation of this collective type of organization in which the musicians would, in effect, accept the challenge of really believing in themselves, by rejecting the crumbs that up to the present they have been forced to accept."

The original members of the guild were culled from the participants at the October Revolution who, Dixon said, represented a possibly important new strata in contemporary jazz.

"This is not meant to imply that there are not others to consider for membership," he continued. "I was simply in a hurry to get started, and so meetings for the creation of the guild were called right away, with the musicians most immediately available asked to participate."

Dixon and the others defined and framed the guild's main reasons for being this way:

"The absence of representation of the most vital elements in the main stream of America's contemporary musical culture has made it necessary for the composers and performing musicians most affected to unite for the following purposes: to establish the music to its rightful place in the society; to awaken the musical conscience of the masses of people to that music which is essential to their lives; to protect the musicians and composers from the existing forces of exploitation; to provide an opportunity for the audience to hear the music; to provide facilities for the proper creation, rehearsal, performance, and dissemination of the music."

"The idea," Dixon said, "is to restrict the activities of the guild to those areas that support it so that its loyal audience will be able to hear the music at a price they can afford."

The guild hopes to achieve the recognition of an audience large enough to make it economically necessary for the business element to come to it and on terms that are satisfactory to its members.

The plan for the guild is that it will function as independently as possible from the jazz scene at large, without agents or managers—without middlemen.

On the theory that the expenditure of energy to this end is no greater or more debilitating than that put forth working as a porter, car washer, or cabdriver, the players themselves handle the guild's administrative work and arrange their own concerts, including publicity and advertising.

Members of the guild turn down work offered by outside sources unless it is considered advantageous to the guild and its goals as a whole. All offers of outside work to any one of the members must be brought to the guild for clearance. No dues are charged, and meetings are held at the homes of the members. Members rotate as chairmen.

The guild has acquired the services of a lawyer who is sympathetic to its cause and is in the process of incorporating it as a nonprofit organization, which would make it tax-exempt and enable it to apply for grants.

Its activities, currently at least, take place at the Contemporary Center, 180 Seventh Ave., in New York City. The center is a triangular loft two floors above the Village Vanguard. Concerts by guild members are held at the center every weekend.

The guild hopes eventually to own its own hall and record company. Currently, the organization is beginning a campaign to get colleges and universities interested in scheduling concerts by the members. It also has been in correspondence, according to trombonist Rudd, with similar cooperatives in Detroit, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C.

Dixon said he believes the guild, though its end goals are far from reached and the period of internal conflict is not nearly over, already has succeeded, "not in an obvious, overt way . . . but in a subtle way it has accomplished certain things. It has frightened some people. It has made them aware of a growing sense of dignity among jazz musicians and attracted attention to the plight of not only the jazz musician but the creative artist at large."

There is no question that the Jazz Composers Guild has already created quite a stir. Potentially, it could do much more than that. It probably will, because the musicians involved in it are of the conviction that no other way is open to them. If it survives any counterattack the Establishment mounts (guild members expect such an attack, for the system and order of the Establishment are being challenged) and if individual ambitions do not come to override the collective one, the guild could turn the whole scene around. 