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LEONARD FEATHER: The Flood of Jazz on LP's

GARY CRAMER: From Jazz to Jazz on Records



*"Bailey's Lucky Seven" held this jazz session February 10, 1923, at the Starr Recording Laboratory, 9 East 37th Street, New York. The sign above the horn reads: "The Difference Is in the Tone." The tone quality of discs made this way is still preferred by many jazz music enthusiasts*

## *The Change from JASS to JAZZ*

*For All the Advances That Have Been Made in Recording Techniques, There Is Much to Be Said for the Sound Quality Still Treasured by Collectors of the Old 78's*

By GARY KRAMER

THE VERY latest thing in the development of music." So reads the breathless advertising copy of the Victor Supplement of May 1917, announcing its first jazz record release. Something like the Original Dixieland Jass Band was the novelty needed just then to

give a new outlet to the irrepressible energies of that dance-crazy era. "Jass" was the last word, and records (by white musicians) that passed for jass became, overnight, a fantastic commercial success.

In the first years, sound played a minor role in the appeal of what later became known as "jazz" discs. The acceptance of the new music was uncritical; people were happy with what they heard, despite the fact that the acoustic process by which records were made until 1925 offered poor definition of instruments, very limited range of frequency response, and noisy surfaces.

### **The Early Methods Now Seem Very Crude**

Pictures of recording sessions of that time strike us as very funny — vocalists bellowing into the recording horn, their faces so close to it that they look as if they were camouflaged in gas masks, or instrumentalists ranged precariously in steep birthday-cake tiers, seemingly perched on each other's shoulders. All of this seems as far removed from us as high-button shoes.

The acoustic era was not without its ingenious experiments. There was the Columbia engineer, for example, who, in order to confine the sound being recorded into as small a space as possible, had a tent of monk's cloth erected inside the studio and suspended from the ceiling.



*Jess Stacey and sidemen record Atlantic's "Tribute to Benny Goodman". Today, musicians play some distance from each other with each section and sometimes each instrument equipped with a separate mike. Note the microphone wrapped in cotton and strapped below the bridge of the bull fiddle.*

Into the tent went Bessie Smith, the Fletcher Henderson Hot Six, the recording engineer and all of his equipment. Out of the session came the marvelous *Yellow Dog Blues*, a claustrophobic Bessie, and the termination of the tent experiments.

The really great jazz musicians were not recorded to any important degree until after 1923. The old jazz records that interest us most today were produced as "race records" (by Negro musicians for a Negro market) and in their great musical interest make up for their lack of prepossessing sound qualities. The jazz market was not an esoteric market; it often generated such demand for a hot record that a number of Bessie Smith discs commanded four or five dollars apiece!

The frequency range of acoustic records in their last years was about 168 to 2,000 cycles. What one heard on the average home phonograph was probably much less than that. For us today it is still all but impossible to tell who is playing lead trumpet in certain passages in the 1923 King Oliver-Louis Armstrong recordings due to poor instrumental definition. And yet, one is forced to agree with Roland Gelatt, who insists that "this was music, not tooting . . . and it gave pleasure."

### Competition from Radio Broadcasting

By 1925, however, the general public really expected a little better reproduction, for radio had come along meanwhile and, comparatively, it was giving superior sound quality. Accordingly, the acoustic process was scrapped at this time and the electric recording method replaced it. For the history of jazz, it is of incalculable importance that this improvement took place at that time, for in the years 1926 to 1929 a number of jazz greats stood at the peak of their creative powers.

The Victor records of Jelly Roll Morton and his Red

Hot Peppers made between 1926 and 1928, for example, stand even today as an unimpeachable musical and phonographic achievement. The balance and presence achieved by the Victor engineers are the work of a genius. Of course, these records do not have the frequency range that our contemporary records do, but the sound is still one of which any present A & R man could be immensely proud.

1929 had its own kind of "hi-fi" sensation. Somehow or other, a Columbia engineer produced an unusually boomy bass in a record of Duke Ellington's entitled *Beggar's Blues* (recorded by Ellington thinly disguised as "Sonny Greer and His Memphis Men"). While the bass is undoubtedly over-emphasized, for the blues it is not inappropriate. In any case, it is still impressive from the point of view of lively sound.

It is often easier to appreciate the sound qualities of the original music when listening to the shellac records of the late Twenties than hearing the way they sound after having been transferred to LP in more recent years. Manufacturers have tampered with the sound of the old shellacs, hoping to make them sound better to our more sensitive ears by such practices as boosting highs, or adding echoes. These "improvements" generally give only the phoniest kind of "high fidelity"; their screechy tones are far more offensive than the well-balanced shellac originals.

### Recording Had Its Period of Depression

The 1929 Depression sent the record business into a tailspin, and for a long time the Thirties did not show much of a technical or musical advance over the decade that preceded it. By 1935, however, the industry was perking up and, sampling discs of that year, it is clear that technical strides had been made. The average record had a

frequency response range of 30 to 8,000 cycles, and manufacturers contended that their records were as much of an improvement over the early electric recordings as the first electric recordings had been over acoustic disks.

A change in attitude took place at this time in regard to *balance* of sound. The ensemble gradually became less important and, in time, was little more than background for a soloist. For balance, one still must admire the fine records made by the Duke Ellington band in 1932 to 1935 for Brunswick. After that, it got to be pretty hard to find big band records with the kind of over-all balance for which we strive today (and which is an asset of so many records of the late Twenties).

### Improvements in Acoustics and Manufacturing

The Thirties saw a growing awareness of the importance of the acoustical qualities of the studio or hall in which recordings were made. The "live" or "dead" characteristics of the room now came in for careful analysis before a session. This paid off in records like those made by Benny Goodman in Liederkrantz Hall in New York in the late Thirties. The qualities of the hall preserve Goodman's work forever in a kind of mellow glow.

It also became clear to manufacturers during this period how important it was to improve the quality of record pressings. The materials used in the so-called "biscuit" make all the difference in the world. Some knowledgeable collectors, for instance, waited for Louis Armstrong discs to be issued on Parlophone in England (which used a higher quality resin) and then imported them, rather than buy the American originals.

To select a high point in pre-World War II recording, one couldn't do much better than turn to the Muggsy Spanier recordings in 1939 for Bluebird. All that had been learned in the previous decade is in brilliant evidence. From this time on, the quality of recording — and especially of pressings — gradually declined. Shellac was hard to get, particularly for some of the smaller labels that sprang up during the war years. Inferior substitute materials had to be found.

Incredibly enough, some of the most outstanding pre-LP accomplishments in sound were made, in spite of all handicaps, in the last years of the war. Woody Herman's records on Columbia and Stan Kenton's first Capitol records dating from this period show a fully rounded sound and flashes of orchestral color that still give an aural thrill.

Right after the war, the market for records was excellent. Obviously it had little to do with the sound qualities of these records, for they continued to be generally poor until 1947. By that time, shellac was again available in unlimited quantities. Advances due to war-time experiments in sound reproduction were being applied to commercial recording, with breath-taking results. A group of younger, better-trained engineers began taking over the record studios.

Jazz collectors have always appreciated fine sound, but, like nearly everyone else, their hypersensitivity to "high fidelity" is mainly a product of forces at work in the last decade. The foundation for this new awareness was

laid by the barrage of advertising coming from RCA Victor and Columbia in the course of *The Battle of the Speeds* (1949). They — and nearly everyone else in the industry — kept hammering away about the superiority of their particular sound qualities.

The sound of records *had* improved radically, as many of us found out at the first audio fairs. This was due, among other things, to the introduction at this time of recording on magnetic tape, superseding the old method of recording on wax or acetate blanks. Vinyl had replaced shellac as the material used for record pressings, and this gave better sound in addition to being more durable and non-breakable. Jazz customers were as avid collectors of hi-fi records as anyone else, and began demanding the highest standards in the LP's they bought.

The arrangement of modern recording sessions have changed until now they look like loosely sprawled collections of individuals lost in forests of mikes. Far from being huddled together, as in the acoustic days, the musicians are often some distance from each other, with each person or section equipped with a separate mike. The engineers and the recording supervisor are in a separate, sound-proof, glass-enclosed control room. If a vocalist is singing with a band, he tends to be even more isolated from the instrumentalists and, in fact, may be enclosed in a separate booth of his own inside the studio.

Far from being a great advantage, the many mikes multiply the problems of getting the best sound possible. The theoretical ideal is to use only one mike in recording. Sometimes, this is done and works out well. Atlantic's "Jimmy Giuffre Three" was recorded in this way. The one-mike system is seldom a success, however, because it is so hard to achieve a perfect balance between instruments of varying intensities.

Once more than one mike is employed, of course, much of the potential artistic success of the record date is put upon the shoulders of the engineer. With a multiple mike system he can achieve an intricate balance of brassy to reeds, bass and drums to piano, and soloist to ensemble. This is difficult to maintain throughout a session. By means of microphone placement, the engineer paints a sound picture. The positions of the mikes determine the color, depth, and focus of the record. The engineer must know jazz because he is as much of a *musical* participant as any man in front of the mike.

### Esthetic Values vs Technical Qualities

In accounting for the vast difference between what we hear when we listen to the phonograph today and what we heard twenty years ago, it is not nearly so important to detail improvements in the recording technique itself as it is to point out the great difference in the typical home listening equipment of 1938 and 1958. Listen to records of the Benny Goodman Carnegie Hall concert of 1938, for instance! Modern recording techniques would not have produced a much brighter sound than was achieved then, but the recording played on a 1938 hi-fi set wouldn't even begin to compare with what a 1958 machine delivers today.

However, with each technical advance, we tend to discard prior accomplishments as obsolete *Continued on page 63*

# MUSIC FESTIVALS

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repertory. Another festival represented on records is the Holland Festival, with its recording of Janáček's "From the House of the Dead" (Epic 4SC-6005).

The enormous interest shown in the Casals Festivals has also resulted in an important documentary series of recordings. Standards of performance vary, and interest will probably be dependent upon the individual works rather than on the series as a whole.

London has announced a new "Elektra" recording, featuring the cast of the 1957 Salzburg performance. This will be a recording to watch for. RCA Victor has an option to record one work at the "Festival of Two Worlds" this summer. But, as important and rewarding as all of these documents are, they will undoubtedly be most cherished by those who have been to the festivals themselves. Bon Voyage!

*Widely traveled George Mayer has many musical interests. His presentation of rarely heard vocal chamber music concerts is a feature of this spring's concert season in New York.*

## FROM JASS TO JAZZ

Continued from page 18

and inferior. In some ways, this is unfortunate, for it puts more stress on technical qualities than musical values. While we must encourage the engineers to improve recording and reproducing equipment, it is

## Recent Jazz LPs That Demonstrate Outstanding Hi-Fi Qualities

- Manny Albam: "The Drum Suite" (RCA Victor LPM 1279)
- Shelly Manne: "More Swinging Sounds" (Contemporary 3519)
- Miles Davis: "Miles Ahead" (Columbia CL 1041)
- "The Jimmy Giuffre Three" (Atlantic 1254)
- "Chico Hamilton Quintet" (World Pacific 1225)
- "Marching Along With The Dukes of Dixieland," Vol. 3 (Audio Fidelity AFLP 1851)
- Thelonious Monk: "Brilliant Corners" (Riverside RLP 12-226)
- Sonny Rollins: "Saxophone Colossus" (Prestige 7079)
- "Oscar Pettiford Orchestra in Hi-Fi" (ABC Paramount LP 135)
- Paul Quinichette: "The Kid From Denver" (Dawn 1109)
- "The West Side Story" (Coral 57207)
- Wess-Burrell-Green-Jones-Clark: "Opus in Swing" (Savoy MG 12085)

not out of place to reflect on how well off we are right now. The great enjoyment of music comes from understanding its esthetic beauty, rather than from concern with the techniques by which music is produced.

*Gary Kramer is director of advertising and publicity for Atlantic Records. Prior to that, he was a member of the music staff at The Billboard. He is known as a young "cat" equally at home in Salzburg or New Orleans.*



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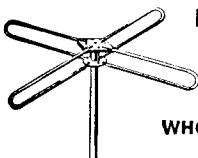
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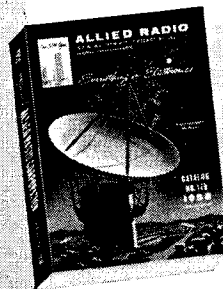


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