

“Jazz at the Philharmonic” (July 2, 1944)

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Essay by Tom Maxwell (guest post)*



Norman Granz

This performance demarks the fault line of a subtle, but tectonic, cultural shift. It's probable that the most history any of the featured musicians of the first “Jazz at the Philharmonic” were considering that summer Sunday night was their own reputation on Monday morning--highly public jam sessions, though often jubilant, are serious business--but they nevertheless participated in something very much like the accomplishment of the American dream. An extraordinary musical expression, new to that middle-aged century and unique to this young nation, was just starting to be taken more seriously. By 1944, its proponents--players and fans of mixed races--were finally being allowed to perform together. It's heady stuff, not that you'd know that from listening to this recording, because it's basically a romp; a bunch of happy monsters being let off the leash.

It started with producer Norman Granz. Granz, then a 25-year-old, had been recently drafted and assigned to the Morale branch of the Army Air Force. “Any book on my life,” Granz told his biographer, “would start with my basic philosophy of fighting racial prejudice. I loved jazz, and jazz was my way of doing that.” Granz supervised the production of a musical short, “Jamming the Blues,” featuring tenor saxophonist Lester Young. It was nominated for an Academy Award in 1944.

Granz's ambition was to take jazz out of the segregated nightclubs where it had been relegated since its inception. He started by renting Los Angeles venues on a Monday night, when they were usually closed, and desegregating the place. This went over big with everybody, so Granz's next move was to secure the Philharmonic Auditorium with borrowed money. A printer shortened the original title, “A Jazz Concert at the Philharmonic Auditorium” to the more streamlined “Jazz at the Philharmonic” and the name stuck, and, in the future, often further shortened to “JATP.”

And so, on Sunday, July 2, 1944, concert goers were greeted with the muttering head riff of “Lester Leaps In,” with one of many absolute killer units to be rolled out that night, this one lead by tenor man Illinois Jacquet, backed in part by Nat “King” Cole on piano (playing that night

under the alias Shorty Nadine, for contractual reasons) and the amped-up guitar of Les Paul. It's a free-for-all from the jump. The abandon of the opener sounds like the closing of any other legendary show. You can't see the audience, but their presence is certainly felt: players don't put out that much energy just for themselves and each other. Every heroic solo (trombonist J.J. Johnson sounds like he's putting in his last word) is greeted with a flurry of applause and whistles. The air must have been electric. The recording of this concert conveys the sound of everybody getting what they want.

Cole and Paul, in particular, start a musical conversation in "Lester Leaps In" that would culminate almost a half hour later in "Blues." Their extended interaction in that number--only the third in the set--is a testament to the almost telepathic ability of great players when fully engaged, and it is as humorous as it is dazzling. There's a call and response, initiated by Paul, which is as playful as it is challenging--right up until Paul throws out some impossible run, only to be answered by something different but equally complex. The crowd howls.

Cole had been getting some traction in the past few years with his trio but was still a decade or so off from being known as one of our most gifted vocalists. He does sing what had already become his signature tune, "Sweet Lorraine," later in the set, the primitive production distorting his voice.

Paul, a last-minute replacement for Cole's guitarist, Oscar Moore, had seized the flaming torch dropped by electric guitar pioneer Charlie Christian when he died in 1942, adding his own Django Reinhardt-inspired angularities to the single-noted solos. A year or two later, Paul would approach the Gibson guitar company with a solid-body electric prototype he called "The Log." They rejected it but started producing the guitar bearing his name in 1952, much to the benefit of future rock 'n' roll fans.

The show sailed on, with Meade "Lux" Lewis taking over the piano stool to crank out a few metronomic boogies, starting with "Yancey Special." They're solos, but Lewis didn't need any support. He plays like he has three hands.

"C Jam Blues," that Ellington standard, is kicked off by trumpeter Shorty Sherlock, followed by a roaring "Bumps" Myers on tenor. The minor creep of "I've Found a New Baby," a Clarence Williams tune from way back in 1919, is treated with a kind of giddy delight, especially in the oddly melodic double stops of Johnny Miller's string bass solo.

Everybody's lip is fairly blown out by the closer "Rosetta," not that it matters. Everything was going to be left on the stage that night, as was declared in the first song. It's a top-notch program, albeit a little heavy on the high-pitched trumpet calisthenics and controlled saxophone shrieking popular at the time. The fact is, this performance wasn't meant to be recorded at all, and would have just vanished into the balmy California air 70 summers ago.

Considering that Granz would use much of the recorded "JATP" concerts to issue on his future record labels Clef and Verve, it appears that the documenting of this first one was something of an afterthought. Granz, probably busy enough booking the venue and assembling the dazzling musicians, didn't initially intend to produce a live recording. They were not really a thing in

1944, given the limitations of the medium. (Magnetic tape, which would allow for longer recording times and higher fidelity, wouldn't be available until the end of the war.) A producer from the Armed Forces Network Radio Network had the idea. Les Paul had been drafted the previous year, and served with that unit, so there may have been a connection there. And so, as luck would have it, that night now belongs to all of us.

Just as live recordings became a staple of jazz and later rock, Granz's national and international "JATP" tours also more or less invented the form for future acts. Granz went on refining his vision of providing jazz musicians with both decent exposure and appropriate pay, regardless of race. Such a thing seems perfectly reasonable now. In 1944 it made for a damned joyous revolution.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.