

NEW HORIZONS FOR JAZZ. ON PUBLIC RADIO

By Michael Ullman
Jazz critic, *The New Republic*

Jazz, variously called America's classical music, great Black music, or -- by Whitney Balliett of *The New Yorker* -- "the sound of surprise" has been played on riverboats, in slums, on the White House lawn, in speakeasies, in garish and dingy nightclubs, as well as in the great concert halls of the world. The music has reached Europe, South America, Africa and certainly Japan, where recordings deemed "unmarketable" in this country are being issued and reissued to avid audiences. Jazz has influenced all kinds of popular music and is at last being taken seriously by some academics and scholars.

In the discovery of jazz, radio has always played a key role. In fact, jazz had its greatest popularity during a time when live broadcasts were typical of late night programming. Well-known jazz critic Leonard Feather reminisced about jazz on radio in a recent article for the *Los Angeles Times*: "Many of today's jazz fans were introduced to this music on what were known as 'sustaining' (i.e., nonsponsored) late-night remotes. Many of these shows featured the eagerly awaited sounds of the big bands. At the risk of waking up late and almost missing grade school classes, millions of young Americans waited for their nocturnal kicks. Would Duke Ellington be on tonight from the Hurricane? Would the Grand Terrace send forth Earl Hines' big band sounds over the Blue Network? Was John Kirby still jumping at the Pump Room? Count Basie at the Lincoln? Later, legendary saxophonist Charlie Parker was heard from the Royal Roost and Birdland in New York City. Live radio was where one turned to hear the newest sounds.

Unexpectedly -- more than forty years later -- the tradition of live radio jazz was resurrected by National Public Radio. One need not remember remotes from the Royal Roost to appreciate NPR's *jazz alive!*, a weekly 90-minute program that brings live and taped performances from around the world. More than 200 NPR member stations now carry the series which is produced by Tim Owens and hosted by Dr. Billy Taylor, himself a respected jazz pianist.

Owens is only 31, but he has been involved in radio since age 16. "The music that was broadcast on the air in the 30s and 40s was creatively more powerful and intense than the music presented on *JAZZ ALIVE!*," says Owens, although his tastes in jazz could hardly be called parochial. Since 1977 *JAZZ ALIVE!* has presented Ella Fitzgerald and Roy Eldridge, as well as performances by avant-garde musicians Anthony Braxton and Archie Shepp. The program's diversity extends from the small Dixieland group of Wild Bill Davison to the big band swing of Lionel Hampton; from the intimate singing of the late Irene Kral to the dynamic brass of the Frank Capp/Nat Pierce Juggernaut. The show's format is designed to present lesser-known artists -- among them Ran Blake, Dave Frishberg or Niels-Henning Orsted Pederson -- prior to the headliner's performance, offering Americans a chance to discover a wide range of music styles and performers.

Despite his success, Owens is extending his sights. *JAZZ ALIVE!* has begun broadcasting via satellite, an innovation that improves sound quality and makes possible more truly live shows such as last year's 8-1/2-hour New Year's Eve program, broadcast sequentially from Washington, D.C., Chicago and San Francisco throughout the evening. "Audiences were able to celebrate New Year's Eve three times that evening with some of the greatest jazz groups," says Owens.

It's believed to be one of the longest live jazz shows ever carried by a network. Other specials coming up include a live broadcast in October featuring New York's famed Jazzmobile (founded by Billy Taylor) and a possible live New Year's Eve show from four cities this year. The new season includes an outstanding lineup of talent. The *JAZZ ALIVE!* fall schedule kicks off with "The Blues is a Woman," a critically acclaimed concert from the 1980 Newport Jazz Festival and a special program originating from Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Other programs will feature the likes of Jaki Byard, Jack DeJohnette, the Mel Lewis Orchestra and the World Saxophone Quartet.

Owens wants *JAZZ ALIVE!* to create and produce more concerts of its own, such as "Billy Taylor and Friends," which was broadcast last year. *Newsday* called that show "entertaining, illuminating and not without its share of thrills..."

Today, *JAZZ ALIVE!* is National Public Radio's number one performance program. Owens, Taylor and their staff have proven that live jazz can still grab millions of listeners, though one might still be nostalgic for the bleary-eyed school children Leonard Feather remembers.



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First, there's that voice, described variously as "a positively enthralling falsetto," a soaring, leaping, inspirational thing, "a disarmingly powerful, stratospheric instrument."

There's his unerring choice of material. Sylvester never merely sings other people's songs; he totally recasts them. Witness his startling transformation of "Fever," on the new LP, from sultry torch song to kinetic dance anthem. The ballad "Change Up" (previously recorded by Jean Terrell) is likewise created anew in Sylvester's hands, as is the contemporary standard, "Cry Me a River."

Sylvester, along with his producer Harvey Fuqua and arranger Louis Small, also draws on the talents of several fine young songwriters: guitarist Greg Crockett, who wrote the supremely funky "Do It For The Real Thing" with Sylvester; Englishmen Lionel Azuly, composer to the title selection; and pianist Eric Robinson, who contributed two extraordinary tunes, "I Need You" and the ballad "My Life Is Loving You." (Robinson and bassist Ron Carter provide accompaniment on the latter.)

"Now To Me, 'My Life Is Loving You' is the most interesting song on the whole album," says Sylvester.

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