

Fritz's Remarks On 30 Years Of Jazz Spectrum

On May 8, we celebrated 30 years of Jazz Spectrum. Marlon Kiser, the President and CEO of WGTE Public Media, marked the anniversary and thanked Fritz for his years of dedicated service. Fritz then spoke.

Thank you, Marlon, for those immensely touching words. It's been a privilege to be associated with you over the long years of our friendship. As is true of so many of our cultural and civic institutions, our public-broadcasting station in northwest Ohio is among the best in the country, and we all owe Marlon a thank you for his leadership.

I'm also thankful for all of the people at WGTE who have worked so well for so long to make Jazz Spectrum what it is. Thanks in particular to Chris Peiffer, the engineer, who week after week makes the show sound so great, taking raw grist and turning it into a show worthy of broadcast. I also want to acknowledge my friend Bruce McLaughlin, who is not here tonight. He was the engineer on Jazz Spectrum for 25 years. He was a calm and whimsical presence, and a good friend. And the world's most unlikely Charles Mingus fan.

Thirty years - as W.H. Auden would say, a nice round number. In the effort to speak about music, I think of the words of Martin Mull: "talking about music is like dancing about architecture." Or as John Coltrane said, eschewing the practice of liner notes: If the music doesn't say it, there's not much to say about it. That's been my rule over the years, and the reason that on air I say so little about the music other than identifying the musicians who make it.

But every five years or so, I allow myself the indulgence to say a few things about jazz and what it means to me. I think of Kurt Vonnegut's wise sermon, delivered at St. Clement's Episcopal Church on Palm Sunday nearly forty years ago. He spoke, as a self-described Christ-worshiping agnostic, about the Sermon on the Mount. He said that mercy is the only good idea we've had. He mused about the transporting effect music has on us, and said that maybe music is the sound of the next good idea being born.

We've nearly all been, in one way or another, lifted by music, and it matters less what music we prefer than that we allow it to have its way with us. I care not at all for the debate about what genre of music is superior, or the highest form. I yield to Duke Ellington's point: there are only two kinds of music, good music and the other kind.

My friend Scott Potter has talked to me about playing trumpet and the way that certain tunes just seem to fall comfortably on the horn. For me, jazz seems to fall comfortably on my spirit, and it has for nearly my entire life.

The question of meaning in music is vexed and vexing. For one, a piece of music may speak of the enduring human condition; for another, the same piece may speak of heartache, or the tenderness of first love. So I'd prefer to speak not about the meaning of music, but, rather, about what the form shows us.

Jazz, in its early second century, is aging better than the country where it was born. So perhaps we can take from it certain lessons that will serve us well, precepts we would do well to honor.

Jazz is characterized by open-mindedness, and its near cousin, mindfulness: a close attention to the present, a sensitivity to what is happening, and an authenticity in responding to it. Improvising musicians accomplish this intricate ballet at an exceptional level of proficiency, poignancy, and purpose

Jazz also reflects the collective's tolerance for individuality, for the unique style, sensitivity, and synthesis that each of us brings to our lives and our concourse with others.

And the act of creating jazz reflects each artist's sincere interest in the worthiness of the visions of others, honoring their expression without preconception or orthodoxy, and evaluating its value without *a priori* categories of worth.

I believe the art of jazz has exhilarating philosophical implications. Five years ago, if memory serves, I was intrigued by what jazz can teach us about the relationship between the individual and the group, and the way each enhances the other.

This year, I am thinking about what the music tells us about the crucial balance between respect for tradition and the thrill of innovation. For that is what the improvising jazz musician balances in virtually every moment of music-making - honoring the tradition of the song itself - its rhythmic and harmonic structure - as well as the entire history of jazz, while at the same time finding something new to add, a new filigree on the melody of the song, a new way thinking about new directions in jazz. This seems to me to be distilled in the phrase of Lester Bowie, the brilliant co-founder of the Art Ensemble of Chicago - Ancient to the Future. That is the path of jazz; it always has been, and it will be.

As for what's to come, I'll quote Lester Bowie again: Asked, "Is jazz as we know it dead," he said, wickedly, "It depends on what you know."

What I know is that the first thirty years of Jazz Spectrum have been an apprenticeship. Now comes the fun.

Thanks to all of you who made time to be here tonight and who have given me the privilege of spending this time, and the occasional Saturday evening, with you.