

Art Pepper's Not the Same
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With a laureate's fervor, Alfred Lord Tennyson once cried, "Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change."

The poet was, of course, playing it safe. Because what the society of his time, and, indeed, the world at large was engaged in, as now and forever, was the process of constant change.

In the context of the world of jazz though, Tennyson's phrase "ringing grooves of change" seems oddly apt when applied to much of the jazz record output these days and the changing styles of the players.

Alto saxophonist Art Pepper is a perfect case in point.

A little more than five years ago, Pepper said that Zoot Sims was "the most natural, swinging musician I've ever heard. I think I could achieve complete satisfaction playing with him in a small group. Add Miles [Davis] for the third horn, and going to work each night would be the ultimate."

Perhaps Pepper still feels this way about Sims. The point is, though, he shows no inclination to speak of the tenorist anymore. At least the altoist did not so incline in a recent interview that centered about Pepper's present approach to improvisation and the reasons for his radical switch from the style identified with him for the last 15 years to the rawly emotional outbursts on his horn to which he exposed audiences at Shelly Manne-Hole in Hollywood recently.

John Coltrane appears to have displaced Zoot Sims as Pepper's current weathervane and symbol of continuing change. And the altoist makes an emotional case for the switch.

Since returning to active playing (he had been serving a jail term for violation of narcotics laws), Pepper said he has had laymen come to him and complain that the saxophone has been "destroyed" for them with the advent of the Coltranes, the Eric Dolphys, and the Charles Lloyds. Stan Getz, Pepper said, is held as paragon by such persons; Getz plays "pretty" and "right." The others, according to the objectors, he went on, sound as if they are mutilating the saxophone.

Pepper disputed this. "You listen to Coltrane," he argued, "on that spiritual he recorded, and it's the most beautiful thing in the world. As far as anybody knowing how to play a saxophone, all you have to do is go back to his old recordings. I don't see how anyone, including Bird, could possibly run through changes the way Coltrane did on that record. He's just a master on the instrument." The performance Pepper referred to is "Spiritual," included on the album John Coltrane Live At The Village Vanguard..

"When he does things that sound 'ugly,'" Pepper continued, "he may make just a squall, or just a double-octave sound or something. It's just an emotional thing; it's not meant to be pretty. If he wanted to play pretty--that is, if he had a 'pretty' emotion going--he would play pretty. But he doesn't play that way; he feels emotional.

"It's a thing of the times. You're ridding yourself of frustration, of hatred, suppression, every other thing. It's just complete freedom of expression."

He qualified the last statement, though. "It's not completely free, naturally, but it's certainly much more free and much more rewarding and true, and it's a much more honest feeling of the person

playing. You're hearing him as he really is; much more so than you ever did before. When the occasion warrants playing beautiful, he'll play beautiful. When it's supposed to be just a swinging, kind of funky little thing, he'll do that too. There are all kinds of facets. It's endless."

If all this would appear to indicate that the musical change in Pepper is fundamental, he denies that it is particularly new to him. He insisted he had been trying to change his playing from his "earliest beginnings" on the horn. The major qualitative change, however, he said came about as "natural" and "just a combination of hearing the things that I had done with my finding out so many things that I didn't like and then just changing these things." He paused.

"When I don't change anymore," he pointed out, "then there's no point in playing anymore, of actually trying to do anything different or trying to play modern. After you reach a certain point when you no longer improve, then you just stay the same."

If there is one basic menace to his playing Pepper now opposes with all his will, it is that he "stays the same." He declared that this always was his point of view, despite the many years of developing a style that many consider crystallized into one of the most individual styles in modern jazz. Pepper seems unimpressed by such critical evaluations. He said he felt as if he were locked in a box--and tied hand and foot, to boot. Lately, he said, his thinking in music changed because he realized that, rather than playing "perfect," i.e., playing what he knew to be "right," he would have to follow the conviction of instinct and deep personal emotion in his horn playing.

Speaking of things past, he said, "A lot of times I wanted to play things that I felt, emotional things...like making different sounds. But I was afraid to do it because I was afraid that people would put me down for it. Then I finally realized where jazz was going and that things are free now."

Obviously Pepper believes that jazz is going in his direction. To the altoist the mechanics of running the chord changes on a standard 32-bar song is as outdated as the icebox. He explained that everybody from Charlie Parker to Coltrane have worked their magic on the chord changes, changed the chords, used substitute chords, and so on. But this, Pepper said, is limiting. Why?

"You might start out to play a tune," he explained, "but before you get into the tune, rather than start out with the melody line, you might want to build the mood--then you're playing a free-type thing. Instead of just playing the tune itself, you're playing a modal-like thing, maybe in a certain scale or a certain key or just completely free. Then, after you finish that, all of a sudden you build yourself to an emotional pitch to play the tune--whether it's exciting, or sad, or melancholy, or whatever it might be--all of a sudden you just go into the tune. Now after you play the tune, suddenly you might get a feeling of emotion--you might really get excited or something--and rather than just continue playing the way you'd been, you might just want to go off on a trip, you know?"

This is the kind of key to his emotional freedom that Art Pepper said he determined to seek from now on. In his present view, the approach is conducive to a deeper level of expression for the jazz artist than has hitherto existed--for him at any rate.

"It gives you a freedom," he said.

"My idea [of playing] is just an emotional thing," Pepper went on, "to really be able to let your emotions come out of the horn. In playing tunes that are opened up, you have little interludes in them. There are also modal-like tunes where you're just playing maybe one change, just one scale for a long time. But every time you play the tune it's a different thing, because it's very difficult to feel in the same emotional state every time you play. So it makes the tune different.

One time you might really stretch out on it, and another time you might not open it up hardly at all."

This, he said, is where the group comes in: if one has a rhythm section comprised of musicians who listen to each other and to the horn player, and if all are playing together, when the lead voice goes into a new idea or heads in a different direction, then all will follow the same path. Theoretically, at least. Naturally, this concept is not without its pitfalls.

"It's almost like a chamber group, a modern chamber group," Pepper observed of the "free-group" concept. "One member excites the other. But there's always a problem...say, when the horn player's playing, perhaps the rhythm section sometimes will go into excitement quicker than maybe the horn player is ready to go into it. That's a problem, and you just have to go along with it. If a group could play together long enough and get to where the musicians really had an affinity for each other and would listen to each other at all times, I think that after a certain length of time the drummer, say, would feel when the horn player was ready to go into a different type of mood, and he would adapt his own mood to the horn player's."

In the case of the current Art Pepper Quartet--Frank Strazzeri, piano; Hersh Hamel, bass; Bill Goodwin, drums--which attempts to function successfully along the lines of performance outlined by the leader, the four individuals attempt to express themselves on two levels: as interacting members of the group and as distinct individuals within the group but in a new way. How, Pepper was asked, does this group concept affect jazz as we have known it?

"It's complete freedom," he replied easily. "Like, instead of the bass player just playing 4/4 and running through the changes, he's listening to what's going on. It's so advanced technically, and his approach to his playing is altogether different than bass players used to play. Instead of just playing the time, he's still playing the time but is adding little figures, little rhythmical things that add to what the horn player is doing. The drummer is doing the same thing. And the piano player has to play altogether differently too. Instead of playing the changes, he's got to listen to what's happening with the whole group and maybe play just one or two little notes now and then or just some type of little pattern, maybe a repetitious little figure over and over again."

"It's really difficult," Pepper added. "You really have to listen and think. But it's very rewarding when it happens."

How often does it "happen" for a contemporary audience? How much is affectation and pretense and fad-following? Moreover, when it "happens" with the musicians onstand, when the player is truly making it, how does the audience know?

Pepper seemingly is untroubled by the possibility of problems in this area.

"You're trying to relate yourself to the audience much more than before," he said. "When the audience hears a group now, they should really be able to feel the person that's playing--completely--if that person is making it."

And how does the audience know if he's making it?

"It should be obvious," Pepper replied. "If something is good, I still believe that people will know it's good, that it's right; and they'll have a feeling for it. If they don't feel it, then something must be wrong with the playing."

Of audiences, he said he doesn't feel they are allowing themselves freedom and insists that they must.

"They have to be free, too," he said, "the same as the musicians. They have to come in and listen freely with open minds and listen to have an emotional experience--whether it's pretty or whatever it might be."

But Pepper is not autocratic on the subject. Nor does he play completely for himself on the premise that his own self-expression is the only element that counts.

"I'd like to have the audience like the playing too," he said. "You just have to try to meet them halfway at a certain point. That's why I'm playing standards. But I'm playing them differently, opening them up a little bit and injecting a little more into them."

Returning to the innards of his approach to his instrument, Pepper commented on the contrast between today's jazzman and the attitude fostered by traditional teaching and training methods and philosophies.

"Everything is changed," he said with perhaps a touch of awe. "The way you play a chord is changed. The whole thing is changed. The way I would run a certain series of changes or think about them or look at them or approach them before, I don't approach them the same way anymore. Because I just got tired of the way I was approaching them. I didn't like it."

"I feel that if I'm going to be a jazz musician, I have to do what I feel. I can't see doing anything just to be doing something. When I feel that I'm changing or trying to do something new, and actually don't feel it inside, then it's useless. I think that a lot of people get lost sometimes because they are trying to express themselves and trying to be free. That's something that's very, very difficult to do. Sometimes you feel in that mood and can make it. At other times you don't. I believe the reason that some guys play real long choruses now, like Coltrane, is because they're searching."

To Pepper, the search is more than restlessness, albeit artistic--it is integral to his existence as a musician. As he views it, when a musician gets on the stand and plays something he knows he can do excellently because he's done it many times before, he is proving nothing. The musician is wasting his time and that of the audience, Pepper said. The altoist said that, for him, the essence of creation is the search and the striving and that there is almost a mystique attached to a musician reaching his "thing" in a moment of supreme creation and the listeners instinctively knowing, and grasping, what is happening. Pepper said he is confident such revelation exists.

His final comment was a plea in behalf of all the strivers and explorers, the "freedom" blowers, the new-thingers, the expressionists, the avant-gardists, call them what you will.

"If the people," Pepper mused, "would just come into a club and sit down and just listen. Just listen."