

Wayne Shorter's "Creativity and Change"

by Wayne Shorter

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Tenor saxophonist/composer Wayne Shorter first came to prominence with Art Blakey, with whom he played from 1959–1963. Since 1964, he has been a member of Miles Davis' group. His most recent recordings under his own name are The All-Seeing Eye (Blue Note) and Adam's Apple (Blue Note). He won the 1962 DownBeat Critics Poll Talent Deserving of Wider Recognition award as a composer.

Art. Art as a competitive thing among artists. I've been wondering how it has come about that art *is*, in fact, a competitive thing among artists. I wonder if artists choose to compete among themselves, or are they goaded, pushed or lured into it as a result of the makeup of this particular society? I wonder if a young musician, hearing another musician, has an instinctive desire to compete with this other musician or instead to join forces and compare notes? I wonder if the two of them were to get together and compare notes, and their notes were appraised by a third party, the critic, would these two artists be so influenced by what the third party says that they would strive to compete with one another to please the critic? In addition, the critic speaks to a fourth party, the public, and in pleasing the critic do you please the public?

I wonder if a poll or a contest is valid to give artists an incentive to create, to go on, or to run the mile in less than a minute. Is art an art or a sport? I think polls, awards and Oscars come right out of the school system—the star you get on your paper, the A B C D mark. If we could rid of the stigma that grading over such a long period of time has produced, I think we might have a clearer idea of what a person does when he is creating something. For instance, if a person wins first place in a category in the arts through a voting system, and he feels good about it, is he actually going to create or merely perpetuate the poll system?

It's hard to get away from voting or polls all the way, because, if you're going to play for an audience, the applause is the same thing in miniature size. Some people even consider applause as greater than a citation or trophy. Applause *is* gratifying to me and a lot of other musicians. Some musicians would deny it, but I know how they feel inside. I cannot say truthfully that lack of applause is *not* gratifying for me, because I can't say that lack of applause means lack of recognition. That has happened to me quite a bit, especially when I first started out. Even now it happens sometimes, but then when I come down from the bandstand, someone will come up and say something profound about the whole set, not just about me. This one person sounds like he's speaking for the whole audience, and he might say, "That was a deep set—a lot of thought going on." I think in that sense he was trying to say that there was no room for applause—they didn't want to disturb the essence of the moment.

Does a person create because of recognition by a large body, and, if he is recognized, does he stop creating? I wonder if any artist can grade himself, using himself as his own

ruler? Maybe that has to be taught. I've rarely had a teacher who said, "I'm going to teach you to grade yourself against yourself, use yourself as your own incentive force." You can draw power, drive, from yourself, from nature and not necessarily from another person. It's hard to do, but once you know what it is and you start to reach for it, it's really something. If anyone has seen *2001: A Space Odyssey*, it's like reaching for that black monolith, that symbol of Why and What and Where. If you're curious enough about yourself, you don't have too much time to be curious about what the next person is doing. You don't try to compete with something superficial and exterior, a "keeping up with the Joneses" idea. I think that if artists learned to use themselves as their own ruler, then audiences would have to learn to do this too. When they go to see Broadway plays, they won't have to read what the critic says.

Who decides what is good art? It's a highly individual thing, with or without a body of people calling themselves critics or an audience calling themselves critics. A lot of people do not want to be individual thinkers and analyze something by themselves, so they turn to polls and awards to make up their minds that way, they might miss a lot of creative people who have something to give, without asking for something in return. When an artist creates he can feed the soul, heal the soul, make the soul well, but a lot of people in an audience listen not with their souls, but with computerized minds, assembled and conditioned by the system which includes polls and awards.

I wonder if those who believe in polls and awards believe that they are building a bridge across a body of water for someone who can't swim. The polls may be like water wings, but there'll come a time when you have to take those water wings off. What I'm worried about is the perpetuation of water wings and bridges. I don't believe that the designer, the critic, really perpetuates it, although he has an advantageous perch. The only one who can perpetuate it is the person who needs it. As I write now, I'm trying not to sit in judgment, because everything is en route, everything is in the interim. If I were to judge, I might as well try to get a great big pencil about the size of the sun, and put a period on this Earth. That would be supreme judgment.

If a critic has the job of criticizing and rating records, and he is torn between giving record A a high rating and giving record B a lower rating, and the reason he is torn is that the musicians on record B, while not as good, are trying very hard, and he doesn't want to step on the toes of the musicians on record A, that's a hard thing to be confronted with, especially if that's your job. His job and his conscience...his conscience is a job too. If he made up his mind to give record A a higher rating and record B a lower rating, and musicians on record B were very honest, I think that, though they may be hurt, along with honesty comes a kind of strength. But would their efforts to get a higher rating bypass real creativity? I suppose it's up to the musicians to rely on their strength to know which way to go, no matter what who says.

Is creativity good, in the sense of originality? How can you be *so* original, when you walk a little bit like your mother or father, or have the color of your father's eyes, or you make a gesture and someone says, "You did that just like your father used to do." Charlie Parker, for example, said that when he was young, his idols on the alto saxophone were

Rudy Vallee and Jimmy Dorsey. If you've heard Bird, and if you've heard Rudy Vallee and Jimmy Dorsey, I think you'd have to dig very deep, tear off many layers of wallpaper before you could find any similarity in sound, approach or technique. I would say that the only thing that would confirm what Bird said about his admiration would be the sophistication of his approach. It's the sophistication of Westernized music, Western scales. But let's go back even further. Western scales came from around Greece, Jerusalem and Arabia. They're *world* scales, really. People are taught music history this way, separating Western music from Eastern music, but I think it's one big circle. It's hard to keep from using labels. For instance, when I said that Bird idolized Rudy Vallee and Dorsey, some people's minds would *stop* and they'd say, "Ooo, that's who he dug!" But I tend to use those names as a springboard into history, going all the way back to the great explosion that started this planet. You can't just go on what Mr. X said, you've got to do a little thinking of your own.

We hear a lot of the word "freedom," and if you're going to have freedom, a critic has to have freedom too. A lot of critics don't consider criticism a job. With some, it's a very esthetic thing. When they put their thoughts on paper about something they've seen or heard, they've more than seen or heard it. They get involved in it. I'm not saying that they get so involved that they get so involved that they're "swayed," because a *great* critic can retain a helluva sense of balance. When reading his words on paper you can feel that, actually, he's not criticizing something—his words turn into a poetic thing, become an extension of the art experience. At the same time he's not putting anyone or anything up on a pedestal. Art comes first—the Baby, save the Baby!

I'd like to return to the other side of competition—the joining, the getting together, comparing notes. When I was 16 I used to get a copy of a magazine that had articles about a musician who was playing a new music called bebop, and I heard Charlie Parker and Bud Powell on the radio. I had to get to New York...because of reading about how things had started at Minton's, where a lot of getting together and comparing of notes had been going on. A number of musicians then were thrown together out of poverty. They lived together, cooked together...they even help bury each other. Today, the ones out the '40s who have made it, the ones who have their own groups now, can always remember the togetherness they had then, but through their fame they have to travel their separate roads. There's some resurgence of that now among the younger musicians—the wanting to get together. They want to get together in large numbers—the big band thing, the studio thing. A few musicians have studios where they can teach students and at the same time get together, but the jam session thing is gone. That was the other way of getting together...just jamming.

I hear all across the country, "Where can I go to play, where can I go to be heard, what is it like in New York?" It's the same old question, but New York is not the same old New York, as far as being in the center of almost anything. When I finally did go to New York in the days when I commuting from New Jersey with my horn, I remember just before I was drafted into the Army, I went to a place called Café Bohemia. Charlie Parker had just died, and I walked in with my horn. There was a drummer there who now lives in Europe; there was an organ player who just got in town (he's very big today), and an alto

saxophone player who's very big today had just arrived. They were all on the bandstand with Oscar Pettiford. I had a chance to sit in with them. Everyone was together, liking each other. When we got down from the bandstand we were shaking hands and talking, and you could see the light in all these people's eyes as if they were making plans for getting groups together out the people who were there. I was feeling kind of bad because I was going into the Army and I didn't know whether I was going to be included in those plans. When I went into the Army, I felt, "That's the last of the jam session thing," but when I got out it was still perpetuating a little bit. There was enough jam sessions going on so that well-known musicians could get around to know people and see who they would like to hire.

Getting started means getting confidence, putting yourself in a context. Being around musicians who are playing, meeting them, talking to them, you're getting conditioned. You're watching how a musician walks up to the microphone and plays, or how another may shy away from the spotlight. You make up your mind how you want to be, because the way you are does affect what comes out of the horn. You can produce barriers or shyness, barriers of lack of confidence, or barriers of over confidence. You have to get your own balance together.

I guess I was pretty lucky, because even when I was in the Army, I had a chance to work with one of the well-known groups. I was stationed in the East, Ft. Dix, so I was not far from the Blue Note in Philadelphia, and not far from New York and Washington, D.C. I was there one night when I *really* heard Coltrane (I had heard him before in New York but I *really heard* him this night. He was breaking away from something.) I would be in New York on a weekend pass, playing, and Coltrane would come out of nowhere and we'd talk. As a result, when I got out of the Army, Trane and I spent a lot of time together in his apartment in New York. We spent a lot of time together in his apartment in New York. We spent a lot of time at the piano, and he was telling me what he was doing, which way he was going, and what he way trying to work on. We'd stay all day and all night. I would play the piano and he would play his horn, then he would play the piano and I would play my horn. That kind of getting together is not going on too much now. Maybe in certain areas of New York, musicians who live in the Village who have lofts can get together. I'd like to see more of it. I'd like to branch out and help this thing get going. On my next record date I'd like to do a large thing, maybe 19 or 22 pieces, and call on those musicians to help perform this work. While recording, I'd like to create the atmosphere that we're not just at a recording session. I've written something down but we'll have a jam session spirit.

The term "musician" can become a hard shell. You can become callous and impersonal, but there's still a human thing there. For example, two musicians will meet in Europe (it always happens in a way out place somewhere), and they belong to two different schools of music, but they will be glad to see each other, shaking hands and talking. I had a long talk with a very well known saxophonist in Switzerland—some people call him the father of the jazz saxophone. We were just sitting there and I asked him how he was doing, and before he said he was doing all right, he started talking about economics. It was as if I were at home talking to an uncle. In the back of my mind I was thinking of people who

admire people; a young fan of 17 for instance. If he could see a young musician that he knows and an older musician he would feel, "Wow, there they are *together*." I used to feel the same way.

In Paris in 1961 (I went to Paris with a well-known group), the bandleader walked into my room along with Bud Powell. We all sat around and then everyone left except Bud Powell. He looked at me, my horn was on the bed, and he said, "Can you play something for me?" I said okay, and I was thinking about when I was 17 and had to sneak into Birdland and sit way in the back and watch Bud play. I picked up my horn and tried to play one of the things he wrote named after his daughter, "Celia," and then I tried something else of his, just playing the melody. When I finished he looked at me and smiled, didn't say anything else, got up, kept smiling and walked out.

At this point in my life, when I see people who are famous and great, I don't want to ever lose the memory of the awe I had when I was younger. I don't want to become so sophisticated and confident that I can say "We're all in this together"—a sort of smug "thing." Now, when I am in the company of a large number of great musicians, I feel very comfortable and I can see them as human beings, see myself as a human being among them, and respect and dig whatever they have produced through the years.

Where is the new music going? I don't know if that's as important as where did it come from, because if you know where it came from, it's going anyway. I don't like labels, but I'll say "new music" anyway—total involvement. When you're playing, the music is not just you and the horn—the music is the microphone, the chair, the door opening, the spotlight, something rattling. From soul to universe.

I saw something on television where they had total involvement. Two men were discussing what was about to happen. Then there was a little ballet. It started and the camera went from the dancers to the two men talking, and they were a part of the ballet, still talking about it. I liked that, as a start.

I think this is a very exciting time to live in. Some people are concerned with an end of things. Then, all of a sudden you hear a small voice say, "this is a renaissance." Things are happening now that have never happened in history and art will reflect this. Everything is speeded up so you can see the change and feel yourself changing. Those who don't change, who refuse to change, can feel themselves not changing, and some of them don't like it.

Everytime we go to California, I always make it a point to go to Berkeley. I've visited the homes of students out there. Some of them are 14 years younger than I am, and everything was very communicative. I found it easy just to be *me*, not to be young. We were all together. No one asked me my age. They want change.

About certain people being reluctant to change for the betterment of all concerned—I find that the people who find it easiest to change and keep evolving, who don't want a status quo, are able to move around. A person who is stationary finds it difficult to

change. In the business I'm in, we move around and travel like troubadours. We are not bound to any city government or neighborhood government. The students I met out in California live in Berkeley and go to school there, but I noticed that they kept moving around. They'd go to San Francisco, then to L.A. and up to Seattle, then all the way to New York, and then back to school.

I saw evidence of a great change when we played two concerts at Berkeley. One change was this—the concert was given by a 21-year-old Chinese girl, a jazz impresario. She told me she had been listening to jazz since she was 8. She put on the concert with a lot of opposition from the school staff about allotting money and other things, but she worked and did it. She had some of the most well known names in jazz. At the last concert she gave, there were over 20,000 people at the Greek Theater in Berkeley. The audience was rock 'n' roll oriented and most of the people had never seen these artists before and had rarely heard them. I saw them turning their ears to jazz, something they had never really heard. They focused their attention and they listened with a lot of respect and at one point they kind of went wild with applause.

When I hear a jazz musician say, "Well the young people—rock 'n' roll is their thing—they're not going to even listen to jazz"—I think that they'll change and grow up. Rock 'n' roll is changing with them. I'm hearing a whole lot of things from them. The "labels" are being taken off the bottles. As I said about the different scales, Western and Greek, it's all one big thing. I saw kids with their long hair, beards and sandals sitting right down in front of the bandstand and they were part of a thing called jazz. The same thing happened in New York at the Village Gate. I met a lot of young people there, and I spoke to one person who had long hair and everything. I'll describe the way the person looked and then you'll have to piece together how he looked and what he does. He had long hair, beard and moustache, and he had on beads, a buckskin jacket, and an Apache head wrapping. He writes opera! He came to listen to the music labeled jazz, and he's meshing and welding what he knows about sound with what he hears everywhere. He said, "I have to be here. It's part of the thing."

East and West I saw evidence of a meeting of minds. The change I like is always that getting together. The person who has been labeled hippie and rock is breaking out and taking his own label off. The younger people will tend to look at the artists who are really doing something and use them as guides, so there's nothing really to worry about.

I'm saying all these things because I myself don't like to stand still. Art Blakey told me once, "Music is like a river. It must flow." When someone would ask, "Why does it have to flow?" he would say, "If a body of water has no inlet or outlet, it's bound to get stagnant." I doubt if you'd find anything living in it. He who drinks from it will have an awful stomach ache—or start digging six feet. Any person knows when he's stagnant. If he doesn't know, there's a whole lot of "camouflage" going on. You can be taught to know things, and you can be taught *not to know* things. If you think you're not stagnant, check yourself out.

When we played at Berkeley with a 19-piece orchestra, I looked out in the audience, I looked at Miles, I looked at Gil Evans, I looked at a 19-year-old girl who was playing harp, then in the French horn section there was an elderly man whose hair was stone white, there was a middle-aged lady playing French horn next to him, then I looked at Howard Johnson on tuba, and I said, "All ages, all ages here, and we're having a ball with sound." No one questioned "What is this—it's not normal." The young female harpist would only ask a few technical questions and that was all. That's what goes on in music, the interplay between ages. I saw life come to *life* that night. I'd like to see that with young people and the elders throughout the world. The youth can't get their hands on the *tanks*, they can't get their hands on the plans at the Pentagon and the Kremlin, they can't get their hands on the buttons, they don't have access to the material power, but if the elders are so nervous about the youngsters and they aren't getting nervous about the power they have in their hands, evidently the youngsters' *mental* power is upsetting someone.

Just recently I've been looking at clothes, and I found one place in New York where a lot of young people hang out. One thing caught me as soon as I walked in—they were playing records in the store. Everybody was looking at clothes and some people were kind of swinging and swaying to the music. I went back to the store another time—no one was buying, everyone was dancing, and the owner was dancing, too. He said, "Well, the main thing is to have some fun, as long as I can survive." He's not afraid if someone comes in the store and doesn't buy. They'll buy or trade something eventually and at the same time they're trading a little happiness. I like that approach. The same spirit—breaking up something that's stiff—happens on the bandstand sometimes. When there is an obviously straight up and down audience, sometimes I know that the musicians feel compelled to throw themselves into the music and break up the ice.

Life to me is like an art, because life had been created by an artist, the Chief Architect. Some people can only relate their soul to God. It seems as if they can only do it when it's time to go to church, or when times are hard. They think that the soul in relation to the universe has to do with religion all the time. I think part of the stiffness we see is due to that, because they cannot relate their soul to a table, for example. They can't see any practical use in relating their soul to a table, to a bug on a windowsill, to musicians on a bandstand, or a picture hanging on a wall, or salt and pepper. You can say that's going from the sublime to the ridiculous, but is it? It's like saying, "A bird does not fly because it has wings. I has wings because it flies."

People who are hung up in stiffness think in issues, broad issues, the issue of making a living, the issue of crime in the streets. The issue turns out to be a hangup—the issue of asking someone to come over to your house to have dinner. What is an attitude and how can you change an attitude? They say how can you legislate attitudes, but when you get down to the nitty gritty, you say, "Come over to my house and have dinner." Some people say, "I don't want to associate with 'outside' music, I don't want anything to do with it." What I hear from younger people is who needs that hangup, everything is everything, let it be, let's do it whenever, if I can't get you tomorrow, whenever...

Among these young people there's no room for jealousy as a force, jealousy between men and women, jealousy about things. I like to call jealousy an emotional rage, and it exists very much among the older age bracket. In the last few years I haven't heard the word "jealousy" used among the young people. When I look at some of the soap operas, I see in their conflicts that they're still perpetuating those things that the young people have almost completely eliminated.

I can't talk about music at this stage of my life without putting it in a wider context. I can't talk about social ills or goods without trying to sneak in something about art. Many musicians who came up about my time are taking care of business when they're not performing, taking care of paperwork, legal things. For a long time I used to hear, "All you've got to do is play your horn and the business will take care of itself, you'll have people to take care of business for you." I think musicians today should try to read about business and copyright laws, etc. They should know what certain words mean when they're confronted with a contract and not just look at the number of zeros attached to a digit and a dollar sign. I wonder how many musicians today have thought of drawing up wills.

Music has always played a great part in inventions. I think there may be something coming along that would be an extension of the TV set and I believe that music will play a part in it. Along with these inventions there comes a new amendment in your business mind. I've written to Washington to get the jukebox bill passed, and I know Stan Kenton's working on it. That, and royalties for the way an artist interprets a certain piece of music. No one's getting any royalties from jukeboxes. The copyright law says that royalties should be distributed to the artists in the event of any mechanical reproduction of musical sound. If they can't get the jukebox bill passed, anyone who invents something to reproduce music may look at the jukebox as a loophole, since it would be advantageous for him not to pay the people whose music is being reproduced.

I mentioned the idea of "total involvement." Everything I've said about art, about youth, about business, indicates that the music and musician of tomorrow will be totally involved. Neither he nor his art will be confined to the stage.