

A RESPONSE TO BRUCE JOHNSON

by Gail Brennan

[Editor's note: Bruce Johnson began this debate with his piece "The Myth of 'The Cutting Edge'", published in the May/June, 1994 edition of JazzChord (see <https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles-11>). Gail Brennan responded in the July/August, 1994 edition of JazzChord, with his piece "A Defence of the Avant-Garde" (see <https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles-12>). In the September/October, 1994 edition of JazzChord, Bruce Johnson wrote "A Response to Gail Brennan" (see <https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles-12>). The following short response from Gail, which appeared in the Summer 1994/95 edition of JazzChord, closes this debate, unless someone else wishes to participate.]

A new picture emerges. Hitherto, Bruce had shown us only one piece in a campaign he has mounted in various high culture pamphlets. Eric Myers may recall that when he heard Bernie McGann for the first time at the Seymour Centre, he said: "I'd heard he was avant-garde, but he's actually very melodic." That Bernie was avant-garde and difficult was a widespread assumption and a frequent put-down. I have heard venue owners say they would not book the musicians I mentioned because they were "too avant-garde". A prominent rock critic expressed disbelief when I said Ornette Coleman was very rhythmic and melodic. "But isn't he avant-garde?" A musician I greatly admire was surprised I liked his record. He thought I was "into the avant-garde."

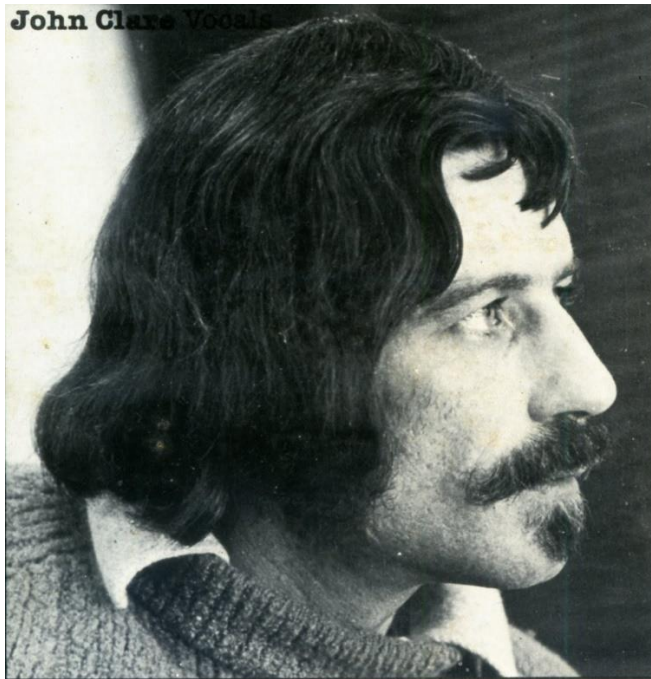


That Bernie McGann (above, pictured in 1991) was avant-garde and difficult was a widespread assumption and a frequent put-down... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY



A prominent rock critic expressed disbelief when Gail Brennan said Ornette Coleman (above) was very rhythmic and melodic... PHOTO COURTESY JOHN FORDHAM'S THE SOUND OF JAZZ

Others have asked why I write about the avant-garde. Those names are mentioned. A journalist is now preparing an article on the future of jazz. On his record and the questions he is asking, I fear an attack on organisations like SIMA, which are widely assumed to support the avant-garde. One of his interviewees described projects such as those Bruce Johnson mounts (a one-man avant-garde industry) as pretentious, or in fact a wank. I find them mysterious too, but object to such generalisations. I still maintain that it is as divisive to deride some unidentified avant-garde as it is to object to this derision. Conjure the furore if I made derisive generalisations about traditional jazz.



Gail Brennan: many musicians he loves – including Coleman, Boulez, Stockhausen and Coltrane - have been categorised as avant-garde, so he defends the avant-garde when it is attacked...

I don't know what constitutes a real or imagined avant-garde. Contrary to rumour, I'm not really interested and probably would not understand if I was told. I only know that many musicians I love – including Coleman, Boulez, Stockhausen and Coltrane - have been very definitely categorised as avant-garde. Therefore I defend the avant-garde when it is attacked. I know nothing about Greek myths or *Cosmopolitan*, so that point goes by me. Nevertheless, I did concede that someone out there might be imitating a notion of the avant-garde that exists only in the minds of arts bureaucrats. I did not know they had this described this notion in print.

When I say it is natural to borrow technological terms, I mean it in the everyday sense that it is natural enough to name a song after a city, or your own street or a Ford V8, or to pick up a ten dollar note if you see one on the footpath, or to call your music techno punk or industrial funk or whatever. Bruce's is a stricter and deeper usage. It doesn't convince me that terms borrowed from technology automatically mean what Bruce assumes they mean. Technology has never been so omnipresent as now. It would be odd if we didn't borrow its terms.

I was asked for a brief reply. We now know the identity of some of the people to whom Bruce is not referring. That's a start. It could be that none of the pretentious people he is talking about actually exist – a concept that could well be justified with a reference to Greek myth.
