

GAIL BRENNAN QUERIES BRUCE JOHNSON

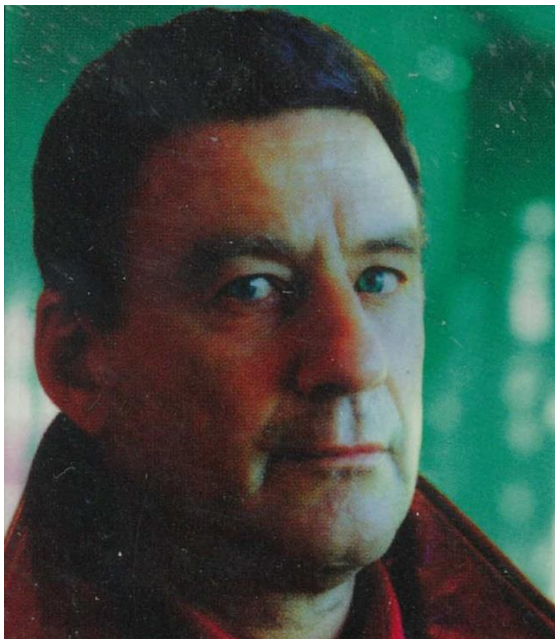
by Gail Brennan [aka John Clare]

[This response to Bruce Johnson's piece "Art, Jazz & Uncle Tom's Cabin" from Gail Brennan, was a letter to the editor of JazzChord, which appeared in the Jul/Aug, 1993 edition. Bruce was invited to respond to Gail immediately, and his response, published in the same edition of JazzChord, is included below.]

Sir,

I'm not sure who it is who "desperately asserts" that jazz is an art form, but Bruce Johnson is right: they should be stopped. In pop and rock they have the right attitude. Rock writer Nik Cohn asked, "Who needs art when you've got superpop?" In this ethos it is irrelevant that Elvis was actually a good singer. His prime virtue was to have embodied a powerful archetype of the teen imagination. The teen imagination may have been well-prepared by decades of commercial activity, but what are you going to do? - debrief them all in order to achieve a level playing field?

Rock has clearly asserted its indifference to the values of "art". In reality, of course, rock critics, and even the musicians themselves, use a parallel jargon to that of the art critic, rock imagery becomes fetishised, and in many ways rock comes to mean the same thing as art for those involved deeply in rock culture - bearing in mind that there is room in "art" for artists like Van Gogh, whose techniques are far from classical, and to whom one would never apply the term "formal purity" (colour not composition was Vincent's strong point). How will it be different when jazz comes to its senses?



Gail Brennan: Rock has clearly asserted its indifference to the values of "art" ...PHOTO CREDIT JAMES ALCOCK



Irish writer Nik Cohn, who has been described as “the father of rock writing and an epic chronicler of street culture over fifty years”: Who needs art when you've got superpop?...



Members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago (above): they offer a suitably irreverent attitude... PHOTO CREDIT ENID FARBER

The ironically named Art Ensemble of Chicago offers a suitably irreverent attitude, while Kenny Davern and Bob Wilber offer formal, high art values: the crafted surface, the well-constructed solo, the suits or reefer jackets denoting "concert artist" status - or, if not that, membership at least in a yacht club - and the feeling that their fans are very consciously connoisseurs. Look a little beneath the surface, however, and we find that the Art Ensemble have their pieties too, and their sometimes confrontationally alternative value system is no less a value system for that.



Bob Wilber (left) and Kenny Davern: they offer formal, high art values...

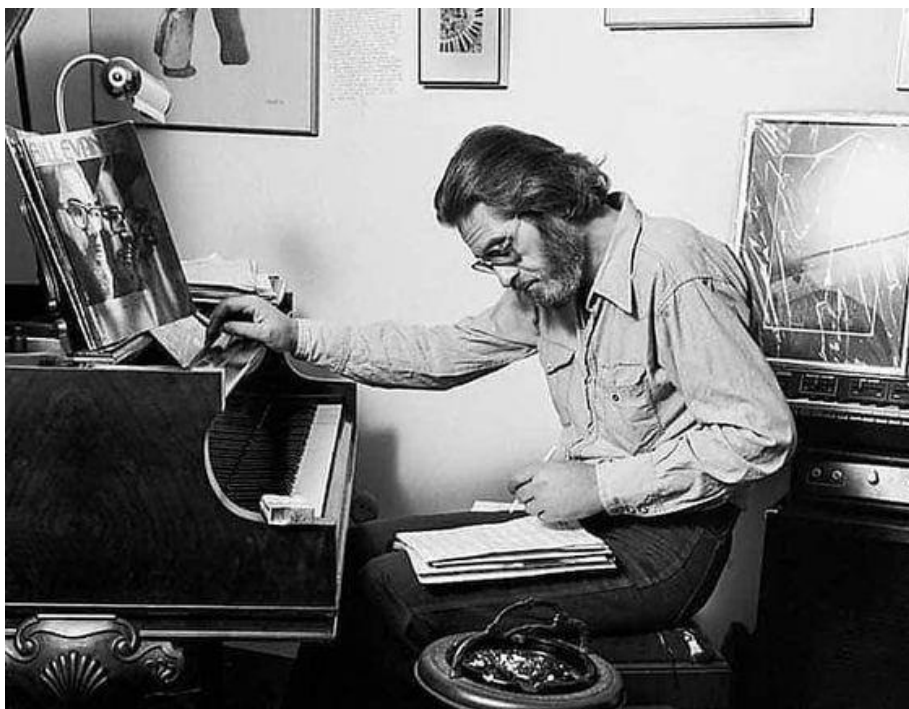
Most rock fans will agree - indeed argue passionately - that one punk band can be better than another. The same is true in all areas of jazz, even the most strenuously primitive. As soon as this happens, you have art, by whatever name you call it. Some jazz fans like to dance, or sit close to the energy of a band, to move or to shout encouragement, etc; but the majority by far prefer to stay at home and listen to jazz on record.

I too would like to see more emphasis on the event, but I remind myself that many people's social lives are not organised that way (Bruce is not himself a conspicuous consumer, gobbling the product at the moment of production) and that many of us would probably never have heard jazz if it were not for records. The Hot Fives and Sevens existed purely for recording purposes.



The Hot Five: it existed purely for recording purposes...PHOTO COURTESY RIVERWALK JAZZ COLLECTION

What, really, is wrong with listening to favourite records, some of which yield more secrets as the years go by? Am I to avoid art galleries and invade artists' studios instead, to watch them unnervingly while they enact that creation of which the finished painting is only a static record? Am I, in purging my critical vocabulary of "classical" references, to refer to chords as chords only when it is made clear that they are pronounced as in China, thus giving the appropriate untutored folk effect?



Bill Evans (above)... Gail Brennan remembers Bruce Johnson referring to Bill Evans's chords as being like bone china...PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

I remember Bruce referring to Bill Evans's chords as being like bone china. At the time I had no idea what he meant, but I can see now that this was a guide to pronunciation. More seriously, Bruce seems to be calling for a uniform approach and response to jazz. Why? Anyone who functions as a critic consciously or unconsciously does the same. We want people to see it our way. But, pinned down on the question, I think most of us would grudgingly agree that there may be other ways of appreciating the form. Not wishing to take up too much space, I will not pursue this consideration, that if you start running away from art too frantically you end up with a trivia contest, whereby flared trousers become synonymous with the 1960s, for instance, completely eclipsing less superficial and political activity.

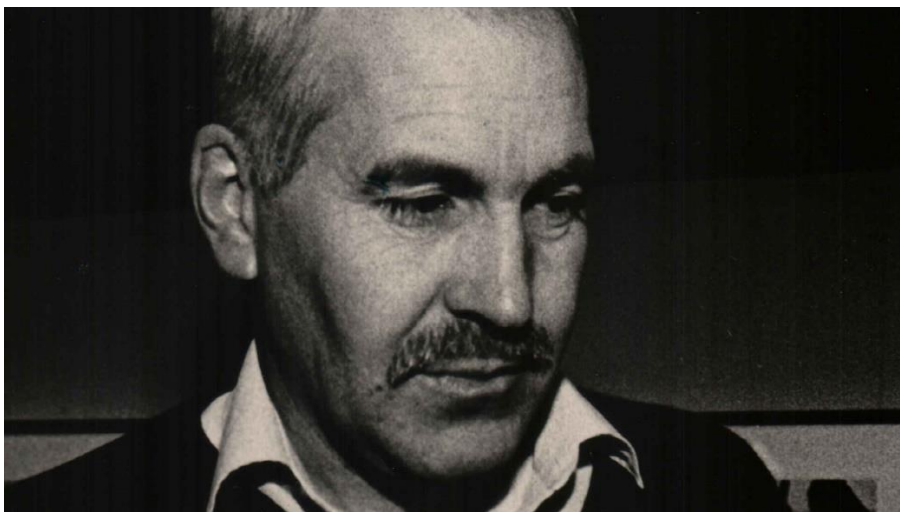
If, as I suspect, all of this is leading to an assertion that funding bodies should consider the aesthetic and social value of earlier forms of jazz, then I could not agree with him more strongly.

Bruce Johnson Responds

[This letter to the editor appeared in the same edition of JazzChord, the Jul/Aug, 1993 edition]

Sir,

I am encouraged by Gail Brennan's entry into this discussion and - my respect for his writing being a matter of record - I am complimented that our perspectives converge in important particulars. There also points at which we diverge, and these points of divergence are equally welcome. They remind us of that temperamental variety without which jazz could not exist in the first place. They provide us with a terrain for harmonising that divergence, which I suspect is part of the essence of civilisation. They provide us with an opportunity to learn things - what others think, what they might have read or listened to. They also provide a seam through which the silence surrounding the music can be opened up.



Bruce Johnson: since the demise of [the Australian] Jazz [Magazine], the discursive soil around Australian jazz has settled and compacted...PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Since the demise of [the Australian] *Jazz Magazine*, the discursive soil around Australian jazz has settled and compacted. Gail's comments display a poised good humour which is also aerating. He leavens seriousness with a lightheartedness which is part of the elegance and constructiveness of his response. I provide the following after consultation with him.

For me, his comments are particularly welcome in showing me where my own thoughts require more careful articulation. The following are a few examples. The 'desperate assertion' that jazz is an art form is one side of the most perennial debate over the music. I take this and its implications up further in "Hear me talkin' to ya: problems of jazz discourse", *Popular Music*, 12/1 (January, 1993) 1-12. I most certainly have nothing against records, without which my experience would be incalculably poorer. It is the kind of authority which the idea of the record has assumed that worries me.

Although applauded as the technology which enabled the spread of jazz, the recording is a highly ambiguous moment in the music. Many improvising musicians have found their performances constrained by expectations based on a successful recording. Recording activity is often taken as the primary index of achievement: when I was writing an account of Australian jazz, it was put to me by someone regarded as having authority in the area that the main criterion for including a musician should be recording activity. At that time (the mid-80s) this criterion would have included, for example, me, but excluded, for example, Bernie McGann. Nuff said?



Bernie McGann: if, in the mid-80s, recording activity had been a criterion for being included in an account of Australian jazz, he would have been excluded... PHOTO COURTESY BODGIE DADA & THE CULT OF COOL

Of course there is nothing wrong with listening to 'favourite records'. But when these products of a commodity economy are allowed to displace and to determine the conditions of performance of a music like jazz, there are consequences for the music that should be recognised. At the most pragmatic level, consider this sequence: there is no doubt that many musicians feel that not having made a recording reflects adversely on their importance. He/she is 'artistically negligible' until that first record appears. It is by setting up this value system that musicians are persuaded to sign away the means of livelihood, to become prisoners of political economy in exchange for the illusion of artistic legitimacy.

I'm talking about the conditions of life, here, not some abstract social theory: how musicians live, how they think of themselves and their work. Yes, the recording gives them a sense of having entered the canon; yes, it enables us to take them home and listen to them. But, yes, it also places them under the control of a commodity system which has no real interest in musical ends. It was an executive of Festival Records who said to a rock musician in the 50s, "We hate music. We'd rather manufacture silent records if we could make them sell".

The commodity based economy operates by strategic alienation - it makes spaces around and within people and inserts its mechanisms into those spaces. It makes architectural spaces, conceptual spaces, discursive spaces, gestural spaces - glamourising certain ways even of standing on a stage. It constructs mutually exclusive cultural/economic categories, then says we can be one thing or the other, but not both: performer or audience, producer or consumer. The performer is essentialised as economically inept, the audience as aesthetically incompetent, and it is into this space that a mediating economy appears.

If I can think of myself as both, I don't need a commercial mediator. We would find it exhilarating, I think, to reconsider the categories and value-systems which are so deeply embedded in a music which has not been discursively oxygenated for years. And no matter how careful, how intellectually curious we may be, these divisive and exploitative categories creep up on us. Does being a producer of jazz (a musician) mean I am not simultaneously a consumer of it (audience)?

As someone who has played gigs every week for the 20 years I have lived in Sydney, it seems to me that I am a chronic consumer of jazz at its moment of production. It is, however, the absolute (and political) distinction between producer and consumer which obscures this. To a remarkable degree, this economically based distinction is inapplicable to jazz. Audiences are also producers of the music. It is not useful to imagine that, in order to preserve some privileged status as musician, I play all these gigs with my eyes closed and my ears carefully plugged. In an improvising situation, the performer has to be also one of the most intent of audiences.

The point I am trying to make just here is: the distinction between artist and audience, imported from so-called 'art music' (and implicit in any assumption that I am not a consumer of live music, presumably because I also play it), does not fit well with conditions of jazz performance, and is held in place for reasons that are suspiciously congenial to our political economy. I also suggest that 'running away from art' does not confine us to the single alternative of a 'trivia contest'. In the

history of the human race most people have run away from art, in the sense we harness the word, and appear to have produced enrichment rather than trivialisation.



Bruce Johnson on trumpet: interrogating cultural categories which find uniformity of taste and approach so exploitatively expedient... PHOTO COURTESY JOHN SHARPE'S I WANTED TO BE A JAZZ MUSICIAN

I think it useful to keep reminding myself that, in the larger historical context, my culture's tradition of thinking about art and social relations is not 'normal' but deeply aberrant. There are other ways of thinking about cultural practice, and most of humanity has adopted them. If I appear to be calling for a 'uniform' approach and response to jazz, I am most dismayed and regretful at having expressed myself so clumsily. Everything I am saying, playing, writing, is animated by precisely the opposite intention. It is the cultural categories I am interrogating which find such uniformity of taste and approach so exploitatively expedient. I consider the articulation of harmonised 'difference' to be essential to the examination of life - without which, it has been observed, it is probably not worth living. Please, may we have more 'differences' aired, and with the openness of spirit which I hope these two contributions have clearly manifested.

Bruce Johnson's original article "Art, Jazz & Uncle Tom's Cabin", which prompted this response from Gail Brennan was published in the May/June, 1993 edition of JazzChord. It can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles-11>.