

## ART, JAZZ AND UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

by Bruce Johnson\*

---

*[Eric Myers writes: A short piece entitled “Bruce Johnson Questions Conventional Jazz Thinking” appeared in the Mar/Apr, 1993 edition of JazzChord. I was aware that, in his writings, Bruce was concerned to question a number of assumptions which were taken for granted, and which in his view have been to the detriment of Australian jazz. Those assumptions included: 1/ The analogy between jazz and so-called “art music” by which jazz is judged by the degree of its conformity to something other than itself; 2/ The “cutting edge” principle which governs funding by Government authorities and which presupposes a future (and fictitious) condition of musical perfection; 3/ The centralizing of virtuosity as an unquestioned measure of worth; 4/ The construction of a critical discourse which is product-oriented; that is, which implicitly treats the music as closed rather than open-ended and permanently unfinished; 5/ The perennial internationalization of performance and educational criteria. This piece caused some comment, and I subsequently invited Bruce to clarify some of his ideas in an article over his own by-line. Accordingly this piece entitled “Art, Jazz and Uncle Tom's Cabin” appeared in the May/June, 1993 edition of JazzChord.]*



*Bruce Johnson: questioning assumptions which in his view have been to the detriment of Australian jazz...PHOTO CREDIT YVONNE DALY COURTESY OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ*

---

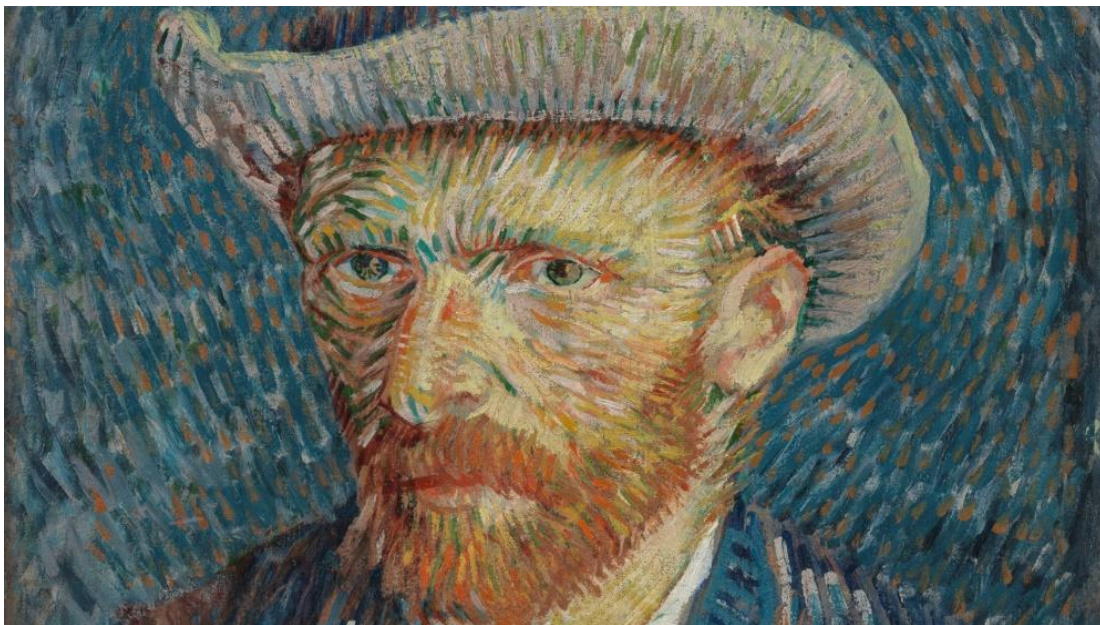
*\* In 1993 Bruce Johnson was an active, professional jazz musician, lecturer in English and cultural studies at the University of NSW, and author of the Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz.*

Since jazz emerged from its folk and geographical origins in the 20s, it has travelled back and forth across the disputed terrain between high and low culture. At various times and in various places it has been referred to as a folk form, as popular music, as art music. Its position within this field makes it a fruitful vehicle through which to study the matrix of cultural politics, by which I mean the balances of power which determine which cultural forms carry authority. Among jazz followers there has been a general tendency to advance the claim that jazz is an art form, supposedly in order to give dignity and legitimacy to its aesthetics.

Manifestations of this attempt at supposed artistic validation include a critical commentary based on so-called 'classical' music, drawing upon a vocabulary that rests upon certain hidden assumptions about the role of artist in society, the way in which art is embodied, the way it should be consumed. I would make two points:

(1) Jazz is allowing itself to play a game which falsifies it, and which it must therefore lose; and (2) It is not even a game about aesthetics, but about a political economy.

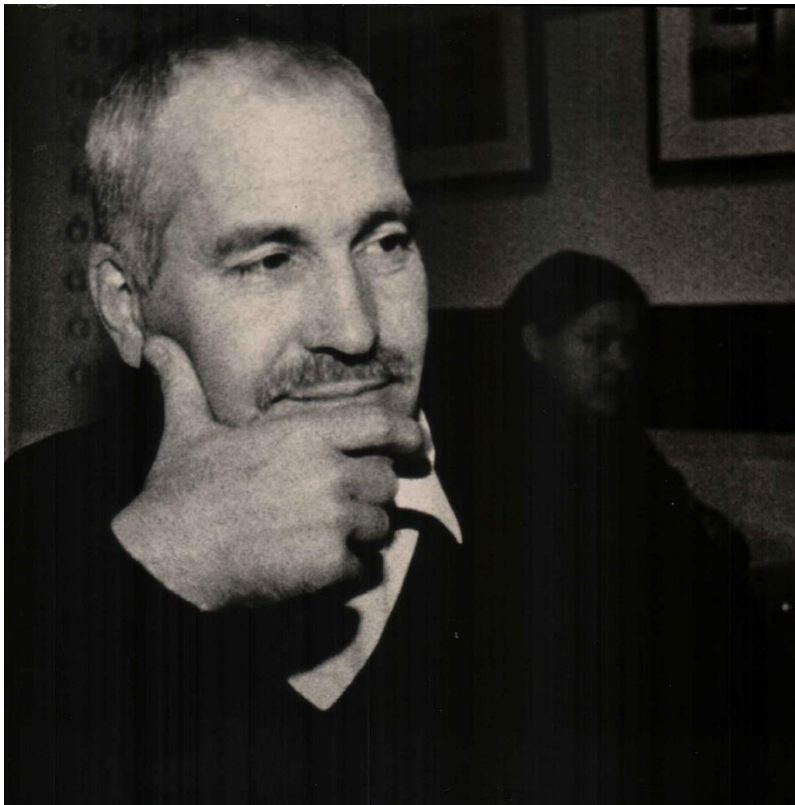
With the aid of traditional musicology, western art music has enjoyed a position of such privilege that, in our society, all other musics are subordinated to it. Western art music is taken as embodying aesthetic principles which are supreme, and two consequences of this are that a/ the vast majority of the world's music-making practices is aesthetically trivialised; and b/ any other music seeking validation has to construct itself according to the discursive procedures by which 'classical' music secures its position.



*A parvenu businessman demonstrates his power by buying a van Gogh, but the real social power of that secular icon is embodied in its massive price tag...*

For one thing, jazz (for example) feels the need to prove that it is 'art', assuming that the notion involves a kind of aesthetic purity. The first thing to be said is that 'art' as it actually functions in cultural terms, is not simply an aesthetic, but a political

notion. That is, it actually functions as an instrument by which power is exercised by one section of society over another, and the channel of this power is economic. A parvenu businessman demonstrates his power by buying a van Gogh, but in spite of critical pieties about 'genius', 'formal perfection', 'imaginative intensity', the real social power of that secular icon is embodied in its massive price tag. In that transaction, the buyer's having arrived at a position of power is proclaimed through the acquisition of a work of art - which supposedly testifies to the authority of his sensibility - but in fact the persuasiveness of the point is made not by the aesthetic character of the painting but by a purchase price grotesquely inflated by the machinery of the art market.



*Bruce Johnson: should jazz be considered an art form? ... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*

This is a very schematic way of illustrating the contention that 'art' is, certainly now, a function of a political economy. There is a limit to what price you can defend for a thing made of simple materials - metal, paper, fabric. But if you call it art, you cease to be accountable for the price tag. If you want to increase that price tag, you simply find a way of fitting it into the category 'art'. No major change is necessary to its composition - it's still the same metal, fabric paper, as before. But convincing people that it is art - whether it's a car or a comic - is one way of raising its value as a commodity, which in turn reconfirms its artistic status. In short, 'art' is now more a function of economics than of aesthetics.

To draw the artistic process into the market requires that the former conclude in a finished, static product, for it is only in this form that it can be bought and sold. That is, the primary project is to commodify the artistic process. If you can 'embody' it (as,

say, a book or a painting), then you control the circumstances of its consumption - regulate the flow of the audience through a box office, ensure that the audience can't interfere by seating them statically at a distance from the performance site, intimidate them into the convention of silence. This reinforces the fetishisation of the art process, and the romanticisation of the artist. And the function of this is to establish a space between artist and audience which can then be occupied by commercial mediators who can control the production, distribution and consumption of art. This is the reason that jazz (like other interactive, improvisational folk forms) has always been marginalised - not because it is inherently inferior, but because it happens to be a form that cannot be so easily regulated through the existing political economy.

Art music is definitively 'stored' in a score, against which all recordings and performances are ultimately judged. And a score exists in a form which can be controlled in a market place. But the centre of jazz is the moment of performance in interaction with audience; the resulting improvisation is, historically, part of its essence. The moments of production and consumption are the same - there is almost no space in there for a mediating network, except by deforming that moment, as in a concert hall where interaction is controlled or in a recording, which is only a static memory of the improvisational moment. Jazz is thus resistant to commodification. This is why it is trivialised - not because it is an inferior expressive form, but because it threatens a political economy.

Desperately asserting that jazz is an 'artform', without reflecting on the political implications of the term 'art', is to play a game that denatures jazz, that requires it to conform to conventions alien to its character. Musical Uncle Tomism. It can never win this game, and will always be apologising for itself. The project should be to set up a discourse which discloses the music on its own terms. This is not just a theoretical project. It has far reaching practical implications for the way the music is funded, promoted, taught, performed, for the quality of life of both performers and audiences.

---

*Gail Brennan's response to this article, published in the Jul/Aug, 1993 edition of JazzChord can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles-11>. Gail Brennan is a pseudonym for the writer John Clare.*