HOW WE GOT TO THE SAME PLACE (ALMOST): THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE MUSIC CALLED "JAZZ"

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO FRIENDS WHO ARE NOT MUSICIANS AND WHOSE PERSONAL HISTORIES COULD HARDLY BE MORE DIFFERENT

BY MELVIN GRIER AND STEPHEN MARINE

The Authors

Melvin Grier

Mr. Grier spent 33 years as a staff photographer for the Cincinnati Post, retiring in 2007. On assignments he traveled throughout the U.S. as well as to Cuba, Central America, Kenya, Somalia, and Vietnam. Among his awards are the Artist-In-Residence of the Robert S. Duncanson Society at Taft Museum of Art; Cincinnati Journalism Hall of Fame; National Association of Black Journalists Hall of Fame; Photographer of the Year by the Society of Professional Journalists; and Photographer of the Year by the Ohio News Photographer Association. Melvin has exhibited his work in numerous museums, galleries, and art centers, including his 2016 “Homage to a Sound”, the story of jazz music and musicians in Cincinnati. Born in 1941 Melvin grew up in Cincinnati’s West End, a section of the city largely destroyed by so-called urban renewal and the constructions of I-75. His interest in and love for photography began during his service in the U.S. Air Force in the early 1960s. He has been married to his wife Brenda Grier for nearly 50 years. They are the parents of daughter Samantha and son Miles.

Stephen Marine

Before retiring in 2015 Mr. Marine worked at the University of Cincinnati (UC) for 25 years in various positions in information technology and libraries, with an occasional assignment teaching Latin. Previously he spent about 10 years at universities in Virginia. And before that for nearly ten years he bounced from university to factory and back, learning that he did not want to work on assembly lines and collecting more degrees than he cares to talk about. His proudest professional accomplishment is leading an effort in the mid-1990s to create one of the first consumer health information web sites, and securing grants that placed computers in public locations in Cincinnati’s underserved communities for residents to access information about their health and wellness questions. Stephen is an emeritus professor at UC. He grew up in rural Ohio in a white middle-working-class family. He and Barbara Houser have been married 41 years. They have two daughters, Marta and Frankie.

Introduction

Now friends for a number of years, we met at the Greenwich Tavern one fortuitous evening. The audience was sparse, which made conversation easy between songs and sets. Neither of us is a musician, but our love for music and our life-long devotion to that music made the conversation rich. FotoFocus had just accepted Melvin's proposal for an exhibit entitled "Homage to a Sound", a tribute to local jazz players and vocalists. Stephen planned to retire within a year and offered to help with any research and writing that Melvin might need. A few months later the collaboration began with visits to local libraries, history centers, and archives, culminating in Melvin's exhibit at the Kennedy Heights Art Center. In the course of this project we discovered not only the depths of each other's passions for music, but a host of other common interests and a similar set of values despite our radically different life histories. The stark similarities and equally stark differences are what led us to the idea behind this essay: just how could two people whose journeys had covered such different terrain arrive at the same, or almost the same, musical destination? What is it about this music that engendered such deep passion in us both?

Through a series of conversations we explored those journeys, compared and contrasted our stories, and discussed just why this music affects us so deeply. We discussed specific musicians in terms of whether we liked, did not like, or were indifferent to their music, and why we either agreed or not. In these conversations we posed various questions to each other, hoping to discover and articulate certain essences that we might share. We hope we have in what follows.

One thing we agreed upon up front is that we are neither musicians nor music critics. In fact, we're not convinced that the field of music criticism is even a valid endeavor. Music description and personal reaction, however, is another matter. In our conversations we tried to describe our reactions to specific musicians and "schools" of music, without labelling the music as "good" or "lousy". You will see that this doesn't prevent us from disagreeing and disagreeing in spirited fashion, while always trying to focus on why our personal reaction is what it is.

What is your earliest memory of this music?

Melvin: When I was growing up in Cincinnati's West End, that part of the city was a "real" neighborhood. Near the Tremont Flats, where my family lived, were store-front churches. The Bible Way Church of God in Christ was a memorable one. The music that came from that church, the rhythmic chants, the call-and-response between Pastor Little Abraham and the congregation, caught my attention at a very early age. When later I heard the call-and-response riffs in songs like Bobby Timmons' *Moanin'*, it was a natural sound that captivated me. What's more, only two blocks away was the Cotton Club, a place as significant to the Cincinnati as the more famous Cotton Club was to Harlem. I was too young to get in, but I would stand near the door for hours listening to the music.

Steve: There was always music playing on the family hi-fi in our living room. This was the late '50s and early '60s. My father had spent four years in the Air Force, much of it overseas and in Washington, DC. I think his experiences broadened his view of the world. He returned to his and my mother's hometown of Bellefontaine, Ohio, with, so I'm told, a record player and a trunk full of recordings. Among my early memories are hearing records of Miles Davis, Art Tatum, Errol Garner, and Thelonious Monk. Of course, I often didn't know whom I was listening to, but years later as my interest in music grew, when I would

hear one of these recordings, my ears would cue my brain with some recessed memory: "I know that song!"

What people and experiences early in your life influenced your attitude about music?

Steve: My parents had the first and most profound influence on me. The presence of music in the house; the conversations about music; their exuberance when they returned from seeing Sarah Vaughan or Joe Williams in Columbus or Dayton; or their spirited discussions about who was the better pianist: Art Tatum or Errol Garner. Of course by my teenage years, 1966 to be exact, I was in full rejection mode. To quote the Marx Brothers, "Whatever it is, I'm against it." For ten years I listened to no jazz. Music, however, was taking up its life-long residence in my being. Rock, soul, and Motown alternated as obsessions. To this day near the top of my "desert-island" list of records is *Nothing Takes the Place of You* by the underappreciated Toussaint McCall. But I guess I wanted more, or maybe I recalled the name of a hermit crab my father had kept: Thelonious! Whatever the reason, while home from graduate school I "borrowed" several of my parents' LPs, including Miles Davis' *Friday Night at the Blackhawk*. Sarah Vaughan's *After Hours*. The rest is history, as they say.

As kid and young man I also wanted in the worst way to be a musician. Twice I had to learn the hard way that I had neither the talent nor the persistence. When I was ten, trombone lessons lasted exactly one year. The sounds coming from my dented used horn I'm sure either scared the neighbors or elicited their complaints. Later at 17, I was convinced I could learn to play piano. After all, my mother played well. I buckled down on my after-school job to pay for lessons. I stopped, frustrated, after six months. My teacher I'm sure was relieved not to see me again on Thursday evenings. What about you?

Melvin: My mother died when I was very young, but my father was a strong, supportive presence. He knew that I wanted to be a musician. I pestered him about getting a drum set, and one day he showed up with a full set in our tiny three bedroom apartment. Could I play? Well, let's say I was good enough by my teenage years to be the drummer in the Sacred Hearth Seminary band. I'm not under any delusion that I could "play" and I have had no inclination to demonstrate that ever again.

In my youth we listened to music on the radio constantly. The first song that comes to mind that really caught me was *Why Do Fools Fall in Love* by Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. Of course we all listened to Aretha Franklin, the Temptations, the whole Motown book. I first heard *Poinciana* by Ahmad Jamal while I was in the seminary, so probably about 16 or 17 years old. I'd sneak into the laundry where there was a radio, and I'd tune it to WNOP. I got lucky once when the DJ played *Poinciana*.

I think the important point is: a lot of different types of music influenced me. I don't even want to call them this type or that type. Categories are okay, and sometimes necessary when they help people understand what they are hearing. And they can help us all in promoting the music we love to others. But personally I don't hear "categories." I hear music. I think that in a nutshell is how my life and my experiences influenced my attitude about music.

How does music affect your life? What are some of the profoundest moments?

Melvin: Here's my one sentence answer. When someone asks me what is most important to me, I say, first, my family; second, photography; third, music; and fourth, the Cleveland Browns. Now you know how central music is to me. It's more important than the Browns!

Really, it's simple. Good music makes me feel good. I have to feel it. And you probably know what has done that more than any recording for the last 60 years. All I have to hear is the first three notes of *So What* on Mile's *Kind of Blue* and I'm a happy man. The first record I ever bought was Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers' *Moanin'*. But the most profound experience has to be the first time I heard John Coltrane play *My Favorite Things* – on the radio! I was young, but I can remember exactly where I was: the intersection of McMicken and Vine, right at Schwartz Point.

When I was a teenager in the mid- or late-1950s I visited an uncle in Detroit. He wasn't a jazz fan but knew I was, so he took me to a club to see John Coltrane. The place was virtually empty. Between sets Trane was sitting a table and I found the courage to approach him and ask him for his autograph. And he gave it to me! But what did I do? I gave it to a friend.

Besides these experiences, I so clearly remember hearing James Brown sing *Papa's Got a Brand New Bag* when I was stationed at Dow Air Force Base in Maine. He had almost the same impact on me on me as Art Blakey did! I remember every detail of when and where that was.

Steve: I could answer this with one sentence, a quote by the late Randy Weston: "Music is life itself." But you know I can't stop at one sentence. Music is one of the elements that make up my core. I became engrossed in music as a young teen. WONE, the pop/rock radio station in Dayton, was always blaring from my pocket transistor radio. I deliberately tried to shock my parents by blasting songs like the Rolling Stones' *Let's Spend the Night Together* from my first record player. It worked! In junior high school an influential coach, Mr. Hassel, would pick me up early so we could work out in what passed for the school's weight room at the time. 98.7 "The Soul of Dayton" kept our adrenaline pumping with Motown, Funk, and local greats like the Isley Brothers and the Ohio Players. I was getting educated in more ways than one.

But it wasn't until I heard Charles Mingus on Madison public radio 10 years later that I began to awaken some distant musical imprint from the Hi-Fi of my childhood. This was at the time Mingus was diagnosed with ALS. He would be dead within a year, but not before I had spent too much of my meager graduate school stipend on nearly 50 Mingus records. A friend who knew a little about Mingus told me I must be as crazy as Mingus himself.

To prove it's never too old to learn something, here's a profound moment, and I'm embarrassed to say it came just a couple years ago. In conversation with Eddie Bayard and Mark Lomax, master musicians and composers, somehow the topic of Kenny G came up. I offered up a snide comment and a *"pfffff"*. Eddie looked at me and said, "G's got chops. He just chose to use them in a way I wouldn't." That was a shock to my system and an important lesson for me. It really drove home that I have no right to judge *any* music. I just know what I like, what I don't like, and what I'm indifferent about. What affects me deeply, and as you said, what makes me feel good.

What musicians and music reach you most deeply?

Steve: I cannot imagine ever tiring of listening to Mingus' *Haitian Fight Song, Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting, Goodbye Pork Pie Hat,* or the entirety of *Black Saint and Sinner Lady*. What I hear is music that

on one hand is complex beyond my understanding, but at the same so affecting in its power to reach into my "soul". When I first heard Mingus I realized his music caused an emotional response no other music had the power to do. This was the late 1970s, when many of Mingus' best recordings were not available. I remember scouring the back page ads in Downbeat and Cadence for possible sources for the then-rare Mingus albums, particularly *Black Saint and Sinner Lady* and *Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus*. Remarkably, right in my back yard at the time was a dealer of rare used records. And, sure enough, he had copies of the treasures I was seeking. They didn't come cheap, especially for a student, but I would have sacrificed shoes, meals, or weed to get these records. And I did. And my life with music was forever changed. And of course there are Monk, Bird, Trane, Ornette, and on and on. Life without them is inconceivable.

Melvin: What I consider jazz is at my center. But not to the exclusion of other music. I like the popular music of JB, Aretha, the Temptations and so on. And then of course there is funk, especially George Clinton. But Miles Davis of course is my favorite. All of his classic recordings have never stopped giving me that "feeling". Records with songs like Working, Steaming, Relaxing, and Airegin, and the albums he made with Gil Evans orchestrating, are always on my playlist. Miles' later work doesn't affect me as much. I don't dislike it, but he clearly wanted to capitalize on what he saw rock musicians doing, appealing to a much larger audience and making a lot more money.

How do you explain to others why certain music has a profound effect on you, and other music doesn't?

Melvin: The very first clue as to whether I will like a piece of music is if it has a visceral effect on me. It's really the only important thing. And for it to have that effect it has to have "soul", which again is something I'm not sure I can define, but I know it when I hear it. Soul will make music resonate within me. I will physically and emotionally "feel" it. If it has no soul, I will be either bored or disgusted after a couple minutes. This notion of "soul" in music also applies to all types of art, as far as I'm concerned. If I'm looking at a photograph or painting and it has no emotional impact, if it's just an exercise in line and color, if it doesn't express something beyond its surface, it has no "soul" in my opinion, and it will have no effect on me other than indifference. Bottom line, if the music makes me feel good, it has soul. If it leaves me indifferent or worse, it doesn't.

Music that has this effect on me I never tire of listening to, because of the fact that it touches my "soul" every time I hear it. I'll give you a couple of examples. Nancy Wilson singing and Cannonball Adderley playing *Save Your Love for Me*. Each and every time I've heard it since that first time in barracks when I was in the Air Force, trying to cope with the racism, segregation, and the bureaucratic BS of the day, right up to the present day this song brings clarity to whatever the problem of the moment is. More contemporary, though recently departed, is Roy Hargrove, especially his *Earfood* album. One particular song *Starmaker* has that "soul" that keeps me coming back. It's mystical in the way it builds tension from its quiet beginning, and when it releases that musical tension, it releases my tension too!

Now I can't discuss this topic without bringing up Monk. Recently I listened to *Rhythm-n-ing* from his *Live in Paris* album. Everybody knows Monk is immediately recognizable almost before he plays his first note, but what amazed me – again! – when I heard this was the intensity of even his comping throughout the solos of his bandmates and how powerfully even his comping even revealed personality.

Steve: Mingus' music set me on a life-long path. The complexity of its sound combined with deep emotion and uncompromising performance was unlike anything I had ever heard. Certainly I had heard music that was passionate, and that was in my opinion authentic. But I had never before heard music with such complex rhythms, with such melodic and arresting polyphony, with patterns of deliberate deconstruction (some might say dissonance, but it doesn't sound dissonant to me!), and with tempos that changed unpredictably, all combined with passionate playing and Mingus' own shouts and hollers to create a sound so powerful that I would jump out of my chair. I don't know how to explain this other than to say: Mingus' music challenged me to think and evoked something emotional in me that no other music or art of any kind had done before.

When I consider other musicians whose music affects me most, I realize they have some common characteristics. The music, both pre-composed and spontaneously composed, calms my soul one minute, agitates the hell out of me the next, and sends me into the stratosphere the next. It challenges me with aural complexity and emotional depth sometimes beyond my understanding, while simultaneously giving me what I can only describe as pleasure. And it continuously surprises me, keeps me mentally and emotionally on-guard. The Sun Ra Arkestra, David Murray's Octet, Beaver Harris' 360 Degree Music Experience, Edward Wilkerson's 8 Bold Souls, William Parker's Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra, Nicole Mitchell's Black Earth Ensemble, Muhal Richard Abrams' octets and large ensembles, Amina Claudine Myers, George Russell, Archie Shepp, Pharoah Sanders, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, come to mind for their innovative composing and idiom-changing playing. And this just scratches the surface.

What is one of your favorite works? What makes it so?

Melvin: When I first heard Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* everything changed! I was stationed in the Air Force overseas so I had to mail order albums. It took forever to get to me, along with another album I ordered, Mark Murphy's *Rah!* And then there is Oliver Nelson's *Sound Pieces*., which was the first album my future wife and I listened to together. Nelson's orchestrations are beautiful and perfectly complemented my company. You can tell that often times my "favorites" are records that I associate strongly with especially meaningful events or experiences or that may have even contributed to changing the course of my life. Those positive associations somehow embed everything I was sensing at the moment, what I saw, what I smelled, what I heard. But Miles for me is the greatest musical artist. And I say IS, not WAS, because his music is still so alive for me and so timeless and eternal.

Steve: By this time I suppose it's no surprise that one of my favorite recordings is Mingus' *Black Saint and Sinner Lady*. But to branch out a little, Melvin, let me shock you with this: Art Ensemble of Chicago's *Nice Guys*. This is the recording that first made me aware that there was music, with roots in Bird, Trane, Monk, Mingus, and Ornette, that veered farther from the music's evolution than its predecessors. AEC seemed revolutionary to me. The music seemed chaotic at first, but as free-form as it was at times, I also found it melodic and propulsive. As I listened more it seemed to have an underlying logic. Usually an off-kilter "hook" or a familiar harmonic or melodic sequence, would make me pay more attention to the rest of the music. For instance, the song *Ja* you might say is nouveau calypso at its core, and on *Dreaming of the Master*, and this may shock you too, Lester Bowie flies his Miles' flag high. AEC in general and *Nice Guys* specifically catalyzed my interest in music that was beyond my realm of experience and understanding. But it catalyzed my pursuit of trying to understand it, which brought me to the great passion I have today for music that stretches my scope, and taxes my wife's tolerance.

What is one of the most memorable performances you've attended?

Steve: Citing favorite performances is a tall order for someone as mature in years as I am and with 40+ years of attending concerts and performances. Many stand out so this is a bit arbitrary: Muhal Richard Abrams at the original Knitting Factory loft in NYC in 1988. His fellow musicians that night were John Purcell on tenor sax, Fred Hopkins on bass, and Andrew Cyrille on drums. I had been listening to Mr. Abrams' recordings for about five years, and after the Art Ensemble, of all the AACM music that originally came out of Chicago, I was most familiar and smitten with Mr. Abrams'. But interestingly my most vivid imprint of the night was Mr. Cyrille's percussion. I had never "seen" a drummer whose mastery was so loose and so tight, so subtle and so powerful, so integral to the composer's (Abrams) vision and overall sound. But then, there was Max Roach at the Smithsonian. Roscoe Mitchell on the lawn of the Capital in Madison. Betty Carter at the Jazz Gallery in Milwaukee. Randy Weston at the Jazz Standard in NYC. And Art Blakey at a small club in Norfolk, Virginia. And meeting Ellis Marsalis while standing behind him in line at a credit union in Richmond, and then seeing him perform with his four sons in a small auditorium that evening!

Melvin: It has to be the Kool Jazz Fest at the Cincinnati Reds' Crosley Field in the mid-70s. Sarah Vaughan was a headliner. But of course, to keep with my life's theme, it was Miles who made my day. He hit a grand slam home run, so to speak, with a performance with his great second quintet – Wayne Shorter, Tony Williams, Ron Carter, Herbie Hancock. But then to make the evening maybe the most memorable of all, during Vaughan's performance, Miles walked over, stood beside me, and said, "Sarah sure can sing!" I was so flustered, all I could say was, "You sure can play!" For the last 50 years I've thought of dozens of clever retorts that I *could* have said. I have suffered that embarrassment privately until now, and wish I could talk you into not repeating it. Of course there are many other memorable performances. I've mentioned Coltrane in Detroit. But I also have to mention the Modern Jazz Quartet the Royal Festival Hall in London when I was stationed at RAF Mindenhall in the Air Force. The impact was beyond the music. Of course, the Hall itself in all its monumental splendor was a player that night. Just walking into the place, seeing the large, raised stage with nothing on it except Connie Kay's drum set gave me a visual I needed no photograph to keep the vivid memory fresh.

What role do American social, cultural, and political matters play in this music?

Melvin: Speaking of Art Blakey, he was first I knew to incorporate his African roots into his music. The album *Drum Suite* in particular includes percussion solos and group improvisations, and chants that are unmistakably African or at least inspired directly by African music. Another important factor for me is personality: is the musician himself interesting? If they are, it helps me relate to what they are trying to accomplish. It's their personality eccentricities that I find often gives their music distinctive character. I think it's harder for younger musicians to get the experiences that in the past have fostered character that in turn is expressed in a unique sound. Maybe it's less contact with their elders. Maybe it's fewer opportunities to learn on the bandstand. Maybe they've struggled less. These are the things that I think help build strong character and distinctive personalities. Many of the younger musicians have conservatory training, which is not itself a bad thing. But without "real life" experiences I find their personalities and their music often lack distinctiveness.

Coltrane's song *Alabama* I believe had a powerful impact when it was first released. He already had an audience that was probably aware of the murder of four young girls in Alabama, but it may not have

been easy for them to feel the loss and the sorrow. I feel those things even today when I hear this song. I believe he helped enlighten a wider audience. And what about James Brown? When he sang *Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud* in 1968 he helped change the way Black people perceived themselves. We were no longer Negroes. Black had been a derogatory term. Suddenly we were proud to be Black.

Steve: I can't say exactly why Mingus had the earliest and most profound effect on me in so many ways, but he did. In my awakening to the music, I listened as much to Monk, Trane, Miles, Bird, and many of the giants as much as Mingus. And their music affects me as deeply as Mingus. But in our conversations, for reasons I can't explain, I reach for Mingus, or he reaches for me. I have to also cite him as my eye-opening experience that told me art is inextricably tied to history, culture, and even politics. I believe if an artist vehemently denies such associations, that denial itself is a cultural or political statement. "Don't mix me up in that stuff. I'm an artist just expressing myself." Well, to me a person saying that her/his values are not reflected in creative output and the message and emotion he/she hopes the art will communicate is simply saying I'm ignoring my values. And that is a stark statement about her/his view of the world. "My art has nothing to do with religion or spiritual life, economic status, justice, or politics" denies the integral role all of these play in human life. It seems to me it would be impossible for an artist to express him/herself without reflecting or exploring these core facets of being human. And the best art communicates values in a way that uplifts others. Melvin, you expressed that so clearly in describing how the music affects you. I believe it can also inspire curiosity and learning, which may lead to enlightenment and positive behavior.

Some examples that inspire me are, besides the obvious like Mingus' *Fables of Faubus* and *Meditations on Integration*, Nina Simone's *Mississippi Goddam*, and Max Roach's *Driva' Man,* are more recent efforts like William Parker's *Criminals in the White House*, Kidd Jordan's *Officer, that Big Knife is to Cut My Sax Reeds*, and Anthony Davis' *Middle Passage*. Nearly all this music is instrumental only. I think the titles are only verbal cues to the artists' intent, which is really conveyed through the music itself. The listener doesn't need the title to feel and know what the music is about.

What is authenticity? How do you know when music/musicians are authentic?

Steve: I trust my ears, and my brain and my gut. It's all I have! Not being a musician I don't, I can't, I have no right to even try to analyze music from a technical perspective. So my reactions to music are strictly subjective, including whether I perceive if the music is authentic. I think I have a decent ear for knowing if an artist is expressing her/himself honestly. That is the peak of the authenticity pyramid for me in terms of how I initially react. After honesty, I want to hear a unique sound. Like Miles! Usually one note is all it takes. And composers. Yes I'm back to Mingus. No matter who plays it or how they play a Mingus composition, you know it's a work of Mingus. Same goes for Coltrane, Lester Bowie, Ben Webster, Cecil Taylor, and hundreds of others throughout this music's history.

Yes, I did say Cecil Taylor, partly, yes, to pique you, but seriously to explain why he represents authenticity for me. When I first heard his music (again Madison public radio) I remember how it seemed to tickle all my senses. Musically, I had no clue what was happening, but when my senses are tickled my brain kicks in. So then I did what school taught me. I researched. Then I bought his music, and I listened. Not only were my senses tickled, but I was moved by the intensity. Then harmonic patterns and dense rhythms began to emerge. And then I began to feel something – really, the full range of emotions. This crazy music was evoking them all.

Melvin: I too also just have to trust my ears. I know what I like and I think I have a good sense of when musicians are committing their heart and soul to their art. I measure all other music against what I consider the gold standards. If it doesn't measure up, I tend to not be interested and will rarely listen to it after that. I can make a long list of musicians who for me reach the gold standard, but Miles Davis is the only one who reaches platinum. For me, during the first 25 years of his career no one rivaled his artistry and authentic creativity. But here's an example of one thing that bothers me and is a tip-off to what may NOT be authentic. How many musicians have you seen who claim to have played with Miles? It seems like everyone. When I hear that, unless I know it for a fact, I will dismiss that musician for likely being dishonest and inauthentic.

But this is probably the real test for how I know if a recording has been made with integrity: no matter how many times I listen to it, each time sounds like the first! It's just like seeing someone you like and respect for the first time after a long absence. Seeing him or her makes you feel better. The music that affects you most deeply always makes your feel better. I want to listen to it over and over and over again.

What or who epitomizes this authenticity? And what are the qualities that set them apart?

Melvin: Original artist radiate a persona that is just a little bit "different." They carry themselves just a little bit "differently." They act "differently." They dress "differently." In other words they are true to themselves. And that's the way they compose and play their music. Their music IS them. And spotting someone who is just trying to be hip, but is not really hip at all, is one of THE easiest things to do. And this difference, this true hipness, will be apparent in the music. It will sound like no one else. It will be intense but approachable. When it is fierce, you will feel fear. When it is soft, you will feel the gentle love.

Some people think artists can be authentic only when they play music they compose. Well jazz isn't like that. A huge part of the creative process is in improvising, and gifted musicians can authentically improvise on just about any song they want to, and they will never do it the same way twice! My favorite example of that is Ahmad Jamal playing *But Not for Me* composed by George and Ira Gershwin. As far as I'm concerned when Jamal plays that song, he IS the composer. That song is HIS.

Steve: I can't judge technical facility, but I think I have a fair ability to know when it is lacking. And for those who believe it has a role in authenticity, Cecil Taylor plays into this point too. I've told my Cecil story many times, because it's important when discussing music with people who think that musicians such as Mr. Taylor are charlatans just banging away. Mr. Taylor is giving a concert at the University of Wisconsin. He begins with a piano concerto by a famous European composer, which he plays flawlessly. He slams the fallboard closed and shouts, "white man's music". He plays one of his compositions, slams the fallboard closed and shouts, "black man's music." Of course, my point is, he has complete control and can play whatever he damned well pleases, which he does and is the music he MUST create.

When music, even music I don't understand, strikes some inner chord, and if I believe in the musician's authenticity, I know I need to *listen* and *learn*. Part of learning is discovering more music that strike's that inner chord. One tried and true method for me is to seek out musicians whom they perform with. Cecil Taylor, for instance, would not countenance anyone without comparable abilities. And so I

discovered drummer Sunny Murray and saxophonist Jimmy Lyons. And then, of course, who else performs with Murray and with Lyons? And so on.

The multi-reed musician and composer David Murray is another example. When he's playing "open", so to speak, how do I know he's playing *exactly* what he intends and is not just "out there" because he can't find his way back in? Because he can *play*! He can swing his ass off when that's what he intends! And when he takes off into the stratosphere I know it's exactly where he wants to go, and he takes me along for the ride in first class!

What about imitation and appropriation?

Steve: Again, I just have to trust me ears. I'm not much interested in hearing *Straight No Chaser* played just like Thelonious Monk and Charlie Rouse played it. But I am interested in hearing someone's interpretation that makes me think that the interpreter could have composed the song, that he/she has "made it" his or her own. You mentioned this earlier. Or better yet, I like to hear an original composition by someone inspired by another, not an imitation, not even an interpretation, but a piece of music in which I can hear the inspiration, whether through direct allusion or just by the sound, the feeling, the mood, or the intent. William Parker's *Essence of Ellington* is a good example.

A lot of people cringe when I say I don't care for Stan Getz. But let me use him as an example of what I think is appropriation. When I hear Getz I don't hear much that sounds original. He sounds like a mildly interpreted Lester Young. And on top of that, likely because he was white he appealed to a much larger audience than Prez did and made boatloads more money. I have to admit my resentment of this phenomenon factors into my attitude about many musicians. To the music industry Getz was highly marketable, which was not really his fault, but the result was, by largely appropriating the creator's sound, he achieved a level of wealth and fame never possible for Prez.

Melvin: Stylistic imitation doesn't appeal to me, and it's pretty easy to spot. I'm simply not interested in listening to someone who sounds just like Sonny Rollins, for instance. When I first heard Wallace Roney on the radio I assumed it was Miles playing a song I hadn't heard him play before. When I heard the credits, I said to myself "ok, that's nice." Hearing the "influence" of another musician in someone's style is an entirely different matter. The music is not created in a vacuum. The history of the music, the innovations and styles of those who came before are always a part of what comes next.

Now quotes are different. A well-placed, clever quote that just flows and fits the context of the improvised solo and maybe even surprises me is one of the music's joys. Quotes can be humorous, sarcastic, or serious. A well-placed quote always puts a little smile on my face even when it's making a serious point.

Appropriation is a societal issue that extends into many walks of life. I'm talking here about the blatant and often unattributed appropriation of the creative and cultural developments of African Americans by white Americans. You hear it in spoken language. You see it in fashion and style. And you hear it in music. Black Americans have created most of the original musical styles over the last century plus. Ragtime, gospel, blues, jazz, funk, hip hop. Black musicians were the creators. White musicians were the beneficiaries, which is not a bad thing itself. But the exploitation of the black musicians by the music industry has often been abusive and unjust, enriching the establishment and white musicians to a lesser degree, and leaving black musicians often with pennies or nothing.

What else besides the elements of authenticity we've discussed attracts you to specific music and musicians?

Melvin: I deeply appreciate a musician's ability to improvise or change course on the spot. As I mentioned, one of my favorite devices is the "quote" from another, usually popular or recognizable work. For instance, there's a story about Charlie Parker playing at a club, when in walks a none-to-respectable woman. Without missing a beat, Parker incorporates the melody from *The Lady is a Tramp*. And anyone who's heard Sonny Rollins or Dexter Gordon knows how integral clever quotes are to listening to an improvised solo.

A musicians' personalities also plays into the equation. Personality characteristics have to influence their music. You can't separate personality and music. The bigger the personality, the bigger the music. This is one of the influences of conservatory training I worry about. Does it result in an institutional sound and prevent them from developing their own unique sounds and styles? I guess time will tell.

Another personality factor that was very important to me in the '60s and continues to be today is a musician's commitment to civil rights and social justice. You pointed out earlier some of the musicians and music that had great effect on you. I would emphasize this point as one of the important factors that makes me respect a musician and the music he or she makes. But I'm not aware of as many musicians today who have committed themselves to these causes that in American society remain as crucial as ever to rectify. Of course, the work that Mark Lomax does with Eddie Bayard such as *#BlackLivesMatter* and his *400 An Afrikan Epic* fill what I see as a significant gap in artists of all types taking a stand and expressing injustices in today's world.

You sometimes talk about experimentalists. I admire experimentalists doing their own thing, but I have to admit the music rarely affects me, rarely moves me or reaches my soul. Too often they sound like they are just trying to be different rather than truly exploring new territory. Sometimes I doubt that they can really play their instruments. Or that they just want to project, "look at me, I'm so cool." You know I hate bullshit.

Steve: Yes, I do admire experimentalists. I want to be surprised. I want the unexpected. I want to be challenged. I want music to make me imagine historical events and future ideals. And I want to be "moved" by the music's emotional depth. Sometimes so-called dissonant notes surprise and make me smile. I want chords that at first sound like mistakes until you realize their purpose was to catalyze the musician her/himself and the band or orchestra into spontaneously moving into a different sphere or plane or planet, and to move listeners outside their comfort zone. I want to wonder and think why? I want unpredictable and complex rhythms that keep me on edge, and make me either roll my eyes or get up and dance, and you know I'm not a dancer. I want to be moved to tears when the music is about a subject of deep sadness. And if some of what I hear are "mistakes", then I say bring on the mistakes. Mistakes are the life-blood of progress, innovation, or invention.

But that doesn't mean that only experimentalists can affect me in these ways. "Masters" in their day were experimentalists. Bird, Trane, Monk, Duke, Miles and others experimented and moved the music into new territory. And when I want to hear the music of The Masters played the way The Masters would perform it, I'm going to listen to The Masters rather than those who imitate their sound and style, even if their improvisations aren't strict copies. Sometimes the experimentation was simply trying

various instrumental configurations. Ellington did this. Coltrane added musicians playing instruments like the oud and the contrabass bassoon. And two of Sonny Rollins' finest recordings to my ears are the *Freedom Suite* and *Way Out West*, both with trios of drums, bass, and Sonny's sax. That was the sound that he was after. There's a freedom of exploration that more traditional configurations can limit.

If the qualities we've talked about exist, like you said the music never gets stale. It will always sound fresh. Improvisation or spontaneous composition, whether live or recorded, makes me feel like I'm part of the music's creation, something unique and never to be experienced again. And I will want to dig deep and try to absorb, to enjoy, and to understand the music to the fullest of my abilities. Which brings me to Cecil Taylor again. I bet it took me 20 years to come to the appreciation of his music I have today. In the beginning, I admit it sounded chaotic. But I had never heard anything like it and something I couldn't identify attracted me to it and made me continue to listen. This was 1979. I bought most of his recordings from the '60s and '70s, and while I couldn't handle a steady aural diet of Cecil, I kept returning. Eventually forms and shapes began to emerge from the seeming chaos. I latched on. Those forms and shapes at some point became images and sounds, often from history or current events. Today I hear melody, harmony, and rhythm, maybe fractured and abstract, but I hear them, and they are beautiful.

In perceiving if music is authentic, is it important to consider for whom the musician is playing? The audience? His/her fellow musicians? Him/herself?

Steve: I have to sense that a musician first of all is true to her/himself, to the vision and purpose behind the music she/he creates. I also believe that because of the nature of the communication that must happen while performing complex music, spontaneously composed or otherwise, musicians must play for each other, must inspire each other. When musicians are true to themselves and inspire each other, the audience will come – at least an audience that understands and appreciates these qualities. In thinking about this topic I always think of Monk, and you know where Monk resides in my personal Pantheon of musicians! If you've ever watched one of his performances or read much about him, you know he was often, even in performance, in his own world appearing to play primarily for himself.

Melvin: Yes, but the answer for me is balance. If a musician plays strictly for the audience, it's usually obvious he/she is pandering. The audience should not dictate what a musician plays. But can a musician entirely ignore the listeners? If he/she does, then will there be in audience tomorrow? And I feel that the music becomes self-indulgent, which may not detract from authenticity but usually doesn't make it interesting for me. Unless it's a solo performance, the nature of improvisation makes playing for band mates a given. Improvised music is a conversation among the voices on stage or in the studio. The players react to and are inspired by what they hear the others play. They catalyze new directions and create music never heard before and that may never be heard again. I think even the audience can influence a musician's creativity, depending on how they respond during the course of a song or solo.

How do you explain this music to people who think that the only "serious" music is so-called classical music?

Melvin: The bottom line, music of European origin is not better than music of African origin. The two are just different, and no one should be placing any value judgement on either. I personally appreciate exceptional musicianship regardless of the type of music. Voicing this often disarms someone who is

derogatory about music he or she does not like. It helps them see that sitting in judgement of an artist's work is inappropriate and only serves to divide people. In the end, we lovers of jazz should never let people tell us jazz is inferior music without an argument. Have your ducks lined up and *make your case*! I have doubts that jazz will ever be broadly accepted as a music comparable to the music coming out of the European traditions. But in one way jazz and classical music are in the same boat. Many people, no matter their color, won't invest energy in understanding and appreciating something that is not commercially force-fed to them.

I had a defining experience on this matter early in life. While still a teen in seminary, where I was limited to playing one side of an LP each week, a priest who would frequently overhear what I was listening to insisted that European classical music was superior. He tried nearly every week to convince me of this. He failed. My favorite recording at the time was Art Blakey's *Drum Suite*. In hindsight I wish I had had the presence to tell him "Africa is in my blood. It's me. It's my heritage." Even these many decades later I still too often hear people with Euro-centric views make similar pronouncements about many art forms, including leaders of major art institutions. Let me get on my high horse again about our city's – in fact any city's – need for an institutions that promote, provide venues, and support jazz and jazz musicians comparable to what symphony orchestras do for music rooted in European classical.

Steve: We humans seem to greatly enjoy categories and labels. I guess it's part of an inherent reductionism that helps us make sense of a complicated world. We like neat boundaries, and need to be able to say something is "good" or "bad", "right" or "wrong", or "black" or "white". Black art music vs European art music. The skills required to play various types, and even specific compositions, coincide or overlap to varying degrees, as do the talents to compose music. But it's all a massive Venn diagram. Since many music lovers are mathematicians at-heart, this image may resonate.

I try to use vocabulary the person I'm talking to is familiar with and avoid words that I suspect may carry a negative connotation. For instance, people steeped in European classical music often consider improvisation inferior to full composed and arranged works. One acquaintance even claimed that "jazz" was simply played by incompetent musicians just trying to make the most of their mistakes. So I use the term "spontaneous composition" instead of "improvisation". When the person gives me a quizzical look, I try to talk about the technical skills and intellectual agility required; the lifetime commitment such musicians must make to achieve genuine creative improvisation that expresses the ideas, emotions, and vision; as well as the personal internalization of music history, and their influences and inspirations, that were necessary to compose in this spontaneous manner. I might try using phrases like: "she's instantaneously organizing sound, silence, rhythm", "combined with his deep creative intelligence", "drawing on all her life experiences", and "expressing his ideas and emotions with a talent that requires complete facility with his instrument(s)".

Even the word "jazz" can cause an immediate rejection of any further conversation by lovers of so-called serious music. Now maybe some of those people will never be open to serious discussion regardless of vocabulary, but I find it worthwhile using other terms, or if possible, no term! For instance, if I mention John Coltrane and the person says "oh, he played jazz", I'll respond by saying "he played his music" or "he played Coltrane music", and then see if that comment opens a door for more discussion.

How do you respond to someone who claims they don't like jazz because it all sounds the same?

Steve: If I like the person despite their attitudes about music, I might extend an invitation to my home, where I'd "improvise" a playlist for our listening pleasure. I might start off with something like Ellington's *Nutcracker Suite* or *Far East Suite*, familiar but probably unexpected. Then I might move to Mingus (of course), cueing up *Duke Ellington's Sound of Love*, the version with George Adams blowing a beautiful but edgy tenor sax solo. Catch my drift. If that goes well, I might take a chance and try out Billy Bang's *Saigon Phunk*. Nobody could claim it sounds one bit like Ellington or Mingus. And if they haven't left my house after that, I would really test their mettle and play *Air-Iwori* by Steve Coleman and Five Elements, kind of a salsa thing with vocals that would make it absolutely impossible for the person to say "it all sounds the same."

Melvin: I usually just let them go on their merry way! I used to do this: when I'd meet someone I'd make them a CD of some of my favorite songs. If they didn't respond in an "appropriate" manner, I'd pretty much say to myself, "We can never be friends. If you don't get this, this relationship is going nowhere." Now I exaggerate some, but that's how important this music is to me. I can more easily ignore someone who doesn't share in at least one of my four passions. More often I hear the response, "it sounds like they're all playing a different song." I might respond that that's the beauty of it. In a sense each musician is playing a different "song", but listen to the whole. Do the various parts work together? Do they support each other? It's actually the same thing that happens in almost all kinds of music. The interplay of the various parts just might be a little looser, or a little more sophisticated, but all you have to do is listen. You'll hear it. Sadly, often you just have to chalk up such a comment to that person's loss.

What do you prefer to call this music we love? Why?

Melvin: Most often these days I just refer to it as music, or THE Music, to emphasize the fact that it is art of the highest order and, for me, THE music. But sometimes either because of long years of using the term jazz, or because there is a need to label the music given the orientation of the person I'm talking to, I will use the word "jazz" to test if he or she is open to a conversation. But then I might open a discussion about the word. Its history, its implications, its limitations, and if the person is still listening, why the name is unsatisfactory to me. Categories are restrictive, so the word too often will lay a too-narrow definition on a concept that is huge, even undefinable. Some people think that jazz is only Kenny G. Others thinks that "real" jazz only existed before 1945. Some define jazz by instruments played, skin color, or size of the band. Let's get over it. It's simply MUSIC, and music of the highest order.

Steve: It usually doesn't pay to get too cerebral when talking about music with most people. I too have moved away from using the term jazz, because, like you, I find its common definition too narrow and because I believe it diminishes the true value of the music in the eyes of people who don't understand it, or don't want to. In their eyes "jazz" is merely "popular" music, not the serious music we know it is, and it is unworthy of serious consideration and should be relegated to smoke-filled clubs. But we know that in a real sense this music is "classical". It has and will always in my opinion withstand the test of time. Its eternal nature will endure and perhaps even someday be widely acknowledged as a "classical music". It knows no age, but all ages will know it. When a label seems necessary I've tried American Classical Music, Black Art Music, and Great Black Music. I favor the last, which was coined by the AACM in the '60s, because it acknowledges the true source of the music but doesn't imply exclusivity (there are competent and exceptional musicians of all races who play this music and acknowledge its origins), and doesn't impose artificial boundaries on all the music that originated in Black cultures. But usually I try not to use labels at all. Let's just call it music. Or Coltrane music. Or Miles music. Or Lomax music!

Is it important for individuals like us to promote jazz? If so, how can we best do that?

Steve: Getting to a time when this music occupies its deserved place in our society sometimes seems Sisyphean. Will we ever get that damn boulder to the top of the mountain? Practically, for us little people, I think often the best way we can promote music is to promote musicians. Make it personal, especially if you know musicians. Take a friend or family member to a performance. Put a record on when they are in your home, or better yet, in your car where you have a captive audience. Use social media to the degree you're comfortable. Get involved with local arts and music organizations and promote the inclusion of jazz and to establish endowments dedicated to supporting Black musicians. And, by all means, attend as many performances, whether you can take a friend or not.

Melvin: Jazz has no real national or local infrastructure to support performance and promotion it deserves - few dedicated performance venues, few dedicated funding sources to support composers and musicians, and limited support from arts and music organizations and foundations. This of course contrasts with the support that European classical music gets, whether from foundations or from our country's wealthiest people. Jazz, like classical, is not popular. It is art music. By definition it is not going to popular in our society. Musicians and composers need non-commercial sources of support. But in our society too many people don't understand the depth of this music or choose not to, among them the people who hold most of the purse strings. But it deserves to be supported and funded in the same fashion as classical music. But it's going to take a sea change to overcome perceptions and frankly the institutional racism that exists in the organizations and the elite who could help.

Of course, until that happens, if it ever does, it's critically important that all of us who love the music promote it and support it in whatever ways we can. If you like an artist's work, buy it! It's his livelihood. If a group if playing, go see them, and happily pay the admission charge. It's their livelihood. And if they are selling CDs of their music at the performance, buy it! I have been known to purchase music that I do not like. Ornette Coleman's *At the Golden Circle Stockholm* does nothing for me. But I bought it because he deserves the support.

What do you think about our local music scene in Cincinnati?

Melvin: There are currently two clubs as a rule I go to: the Greenwich Tavern and Caffe Vivace. They are around the corner from each other in Cincinnati's Walnut Hills neighborhood. The Greenwich has been showcasing jazz for decades. Vivace is new. I see a lot of faces at Vivace that I've never seen at the Greenwich, and don't expect I'll ever see there. I have my theories about that. In the musician community I hear and often observe the same thing. This group feels shut out of here, another group feels shut out of there.

In Cincinnati, as I'm sure is the case with most other cities, there are no real "jazz" institutions that develop local talent, provide performance spaces, and serve as an umbrella for what is now a fragmented community of musicians, supporters, and music lovers. It's hard to organize free-thinkers, like musicians, but no one and no institution or agency with the influence and dollars has ever stepped up and followed through to make it happen. We need a dedicated "Music Hall", or to have some such institution believe in the cause enough to commit the resources necessary to make it happen.

Steve: I agree that we are served reasonably well by the two clubs you mention. There are also several very good concert spaces that occasionally present this music. Memorial Hall and Woodward Theater are two that come to mind, but the programming is infrequent and inconsistent. This is one of the most disturbing things about this music we love. Not enough people take it seriously, and not enough organizations are willing to sponsor and support it by providing a concert venue. We also have two summer outdoor programs – It's Commonly Jazz and Crown Jewels of Jazz. I also want to commend the Kennedy Heights Art Center for occasionally filling the gap with its performance space. But there could be so much more. Virtually every museum in the city has a small to medium auditorium, for instance.

But, as you say, there is no larger community understanding that this music deserves serious support and the commitment from existing cultural institutions, granting agencies, and political leaders to put it on equal footing with other art institutions.

After all this discussion, what musicians do you like that might surprise us?

Steve: When people see my music collection for the first time, I usually get some puzzled, even shocked, looks. As you know I grew up on Bob Dylan and have never lost my love for most of his music. I also listen to a group of musicians, most with roots in Texas, who usually are labelled "Americana." Guy Clark, Rodney Crowell, Steve Earle, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Robert Earl Keen, James McMurtry, Lucinda Williams, Townes Van Zandt. And a few old school rockers like Van Morrison, who has for me those associative qualities we talked about, and who blends his Irish roots with jazz. In fact, bassist Richard Davis and percussionists Warren Smith and Connie Kay were early collaborators. And Neil Young, whose extended songs are largely melodic improvisations, even if they are performed over predictable harmonies and rhythms, continues to mesmerize. But what they all have in common, and why I think I'm attracted to them, is that I believe they compose exactly the music they want. They are creators, for whom making money in some cases at least has been only a happy by-product. They are reasonably skilled, but most importantly they produce music they believe in.

Melvin: Nobody I know should be surprised that George Clinton is near the top of my list, all genres included. But I bet some will look at me side-eyed when I say John Mellencamp is someone I listen to and admire, especially *Jack & Diane*. And Garth Brooks, especially *The River*. From travelling to small towns in the Midwest when I worked at the Post, I could relate to the stories that these songs tell. And I love the line in Jethro Tull's *Thick as a Brick*: "I really don't mind if you sit this one out. My word's but a whisper, your deafness a shout." It tells a deep truth about human nature, cleverly and humorously. Bob Dylan, almost everything. Incredible lyrics, even though he can't sing to save his soul. Branford Marsalis' group Buckshot LeFonque produced some innovative music in which you can hear just about every type of Black music – jazz, blues, R&B, hip-hop, even rock-n-roll. But I've saved the best until last. The hip-hop duo Foreign Exchange has a song *Downtime* that has one of those memorable lines that has become kind of a mantra for me: "Cause I ain't got no fuck-around time."

Let's get back to why we originally decided to have this conversation. What have we learned about the music that got us to the same place (almost)?

Melvin: While we know our tastes overlap a great deal, there are some differences. That shouldn't surprise us or anyone. We're two different people with different histories. Throughout our discussions I learned that much of the music you like you had to work at understanding it in order to enjoy it to its

fullest. I, on the other hand, don't want to work at it. What I like is almost always immediately accessible to my ears. I don't have to think about it. I don't want to think about it. I want to be swept away, no questions asked. Jazz is my therapy. When life is throwing me curve balls, jazz will make me swing with all my might. And you know what will have that effect on me every time, not matter what or when. That's right, all it takes is the first couple measures of Miles and colleagues playing *So What*.

But that said, understanding your history a little better and knowing your thinking behind how you arrived at the music that moves you most, I think I've come to appreciate that music, even if it may never appeal to me in the same way it does you. But I think one important thing we've both learned is that we have a huge overlap in the music that reaches our "souls". But now I do know how I can get you out the door when you've overstayed your welcome at my house. Yep, Stan Getz!

Steve: We certainly do have a lot of common ground. And I think we explained well why the music in general affects us so deeply and why the music of certain musicians reaches our core while others not so much. In a way it comes down to one word: universality. Despite our obvious differences in backgrounds, life experiences, and tastes, the qualities of this music move us both in about every way you can imagine. I told a friend recently who asked what I meant when I said "moved." I replied, the best of this music moves my heart, my mind, my soul, AND my body, from my feet to the balding crown of my head. And you know how hard it is to move my feet! A dancer I am not.

For much of the music that we don't agree on and that I have had to "work at understanding", as you've said, I did not have to work at "liking". I knew I liked it because in an inexplicable way it moved me. The "liking" came first, and that made me want to understand it, know where it came from, try to get what it meant, and hope I was getting and feeling the musician's intent. Sometimes I just want to know "why".

Final thoughts?

Melvin: This music makes everything right with the world.

Steve: Thelonious said, "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture." Melvin, I'm glad our topic is not architecture!