An interview with veteran jazz musician Charles McPherson: “Art is an expression of the human condition”

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Charles McPherson is an American alto saxophonist and composer with a career spanning eight decades. He has worked closely with a host of artists, among whom are some considered to be originators and leading exponents of the bebop movement of the 1940s and 1950s. McPherson’s list of collaborators includes, to name a few, Charles Mingus, Lionel Hampton, Art Farmer, Pepper Adams and Red Rodney.

McPherson has developed a prominent career as a bandleader as well as a composer. His most recent album, *Reverence* (2024) was composed and recorded as a tribute to the late Barry Harris, his long-time musical colleague and co-thinker. Between 2015 and 2020, McPherson composed several commissions for the San Diego Ballet, many of which were featured on his 2020 album *Jazz Dance Suite*.

Last month, the *World Socialist Web Site* featured McPherson in its article, “Assessing popular music in 2024.” We wrote:

> Octogenarian saxophonists Charles McPherson and Charles Lloyd continue to produce some of the most soulful and serious compositions in jazz. Surrounded by talented band members, their compositions are deeply engaged in the moods and feelings of the world around them and were a breath of fresh air this year.

We recently spoke to Charles McPherson.

Jesse Thomas: You are well-known for being part of a school that is rooted in bebop, the musical language developed by Charlie Parker and others. Can you talk about what it was about this style, approach and era of music that won you over during your youth, and that has carried you through your career?

Charles McPherson: I was born in Joplin, Missouri [in 1939]. I left Joplin in 1948 and came to Detroit as a child. In junior high school, I started playing the alto saxophone. I discovered Charlie Parker at about 13 years old. I heard him on a jukebox, and he played a tune that a lot of people were familiar with, it’s kind of a Latin-based tune called “Tico Tico.”

I was just blown away by his technical abilities, his linear logic, and how he musically put things together in these beautiful [improvised] phrases, long flowing sentences that connected to other sentences seamlessly. And that got me. I had heard other players, other jazz players, but I had never heard that kind of logic, that kind of connection between phrases. His ability to play those many notes might be equivalent to a speaker who spoke very eloquently, using long sentences that were everything that a sentence should be—including all of its content.

After I became enamored with Charlie Parker, I found out there was a school of young musicians who played like that. I was interested in everybody that played this particular genre of jazz music, including Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, John Coltrane, Stan Getz, Chet Baker, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk. I got every record I could get featuring not only Charlie Parker, but anybody else who played in this way.

In those days, we called that kind of jazz *progressive* jazz or *modern* jazz, as opposed to swing and big band-era jazz. But at the same time, the transition from swing to bebop wasn’t abrupt. It was more like a morphing, or a segue. Bebop has a certain feel that is just a gradation from swing, but with more in terms of rhythm and harmony.

Bebop has been at the heart of every major innovation in jazz that has happened since that time. For instance, fusion, funk jazz, smooth jazz, avant-garde, modal jazz, every kind of jazz movement since then really comes from bebop. It seems like this—once musicians learn how to negotiate the bebop language, then they can pretty much do anything else.

That’s why it is so compelling, because in order for musicians to master bebop, their rhythmic conception has to be wonderful, their melodic content and ideas have to be wonderful also, and their harmonic approach very sophisticated. It is in every sense virtuosic music, and not only for instrumentalists, but also singers—take for example, the great Sarah Vaughan.

The great jazz drummer Billy Higgins described the development of bebop as “sanctified intelligence.” What he meant by that was that the original bebop musicians kept all of the older emotions that came from the blues and from the very roots of jazz music—that spirituality—not the notes, but that feeling coming from spirituals and work songs, New Orleans music and also swing. But there was also the deliberate musicality from an extremely deep understanding of great Western, modern and classical music.

So musicians like Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker—they maintained all of the precepts of jazz, but mixed it with a heavy dose of Stravinsky, [Paul] Hindemith, Prokofiev, Bach and many older composers. This mixture brings about this beautiful harmonic conception. So this is why I’m in love with bebop. Because it’s music that encompasses all important musical and behaviors and intelligences.

JT: Why do you think the bebop movement developed at the specific historical time and place that it did?

CM: That’s an interesting question. It touches on all of bebop’s moving parts, the pieces of the bigger puzzle. It’s a confluence of circumstances, socially, economically and in terms of the global collective consciousness at that point in time. You have to factor in World War II. The war had a tremendous impact on the big band era. It meant that many young men were drafted, including many musicians who had been playing in big bands. This favored smaller groups of five or six people, rather than, say, 20 or more.

Different emotions and feelings also came about as a result of the war.

African-American men are now going to Europe who had never been outside of their neighborhoods, let alone the United States. They're seeing how differently they are treated there. And they come back home with this modicum of respect, with an attitude, like, "Okay, I've been over there. I've dodged bullets. I've got half my butt shot off, to make 'democracy' and all this. But I can't even ride the bus." These young men are coming with a different kind of attitude, maybe loftier feelings about themselves, saying, "Hey? I'm equal. I'm valid."

And so when it comes to musicians, the bebop guys had a different attitude than the older jazz musicians, who were more steeped in being very much the showmen. Charlie Parker's attitude was, "This is me, this is what I do with music. I hope you like it, because I'm giving it to you ... but that's it. I'm not dancing. I'm not singing, I'm not bouncing around. I'm not doing that because [Vladimir] Horowitz doesn't do that." This outlook becomes a cornerstone of the new music.

As far as economics is concerned, let me return to Detroit. I came to Detroit in the late '40s, and I was 15 years old in the early to mid-50s. I'm playing music. At this time, the automobile factories were booming making American cars, and this makes it possible for musicians to make a livelihood.

The economic boom meant that the blue collar class —that is, the working class, of all colors, black, white, green, yellow, whatever—were making good money. They were working hard, but they could earn a substantial living. This meant that people who had to work at Ford [Motor Company] could educate their kids so that they might not have to do the same thing. They might instead become doctors, lawyers, school teachers—whatever. So you had a healthy, blue-collar working class at the time.

There was also a culture around live music venues that doesn't exist anymore. Television and radio were not as widespread. If you wanted to socialize, you'd go to a club. Every janky little bar in Detroit had a live band, which had every kind of music from country-western to Polish. And also jazz. So many clubs meant that musicians were able to live there and work there, six nights a week.

It also meant that we got to play with older players. It was like an apprenticeship. Musicians educated themselves like this, and it was in this way that jazz was handed down. This was the way you learned how to play.

Detroit was this beautiful, great metropolis that was attracting people from all over the world, especially from the South. It was like a magnet because of the possibilities of work. This mixture of people were exchanging ideas that created this wonderful culture.

Detroit was an incubator. There were other cities like that, as well, for example, Chicago.

But Charlie Parker was the product of a wider, collaborative, human endeavor. Great things in society—music among them—but also art, painting, politics, writing and science ... They don't develop in a vacuum. There's a saying, "There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come."

If it had not been Charlie Parker who developed bebop, it would have been someone else. It just so happened that Bird was the one.

JT: You came of age professionally in the 1960s, and you've been active since. So you saw firsthand many of the changes that happened in music and society in the decades subsequent to what is often referred to the "high point" of jazz.

In the 1970s and '80s under Carter and Reagan, for example, there was a brutal offensive against the American working class. There was the intensified focus of US economic policy on hyper-profitability, as well as the expansion of militarism abroad. Detroit, for example, was the scene of some of most savage austerity attacks on workers. How did you see these larger political and social shifts affecting the aesthetics and economics of music at the time?

CM: So, I first became active in the '60s, at which point I was a young man in my 20s. And you're right, there was a lot of flux at this time. There was the Vietnam War, and most young people in America were against that war. Now, you also had the civil rights movement. All of this was happening at the same time.

Politics was heavily on everybody's mind. I remember in New York City, for example, even the graffiti on the bathroom walls was different at that time. Instead of people writing profane and stupid stuff like they do now, young people were writing political messages, "Down with the war," and so forth. There was a much higher social awareness of social injustices. Young people wanted to understand what wars were about, and what was the reason they were fought.

So a lot of players had a lot of protest in their music at that time. Anger, frustration and angst started appearing in music. Max Roach, Charlie Parker's drummer, captivated some of this in his work of this era. At the same time, he still played bebop. Charles Mingus was also of this age. Mingus was very much influenced by the bebop movement, as well as Duke Ellington. But Mingus was also influenced by a lot of more modern classical music, like Shostakovich, for example.

This was a time where most young people—black, white, red, yellow, I don't care—were on the same page. They didn't want to fight the war, go overseas and get their brains shot out.

That's very powerful, when you have that many people across so many cultures all on the same page. They all had a beef with the powers that be. So the establishment became very nervous about that. The one thing that the people in power want is for everyone to remain ignorant, because they're easier to control that way. It's almost like jailhouse politics. They keep races and cultures divided and they can't get together and say, "Hey, we don't like the way that you're running things, so we're trashing the joint." The ruling class has a vested interest in people feeling separated.

So the '60s were like that. People were pissed off, and the music became angrier, more protest-like.

JT: What is special about the music that you've made throughout your career is that it exudes a certain confidence in the egalitarian, countercultural and rebellious currents of the best traditions of jazz from the 1940s and 1950s.

CM: Well, thank you.

JT: You're obviously a person who recognizes a deep connection between politics, society and your art. At what point in your life did you become conscious of this connection?

CM: Definitely as I became older. I didn't really think about things like that when I was I was in my 20s. I knew that I was against the war. I was also against the racial injustice in this country. I'm 85 now, but it wasn't until later in life, maybe in my 30s or 40s, that bigger issues came into my consciousness. I started asking "Why?" at a deeper level of inquiry. And to this day, I like to ask not only "What?" but also "*Why* what?"

JT: We are coming into a situation now where younger generations are becoming more and more activated by the crisis in the political situation. The genocide in Gaza, the war in Ukraine, the growing threat of world war. What would you say about new music under such conditions? How would you advise generations of new musicians under the current social circumstances?

CM: I think that a rebelliousness in art is welcome and necessary. I have no issue with anyone who wants to introduce such themes into their work. Art, no matter what kind, is the conveying of human thoughts and emotions. Art is an expression of the human condition.

And so incorporating the emotions of frustration, protest, discontent—there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. But for me, I'm very much aware of *all* aspects of consciousness and how they manifest in humans. And the way I think about it personally and artistically, I might have certain tunes that express that stress and disquiet. But I also like to write stuff that expresses happiness, joy and ecstasy—happy, happy happy!

Also reverence.

I like the whole menu of human experience, and I try to be varied. I don’t want to be in the angry place for every tune that I write. If I do stay in that mode, I don’t want to stay there long.