

Assignment: Write an essay in which you explain something that many people misunderstand or misperceive. Use information, explanation, and argument to correct their misunderstanding.

**In Defense of “That Jazz Crap”**  
by Becky Klosowski

The arguments between my siblings and me over the radio in my mother’s minivan are enormously vicious. When forced to ride somewhere together, we tear one another’s throats out over who gets her pick of the music we all must listen to and—in all honesty—survive: my brother’s classic rock and alternative, my sister’s rap and the latest number one on MTV’s Total Request, and my jazz. “How can you listen to that crap?” my sister moans when I win the front seat and control of the station. “Turn that crap off!” my brother shouts. “We don’t have to listen to anything; let’s just talk...” (“That Crap” has become the working title of my music within my family, and so accustomed to this title am I that I find myself calling jazz “that crap” when talking to other people as well, even fellow jazz fans. Oops.) On one such occasion, I granted my brother’s wish, turning the radio off and the conversation on to jazz to compensate. “Why do you guys hate this stuff so much?” I asked. “Why do you have any opinion at all?”

“Why do you care?” my brother returned. “Why do you always try to force that crap on us?”

“You *do* force,” my mother added. Thanks, mom.

It was the conversation that followed that inspired me to consider my opinion: Why *do* I care? I’d never really thought about it before. I suppose I’ve always been offended by people who make such quick judgments: I knew my brother and sister never really listened to jazz; they simply whined the moment it came on and lived through it by entertaining themselves in some other way, usually by attacking me for choosing it. I want others to understand my point of view, but also—since jazz has become my career choice and main love in life—I want to share with others its impact on me as well. Perhaps you don’t believe any music could have that much impact on a person’s life, but perhaps that’s because you’ve never really listened to jazz. Before jumping to the conclusion that it’s just “crap,” you have to understand what jazz is, what is true as opposed to what is myth, and what makes jazz unique among popular styles of music.

It has been my experience that jazz has a relatively small audience. Obviously, I’ve lived most of my life with a household of people who dislike my music. In the many part-time jobs I’ve held, I’ve worked with people who told me to “turn that crap off.” In high school, I played in a jazz band in which people who *didn’t* like jazz comprised the overwhelming majority of the members. I began to feel that everyone I came in contact with must hate jazz. However, I realize most of you aren’t so strongly opinionated as my siblings are, and that most of you have had less exposure to jazz than even they. You don’t know what you’re missing.

As someone who has listened to jazz for many years, I can tell you that you’re missing out on a deeply interesting and stimulating music. For example, improvisation is one of the defining factors and most exciting aspects of jazz. When musicians improvise, they play with the melody and chords of a song: they create music spontaneously, completely from their heads; they strive to portray their emotions with their notes. Great soloists can play sorrow, anger, joy; they can create and expand on ideas as though speaking in their own language. Wynton Marsalis, a jazz trumpeter and composer as well as respected jazz educator, explains, “It’s just like when we talk. We invent what we’re going to say right in the moment, and we try to organize our thoughts as we go along.”

As I have so far spent nearly four years trying to learn this art of improvisation, I can tell you that learning it is a life-long process. Improvising demands talent; respected jazz musicians study their whole lives to constantly improve: to learn the music and its history. Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Benny Goodman—these jazz greats played as long as they were able. Joshua Redman, Leon Parker, Wynton Marsalis—though still young, these highly respected players have devoted their lives to learning from jazz greats. Jazz is a long story of both tradition and growth. But popular music lasts a short while and is replaced by the next number one on MTV’s Total Request.

Because most people are uninformed about jazz, they hold many misconceptions. One of these myths is that jazz is “old people’s music.” I’ll admit that some styles of jazz could be considered “old people’s music,” swing for instance, since swing was the popular music when these “old people” were our age. But that is not to say, however, that only the “old people” should get the fun of listening (and dancing!) to swing. Ever see the movie “Swing Kids”? (If not, I highly recommend you rent it.) According to the biography *Swing, Swing, Swing: The Life and Times of Benny Goodman*, swing was a thrilling music. Whenever the big band would kick off a hot tune, all the kids would jump up and dance! Everyone knew how to jitterbug in the 30s and 40s: men would spin their ladies around, toss them into the air, catch them deftly; people would bounce and fly across the dance floor. Were these kids all that much different from us? Did they not want to have fun? The fiery music I would expect to have that kind of effect on people does not sound like what I would call “old people’s music.”

Another myth is that jazz is “elevator music.” Let me set the record straight. “Smooth jazz” is elevator music, not jazz; the two should not be confused. For those of you who are fans of Kenny G and the like, I pity you. You have put your faith in a music that is a child’s attempt at drawing a crayon masterpiece, with its circular trees, pentagon houses, stick character families, and strip of blue sky at the top. This “masterpiece” is certainly not a fair representation of the world, as this so called “jazz” is in no way representative of what true jazz is. They may have their similarities, but smooth jazz is only an amateur pretending to be a professional. Most smooth jazz tunes are merely unobtrusive arrangements of popular melodies, played by “musicians” with little or no talent. While they do improvise, this lack of talent stands out clearly when compared to “real” jazz improvisation. Their ideas are repetitive and unimaginative. It’s a shame smooth jazz is allowed to be called “jazz” at all, as this confusion of titles is usually the source of people’s misconceptions.

A popular myth drawn from that confusion is that all jazz is mellow and relaxing. This belief is often the reason many people say they *like* jazz. I always cringe in response to that opinion. What people don’t realize is that most of these “mellow and relaxing” songs are not trying to be mellow or relaxing. True jazz isn’t meant to be background music. People who find slow, emotional ballads with gorgeous melodies and harmonies relaxing are missing the point, often because they are not really *listening*. Unlike smooth jazz, real jazz is not meant to relax, but to stimulate, both emotionally and intellectually. For example, the range of emotions in Stan Kenton’s arrangement of “My Funny Valentine” is staggering. The piece builds from a warm, whispering, trombone opening to a screaming, dissonant, trumpet climax, but with the volume turned down low, someone who doesn’t know what he’s listening to could call it “relaxing.”

On the other hand, many people I have talked to tell me they don’t like jazz for the same reason: it’s too mellow; it doesn’t have the excitement of popular music—namely, the beat. On the contrary! Listen to Buddy Rich or John Fedchock’s new big band or the old Count Basie Orchestra: jazz is defined by its rousing and exciting beat. According to Ron Carter, director of the top jazz band at Northern Illinois University, “If it don’t swing, it ain’t jazz!” The swing feel is unique to jazz: a driving rhythm that both leans forward and lays back the solid beat at the same time. Most popular music simply offers the solid beat monotonously and mind-numbingly.

I hope you are now starting to see what jazz is and isn’t. Jazz is obviously very different from most types of popular music, and some believe jazz is not as good for this reason, but these differences can actually help show how interesting and unique jazz is. For example, while most jazz is purely instrumental, and most lyrics in jazz lack the depth of those in more musically mature popular songs, this lack of emotional words is more than compensated for by the rich emotional language of improvised jazz solos. When you understand jazz, you begin to understand this language as you understand your spoken vocabulary. Because soloists create music based on their own feelings, you can learn how to translate these ideas to fit their meaning to you: much like hearing someone speak. You find with some surprise that musical ideas can make you feel certain ways: some make you laugh; others remind you of a sad time in your life.

Another way jazz is distinct from popular music is that a particular song can be played for decades and never get old; each performance of any jazz song is unique. Many of these songs, called “standards,” have been around for over half a century. The reason for this longevity is also one of the main reasons jazz still attracts young people today, despite its general unpopularity: jazz is constantly growing while staying true to its history. Different arrangements of an old standard can give it a fresh feel, sound, or style. Different groups always strive to have their own original style, so playing old tunes doesn’t mean they have to sound old. Also even if the same band plays the same arrangement of the same tune many, many times, the different improvised solos of the different musicians in that band will make it a different song every time. For example, Benny Goodman’s band was best known for the song “Sing, Sing, Sing,” a tune the group must have played several times a night at various concerts and gigs. (You may have heard this song in the old “Chips Ahoy” commercial with the dancing exclamation point.) The members of the band often claimed to be sick of hearing it; however, the crowds they played for always voiced their opinion, and the song continued to be played, night after night. Night after night, the performers produced fresh solos that made the tune swing harder than ever (Firestone). No other form of music is quite like jazz in that way.

If you open your ears, your heart, and your mind, you too can discover this amazing music called jazz. When musicians of any genre write music, they do so to express and share their emotions with those who listen to their music. This is something that is often overlooked by fans of popular music who listen to the music for its “beat” or simply its popularity. However, when you really listen to jazz, it is almost impossible to miss this true intent. Jazz is not only an emotional roller coaster, a thrilling and engaging music, but it’s also deep and intellectual, a music with a history and language all its own. One of these days, when you’re driving in silence, try flipping on 90.9 FM (College of DuPage’s radio station, which plays mostly jazz). Perhaps you’ll catch some big band jazz on “The Saturday Swing Shift,” maybe some fusion on “Acid Jazz by Moonlight,” or perhaps even one of the shows in which people—often famous musicians—discuss how jazz works, how to listen to it, and what makes it so exciting. See if you notice any of the things I’ve mentioned: the intoxicating swing feel, the intense emotions of improvised solos, the heart and head of the music. It’s almost impossible for anyone to really listen to and understand jazz without being affected by it. At the very least, you learn to appreciate it. At the very most, you come to love and respect it. As well, you begin to hear *all* music in a deeper way: the way it was meant to be heard.

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