

## THE SOCIETY FOR CARIBBEAN STUDIES CONFERENCE 2007

### JAZZ IN THE CARIBBEAN

#### SONNY BRADSHAW: JAZZ AS A METAPHOR FOR LIFE

In his book “The Steelband Movement” Stephen Steumpfle quotes the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris’ call for a ‘History of the region that moves beyond the chronicling of imperialism to include “the arts of the imagination” and suggests that the art-forms created by slaves in their New World “represented the renaissance of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures” and “is of utmost importance and native to the CARIBBEAN, perhaps to the Americas as a whole.”

For my own part he could well be speaking of the African- American art-form JAZZ which has flourished in the Caribbean, having been born there, spreading its tentacles throughout the world, and claiming aficionados, both black and white. Within Caribbean Jazz one of the most influential figures of the colonial and post colonial period has been Jamaican composer/arranger, multi-instrumentalist and bandleader Sonny Bradshaw.

Within the Caribbean the Jamaican population is, perhaps, the most entertainment oriented, with a wide range of entertainment options being offered continually, from reggae shows to gospel concerts to fashion shows to dance presentations; from tea parties to brunch to lunch to major imported star events and concert recitals, with theatre being a year-round activity offering roots plays and comedies. With the exception of the actual music events (Reggae shows, Gospel shows, concert recitals), all other events are accompanied by music, jazz being one of the forms most often used in this context, Roots plays being the obvious exception. As a result Jamaica has had the longest era of sustained Jazz activity in the region.

#### CLASS, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

The political and intellectual objection to North American cultural invasion expressed by those of nationalist/socialist ideology has resulted in a resistance to anything supposedly North American which has had the effect of dismissing Jazz as having nothing to do with 1) the Caribbean, and 2) with Black people, this last being the most unfortunate, since it demonstrates a gap in the information line and the throwing away of a very precious baby with some bath water!!

Perhaps because the music arena is always a site of cultural contestation there was and is conflict between the many areas of musical tradition in the Caribbean, tied up with the struggle for cultural identity and social space.

There are those trained in European classical music, who embrace that musical tradition and regard it as the only socially acceptable way to be entertained, all things European being the ideal. Others, equally well trained, but not as enamored of the European tradition, and not belonging to the ruling upper and middle classes, have used their skills to develop in other ways, such as the jazz player, and the pianist.

The use of grass-roots cultural forms in the 50's by the power-seeking middle class nationalists everywhere in the Caribbean, saw the emergence of popular music forms that were to become Nationalist symbols of identity and of resistance to the ruling European elite. Jazz, being too much of an individualistic and skill-oriented performance art to fit into the frame work of the new cultural policies being developed, was politically marginalized, in spite of the fact that jazz musicians and professional musicians in general, come traditionally from the black underclass. These same musicians were to become the artistic force behind the development of the regions many popular forms, creating the musical structures upon which hung the lyrics of the songs which would dominate the region for the next fifty years.

In Trinidad it was the Steel-Pan and Calypso which were to take on political significance in the Nationalist struggle; in Cuba it was the 'Son' which began to take on more Afro-Cuban elements, 'the result of an insightful grasp by Cuba's leader, of the deeper cultural realities of Caribbean life in terms of the centrality of the African presence in the cultural calculus', thereby 'invoking an Afro-Latinity'. Rex M. Nettleford. *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case for Jamaica*, 1978 p205. This Afro-Latinity went on to give the world of Jazz, Cu-Bop and Re-bop from the term 'Arriba' as well as the dance forms Mambo and Rumba.

In Haiti it was Voodoo-Jazz which employs folk themes and voodoo rhythms. In Dominican Republic it was the Merengue and in Jamaica it was Ska. Not only was Ska a creation of the Jazz musicians of the day, but one Jazz musician in particular was to be instrumental in bringing the music and its young exponents to wider public notice through his radio programme TADP(Teenage Dance Party), which was broadcast five days per week, and stayed on air for five years. That musician was Sonny Bradshaw, who today is also at the forefront of the struggle to keep jazz alive and recognized as the classical music of black people and the musical resource from which other popular black music forms spring. Employed by the fledgling JBC (Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation) as a member of the JBC Orchestra, Bradshaw was kept on as staff producer when the orchestra was disbanded, and being of nationalist/socialist orientation, he was himself acutely aware of the need for nationalist symbols and for music to reflect the growing self-awareness of the population.

In this regard, he saw no conflict between his love and playing of jazz, and his promotion of Jamaican popular music. He himself was to go on to experiment with big band arrangements of Caribbean themes, Reggae and dancehall compositions, his most controversial work being his re-arrangement of the National Anthem, which employs four bars of reggae rhythm accompanying the words "justice, truth be ours for ever, Jamaica land We love". Jazz then, according to Kamau Braithwaite, "Was the way to disrupt the

hegemony of culture in the British west Indies, and to open the way for the development in indigenous culture, and functions as a mode of resistance and aesthetic counterpoint to mainstream Anglo-American Music and the European classical tradition". The Art of Kamau Braithwaite, Stewart Brown. P.64/76

Losing ground to the new Jamaican popular music, Jazz became a victim of the cultural engineering that was taking place and was thereafter demonised as being elitist; it nevertheless maintained its following among the older demographic who remembered, and for whom it was their rallying cry, and their vehicle of resistance and transcendence. Most of those jazz musicians, with few exceptions, were disenfranchised ex Alpha and Stony Hill inmates whose choice of music instead of woodwork or other practical skills, left them on the edge of employability, just as it does today, even though popular musics in the Caribbean, especially Reggae, can command huge audiences and huge payrolls.

Those musicians who could find work in the recording studios which were beginning to open up, such as Studio One run by Clement 'Coxone' Dodd, stayed in Jamaica and became the musical force behind the songs and sounds which would become the hallmark of the '60s. Many left their homeland, heralding the near death of Jazz at home while becoming major contributors to the development of jazz wherever they went. This response to the Nationalist movements of the period was to be echoed in many of the territories in the region, Bradshaw being the exception, never having migrated, and choosing instead to fight his battles on familiar ground.

Note:

Alpha Boys Homes was a Catholic run home for homeless or abandoned boys.  
The Stony Hill School was a Government run institution for delinquent boys

## THE SCENE

The formed sub-culture of the jazz scene was set apart by its adopting of a special language and style of dress. (The Sonny Bradshaw Seven wore rakish Berets.) Although the image was one of overwhelming maleness, the fan base had a large female component, who were as knowledgeable about the music as their male partners, and were respected within the space. This was the youth sub-culture of the 40's and 50's prior to the arrival of Rock and Roll and the development of the regions' popular musics, and as such was meant for dancing, a vitally important element of black life and entertainment.

It was an urban phenomena which drew to it black men marginalized within their own country by the white political superstructure and who not only found a way to speak without words, but also a way to create a world of their own.

Young men like Sonny Bradshaw and Horace Galbraith made their own radios and defied the colonial ban on information; they listened to Cuban radio, Germany

calling, Armed Forces Radio (AFRS), Voice of America and anything else they could pick up.

It was to be the big disappointment of Bradshaw's life, when the Royal Air Force call came for technicians and other Air Force personnel from the Colonies and everyone else in his little group of electronic experimenters got the chance to go to England, but he was just one month too young. As he says:

“I was never to wear the wonderful blue uniform that the girls were crazy about.”

During the school Summer holidays, through the intervention of his teacher from Central Branch/Conversorium school, Bradshaw acquired a holiday job as a wrapper at Montague's Music and Novelty store on Tower Street, and after leaving Kingston Technical High School was employed full time as clerk in the novelty section where the musical instruments were housed. This was to be the start of Bradshaw's serious interest in music-making and a long 60-year career.

At Montague's Music store, Bradshaw discovered European classical music and got accustomed to the form and style of popular composers as the music teachers who, on the other side of the store, tried out every piece of music before they bought it; at the same time, listening on his home-made radio, he was able to hear the American Hit Parade, and young Jo Stafford singing the popular reworking of Chopin's Prelude in E-flat into 'No Other Love' as well as classical themes such as Debussy's 'My Reverie' of which he says: 'gave me the opportunity of noting the differences and similarities in the black and white worlds of music; I think it was called musical appreciation, and when I discovered modern classical composer Stravinsky doing things with one of my favourite bands, the Thundering Woody Herman Herd...I knew it was time for experimentation. Of the lot, I rather liked the melodic lines of Chopin, also Beethoven for his percussive and jazzy feel; in addition I had to sell the five-inch statuettes of the 'great composers' and noting their attire and hairstyles-long hair and curls, along with hearing their music across the music store, I concluded that these guys were not rich or even high-class individuals, but struggling musicians making a living out of what they believed in. This was very encouraging. I took on Valse Trieste by Sibelius one Saturday when the store was empty.....this piece attracted me greatly as I kept wondering what chords the composer was using to accompany that beautiful dirge-like composition. I took home the piece, and with my little harmony book, took all week dissecting the left and right hand notes to arrive at my set of chords and doing a four-part ensemble for trumpet, alto-sax, trombone and tenor sax; after a few corrections, it sounded great, but there was no-where to play it!!'.

As his interest in music grew so did the conflict between his day job and his occasional night-time playing which caused him to be late for work on those occasions. He eventually gave up the job to the great annoyance of his father, who nevertheless supported him by asking Mr. Roy White who was not only the leader of the Roy White Jump Sultans Orchestra, but also the woodwork teacher at Kingston Technical, if he had

a place for Sonny in his band. Mr. White duly auditioned Sonny and gave him a place as third trumpet in the section.

The band rehearsals were kept at Mr. White's woodwork shop at Beeston Street and further exposed Bradshaw to black music and musicians, the charts for which Mr. White imported especially for his band. Although his stint with the Jump Sultans was short, just a few months, Bradshaw was to be exposed not only to black music and musicians, but also to politics, as Mr. Whites woodwork shop was also a political meeting place, as he was an activist for the PNP/TUC coalition.

As Bradshaw's career developed, it became clear that his main instrument was to be the 'Orchestra'. Of all the musicians and bandleaders operating at the time he was the only one who consistently wrote his own arrangements for his band as opposed to using the stock arrangements such as those which his old boss used to bring in from the US. He taught himself to play the bass and the trumpet, later on adding the Fugelhorn, thereby developing into a multi-instrumentalist. He bought himself an arrangers book and taught himself arranging by studying the workings of the brass instruments, the wind instruments etc., and wrote out his experimental ideas, even while having nowhere to play them. Unlike his contemporaries whose works are recorded on vinyl, Bradshaw's works are written compositions which may be read and interpreted both visually and musically. Says Bradshaw:

"I didn't just write for my band but for any band that I was in and for other musicians as well. Milton McPherson also wrote quite a few things, but he was before me."

In later years Bradshaw would write music for plays on radio, for Pantomimes and other theatrical productions, radio commercials, themes for JTB (Jamaica Tourist Board) promotional films as well as his own compositions and arrangements for other bands and singers.

After making the decision to leave his job at Montagues' music store in pursuit of music, Bradshaws' entrepreneurial spirit was to come to the fore; he had already decided to form his own band and being bored with the stock arrangements being played by the Roy Coburn band which he joined after leaving the jump Sultans, he left the band and stayed home practicing and writing arrangements. According to Bradshaw only his mother understood; his father certainly did not!!

In 1950 the first Sonny Bradshaw seven was formed. The format was based on that of the Johnny Dankworth Seven, a British band which Bradshaw admired. The personnel included young Joe Harriott saxophone (just out of Alpha with permission from Sis. Ignatius) and Bradshaw himself on Trumpet with a little scat vocals thrown in. He was twenty-four years old and the youngest bandleader.

Throughout its 40 year life this band would become the half-way house between Alpha Boys Home and the world of professional music making for a number of

musicians many of whom have subsequently become world-famous within popular music and jazz.

They were immediately successful as a result of the Cocoa Cola Company's new Sunday morning promotional shows at the Carib Theatre which employed the new band with its new sound and after the first show contracted them for three months. The shows were simply called 'The Cocoa Cola Show'.

The young band acquired a following of young fans and Bebop became the music of the day heralding a new kind of dancing, away from the foxtrots, waltzes and Swing of their parents and on to what they called 'progressive' dancing which reflected the improvisatory style of the music.

Bradshaw's next entrepreneurial foray was the production of a four-page music magazine called "The Music sheet" in 1952. With encouragement from friend Hartley Neita, the 'Music Sheet' was developed into a 20-page magazine called The Ivory Magazine in conjunction with the Ivory Club, chaired by Vance Lannaman and of which Neita was a member. After two editions the magazine ceased due to conflicts with Lannaman; Bradshaw returned to his 4-page Music Sheet which came out monthly and continued until 1955. At JBC he developed the Jamaica Hit Parade and became the main supplier for the English market of Jamaican hits. Later, Bradshaw would become an importer of the Farfisa Organ from Italy which can be heard on many Bradshaw recordings and which was being used to replace the piano as bands became smaller and had to be more flexible.

As a result of the success of the Norman Granz productions 'Jazz at the Philharmonic' the Jazz Concert idea arrived in Jamaica in 1954 when Bradshaw and his friend and piano player from the SB7 Lloyd Adams put on the first Jazz 'concert' at the Ward Theatre in Kingston. Previously he had put together at the request of empressario Stephen Hill an All-star band for Hill's 'celebrity Concerts' which was to accompany stars, Sarah Vaughan, Johnny Rae, and Johnny Mathis. This 'Jazz Concert' however, was to be a Carnegie Hall style event, in the manner of the Norman Granz productions, presenting music for listening as opposed to music for dancing. The programme included presentations of trios, quartets, quintets, the SB7 with Strings and bongos, and the Big Band (16-pieces) which has remained in existence to the present.

Note; The Milton McPherson Orchestra was a society band along with the Ivy Graydon, Whylie Lopez and George Alberga bands. The Ivory club was a group of young professionals and civil servants who were music lovers. They met at the YWCA on North street where the Ministry of Labour now sits. Copley Johnson was the Vice chair. Lannaman went on to develop 'Lannaman Shipping' The Sonny Bradshaw Seven accompanied Carmen McRae twice. The Big Band has subsequently been renamed The Jamaica Big Band

Throughout his life and career, Bradshaw has pushed the boundaries of what was expected of a black man in colonial Caribbean society. As a musician he has struggled with the prejudices against both his colour and his profession.

As president of the Musicians Union he fought against 'blank labels' in the fledgling recording industry which deprived musicians and composers of their copyright earnings while at the same time fighting for copyright laws to be enacted for the same reason. He fought for the introduction of the 4-hour night for live gigs in the dance-halls and nightclubs where the norm had been for the musicians to play all night (at least 8 hours), and for appropriate changing facilities and meals in the hotels. His work in sustaining jazz has focused on The Jamaica Big Band, which he conducts, the Jazz-Mobile which has replaced the SB7 as his working band, and the JAMAICA Ocho-Rios Jazz Festival which is the international jazz festival he started in 1991. The youth arm of this Festival includes the Sonny Bradshaw School Band competition which specifically encourages the playing of wind and brass instruments, and the Jazz Awards which recognizes those musicians and media persons who have contributed to the growth and development of the form.

Although overshadowed internationally by the musicians whose careers he has fostered, Bradshaw continues to be a force to be reckoned with both musically and socially, and is referred to by every musical historian in the region as having been present and actively involved in every aspect of cultural development prior to and since independence.

As a member of the Boards of The Jamaica School of Music and the Cultural Development Commission, as well as initiating the Taste Talent contest (which has seen the emergence of some of Jamaica's major pop Stars), Bradshaw's influence has been far-reaching and historically significant in any discourse on Jamaica's musical development.

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