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ALL THAT JAZZ

Jazz is a good subject for bluffing because whoever happens to contradict you is almost certainly bluffing as well. This is because no one seems to know for certain how, where or why it all began. So your theories should, in theory, be as good as anyone else's. You may also hold the most outrageous critical opinions (for example, that Bunk Johnson was a fluent and inventive trumpet player, or that Jelly Roll Morton was a model of modesty and self-effacement), and citizens of the jazz world, far from regarding you as a nutter, will declare respect for your viewpoint and earnestly discuss the basis of your contentions.

However, there are three notes of caution. The earnest jazz enthusiast is as earnest as anyone you are ever likely to meet, so:

1. Never make jokes about jazz. If you do, make them with a fairly straight face or, at most, a slightly apologetic smile.

2. Whatever line you take, stick to it – no matter where it might lead you.
3. Don't agree with anyone completely. You might generously concur now and then in moderate mutual admiration of the art of Dink Johnson (or whoever is in the frame), but make sure that it is for different reasons. Total agreement will only lead to a reputation for indifference and might even raise suspicion.

One advantage of jazz over other kinds of music is that you don't have to listen to it if you don't want to. And plenty of people who do listen to it don't actually listen either, because they have their own agenda. While the music is being played, live or on record, they are arguing, very loudly, about how – or even if – the contents of rare and crackling old 78s and battered LPs should be transferred to CD. They are questioning whether this or that presenter/editor/columnist/authority knows what he or she is talking about.

They are pontificating on matters such as exactly when Louis Armstrong stopped being great, why Miles Davis was the way he was, what Anthony Braxton's geometric titles really mean, and why it can't be jazz without a banjo. They are asking whoever is sitting next to them which two Blue Note sleeves were designed by Andy Warhol, and whether David Stone Martin's sleeves were often better than the music within them.

This chatter used to die down only during a bass solo when it was suddenly apparent that everything

had gone comparatively quiet. But then bass players realised that the subtlety and brilliance of their playing was being masked by the sound of other instruments, so they fought back by purchasing amplifiers of their own and winding up the wick to suit themselves. Any chatter during a drum solo is usually pointless as it is too noisy even to hear your own bickering.

Do feel free to join in all this innocent fun. After all, there is no reason not to, and it's one way to advance your own credentials. If you've always assumed that Ruby Braff was a female wrestler and Randy Brecker is a kind of aphrodisiac muesli, don't be put off. Ignorance has never deterred others, and in this kind of verbal skirmishing, he who hesitates is defeated. So, get in there and grab your share of pontification.

This short but definitive guide sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in jazz discussions, and to equip you with a vocabulary and an evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and techniques designed to allow you to be accepted as a jazz aficionado of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will provide you with the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that before reading it you didn't know the difference between a trumpophone and a US president's mobile phone.



If you feel like suggesting that the word 'jazz' is derived from the African-American word 'jizz', meaning a certain horizontal exercise, then there's nothing to stop you.
