

Jazz is for Ordinary People

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“Jazz was for ordinary people. Jazz is ordinary people.”

Introduction

At first, it was blue, and then I saw white, followed by orange, then brown until they finally began to dance together. That was the first time I had seen music. I was 12.

It was quite normal for my family to take their usual Sunday brunch trip to Pip's, a local Italian food joint that, for some reason, did a very American-style brunch. What was not normal was that this Sunday, I would be in attendance. Nonetheless, on a random day in my twelfth year of existence, my parents decided that I was of age to attend Sunday brunch. (Little did I know that 'of age' essentially meant that I was finally old enough to see them get drunk off mimosas at an ungodly hour of the day.) So, I said goodbye to my weekly 11- 4:30 appointments with Grandma and said hello to the funny little glasses that didn't hold enough orange juice. I would quickly learn that these Sunday brunches always included my parents, myself, my older brother and sister, along with the Jones'. Oddly enough, the Jones family was almost identical to ours, both fathers suffered from a lack of hair, and the mothers sported freckles and medium-length blond curls. The only distinction between the Jones' and our family was that we had two young girls while theirs had two young boys. Regardless of how eerily similar we were, they were practically family, and to this day I am grateful to still have them as our brunch companions, no matter how sporadic they are these days.

Despite the four hundred and sixteen brunches I have attended since then, I can never forget my first Sunday brunch. That morning, I came out of my light pink room wearing a blue Justice tracksuit, still under the assumption that my Sunday afternoon would be spent at my grandmother's. As I entered the kitchen for my morning Yoplait yogurt, my father glanced down at me and raised his brow. He quickly turned to my mother and made a face I didn't quite understand yet, but as I grew older, I realized it meant, "Please don't let her out of the house in that outfit." (The day I turned 16, this look was used much more frequently.) My mother slowly turned to me and put on a soft smile. "Morning baby, we're going to get some brunch today with the Joneses', why don't you go put on that orange dress we bought," my mother spoke slowly and assuredly; the way she always did that made everyone feel comfortable with her. I quickly nodded and went to the fridge to grab my yogurt, then ran to my room, excited to have an event that required a dress. As I got older, the dresses for brunch became less and less mandatory; these days, I could show up to brunch in my pajamas, and no one would pay any mind. Though I haven't been to brunch in quite a while.

When I looked out of the car window at the slightly dingy Italian restaurant, I immediately felt my stomach growl at the thought of lasagna, not fully understanding the concept of brunch just yet. As I slowly opened the heavy door of my father's SUV, my brother shoved me out laughing as I tripped onto the sidewalk. "STOP IT AARON," I yelled with my treasured prepubescent squeal. Aaron just laughed as he hopped out of the car and casually strolled past me to say something to my father. My sister came from behind and grabbed my shoulders, giving them a bit of a squeeze for comfort before she nodded her head towards the restaurant. I trailed behind, wiping the dirt from the ground off of my dress as we began to enter

the restaurant. The inside was dark and dreary. The dining chairs sat upside down on dark brown wooden tables; the murky yellow walls became heavily muted as the windows were shut, casting a shadow over the restaurant. I remember searching for any sign of discomfort from my family as they walked through the restaurant, but I was only met with casualty. So, I mentally shrugged my shoulders and kept following my family. Quickly enough, I noticed that we were approaching a light shining from the back corner of the dining room. As we grew closer to the light, we approached a door that was essentially a window, as a large glass panel occupied most of the frame. I could hear the beat of Sade's *Smooth Operator* coming from behind the door. I remember picking up my pace as I was particularly attuned to that song (and still am). I always heard my father play the melody in the car on the way to my grandmother's while he tapped his finger on the steering wheel to the beat. When we reached the door, I looked through the glass at a sight I was fully unexpected to see.

Through the backdoor of Pip's was a large patio area covered by greenery on all three sides other than the wall it shared with the restaurant. I found myself leaning against that very same wall as we entered the outdoors. My eyes were drawn to the stage that sat in the middle of the patio; white tables occupied the surrounding space, accompanied by multiple buffet tables lining the far-right wall of greenery. Despite the beautiful smell of fresh pastries being placed on one of the buffet tables, I couldn't take my eyes off the stage. The red drums took up the majority of the upstage; on their right sat a quite large bass guitar in black and white directly next to an electric keyboard. On the far left sat two instruments I was unfamiliar with at that age: saxophones. I remember the saxs taking up a small portion of my brain while the rest was occupied by an instrument I didn't see, a microphone. "What kind of music would they play

without a microphone," I mumbled with furrowed eyebrows. My sister looked down at me with a smirk as the family moved towards the first table next to the right side of the stage. As she lightly nudged my head to the side, she said, "Jazz." I raised an eyebrow and sat down.

The Jones family joined us around 15 minutes after we sat. I waved to their youngest daughter, Cara, as she sat down next to me at the edge of the table, her to my left and my father on the right. I don't remember speaking that much to Cara that day, but then again, I don't remember really speaking to anyone as I waited to see what this jazz stuff was all about. Of course, I'd heard the genre of music with my family, but it was always played in the background. And like classical music, I was under the impression that jazz was only played in social settings to make grown-ups feel more sophisticated. So, when I heard my sister mention the genre, I thought some sophistication might do me well. I finally tore myself from my thoughts as I noticed the family begin to move towards the buffet tables. As some food would pose as an adequate way to waste some time before I could see the jazz band, I followed the family eagerly. As I put the finishing touches on my low vibrational plate, I heard a shuffle coming from the middle of the patio—the stage. I turned around to see four men walk onto the stage, all bald and wearing sunglasses. (At the time, I chalked it up to that whole sophistication thing.) I found myself pulling Cara's arm in a hurry, motioning us towards our table and closer to the stage. It was time to hear the music of the refined.

As the men began to grab their respective instruments or sat and stood behind them, I straightened my back and crossed my legs, ready for my new cosmopolitan life. (I am glad to say that my life did change at that moment, but it became far from classy.) The song began with the slow, deep notes of the piano. Blue. I remember my eyes widening at the sound, watching the

streaks of blue enter my vision. The score was almost classical, but somehow, the melody was filled with soul, changing the feeling of the notes entirely. Then came the sound of the drums. White. It was a far cry from the drums of rock songs I was used to hearing through the muffled walls of my sister's room. Spots of bright white popped in and out of my vision to the beat of the drum. I cocked my head to look past the sax players still readying their instruments so that I could see the drummer. His drumsticks moved so fast my eyes couldn't keep up. I grew curious as I almost never saw him hit the actual drums on his kit; it was as if the cymbals were his instrument instead, while he occasionally tapped the middle drum to give us some bass. I nodded my head to the scat of the cymbals and looked down to see my ballet slippers tapping to the occasional beat of the tom drum. The pace of the song was quickly picking up when the saxophone player closest to my table raised his instrument to his mouth and blew. ORANGE. The sax was loud, loud enough to encompass the song but not overpower the piano, which slowly sped to the beat, its player's fingers running from left to right on occasion to create the wonderful sound I would later learn was a glissando. The orange swirled with blue to fight for my attention at first, as I bounced my focus from piano to sax and back and forth again while white dots of the drums came in and out to play with them until I was able to see brown. A deep brown, which was somehow bright at the same time, flowed in front of my eyes from the sound of the bass guitar. I could only hear a few notes from it at first, though as the song progressed and the melody became complicated, the bassist's fingers became the glue that held the song together, sometimes making the first move to add a new note, the other instruments following to create a new tune, making the song seem never-ending and forever changing. Then suddenly, the second sax player rose, and the other instruments paused. And after a breath of silence, the saxophone man brought the music back again. For the next 65 seconds, the orange blurb flew in and out of

my vision as the waves of the sax flew to and from ear to ear, moving slowly, slowly, slowly, and then quickly. The notes riffed up and down as the player's face grew sweaty from lack of air, and just when I became the most entranced, the other instruments joined in again, making me sit back in my seat at the overload of colors. They danced with each other as the smiles of my ears grew wide, and I could finally see all the colors of my life.

That was the moment when I realized jazz wasn't for the bourgeoisie. Jazz was for people like us; it was for the young girls in orange dresses; it was for the fathers and mothers of little girls in orange dresses, and the siblings, and the family friends, and for the people sitting five tables down from little girls in orange dresses, and for the owners of restaurants in which little girls in orange dresses sat. Jazz was for ordinary people. Jazz *is* ordinary people.

Dedication

I'm thankful to everyone involved on that day that completely and entirely solidified my career as a Jazz musician. And I am thankful for everyone who has stuck with me during the long nights of banging on the snare one too many times. I am grateful to be able to share my story, which currently ends in a Grammy nomination for *Best Large Jazz Ensemble Album*. Please enjoy this collection of memories from an ordinary person who simply plays the music of the young.