



Players and Listeners Make the Music Together

By Michael B. Friedman, LMSW

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During a recent performance at Keystone Korner, Samara Joy—a fine young singer—said how glad she was to be appearing before a live audience again. “I love hearing an audience speaking back to me,” she said.

Samara is young, but she gets it. Jazz at its best is a conversation—and not just among the musicians but also with the audience.

It isn't necessarily that way. Sometimes the musicians are just playing mechanically, following the changes and not really interacting with each other, like children engaged in parallel play. And sometimes audiences are immersed in conversations with their friends, so that for them, the music becomes just background sound.

But sometimes something magical happens, and the players and the listeners are joined together in what for me, both as a player and a listener, is an experience of transcendence, a shared spiritual journey. These moments are why I play and why I go to live performances rather than just listening to recordings.

I am not alone. Other jazz fans who were recently interviewed by Liz Fixsen, the editor of this newsletter, shared their experience of listening to jazz. Sue Carlin, a member of the Baltimore Jazz Alliance Board of Directors, said, “When I am at a jazz performance, I feel a close togetherness with everyone there. It is like we share a wonderful secret.” Carol Kowarski, another devoted fan of jazz, commented, “Musicians become more inspired and animated when playing in front of an enthused audience.” Saxophonist Derrick Michaels observed, “Undivided attention is the best recipe for music of depth and substance. This is true both on the bandstand and in the audience.”

Alice Schlothauer, who described herself as both a performer and a listener, said of her experience, “The folks in an audience absolutely have an influence on how I present any piece of music. I set out to tell a story and to create a mood—a feeling. The people listening—their eyes, their body language, their smiles and their tears—tell me what is working for them and bringing them with me into the music. It is gold.” She added, “As a listener, I try to connect with the musicians on stage. I listen for their souls and hope to feel that magic only music seems to bring. To look into the eyes of a musician who is truly passionate about what they are

doing is a very personal and special moment to me. I feel that jazz musicians make music out of pure love and joy.”

Clearly, Alice feels the same powerful emotions that I experience as a player and a listener—at least when the playing is inspired and the audience is attentive. Also, whereas Alice seems to be moved by what she sees, I—and I believe many others—do not get our sense of connectedness from *seeing* the players and the audience, but from *feeling* them.

Music obviously is an experience of the senses but—at its best—it is more than that. It is like tapping into an underground channel of energy and enlightenment. Carl Jung, a psychoanalytic theorist of the first half of the 20th century, called this a “collective unconscious.” Players feed into it and draw from it; so does the audience.

Many years ago, I dropped by the Village Gate on Bleeker Street in New York City to listen to Marian McPartland, a wonderful piano player. Her first set was terrific, and when she took a break, I was delighted to discover that the interim piano player—working solo—was Joel Schulman, a blind player who used to work across the street at the Surf Maid, where years previously I often had stopped after working an evening shift to listen and to play. I called out some requests of tunes I had heard him play at the Surf Maid. He came alive. He became more than a journeyman musician filling in for the star; he became the star himself. When I asked him to play “On Green Dolphin Street,” he called back, “I need a bass player for that. Is there a bass player in the house?” Marian McPartland’s bass player came on stage. They began to play. Then her drummer joined them. It was an electrifying performance. Joel played at a level I had never heard from him before, a fresh, exciting, and connected performance. And the room was with him. The audience and the performer were united. Joel, as I said, was blind. He could not see the audience, but he could feel us.

Audiences can, and do, have a powerful impact on the music. They can be, and are, part of it. Sadly, (this is a player and a listener speaking) audiences sometimes are too immersed in their own conversations whether at venues where the music is just supposed to be in the background or even at the very best listening clubs, such as Keystone Korner. Thus they (we) lose the opportunity for a magical and transcendent shared experience.

Audiences everywhere should listen to Todd Barkan’s admonition at every performance at the Keystone Korner. “Take care of the music and the music will take care of you.”

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