IS THE LAPTOP A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT? OR, WHAT’S OLD IS NEW AGAIN, AND VICE VERSA
EUGENE MARLOW

One night in April 2008, during two sets at The Jazz Standard, a leading New York City jazz spot, master jazz trumpeter Dave Douglas clearly demonstrated there’s not one part of the instrument’s range he can’t call up with precision at a moment’s notice. But Douglas’s masterful performance is but the tip of the iceberg in an evening of compelling sounds not just from traditional jazz instruments, but non-traditional ones as well, that speaks loudly about the influence of electronic media and concomitant inherent messages.

Joined on the stage with Douglas were Marcus Strickland (saxes), Adam Benjamin (Fender-Rhodes), Brad Jones (electric baby bass), Gene Lake (drums and cymbals), and DJ Olive. All these musicians are individually highly skilled and inventive in their own right. But what made the evening’s sounds all the more compelling was DJ Olive’s performance—except Olive doesn’t play an instrument. He plays around with sound. One of his instruments is a laptop. Others included a turntable and an assortment of electronic buttons!

Olive’s contribution to the evening’s entertainment were the various sounds and sound effects elicited from his library of LPs and hard-drive stored effects: sirens, people talking, a woman yelling, the sound of dice (I think that’s what it was), laughter, and fireworks, among others. At one point, I thought I heard sound effects from the 1956 science-fiction movie Forbidden Planet.

Eugene Marlow, PhD, is the author of eight books and over 125 articles on various aspects of communication, technology, and culture. In addition to scholarship, he is a noted composer, arranger, musician, and music journalist.

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The introduction of these electronic “instruments” could easily be viewed as gimmicky to some jazz purists, who might point a finger at the commercialism such a “player” represents being on the stage with the rest of the “legitimate” instrumentalists: “Come now. A turntable? Is this a rap concert or what?”

Fact is, Olive’s contribution to the music fit right in. Fact is, the very first and last “sounds” heard (at least in the first set) were from Olive’s smorgasbord of auditory offerings. Musically, it worked. Perhaps it worked because, as Douglas remarked between sets, he and Olive have worked together for about five years. Clearly, there is a comfort level between the standard instrumentalists and Olive’s “playing.” In fact, in the first piece of the first set—a funky, moderate tempo tune anchored by an electric bass ostinato—Olive takes a solo. How does a laptop, et al., take a solo? It all seemed quite natural and integral to the performance.

Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised. The use of non-standard instruments and sounds in live musical performance has been a “compositional” technique going back to at least Mozart’s day. The “Toy Symphony” (there is some debate as to who actually wrote it) uses toy instruments that are highly integrated into the score. Hovhaness’ “And God Created Great Whales” uses whale sounds. Walter Piston’s “The Incredible Flautist” uses dog sounds. Eric Satie’s “Parade” features a typewriter, revolver, and siren. Shostakovitch’s “Symphony No. 2” uses a factory hooter. And Tchaikovsky’s world-famous “1812 Overture” employs cannons and bells.

There are other examples. Musique Concrète—the use of sounds from life—was pioneered by French composer and radio broadcaster Pierre Schaeffer in the late 1940s and 1950s. This genre was facilitated by developments in technology, most prominently microphones and the commercial availability of the magnetic tape recorder used by Schaeffer and his colleagues for manipulating tapes and tape loops.

On the jazz side of the twentieth-century music house, in 1967 trumpeter and composer/arranger Don Ellis began his experimentation with electronics. His pianist started using the Fender-Rhodes electric piano, clavinet, and electric harpsichord. Ellis himself started using what he called the “electrophonic trumpet,” that is, a trumpet whose sound was amplified and often routed through various effects processors. The first appearance of this innovation is on “Open Beauty” from 1967’s Electric Bath, in which Ellis takes an extended solo with his trumpet processed through an echoplex.

With respect to Douglas’s “Keystone” sextet, one could say what’s old is new again. From that night’s two sets at The Jazz Standard it is clear Douglas
has an affinity for things past. The name of his group alone, Keystone, is a reference to the past—a tip of the hat to the silent movie days early in the twentieth century. What the connection is to the music escapes this writer, but to Douglas there is some kind of bond. Several prior musical influences are notable. Both tunes #1 and #2 (all the pieces remained unnamed by Douglas throughout the evening) were funk/fusion influenced. In one piece, drummer Gene Lake made a clear reference to Afro-Cuban rhythms on the cowbell; timbale riffs were ever-present. Other pieces reflected R&B and Latin funk influences. Middle-eastern scales were part and parcel of another piece. The psychedelic aura of the 1960s was also in the house. The last piece of the first set was clearly in three, but could have just as easily been in 6/8 and taken for a rhythmically West African “bembe” construct. Traditional “swing,” however, never entered the musical conversation. Collectively, these references resonated with the audience, apparently eager to hear a new context for pre-existing musical patterns.

Quite apart from Douglas’s well-recognized trumpeting acumen and well-organized sets, he has also figured out the other side of the equation—an aspect of the music business that escapes many musicians, fine and performing artists of all kinds included, and that is the business side of the music business in a world of digital communications. Douglas has apparently thought it through from analog beginning to digital end. It shows in the musical and electronic influences and the musicianship; it shows in how he markets his music.

In other words, “What’s new is old again.” It’s not just the quality of the music that matters: music has to be sold. An audience has to come to the live performances; the music has to be bought by consumers who wish to keep a memory of the performance or expand their music collection.

Thanks to engineers from Geoff and Tyler Recording, both sets were recorded and made available digitally online within hours of the evening’s completion. The morning after the performance (Saturday, April 12, 2008), each piece from each set was available for download through Douglas’s Greenleaf online label. What’s new is the mechanism by which Douglas is marketing his product: not only in the club (“CDs for purchase on your way out,” he casually mentions from the stage), but also online, cut by cut.

What’s old is selling one’s artistic product, a conundrum with a centuries-long history of many failures. Only a few have managed to integrate the creation of artistic output and the financially successful selling of it. Shakespeare was one who comes to mind immediately. Beethoven, also. The Beatles, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Madonna, Quincy Jones are others. Perhaps we
can add Douglas’s name, aided and abetted by DJ Olive’s “electronic musical-
ity,” to this list further down the digital road.

All in all, the Dave Douglas troupe represents a media ecological event in
various ways. Clearly, Olive’s laptop, et al., indicates a seamless integration of
modern electronic technology into the standard jazz instrumentation. Is this a
twenty-first century example of Mozart’s “Toy Symphony” orchestration? On
the other hand, Douglas uses digital technology to stream his performances
to those not present at the “live performance” or perhaps to those who want
to purchase a “memory” of the event at a later time. The “selling” of the fine
and performing arts is a centuries old challenge. In the so-called “digital” age
this process has apparently found a new venue.