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Was Newport 1969 the Altamont of Jazz? The role of music festivals in shaping the jazz-rock fusion debate

Festivals play a central role in popular music mythology. Through their organizational practices, programming, and high degrees of press coverage, festivals and their outcomes contribute to the narratives that give order to music history. At no point was this more true than in 1969, when the Woodstock Festival became the single most iconic event used to represent 1960s youth culture, mythologizing an era, a generation, and their music. But Woodstock was not the only music festival to make headlines in 1969. That same year, producer George Wein made the controversial decision to introduce rock acts to the Newport Jazz Festival. The Newport lineup included jazz familiars such as Art Blakey and Dave Brubeck, but also rock groups like Sly and the Family Stone and Led Zeppelin. According to the press coverage in *Down Beat* and *Rolling Stone*, the result was disastrous: the audience nearly brought the festival to its knees, causing the city council to ban rock ‘n’ roll from future Newport festivals. In this sense, Newport 1969 was perhaps more comparable to the infamous Altamont rock concert later that year, where a fan was beaten to death by Hells Angels during a Rolling Stones performance, ending the 1960s with a fatal antithesis to the optimism embodied at Woodstock. This paper will examine the Newport Jazz Festival, and consider how it and other festivals shaped critical debates about the feasibility of a fusion between jazz and rock.

OPTIMISM FOR NEWPORT 1969

1969 marked the sixteenth installment of the Newport Jazz Festival, and in press releases producer George Wein claimed to be excited about the possibilities for a crossover between jazz and rock, both in terms of music and audiences. When the preliminary line-up came out in March, there was a tone of anticipation in a *Rolling Stone* article called “Jazz Meets Rock”, which was part of a broader sense of excitement in the magazine’s coverage about the early jazz-rock fusion albums being released at that time. Rock acts had previously been booked at the Monterey Jazz Festival, but the 1969 Newport program had far and away the most ambitious mixture of jazz, rock, and avant-garde acts yet seen in a festival. Wein took out a full-page ad in *Rolling Stone* [which you can see on the screen] to publicize the final line-up in June. According to him, “all of the major rock artists we contacted were eager to perform at Newport. The Newport Jazz and Folk Festivals were still undisputed as the most important outdoor music events in the country, and the response from rock artists and agents was a deluge” (Wein 2004: 281).

In the festival program, Wein wrote an essay in which he lamented the avant-garde jazz movement as “going nowhere,” and explained that he turned to rock music for its vitality: “the better rock kids have the enthusiasm and the drive that many young jazz musicians seem to lack. They know there is a public out there and they go get it. They improvise, jam, play with a beat, play the blues and have many of the characteristics of jazz. But is it

JAZZ?”, he asked. (Wein 2004: 283). Moreover, Wein claimed “I want to bring a new audience to jazz. I want to bridge the gap between rock and jazz” (Worsley 1981: 197).

WAS THERE A RIOT GOING ON?

The 1969 festival began Thursday, July 3rd, with a program bill aimed at the “the jazz aficionado” (14 June 1969: 23). It was the most conventional jazz night of the festival, but even so featured players who were being influenced by pop and rock styles, such as George Benson and Freddie Hubbard, as well as the Sun Ra Arkestra, a group whose image appealed to a segment of the rock counterculture and who had in fact graced the cover of *Rolling Stone* only a few months before. 3,500 attended without incident.

After the Friday afternoon concert came and went, the field began to fill up for the Friday evening concert, which was billed as “an evening of jazz-rock.” On the bill were Jethro Tull, Ten Years After, Jeff Beck, and Blood, Sweat and Tears, as well as two jazz players who experimented with rock, Steve Marcus and Roland Kirk. According to official estimates, the field was sold out and an indeterminate number of people managed to jump the fences: “in all, there were nearly 22,000 people packed onto the grounds ... and another 10,000 on the adjacent hillside” (Wein 2004: 283). At one point, a 20-foot-wide section of the 10-foot-high fence was knocked down, and more crowds from the hillside poured into the field. Wein went onstage to try and establish a sense of order, but was powerless before the crowd.

On Saturday afternoon, the Newport Jazz All-Stars appeared, as did a pre-*Bitches Brew* Miles Davis. They were followed by sets from John Mayall and Frank Zappa’s Mothers of Invention, all without incident. But the Saturday evening concert was a different story. After sets by a Finnish jazz ensemble, Dave Brubeck, Art Blakey, and the Gary Burton Quartet, Sly and the Family Stone took the stage and the crowd began to react differently. *Rolling Stone* reported the scene in hyperbolic detail as follows:

Everything went off. The rain. The crowds. Firecrackers. And, above all, establishment paranoia. The fence went again. To prevent more damage to the fence, the gates were opened and bands of wild hippies, LSD on their breath, swarmed through, pushing the bleacher audience forward, vaulting over the VIP box seats, shoving into the press section, slamming the customers into the stage, all the while Sly, monarch of his own fascist jungle, urging everyone higher! Higher! *Higher!* ... [Wein] stalked the stage, crying, “Alright you kids, be cool, be cool, we don’t want any riots,” as firecrackers shot into the crowd, fist fights erupted between what one observer described as gas station attendants and boogalooers, and hippies leaped over the bodies—flashing the victory sign furiously—and one acid tripping lady went into her own gymnastic reverie. Sly played on, digging it, and the audience still with seats stood on them. To the encore applause for Sly, Wein replied: “that’s all—Sly isn’t playing anymore” (9 August 1969:10).

After Sly’s performance, Wein feared a riot, but felt that canceling the show “would surely have had consequences,” and therefore went ahead with the program. (Wein 2004: 284) The next group on was the World’s Greatest Jazz Band, a group specializing in Dixie and traditional jazz, and therefore a bizarre musical contrast to Sly. Yank Lawson

was playing with the group that night, and described an even more chaotic scene from his view on the stage. “People were coming over the wall. Some were throwing rocks and empty beer bottles at security guards and police. There were fires on The Hill. Some couples were ‘making it’ out in the open. It was shocking to me,” he recalled (Worsley 1981: 201-202).

The festival field calmed down again for the Sunday afternoon concert, which featured James Brown, the Buddy Rich Orchestra, and B.B. King and Johnny Winter. After Saturday night’s events, Wein feared that Led Zeppelin’s scheduled evening performance would generate even greater chaos, and without informing the band members, made up a story about one of them being ill and announced that Led Zeppelin had cancelled. The band’s manager, Peter Grant, was infuriated and warned Wein that he didn’t let Led Zeppelin play, they would set up their equipment in the street outside” (Wein 2004:285). But by that point much of the crowd who had caused the previous night’s disruptions had left the city, and Led Zeppelin were allowed to perform on stage.

The total attendance for the festival that weekend was 85,000 people, breaking all previous Newport records (Wein 2004: 286). Fifty-three people were arrested during the weekend, while one hundred twenty were treated at Newport Hospital (Worsley 1981: 203). Shortly after the festival, Wein described the experience as “sheer hell—the worst four days of my life” (Goldblatt 1977: 177). Reflecting on it years later, he felt that “the rock bands that played the festival were in another league and in another world, and their scene had nothing to do with my passion as a promoter or as a musician ... I still consider it to be the nadir of my career” (Wein 2004: 286).

Despite all of this, what is most striking to me is that none of these events sound like a riot. On the contrary, much of the audience behaviour could be considered normal for contemporary rock festivals such as Glastonbury and T in the Park, both of which have experienced fence-crashing, drink throwing, and crowd surging, but neither of which would have these actions described as rioting. Even Wein himself wrote in his autobiography of the events, “it’s a miracle that we *avoided* a riot” (Wein 2004: 284, my emphasis). But as musical events become compressed and painted in broad strokes over time, 1969 has come to be known as a year when the festival did have riots. The Columbia Encyclopedia, for instance, summarizes in its entry on Newport that “riots caused performance cancellations in 1960, 1969, and 1971” 2006).¹

A DECISIVE MOMENT FOR MILES?

Miles Davis offered a very different perspective of whether the mixing of jazz and rock at the festival was successful. Miles did not normally spend much time beyond his own performance hanging out at Newport, but this year was different; Miles remarked that “I enjoyed myself more than I ever have. There was life there and I specially enjoyed hearing Blood, Sweat and Tears and John Mayall, everybody. Everyone was

¹ <http://columbia.thefreedictionary.com/Newport+Jazz+Festival>

encouraging to each other backstage. It was something to look forward to and I went every night” (9 August 1969:10). Wein verified this account in his autobiography:

[Miles] listened to every group. He scrutinized every detail of each performance. He saw those thousands of young people and their enthusiasm—and decided that he wanted to be a part of it ... There’s no telling how the experience of the festival—seeing the response of the crowds up close—influenced Miles. All we know is that one month later, he went into Columbia’s studios in Manhattan with a dozen musicians and recorded the first three sessions of what would become *Bitches Brew* (Wein 2004: 463-464).

PRESS REACTIONS TO NEWPORT 1969

The events at the 1969 Newport Jazz Festival were covered in detail by both *Down Beat* and *Rolling Stone*, respectively the leading jazz and rock periodicals of the time. The journalists from both magazines agreed that the festival was a disaster, but the similarities in coverage ended there. I will also compare these reports to George Wein’s own recollection of events in his autobiography published over three decades after the fact, and to other accounts of the festival.

In the *Rolling Stone* report, Wein was portrayed as an out-of-touch old fool. The story opened with an unflattering description of the “short, bald, fat and 42-year-old” Wein, who was indirectly blamed for lacking the understanding to provide adequate sound equipment for the rock bands; after the so-called riots set in Wein was represented as patronizing and uptight, and described as a “high school principal” stalking the stage, “all flailing arms” and unable to relate to the young crowd (Ibid 10). The theme of generational gaps recur throughout *Rolling Stone’s* coverage of jazz festivals, including the Monterey Jazz Festivals of 1968 and 1969. Jazz festivals were repeatedly represented as sites of tension between old and young, square and hip, traditionalism and the avant-garde, and finally, jazz and rock. Moreover, any conflict between different social groups at a festival was then used as evidence in arguments about the artistic worth of the music. In the case of Newport ‘69, the reporter quoted Wein as wanting “to bring ‘a new, young audience to jazz,’ and ‘to bridge the gap between jazz and rock’”; but in the next line the writer editorializes by concluding that “As usual these days, the chasm was more apparent than the link,” equating the audience conflicts with a conflict of sounds (9 August 1969:10).

The same kind of rhetorical leap occurred in *Down Beat* coverage of Newport. Dan Morgenstern confronted the rock debacle head on in an article entitled “Rock at Newport: Big Crowds, Bad Vibes,” where he used the problems of the festival to support his criticisms on the musical value of rock. Morgenstern admitted to not hearing Friday night’s rock concert, but mentioned that the groups were “over-amplified” (21 August 1969:40,45). He applauded Lighthouse, the first rock act of the festival, for having “a musical slant,” but wished that some of the jazz guitarists at the festival like Kenny Burrell and George Benson could have been on hand “to show the [other] rockers what fine guitar playing is all about, and how amplification can be used for musical ends” (Ibid). After describing the riots, his verdict on the inclusion of rock music at the Newport festival was especially grim, writing that “the rock experiment was a resounding

failure ... By all means, spice [the program] up with valid things like real blues and r&b, but leave rock where it belongs: in the circus or the kindergarten” (21 August 1969: 45).

At the end of 1969, the topic of the Newport Festival was revisited in *Down Beat* in two articles, this time written by Alan Heineman, the magazine’s chief rock critic, and Morgenstern, who re-assessed his initial evaluation of the festival (25 December 1969:22-23). Heineman took Morgenstern to task for all the points mentioned above. On the music being over-amplified, Heineman wrote “by whose standards[?] ... Rock music is designed to be played very loud, louder than you or most jazz critics are prepared to tolerate” (22). As for Lighthouse, he argued that “it is very clear ... that what you meant by their having ‘a musical slant’ on things is a ‘jazz slant’.” Heineman felt it was impossible compare the musical conventions of a jazz guitarist like George Benson with those of a rock guitarist, writing that “if you think the electronic aspects of the guitar aren’t being explored [in rock] in a thoroughly musical way—albeit violently and jarringly—then you just haven’t been listening to rock” (22).

Morgenstern gave himself space to respond to Heineman’s comments and defend the critical stance he took on rock music. He began with a clarifying statement about his intentions in the original review:

My reaction was quite simply that of a life-long jazz enthusiast who had witnessed the near-destruction of the oldest and most famous jazz festival in the world, brought about by a combination of carelessness and stupidity in which rock, unfortunately, was the active principle ... Specifically, I think (aside from the crucial lack of suitable facilities to accommodate the crowds) [it was] a clash between two kinds of fans and two kinds of music. The jazz fans had come mainly to listen, while the rock fans were mainly there to create—and be part of—a “scene.” And in that difference in motivation—if I am correct in my assumption—is revealed a fundamental fact about rock: It is only incidentally music, whereas jazz, alas, is by now primarily music. Why alas? Because jazz once was also a social force as well as a great music; because, at one time, it elicited similar (if less demonstrative) spontaneous participation from its audience (22).

THE DIVERGING DISCOURSES OF JAZZ AND ROCK

Having sampled the press coverage of the 1969 Newport Jazz Festival and other festivals of that year from a variety of periodicals as well as retrospective accounts from those who were in attendance, a few key issues begin to emerge.

First, there was very little consensus about which performers were actually playing jazz and which were playing rock. Some writers attempted to categorize the performers: they were rock musicians if they played straight eighth notes, jazz if they played swing eighths; rock if using an electric bass, jazz if using an upright bass, rock if wearing psychedelic clothing, jazz if wearing a suit and tie. But such distinctions didn’t hold up to close scrutiny and could not be applied universally. Some critics complained about the lack of professional behaviour from rock musicians, but these were possibly simply different performance conventions rather than a matter of professionals versus amateurs: rock musicians might have appeared to be overly nonchalant or losing control on stage, but

these could easily have been practiced routines used concert after concert to give the impression of losing control and playing in wild abandon. And of course, such performance conventions would also sometimes be employed by jazz musicians.

Second, there was a lack of consensus about *who* was listening to jazz and *who* was listening rock. Were jazz and rock audiences mutually exclusive, or was there some overlap? Did some people go to the festival to hear both jazz and rock? No one could agree. Overall, rock audiences may have physically moved more than the typical Newport jazz audience, with a *Rolling Stone* reporter complaining that the Newport jazz and folk festivals appeared to have been “designed by programmers who find it natural to remain stationary on a 14-inch wide wooden chair for hours at a stretch (23 August 1969: 20). And according several accounts from jazz critics, one would think that anyone who caused trouble at the festival was automatically a rock fan, while jazz fans played no part in the disruptions. But again, these differences are far from absolute.

And that, of course, is the point. Distinctions between jazz and rock—and jazz and rock audiences, for that matter—are socially constructed, sources of disagreement and dispute, defining themselves according to shifting categories of age, race, performance convention, audience behaviour, fashion sense, and language. And in their own way, all of these elements could be said to collectively constitute musical experiences and musical cultures.

CONCLUSIONS: SHAPING THE JAZZ-ROCK FUSION DEBATE

In 1969, there was a rich dialogue between jazz and rock cultures, and festivals were a crucial part of the debate on whether the traditions of jazz and rock could successfully merge and produce music of lasting artistic value. Musicians had experimented with jazz-rock on record and in isolated concert performances for some time, but the sheer size and symbolic weight of the Newport Jazz Festival placed the musical experimentations of jazz-rock into a living, social context, all well-documented so that the results of that experiment would make a greater impact on critical debate in 1969 than any individual album or concert. Critics had debated the worth of jazz-rock experiments before, but the clashes were mostly restricted to the printed page, without any real threat of violence. At Newport, however, sonic experiments had tangible social consequences; people could literally get hurt, and the jazz-rock fusion debate suddenly became much more serious.

We now think of jazz and rock as quite separate traditions. But in 1969, with Blood, Sweat and Tears at the top of the pop charts, Sun Ra on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, and Miles Davis heralding new directions in music, no one knew for sure which way popular music would turn. Before Newport 1969, the prospects of a merger between jazz and rock were represented as exciting and real in both *Down Beat* and *Rolling Stone*. After the festival, reviews implied that it had been obvious all along, and indeed inevitable, that a fusion between jazz and rock was massively problematic. The seeds of doubt had been laid, and in retrospect the festival can be seen as a turning point in jazz and rock discourse, one where allegiances were cast and one was either for fusion or against it. By revisiting the moments where such divisions were still being challenged, we can

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hopefully reach a better understanding of how the divisions between jazz and rock are
constructed in the present.