

THE BARCELONA JAZZ FESTIVAL:

Unserious Music

Some people have told Joan Cararach, the producer of the Barcelona Jazz Festival, that they thought it was inappropriate for him to have programmed the fado singer Mariza. They did not approve of fado music on a supposedly jazz program. Just like I don't approve of their reasoning.

But the problem is deeper than that. The way jazz festivals have been evolving for maybe 30 years now, they should no longer be so narrowly self-named.

It is an exploitation of the good name of jazz. Jazz is the most vibrant, interesting, honest (and poverty-stricken) music of the 20th century, and so far in the 21st. Promoters have co-opted its name to cover a diversity of other, more commercial, often vocal, less challenging contemporary music like swamp rock. Not that there's anything wrong with swamp rock.

Somebody should just find another name for these things. "Contemporary Music Festival" is not terribly sexy. Maybe we could call them "Unserious Music" Festivals, Classical is also called "serious music." I remember that Elvin Jones used to say that "all music should be taken on its own terms."

When I had a column in the International Herald Tribune, I used to joke that my territory was all kinds of music except serious music. I wasn't considered serious enough to write about Igor Stravinsky, though Gil Evans was okay. It seems to me in my unseriousness that one way or another, Gil and Igor are just about inseparable. Never mind.

Yes, come to think about it, you should mind. I mind. Why put music into all those little boxes? But that's not our subject right now. Or is it?

Barcelona, a stately city, may be the city of the decade. It has the good posture of a first-class European city, with deep

multicultural roots. Yet it is modern, it will not soon be torn down. It is an exciting city, all sorts of stuff happening.

Legally aside, however, it is not in fact a Spanish city. I think of the Spanish civil war whenever I am in Barcelona, which was then the stronghold of the Socialist Republic. (They lost.) Those were the same years as when Lester Young was in his prime with Count Basie. In some way those times were connected.

I hope this does not come across as judgmental, but Avishai Cohen's "Eastern Unit" was, somewhat oversimplified, too ethnic for my taste. You should know that my definition of "too ethnic" at a jazz festival is an absence of anything approaching Basie-style swing. Perhaps that's going too far. Or, I'll add, Philly Joe Jones-type swing.

When, trying to be nice, Cohen announced how happy he was to be back in Spain, there were a few boos and whistles in the seats around me. Barcelona is, in fact, the capitol of Catalonia. Spain and Catalonia are two rival cultures with two different histories.

Bassist Cohen sang 500 year old songs in Hebrew and Aramaic, and he even did a Bedouin folk song. It is all in minor keys, and his otherwise excellent octet was much too busy being ethnic.

I start to feel exploited. Not that there's anything wrong with world music, but you would think that a jazz musician who performs with such determined ethnicity should know when he is not really in Spain.

Ironically, the band of the "inappropriately-programmed" fado singer Mariza came closer to pleasing this bebop snob than anyone else. One way or another, they swung very hard. Mariza knows how to present a song, though she sometimes comes uncomfortably close to belting.

The three-acoustic guitar frontline was similar to the Quintet of the Hot Club of France. Angelo Freire, who is only 16, played lead on a "Portugese guitar," and he reminded me of a young Django. Fado is a combination of African, Indian, jazz, and Gypsy influences.

The Chucho Valdés octet was sort of like Irakere brought into the 21st century. Afro Cuban jazz just cannot avoid grooving, that's what it's all about. And what a drummer is Juan Carlos Rojas.

Which leaves only the Chick Corea/John McLaughlin "Five Peace" Band, supposedly the all star attraction of the festival, which was a big disappointment. Worse, boring.

I'm sorry, I like them as people, and I liked them as musicians in the past, but in 2008, Here were excellent musicians lowering their common denominator for the money. The image in my mind was of a hippy t-shirt lost in the Fusion Launderette. It was so obvious. I mean, they did not appear to be interested. They were insulting my intelligence and their talent.