



Industry Q&A:

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On The Charts:

#1 Jazz Album – David 'Fathead' Newman

#1 College Jazz – Norah Jones

#1 World Music – Brian Lynch/Eddie Palmieri

#1 Smooth Album – *For Luther II*

#1 Smooth Single – Kirk Whalum



photo: Lourdes Delgado

**Industry
Q&A:
Howard
Mandel,
JJA
President
and
esteemed
journalist**

Howard Mandel has a ubiquitous presence in the jazz scene. As a journalist, he's worked in Chicago and New York City and been a lecturer, ambassador and correspondent abroad, but many also know him for his tireless work as president of the Jazz Journalist Association. In this role he hosts and oversees the annual awards ceremony, puts together "Jazz Matters" discussion groups at the New School and generally acts as the de facto face and voice of the organization. He will soon have a new book out called *Miles, Ornette, Cecil: How Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, And Cecil Taylor Revolutionized The World Of Jazz* (Routledge).

– Tad Hendrickson

JazzWeek: What is your background in jazz?

Howard Mandel: I grew up in Chicago during the 1950s and '60s, intensely aware of the exciting music around – jazz, blues, doo-wop/r&b, AACM experiments, electronic music – and trying to figure out its connections to other my favorites from across the entire swathe of common, elite, folk and commercial culture. I was drawn to jazz as I was to hardboiled and/or extraordinarily imagined fiction, movies, tv, plays, modern dance, visual arts, comedy –

“*We’re probably seeing more terrible writing than we ever did, but there’s a lot more high quality criticism being written and published, too.*”

everything fun, hot, urban, expressive, complex and in free flux. I always liked to play music – heedlessly make noise on a piano, if one was around, and I had lessons eventually in piano, flute, alto sax and electronic music. But I have more patience for writing and realized as early as high school that it was my discipline. I’ve kept listening, looking, sometimes jamming, and always asking questions of the fans and experts around me at concerts, and the musicians I’ve gotten to know. I’ve read a lot about jazz and other musics I liked, and I’ve taken the whole jazz/American/world music endeavor seriously, though I hope not pompously. Pomposity has no place in jazz.

I just sat on the JJA panel at IAJE and one grumpy Gus said that jazz journalism has gone down hill. Do you agree?

No. There’s more jazz journalism than ever, despite the commercial challenges to its purveyors – there are more people writing. And in general I see a high level of understanding and base knowledge about the professionals in print. There is also much more semi-pro and amateur music journalism out there, in the form of unedited blogs, chat rooms and the like – and some of that is terrible. We’re probably seeing more terrible writing than we ever did, but there’s a lot more high quality criticism being written and published, too.

We lost a good one in Whitney Balliett. Any thoughts on Whitney, now that some time has passed?

I’ve always enjoyed reading Whitney Balliett – my parents had a New Yorker subscription, and he was the first great jazz critic I was exposed to. His writing is great for metaphor, portraiture and narrative – he really makes performers come alive weaving his skills together deftly (see his piece on Betty Carter, for instance). But he also had great respect for oral history, and ennobled the autobiographical monolog as a kind of self-portrait of artists. Most of his subjects end up reading like he wrote, but you still get a sense of who they are, themselves, rather than who he thinks they are. He was also positive about his subjects without seeming to be hyping them. And he was very wide in his listening. All very admirable, and the pleasures in his prose endure.

Will (paid) journalism survive in the electronic age?

I sure hope so. A lot of the way electronic media is currently set up works strongly against freelancers who depend on multiple markets and reserving their copyrights in the face of low (or no) pay, and that is making survival right now an enormous challenge. But I think of paid journalism as professional journalism – work turned out by people who are committed to understanding their craft much more deeply than the amateur – even the devoted amateur – who dabbles but doesn’t grapple with the form’s life-or-death issues. The seriousness of the professional’s struggles gets reflected in the quality of their work. If the public demands better work – if people realize that more substantial, insightful and finally useful information is available but it comes at a cost, because it requires serious investments of time, labor, background and self-immersion to produce – professionalism journalism is the answer. It requires consumers and publishers to be willing to pay what really amounts to mod- ➤

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est labor costs – no journalists command rock star or athlete paychecks. But without it, we’ll be consigned to a world of less verifiability – fewer facts, more faith-based “truthiness.”

Can you give us the relatively short version of how and why the JJA came into being?

The JJA was born as a loose organization of jazz people forming bowling teams and eating together late at night after jazz fests. We got together somewhat more formally at a meeting of writers and broadcasters in Chicago in 1986, and it took us a while to understand what we might do as a professional organization – principally to raise the individual and overall profile and effectiveness of jazz journalists. We talk to each other about standards and important issues, we stay connected to share information and promote honest, searching discussion and appreciation of jazz in the greater world.

We have more than 400 members – writers and editors, radio and television broadcasters, photographers and new media professionals, as well as support members among the jazz publicity and recording worlds. We’re international – most of our members being in the US and Canada, but a cluster of activists in Eastern Europe and Russia, and scattering of members in Japan, South Africa, Java, the Caribbean and South America, U.K. and Europe, including Turkey. We’re web-based at Jazzhouse.org and have a quarterly news journal, Jazz Notes. We run enrichment panels at fests – in Portland, Oregon, in Monterey, Chicago, etc. -- and academic institutions such as the New School Jazz Program, and of course the IAJE conference.

Are radio people welcome to join?

Yes, radio people are welcome. We’ve had panel discussions recently about jazz radio production and formats, and we’re looking ahead to podcasting and the issues that will come from more of that.

I’ve just voted on nominees for the jazz awards. I’ve heard that there is going to be a change in the way the ceremony is run in 2007. What changes will be made?

At the moment there is no plan for a JJA Jazz Awards gala event, such as we’ve had at B.B. King’s for the past three years, convening major players among musicians, journalists, jazz industry types and aficionados for one big gabfest party. I’ve got a book due at the end of March, and I just can’t fundraise to produce that event at the same time I’m writing. We’re still going to vote on Awards winners, distribute Awards, and do something to celebrate them. I’m not sure what.

With all the woes in the music industry, how solid is the footing of the organization?

The organization is strong among its members – we know we need each other, and benefit from association, from being in touch. When we say “music industry” we seem to be saying “record companies,” but there’s more to the jazz

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“*Musicians need us, audiences need us, and I don't see many jazz journalists retreating from their work to do something else.*”

world than that. Musicians need us, audiences need us, and I don't see many jazz journalists retreating from their work to do something else. Most of the jazz journalists I know want more contact with each other. Maybe that's because there's not much else we're good for. ...

The JJA does, though, have a budget to meet, and if we don't have the Jazz Awards gala as a fundraiser, I'm not sure how we will raise the modest funding we need for a year's operations. We keep our dues low, and we don't have profit streams from selling t-shirts or baked goods. So there's always some anxiety.

What other activities is the JJA involved? Are there other things the JJA is looking at?

The JJA will have Jazz Awards events in L.A., and maybe the Bay Area this summer – I don't have details about that yet, stay tuned. We want to have more “Jazz Matter” panels, presented everywhere we have members, by those members convening jazz activists from their locales and talking amongst themselves about the most pressing issues. We're also trying to stay aware of intellectual property rights laws as they pertain to freelance creators, and we maintain some contact with other arts journalists organizations, hoping to organize more events like the 2005 National Critics Conference. We want to hold an institute, a multi-day seminar on jazz journalism, as a career advancement and training event for veterans and newcomers alike. We want to strengthen our international connections, encourage critical literacy and thinking and more outlets for our work. We're always looking for smart and efficient ways to do all those things.

How did you end up as “Prez”?

I was nominated by outgoing President Art Lange in 1993, and took on the job, which has stuck with me a long time now. It was only fair he do that, as I had a hand in having him shoulder an editorship at *Down Beat* in '82. I guess this was payback. Really though, it's been fun. I like being in touch with everybody.

How's the book coming?

I better get back to it – right now. It's hard to write books of criticism, and I've been working on this one for a while, but still have a ways to go, and time's getting short! 'Nuff said.

So what do Miles, Ornette and Cecil all have in common?

All three have applied very personal critical perspectives to what was commonly assumed or habitually done, and have created very new, very personal musics that energize, provoke, ask questions rather than fulfill other peoples' familiar versions of the answers. They all stimulate and at least partially satisfy listeners' desires for musical adventure, speculative, imaginative thinking. And they all three continue to puzzle if not outrage people who think they understand everything, and so can control us. Miles, Ornette and Cecil are figures of subversive spirit, deeply allied with change. **JW**

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