

Kenny Armstrong
Jazz Is Records
26 Broadway
New York, New York

Dear Winton,

The partners came across your letter today. We were all very surprised to hear about your decision to leave. All of us at the label reacted differently, but it is I responding to you because I respect, understand, and strongly disagree with you. Most of the partners were just angry, some have followed you, and some went to the statistics. I have my own views and because I know you will take the time to read this, I will take the time to tell you.

Jazz is a sleeping giant that awakes when you least expect it, takes the world by storm, and then disappears back into hibernation. In the twenties Jazz was all that young people knew and they loved it. People would dance and sing and smile whenever that swing was playing. With the exception of minor mediocre white record sales, real black New Orleans jazz was being played in pubs and speakeasies all over the east and eventually west coast. Jazz was the most popular form of music in the country. In the nineteen thirties Jazz became pop. Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington were all larger than life. They were pop stars. The music was catchy, danceable, and fun. Jazz was at its commercial peak, and we all know what goes up must come down. After the thirties, Jazz withdrew from the mainstream. The record ban from 1941-1945 slowly killed the big band buzz. Though the fifties and sixties were some of the most inventive and creative years in jazz, nothing caught the pop culture. Record sales were good, but not incredible. We might hail Bird and Diz today, but in their time, no one bought be-bop. So, in the minds of the public, jazz was in hibernation. With the exception of Miles Davis (who was connecting with the mainstream), and a few others, jazz didn't sell. Then, as you stated, the seventies came and brought jazz back into every American home. Jazz cats took what was popular in the commercial market, and combined it with jazz sensibilities. Sure, there were some jazz enthusiasts that didn't agree with the idea of fusion, but they weren't selling records. With fusion, came the first ever gold and eventually platinum jazz records. Bands like Return to Forever, Weather

Report, Mahavishnu Orchestra, and Tower of Power all took jazz to the people. Weather Report even scored the first ever number one single in jazz history with “Birdland.” Once the seventies ended, so did the jazz record sales.

So, why did I just give you a history lesson? I know that you know all of this. I thought that maybe if I told you again, you might catch a pattern. What happens when jazz cats are free to experiment? What happens when jazz cats take their introverted ideas and combine them with extroverted ones? Record sales! That’s what happens! It’s the same as if you took Shakespeare and put it into cliff notes. People can understand cliff notes and therefore are more likely to read and understand Shakespeare. If I let someone listen to a Benny Goodman record, they are bound to go try out Count Basie. Just as, if I let someone listen to a Brecker Brothers album, they are bound to be curious about Charlie Parker. Big Band and Fusion were popular because they captured the emotion of an era. And though it’s sad that the American public’s most distinct character trait is laziness, the artists still related and connected with people by hitting them in the heart.

Let me give you a scenario. A couple of weeks ago, I went to see our friends Gary Burton and Makoto Ozono. They were playing at the Regatta Bar in Boston. I had never seen Gary play duo music with Makoto and I was very excited. As soon as I walked into the venue, I could tell that almost the entire audience consisted of musicians. The remaining members of the audience looked like outsiders. In one corner, I saw a couple laughing and drinking and being loud to the point of rudeness. Across from me, I spotted kids asleep and their parents yawning. It was obvious that the parents had forced the children to get some culture in them by seeing a “jazz” show. On the other side of me, I saw a couple that just couldn’t stop making out. I don’t even know why they bothered to spend the money. There were people like that scattered throughout the musicians. As the show went on, I realized once again why I love Gary’s playing so much. He and Makoto are true virtuosos. They played like it was the last show on earth. Every note was beautiful. The improvisation level was higher than anything I had ever heard before. It was like poetry through sound. The obscene clapping in the middle of solos was annoying, but only because it showed who was listening and who was sleeping. It shocked me to see so many people not paying any attention. I didn’t understand. Gary Burton has won multiple

Grammy's and here he was in a small venue with a third of the audience not even listening. Why?

After the Gary Burton and Makoto Ozono show, I reflected. I remembered another show I had gone to during the summer. Though I am a jazz lover till the end, I also enjoy every other kind of music. I remembered seeing Aerosmith. They were touring with Kiss, and I just had to see the show. It took me almost an hour to park and another half hour just to get inside. Sixty thousand people were in attendance that day. When Aerosmith came on, every person stood up. For two and a half hours, not one person sat down. Aerosmith had the audience's full attention for every second they were on the stage. As they blasted through hit after hit, I noticed that everybody in the audience was singing along. Not only did they know all the words to every song, they also screamed them so loudly that it was sometimes hard to hear Steven Tyler. The band was a little sloppy, but their energy was unmatched. Between the lights, the show, and the music—no one could go home unsatisfied. Joe Perry was running everywhere, and Steven Tyler even went down into the crowd. There were girls crying just because Steven Tyler had touched them. When the show came to an end, people screamed for more. After two encores, Aerosmith finally said goodnight.

So why did Aerosmith bring out more people? Why did Aerosmith have everyone's attention? Why did the jazz show bore people? *You* might say that it's because jazz is dead. I strongly disagree! Jazz is far from dead. Jazz and rock stimulate different parts of the brain. Jazz stimulates the inner thinking side of the mind. Rock stimulates the visual side of the mind. Combining these two sides is what equals records sales. Gary Burton is a constantly adventurous musician, He, like many other jazz musicians, is not interested in the masses. He is interested in challenging himself as well as the listener. He's not trying to sell sixty thousand tickets. He's only trying to outdo himself always and play what's in his heart and that is the spirit of jazz. Louis Armstrong never sat around and complained when his ticket and album sales were down. He just kept playing what he loved. Duke was the same way. He stayed always true to himself, even through the worst of times He followed his heart and because of that, he and his music will be remembered forever. Aerosmith is a direct and commercial sound. They connect with the audience because their songs are aimed in that direction. An Aerosmith

song is extroverted in that it relates to every person. Musicians and non-musicians alike can appreciate it. The reason Gary doesn't really appeal to non-musicians is because his music is over their heads. It's not what's on the radio and it has no commercial image. Aerosmith has both.

Jazz is hibernating. Musicians are experimenting right now and I'm sure that jazz will sell records again. This is an art form, and it's one that won't be going anywhere anytime soon. In the meantime, we should enjoy the great music that's out there. Are you really going to tell me that just because Pat Metheny's last record didn't go gold, his label should drop him? Are Brad Melhdou and John Scofield worthless because they don't sell out arenas? These guys are going to be legends fifty years from now and I'm not going to be the one who pulled the plug on the next jazz hero. Whether they sell ten or ten million records, I don't care. Good music is good music and good musicians make the difference up in touring. Pat Metheny plays two hundred plus dates per year. Jazz is Records exists because there needs to be a label where artist can be free to be artists. We need to exist, whether we're selling or not, because there is music out there that needs to be heard. Think what music would be like if someone hadn't ever recorded Louis Armstrong with King Oliver.

Fusion combined the energy of Aerosmith with the complex improvisation of Gary Burton. Fusion disguised jazz as rock, combined the two with funk, and took the world by storm. For you, the money crazed label executive, I can bring good news. Every teenager in America is listening to jazz right now and they have no idea. Verve, one of the leading jazz record labels, had the highest selling new artist for last year-Nora Jones. Mrs. Jones not only sold six million in the U.S. alone, but also won six Grammy's. Her music is unarguably pop. However, listen carefully and you will hear Joe Pass, James P. Johnson, Herbie Hancock, Bill Evans, and all the other greats. The music is pop melody with jazz harmony. The chords and their relationship to one another is jazz. Some of the tracks even have soloist improvising jazz licks from Ellington to Melhdou. Verve has been known for bringing jazz and pop together. George Benson did this same thing. Though his vocal music is watered down, no person can doubt his skill as a guitarist or his album sales. There are many Artists out there just like Norah Jones such as: John Mayer, Santana, and even Outkast. No one would ever say these artists are jazz, but listen

and you will have a hard time getting the jazz notion out of your head. These pop characters will save our jobs, but that doesn't mean we don't need real artists. The real artists are why we need music for the moment. Norah Jones allows the label to allow the musicians to experiment freely.

As far as how cats learn today, that isn't my business. All I know is that Chick Corea went to school and he's had just as much impact on jazz as Thelonius Monk or Cannonball Adderly. So if paying for jazz education is how it's going to be, that's fine with me. If Joe Zawainful can go to Berklee and keep up with Miles Davis, the new education system must be working.

Jazz is here to stay. You can either whine because not everyone sees it or you can enjoy the music simply because you like it. The label isn't going under and jazz is not dead. Yes, maybe jazz isn't connecting with young people right now, but it will. Jazz is a complex musician's music. It has been introverted for quite some time. Every now and then jazz reaches the mainstream public, but for the most part jazz is an on going conversation between sound and the musician.

Sincerely,

Kenny Armstrong