

1958

An American Idiom

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Recommended Citation

Corletta, Bob and Pontes, Lionel (1958) "An American Idiom," *The Angle*: Vol. 1958: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle/vol1958/iss1/11>

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An American Idiom

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"When the first vague drumbeats of a new musical idiom rumbled out of the dark corners of the South, Mencken's 'Sahara of the Bozart' was no more. In the rhythms of jazz the cacophony that is the modern industrial city found its artistic spokesman. At first this errant child of music was forced to take refuge in the dance halls and smoky dubs like a yelling, mewling, newborn child, and it was several years before the jazz artists were able to attract the serious attention of the cultural custodians of American society, and not merely its outraged gendarmes."

Cover Page Footnote

Appeared in the issue: Volume 3, 1958.

AN AMERICAN IDIOM

BOB CORLETTA AND LIONEL PONTES

When the first vague drumbeats of a new musical idiom rumbled out of the dark corners of the South, Mencken's 'Saliara of the Bozart' was no more. In the rhythms of jazz the cacophony that is the modern industrial city found its artistic spokesman. At first this errant child of music was forced to take refuge in the dance halls and smoky clubs like a yelling, mewling, newborn child, and it was several years before the jazz artists were able to attract the serious attention of the cultural custodians of American society, and not merely its outraged gendarmes.

Through the Thirties not a single book concerning the new medium had been published in this country, and aside from a few rule-proving exceptions at Carnegie Hall, jazz had rarely been presented as a concert attraction. In the mass-circulation magazines the subject of jazz went virtually unmentioned. Advances were made slowly and hesitantly, but little by little this embryonic art crept out of the honky-tonks and found an established position on concert stages throughout the country.

Touring the country for many years with his "Innovations in Modern Music", Stan Kenton acquired a substantial following by portraying his personal feelings for jazz in screeching brass and flowing reeds. And from their association with Kenton, many

'silemen' came into recognition. Some of these were Shorty Rogers, Shelly Manne, Stan Getz and Maynard Ferguson. All these jazzmen issued from the West Coast, and created a revolution in modern jazz that caused it to achieve a critical acceptance beyond that of early Southern jazz.

Serious music lovers began to look upon 'modern' jazz as an American complement to European classical music. Accustomed to visualizing in the symphonic violins the wind, birds, and general harmonics of nature, they hear in the drums of modern jazz the monotonous revolution of auto wheels, the roar of industrial machinery, the crash of metropolitan traffic. Like classical music, the free-swinging improvisational style of modern jazz may be at times as smooth and polished as old mahogany, yet in addition it has the nerve, vigor and spontaneousness of contemporary existence. The melody is not always distinct, and may represent the whirr of rails or the drone of a plane, the crashing of skyrocket or the boom of artillery. Jazz is in many ways linked with, yet fundamentally distinct from, classical music.

Jazz, a wild and wonderful example of the modern idiom, is exclusive to the United States. Despite our country's reputation for cultural aridity, who will question the fact that we have fathered a new art?