Christian Scott on making your own rules

July 11, 2017 - Christian Scott, also known as Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah, is a New Orleans-based trumpeter, composer, producer, and music executive. He is widely recognized as one of the progenitors of "Stretch Music," a jazz rooted, genre blind musical form that attempts to "stretch" jazz's rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic conventions to encompass as many other musical forms, languages, and cultures as possible. This year he will release three albums in a series known as *The Centennial Trilogy*, which is described as "a sobering re-evaluation of the social political realities of the world through sound," one that "speaks to a litany of issues that continue to plague our collective experiences: slavery in America via the prison industrial complex, food insecurity, xenophobia, immigration, climate change, sexual orientation, gender equality, fascism, and the return of the demagogue."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2185 words.

Tags: Music, Inspiration, Collaboration, Independence, Anxiety, Identity, Process.

There are a lot of people who find the whole idea of jazz to be daunting. It's hard to know where to start, or what the right entry point is for someone that doesn't know anything about it. Is that something you come up against when people find out what kind of music you make?

A lot of times when you use the word "jazz" you immediately become persona non grata, especially in the context of modern music. People have often accepted this notion that the best jazz records have already been recorded, right? And that the best jazz musicians have lived and died, which is a completely false idea, but it's one that people hold on to. So the practitioners of this music now are constantly faced with that. We are constantly having to help people reevaluate the way they see this music and this culture. I mean, that's part of the work. It's not the sort of thing that gets me down though. Everyone's job has stuff. You know what I mean? You just get up every day and you try and make work that's impactful and moves the ball forward.

But yes, it is a reality of what we go through. I think it's essentially based in this idea that we've created this allure around jazz that you have to be a fucking rocket scientist to understand it, which is bull. It's the same as any other form of music, either you like it or you don't like it, and you shouldn't be basing whether or not you like it on some trope some asshole created 30 years ago that says that in order to understand this you have to somehow be highfalutin. It's just foolish.

This is the music that comes from an oppressed people trying to express something that they weren't allowed to express in their societal structures and in the way they had to navigate their daily space. A lot of people can relate to that idea. A lot of people go through that on a daily basis. So it's not *that* abstract for people to be able to hear and appreciate the historic aspects of the music, and also understand how that relates to how people navigate and play with music today.

So every night we play, there are multiple people that come up to me and say they hate jazz, which is a strong word. That's strong. Hate is strong, that's an active word. So they'll say they hate jazz but they love my music. And I'm sitting there looking at them completely perplexed because we don't really call what we do jazz—people call what we do Stretch Music—which is essentially Second Century jazz. But when they're saying that to me I'm sitting there completely confused because most of the tenets of what we're doing are what the actual tradition in jazz is. The music is us fusing all of these forms, grabbing seemingly disparate vernacular from all kinds of musical contexts and collapsing all of those things into one space and trying to make those things work. Marrying all of these different cultural spaces and music and stuff, that's what jazz *is*. Jazz essentially is the world's first fusion.

So it's weird to me when someone says, "I like rock and roll, but I don't like jazz." That seems crazy because rock and roll is a direct descendant of jazz. When someone says, "I like R&B music, but I don't like jazz," I'm also looking at them like they're crazy because literally all of those forms grew out of jazz. It's like saying, "I like that person's grandkids, and I like their nephew, but I don't like them," when you know how the grandkids and the nephew act and look just like their grandparents. You're like, "This doesn't make sense because they are pretty much clones."

You have a "Letter to a Future Artist" on your website that explains your creative mission and details the issues you sometimes have with the jazz establishment. It's fascinating that even within this genre that's supposed to be based largely on experimentation and improvisation, there are still people who feel there is a right way and a wrong way to do it.

Yeah, there are no wrong ways. The thing is, if we're speaking English, you're gonna want to make sure that when you're speaking to someone that your sentence has subject-verb agreement and that they can understand the language you're using. So yes, there are some very basic core rules, but the problem is that once you've gotten past the point where you understand those rules and you're making active and informed choices to break those rules, *that* is when someone pops up to tell you that your choice to break the rules isn't valid. That's the issue I had. To say that someone's aesthetic preoccupations are wrong, that is a very heavy thing and it points to a mode of operating and living that people also need to get past. No one's right or wrong in terms of how they creatively express something through music. That's not a space where right or wrong can apply.Music is just people expressing themselves.

You always have this push and pull between these different factions in the music, but that exists in all art. I don't know if that's something that's exclusive to jazz; I think it's just a little more pointed in this world because jazz has such a long history. When you're contextualizing all of that history, you can say, "Okay, well maybe it's not right because it's not like *this* or maybe it's not right because it's not like *that*." And there's literally a hundred years worth of that to do, so it makes it easier to point things out because the history of the music is so dense. You can't really do that in the same way with something like hip-hop because you only have the last 30 or 40 years to reference. It's a younger art form.

Part of your artistic statement says that the idea of stretching jazz is not replacing it. Trying something new doesn't negate what's already been done. It's nice to be reminded of that idea, even if it does seem like such an obvious thing.

You're right, it seems like an obvious thing but people definitely don't always react to it that well in the jazz world. Sometimes you have certain factions of this culture that react as if what we're trying to do is replace all that history or erase it. Young musicians should definitely respect the history of jazz and try to understand it, but they shouldn't be afraid to build on it. It's funny because what we do is just partly jazz. It's inherently jazz, but it's not exclusively jazz. I say this all the time. You can find as much indie rock and trap music in my music as you can find jazz these days. It's also funny to me when I'm having a conversation and it becomes pointed in that direction, when there are other musical cultures that are present in what we do that are just as palpable. It's because I'm not singing—I'm playing into a trumpet—that the music always gets perceived so specifically under the category of jazz.

For kids who want to play in rock bands, there's an established trajectory for how you do that—how you start a band, how you get management, how you get a booking agent—and there's a vague A to B to C to D to how that world operates. But if you're an aspiring jazz musician, a lot of kids might feel a little bit lost. What advice do you have? Is it just about finding people that are into the same thing as you?

I figure it's just like anything else. How does one become a great basket weaver? How does one become a great lawyer? They find people that have similar interests, and they learn to refine what they're doing based on what they're around. If you wanna learn to play jazz music, it means you probably have to find people that play jazz. To me it's a simple idea. I think it can just seem like a daunting task. I'm not a CPA, right? That's not what I do. So thinking about how someone learns to do that may seem like a bit of a task, but it's not if that's what you wanna be doing. Jazz is the same way. If you wanna learn to play jazz, you can go to school to learn how to do it, just like anything. You learn the basic vocabulary.

Obviously you don't learn to do it on the highest level in a classroom because this is a social art form, but there's no shortage of ways to learn. I mean, there is a jazz music program in every major university in the fucking country. If it's a university that offers music, jazz is gonna be there. So, I don't think it's actually that daunting once you're active in trying to find what you want to do in this music. I think it may seem like that before you actually get started, but once you get walking, you'd be surprised how easy it is to find a community. Jazz musicians are very welcoming. It's a very democratic form of music.

How many forms of art are there where you can walk into a space where other artists are going to be, and they're gonna let you speak your peace? That doesn't happen. You don't hear about guys showing up to art galleries with paint brushes and shit because it's an art jam session. You don't even hear about that with rock music, really. You don't hear about anyone going up with their fucking guitars to somebody else's gig at a rock concert like, "Yeah, I wanna take a solo." You'd look at that person like they were fucking crazy, man. Jazz, on the

other hand, is probably the most welcoming and open environment that exists in music. If what you love is collaboration and really making art with other people, this is where you should be.

How does the writing process usually work for you?

I don't really have a process. I write so much music and inspiration comes in so many different ways, different forms, different times, and different moments. There is no process. But like I said, I've been doing this since I was really young and I learned a lot from watching other musicians, seeing how they develop and how they write. By the time I got to college I knew that I'd have to develop the ability to compose pretty instantaneously, to be able to frame what I wanted in the right context, to be able to articulate my ideas to other musicians in order to teach them the music and be able to create the sound that I wanted. It was a priority for me.

So when I was in college, I had a rule. I was only at Berkeley for two years—I left with two degrees in two years because they let you test out of classes—but my friends would always make fun of me because I had this rule where I couldn't leave the school or go to sleep unless I wrote two songs that day. There were also rules for the songs: the bridge had to have some type of harmonic shift, so it wasn't occupying the same harmonic space, and the rhythmic permutations in the composition also had to evolve. So essentially those two tunes were really four tunes. You do that every day for two years and you develop a skill set that allows you not to really worry about if you can write. I can write a song now the same way I'm writing a letter to a friend. It's quick because I know what I'm trying to get to, I know what I'm trying to say. I have the skillset to be able to do that easily now. But that takes a long time to develop. In the meantime, <class="highlight">you just have to play and write and listen and play and write and keep listening.

I love the idea of making these strict rules for yourself as part of your personal creative practice.

Hell yeah, man. You have to. Foresight is real in art. You gotta learn what the rules are before you throw them out and make up your own.

Essential Christian Scott:

Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah: NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert

Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah – "Diaspora" (Feat. Elena Pinderhughes)

The Checkout Live from Berklee College of Music: Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah

Christian Scott - Stretch Music (Full Album)

Complex City Cypher f/ A$AP Ferg, Wiki, Your Old Droog With Christian Scott (Brooklyn, NY)

Name
Christian Scott

Vocation
Musician

Fact

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Kiel Scott