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Excitement, Expression, and All That Jazz

Despite being a musician almost all my life (learning how to play piano when I was four and teaching myself guitar six years later), I've always struggled with accepting and appreciating the jazz genre. Although I *tried* to stay open-minded about it, the offbeat percussion and strumming patterns and the seemingly constant changing of chords was enough to make my head spin as a budding guitarist. As a listener, I often equated jazz with boring "elevator music." However, after watching the 2016 film *La La Land*, I grew to appreciate this genre which the movie's protagonist Sebastian called "conflict and compromise"; music that is "new every time [and] very, very exciting" ("La La Land Quotes").

This new take on such an iconic yet seemingly dated field of music convinced me to include more jazz songs in my repertoire. That being said, I welcomed the *Jazz Greats: Classic Photographs from the Bank of America Collection* exhibit at Santa Clara University's de Saisset Museum with open arms, as should every musician. This exhibit runs January 26th through June 16th and includes a variety of gelatin silver print photographs involving the American jazz scene across the ages, focusing on the 1920s through 1980s eras. Most of these 34 gelatin silver prints are made from negative film, a rare medium which produces a more striking depth than even the highest quality digital photos (de Saisset Museum). The photographers who employed this method are sixteen of the most vibrant forces at the crossroads of jazz and photography themselves, including Chuck Stewart, Milton J. Hinton, William Gottlieb, and Anthony

Armstrong-Jones (“Jazz Greats”). Many of their subjects are iconic jazz musicians, such as Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis, and the like. About half of the photos depict musicians actually playing their instruments and performing live, while the other half are comprised of somber portraits or lively dance scenes.

Throughout the collection, there is a sense of excitement and vibrancy, despite all of the images being black and white. This juxtaposition actually highlights the pure joy of the subjects in the photos, as colors are not even needed to convey the colorful tone set by them. Only musicians who have performed live know what it’s like to light up a room this way. To bring live music into a room is to allow both the audience and the musician to open floodgates of emotion. This outpouring of passion is as colorful as it is varied from one concert-goer to the next. The varying facial expressions are also important to note, considering there is such a mix of animated, jubilant faces and more solemn ones. Seeing the range of expressions depicted in these photos helps musicians to understand the myriad of feelings their music evokes. This range also conveys the multi-faceted nature of jazz, from somber blues to punchy big band.

One of the pieces which immediately caught my attention was Chuck Stewart’s “Miles Davis, Cannonball Adderley, Jimmy Cobb, 1959.” The stark contrast between trumpeter Miles Davis’s pale suit and the pitch-black background was enough to initially catch my eye, and the closer I looked, the more I came to appreciate the emotional expressions of each band member. There is a general feeling of content among the artists, as all their eyes seem to be closed in deep concentration and attention to their craft. A musician observing this image can understand and appreciate it on a deep level, knowing the determination and passion it takes musicians to turn their crafts into careers. Just looking at the photograph, I could clearly hear the spine-tingling twangs of Davis’s trumpet and Adderley’s saxophone, as well as the thundering rumbles of

Cobb's drums. Stage lights illuminate the band's cohesiveness, as the rest of the scene is shrouded in darkness. This communicates the idea that the band's music lights up the room, bringing life and sound to an otherwise dark and uncertain scene.

Another piece that caught my eye was William Gottlieb's "Ella Fitzgerald performs with the Dizzy Gillespie Big Band (Dizzy on right), NYC, 1947." While Fitzgerald's pale-feathered hat was my point of focus at first, my eyes quickly wandered to Dizzy Gillespie on the right. His pleasantly surprised look is telling of his admiration and awe for Ella Fitzgerald's talent. Knowing all the hard work it takes to rise up in the music industry and jazz scene, musicians would agree that Dizzy can acknowledge Ella's talent more profoundly than any non-performer. In the background on the left, the upright bassist has his eyes glued to Dizzy in strict focus on the music and Dizzy's musical direction. Ella herself has her eyes closed and eyebrows raised in deep concentration on the emotions conveyed in her singing. Performers analyzing this piece can recognize the kind of focus and attention it takes to perform live while wrangling with so many emotions onstage—from fear to elation, absorption to distraction, and everything in between. Complementing the artists' attention to the music is their attention to style. Ella's glossed lips, blushed cheeks, large pearl earrings, and ornate beading on her long sleeve dress are telling of the great attention to detail involved in the jazz genre. Every medium of self-expression is taken advantage of in a classy way, from her makeup to beautiful dress. Similarly, the male band members are dressed to the nines in dark suits and ties. I suddenly realized that most of the right corner of the photo was actually taken up by a man's balding head. This juxtaposition of such an elegant expression of music against the foreground of a man's head was almost comical to me. However, it did also speak to the moment in which this picture was taken—the scene is set as being so packed that the photographer was *that* close to his fellow concert-goer. This reminded

me of Sebastian's quote about jazz being "new every time," since it was only in that moment that a picture could be taken to represent so many things happening at once ("La La Land Quotes").

The bassist is looking for direction from Dizzy Gillespie, who is looking at Ella Fitzgerald admiringly, who is fully devoted to singing her heart out, all while a packed house listens.

Another aspect of the exhibit that made it more interesting and interactive was the record player in the corner of the second room playing a "Sarah Vaughan and Dizzie Gillespie" record. The music wandered throughout the rooms, bringing each character to life. Having the musical medium coexist with the photographs spaced evenly on each wall of the room offered a deeper insight into each piece. I could more easily insert myself into each scene, having more of a feel for the music at that moment. It was not only easier, but far more enjoyable, to absorb each one of these pieces with the addition of the vinyl record spinning in the background.

All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed the de Saisset Museum's *Jazz Greats* exhibit displaying the giants of the genre and their devotion to their craft. Though I would recommend this exhibition to everyone, I believe musicians would especially benefit from a trip to the de Saisset. Each photo gave me a deeper understanding of and admiration for jazz musicians, as well as performers in general. The sixteen masterful photographers included in this exhibit have perfectly captured the world which these artists create; one of thrilling improvisation, intense feeling, and vibrant color.

Works Cited

de Saisset Museum

“Jazz Greats: Classic Photographs from the Bank of America Collection.” *De Saisset*, Santa Clara University, 1 Dec. 2017, www.scu.edu/desaisset/exhibitions/jazzgreats/.

“La La Land Quotes.” *IMDb*, Amazon.com, Inc., www.imdb.com/title/tt3783958/quotes.