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POP VIEW/Peter Watrous

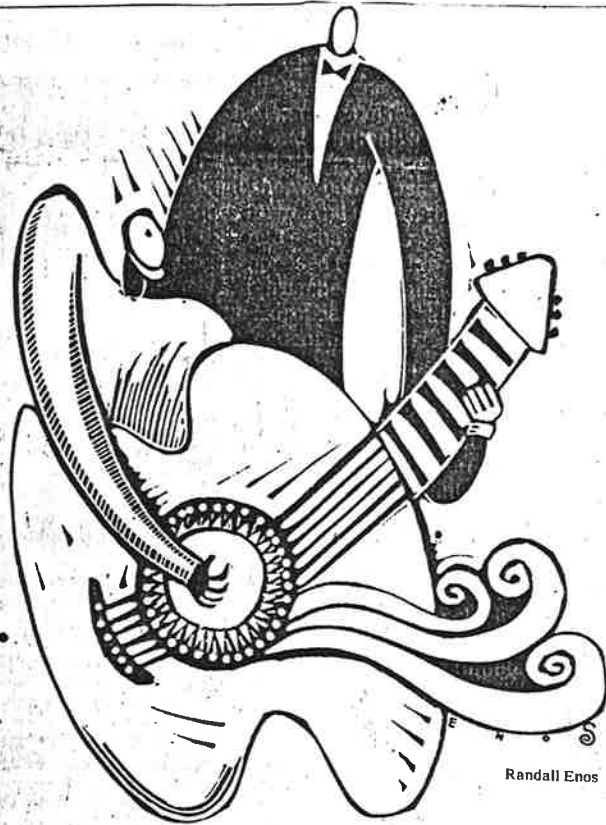
The Blues: A Cousin Of Mozart?

TWO CULTURAL EVENTS DON'T NECESSARILY make a movement. But when common ground is reached by such disparate performers as LaMonte Young, the pianist and minimalist composer, and Wynton Marsalis, the jazz trumpeter and composer, something's up. In recent shows, both musicians used the simple three-chord blues form. And though their interpretations were different, they had a shared purpose: they treated the blues as art music, as opposed to popular music.

The two composers approached the music in a new way, one not identified with the European classical world of Mozart or Beethoven, though undeniably classical. Their conception was based on a classical model whose elements are simplicity, durability, cultural importance and critical consensus. Blues, not the genre but the form, looks as if it's going to outlast many of the cultural products of the 20th century. It may just end up being one of the century's better moments, transcending its background and attaining universal acceptance as a cultural landmark — another definition of "classical."

At the Kitchen, the Manhattan art space dedicated to the avant-garde, Mr. Young and his group (a guitarist, bassist and drummer) performed a medium-tempo rock blues for two hours. In the length of the performance and its formal looseness — the band hovered on one chord for minutes at a time or dashed off into a more traditional structure — Mr. Young was reveling in the form's possibilities. Mr. Marsalis, lecturing an audience of children at Alice Tully Hall, used his octet to play Ellington's "C-Jam Blues" as an example of blues structure; the implication was that modern American music couldn't be understood without the blues, and that it, in all its richness, could still force musicians to think through their solos.

Mr. Young and Mr. Marsalis, in their insistence on the importance of the form, were expressing a reality understood by most musicians performing in popular American idioms. Whether in a cabaret, a honky-tonk or a blues, jazz or rock club, the musicians are usually intimately familiar with how to play the blues. The form is easy to understand, but with its endless repetitions within an austere structure, it is amazing how complicated it can become because of harmonic substitutions, rhythmic patterns and tempo changes. The blues in all its variety has conjured up everything from the



Randall Enos

bliss of a Saturday-night dance to the worst sort of melancholy.

Indian classical music provides a close analogy. Like the blues, ragas usually have a limited amount of preplanned material, leaving the value of the performance up to the improvisational ability of the musicians. As such, the form expands as musicians' styles change, and improvisation keeps the music from dying. Ragas, for example, date back to the 17th century and have assimilated all sorts of exploration.

Because of its origins, it would be paradoxical if the blues structure were to reach the stature and pervasiveness it deserves. Born roughly 100 years ago, it is the product of disenfranchised blacks. The blues quickly caught on as a form, and just as quickly became hugely successful, influencing popular music styles as divergent as the urban pop of Bessie Smith, the highly romanticized singing of Robert Johnson and the faux uptown blues of Broadway shows.

The form almost immediately took on democratic implications, rarely imposing itself on its practitioners, remaining open to the experience of a culture in flux. It's that ability to stretch and bend that makes the blues such a part of the rapid change and tumultuous movement that has marked the 20th century. It's essentially democratic in another way: almost anybody with rudimentary musical skills can step up and try it. But to do it well, the form demands a sense of the past. A musician has to spend time searching and amassing information to achieve mastery of the form.

In their shows, Mr. Young and Mr. Marsalis were working with a set of codes that determine the sound of the music, suggesting both awareness of the artistic choices available and a historical knowledge. Mr. Young's performance was based on just intonation — an alternate tuning system — and his keyboard and the guitar and electric bass sounded slightly different from average instruments. But the core of the performance was roadhouse blues rock, leavened with a jazz sense of improvisation. Mr. Marsalis turned in a performance that at times echoed Duke Ellington but also used trumpet traditions that predated him and Mr. Marsalis's own contemporary harmonies; the music could have spanned a century and still seemed totally modern.

The invention in the performances came from the composer knowing the disparate blues languages that have developed over the century — from solo acoustic guitar music to highly sophisticated jazz blues, from the bluntness of Jimi Hendrix to the stripped-down, unclimbed blues of Miles Davis or the plaintiveness of Ornette Coleman. To play the blues well is to take part in history acting itself out, to understand the fertile story of the 20th century. To do it well is honorable, helping the simple three chords, so laden with connotation, to cruise happily into the 21st century, a reminder of what happened where, when and with whom. □