

On the orthography of cool *

I have an excellent cable-internet music provider which I tune into every day when TV programs are boring. However, one thing that never fails to piss me off is that they invariably get it wrong when it comes to the titles of jazz albums from the forties and fifties, all of which are clearly printed on their original covers as displayed on the left of my screen. Why is it that, if an album cover states that I'm listening to "a new perspective / donald byrd band & voices / blue note", the description on the right of my screen will state that the album's title is rather "A New Perspective – Donald Byrd – Band and Voices?" Or, if the cover states clearly that I'm listening to the album "hub-tones / freddy hubbard" the music provider lists it as "Hub-Tones by Freddy Hubbard?" I have a mind to call them and quietly give them a piece of my mind.

They don't get it.

What these great jazz musicians and their record producers were trying to express by keeping all words in a lower case mode or their titles in miniscule letters was that their music was quintessentially "cool"... that they were cool as opposed to the loud and overdramatic jazz of the previous decades –which was also quite beautiful in its own way: the Big Band sound, the Dixieland sound, etc.

A good example of this then new trend is the trailblazing album "Birth of the Cool" recorded in 1949 (although only the name of 'miles davis' appears in small case on the original cover.) All the great master of jazz of that generation were cool... expressing the cool... grooving on the cool: Thelonius Monk, John Coltrane, Billie Holiday, Blossom Dearie, Bill Evans, Chet Baker, etc., tried and succeeded in transcending the obstreperous, melodramatic and over-amplified sound of their predecessors. They were trying to say to their audiences: "Stay cool, daddy, don't you blow your top."

Why this emphasis on staying cool? What's the meaning of 'cool'? These were the years following World War 2 and the start of the Korean War. The horrors of the Nazi Holocaust and Hiroshima were still fresh in the minds of young thinkers and artists. The Cold War had begun with its promise of M.A.D. (Mutually Assured Destruction). From 1950 till well into the sixties, the possibility of nuclear war wiping out 80% of the world's population was a daily nightmare affecting all Europeans and North-Americans –especially the more sensitive among the population. Nihilism and Existentialism, as well as Zen Buddhism spread throughout the educated strata of all countries.

In all branches of the Arts, these philosophies became predominant. In the Theatre of the Absurd, Samuel Beckett waited in vain for Godot; while abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock, Frantz Kline, Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell tried to express the cool chaos of modernity. Cover illustrators like Neil Fujita created beautiful and enigmatic artwork for jazz albums by Dave Brubeck and Charles Mingus.

So, some contemporary intellectuals and artists tried to tone down the rhetoric and the high-tension, blaring discourse of the times by revisiting the understated, the miniature, the simple line and the uncarved block; and in their book titles and album covers, they reduced the typographic use of upper case letters in their names as a way to deflate egos and show they were digging into the lowest common denominator of human solidarity.

Last night I went through some of the books in my library and found these three examples of lower case typography: *the fall / camus* and *nausea / jean-paul sartre* and *waiting for godot / samuel beckett*. And turning on my cable music provider I picked up at random: *king pleasure sings / annie ross sings* (which, of course, was upper-cased on the right of my screen.) I'm sure I could produce many other such examples of lower-casing titles and names, but I don't want to be overbearing.

With some glaring exceptions many of the novelists, poets and playwrights of the fifties and early sixties went for the cool, easy, improvisational modes derived from jazz... Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Sylvia Plath, Neal Cassady and Gregory Corso all tried to lower-case their products.

With modern jazz came also the re-discovery and identification with the Black experience. Of course this was not new, as sporadic use and misuse of Blues and jazz had been a feature of popular music since the 1920's. But in the late forties and fifties jazz musicians and writers assimilated not only the rhythms and voice modulations of Black America but also the Black urban ethos:... the down-beat, the laid-back insouciance, the down-to-earth sexuality and the street-wise jive. And, to be cool also meant (unfortunately) appealing to the substances legal or not that could help one get cool (alcohol and narcotics) which ruined the lives of some of the greatest among them.

Some would say that I'm getting all hot under the collar about such a trifle as the typography of book and album covers. I grok.

However, my rant goes beyond orthography and typography. Today, and for the last 20 or 30 years, the use of the adjective "cool" has been distorted to such a degree that one can no longer recognize what it meant to be cool in the hay-day of the avant-garde. The word "cool" today can mean anything from "good", "fun", "wicked" or "insane" to even "hot". Any Hollywood or music industry superstar is labeled "cool" even though he or she may be a bombastic, megalomaniac dork, or a screaming, sexist, racist rapper. There are—as in social media—no boundaries to meaning anymore. But the etherealization of meaning is a subject for another essay.

For now, I just wish my cable music provider would simply read what's on the album cover and transcribe it faithfully.

Dig?

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