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Beyond Bop: Substance in the fusion offerings of
Donald Byrd, Freddie Hubbard, and Art Farmer

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During the late 1960s and early 1970s critics and musicians frequently championed the fusion innovations of young musicians who were not particularly well-versed in the jazz tradition (e.g., John McLaughlin, Larry Coryell, and Gary Burton). Their youth and lack of hard core jazz seasoning served as an excuse as to why these musicians used rock rhythms, electronics, and volume in their quest to produce modern jazz. However, when young jazz-experienced musicians made a move to rock- or funk-influenced jazz, they were frequently criticized. The severest thrashings, however, were reserved for jazz musicians who had track records as leaders, especially post-bop players who had recorded for record labels such as Blue Note, Prestige, or Cadet. Critics often opined that a move to fusion by veteran jazz musicians was nothing more than an attempt on their part to make some quick cash; their fusion music had no real value.

Trumpeters Donald Byrd, Freddie Hubbard, and Art Farmer all made fusion or fusion-influenced recordings. Today, Byrd and Hubbard are usually viewed as two artists who sold out to a growing music business. Farmer is not usually viewed in this manner; his fusion-influenced recordings did not produce the type of revenues afforded to Byrd and Hubbard. However, all three musicians produced some marvelous music under the banner of fusion.

Donald Byrd first recorded as a leader for Blue Note Records in 1958 and was soon heralded as an important young post-bop trumpet player. By the late 1960s he was beginning to move beyond the characteristic sound and philosophies of mainstream jazz and was experimenting with form, rhythm, harmonic progression, and instrumentation. His recordings from the late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrate that Byrd is one of fusion’s pioneers; his earliest efforts are often similar to some of Miles Davis’ recordings from the same era. Byrd’s new musical directions were not easily accepted by the traditional Blue Note record company. On the liner notes to Kofi, Byrd states: “We were already experimenting in so-called fusion before anyone else. If it didn’t get out there ahead of the others, you can blame that on the record company. Trying to get Blue Note to release my material was always a struggle.” (Boyd 1994).

The album Fancy Free (recorded in May and June 1969) may be regarded as the beginning of Byrd’s excursion into fusion. Formally, there is nothing new presented—each track contains an ensemble melody presentation followed by individual improvisations. However, the title track immediately illustrates Byrd’s lighter and more accessible group sound. The juxtaposition of a slow-moving, relaxed melody with an active Latin-rock rhythmic support results in music that is easy-flowing and sincere in its musicality. Especially noteworthy is the instrumentation: electric piano is used and the melody is assigned to flute. Harmonically, “Fancy Free” is fairly simple; during his solo, Byrd intersperses aggressive post-bop trumpet licks among areas that recall the tune’s melody. The album’s remaining tracks all feature a new sound. “I Love The Girl” is a ballad feature for Byrd and exploits the gentleness of the electric piano timbre. Electric guitar and a repetitious bass line establish “The Uptowner”, a funky blues number whose simplicity is thwarted by Byrd’s arrangement of the melody. The last tune on the album, “Weasil”, is also a well-arranged blues. Taken as a whole, Fancy Free does not easily fit into any type of post-bop category of jazz performance. Although there is plenty of blowing room for the soloists, elements of pop or fusion are skillfully introduced in an understated way. Critics sounded off about what Byrd was up to. In Down Beat, the album earned only a “fair” rating from reviewer Ira Gitler, who stated: “...this is an undistinguished album. The material on Side 2 is eminently forgettable. It won’t get to rock fans, and jazz fans will be bored by it. I expected something heavier from Byrd.” (Gitler 1970).

In December 1969 Byrd took a similar group into the recording studio and recorded “Kofi” and “Fufu”, two tracks that Blue Note eventually included on its 1995 CD release, Kofi. Melodically and harmonically, “Kofi” recalls “Fancy Free”. “Fufu” is somewhat of a mood piece—an ostinato is offset by effects from the electric piano and cluster voicings in the horn section. Each soloist is allowed to improvise for an indeterminate amount of time. Throughout his solo, Byrd thoughtfully develops a multitude of brief motives. The freedom that “Fufu” suggests will be the basis of Byrd’s future fusion style—a sort of controlled freedom especially in terms of form and the subtle blurring of primary and secondary musical elements. Kofi also contains three tracks from a December 1970 session. Slow tempos, with rubato...
tempo often dominant, as well as reverb and tremolo effects applied to guitar and electric piano, contribute to an overall free or dreamy feeling on Byrd's "Perpetual Love" and "Elmina." Both of these tracks recall Miles Davis' sessions from 1969-70.

Byrd's incipient fusion phase is ultimately realized with the release of Electric Byrd. Rubato tempo, ostinati, electric instrumentation and effects, colorful orchestration, and interesting voicings are all present on this recording. Actually, the title of the album is somewhat misleading—a bombastic or showy type of electric jazz (that is, fusion in the style of the Mahavishnu Orchestra or other such groups) is never heard. This is a highly controlled and well-thought out recording—it emits an overall feeling of freedom and demonstrates Byrd's successful blending of new compositional and performance techniques and ideas with established jazz customs. As a soloist, Byrd demonstrates great melodic development and always maintains a balance with the underlying accompaniment.

The feature article in the February 1972 issue of Black Enterprise outlines the economic difficulties that jazz musicians face, especially in dealing with record companies, and concludes with the following statement: "There is also a new feeling of coming self-determination abroad, a feeling that the economic life of the music is slowly coming under the control of those who make it." (Douglas 1972). A 1976 follow-up article explores the managing and commercialization of jazz. The author raises the common arguments about why mainstream jazz is not popular: 1) The complexity of the music, 2) A lack of proper media promotion, and 3) An avoidance of electronic or synthesized sounds. (Weathers 1976)

Byrd found a way to substantially circumvent each of these non-acceptance arguments and discovered how to take control of his product. Beginning in 1972, Byrd's work is no longer produced by Blue Note company man, Duke Pearson. An outsider, Larry Mizell, oversees Byrd's most successful Blue Note recordings—Black Byrd (recorded 1972), Street Lady (recorded 1973), and Stepping Into Tomorrow (recorded 1974). Together, Mizell and Byrd change the sound of Byrd's jazz by utilizing electronic synthesizers, organ, and clavinet, introducing vocals, limiting Byrd's solo space, and focusing on a group jam effort where individual solo space is often undefined. Any jazz purists who had stuck with Byrd up until Electric Byrd soon abandoned him completely. Byrd had no regrets about his musical direction, especially since Black Byrd soon became Blue Note's first million-unit seller. After the album's release Byrd stated: "The way I look at it, as an artist I have attained the stature that other great musicians have. In other words, I don't have any problems about my musical ability or where I am. I am well trained, if not overly trained. I am a thorough musician." And later: "I will continue to be eclectic because jazz music is all encompassing, as Miles said, it has no direction, and it never did." (Nolan 1973).

In the late 1980s, after recording many fusion albums in the style of Black Byrd, Donald Byrd returns to recording mainstream jazz, but critics are generally lukewarm in their praise. In 1993, Byrd once again moves away from mainstream jazz, and teams up with GURU in order to fuse jazz with hip-hop.

Throughout the first part of the 1960s, Freddie Hubbard was known as a forward-thinking trumpet virtuoso who could fit in with any type of jazz group. In a 1966 interview, Hubbard let his unrelenting compulsion to investigate all musical styles be known: "I like classical music, I like commercial jazz, I like television music. It's all part of what's happening, and I'm going to get with everything I can get with. I want to check out everything. I'm not going to be limited." (Morgenstern 1966b). While such a viewpoint led to some unusual recording projects for Hubbard (such as A Soul Experiment and Sing Me A Song Of Songmy), it also convinced producer Creed Taylor to sign Hubbard to his brand new, fully independent record label, CTI. In 1970, Hubbard's Red Clay launches the CTI sound. The recording is deemed funky, electric, and jam-like—an excellent musical setting that enables Hubbard to play with intensity and depict his showmanship.

Red Clay only really hints at fusion, mainly through its electric instrumentation and occasional bluesy and gospel tendencies (as heard in "Delphia"). A straight-ahead post-bop style (represented by "Suite Sioux" and "The Intrepid Fox") dominates the album. However, one of the more interesting aspects of Red Clay is the fact that John Lennnon's "Cold Turkey" appears only on the CBS CD reissue; it is not issued on the original album. This track is the CD's only obvious fusion tune—it is harmonically and melodically very simple and is underpinned by a rock drum beat and bass line. The solo section employs a single underlying sonority and hence, provides unique challenges to an improviser. As a means of sustaining melodic interest over harmonic staticity, Hubbard relies on disparate ideas, trumpet solos, and short, bluesy phrases—a style that will eventually distinguish his work throughout the 1970s. His solo on this track is decidedly different from his other work on Red Clay.

In November 1976, Hubbard records his second album for CTI, Straight Life. The blowing section of the title track is harmonically static, in this case, a two-chord vamp. Here, Hubbard works on developing the trumpet lines and short, bluesy phrases—the initial solo style spawned by "Cold Turkey" is obviously advanced on this track and on the album's
other long jam tune, “Mr. Clean”.

On the title track of First Light, Hubbard’s third album for CTI (recorded in September 1971), the trumpeter’s fusion solo style is ultimately realized. Along with the development of disparate ideas, Hubbard adds an element of pacing—areas of impatience are followed by areas of restraint. His solo consists of a series of climaxes and releases, all while building toward a definite goal. All of the album’s remaining tracks are superb, enhanced greatly by Don Sebesky’s orchestral arrangements. Even Paul McCartney’s “Uncle Albert/Admiral Halsey” receives admirable treatment. First Light won a Grammy Award, in the “Best Jazz Performance By A Group” category.

Although Hubbard is reluctant to recognize the rock influence that is evident in his early CTI catalog, he makes no apologies for playing what he wants to play. “It’s got a rock beat. We’ve been doing that for years; and I’m going to keep doing it—like you say, include some of the rock beats. But I wouldn’t say it’s out-and-out rock. Look man, I’m playing what I want to play.” (Tesser 1974).

After the success of his CTI albums, Hubbard views himself as a superstar who needs the type of attention that only a major record company can provide. In 1974 Hubbard signs with Columbia Records, and is pleased with his decision. According to Hubbard: “…this is what they told me: ‘We’re gonna make you the number one trumpet player at Columbia because Miles isn’t playing.’ [Bruce] Lundvall [then Columbia executive] said, ‘Look Freddie, I want you to just play.’ So I felt pretty good.” (Bloom 1981). Hubbard’s first album for Columbia is High Energy. Hubbard is in fine form—an element of freshness, or renewal, is evident in his playing. Some studio experimentation occurs, mainly Hancock-like “space” synthesizer background effects and Hubbard’s occasional use of an echo machine—but this type of gimmickry is never overdone. The biggest surprise of the album is Hubbard’s funky remake of one of his better known compositions, “Crisis”, which originally appeared on his 1961 Blue Note LP, Ready for Freddie (the tune, according to Nat Hentoff’s original liner notes, “…came from Freddie’s desire to express in music some of the spiraling tension of all our lives under the growing shadow of the bomb.”). Although the bomb threat has disappeared, Hubbard’s new solo is very dramatic, but confidently controlled—he seems to relate to the spirit of the tune much more effectively this time around. Beatles tunes are no longer present in Hubbard’s repertoire—Stevie Wonder tunes appear in their place. This type of substitution may be a manifestation of Hubbard’s desire to remain true to his sociological roots: “Look at people like James Brown and Berry Gordy. They’re promoting blackness. I’m black, and I dig the music, and I’m going to play until I die.” (Taylor 1977). Wonder’s “Black Maybe” receives classic Hubbard ballad treatment.

Hubbard’s next series of albums for Columbia are generally condemned by critics. On Liquid Love, Windjammer, and Bundle of Joy, there is an accent on promoting Hubbard as an entertainer and not as a jazz musician. Hubbard concurs with this philosophy: “Jazz is not a show. Most people go to a night club to be entertained. Most jazz artists don’t entertain.” Hubbard’s way of recording also changes. While Columbia does not always use overdubbing techniques on Hubbard’s records (a record jacket statement proudly proclaims that High Energy was “recorded completely live at Sunset Sound”), Hubbard is dissatisfied with its use on Windjammer: “I had made the mistake of not being at the session with Bob James, so the Windjammer album is one straight thing. But Bundle goes up, comes down because the musicians are looking at me and playing with me. It makes a big difference, having to do with the feeling. And if you’re not there the rhythm section can’t build under you.” (Mandel 1978).

Hubbard did play with CTI-like passion on his later Columbia offerings; good solos prevail and Hubbard is able to relate musically to the simple funky grooves used on some tracks. In 1978, an effort is made to combine the best of accessible music with genuine jazz playing, resulting in the album Super Blue. According to a Down Beat reviewer: “Apparently Freddie Hubbard has realized the errors of his recent recorded ways. Super Blue is certainly Freddie’s best album in some time.” (Stern 1978). The style that Hubbard developed on his early CTI albums is heard on the title track—he is simultaneously funky and thoughtful throughout his solo. And his flugelhorn tone is quite full throughout the album, especially on the ballad “To Her Ladyship”. Straight-ahead post-bop numbers such as “Take It To The Ozone” and “Theme For Kareem” are reminiscent of “The Intrepid Fox” and “Suite Sioux”. All-in-all, Super Blue is a satisfying listening experience—this album suggests a fusion influence within a mainstream jazz context. Hubbard’s next album, Skaggy, is also accepted by jazz fans; it exhibits many of Super Blue’s most-favorable characteristics. Doug Ramsey concludes that, “…in the late seventies, it became increasingly apparent that, in Hubbard’s internal war, jazz was winning over commerce.” (Ramsey 1989). And this should be no real surprise, because in the middle of his Columbia years, Hubbard believes that a jazz musician can make money: “Trane’s music was on the radio. He made big money. Miles makes big money. All the jazz cats I know who are making it are making big money, or trying. You have to put limits on it, though, as far as going for the money. It’s still basically up to the artists.” (Coryell and Friedman 1978).

When his association with Columbia ended, Hubbard made a real effort to rejuvenate his career by recording for
Pablo and other small jazz labels during the 1980s. To this day, Hubbard has remained true to mainstream jazz.

Art Farmer is never named as a fusion player. The fusion-influenced albums he made for the CTI label do not often appear in a typical Art Farmer discography. If anything, Farmer's output is always viewed as uncompromising, often representing the antithesis of commercial music because of its pure jazz content. Beginning in the 1950s, and continuing until his passing in 1999, critics and listeners alike usually describe Farmer's playing as understated and lyrical. And of course, fellow musicians appreciate Farmer's talents. Dizzy Gillespie describes Art Farmer as "...some fantastic musician. He's so pretty. Some guys can play all the changes, and you don't get the significance of the resolutions going on from one to the other. But Art Farmer, he's so gentle. Just beautiful." (Lees 2000).

It was somewhat of a surprise then, when Farmer signed with Creed Taylor's commercially-oriented CTI label and, in July 1977, recorded the album Crawlspace, complete with rock and funk grooves and accompanied by youthful rhythm section players. However, in looking at Farmer's recording activity in the years immediately preceding Crawlspace, it can be argued that Creed Taylor was offering Farmer a sense of direction. Albums that Farmer recorded in the early 1970s not only included classic jazz tunes, but also pop songs such as "We've Only Just Begun", "Where Is The Love", and "Alfie". Although there was probably no real threat that Art Farmer would disappear into the black hole of crass commercialism, it is apparent that, at the time, there was some indecision regarding his repertoire and audience—a problem that many jazz musicians had to come to terms with in the 1970s. A relocation to Vienna in 1968 could not offer Farmer a complete escape from the rock revolution—as a member of Peter Herbolzheimer's Rhythm Combination & Brass, Farmer undoubtedly sat through many a high-decibel performance. Creed Taylor provided Farmer with two things: 1) the resources that could propel Farmer to commercial stardom, and 2) an environment that maintained a sense of jazz respectability—especially important to Farmer.

In a 1970 Down Beat article, Farmer laments that before leaving for Europe, most recording projects and everything he did "...was from economic necessity: to make some money and pay the bills..." and that, "...if you want to record...you have to go along with the record company's idea". Later in the interview, Farmer opines that an A&R man's function is "...similar to that of an editor for a novel, and suggestions concerning material and treatment of material is one of the main functions, but to be able to recognize what makes an artist unique and to find the best way to present him, is also very important". Lastly, Farmer would pick an A&R man "...who first had confidence in the judgement of the artist and would be able to add constructive criticism to what the artist wanted to do." (Lystedt 1970). In terms of recording then, Farmer realizes that a tradeoff is usually in place—but he is willing to commercialize his music as long as it is entrusted to a sensitive and respectful producer.

Crawlspace contains four tracks—all unknown tunes in terms of jazz repertoire. With the exception of two compositions that are linked to Farmer, all aspects of the album's production are apparently entrusted to Taylor. In terms of personnel, it is doubtful that Farmer had ever met 26-year-old bassist Will Lee, drummer Steve Gadd, and fusion flutist Jeremy Steig prior to the recording. Furthermore, pianist Dave Grusin was not an active jazz session player at the time, and guitarist Eric Gale was associated mainly with B&B. And on the surface, it seems as if Farmer has little command over the basic spirit or feeling of the album. Indeed, when Farmer is not playing, the rhythm section takes on a different identity—the volume level rises and the drumming is more aggressive. But...when Farmer does play, all players bow to him. Lee and Gadd both tighten up and Grusin comes in a less pushy manner. These reactions underscore the fact that the leader of the session is Art Farmer—Crawlspace is not merely a generic CTI jam session organized by Creed Taylor. The rhythm section reacts and adapts to Farmer's playing—Farmer does not have to adjust his style to theirs. This fact alone illustrates why Farmer's brand of fusion is unique, and therefore, valuable. His approach belies the "higher, faster, louder" attitude imparted by many fusion superstars. Through understatement, Farmer is able to convey a true sense of control over an electric rhythm section. His use of flugelhorn, in its most natural way (as opposed to how Freddie Hubbard has extended the instrument's range and sharpened its tone), aids greatly in this effort. As an improviser, Farmer shines throughout the album. Overall, he sounds very confident and relaxed, especially when the rhythm section's volume comes down to his dynamic level. All-in-all, it appears that Farmer's musical personality is not sacrificed in Crawlspace.

Only six months pass before Farmer and Taylor return to the recording studio to record Something You Got. Although this album provides Farmer with generous "resources" (i.e., large ensemble accompaniment, tailored arrangements, a worthy co-star in Yusef Lateef), the "respectability" issue is questionable. This is evidenced by the nature of the title track—a silly little tune written by New Orleans songwriter, Chris Kenner. Farmer's performance on this track is totally uninspired. This poor repertoire choice is made up in part through the inclusion of arranger David Matthews' "Flute Song", Chick Corea's "Spain", and Clifford Brown's "Sandu". But Brown's tune is played in a curious style, complete with electric keyboard and a shuffle beat—Farmer plays a mediocre solo on the one tune that
should have inspired him to no ends. By October 1977, Farmer must have been totally fed up with his recording situation—he appears on a Yusef Lateef CTI recording, *Autophysopsychic*, an album that includes Lateef’s vocalizing and background singers.

In what may have been an olive branch extended to Farmer by Taylor, the producer invites guitarist Jim Hall to guest on Farmer’s third CTI album, *Big Blues* (recorded in February 1978). With just a hint of rock influence, the two traditionalists record some marvelous music. In fact, *Big Blues* may be categorized as an updated version, or continuation, of some of Farmer’s and Hall’s collaborations recorded in the 1960s. Farmer states: “Creed Taylor wanted a little more of a contemporary ‘funky’ beat on the drums, to change the environment for Jim and I just a hair. That’s why they had Steve [Gadd].” (Tompkins 1983). In using basically a mainstream quintet, Farmer’s *Big Blues* was a departure from the tried-and-true CTI formula. Farmer probably enjoyed making this record, for he has always been, first-and-foremost, a group player. He believes that, “…good-selling records are important, but it’s still more important to have your own group...if the group doesn’t give you enough room—get another one.” (Morgenstern 1966a). Could the same be said of record companies?

*Yama* (with guest Joe Henderson) is Farmer’s final session for CTI. The album (recorded in April 1979) contains some excellent tunes. Farmer creates some fine solos, especially on Mike Mainieri’s “Blue Montreux”. Still, one cannot help feel that Farmer is anxious to get on with a post-CTI career—he does not contribute any compositions to the album and his flugelhorn is not heard prominently until halfway through the first side. The personnel roster is in direct contrast to Farmer’s previous recording. The players were probably all chosen by Creed Taylor or vibist/arranger Mainieri—bassist Will Lee is back, and three different pianists (and two different guitarists) appear throughout the album. This is definitely not Art’s “own group”.

In the end, Creed Taylor must have realized that Farmer’s style was simply too personal to shape or change. And for Farmer, the making of *Big Blues* was probably a considerable catalyst in his decision to opt out of any long-term fusion or commercial commitments to CTI or any other record company. In the February 22, 1979 issue of *Down Beat*, reviewer Scott Albin reports that at a recent appearance at Sweet Basil in New York, the Art Farmer Quartet’s set included tunes such as Charlie Parker’s “Red Cross”, and the standards, “I Can’t Get Started With You” and “It Could Happen To You”. There is no mention of fusion-influenced repertoire or electronic instrumentation (Albin 1979). It appears that the flugelhornist’s desire to play mainstream jazz could not be subjugated by popular influences or technology’s inevitable advances. Farmer surmises: “There might be a time when the majority of music will be electronic, but that’s just going to make acoustic instruments that much more dear to the listener, because it’s going to be so rare. If you’re playing an instrument, your own unique being, your body, is going to have an influence on the sound. But whatever happens in the field of science, you can’t hold it back; even if it’s harmful to humanity, it has a life of its own.” (Waterhouse 1984).

In conclusion, the fusion catalogs of Byrd, Hubbard, and Farmer are worthy of further consideration and study because each player seriously explored this style of music at some point during his career. In each case, this exploration did not radically change a player’s previously established musical personality. In fact, each trumpet player’s individualism is as apparent in fusion as in mainstream jazz.
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