

1



The Importance of Teaching the Oral Tradition by Brian Lillos

I want you to pick your favourite piece of music. The style doesn't matter. Take some time to think about it. Pick your favourite tune. You know, the one that puts a smile on your face any time of the day or night. The tune that gives you goose bumps, or gets your toe tapping, or provokes a tear in your eye. When you go home this evening, I want you to listen to this tune several times. When you have heard it enough times that the glow is starting to dissipate, I want you to describe in words, in your most scholarly manner, the sound that is being made. Review your written work several times for accuracy and thoroughness. Once complete, put the written material away for one week. Store it in a safe place and one that you won't forget (with your bills) and not in a place where you will continue to refer to it (underwear drawer). In one week's time take the written material out and read it without listening to the tune. Then listen to the tune and see if your words adequately describe the sound being made. Then give your written description to a colleague and see if they can determine the song/artist you are describing. I'm hoping that this has become a somewhat frustrating exercise for you and that you've come to realize that words are inadequate to describe certain aspects of music.

In music, there are some things you just cannot quantify. They are Oral and best left that way. (If you need an academic term for Oral, it is called performance practise.) Oral Tradition is an essential part of learning music and one that is neglected by many jazz educators today. For example, when I was in my late teens I had the privilege of working in a Big Band that backed up jazz acts on their way to Las Vegas. It was quite a remarkable experience because we would have two weeks with Ella Fitzgerald, and two weeks with Tony Bennett, and then two weeks with Frank Sinatra, and so on. At my first rehearsal I had trouble with time placement - specifically, the "and" of the beat. On the first entrance I came in early on the "and" of one and got to wear the "non-jazzier dunce hat" for the rest of the rehearsal. I was very nervous about losing the "gig" and for the rest of the set I listened carefully to the lead trumpet entrances but often it felt like swing subdivision was a lot of guesswork. During a break at the rehearsal, my saxophone teacher (the late Fraser MacPhearson), who was playing lead alto, told me to listen to the ride cymbal. "Listen to the skip and that will tell you where they're placing the 'ands'". It worked! He said, "You've got it." I asked him to be more specific and he said, "I can't." I persisted with the need for specifics. He said, "just