

CHAPTER 3 - MUSICIANS WORKING TOGETHER

One of the most ancient strategies for control and domination is to “divide and conquer.” Jazz musicians have fallen victim to this methodology since the inception of the jazz business. With gigs and record deals being akin to the availability of a single seat on the subway during rush hour, it’s inevitable that an extremely high degree of competition will exist among musicians for each and every one.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. Jazz musicians are too often like inhabitants of a land filled with rich and fertile soil and ideal amounts of rainfall, choosing to fight over the last sandwich at the local deli rather than plant their own crops. While musicians often state that self-empowerment and independence are their ultimate goals, I find that such talk is most often a position maintained until the next record deal, new agent or manager comes along to “make things happen.”

Even the rare phenomenon of a productive record deal and good management won’t produce empowerment and independence. That has to be steered by the artist – assuming of course, that it’s actually *desired* by the artist. But assuming it *is*, the most powerful tools the musician has are the music and the intellect and spirit behind it. And it doesn’t take a degree in physics or a new-age philosophy to recognize that a number of musicians coming together in a cooperative spirit will magnify that power enormously.

The regular exchange of ideas and sharing of knowledge that took place in the early days of jazz, throughout the modern era and into the avant-garde era of the ‘60s and early ‘70s, were immeasurably valuable to the art form. Likewise, musician-driven organizations like New York City’s Jazzmobile, Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and St. Louis’ Black Artists Group (BAG) were all instrumental in establishing musical and professional partnerships among many musicians, providing a springboard for them and others through their involvement with the central organization.

In the ‘80s with the emergence of Lincoln Center, the focus shifted away from the artist and onto the presenting facility. These presenters exhibited virtually no concern for the holistic well-being of the scene. Instead they’ve embraced industry-anointed high-profile artists, along with some of their personal favorites who often work for lower fees than they were getting 20 years earlier in the same markets. Suddenly musicians – who’d always had to compete heavily for the few worthwhile gigs in town – were locked in fierce competition for an opportunity to play for 70% of the door in some squalid dump that had somehow been declared the center of the new “musicians’ scene.”

Meanwhile, with jazz education becoming big business and an institution unto itself, the very process of exchanging information and sharing ideas became packaged, processed and privatized. Everything has a price, regardless of whether it has any value. The *ultimate* price? After 60-some years of having no control over the business but complete control over the music, musicians lost control of the music in the early ‘80s and finally seem to be recognizing it some 20 years later.

Musician cooperatives, artist-driven festivals, artist-owned labels and self-produced events are becoming more commonplace. More and more musicians are looking into non-profit incorporation and are

becoming more technology-proficient. Some of this is due to sheer desperation and some due to simpler technology. Maybe it's just the power of the music and its refusal to succumb to the humdrum forces working against it. The most profoundly important requirement is musicians' willingness to work together toward mutual benefit – musically and professionally. Just as being concerned about the well-being of your neighbor doesn't demand Communism, working cooperatively doesn't (and shouldn't) mean co-dependency. It simply means a willingness to work together to produce mutually rewarding results in which all parties feel that a proper balance exists.

As in any business arrangement, good judgment should be utilized regarding those with whom you're making the deal. Someone who is unlikely to pay back a cash loan is unlikely to carry his weight in a cooperative venture. Behavior and personality traits don't change whether it's a play-for-pay or some abstract everything-evens-out concept. And some people are simply sociopaths or plain uncooperative.

The key is to find the proper individuals who can all share the same spirit behind the reason for your coming together. Basically it's the same formula used for putting together an ensemble. Only this time the glue isn't the music, it's the business surrounding it.

There are numerous approaches that can be taken once the mindset of cooperative action is established. It can be as formal and committed as a marriage or as loose and free as sharing a cab. We'll look at the six basic categories, starting with the most formal.

(These six categories are – **The Cooperative Ensemble, Profit Sharing, Barter of Services, Project Partnership, Shared Team Management, The Collective**).