

An excerpt from...

STRAIGHT AHEAD

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO THE BUSINESS OF JAZZ*

*[WITHOUT SACRIFICING DIGNITY OR ARTISTIC INTEGRITY]

Compromise eBook

As a part of the *Straight Ahead Advice* blog

www.outwardvisions.com

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*A free excerpt on musical compromise from **Straight Ahead: A Comprehensive Guide to the Business of Jazz (Without Sacrificing Dignity or Artistic Integrity)** by author [Marty Khan](#). **Straight Ahead...** is available in print and digital formats at www.outwardvisions.com. This excerpt can be found in PART II, Chapter 1 – The Artist.*

9. Is it possible to remain true to one's original ideals, or is compromise necessary?

Some years ago an up and coming artist came to me for management and proclaimed that she did not want to compromise her music. I told her that the day she took her first dollar to play her instrument she compromised her music. Now the issue was how to make the best of that decision.

There is no real correlation between music and income, as I state over and over in this book. In Africa, music is woven into every aspect of daily life. Anyone familiar with this music knows that extraordinary levels of profound artistic expression are often attained within these contexts. Likewise, from American churches to Asian shrines, magnificent music is created with no financial motivation whatsoever. The artificial circumstances dictated by bringing the lofty goals of musical edification into focus with economic benefit demands a certain level of compromise often resulting in something being lost in the translation.

I once remarked to the brilliant educator/composer/musician Makanda Ken McIntyre that Duke Ellington seemed to be the only jazz artist to dictate his own terms over the course of a long career without compromising. He responded that Duke had once told him that he regretted being forced to play his more popular compositions over and over at the expense of the extended works he would have preferred to play. Does that mean he compromised his ideals? No, but the decision to bring his magnificent music to so many people, and providing such joy, awareness and spirit throughout the world over a half a century had a price. And he was willing to pay it.

All kinds of compromises – from small to large – are necessary in the process of bringing music to an audience. Sound systems are usually necessary in order for an audience to hear a live performance, inevitably altering the pure, natural sound of the instruments. Most radio stations will only play tracks of a certain length. Personnel choices are limited by availability and economic wherewithal. Record executives demand input on elements from repertoire to personnel to stylistic approach.

The list goes on and on, and not simply in terms of willingness to make compromises in exchange for

greater financial earnings. But with foresight, objective planning, and a clear identification of artistic intent, an artist can prepare for necessary compromises without altering the essential artistic goals. Throughout the history of jazz and that of every other art form, there have been mavericks and innovators who refused to compromise the integrity of their art, usually at various levels of sacrifice.

Members of the jazz pantheon like Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk and Charles Mingus achieved considerable levels of recognition during their lives, but have been greatly exalted after their departure. Others still with us, like George Russell, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor and Sam Rivers will likely receive similar treatment after they're gone.

Miles Davis and the glorious John Coltrane, whose huge popularity during their lives has increased enormously since their passing, continued to be assaulted by critics throughout their lives with every new stage of evolutionary development, losing old fans and picking up new ones with each new step. Some, like Betty Carter, Lester Bowie and Sun Ra had a brief taste of acceptance and success before their departures. Others like Eric Dolphy and Clifford Brown achieved their status post mortem. Still others, like Herbie Nichols, Tadd Dameron, Lennie Tristano, Booker Ervin and Booker Little have yet to receive even a fraction of their due.

But each of them, along with many others major and minor, has one key element in common – the steadfast commitment to expressing their unique artistic vision without any meaningful compromise. These are the standard bearers, the symbols of excellence and commitment to which all serious artists should strive. Despite the limited opportunities and financial rewards endemic to the jazz business, despite the critical disdain and the resistance of many of their peers to their music when they created it, they stayed on course to their own goals and aspirations.

Following the enormous success of *My Favorite Things*, when he began to pursue a musical path that outraged critics and befuddled fans and peers alike, did Coltrane compromise when he recorded *Ballads* and the album with Johnny Hartman, two of the most beautiful records ever made in any genre? Or was he simply informing his detractors that he hadn't lost his ability or his mind, and by making these albums proved that his new direction was one of committed pursuit and not confusion. When Miles embraced electric instruments in the midst of the huge popularity of his 1960s "freebop" quintet, was he catering to a new audience of sophisticated rock fans, or was he simply utilizing new technology and colors to evolve his edifying message and bring it to a wider audience using a new

language?

Is it compromise when performing in a venue or on a bill that will draw a younger, more pop-oriented audience to program more rhythmic and accessible works from within your own repertoire?

After making a series of critically acclaimed albums of original material and developing a strong European and underground American audience, was it a compromise when the World Saxophone Quartet recorded an album of Ellington material that outsold all of their other albums combined, resulting in a long term contract that was both economically and artistically successful?

Is it compromise for an artist whose natural tendency is toward the lengthy solo, to conceive an album containing shorter solos in order to get the radio play that opens the door for bringing the music to a wider audience in live performances and future recordings?

There is no compromise when audience-expanding elements are factored into a musical context without artificiality or contrivance. Some artists maintain multiple ensembles that allow them to work in a wide range of venues and settings without losing any of the purity of their artistic expression. Other artists choose to earn their income by ancillary means – teaching, studio work, sideman activity, etc. – in order to be independent of having to earn their living from their own artistic ideal.

If an artist doesn't earn enough to support himself or his family, it's unlikely that the real opportunity to create great music will exist. Finding the proper balance between art and dollars has always been one of the greatest challenges facing the creative artist.

10. Can the refusal to compromise actually be damaging to one's art?

Yes, when the refusal is based on too much concern for the perception of others. Peer pressure and personal ego are prime causes of this. But there's also the circumstance where a label executive, presenter, or performing arts organization persuades the artist to focus entirely on the art with no concern for economic results or audience appeal because it's advantageous to them for the artist to do so, often at great cost to the artist.

Promises that the label only cares about the artistic quality can rapidly be undone by a corporate

decision, executive shift or new label direction. Poor sales or poor attendances are the empirical evidence of economic failure, and some individual's guarantee to not be concerned over such things does not necessarily provide the asterisk that makes it okay. The less scrupulous among these individuals often play upon the artist's sense of self-respect or peer acceptance, thereby forcing them to make damaging career decisions to uphold some abstract ideal that isn't even really embraced by the artist.

As for peers, the limited work and recording opportunities for jazz artists often foments jealousy. An artist will often fall under criticism and contempt by other artists who would jump through a flaming hoop for the same opportunity for which they criticize another.

A strong sense of ego is necessary for any artist. After all, the prime concept behind the artist's intent can reasonably be described as "dig me." But the strongest egos must contain an element of objective judgment and self-knowledge, and should never be twisted by knee-jerk reactions or concerns of outside perceptions that have very little to do with true respect, dignity or artistic aspiration.

11. How much can the artist compromise before it becomes selling out?

When musical honesty, integrity and authenticity is sacrificed for potential fame or fortune it's selling out. This can occur by hiring a musician for their name value, even if their participation is damaging to the music. It can be performing a popular composition that is antithetical to the artist's musical vision, or resorting to instrumentation, arrangements or stylistic approach that is only utilized because of the financial results that may occur. It can happen by wearing a demeaning costume or making outrageous statements that damage another artist just to gain attention or create self-exaltation.

There are so many ways that an artist can adapt his or her own artistic vision into intelligent and effective career decisions without sacrificing integrity. Taking an easier road simply because it's more convenient, or will provide a quicker or larger return, can only be properly described as selling out.