

The Clarinet Was Invented by the Devil

Enzo Capua (July 14, 2016)



There was a time, around the 1930s, when jazz music became so popular and recognizable that even today it is still described as the peak of the “Jazz Era”, which in fact began around a decade before.

That pinnacle of fame for the genre – which has perhaps never been reached again since – was known as the “Swing Era,” drawing a link between these two historical periods, a little like the zipper of a dress, was a dramatic event in American history: the Great Depression.

Yet, miraculously, jazz music seemed at first – during the Jazz Era – to represent a new desire for crazy, unbridled joy after the gloom of World War I, while after – in the Swing Era – it became a wild, uninhibited reaction to the sadness of hunger, and the absence of work.



All this came before another tragedy that would affect the entire world: World War II. Thus we can say that jazz, together with other art forms (though for different reasons), represented in the first half of the 20th century an exuberant, imaginative and unifying bond between the people who wanted to react with vital force to the tragedies currently happening or threatening the future.

The symbolic instrument of those decades was certainly the clarinet: so strongly symbolic that jazz itself can be identified with its sound. There were two absolute protagonists of the clarinet in jazz: Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw. Both men were white, with very different personalities, though equally capable and extraordinarily talented.

Of course before them there were other ingenious clarinetists, for example Jimmie Noone from New Orleans, and then Pee Wee Russell and Eric Dolphy, but the great popularity of both jazz music and the clarinet is owed to those two players.

And what about Italians? Well, there were at least three great Italian players of American jazz, extraordinary clarinetists and all sons of immigrants: Jimmy Giuffrè, Buddy De Franco and Tony Scott (whose real name was Anthony Joseph Sciacca).

So Italians evidently had a particular fondness for the clarinet, as evidenced by a famous showman of today, a certain Renzo Arbore, so dedicated to his music that his business card reads "Jazz Clarinetist". One of the greats among Italians in the modern age, Baldo Maestri, who unfortunately has long disappeared, said to me once, "the clarinet was invented by the devil!" referring to the countless difficulties of playing it, especially with regard to intonation.

Woody Allen knows something about that, insisting on performing in public despite having many problems with tone, instead of dedicating himself completely to the thing that he knows how to do better by far, directing films. Nevertheless, this beautiful instrument of ebony and reed, so difficult to play yet with such a soothing sound, is not currently going through a period of great popularity.

The famous jazz musicians who still play it are somewhat scarce. In Italy however we have four of them that we could place at the top of the list of the best in the world: Gabriele Mirabassi, Daniele D'Agaro, Mauro Negri and Nico Gori. All excellent musicians who have raised the age of Italian jazz music. Because of them, the sound of the clarinet has undergone a magnificent rebirth, completely Italian, fascinating and inviting. It wouldn't be otherwise, would it?

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