

More Musings on Art and Commerce

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You know, I've found that the most difficult thing for me, as an artist, is to believe in the intrinsic value of my own work. Our culture tirelessly, ceaselessly tries to reduce the value of everything and anything to dollars, attempting to quantify art along with everything else in stacks of dull green notes -- a formula that collapses at all but the most superficial level. Charlie Parker, to take just one example, revolutionized modern music -- unleashed a cultural thunderclap that still reverberates from every bandstand and loudspeaker. Yet he died essentially penniless, left no estate. The sales of his recordings -- although still coveted by fans and collectors -- cause hardly a blip on "The Industry's" radar.

How then does one go about quantifying that kind of contribution? What unit of currency could sufficiently embody such a gift to our collective dignity? to our collective humanity? The answer is, of course, that any attempt to do so is an absurdity, a joke, a futility that only the most venal or shallow among us would undertake. The work creates its own value system. It is beyond commerce. Ditto the contributions of uncounted numbers of other artists, mothers, teachers, paramedics, gardeners, nurses, firefighters, and on and on -- the vast majority of whom will never achieve even the kind of limited celebrity Bird enjoyed -- and who could care less about doing so because they are not motivated by the ego's insatiable appetite for recognition and praise.

I've often wondered about the seeming incompatibility within the human psyche of the artistic impulse and business-savvy. I have known very, very few truly creative people who could be said to have a talent for both. I would be hard-pressed to name one or two. I suspect the nature of that dichotomy is two-fold:

1. The artist and the business person are driven by opposing impulses. The business person is motivated by the desire to create material wealth. The creative person -- the true artist -- is motivated solely by the simple amusement of watching the work take shape. Any other reward or compensation which may or may not be forthcoming is secondary (although not necessarily unwelcome). This is not in any way to diminish the artist's need for money or to resuscitate that tired icon, the "starving artist." As I like to say, money ain't everything, but then no money is nothing. It's usually better by far to have more than less. Artists need to eat as much as anyone and, like most people, prefer to do so in four-star restaurants whenever possible.

At this point in my life I don't rely on my art for daily sustenance. The upside of that (in addition to a slight weight problem) is that I can choose to make only music that has meaning and resonance for me. The downside is of course that I don't spend nearly as much time as I would like honing my craft. But for most it seems the economic reality of choosing the path of the artist is not pretty. It is an unreal un-reality in which the greatest artists of our time earn less money than a midlevel paper-shuffler at one of the corporate behemoths. As my buddy the late Nicky Hammerhead used to say, "No one became an artist because it was a good business decision."

2. The second part of that dichotomy is attributable I think to the near impossibility of the artist to believe in his/her own work. Most likely this is related to the lack of distance between the artist and the work. Assessments of (financial or aesthetic) worth mandate a degree of objectivity, and the ultimate import of a work of art is stubbornly subjective. Really, the best the artist can hope for is just NOT TO THINK ABOUT IT. Do the work, put it out there, and move on. And for god's sake, don't obsess. (What could be easier?)

I recently read an interview with Sonny Rollins, arguably the greatest improviser of modern times. The interviewer (saxophonist Joshua Redman) asked him how he was able to spontaneously create such extraordinary improvisations -- piling up choruses of intricate, indelible musical complexity replete with thematic development on a par with the written compositions of Bach or Mozart. Rollins' response was "Well, I never really thought about it beyond what I'm saying right now."

And so I keep the faith and keep on working. Not because of the promise of recognition -- however elusive -- or any expectation of achieving the level of artistry of a Bird or Rollins, but because the simple experience of doing the work is its own reward. The means to an end where *the means is the end*.