

## American Splendor: How Comics Are Becoming Jazz

by Phillip Kennedy Johnson

I wrote this with the understanding that my target audience consists of pretty much no one. Most of my readers are devotees of either 1) music or 2) comics, and very few are both. Most of my friends and colleagues identify me as either a musician who loves jazz or a writer who loves comics, and whichever side they fall on, they don't entirely get why I'm into "that other thing." The answer: They're the same.

With only a century of history, the relatively young art form of jazz is one of America's greatest cultural contributions to the world. But the even younger art form of comic books is evolving, and has taken on distinctly jazz-like qualities. Both industries struggled with censorship early on, both art forms revolve around a small creative team, and both genres have developed distinct sub-genres, each with its own cult following. The similarities are many and significant, but one of the most striking is the reliance of both art forms on "The Standard" and on the artist/creator.

Since its inception, the most common vehicle for jazz has been the jazz standard. Most jazz standards are show tunes or popular songs from the 1910s-40s, relics of the "Tin Pan Alley" era of songwriting. Many songs that were pop favorites then are jazz favorites now, and there are as many interpretations of these songs as there are jazz musicians. To hear the evolution of jazz, listen to recordings of "I Got Rhythm" from 1930 to now.

To see the evolution of comics and sequential art, read *Detective Comics* from 1939 to now.

Batman. Superman. Captain America. Spider-Man. Wonder Woman. Wolverine. These characters are the "jazz standards" of the comic industry. All artists who dream of making it big in mainstream comics cut their teeth on these characters.

Go to a college masterclass by a jazz musician, and often you'll hear them perform "All The Things You Are," or "Autumn Leaves," or "My Funny Valentine," or some other antique show tune that every jazz student knows. These songs were popular before our parents were born. What inspires jazz musicians to play the same tired old songs generation after generation?

A simple, well-constructed theme or chord progression with plenty of room for creative interpretation.

Go to any Artist Alley at any comic convention in the world. You'll find comics professionals drawing and selling sketches of beloved superheroes, most of which are older than the artists themselves. After all these years, what makes the characters of the comic pantheon so appealing to writers, artists and readers?

A simple but compelling theme with plenty of room for creative interpretation.

All the most timeless comic book characters have a story that can be summed up in a single sentence:

*When a young boy's parents are brutally murdered in front of him, he devotes his life to fighting crime in a dark and corrupt city.*

*The sole survivor of a distant planet, a super-man disguises himself as human to bring hope and justice to his adopted world.*

*A high school student gains super-strength, speed and reflexes from the bite of a radioactive spider, eventually learning that great power comes with great responsibility.*

These characters are the comic book equivalent of "Autumn Leaves." Any kindergartener could hum the melody to "Autumn Leaves." But jazz artists have been doing amazing things with it since the 1920s, and fresh, inventive recordings continue to be made. As with Batman, Superman or Spider-Man, the most basic premise becomes a starting point for a unique, personal story.

"Round Midnight" is often called the national anthem of jazz. It's the kind of song you can practice your entire life and continue to find new ways to play. I've heard hundreds, if not thousands, of improvised solos played over it. A great rendition of "Round Midnight" is a treasure. The best ones, while unique, always flow from the same whistle-able melody, and give the listener a new appreciation for the source material.

Batman is the "Round Midnight" of the comics form. Every new story arc begins from the same point: *When a young boy's parents are brutally murdered in front of him, he devotes his life to fighting crime in a dark and corrupt city.* Now what? You'd think we'd get tired of hearing this lame old story every year.

But we don't. As with "Round Midnight," the reason we don't is the vision, interpretation and execution of the creative team. The best Batman stories explore new aspects of the character without compromising who he is, giving the underlying character more depth and enriching the stories that came before.

Thelonious Monk showed us what you can do with "Round Midnight" by revering the melody, ever-so-slowly moving away from it and winding back in at the end, like a conversation between two people.

Miles Davis showed us the elegance of understatement, and of relying on sound as much as melody.

Lee Konitz, Brad Mehldau and Charlie Haden showed us how to reconstruct a melody from its elements, and how to use each new variation as the theme for the next variation.

Amy Winehouse showed us how to abandon convention and apply her own signature style, taking complete ownership of a tune nobody would expect her to do.

Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams reminded us that Batman should be scary and intimidating, introducing darker, more complicated characters with stories like *Daughter of the Demon*.

Frank Miller took that a step further with *The Dark Knight Returns, Year One* and *All-Star Batman and Robin*, showing us a Batman completely without remorse or compromise.

Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale explored Batman's early career, showing us a pre-Two-Face Harvey Dent and Gotham City's transition from organized crime to a more psychotic, theatrical kind of criminal.

Scott Snyder shows us centuries of history of Gotham City itself, defining its architecture, its influential families and the role of the Wayne family.

Appreciating jazz isn't about learning the tunes. It's about learning the musicians. You gravitate towards favorite players, find out who they played with, and in turn who those musicians played with. You learn to hear the influence of one musician in another, the influence of one generation in the next and, with years of listening, you gain insight into the evolution of the art form. Appreciating comics and sequential art is a similar journey: learning who wrote and illustrated favorite books, who they worked with, and what they went on to do.

If anyone reading this wishes the first great Miles Davis Quintet had recorded more albums, read Scott Snyder's *American Vampire*, line art by Rafael Albuquerque. If you prefer the second great Quintet, read the same book, but with line art by Sean Gordon Murphy. That's right, I said it: Scott Snyder is Miles Davis, Rafael Albuquerque is John Coltrane, and Sean Gordon Murphy is Wayne Shorter. Don't believe me? Go and read. And if you're already a reader: Go and listen.