

LET'S DO HARD THINGS AGAIN



There is such fear in Hollywood that movies and TV series won't be understood, and therefore won't be popular, thus becoming financial failures. So most scripts are written "on the nose," leaving little to the imagination. For a movie to be reviewed as difficult or ambitious is death. There is also fear in K-12, and even in universities, that course work might be overly challenging. After the focus on reading, math, and coding, the rest is Civilization for Dummies. This radical change is generally accepted because an amazing number of people believe in "Google memory" and therefore don't think they need all that educational baggage. (See *Caliban Chronicles* #10.) Of course, we do need it. How can we discern the difference between factual material and propaganda or disinformation unless we have the education to navigate what Google offers? There was a time when educational standards were much higher. There was also a time when challenging movies, musical compositions, comedy performances, and books were not only tolerated but rewarded with general popularity and commercial success. Making

things hard and thought-provoking was praised. It's time to make things hard again.

Jonathan Winters was the most transgressive performer in the Golden Age of Comedy (with the possible exceptions of Lenny Bruce, whose use of four letter words in his club acts got him arrested multiple times, and Richard Pryor, who hit the scene a bit later). Winters gleefully attacked all kinds of institutions and sacred cows. He imagined Indians overwhelming covered wagon trains, mocked the conventions of World War II heroism (having "almost lost my skull" in the Pacific as a marine), and he incorporated many theater of the absurd tropes into his acts. A perfect example was "Maude Frickert, the World's Oldest Airline Stewardess." (*Here's Jonathan*, 1961) First Maude describes her "aviation pioneer" brother with an unsettling emphasis on his beautiful semi-nude body. Then, as they stand at the edge of Willard's Bluff, Maude says "He'd scotched-taped 146 pigeons to his arms." The delighted audience laughs and cheers, breaks into long applause. Winters drops

the amazing finish to his bit: "He was airborne for a good...20 seconds. And then some kid, from outta nowhere, threw a bag of popcorn in a stone quarry and he bashed his brains out." This moment demonstrates two things: Winters' absurdist humor in many ways anticipated magic realism—and there was a very large audience for what he did. More than that, his audience was willing to follow him anywhere.

Three years later, in 1964, Thelonious Monk was on the cover of *Time* magazine. He was the ultimate transgressive musician in modern jazz, itself a transgressive movement, and yet he was hugely popular. From the liner notes of his 1963 album, *Criss-Cross*: "In Berlin, after a recent concert by Thelonious Monk, a leading newspaper made the following comment: 'Thelonious Monk is not only the greatest composer of modern jazz . . . he is the greatest composer since Bartok.' From San Francisco to Stockholm, from Osaka to Amsterdam, the name of Thelonious Monk stirs the pulses and imagination of musicians young and old, brings people of all races, ages and denominations from their homes to jam the

auditoriums where he appears, and is agreed by one and all to be synonymous with 'genius'."

In that era, few people rolled their eyes and smirked at the mention of jazz; the word could never have been a gag line. What happened? How did we get from a wide cultural embrace of jazz (and Winters' style of comedy) to a wide rejection of these American classics? It is true that many of the musicians and comedians of that era died or, like Mike Nichols and Elaine May, went into different areas. But there has been a fundamental cultural change between that period and the world we find ourselves in now.

Some people claim that the rock era, from the mid-sixties through the seventies, killed jazz. I loved the music of many of those rock musicians, but it would be hard to claim that either the intellectual openness to complexity that modern jazz requires or the extraordinary musicianship of its greatest adherents was at play in those big, showy rock concerts. You could also point to the fact that in the fifties and sixties people still bought poetry books and read challenging novels in significant numbers. So what we are talking about here is audience, or the lack of it. How did this evolution (or devolution) take place? You don't need to imagine the dystopian future of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* to describe the loss of what should be among our most valued American cultural

achievements; holding them in general contempt destroys them just as surely as burning books does.

I willingly admit that there is a high degree of nostalgia in calling back these memories. The Five Spot in the East Village was my favorite haunt, Monk alternating gigs with Charlie Mingus, and amazing pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi (who could give Bud Powell a run for his money) and Mose Allison playing the off sets. I saw Rahsaan Roland Kirk at the Village Gate. He played several saxophones, a flute, a clarinet, and a nose flute, sometimes all at once. It was one of the greatest performances I have ever seen: not a novelty act, but a wild innovation, where a master musician turned himself into a new, multi-tonal instrument. When I went to Cal in 1962, my friend Keith and I liked to hang out in North Beach. Since the drinking age was 21 in California, as opposed to 18 in New York, we had to stand outside the Jazz Workshop and listen to Cannonball Adderly and his quintet tear up the place. The glorious music that came out of that dark cave made our hearts ache, because we could not be part of the audience. We even endured sitting behind a metal fence to see Miles Davis at the Blackhawk. We knew how lucky we were to be in the presence of these masters, but we thought it would last forever, or at least until we turned 21. A couple of

years later, the new topless clubs had destroyed the jazz scene in North Beach. A couple of years after that, the Hungry i, a prime location for the great comedians of the time, closed.

The spirit of that innovative era of the late fifties and early sixties was best articulated in JFK's famous moon speech, delivered in May of 1961: "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard . . ." The giants of modern jazz and the golden age of stand up comedy did not improvise, innovate, and challenge their audiences because it was easy, but because it was hard. We, the people of this era, should not insult ourselves by thinking that such a thing could not, or should not, happen again.



If you are anywhere near Ann Arbor in the next three months, make sure you get to the Ellen Wilt retrospective at the Stamps Gallery, 201 S. Division Street, Ann Arbor, MI. Ellen is a 97-year-old art genius who has been an active avant-gardist for many decades and who is currently doing some of the best work of her career. She was with us in the old Caliban and had a cover and portfolio in issue #10. Her brilliant work has appeared frequently in Calibanonline, including a cover and portfolio in issue #28. The poster for the show is on the following page. Do not miss this experience!

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MATERIALS ON HAND: THE ART OF ELLEN WILT

MAY 31-SEPTEMBER 9, 2018

OPENING RECEPTION: THURSDAY, MAY 31, 6-8 PM

ARTIST CONVERSATION: SATURDAY, JUNE 9, 2-3 PM

Artwork by Ellen Wilt
Bridge with Toll Booth, 1995
Water-based Pigments on Paper
Courtesy of Barbara Bach

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MATERIALS ON HAND: THE ART OF ELLEN WILT

Curated by Srimoyee Mitra with the assistance of James Barker and Jennifer Junkermeier-Khan

MAY 31-SEPTEMBER 9, 2018

OPENING RECEPTION: THURSDAY, MAY 31, 6-8 PM WITH MUSIC BY FRANK PAHL

ARTIST CONVERSATION: SATURDAY, JUNE 9, 2-3 PM

Materials On Hand: The Art of Ellen Wilt is a retrospective exhibition that spans fifty years of the artist's expansive art practice. During this time, Wilt (Stamps BFA '69, MA '70) has consistently experimented and explored new ways of working in a variety of two dimensional mediums including, oil, acrylic, and watercolor. At 97 years of age, Wilt maintains an intuitive, and lively practice that feature domestic objects like teapots and chairs, while also reckoning with the iconic architectural tropes of bridges and tunnels — these are the ongoing motifs in her work. Timely and deeply personal, Wilt's work reverberates with urgency to remind viewers of our shared humanity.

LEARN MORE: STAMPS.UMICH.EDU/ELLENWILT

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