

Why Is Quincy Jones Worried About Music's Future?

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INTERVIEW: Why Is Quincy Jones Worried About Music's Future And The Distortion Of Sound?

When you're discussing Quincy Jones, there is no such thing as hyperbole. Just ask his 27 Grammys. The 81-year-old has played a vital role in the development of jazz, funk, and hip hop, holds more records than a jukebox, logged more firsts than Adam and Eve, and collaborated with everyone from Frank Sinatra to Grandmaster Melle Mel. It is no exaggeration to say he's the chief architect of popular music in the 20th Century. But as we venture further into the new millennium, he's getting pissed.

The cultural titan recently appeared in the *The Distortion Of Sound*, a documentary produced by cutting edge audio outfit Harman Kardon. The fascinating film explores the complex pros and cons of music in the digital age. Although companies like iTunes and Spotify have made music more accessible, portable, and cheaper than ever before, mp3s have become so compressed that the vast majority of the sound quality -sometimes up to 90 percent- is lost. With the omnipresence of iPods and ear buds, the documentary contends that a generation of music lovers are being raised on low-grade sonic sludge. As the final piece of his formidable legacy, Jones is working with Harman to ensure that his art, and the art of so many others, can be enjoyed the way it was meant to be heard.

Among his many musical milestones, Quincy Jones' name will forever be linked with *Thriller*, the worldwide smash he produced with Michael Jackson in 1982. The work has been held up as a near-perfect piece of pop artistry, blending genres, boasting an unprecedented seven Top 10 hits, and earning sales records that remain unbroken to this day. So how does the man behind the biggest album of all time feel about today's singles-oriented iTunes culture, where one can pick and choose tracks a la carte based on an incomplete sample? Does he feel that album making is a lost art?

The answer is a strongly worded yes. "It's like they don't think about albums anymore!" he laments. Sequencing an album is one of the joys in being a producer because it's like making a movie. That's why I had "Human Nature" right after "Billie Jean" on *Thriller*. Because "Billie Jean" was in three parts, like a mantra. The other one is like a kaleidoscopic harmonic collage, with all the harmonies running around the place. The ear loves that. It loves to feel that growth and change and movement.

The abandonment of the album is an ironic bookend to a recording career spanning seven decades. He first entered the studio in 1956, another time when full length LPs were marginalized in favor of singles. The technological limitations were many, severely limiting his artistic canvas. "It couldn't be over three minutes because [the disc] didn't hold it," he laughs now. And the turnaround time wasn't exactly luxurious. "You had to do four 3-minute songs every four hours as an arranger or you didn't work again!"

Obviously he's come a long way since then, helping elevate the album to an art form along with the likes of The Beatles producer George Martin, whom he considers a friend. While he admits that software has made it easier to realize creative ideas, he warns against using technology as a crutch. "If you don't know anything about music and you use Pro-Tools, you will be working for the machine. But if you know music, the machine works for you. That's what it's designed for."

If there's anyone who knows music, it's Jones. A child prodigy, he honed his skills at the age of 13 playing trumpet with jazz and swing bands around the Seattle area. Within a year he met a young pianist from Georgia named Ray Charles and the two formed a close bond. To this day he cites Charles as a major influence in his formative musical ambitions. After just a year at what is now Boston's Berklee School Of Music, he was invited to tour with Lionel Hampton's band, and soon he was commissioned to arrange songs for heavy hitting stars like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Dinah Washington.

But show business is filled with hopefuls who have music pumping through their veins. Many fail, while a few succeed for a short time before inevitably falling out of fashion. It takes a special talent to remain relevant (let alone revolutionary) in an industry that is constantly evolving. How has Jones navigated the changing styles and technological upheavals that have made the recording studio unrecognizable from the world where he started?

In an age when repetitive hooks, cheap speakers, and splashy gossip headlines risk making music a disposable commodity, he follows a deceptively simple rule: put the song first. Our entire industry is all about a song and a story & A song can make a terrible singer a star. If you've got a good singer, you're in good shape. A bad song? The three best singers in the business cannot save it. And that's a fact. Even when literally working with the best singers in the business, he still labors tirelessly to make sure the tunes fit. We went through 800 songs to get nine for Thriller, he tells us -and the intense quality control doesn't end there. After you get nine of them on their feet- you've got vocal backgrounds and counter lines and all that- you look at the nine you have and very honestly say, What are the four weakest songs in the company of these nine? And you take those out and try to make those your four strongest on the album.

And that's how you make the most successful record in history.

When most of us would walk away feeling nothing but supreme satisfaction, Jones consistently strives for more. The diligence shown on projects like Thriller has marked his career since the very start. At the age of 24, Jones put his lucrative career as a session arranger on hold and moved to Paris, where he studied music theory with the legendary composer Nadia Boulanger. She said to me, There are only 12 notes, until God gives us 13. And Quincy, I want you to know what everybody did with those twelve. Bach, Beethoven everybody- it's the same 12 notes. Isn't that amazing? All we have are twelve notes and you have to find your own sound through rhythm, harmony and melody. You have to find a way to make that your personal sound.

Jones knows that music is a continuum, built on the shoulders of those who have come before. But after a lifetime of learning, he is now ready to do a little teaching himself. He's currently working with engineers at Harman Kardon, helping to implement artist-driven solutions that combat the low quality recordings and inferior sound systems infecting the market. He is also mentoring an international youth orchestra that he calls The Global Gumbo All Stars. It's really about a case of passing it on. And it's a pleasure, too.

For Quincy Jones, working with young talented people is the only way to roll. They're energetic, passionate, curious, fearless, unrelenting, and always testing limits-just like him. He mentions a recent conversation with Johnny Mandel, writer of standards like The Shadow Of Your Smile and Emily, among others. We've been friends since we were in our teens, you know? He's 88 now and I'm 81. He called me up and he said, Q! We're the only two guys who are going to go from infancy to Alzheimer's and bypass growing up! We don't want to get grown up. He's a funny cat, man. He's right, too. I don't ever want to grow up.