

tuning

I was tuning. It takes longer to tune a bass than it does other instruments. Pianos you don't tune at all, and horns generally tune to only one note. Bases have four strings which are tuned by using harmonics. A bass player needs quiet when he tunes. And he need more time.

Lysander Johnson, the sax player on the stand that night, did not understand the concept of tuning a bass.

"What's the hold up? he asked.

"I'm almost done; just a second."

He came over and noodled around on his sax until he found the note I was working on.

"You're flat," he said.

"I'm not finished," I replied as I continued to try and hear the note.

"Well, hurry up," he said and then he honked out the note again on his sax. "You're still flat," he insisted.

The pianist, a guy named Corky, was someone who Lysander gigged with a lot. They both knew a lot of the same tunes in the same keys. This worked to my disadvantage all night, since many of their keys were not the traditional ones. They started out doing "All the Things" in D, which seemed crazy since D was such a crappy key for sax. I ended up stepping all over the changes. After the tune was finished, Lysander gave me an exasperated look and said

bluntly, "You're still flat." Then he came over and honked an A in my face.

"I'm not flat," I said, defending myself. "It's just that that key was shit. No one does that tune in D."

"Hey, man, if you can't hang it ain't my fault."

"Let's just do something. How about some blues?"

"Shit." He smiled at Corky. "The man wants to play some blues." Then, with a couple of bellicose grunts, which was his way of counting, he took off into this Ornettish frenzy -- in another strange key. I couldn't keep up.

Later that night, after I got home, my friend Wayne called. He was a trumpet player. He worked occasionally with Lysander in a big band and was the one who had got me the gig that night. Apparently Laysander's regular bass player, an older guy named Dutch, had gone out of town to do a wedding for some real good money. Lysander needed a sub -
- me.

Wayne asked how things went. I told him that I thought the guy was an asshole.

"That's funny," said Wayne, "he said the same thing about you."

"What did he say?"

"He said you kept complaining all night . . . that you kept criticizing the music and trying to piss him off."

"What!? I didn't say a thing to get him pissed. he was the one who gave me shit all night about my playing. I didn't say a thing -- what an ass!"

"He thinks white people can't play jazz. Don't let it bother you; he does the same thing to everybody. He thinks all rhythm players should be black. The guy's a dick. He can play, but he's a dick."

After the phone call I smoked a couple of joints and put on "A Love Supreme". Coltrane . . . My God, John Coltrane. As I listened in the darkness of my bedroom, the music seemed impossible to me. He was so musically superior, he made me feel like a musical amoebae. Like an animal that has night vision or the ability to hear supersonic frequencies, Coltrane had a musical sense that was beyond what was human.

It made me wonder whether it was worth continuing to even play music at all. Or whether it would be wiser to just spectate. Like a young artist seeing Picasso or a ball player watching Hank Aaron, sometimes it can be so overwhelming. You can either take inspiration or be scared off, I guess. But sometimes you just feel so small.