



Stage Diva

My opinion is yours.

Purpose of this column = To reinforce the fact that there is no "opera" in soap operas.

What the Hell Are You Listening To? *It's called opera.*

If you ask just about anyone who breathes, opera sucks. Growing up, (yes, I was a small child once) the closest I ever came to "appreciating" this art form was through the brilliant incorporation of Wagner and Rossini into such legendary Warner Brothers cartoons as "What's Opera, Doc?" and "The Rabbit of Seville" (you know the one where Bugs plays a barber and massages Elmer Fudd's head with his feet - Ha! Ha! Ha! Hoey Hee! Ha! Snort. The rest of it, for me, was just a bunch of extra-large people waddling onto a stage, throwing an arm out and bellowing in a foreign language. Not something I was going to seek out and curl up with for a few hours.

But upon abandoning cartoons for more sophisticated forms of distraction (I'm lying), I soon discovered that opera music was all around me. From cell phone rings to the scene in *Apocalypse Now* where Robert Duvall is hoping to storm the beach in good time so he'll be able to go surfing. Remember that Cascade dishwasher detergent commercial where the water was splashing around to the thunderous clashing of cymbals and drums? Opera. Bizet's *Carmen* in fact. Because the scandalous story of a gypsy wench-bag who captures the heart of a soldier only to later kick him to the corner is synonymous with clean dishes.

Scandalous?? This opera was scandalous??

Well, yes. You see back in 19th century Paris, lawless proletariat figures were not "allowed" to be the main character - it was considered bad form. Those post-Reign of Terror frenchies were all about high society (I'm just teasin, just a little ethnic humor, put down the gun). That *Carmen* was a gypsy only added to the haughty sniffing. What's more, the ending - which I'm not going to disclose because I'm a sassy lass - shocked and I mean shocked the audiences who first saw Bizet's bold production. And these guys saw A LOT of opera. Take away film, television, radio, MP3 players, comput-

ers, *Playboy* and you'd be watching a lot of opera too. In the end, *Carmen* was rejected. The opera failed miserably during its first few runs and Bizet died a few months later in a puddle of misery. Yet now - ironically - *Carmen* is one of the most popular operas in the entire world. Pretty uplifting story, huh?

But the real question is how did I know all of this? Didn't I just get done emphasizing my complete disinterest in epic music theater? Doh! Busted. Ok. Ok. I might know a teensy weensy bit about opera. But that's all! Just a wee bit. And it took a huge shove from the "LET'S TRY SOMETHING NEW!" gremlin that resides in the right side of my brain to get me to harness what little knowledge I do have. Harness it and put it to work for me. Not unlike a small donkey somewhere in a remote region of Columbia.

So this is what I did. I went to the Appleton Public Library where things are free if you can remember to return them on time, and I picked up twenty different operas on compact disc. Now some people might find this odd, but I'm not one of them. Then I lugged my overstuffed backpack home, cranked on the cd player, opened a fabulous bottle of red wine and let myself be overtaken by some of the most incredible classical music I ever heard. By going through the complimentary books included in the box sets, I was able to learn and follow the plots of all of them while the music and song brought out the emotional states of both the characters and the mood of the story.

But the best way to experience opera - as with any form of performance art - is to see it live. And for those of you who don't want to take the extra time to become familiar with the "play" of the opera, the incorporation of supertitles (subtitles for opera) completely eliminates the language barrier. So basically what I'm telling you is don't rip on opera until you've at least given it a real chance. Because who knows? You might just discover something new not only in the world of art but within yourself as well.

And, um, er - speaking of late fees at the library - does anyone have \$10 I can borrow?



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Typewriter rage and modern dance

By Jennifer A. Gritt

Writing about music is one of the hardest and most futile things to do. To create a visual image with words is one of the reasons we writers exist. Communicating the sound of a voice, a guitar riff, an entire song by pounding letters onto a page does not – nor will it ever – come close to capturing the essence of music. I don't care how great the writer, how brilliant the poet. So what happens when you add modern dance to the mix? You get a crabby 31-year-old trixie gnawing her arm off in frustration due to the thirteen hour staring contest she just had with a blank piece of paper. It won. And I'm angry.

Modern dance.

What the hell? How do you describe it? On top of it, there are lots (and I mean lots) of dance companies out there and each of them more or less does their own thing. Pilobolus, a troupe out of Connecticut, is known for their innovation and bizarre yet fascinating imagery. Watching them dance is like watching human sculptures move – slowly, deliberately, gracefully. A feeble description I know. For the love of god, there simply are no words! And then, of course, there is Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, a company whose main purpose is to celebrate the African American experience through the art of dance.

What does that mean! Can you explain it?!

What images do the words "African American experience" inspire, huh? Slavery – bigotry – repression – hatred – marching – yelling – throwing – hurting – tears – hugging – Martin Luther King – Malcolm X – death – HOPE – TRIUMPH – PASSION – STRENGTH – SPIRIT – trumpets blaring – pianos hopping – church – choir – flowing robes – eyes closed – mouths singing – but singing what? Praise be God? Praise

be Jesus? Or fuck you America!!!! I'm black!!! I'm proud!! I'm here! I dream . . . I feel . . . I create . . . I love . . . I breathe . . . until I reach that inevitable stop sign. But most of all I dance to the sounds created by my people. Created for everyone to hear. And I dance for everyone to see.

Alvin Ailey captures it all. And it all begins with the music.

Duke Ellington's "Night Creature." You know this jazz tune, and if you don't, you should. Listen to it. Because it's not like I can play it for you with my words. Dizzy Gillespie's "Manteca" with its Cuban beat and sliding horns. Charlie Parker's "A Night in Tunisia," human greatness never sounded so sweet. To hear this music is to feel it. The horns lift you up, pull you around yourself and then gently set you back down to where you just came from. Now picture human bodies dancing like you've never seen human bodies dance before. Riding the bold thump thump of the rhythm, floating along the soul cry of a horn. But the thing with modern dance is these performers don't just move any which way they can to the beat of the

music. They are choreographed so that their bodies tell a story. A human story. The human stories of us all. To not be moved by the sweeping image of them is to deny the passions of life. For that is what modern dance is all about.

And it will continue on. As long as there is new music to create and songs to sing. Because one thing troupes like Alvin Ailey, Pilobolus,

Cycopia Aerial Dance, Group Motion and the Neta Company make you realize and understand is that music was meant to be danced to.

Postscript:

I just want to take a moment to say farewell to Hunter S. Thompson. Gonzo journalism will live on, buddy. Oh, and say hi to Ernest, William, Jack and Neal for me will ya?





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What Jazz Is — in Fragments

by Jennifer A. Critt

Jazz.

The word itself is electric. Snapping, popping, coursing through the veins of history. Bringing life to the cold notion of freedom. Ironic, considering this genre's roots. Running deep as they do into the earth of cotton fields. In a South long dead. But the memories live on. To be felt and heard in spirituals — songs of pain, songs of praise, songs of life enchainned. It was freedom of expression in its purest form. And then the world around began to change. And although the end of civil war gave black America. Its pink slip of freedom. Society had other plans.

To New Orleans we go.

Horns. Bass. Drums. And Bessie Smith. Poverty hung like ropes. From trees burdened by mists. And through it all. A new sound broke loose. With a heartbeat. With a soul. It followed the dead. To their final destinations. It gave voice to hardship. And love. And

Even if they didn't want to. And the color line. Was starting to feel the strain. Of human will. Getting restless. In its cage of unreason. And illogic. A cage as mortal. As the anger that built it. But it was going to take some time. To bring it to an end.

Society shifts gears.

And in a moment of who knows what. Congress cracks down. And tries to force America. Into a box of righteousness. From which it began to roar. And fight. And claw its way. Around prohibition. Seeking freedom from. And freedom to. And the music. It made them dance. And feel. And live. Even though the times were hard. And money was as scarce. As jobs. The music. However. Was able to bring people together. And it began to change. More horns. More bass. More drums. More rhythm.

And the world began to swing. All the way to another war. But this one. Was different. It had a cause. It was just. Just another way. To inflict pain. On a human enemy. But we don't remember that. Or don't want to. We only

remember the music. To which life moved. And it bopped. And made people fall in love. In an uncertain time. And white people "got it." The music that is. And eyes began to open. And blink. In wonder. In amazement. And horror.

Victory.

And America felt good. And so did the music. And together they danced their way. To suburbia. To technological ease. To what is good and proper. But never mind. That inconvenient fact. That life for some. Was not good. Or free. And the war. That continued on. Was not good. Or about freedom. And the music began to change. And go back. To the root of its pain. And anguish. And it began to question. The norm. The standards. Moving faster. It darted. Here and there. In what seemed. Like chaos. On and on. Through time. And generations. Chasing answers. That bring them back. To where they started. Armed with a knowledge. A new understanding. That in America. Jazz is.