

# Ramsey Lewis defies categories



Artists such as Ramsey Lewis, have learned to maintain a balance between what is going on within themselves and the world outside, without fearing to resurrect the genius of the past. At forty years of age, then, it's not surprising to find Ramsey touring with Earth, Wind & Fire (a group he helped spawn), playing to packed rock clubs and crammed college concerts, borrowing some ideas from Duke Ellington, and picking up his seventh gold record in the process, this time for his latest Columbia album, "Sun Goddess."

Although the Ramsey Lewis resurgence exceeds his popularity during the mid-sixties "In Crowd" successes, the pianist points out there has been no deliberate change of image. Indicating there are a lot of good piano players, but few well-rounded entertainers who also happen to play piano, Ramsey says, "I'm involved in other facets of music and life. I'm aware of other people, places and things. I'm always trying to enlarge upon my musical knowledge."

"This Black folk music, African improvisation and tribal music coupled with European harmonies, which has become known as Jazz, is really the truest reflection of the American community," Ramsey asserts. "Although Whites were attracted to the music's sense of mystery, they were still frightened by its racial connotations."

"Jazz hurt itself by simultaneously becoming both conservative and avant-garde," he opines.

Ramsey is "fighting labels and categories, which is what the cultural revolution of the sixties was all about." Particularly frustrating to him are those who classify him, or any modern instrumentalist, as a jazz artist.

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On Saturday, June 7 County jail, Black History highlights from K. O. Knudson Jr. High and Chaparral High and a rap session at Woodbury Jr. High are included in the Clark County Schools.

The La Raza Club Fiesta at Basic High; a luncheon at Roy Martin Jr. High; the telecommunications class at Las Vegas High; a skit written and performed by students in the Human Relations Club at Fremont Jr. High are all included in the first week's airing. In the following weeks, students from Rancho High, a talent show from Hyde Park Jr. High, Brinley Jr. High's trip to Mexico, Gibson Jr. High on a visit to Levy Gardens, Garside Jr. High visiting kindergarten, Sunset High visiting the Clark

"As the jazz musician saw his music taken away from him -- and adulterated and relabeled -- he withdrew and created more complex music which no one else could understand. His music no longer entertained, no longer reflected his environment."

Fortunately, however, White kids began listening to Black music during the sixties with no preconceived notions. This decade has seen musicians and their audiences catch up with each other. As listeners became more tolerant and sophisticated, the new musicians looked back at their roots and tried to convey their messages in ways the average person could understand. This new attitude opened the door for innovators like Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, Weather Report and Ramsey Lewis.

A bandleader who allows his musicians freedom to develop, Ramsey points with pride to the success of the Young-Holt Trio, Cleveland Eaton, and Maurice White, the latter of Earth, Wind & Fire -- for all emerged from his groups.

Ramsey's band is currently graced by Tiaz Palmer (bass), Morris Jennings (drums), and the precocious Derfreklaw Raheem, who plays flute and up to twenty drums, some African and some home made. This summer he is adding Byron Gregory on guitar and a few human voices.

He has learned from Duke Ellington that a complete musician cannot limit himself solely to his instrument.

"I try to be sincere with my art and the way it is presented," he says. That is probably why the children of the people he entertained 15 or 20 years ago can be found in his audiences today.

He feels we take too much for granted, rather than working to improve governmental systems. "I'm not for isolation," he adds. "But I am for cleaning up our own backyard before sending the lawn mower across the street."

Although he believes Americans should be able to live together, he does not subscribe to the ideal of the melting pot. "It should be more like a mixed salad, with each ingredient sustaining its own character."

Ramsey sees art as a reflecting history, not influencing it. "The sixties are the best example of this. The songs of social protest, although an event in themselves, merely reported what was happening; they did not create change."

Concerned by the growing apathy on college campuses and the prevalent view of the experience of the sixties as a lost cause, Ramsey feels we will survive, even if it takes a catastrophe to force us in the proper direction. "We need a period of looking within, and the present state of the economy has forced a lot of people to do just that."

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