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**David Yaffe: Fascinating Rhythm**

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## INTRODUCTION

In Donald Barthelme's short story "The King of Jazz," attempts to describe a trombone solo by Hokie Mokie demonstrate the folly of jazz writing. The story narrates a cutting contest between Mokie, the former "King of Jazz," and his Japanese contender as onlookers grasp for superlatives. The dethroned trombonist, whose playing had earlier been described as having an "epiphanic glow" with a style known as "English Sunrise," emerges with a solo so thrilling that it inspires a series of questions that build to their own absurdist crescendo:

You mean that sound that sounds like the cutting edge of life? That sounds like polar bears crossing Arctic ice pans? That sounds like a herd of musk ox in full flight? That sounds like male walruses diving to the bottom of the sea? That sounds like fumaroles smoking on the slopes of Mount Katmai? That sounds like the wild turkey walking through the deep, soft forest? That sounds like beavers chewing trees in an Appalachian marsh? That sounds like an oyster fungus growing on an aspen trunk? That sounds like a mule deer wandering a montane of the Sierra Nevada? That sounds like prairie dogs kissing? That sounds like witch grass tumbling or a river meandering? That sounds like manatees munching seaweed at Cape Sable? That sounds like coatimundis moving in packs across the face of Arkansas?<sup>1</sup>

Barthelme famously observed that “the principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century,” but these descriptions, even when patched together, do not add up to much—and that is Barthelme’s point. Hokie Mokie might be blowing his trombone with superb virtuosity, but the act of matching it to language is, to paraphrase Barthelme, about as elegant as a herd of musk ox in full flight. With each simile more useless than the last, Barthelme demonstrates the pomposity, hubris, and failure of language when it is applied to jazz.

Since “The King of Jazz” is a parody, Barthelme offered no alternative to a jazz writing built on ridiculously insufficient similes. In recent years, jazz and literature scholars have been attempting to do just that. Some of the most important work now being done in jazz studies engages in research that says as much about what jazz musicians thought of themselves as it does about the writers who were inspired by them. Recent examples would include John Szwed’s anthropological journey into the minds of Sun Ra and Miles Davis (*Space is the Place* and *So What*); Krin Gabbard’s shrewd scholarship of the cinematic, psychoanalytic, and racial terrain of the jazz canon (*Jammin’ at the Margins* and his anthologies *Representing Jazz* and *Jazz Among the Discourses*); Robert O’Meally’s and Farah Jasmine Griffin’s demystifications of Billie Holiday (O’Meally’s *Lady Day* and Griffin’s *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*); Ingrid Monson and Paul Berliner’s semantics of improvisation (Monson’s *Saying Something* and Berliner’s *Thinking in Jazz*); Scott DeVaux’s rewriting of the history of bebop (*The Birth of Bebop*); Eric Porter’s account of jazz musicians as critics and activists (*What is this Thing Called Jazz?*); Fred Moten’s theoretical investigations into African American Aesthetics (*In the Break*); Brent Hayes Edwards’s international inquiries into improvisation’s syntax (“Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat,” “The Literary Ellington”); Michael Jarrett’s

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demonstrations of jazz as a pedagogical model (*Drifting on a Read*); Aldon Nielsen's limning of postmodernism and postbop aesthetics (*Black Chant*); Eric Lott's narratives about America's ongoing minstrel show and bebop's social consequences (*Love and Theft* and "Double V., Double Time"); and Scott Saul's historical narrative about how jazz musicians pressured the social upheavals of the 1960s (*Freedom is, Freedom Ain't*). These are among the many scholarly studies that have been important for this one, and the interdisciplinary work on this subject is just getting started.

*Fascinating Rhythm* builds on these scholarly conversations, using narrative, anecdote, and musical analysis to unravel what has often been a convoluted interaction between jazz and American writing. Throughout this study, when I describe performances by Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Charles Mingus, or Miles Davis, I hope that I have used literary devices with more precision than have Barthelme's commentators. Part of what makes "The King of Jazz" funny is that the arcane similes are doled out as part of a conversation between effete jazz snobs who know all the rules. The musicians, meanwhile, are oblivious—they are too mired in a cutting contest to pay attention to prattle—and the uninitiated are left out in the cold. If mystification is inevitable, demystification is, on its own, sterilizing. The purpose of this study is not to dismiss the inspiration that jazz provided for novelists and poets, but to see if literary writing about jazz can hold up to a serious historical, aesthetic, and biographical investigation of the music and the artists who made it.

The jazz fan is such a marginal cultural figure that he—and it is, alas, often "he"—spends a considerable amount of energy identifying the places where the music is misrepresented when it does make it into cultural arenas outside clubs, festivals, and reissue packages. Sometimes, these arguments are about trivial

carelessness: how could Cameron Crowe misidentify the year of the Miles Davis and John Coltrane Stockholm concert in the film *Jerry McGuire* as 1963? (It was 1960.) But getting jazz wrong can also have more troubling implications. When Norman Mailer claimed that “jazz is orgasm” in “The White Negro” (1957), he was not simply off base in his conflation; the word “jazz” has been associated with everything from an African word for “jism” to a synonym for “fuck”—a meaning upheld even by Jazz at Lincoln Center Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis.<sup>2</sup> And yet in the year when Mailer wrote this, Coltrane was famous for practicing so extensively that he could spend an entire day on the same scale. His regimen was so demanding, he would even practice using harp and violin books, too, insatiably reaching beyond what his instrument was designed to produce.<sup>3</sup>

What Coltrane produced might have sounded like ecstasy to Mailer, but it was rehearsed and thought out with a religious devotion. In the music of Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, and other figures Mailer revered, that orgasmic sensibility was expressed with a level of harmonic and rhythmic sophistication he never recognized. Because improvisation was not notated, it was often confused with mere unrestrained id, and forty years after Mailer’s essay, Allen Ginsberg still claimed of bebop that “anyone can pick up an axe and blow.” Mailer’s and Ginsberg’s characterizations of jazz as noble savagery are not that different from a statement overheard by Miles Davis on a night when he was sharing the bandstand with Charlie Parker: comedian Milton Berle referred to the band as “headhunters,” a derisive epithet reclaimed by bop musicians who spoke of “cutting heads” in jam sessions, and revised generations later as the name of Herbie Hancock’s wildly successful fusion band. Getting jazz wrong in literary writing has often been a case of underestimating the complexity of jazz musicians—even in intended admiration.

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I would be equally remiss if I did not take these levels of understanding into account. If this study does not offer a single unified theory that can explain representations of jazz in writing, it is because the music itself has steadfastly eluded stable definition. “Jazz is only what you are,” said Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, Max Roach, and Anthony Braxton, to name only a few, have all expressed misgivings with the word.<sup>4</sup> This study will not attempt to impose order where it does not exist. Nor will it attempt to be an exhaustive account of jazz’s representations in the history of American writing—a work that would necessarily span volumes.

Jazz fans are often notorious completists, but the musicians often resist the whims of collectors and requesters. I remember seeing Hancock playing a trio gig at the Blue Note in 1995, accompanied by Ron Carter on bass and Gene Jackson on drums. At one point, a white man of advanced years began calling out for a Vincent Youmans number. “More Than You Know!” the patron called out. “More Than *You* Know?” Hancock replied. “You see, we only rehearsed certain songs. If we had anticipated every song you were going to call out, that . . . would have been a *long* rehearsal.” There will be readers of this book who will wonder why certain authors are not discussed at length here. This study is neither an encyclopedia nor an attempt to uncover every last reference to jazz in American letters. That would have been a long rehearsal.

And there are plenty of texts that made it into my rehearsal but not the final cut, and this is not because I am unaware of them, but because they simply did not fit into my rhetorical strategy. So while, for example, the first chapter examines the relationships between blacks and Jews in jazz and literature, there is no discussion of Mezz Mezzrow’s *Really the Blues*. Why? Mezzrow was a friend of Armstrong, a hepcat, pothead, and Virgil

through the jazz matrix—a Jew who actually believed he had physically turned black. All this is of tremendous interest, but since this is a book that examines writers on the level of Philip Roth or Ralph Ellison, or musicians as vital as Louis Armstrong and Charles Mingus, Mezzrow, a mediocre clarinet player and entertaining, if sentimental writer, could neither write like Ellison nor wail clarinet like Sidney Bechet. His importance, in other words, resides more in the realm of anthropological interest than aesthetic exactitude, and thus does not fit with the figures examined in depth here. Other modes will reveal much about ethnic appropriation in his wild narrative. There are many other writers that merit attention in this book but do not get it, and an entire study could be written about what is not included here—including William Carlos Williams’s “Old Bunk’s Band,” Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, Elizabeth Bishop’s “Songs for a Colored Singer,” and William Melvin Kelley’s *A Drop of Patience*, in which the music is never described, but the metaphor of the struggling performer is depicted with harrowing immediacy. These outtakes deserve to be polished off and appreciated, but they simply did not fit into the narrative I was weaving here. A study of equal length could certainly be written about the writers I did *not* include.

What this book *does* examine is a series of crucial moments when jazz has surfaced in the work of major American novelists, poets, and playwrights, and how, in turn, the musicians chose to represent themselves in autobiographies. The movement of this book is more thematic than it is historical or syllogistic. Jazz history is an unstable mass of recordings, liner notes, reviews, biographies, documentaries, and endless arguments. I have used that history—a history that is itself still in revision—as the basis for what Ralph Ellison would have called a “jazz-shaped” reading of some American literary texts.

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This book tells a story of how Ellison's description of a Louis Armstrong record led to a jazz repertory movement labeled as "neoconservative"; how Langston Hughes and Charles Mingus's distinct aesthetics clashed in the recording studio; how a Billie Holiday performance left Frank O'Hara's muse breathless; how a Bessie Smith-inspired record saved Salinger's Holden Caulfield from phonies; and how autobiographies by Billie Holiday, Charles Mingus, and Miles Davis both reinforced and redeemed jazz's red-light district origins. I have let jazz history—more nuanced, distanced, and researched now than it was for many of the writers discussed in this study—serve as a background for the texts, often allowing it to demonstrate how literary writing can be both dated and prophetic. The distinct role jazz played in ethnic relations, the Ellisonian formation of the jazz canon, the collision between the poetics of jazz and jazz-inspired poetry, and the revelations and mystifications surfacing in jazz autobiography—all of these subjects will be given close attention in this study.

In attempting to describe jazz, writers have used the technical language of musicology, the contextual devices of history, the complex dialogue of race, or resorted to figurative language, using those very images, metaphors, and similes parodied in "The King of Jazz" to describe rhythms, chords, tones and the ephemeral drama of improvisation. When Ellison wrote about the music, he took all of these factors into account. In the prologue to *Invisible Man*, Ellison balanced literary devices, harmonic insight, and history when he used a metaphor to describe how Louis Armstrong "bent that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound."<sup>5</sup> Ellison's image is as ambitious as one of Barthelme's absurdist similes. It simultaneously addresses the "bent" thirds of the blues with a reference to Armstrong's early cornet training at the Colored Waif's Home. And yet it is also steeped in Armstrong's technique, idiom, and biography, as well as a

metaphysical conceit indebted to T. S. Eliot. For jazz to be a guiding principle for a major modernist novel was a remarkable achievement indeed. It was a turning point in the middle of a trajectory that this study follows from Hart Crane's 1923 attempt to "transform jazz into words" in his poem "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" to Richard Powers's 2003 novel *The Time of Our Singing*, in which the biracial Strom brothers discover jazz with the discipline of prodigies.

It has been difficult for writers to approach an art form that confounds Western principles of notation and empirical analysis. In the heart of the so-called Jazz Age—a term F. Scott Fitzgerald used as a generational signifier more than a specific discourse about a musical art—jazz music was either mystified by white writers like Crane or set to mellifluous verse for those already in the know by Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes. The music itself, though, remained as indeterminate as a modernist poem. What, after all, is jazz? Is it a radical rejection of popular music or is it just more popular music? Is it about improvisational audacity or structural intricacy? Does it embody racial strife or transcend it? Is jazz about being in the moment or does it make a self-conscious statement about that moment? The answer to these questions would turn out to be "all of the above," but it was midway into the music's rapid-fire development before Ellison could catch up with it.

Ethnic strife obfuscated an understanding of jazz among many writers during its most fertile moments of development, but among the musicians themselves, interethnic dialogue happened much sooner. The first chapter, "White Negroes and Native Sons," shows that the story of black-Jewish relations is one of opposition in the literary texts of Bellow, Mailer, and Baldwin, but one of collaboration in the music of George Gershwin, Thelonious Monk, Benny Goodman, and others. Ellison lamented

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on PBS that there was no equivalent of an Alfred Kazin of jazz, and as a Century Club member in the 1960s, he found looking for New York Intellectuals who took the music seriously to be a lonely business. The Jews who learned to read in a different way were jazz musicians like Red Rodney, Benny Goodman, and Stan Getz. If literary texts were the only evidence of black-Jewish relations, there would be J. D. Salinger admiring Bessie Smith from afar, Amiri Baraka concocting versified conspiracy theories about Israel, Saul Bellow wondering if there could be a Zulu Tolstoy, Mailer's "jazz is orgasm." The collaborations of blacks and Jews tell a different story: when George Gershwin's "I've Got Rhythm" was hermeneutically developed at Harlem's Minton's under the aegis of "rhythm changes" and by artists including Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk, the idiom of bebop was invented partly as the result of an inter-ethnic exchange. These "rhythm changes" were flying around decades before the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, but when it came to the music that was produced, who could ask for anything more?

Ellison provided a bridge between literary modernism and the jazz canon with the publication of *Invisible Man*, which achieved instant status as a modernist classic and made people listen when Ellison argued that Louis Armstrong was as modern as T. S. Eliot. Ellison's characterization of jazz as a high modernist art was a necessary corrective to the prevailing notion that improvisation did not have its own overdetermined structure, and among literary figures, he is unique in his influence on the formation of a jazz canon—one that many critics and musicians have found to be too confining and restrictive. This study's second chapter, "Listening to Ellison," argues that, while Ellison may have failed to produce the long awaited follow-up to his 1952 masterpiece *Invisible Man*, Ellison's true second act was actually

not the writing of a second novel, but the narration of jazz history from beyond the grave. Ellison was a transgressive novelist and traditionalist jazz critic whose criticism, like his poetics, was overtly indebted to T. S. Eliot. He set strict parameters for his jazz canon and anticipated many of the “jazz wars” that have divided jazz critics for the past decade.

The third chapter, “Stomping the Muse,” explores how poets as disparate as Hart Crane, Langston Hughes, Wallace Stevens, Frank O’Hara, and Amiri Baraka identified themselves with jazz, engaging in a strange and paradoxical wrestling match as they vied to be what Hughes called “The Original Jazz Poet.” “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen” would ultimately reveal more about Hart Crane’s desire for sonic, celestial transport than about his stated attempt to “forge an idiom for jazz into words, something clean, sparkling elusive.”<sup>6</sup> (Crane would later characterize the results as “impotent.”) In a 1950 poem by Wallace Stevens, “The Sick Man,” the figure of the poem’s title attempts to resolve the southern music of “thousands of black men, / Playing mouth organs in the night or, now, guitars” and the northern music of “Drifting choirs.”<sup>7</sup> The poem concludes, “The words of winter in which these two will come together,” without acknowledging that Duke Ellington and other figures in 1950 were already addressing the classical-vernacular split Stevens’s poem pledges to resolve. Meanwhile, there is no split at all in the poetry of Langston Hughes, who, in poems such as “Jazzonia,” “The Weary Blues,” and “Morning After,” did not merely write about the blues, but actually *wrote* the blues. Manifesting the music itself, Hughes avoided the high-low problem posed by other poets by acting as a participant rather than an observer, but when he teamed up with Charles Mingus in 1957, their contrasting sensibilities were documented on record. This chapter

explores whether jazz-inspired poems can sufficiently address the poetics of jazz.

The final chapter, “Love for Sale,” finds jazz autobiography to be the red-light district of African American narrative, with Billie Holiday, Charles Mingus, and Miles Davis telling tales of the oldest profession while selling their wares to editors and ghostwriters, and turning narrative tricks of their own. Holiday and Davis, submitting their stories to ghostwriters, and Mingus, working under financial pressures and an aggressive editor, were well aware that doing the hustle told a more lucrative story than practicing scales. Holiday’s harrowing tales of childhood prostitution, Davis’s unrepentant tales of pimping, and Mingus’s anguished account of the same profession (the dominant subject of his memoir) anticipated the hip hop fascination with the hustle. One would have thought that jazz autobiography would be the medium where writers could finally tell the story of jazz accurately, where the subaltern, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak put it, could speak. But the textual histories of these memoirs are as seedy as the tales of the streets they tell, with publishers and editors manipulating the stories of these artists for maximum titillation and profit.

“Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around” (*IM*, 8). This is Ellison’s Invisible Man listening to Louis Armstrong’s trumpet, and while he is describing a feeling of displacement—and this is right after he describes smoking a “reefer,” Armstrong’s medicine of choice—he is also demonstrating how a serious contemplation of Armstrong’s music can leave a writer to slip into the breaks and look around, often without a compass. The writers in this study struggled to find language for

a music that defied empirical explanation. The word “jazz,” of course, comes up in writing more often than the music is actually confronted. F. Scott Fitzgerald coined the term the “jazz age” without offering his views on Ellington and Armstrong, but as Fitzgerald himself noted, the word’s meaning in the 1920s was multivalenced: “The word jazz in its progress toward respectability,” he wrote, “has meant first sex, then dancing, then music.” Add “drinking” to the list, and Fitzgerald would have been concerned with music the very least.<sup>8</sup> By 1992, Toni Morrison had titled a novel *Jazz* without directly writing about the music; like Fitzgerald, her use of the word described a feeling—an aura, an attitude—but not an inscribed and historicized musical art.<sup>9</sup>

In this study, I have looked beyond the auras to examine what was actually happening with the music these writers described. All art may aspire to the condition of music, but jazz has presented particular challenges to the American writer. When Ellison had Armstrong score his hero’s “music of invisibility,” Frank O’Hara privileged Billie Holiday for a sublime moment in a prosaic day, J. D. Salinger looked to Bessie Smith for authenticity in a fraudulent world, and Norman Mailer mythologized jazz as the apocalyptic orgasm itself, I have listened for the music beneath the writing, slipped into the breaks and looked around. This book measures jazz music against the writing it inspired: how Billie Holiday the artist can be understood within Frank O’Hara’s gaze, how Thelonious Monk rewrote Gershwin and Berlin in collaborations that could have made Mailer rethink his ethnic allegories, and how Duke Ellington found a synthesis between classical music and the blues that Wallace Stevens only wrote about as an imaginative conceit. After surveying these novelists, playwrights, poets, and critics, this study concludes with jazz autobiography in which the musicians are given an oppor-

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tunity to speak for themselves, taking the music's mythology back to the whorehouses where, according to the legends of Storyville, the music began.

This book begins with understanding the jazz process itself as an antithesis to an ethnic divide in the literary world and ends with ghostwritten accounts of jazz legends as streetwalkers and pimps, with modernist poets, hipster essayists, and transgressive novelists giving their accounts in between. Somewhere between Mailer's "jazz is orgasm" provocation and Ellison's conflation of Louis Armstrong with T. S. Eliot resides the poetics of jazz, on the threshold of spontaneity and precision.