

viewpoints

Struggling with *Jazz*

By Scott DeVeaux

As a musicologist, I'm accustomed to forming opinions that nobody in particular wants to hear. So when Ken Burns's mega-documentary *Jazz* first aired on PBS in January 2001, it was an interesting time to be an academic specialist in jazz. Suddenly everyone, from close friends to casual acquaintances, was asking what I thought, and a surprising number actually wanted to hear the answers.

And I was eager to talk. I'd already done my homework. Armed with an advance copy of the tapes, I had sat through all 17½ hours not just once, but twice, the second time taking detailed notes. I had read as much as I could find in the press and on the internet about the documentary—how it was made, what Burns and his collaborator Geoffrey Ward had to say about it, along with preliminary reactions by various jazz insiders.

But when it came down to it, I felt an odd sense of constraint about expressing myself. In part, that was because my feelings about the film were too complicated and ambivalent to reduce to a socially acceptable soundbite. Beyond that, I felt keenly the vulnerability of my position as an academic evaluating what was, after all, a form of television entertainment. To be sure, some might be glad to hear from me that the show was less than wonderful, if only to justify their own decision to change channels after the first episode or so. But others undoubtedly found Ken Burns's *Jazz* an engrossing and enlightening experience, leaving me the unpleasant role of spoilsport. Any negative reactions would sound cranky and elitist—just the sort of thing you would expect from a self-appointed expert who happened not to be consulted for the film.

You have to hand it to Burns. Expecting nothing but trouble from the jazz experts, he skillfully preempted any such criticisms from that quarter. In a way, it's as if he's baiting us—dismissing us contemptuously as the “jazzerati,” granting us our mastery of petty detail while chiding us for our failure to see the big picture. “This is too important a subject,” he told Larry Blumenfeld of *Jazziz* magazine, “to let, as we said in *The Civil War*, the buckle-collectors tell the story” (Blumenfeld 2000)—“buckle-collectors” being his shorthand for those who “do the regimental histories and know the caliber of every gun in the Civil War” (Burns 2000a). The clear implication is that there is nothing particularly intellectual, or musical, or even

ultimately very useful, about this knowledge. “We don’t have an intellectual community that surrounds our music,” Wynton Marsalis has chimed in in Burns’s defense. “It’s kind of like a barbershop argument; you don’t have to know anything to argue about it” (Robischon 2000).

It would be one thing if this disgruntled back talk were merely an irrelevance to Burns and Ward; but they go further to decry the *jazznerati* as a positive hindrance. Expecting loyal allies, they found instead a “dysfunctional family” of scholars, enthusiasts, journalists, and musicians prone to squander their energies in internecine quarrels (Cocks 2001:72). “These people in their ‘academic purity,’” says Burns (more in sorrow than anger), “basically are not being friends of the music they purport to love” (Blumenfeld 2000). Were they true friends of jazz, they presumably would have long ago put aside their petty differences to help find a mass audience for this inexplicably neglected music. Instead, thanks largely to their obsession with specialist knowledge, the general public has come to mistrust jazz. The potential audience, Burns says, is put off by a “critical discourse [that] has reached a level disproportionate to its importance. It’s become a Tower of Babel, splintering and clouding our appreciation of the music” (Blumenfeld 2001:52). Less biblically, Burns has compared jazz experts to Pigpen, the character in the comic strip *Peanuts* who carries a cloud of dust around with him wherever he goes (Wilonsky 2000). There’s apparently no pleasing such people. In making *Jazz*, Burns has decided simply not to worry about the jazz experts, aiming his film instead at the American heartland—the “little old lady in Dubuque” or “farmer in Nebraska” (Burns 2000a), people who could learn to love jazz if we would all quit pretending that it’s so damn difficult.

There’s a certain logic to Burns and Ward’s position. Perhaps it is churlish, not to say ungrateful, to snipe from the sidelines when so much time and effort, years of people’s lives and hundreds of thousands of foundation dollars, have been devoted to the single task of placing jazz, if only temporarily, at the center of American attention. And there is no denying that Burns and his colleagues are highly skilled and indefatigable at what they do, which is to pull out of a near infinitude of sounds, images, and commentary a single, readily comprehended, and cinematically effective narrative. All this is cause for celebration. The problem is that any sense of gratitude is nearly impossible to separate from frustration, exasperation, and outright anger. One musician involved with the production privately summed up his feelings about *Jazz* to me as “a horribly flawed film with some truly great and beautiful things about it.” The same peculiar conjunction of “horrible” and “beautiful” came up in conversations with the jazz trumpeter John D’earth, my colleague at the University of Virginia. Which raises the question: how can we register our considerable discomfort without seeming to undo any good the film might have done?

One way out of this dilemma is to take the advice not to get lost in details. It is indeed the big picture that counts. By enlisting the help of a wide range of jazz critics and musicians (if not scholars), Burns and Ward clearly see themselves as presenting jazz history as consensus. Just as jazz itself is not hard to understand—all you have to do is pat your foot, right?—so, too, should its history be uncomplicated. All that is necessary is to cut through the tangle of jazz discourse to get to the underlying human narrative. Thus, according to one press account, *Jazz* “was not going to be a thesis, but a tale, and those interviewed for and consulted about the film were not allowed to offer theories or make accusations. They were brought aboard for very simple reasons: to tell stories” (Wilonsky 2000).

Unfortunately, history is never so uncomplicated. For its own reasons, *Jazz* tells the story in its own distinctive way; and to the extent that one can speak of a consensus in the jazz world (by which I mean not simply the “experts,” but all those who have a deep, ongoing relationship with the music), it is a story so at odds with that consensus in certain respects that many find it bizarre and almost unrecognizable. But because of the power of mass visual media to combine compelling images with the power of myth—in short, because it’s television—Burns’s version will inevitably have a wide influence. There’s not much we can do about it—just as some of my musicology colleagues could say little about Mozart and Beethoven to displace or modify the equally bizarre (and entertaining) impressions left by Hollywood in *Amadeus* and *Immortal Beloved*. The question that remains is: what are the implications of Ken Burns’s *Jazz* for teaching jazz history? In what ways does it constitute a revision of the basic historical narrative?

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Any historical project is inevitably shaped by its author’s methods and priorities. Burns’s own are readily deducible from his numerous film projects. Over the years he has also become comfortable making them explicit in interviews. He is fond, for example, of referring to himself as an “emotional archaeologist” (Pult 1999)—a term that neatly conveys his knack for involving audiences in distant historical events through the vivid personal anecdote (think of his use of Shelby Foote in *The Civil War*), as well as his corresponding disdain for an overtly intellectual mode of explanation: “Analysis kills poetry and emotion! It’s the texture of emotion that [is] important to me” (Edgerton 1995:5).

The preference for the emotional pervades the film, determining its relentlessly earnest tone. It is certainly behind the emphasis on the biographical, a device that allows Burns and Ward to bypass abstract explanations for the development of jazz in favor of life stories, in particular that of the ubiquitous Louis Armstrong. The metaphor is planted early in the

second episode when Wynton Marsalis introduces Armstrong as “the embodiment of jazz music.” Thereafter, no opportunity is lost to bond viewers emotionally to Armstrong’s life, thereby assuring their emotional attachment to jazz itself. *Jazz* is an irony-free zone, in which sentimentality trumps detachment and skepticism. “I’ve seen [Armstrong’s] death scene in the editing room 50 to 60 times,” Burns told *USA Today*, “and it still gets to me” (Jones 2000a). What better reason can one have for including such a scene—or the touching tale of Armstrong’s first Christmas tree?

In point of fact, jazz history has always had a skewed relationship to biography. Not surprisingly, personality has been crucial to an art that is popularly thought to be unmediated expression. In certain instances—lives tragically cut short by illness or accident, or cases of melodramatic deterioration—biographical details are crucial to critical and historical interpretation. But the real subject of jazz history is jazz itself, and it is essential that jazz seem forever young. New artists, carrying new stylistic innovations, must continually arrive at regular intervals to demonstrate the music’s vitality. A few, like Miles Davis, maintain an ongoing presence in the story by periodically reinventing themselves. Otherwise, jazz musicians tend to be defined rather narrowly by their moment of “influence,” the point at which they contribute signally to the broader narrative: Louis Armstrong in early jazz of the 1920s, Benny Goodman in the Swing Era of the 1930s, Dizzy Gillespie in bebop of the 1940s, Horace Silver in the 1950s, Ornette Coleman in the 1960s, and so forth. The fact that these musicians led (or continue to lead) long and active careers is, from a narrative standpoint, an inconvenience, summed up by the cliché that if so-and-so had been hit by a truck at an early age, he or she would still have a place in jazz history. A callous sentiment, but honest.

Burns is interested in a different kind of story. As is clear from his repeated invoking of jazz as a national icon (in nearly every interview, he cites as his inspiration for the film Gerald Early’s observation that “2,000 years from now, this country will be known for only three things: the Constitution, baseball and jazz” [Wilonsky 2000]), he is less concerned with aesthetics than with the future of America itself. In an analysis of the pre-*Jazz* films, Gary Edgerton has underscored Burns’s preference for sweeping narratives with strong political and moral implications. “I feel connected to the Homeric tradition,” he quotes Burns as saying, “where we might be singing our epic verses to one another, no longer around a campfire, but maybe around this electronic campfire.” In epics, the lives of heroic individuals loom large. “The epic form tends to celebrate a people’s shared tradition in sweeping terms,” Edgerton notes, “while recounting the lives of national heroes is the classical way of imparting values by erecting edifying examples for present and future generations” (Edgerton

1993). Needless to say, it is an inherently monumentalizing approach. In one interview, Burns even muses on who would be on a jazz “Mount Rushmore”: “I would say it’s Armstrong, Ellington, [Charlie] Parker, and then I’d probably put Miles Davis but for obvious reasons—so there are no arguments—we need to have a woman and we need to have someone who’s dramatic as Billie Holiday” (Burns 2000b).

In populating his Mount Rushmore with black faces, it’s clear that the central issue for Burns is race (not gender, as the transparent tokenism of including Holiday “for obvious reasons” shows). One might have guessed as much from his previous films. *The Civil War* consistently focused on slavery as the crucial moral issue. Even *Baseball* devoted a generous portion of its time to the Negro Leagues. “Jazz is an opportunity to see how we are as a people,” Burns has said. “In many ways, I’ve made the same film over and over again, just asking that question of different subjects” (Considine 2000). Gene Santoro, in his review for *The Nation*, concurs: “This isn’t really a movie about jazz history. . . . Like the Civil War and baseball, jazz for Burns and Ward is a lens to focus on basic questions: Who are Americans, and how do they manage to get along—or not? And their central query concerns race” (Santoro 2001:36).

Such an approach has enraged some viewers, who came to the show expecting music *per se* to take center stage. And it is certainly true that music often seems pushed to the margins. Burns seems to mistrust our attention spans, seldom allowing us to hear more than a brief passage of music before hurrying to gloss it with commentary. But one has to consider the whole package. Is television the best way to actually experience music in any case? Those whose curiosity has been piqued by the film can turn to the impressive series of CD reissues Burns has devised to accompany the film, which provide direct access to, and draw unprecedented attention toward, the musical performances themselves.

Besides, in *Jazz* the cultural/political narrative doesn’t necessarily displace the aesthetic one. Often the two run side by side. A good example is Louis Armstrong’s 1928 “West End Blues,” one of the few performances accorded the honor of being played without interruption. “West End Blues” is introduced simultaneously as an aesthetic gem—“the most perfect three minutes in music,” according to an astonished music professor—and as an emanation of an American ethos: “a perfect reflection of the country in the moments before the Great Depression.” All this perfection is then adduced to a single heroic figure. “West End Blues” is the piece that “would once and for all establish Louis Armstrong as the first great solo genius of the music.”

The problem is not that the film scants “the music” in order to give us a history lesson or to subject us to the filmmakers’ peculiar obsession with

race. Anyone with a serious interest in jazz needs that lesson. To the extent that *Jazz* situates its subject within the tangled history of American racial politics (as it often does, and very effectively), it lives up to its advance billing. The problem, rather, is that all this piling on of rhetoric does little to help us understand jazz *as we know it today*.

It may seem perverse to suggest that a history should be responsible for explaining the present. And indeed, in response to the film's famously skewed proportions (while earlier episodes often linger over only a few years at a time, the final episode hurries to cover the four decades from 1961 to the present), Burns is quick to defend his prerogatives as a historian: "I consider the later years no less important, but more the province of journalism. History itself, the making of history, requires a certain kind of triangulation to take place, and the essential ingredient in that triangulation is distance from the subject, something we don't have in the modern era" (Pult 1999).

This answer overlooks an important point. Although history is told forwards—that is, stories begin at some point in the past and proceed toward (without reaching) the present—it is necessarily written *backwards*. It is a story told from a contemporary perspective, offering a vision of the past in the service of the present. In Burns's earlier films, none of this needed to be made explicit. His epic retelling of the Civil War affected American audiences as it did precisely because that conflict has such a vivid presence in modern politics and culture. Similarly, with millions attending games every year, Burns could afford to assume that anyone watching *Baseball* would bring with them a sense of the game itself: how it is played, and, perhaps more unconsciously, what its cultural meanings are. Alas, such is not the case for jazz, which for most Americans remains a puzzling noise and an impenetrable mass of sub-cultural practices. Curious viewers turned to the film to find out what jazz *is*, not merely what it has been. They certainly (and rightly) expected a historical perspective to provide much of the answer. And since historical narratives carry implicit definitions, in the process of telling their stories about what jazz was Burns and Ward did indeed convey their own highly idiosyncratic impression of what the music is today. In the end, it is an impression that may not necessarily earn our gratitude.

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A basic assumption underlying *Jazz*, as indeed virtually any such comprehensive history, is that something called "jazz," a musical tradition separable from other currents in twentieth-century American culture, provides a stable subject for the narrative. What this means in practical terms is that whatever is called "jazz" at the beginning of the story should be recognizably the same as what we call "jazz" today. It takes only a moment's

reflection to see what a stretch this is—if nothing else, there is an enormous qualitative difference between a scrappy, street-wise dance music with no cultural capital (which is certainly how most people early in the century, musicians included, would have thought of it) and the monument of American culture deserving of a massive PBS special at century's end.

One of the first tasks of the documentary, then, is to erase such differences. Thus jazz, almost from its very inception, is declared to be Art—a status that both raises it above the ordinary and ensures a certain brand-name consistency of quality and integrity. The contexts for this assertion vary. In the first instance, which comes so early in the film that the historical narrative has barely gotten underway, it grows out of a statement of American exceptionalism. As Gary Giddins explains:

Jazz is the quintessential American music. And the important thing that you have to begin with is that it could only happen in America. It's not an African music, obviously; it's not a European music, obviously; it's something that comes right out of this soil. Out of influences that come from all different cultures. And all of those come together. But in jazz, unlike all of the other folk musics of the world, it blossoms into an authentic art.

The claim that *only* jazz, of all the world's "folk musics," has proven capable of such a transformation is startling. But so is the assumption that "authentic art" is a category so self-evident that no further explanation is required. (Giddins, presumably, knows it when he sees it.) Later passages flesh this out somewhat. In episode 2, "jazz" is introduced in the context of the 1920s Jazz Age as a novelty music, good for frenetic dancing but arguably an ephemeral trend. The narration explains: "It would take the soaring genius of musicians such as Louis Armstrong to broaden its message, deepen its emotions, turn it into Art." Indeed, as it turns out, Armstrong is the focus. Giddins returns in episode 3, introducing Armstrong's "West End Blues" with a litany of aesthetic principles:

For the first time, we know that jazz is an art. What does he bring to this music that has not previously existed? First of all, he establishes almost single handedly that jazz is going to be a soloist's art, not an ensemble music. He affirms for all time that a fundamental basis for this music is going to be a blues tonality, which is gonna be as fundamental to jazz as the tempered scale is to Western music. It's the blood, it's the life of the music. Third, and most significant, . . . maybe the most astonishing to contemplate, Armstrong invented what we call swing. He created modern time. The music that Louis Armstrong improvised in 1928 excites us today. And if that's not classical music, I don't know what is.

Is Art, then, recognizable mainly through its enduring aesthetic impact? If so, perhaps the Beatles are also “classical,” since so many obviously continue to find their music “exciting” thirty-five years later. I doubt that’s the conclusion Giddins wants us to draw. But it is worth noticing that his criterion acknowledges that “art” is a category imposed on the past from a later vantage point. The obvious relevance of the assertion “jazz is art” is for us *today*: it explains and justifies the efforts made to pull jazz toward the center of official American artistic culture, whether on public television, at Lincoln Center, as a genre officially recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts, or as a staple of the academic curriculum. That declaring jazz as Art might have a different, perhaps more political purpose, is indicated only in passing. In episode 4, for example, James T. Maher explains a powerful motivation for many early jazz critics:

It was Depression era, mind you, and they were pretty much leftist in their feelings and their politics and so on, so they approached jazz with this in mind and that the black musician who after 300 years of maltreatment in America, it’s time we open the doors and windows and recognize that they created a great art.

Maher’s comments point the discussion in a more historicist direction, reminding us that categories such as “art” are social constructions, not timeless realities. And in fact, the idea that jazz not only *is* art, but also always *has* been, is relatively recent. Throughout the period covered by the film, definitions of “jazz” were highly fluid and hotly contested. On its first appearance in popular discourse in the years immediately following World War I, the term was a free-floating signifier that did not necessarily even derive from the musicians’ community (many early “jazz” musicians preferred to call what they played “ragtime”). It was a term so broadly and promiscuously associated with all kinds of popular entertainment that “for most Americans it had no precise location or independent existence” (Hobsbawm 1993). Only when certain musical practices were seized upon by critics for special attention (whether first by Americans or Europeans is the subject of some debate) was any effort made to set jazz apart as distinctive, usually as “hot jazz” as opposed to other kinds of jazz (e.g., “sweet” or “symphonic”), or to define its aesthetic qualities.

By the time referred to by Maher (the 1930s), “jazz” had been joined by a new term, “swing.” Today, swing is understood to be a sub-category of jazz: a “style” or “period” (or, in the inflated rhetoric of American popular culture, an “era”). At the time, no such consensus existed. Indeed, the very economic conditions that raised the stakes—the unprecedented boom in commercial dance music—prompted a vigorous and, at times,

hysterical debate over definitions that Bernard Gendron has characterized as a “battle of jazz ancients and moderns” (Gendron 1995:32). Is jazz a static folk practice that commercial exploitation or the influence of aesthetic modernism can only degrade or corrupt? Is swing an emblem of progress, the laudable evolutionary fulfillment of “primitive jazz”? Whatever the outcome, Gendron has noted, the mere fact of arguing helped to solidify the discourse through which jazz would ultimately be considered an “art music.” The coming of bebop in the 1940s only reshuffled and refocused the terms of debate, providing an even more self-consciously modern form of jazz to target or champion.

The modern notion of a *jazz tradition*, with “jazz” now not just referring to dance music of the 1920s but reconfigured as an overarching genre embracing a succession of deeply interrelated styles, did not emerge until mid-century. At first, the dominant ideology for the jazz tradition was colorblind. While acknowledging the “Negroid” origins of the music, the consensus among (predominantly white) critics and historians was that jazz, in becoming a “universal” art music, had necessarily transcended limiting racial categories. A further modification, then, came in the wake of the Civil Rights movement: the jazz tradition became celebrated *as* black music, a crucial cornerstone in the conception of a multicultural America.

And this is the point, more or less, where Burns and Ward come in. They heartily subscribe to the idea that jazz is a continuous, uninterrupted tradition and that it is, in some basic sense, African American. To this they add a heavy overlay of nationalism—or rather, they put a different spin on an already heavily Americanist discourse. In the cliché “jazz is America’s classical music,” America is usually invoked to bolster the prestige of jazz. Burns reverses this, using jazz (as he did with baseball) as a way of articulating what is great—or, with a liberal’s sense of self-critique, what *may* be great—about this country. “Though it is a look backwards into the 20th century,” he has said, “[*Jazz*] is in a way a look at the *redemptive future promise* of America [italics in original], because embedded in the perfection of jazz is all that we might become as Americans” (Pult 1999). And for Burns, the strongest hints of a perfectly realized America are to be found in the big band style known as swing.

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The Swing Era—roughly, from 1935 to 1945—is the film’s apotheosis. It is a historical moment when jazz is simultaneously a fully-realized “authentic art,” a source of “pure pleasure” for the masses, and, with the outbreak of World War II, a symbol of America’s special mission abroad. Here, Burns as emotional archaeologist is most fully in his element. Footage of ecstatic dancers accompanied by the splendid music of

Ellington, Basie, and Goodman shows artists and the masses in perfect synchrony. The wild enthusiasm with which both black and white audiences greeted swing proves that music can transcend even the most entrenched racism, ultimately revealing the goodness at the heart of New Deal America. Although the economic underpinnings of swing can easily be characterized as exploitative—black dance styles marketed to the white mainstream, with economic reward going disproportionately to whites—in *Jazz* the process by which jazz traveled from the margins to the center is presented as wholly benign. To quote an episode title, through swing music, black Americans offer “The True Welcome” to sympathetic whites. The result is that “swing, which had grown up in the dance halls of Harlem, would become the defining music for an entire generation of Americans.”

As a portrait of a music culture, this is vivid, involving, and (assuming one has the stamina) well worth the time devoted to it. No knowledgeable jazz fan would deny the music of Basie, Ellington, or Goodman a place of honor in the triumphant narrative of jazz. So what’s the problem? Simply that after a dozen or so hours of leisurely documentary coverage of jazz up through 1940, that same knowledgeable fan would be eager, not to say impatient, for the story to move on to new heights, to the *further* triumphs of jazz as embodied by Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, Sonny Rollins, Art Blakey, and other giants of the 1950s and beyond. Only gradually does it become clear that this story has a different plot. Swing, it turns out, is the peak. All else is decline.

The issue is not necessarily aesthetic: in the relatively brief time allotted, the music of Davis, Coltrane, Monk, et al., is treated with all due respect. Instead, the criterion by which post-swing jazz is judged and found wanting is popular appeal—a quality evident enough in the faces of those ecstatic dancers, but also quantitatively measurable by sales figures. At the beginning of the sixth episode, we are informed that by the late 1930s, “big band swing . . . accounted for almost 70% of the profits in the music industry.” The obvious implication is that with swing, artistic achievement converged completely with commercial success. When the 70% figure is invoked later in the film, it is only to throw into sharp contrast the depressingly paltry sales figures of our own time (by most accounts, jazz currently accounts for about 2–3% of the total market in recordings). Clearly, the relationship between jazz and its audience has suffered a catastrophic collapse.

I have no idea where Burns or Ward got the 70% figure (the film of course doesn’t say, but neither does the accompanying book). The issue in any case is not the accuracy of statistics, but the vexed question of categories and definitions. Not even *Jazz* pretends that everything that passed under the label “swing,” and that presumably was included in that 70%,

should count. "When we talk about 'swing,'" James Lincoln Collier observes on-camera, "it's pretty dicey whether we're going to call this jazz or not. Because a great deal of that music was pretty commercial stuff." At various times in the film's discussion of swing, "commercial" music is excoriated (particularly by Artie Shaw, notorious for his contentious relationship with the workings of the music industry). Even Glenn Miller—responsible for more than his share of the 70%—is dismissed with faint praise.

Nor is Burns above using concerns over creeping commercialism as a merely dramatic device to keep the narrative from flagging. At the end of episode 5, over music that suddenly turns somber and moody (Benny Goodman's "Clouds"), the narrator informs us that for all "its overwhelming popularity, swing music had not captured the heart of every musician, or every jazz fan. Some found the big bands too stiff or too regimented." The same aura of gloom is picked up again at the beginning of the next episode:

By the late 1930s, swing was big business. But commerce had too often led to compromise. The individual expression that had been at the heart of jazz was too often kept under wraps. Musicians grew impatient playing the same thing the same way every night. Chafed at not being able to tell their own stories.

All of this, however, is merely a way of setting up the second act of the drama: a *new* swing sound that, like Mr. Smith going to Washington, arrives from the hinterland just in time to keep the democratic promise of swing from going stale:

But in the middle of the country, in the black dancehalls and roadhouses and juke joints of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri, a new kind of music was being born. Pulsing, stomping, and suffused with the blues and played by men and women who had honed their skills in cutting contests that sometimes went on all night. The man who had come to epitomize this new sound and would bring it to the rest of the country, the man who had helped return swing to its roots, was Count Basie.

In short, as with most jazz histories, an implicit line is drawn in *Jazz* between the merely "commercial stuff" and the "real" swing bands—the latter comprising the usual short list of Ellington, Basie, Goodman, Shaw, Chick Webb, Fletcher Henderson, Jimmie Lunceford, Tommy Dorsey, and Gene Krupa. But when it suits the film's purposes, that line is often

blurred. The exhilarating footage of the 1938 festival at Randall's Island in New York City, a remarkable outdoor event that gathered 24,000 swing fans on a warm spring day, leaves the impression that everyone was there solely to enjoy the "hot" instrumentals of Count Basie, rather than the more varied fare of any of the two dozen other bands on the bill, some of which, like Kay Kyser's and "Swing and Sway with Sammy Kaye," are seldom categorized by anyone as jazz. Rather than probing the meaning of swing in all its robust and tacky variety (as Krin Gabbard has done in an intriguing discussion of Kyser [Gabbard 1996:19–33]), or acknowledging that the narrative of jazz as conventionally understood is based on a narrow definition of "swing," *Jazz* disingenuously tries to have it both ways.

Furthermore, any discussion of the popular appeal of jazz or swing must take into account dramatic changes in the nature of consumer product marketing over the past century. Swing exemplifies the phase in the modern economy that Richard Tedlow (1996) calls "unification": the creation of a national mass market, featuring single products (like Coca-Cola) designed to appeal to as many people as possible. The same trend held true for popular culture. Hollywood films and radio networks also sought out the broadest possible audience—the latter literally "broadcasting" its shows indiscriminately to everyone who could afford a radio receiver. Thus, in the swing band, elements now regarded as "jazz" were presented to the public in a package in which instrumental improvisation was inseparable from popular song, dance, entertainment, comedy, and fashion. Such marketing strategies make the 70% figure seem credible.

By contrast, jazz as we know it today is a product of the subsequent phase in the maturation of mass market capitalism, which Tedlow calls "segmentation." The new strategy has also been called "narrowcasting"—a dividing of the mass market into a near infinitude of small, distinct consumer groups, each of whom can be assured that their tastes are unique. As I have written elsewhere (DeVeaux 1997:299–306), this trend was evident in the music business as early as the 1940s, with profitable niche markets for recordings emerging in country, rhythm and blues, and jazz, and has only intensified since. The current market share for jazz may be uncomfortably small, but a figure considerably lower than 70% is not out of line for a music whose appeal—its distinctive market presence—has always been that it's "not for everyone." In an interview that Burns chose *not* to use in the film, James T. Maher explains:

One of the very peculiar things about falling in love with jazz is that you accidentally joined a cult, whether you liked it or not. And sooner or later you became acquainted with other zealots, who I call jazzniks, for want of a better word. And of course they are instantly

telling you that all the people that you like and admire, they all stink. They don't play jazz, see. So, you have this cult problem to deal with. And it went on and on and on and still goes on through the history of jazz that "I know what jazz is, you don't know what jazz is."¹

By contrast, Burns and Ward seem to regard mass popularity as the natural condition of jazz. In subsequent episodes, the handful of commercial successes among jazz recordings (Dave Brubeck's *Time Out*, Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things," Stan Getz's "Desafinado") are held up as hopeful reminders that such popularity could come again. But in general, the failure of modern jazz to regain a central place in American popular culture casts a deep shadow over the music's artistic successes. In the following passages, all drawn from the film's narration, the loss of audience becomes something of an incantation:

- The singular genius whose startling innovations came to epitomize the new music was Charlie Parker. But those innovations came at a great cost. The jazz audience shrank as young people, both black and white, found other forms of music to dance to. (episode 8)
- Dizzy Gillespie struggled always to make bebop accessible to everyone. But for all his showmanship, his brilliant playing, and the drive and precision . . . he failed to find a wider audience. (episode 8)
- In the years following Charlie Parker's death. . . Jazz of every kind survived but it struggled to find an audience. (episode 9)
- Now white teenagers had a new dance music of their own: rock 'n' roll. And the audience for jazz, once the most popular music in America, shrank still further. (episode 9)
- Art Blakey made it his life's work to bring back to jazz the audience it had lost to rhythm and blues. (episode 9)
- Nothing that the Art Ensemble of Chicago did seemed able to win back a black audience. (episode 10)

This begs an important question: if swing held the key to mass appeal, why did musicians from Charlie Parker on abandon it? No coherent answer is ever given. We hear the cliché that bebop was a reaction to the commercialism of swing, its creators "dissatisfied" and "defiant," eager to rebel "against all those blue suits we had to wear in the big swing bands." The influx of heroin in the 1940s is continually invoked, although whether as a symptom of malaise or its cause is not clear. (Nor is much

said about alcoholism in earlier jazz.) Mostly, we get a distinct shift in tone. If swing was joyful and exciting, a matter of “pure” physical “pleasure,” modern jazz is about “risk” and “danger.” Stanley Crouch describes Charlie Parker’s sound as “hard, brittle, devoid of pity,” the sonic equivalent of being pricked in the leg by a pin. Gary Giddins speaks of Sonny Rollins’s music as “tear[ing] the hair off your head,” or Coltrane’s as “pinning your ears back.” Even Billie Holiday, praised earlier for her “insouciance,” is eulogized four episodes later for the “pain” and “heartbreaking” quality of her singing.

In short, a new aesthetic paradigm has taken hold: instead of the artist playing the role of genial entertainer (as exemplified by Armstrong, described on-camera as a “special messenger” sent “to this Earth . . . to make people happy”), we are now face to face with modernism in all its prickly complexity. In episode 8, as a way of justifying the notorious failure of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie to draw audiences to bebop during an ill-fated trip to California in 1945, Wynton Marsalis patiently explains that jazz is yet another art requiring diligent, informed effort from its audience: “When an art form is created, the question is how do you come to it? Not how does it come to you. Like Beethoven’s music is not going to come to you. Or the art of Picasso is not going to come to you. Shakespeare—you have to go to it. And when you go to it you get the benefit of it.” Coming so late in the film, after hours and hours in which jazz has been celebrated as uncomplicated and immediately accessible, this art-as-medicine line of reasoning is neither logical nor convincing.

At the same time, the film strongly implies that jazz has lost its way. Once a coherent art form, it has splintered into “a Tower of Babel bitterly divided into schools” (that biblical image again) as artists, interested only in pleasing themselves, have pursued their separate, irreconcilable agendas. As “the definition of what was jazz and what was not began to blur,” jazz entered a state of crisis from which (to judge by sales figures) it has yet to fully emerge. As I have already indicated, this overlooks the noisy confusion over “what was jazz and what was not” that has marked the entire history of jazz—or at least, ever since “jazz” was thought worth fighting over. In some ways, Burns has things exactly backwards: the coherence that he imagines for jazz in the first half of the century has been imposed upon it from the present, and the imagined moment of crisis is in fact the point at which jazz “becomes itself”—that is, when it acquires enough cultural weight to establish itself as an art. If jazz today seems a kaleidoscope of styles, that is not because “jazz” has no meaning, but that each different *kind* of jazz, whether fusion, avant-garde, or Marsalis’s determined historicism, claims for itself the legitimizing heritage of the jazz tradition.

To the extent that the film suggests that jazz shivered into pieces when it became modern, it indulges in reactionary myth-making. Interestingly,

that's not how Burns himself sees it. In an interview, he offers an extended analogy with the history of painting in which he claims the mantle of modernism for the kind of jazz he prefers. Bebop, no matter how "fantastic," is simply a bad bargain that has earned its exile to the margins.

For hundreds of years painting was representational. Round the turn of the century, at the height of the impressionist era it got into a sort of modern thing . . . there's fauvism, there's pointillism, all this sort of stuff. Hugely energetic. Picasso is leading the way, right? And the equivalent of Picasso is Louis Armstrong. The ultimate—and Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein and the Wright Brothers. You're dealing with the essence of modernism and jazz is born out of that tradition.

It's still representational painting, as impressionistic as it becomes . . . and that's what painting is until 1945. Now suddenly in 1945 this 'new thing,' throwing out all the rules, comes in, calling itself Abstract Expressionism. The audience for art just hits bottom. People don't get it, Harry Truman complains that it looks like scrambled eggs, blah blah blah blah blah.

What happened in 1945 in jazz music? Bebop came in and the hugely popular—let's put it in quotes—"representational" music of swing—art in itself—is overthrown by this new revolution. And most people could not get with it. So they gravitated to the people who wanted to dance and move their bodies around . . . and make love after they listen to music, went to rhythm and blues and all that sort of stuff.

But the art was still great and we made a huge case for how fantastic bebop was, but the audience dwindled. (Burns 2000a; ellipses in original)

The only way out of this impasse, Burns suggests, is a turning back:

Then all of a sudden in painting you've got a kind of neo-realism coming back—you've got people not imposing the same old same old but they're saying, "I'm going to go back to the figure." You've got the hottest movement among the British, the Lucien Fords, that echo to another era but are completely their own.

And you know, you could easily say that this is very much like a Wynton Marsalis with the neo-traditionalists. . . .

* * *

As noted earlier, *Jazz* banks heavily on the narrative power of biography. In an interview, Ward admitted: "I think history is biography. . . . That may be a failing on my part, but I can't get interested in history

unless I read about people doing things. So we deliberately looked for those whose lives stretched the longest and could tell the story of jazz best" (Reich 2000). As a result, the narrative arc of the film inevitably aims toward death. In its last episodes, *Jazz* gives us a heart-wrenching portrait of artists in decay. As the founding figures of jazz grow old and die, the portrait of an art form in crisis is made inseparable from mortality. Jazz itself is dying.

The most striking moment in the final episode is what I think of as the funeral scene, which immediately follows the death of Ellington in 1974. To the melancholy music of Ellington's "In a Sentimental Mood," the camera slowly pans over a jazz club, candles flickering on the tables, photographs of now-dead artists on the walls. There are no people in the club: the tables are empty, and the instruments stand mute on the bandstand. A voice-over narration explains why:

In the 1960s, the city of New Orleans tore down the house in which Louis Armstrong was born to make way for a police station. By then, the Lincoln Gardens on the South Side of Chicago, where Armstrong had played with King Oliver, had long since closed its doors. Law and order had come to Kansas City, and most of the wide-open clubs in which Lester Young and Count Basie and Charlie Parker once played . . . vanished. The Cotton Club in Harlem, where Duke Ellington first broadcast his jungle music was gone. So was the Savoy Ballroom, where Chick Webb once took on all comers and Ella Fitzgerald first became a star. Birdland, the club named for Charlie Parker, abandoned jazz for rhythm and blues. In 1968, the last club on 52nd Street finally closed its doors. Even the Five Spot, where Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane first performed their demanding music, eventually went out of business. During the late 1930s, jazz and swing had provided 70% of the profits in the music industry. By the mid 1970s, it was less than 3%. In 1975, Miles Davis himself said that jazz was dead, the music of the museum.

Of course, all of this is a set-up for the drama of resurrection—the so-called "jazz renaissance," which according to the film began when Dexter Gordon returned from self-imposed European exile in 1976, and hit full stride with Wynton Marsalis's dramatic appearance in the early 1980s. Since the idea of a jazz renaissance is so indelibly associated with Marsalis, it only seems appropriate to let another musician debunk it. Brad Mehldau is a brilliant pianist in his early thirties, a decade younger than Marsalis. Understandably, he is ill at ease with a narrative that erases so much of his formative experience as a musician. In one of the typically

erudite essays that accompany his CDs (published, one must note, before *Jazz* was broadcast), he exposes its hollow core:

I have a built-in wariness towards the term “renaissance” when applied to jazz music being played and recorded in recent years. A resurgence of interest took place, perhaps. But should we really paste a normative historical term to a music that evades the burden of history? . . . People with this kind of backward longing are blind to their own irony. They feel that they missed an event that’s no longer possible and, with their heads in these gray clouds, miss the present event. The lover of classics will always miss his art object in frustration because art can’t achieve high or classical sainthood until at least a couple generations of posterity-testing. A dubious claim to jazz’s legitimacy is its own watery-eyed parody of this species: the drunk at the bar who talks through the set, whining about how jazz will never be like it was in the days when Coltrane played here, oblivious to the music taking place in front of him. . . .

If we’re in a Renaissance, when exactly were the Dark Ages? The unspoken implication, of course, is the 70’s, a time when jazz succumbed to “lower” influences like rock ‘n’ roll and infected itself with electric instruments. What jazz in fact was doing was what it had always done: taking leads from pop music of its day, and reanimating the stylistic garment into something transfigured by the force of its composition and improvisation. . . .

An endgame attitude toward jazz gives us a premature, peanut-sized parody of the entire Western tradition in art. There’s the familiar defeatist implication that the music degenerates over time, with a kind of Faustian inevitability, until it can be redeemed, which presumably is taking place now. Jazz never lost itself, so a redemption isn’t necessary. The prelapsarian myth of art as a fallen thing from some earlier grace-state is a vestige of high art criticism that jazz need not willfully inherit. The Fall myth is usually less about art than it is a stapled-on projection, a misplaced anxiety about the mortality of the culture in which that art is created, which is in itself another evasion, fear of one’s own mortality. (Mehldau 1999)

Mehldau’s indignation seems on target. I am not as young as Mehldau, but I still object strongly to the claim that jazz died during my lifetime. In fact, the 1970s was when I first became aware there was such a thing as jazz and began imagining my place as listener, performer, and historian in the jazz community. The music I heard seemed simultaneously contemporary and historical, taking its meaning from a rich and storied past. I didn’t

separate my discoveries of Coltrane, Mingus, and Ellington from my enjoyment of new music in clubs and on records, or from the challenge of learning to create my own music with fellow novices of staggeringly varied tastes, talents, and temperaments. As much as I respected jazz as a culture with its own traditions, I was also immersing myself in contemporary popular music (especially funk) and the traditional music of West Africa and didn't distinguish among them much: there was too much pleasure to be had in hearing connections and cross-influences to bother with policing boundaries. Whatever jazz was, it didn't seem dead or dying. Like all living art forms, it was up for grabs.

The near-complete erasure of the 1970s in *Jazz* prompted me to try to recall all the musicians I heard in person during that decade—mostly in the latter half of the 1970s, on a graduate student's budget. A pleasant exercise in nostalgia, perhaps, but also a useful point of reference. Here is my list:

John Abercrombie
 Dave Brubeck*
 Jaki Byard
 Betty Carter
 Richie Cole
 Chick Corea (and Return to Forever)
 Charlie Haden*
 Herbie Hancock*
 Sir Roland Hanna
 Earl Hines*
 Keith Jarrett
 Eddie Jefferson
 Eric Kloss
 Art Lande
 Chuck Mangione
 Charles Mingus*
 Joni Mitchell's *Mingus* band (with Michael Brecker and Jaco Pastorius)
 Oregon
 Art Pepper
 Sonny Rollins*
 Sun Ra
 Weather Report
 McCoy Tyner*
 Randy Weston
 Joe Williams
 Phil Woods

Needless to say, only a few of these musicians and groups are mentioned in *Jazz* (those marked with an asterisk). Some of the omissions are stunning (Jarrett, Corea, Weather Report), but Burns is within his rights to argue that a good film cannot also be an encyclopedia or a telephone book. What *is* inexplicably absent from his film is a sense of the diversity and vitality of music in the 1970s, and by extension, of a continuous tradition of creativity that continues to inform the jazz of today. Perhaps not all of the music from that decade has aged well (in particular, I'm willing to publicly disown my youthful infatuation with the music of Chuck Mangione). But the above list is still evidence of a musical culture that is both remarkably diverse and consistently excellent.

Furthermore, all of it was *live*. Burns's emphasis is on jazz as a heritage that must be revisited—in short, music as museum. “We've simply told the story of jazz as best we can, and hope that it might stimulate people to read lots of books, see lots of films and buy lots of CDs. That should make everybody in jazz happy” (Wilonsky 2000). But what about “go out to a club”? There may be fewer venues for jazz today than in years past, and those venues may face increasing financial pressures; but the music is still performed, and that is where the focus should lie, not on books and films. For that matter, how will the heavy promotion of reissues help artists trying to release and promote new recordings? Ron Goldstein, President of Verve Records, could muster only cautious enthusiasm at the prospect. “If you get somebody, say a college student, who maybe never heard Ella Fitzgerald but is really taken with her because of this show, they may be compelled to buy a Diana Krall album,” he says. “They may like hearing Armstrong playing trumpet and wonder if there is someone more contemporary that they could get into. We don't know how strongly this will connect with the consumer” (Jones 2000b).

Unfortunately, an impressionable youngster searching for another Louis Armstrong will be disappointed. There will be no more Louis Armstrongs, and not just because his genius was unrepeatable, but because the day of the jazz musician as charismatic pop entertainer has passed. For at least a generation, the “embodiment of jazz music” has been someone more like John Coltrane, or Thelonious Monk, or Miles Davis: introverted, fiercely individualistic, and perhaps less immediately loveable. But for many of us who came of age in the past forty years, that is precisely the jazz that we have come to love. Just because we have also come to love the sunnier music of Armstrong and Ellington does not alter this basic fact.

Obviously, there is no reason why *my* experience should be the subject of Burns's narrative. But there's a basic misunderstanding in his cop-out ending and in his justification for pulling up so short of the present. Burns admits that the final episode is “impressionistic” (Pult 1999), but

claims that he had no other choice: "I'm relinquishing control of the narrative to journalists, and saying that the last forty years deserves journalistic attention much more than historical attention" (Blumenfeld 2000:39). Perhaps my response to this is colored by my experience as a college teacher constantly faced with people who can barely recall the Reagan administration, but the time span yielded up to journalism simply seems too large. More important, any historian—especially of a "living subject"—has the responsibility of acknowledging the dialogic relationship between the present and the past. Burns owed us an honest portrait of a musical scene that is informed, but not cowed, by its traditions. To paraphrase Ralph Ellison: the gloom at the end of *Jazz* "is enough to give jazz the blues."

As for myself, I prefer the liberating sense of being in the present that I get from the following passage from John Chernoff's *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*. Chernoff, in Northern Ghana to study traditional African drumming, asked his teacher about the origins of the genre known as *Takai*. The response is a bracing lesson in the limits of historical thinking:

You want to know who introduced the beating, and I can tell you that no one introduced *Takai*. Any time you hear a dondon beater beating, and someone is dancing, then you must know that the dondon beater introduced the playing. He is the one who introduced the beating of the drum. . . . (Chernoff 1979:61)

So as the *Takai* dancers who are dancing now are becoming old, they will train another set after them, and another set. . . . No one knows the original beat of *Takai*, and by that time the beat we take as *Takai* will die. It may be a new one altogether. By that time, I and the others will not be there. And those people who will be there at that time, they will think that they are dancing the real thing because they will not know the original beat as before. Before me Alhaji was leading the *Takai* group. . . . But Alhaji has now given it over to me. At present if we are drumming and he comes there, he says that we have changed the beat so much that we have spoiled it. And whatever happens, in the future it will also change. Even in our time it is not the original beat. That is what will keep on happening.

So how do you feel about the fact that they will be changing the Takai beat?

To me, I feel it is better. The change is better because I have come to the stage that I feel that what we are drumming is good. If an old man says that at the time they were drumming, the beat was good, I don't know what the beat was at that time, so I feel that what we are doing at present is good. And in the future they will feel that

what they are doing is better than what we have been doing now.
That is what will keep on happening.

And what will you tell them?

I won't tell them anything because by that time I will not be there.

But if you are there, what will you say?

I'll tell them that they are spoiling it. (64–65)

Note

1. Transcripts of all of the interviews for the making of *Jazz* can be found on the PBS web site, <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/>.

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