

Fan Fare: An Investigation of Recent Jazz Biographies

By Evan Spring

John Kruth. *Bright Moments: The Life and Legacy of Rahsaan Roland Kirk*. New York: Welcome Rain Publishers, 2000. x, 404 pp.

Gene Santoro. *Myself When I am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. x, 452 pp.

Eric Nisenson. *Open Sky: Sonny Rollins and His World of Improvisation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. xvi, 216 pp.

Nick Catalano. *Clifford Brown: The Life and Art of the Legendary Jazz Trumpeter*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. xv, 208 pp.

Linda Dahl. *Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999. viii, 463 pp.

Safford Chamberlain. *An Unsung Cat: The Life and Music of Warne Marsh*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2000. xv, 395 pp.

Expert music scholars have long derided most jazz books as glorified fandom, or at best inflated magazine articles. Especially suspect is jazz biography, the sycophantish fan's most likely entrée into book publishing. Unfortunately, these biographies under consideration, with one or perhaps two exceptions, will do little to dispel highbrow suspicions.

In jazz studies, "fandom" at its worst implies hackneyed prose, pretentious hipsterism, petty infighting among cliques and camps, prurient slumming and sensationalism, unearned license to call musicians by their first names, amateurishness in the historian's craft, and, most of all, musical illiteracy. Countering such problems, however, need not require all the trappings of "legitimate" scholarship. In other words, jazz biography can raise its standards of rigorousness, historical methodology, and musical literacy without being tempted by all the traditional tokens of respectability.

Our fandom prototype will be John Kruth's biography of Rahsaan Roland Kirk (1936–1977), the blind, charismatic multi-reed instrumentalist and bandleader. Kruth's casual, vernacular style should not disqualify his book from serious consideration. When he writes that a Kirk solo "burned down the house," he should be free to use idioms favored by the music's creators. If Kirk's music is accurately described as "kick-ass," "ballsy," or "freaked-out"—even a "funky big butt bump"—then accuracy can trump decorum. Most of Kruth's writing, however, is simply pointless,

goofy, and irritating: "The man was a nonstop gushing fountain of fresh improvisational ideas. A Whitman's Sampler of sound. Kirk had more 'flava' than a Good Humor truck. Mistuh Chock Full of Notes" (78). In this passage, Kruth intones Kirk's name:

"Rahsaan" sounds mythical, like a blind apocalyptic lion god whose volcanic roar causes the populace to panic. It is "Rahsaan" that the natives placate nightly, leaving offerings of nervous virgins and snow-white fleeced goats chained, shivering outside the city gates. (256)

This breed of ostentatious writing is often associated with jazz magazine journalism. Serious biographers, however, should not be unduly afraid of taint by association with the genre. Kruth, for instance, adopts the celebrity profile convention of chronicling each interview: which cafe they meet in, what the interviewee is wearing, the twinkle in her eye as she tells a story. This procedure could actually be instructive for scholarly work, which too often isolates the quoted word from its contextual meanings. Kruth, however, is really only calling attention to himself, and disrespectfully caricaturing his interviewees. One has a "weary, wrinkled roadmap of a face" (76), and another is described as a "pretty goofy dude" (164).

Serious biographers also need not make a fetish of avoiding the first person or the confessional mode—better to have the author's perspective out in the open. Once again, however, Kruth abuses the privilege. The first time he hears Kirk's music, "the flute poured through my dashboard speaker like mercury, swimming cold and delicious, tickling my ears like a lover's sweet and sticky tongue after a mouthful of that delicious ice cream . . ." (311).

Kruth will dream up any referent for Kirk, as long as it makes him into an "XXL persona." Kirk is compared to a "mad bull," a "monstrous chipmunk," a "mad yak," "a grizzly clawing his way through the primeval forest" (257), Quasimodo, Thor, an Old Testament prophet, a Wild West sheriff, King Kong, a chef at a Japanese steak house, "Ali Baba's pimp," and "a sumo wrestler bounding into the ring like a mad panda." If Kirk's musical mission is "ascending an Everest of emotion," "scouring your soul like a cosmic Q-tip," or striving to "maintain the positive vibration of the planet," he is more "sonic shaman" than discriminating artist.

The mantle of "jazz historian" doesn't even interest Kruth, who devotes more space to Jimi Hendrix, Kirk's "psychedelic soul brother" (215), than to any of Kirk's other colleagues.

They both burned a mad path across a sad, square world at break-neck speed and one bright moment later, they were gone . . . this pair of "uppity niggers" detonated a sonic bomb that helped

demolish the tired old clichés of both jazz and rock. Neither one of them knew any limit to their expression. They were simply, as Rahsaan often said, “too heavy for most people.” (215–16)

There is nothing wrong with this comparison, of course, if it would only extend beyond hippie solipsism and sixties generational vanity.

Kruth's sloppy research methods suggest that book publishers do not hold jazz biographers to the standards of biographers in other fields. To begin with, casual license should not extend to spelling, copy editing, and fact-checking. Kruth could hardly be bothered to check the biographical dictionary and spells at least nine musicians' names wrong. Another methodological problem is Kruth's persistent failure to attribute or verify quotations. For example, he quotes Archie Shepp claiming that John Coltrane first played the soprano saxophone after borrowing one from Kirk. The story probably stretches the truth (see Porter 1998 for details), but deferring to Shepp shields Kruth from factual liability. Also, the reader often doesn't know whether a quote was transcribed from a tape, lifted from a magazine page, or recounted second- or third-hand by another person. Kruth, for his part, would probably have no patience for my hang-ups about research methodology. After an iffy story in which Mingus blindfolds himself in order to fistfight the blind Kirk on equal terms, Kruth offers this convenient research timesaver: “In the long run it's really irrelevant if the story is true or not” (142).

Completing our fandom prototype, Kruth seems to have little or no technical understanding of the music. Jazz researchers bicker constantly over whether non-musicians should qualify as critics and historians—a debate far too complex to dwell on here. Clearly, non-musicians have plenty of valid contributions to make. However, books like Kruth's suggest that for jazz biographers, at least, prevailing expectations of musical knowledge are too low. In a typical example, Kruth's complete definition of Ornette Coleman's “harmolodics” theory is: “a recipe of one-part harmony, one-part motion and one-part melody” (90).

Biographers with more of a musical background can take extended breaks from the life chronology to explore ongoing musical themes in essayistic form. For Kirk, here are just a few of the recurring musical issues which Kruth might have developed in depth: Kirk as “simultaneously a futurist and a traditionalist”; the contention that Kirk should have surrounded himself with equally capable musicians to remain challenged and focused; Kirk's strengths and limitations as a composer; Grover Washington, Jr.'s comment that Kirk's concerts were like a “communion or a religious service”; the question of taste, and whether Kirk's borrowings from funk, rock, and psychedelia have held up well; producer Joel

Dorn's imprint on Kirk's later LPs; Andy Statman's comment that "his personality got in the way of his artistic vision. He cast himself in an adversarial position. He tried to out-avant-garde the avant-garde . . . Coltrane had a clear vision, as did Albert Ayler. I'm not sure what his vision was"; and another Statman critique:

Musically Kirk was disciplined. He really worked his butt off. Rahsaan was an amazing improviser. He was a colorful showman but it was often detrimental to the music. You didn't see anything like it in Ellington's band. Two guys playing the saxophone sound better than one guy playing two or three horns at once. (124)

This is a critical issue, but Kruth can only respond with platitudes, such as "Rahsaan tirelessly jumped whatever hurdle life threw him on his endless quest to express himself" (124–25).

A similar catalogue of missed opportunities could be assembled for Gene Santoro's biography of Charles Mingus (1922–1979), the masterful bassist and gargantuan personality. Mingus is usually ranked among the greatest composers and bandleaders in jazz history. Santoro, however, is inspired less by jazz than by the Beat poets, whose adventures we are constantly apprised of. Unsuspecting readers will get the impression that Mingus, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Timothy Leary formed a close-knit salon. Terms like "The System" and "The Man" appear without irony.

Santoro's prose style is so affected that the reader is on constant alert for historical license. Among his writerly conceits are banal, folksy platitudes—"Creativity isn't necessarily straightforward in its dealings with the world" (ix); "Nobody, not even a genius, is 100 percent right" (7); or "Part of what culture does is create ideals, goals, and aspirations, the glue that binds society" (61)—and portentous, melodramatic one-sentence paragraphs: "He was a Romantic" (39); "Nobody thought quite like he did" (99); "He stood on the cusp of greatness" (119); "The die was cast" (213); "They fell quickly into torrid love" (222). The line "Mingus was feeling the *Zeitgeist* again" is repeated at least ten times throughout the book, with minor variations.

In Santoro's excitable narrative, everyone becomes a character; one person is introduced as "straight out of *Goodfellas*" (95). Ideas are constantly forced into other people's heads: for Charlie Parker, "Heroin was a self-destructive way of saying Fuck You" (72). Santoro also makes the common mistake of assuming jazz musicians approach "standards" with snickering condescension:

For bop's imitators, this was a way to make art from American pop the way Bartok made compositions from Hungarian gypsy melodies

—an ironic blues inversion. It was payback. You made The Man's hit tunes vehicles for your voice. It was what happened to the slavemasters' hymns. (88)

Other passages read like a film noir voiceover:

Most jazz clubs in New York dealt with the Mafia. They had to. Prohibition had made the mob booze overlords, and they'd never fully let go, police monitoring or no. Anyway, jazz had always been surrounded by gangsters and pimps and whores, and even its stars walked the edges of respectability. Who but other outcasts would deal with blacks? For a lucrative cash flow, the mob supplied them with drugs and booze and records, and numbers to play, and places to score and hear music. (95)

Santoro also naively trots out conspiracy theories about JFK's assassination, and says the killing of Malcolm X by Black Muslims was "never proved" (245).

Of Mingus's childhood, Santoro writes: "Then there were the boys at school, who called him names and left him out of recess games and stole his lunch almost every day. They inspired only dreams of revenge" (21). This is fable writing, not history. Santoro might not even object to the charge. If, as Santoro claims, Mingus's "whole life was a series of parables waiting for explication and music" (159), and Mingus "liked his history to be mythic" (133), then perhaps Mingus is best conjured and illuminated by a biographer who can appropriate his worldview and artistic methods. Unfortunately for Santoro, biography as mythic parable is very hard to pull off, especially with a subject still so viscerally *Amongus*.

Parables generally conform to an overall dramatic arc. So when Santoro says Mingus in the mid-sixties "was on top of the world" (241), without quoting Mingus to this effect, we suspect we've reached that point two-thirds of the way through the book, where our hero has reached a height from which he must fall. In the final chapters, Santoro continuously repeats the sentence "He [Mingus] was closing circles everywhere," when in fact the author is closing circles everywhere.

Santoro's portrayal of Mingus is often admirably frank: "Multiracial by birth, black in America, Mingus fought for recognition and belittled racial copouts. But he also knew how to mau-mau the flak-catchers: he could inject race into any situation to try to fix it so he came out the aggrieved party" (7). Unfortunately, Santoro's fanciful projections take over. Initially, he promises not to write a Mingus "psychobiography," but soon comes around, with observations such as: "Women were his muses. They distracted him from the magnetic gaze of his own death" (45). Mingus is overly cast in the language of primal essence; terms like "soul" and "core

of his being" pop up constantly. Mingus becomes a force of nature—"He was constantly giving off vibes, like the San Andreas fault" (268)—or a sonic shaman: "Everything in his life was an instant cosmic metaphor" (7). By dwelling on Mingus's "Dionysiac" side, Santoro neglects the Apollonian virtues of his music—form, balance, poise, discipline, and classic beauty—especially in his orchestral masterpiece, *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*. Santoro also pushes some rather severe revisionism in his subject's favor, implying Mingus was the uncredited originator of Cannonball Adderley's "soul jazz," Miles Davis's "modal" concept for *Kind of Blue*, and Ornette Coleman's "free jazz."

As for research methodology, Santoro is only somewhat more conscientious than Kruth. Once again quotations are not properly attributed or verified. Historical sources are left untapped—Mingus surely had an FBI file, but Santoro apparently didn't think to request it under the Freedom of Information Act (Kruth also neglected this for Kirk). The book is riddled with factual errors, which any proofreader versed in jazz history could have spotted. A musically literate proofreader could have also spared Santoro considerable embarrassment. Here he almost gets his definitions right:

There was pedal point—a bass note extended over measures and chord changes. There was polytonality—more than one key signature to a piece. There was striking counterpoint that wound two songs against each other, often ironically. And there was extended form, where measures were added or subtracted (69).

But when Mingus comments, "[Thelonious] Monk and I play similar music. Perhaps it's because we both dug Duke at the same time, and the old-time piano players, and we both like the use of 'pedal points' in compositions" (173), Santoro could have traced these musical genealogies for several pages. Instead he moves on, in his breathless fashion. Kruth and Santoro are both identified as musicians on the book jacket, but you have to imagine they were the ones holding the tambourine.

Eric Nisenson's biography of Sonny Rollins (b. 1930), perhaps the pre-eminent tenor saxophonist of the late 1950s, reads like an extended magazine article. As mentioned above, journalistic prose can be perfectly appropriate for jazz biography. Even if Nisenson had given Rollins a "blindfold test," or asked him to name his "desert island discs," the results might have been very interesting. This book, however, is simply not rigorous in any respect. Even the spelling hits a new low: Nisenson mangles poor trumpeter Lowell Lewis into Lewis Lowell, Louis Lowell, and Lowell Louis, all within two pages (30–31).

Today's jazz biographers may feel constrained by the sins of past writers: the voyeurism, the odd projections onto racial otherness, the sensationalizing of addiction and criminality. Nowadays, these exploitative tendencies are often inverted, resulting in reflexive boosterism or unctuous genuflection, which leaves the "real person" equally obscured. Nisenson in particular is far too toadyish. Everything Rollins says and does is cast in a relentlessly positive light. If Rollins currently refuses to listen to anyone else's music, that can only be proof of his artistic integrity. The reader is constantly sifting through Nisenson's idealizations: "Sonny thinks of himself as being just an 'average Joe'" (xvi), "Sonny has never had the slightest interest in being trendy" (162), or "Sonny has always been too independent a thinker (and not just in terms of his music) to care much about being fashionable" (72). Rollins becomes a force of nature, or a benevolent God: "But it is his eyes that draw us in; his eyes are sad and wise, ancient and compassionate" (2). Aesthetic value is measured in terms like "emotional immediacy," "ecstatic joy," and putting one's "soul on the line"—all of which would disqualify an artist like Warne Marsh from serious contention. Nisenson also tries his hand at self-serving revisionism, claiming Rollins was the real inspiration for "free jazz." The early 1950s are simplistically characterized as "the cool era," so that Rollins can rescue us from it.

A certain sense of desperation and futility underlies all descriptive music writing, but few writers seem as helpless as Nisenson, who hopes to get by on vague, impressionistic commentary and raw enthusiasm. "We almost feel we can touch the notes," "the atmosphere becomes molten," or "the lights dance over his golden saxophone." The principle of "finding your own voice" is blandly rephrased over and over. In a typical instance of confusion, Nisenson writes that the Rollins composition "'Oleo' is based on the chord changes of 'I've Got Rhythm'; what makes it a fascinating vehicle for improvisation is the arrangement" (62). Never mind that the correct title is "I Got Rhythm"—there is no "arrangement" for the improvisations, other than the rhythm section keeping the form.

Drawing on Gunther Schuller's famous analysis of Rollins's "Blue Seven" solo on the 1956 LP *Saxophone Colossus* (Schuller 1958), Nisenson tries to develop the concept of "thematic improvisation," defined as "instead of simply ignoring the melody and creating an improvisation based solely on the harmonic structure, the musician improvises with the melody itself as well as with the harmony" (90). This general idea could certainly be tailored to some of Rollins's improvisational strategies. However, Nisenson slaps the term on any kind of sequential motivic development in a solo, with no distinction as to whether the original motives are embedded in the theme or improvised on the spot. This assessment of Rollins's extended composition "The Freedom Suite" is simply baffling: "Sonny had

to be consciously aware of the principles of thematic development in order to have written the *Suite*. He didn't compose this long, complex piece solely through intuition" (127–28).

Nisenson implicitly admits defeat by quoting Sufi writer Hazrat Inayat Khan: "We may certainly see God in all arts and all sciences, but in music alone we see God free from all forms and thoughts . . . Sound alone is free from form" (53–54). If so, I guess Nisenson is off the hook.

Nick Catalano brings promising credentials to his biography of Clifford Brown (1930–1956), one of the most dazzling and influential soloists of the 1950s. Catalano is a University Performing Arts Director and Professor of Music and Literature at Pace University. Unfortunately, this only demonstrates that academic titles and musician status are no guarantees against amateurish writing and scholarship. Here is a typically slapdash attempt at sociology: "Although the atmosphere at home was characterized by the 'yes sir/no sir' form of address Joe [Clifford's father] required, there was no sense of the repression that occurred in many other cultures of the period. Religion, for example, did not induce fear" (20).

Catalano's overarching thesis is encapsulated in this passage from the introduction:

What Brown and [Max] Roach achieved in their group of the early 1950s was unique. At a time when the art music of the great boppers was being diluted at "Jazz at the Philharmonic" blowing sessions designed to excite the appetites of screaming audiences, Clifford and Max turned elsewhere. Drawing upon training that had strong classical roots, Brown had found an unusual jazz colleague—a drummer who listened to Stravinsky. The two musicians spent long hours discussing new concepts of jazz performance that would incorporate many traditions inherent in classical forms. It soon became clear that only in the context of intellectually crafted compositions containing tapestries of exquisite improvisational design could the music achieve the artistic heights Brown and Roach desired. Solos, the *raison d'être* for any improvisational virtuoso, had to be economical, serving the needs of the compositional framework rather than the demands of egocentric players or hero-worshipping fans. (xiii)

A certain dichotomy emerges here, and solidifies throughout the book. On the bad side are egotism, appetite, unreflectiveness, screaming, dilution of art, and hero-worship; on the good side, classical traditions and forms, serious discussion about artistic intent, intellectually crafted compositions, improvisational design, and economical solos. These good qualities seem to be inspired by classical music, even though all can easily be found within the jazz tradition prior to Brown's arrival on the scene. As

the book progresses, other positive buzzwords appear: brainy, academic, sophistication, subtlety, understatement, discipline, logic, order, cohesiveness, balance, symmetry, etc. Of course Catalano should be allowed to privilege and defend these virtues, and Brown is a good foil for doing so. However, Catalano's critical preferences are often wrapped in the mantle of historical necessity, or crudely projected onto Brown himself. Assessing a 1954 jam session recording, Catalano writes:

Despite the artistry of Brown and Roach in this session, the sheer length of the pieces removes any feeling of drama or subtlety. The long jam session is directly opposed to the kind of music that Brown and Roach wanted to play, so they were very uncomfortable on the date. The session goes right for the gut without pausing at the brain. (128)

No evidence is cited indicating that Brown or Roach felt long jam sessions were "directly opposed" to their artistic goals. Two pages later, Brown's wife reports that Clifford was thrilled and humbled to be asked to participate in a jam session with Clark Terry and Mr. "right for the gut" himself, Maynard Ferguson.

Once again, an editor somewhere is not upholding basic standards of historical authentication. Catalano quotes some critical plaudits for Brown, noting "Such extravagant praise was rare from critics such as [Ira] Gitler and Leonard Feather" (69). Flip to the endnote, and you discover the plaudits were taken from liner notes, where "extravagant praise" is not exactly rare. More practiced historians might also have avoided imposing contemporary perspectives on historical figures. When Catalano writes, "In 1948 Delaware State College was an institution caught in the time warp between old time segregation and the new civil rights struggles" (30), the time warp is in Catalano's period scheme, not in the minds of Delaware State College students.

Again, we see exaggerated claims for the subject's musical influence. Brown is portrayed as the real pioneer of "modal jazz," a style usually credited largely to trumpeter Miles Davis. Catalano, who continually picks on Miles, also asserts: "What was happening with Brown-Roach was infinitely more interesting to Sonny [Rollins] than his work with Miles Davis . . . During his time with Miles Davis, he had languished, feeling unchallenged by Miles" (166-67). "Infinitely more interesting" is quite a claim, but Catalano offers no evidence.

Catalano's musical proficiency is sometimes put to good use. He can truly appreciate, for example, how Brown adapts to a last-minute key change during a recording session. Catalano also knows musicians' shop talk, and the physical challenges of trumpet playing. An educator himself, he includes good detail on Brown's pedagogical training and practice

techniques. However, Catalano is not good at describing music, especially to the layman. Terms such as “the release,” “subtoned,” and “turnback sequence” are dropped without explanation or glossary. Musically untrained readers, making an honest effort to follow along, deserve more than “They proceed from eights to fours to twos and then ones” (127) or “he reconstructs the head rhythm” (129).

For each of Brown’s recordings, Catalano’s tune-by-tune commentary reads like mumblings into a dictation machine, in preparation for a future attempt to write liner notes. Phrases such as “premeditated spontaneity” or “countermelodic approach to improvisation” appear unceremoniously, without further elaboration. Often, Catalano will note simply that Brown’s solo had content—“The arrangement reflects some new thoughts, even though Brown has not quite fully developed them yet” (90)—and then flip to the next track, as if his job is done. His most absurd dodge is to casually pass work off to “scholars,” as if no one should expect him to be one. Brown’s cover of “Donna Lee,” Catalano writes, “has been the subject of much scholarly analysis—that he had created a new improvisational standard is the consensus opinion” (159). On to the next track. Or an unissued live recording “will certainly evoke much discussion” if it’s released. Leading this discussion is left to Brown’s next biographer.

The book includes one page of music notation, a transcription of short exchanges between Brown and tenor saxophonist Harold Land on blues changes. Surely, Catalano could analyze at least one complete solo transcription, since he repeatedly emphasizes how perfectly designed Brown’s solos are. Catalano also likes to point out where Brown repeats licks from previous solos, and notation could have been used to illustrate the evolution of Brown’s working vocabulary. Such omissions from an already short book suggest that publishers think the very sight of music notation scares off book buyers. Sad to say, the publishers are probably right.

Of the six authors represented here, Linda Dahl is best able to recreate the broader environment in which her subject lived and worked. This is especially welcome in the first biography of Mary Lou Williams (1910–1981), who is arguably the most accomplished female pianist and composer-arranger in jazz history. Dahl is a meticulous and sound researcher, with a flair for tangential detail (e.g., whether a club employing Williams admitted unescorted female patrons to the late show). Dahl also unearthed all kinds of fascinating documentary material, including wage and royalty figures, other contractual details, and correspondence with friends, lovers, agents, and the musicians’ union.

Dahl’s historical analysis is not without occasional missteps or overreaching. As with the four books above, too much can be inferred from incomplete evidence—Dahl cannot be certain that Williams “never tried

heroin" (185), or that she never told "anyone else what had happened to her" (75) after a gruesome encounter with a pervert. Here the narrative veers into uncharacteristic dramatic license: "Aboard the *Queen Elizabeth*, . . . [Williams] must have felt a great sense of relief as the liner pulled away from shore. How bracing the sea air must have been—breathed alone, in the blessed quiet that feeds an introvert's soul" (223). For all Dahl knows, Williams was schmoozing happily in the pool. Drawing a breath and gazing inward are the needs of Dahl's storyline, projected onto the subject, as Dahl enters into the tale of Williams's religious awakening. When Dahl writes "The pit band, with the awful name of 'The Chocolateers'" (157), she is too anxious to display current racial sensitivities, obscuring how such a name was construed in its own time.

Dahl handles the gender implications of Williams's career judiciously, but gets in her own way somewhat, when she stresses "the whole dilemma for women artists who must perform not as women but as men in order to be taken seriously" (77). The problem is that alternative norms for playing jazz "as women" have not been clearly established, and Williams herself never expressed interest in developing any. Dahl can only offer a brief detour into piano technique, noting that Williams learned to relax properly and generate a strong sound through "balance points" rather than "brute strength." But this is simply good technique for any pianist, male or female.

Oddly, Dahl never mentions a song called "The Lady Who Swings the Band," a tribute to Williams written by Sammy Cahn and Saul Chaplin and recorded by Andy Kirk's orchestra in 1936, with vocals by Harry Mills:

In Kansas City there's a pretty gal named Mary Lou
 And she plays the piano ["pianuh"] in a manner ["mannuh"] that is
 ultra-new
 Here of late she's playin' with the band
 Let me tell you of this baby at the baby grand
 When you hear a hot trombone, who's the power behind the moan?
 [piano fill]
 It's the lady who swings the band
 When you hear the saxes drive, who's the reason why they glide?
 [piano fill]
 It's the lady who swings the band
 When the rhythm section gives you action
 The lady at the keys is the main attraction
 Who makes dancers on the floor beat their feet and yell for more?
 [piano fill]
 It's the lady who swings the band [various solos and ensemble passages, plus the band sings in unison: "She's the lady who swings the band"]

Now we've introduced you to
 Kansas City Mary Lou [piano fill]
 She's the lady who swings the [brass fill]
 She's the lady who swings the [reeds fill]
 She's the lady who swings the band
 She's the lady who swings the band

Dahl might have used this lyric to illustrate how Williams was pressured to "out-male" the males. Yet the words also seem to convey sincere respect for her musical abilities, as well as certain advantages to being female in such a male-dominated art form.

Dahl consistently refers to her subject as "Mary," which raises the issue of first-name usage, a pervasive practice among jazz fans and writers. In my opinion, calling musicians by first name should be a matter of context and taste, rather than strict rule. The given name "Miles," for instance, by now has a respectable, self-contained iconic status, like "Michelangelo." Dahl should feel free to use "Mary," if only to help the reader distinguish her from her first husband John Williams. On the other hand, Catalano should probably not refer to "Quincy [Jones]," or Nisenson to "Jackie [McLean]," even if they are on a first-name basis.

Lack of musical expertise is the major flaw in Dahl's otherwise solid work. Having an orchestral arranger for a subject is especially tough for a non-musician. For Williams's intricate 1936 arrangement of "Walkin' and Swingin'," Dahl observes that the band "loved the second chorus, a witty, winding 8-bar road of melody" (94). Never mind that the chorus is actually 32 bars—"road of melody" is simply inadequate for what might be Williams's best arrangement for Andy Kirk's orchestra. Dahl compensates for her inexperience by remaining focused on the music, and relaying good information from other sources. Often she defers to better-trained scholars, quoting them at length before adding a graceful touch of her own. At other times, she quotes incompetent critics without knowing the difference.

Safford Chamberlain, meanwhile, has demonstrated that musical knowledge can elevate one jazz biography above the majority. His subject is Warne Marsh (1927–1987), the reclusive and underappreciated tenor saxophonist, whom *New Yorker* critic Whitney Balliett called "one of the most original and daring jazz improvisers alive" (1986:381).

Chamberlain played a few instruments as a teenager, then gave them all up to teach writing, English, and American literature. At age 45, he decided to study tenor saxophone seriously, and took some lessons with Marsh. Readers may find the following passage from Chamberlain's book excellent, or merely good. In any case, it's a better description of the

subject's *music* than anything written in the other five biographies under consideration. The passage is also accessible to the layman without condescending to the specialist.

Something of the same hermetic flavor can be found in Marsh's playing, especially in that most personal aspect of a jazz player's expression, his tone. Most players strive for a more or less conventionally attractive tone. They know that their adherence to generally accepted standards of tone will sustain them when inspiration fails, will please the audience even when the notes they play are ordinary. Warne Marsh refused to rely on a conventionally "pretty" tone as a substitute for ideas. As his frequent colleague Lee Konitz said, tone for Marsh was a function of the depth of his inspiration at any particular moment. He was committed to the process of improvisation, and tone was an aspect of that process. He did not start with what his instrument would let him do and work within that, as one imagines players with consistently pleasing tone like Zoot Sims or Ben Webster or Stan Getz did. Sound, like everything else, came from within, and in the moment. There is, of course, an intensely personal substratum through all the variations that is constant, and that one can acquire a taste for, a sound that is extremely distinctive but somewhat odd. As one listener said, it is as though the sound is not happening in the horn but in Marsh's head. Another characterized him as a kind of ventriloquist, with the sound seeming to come from another part of the room. He could sound, as on the 1983 *A Ballad Album*, as accessible and pretty as Getz, or he could sound harsh and aggressive, as on the records made on his first European tour in 1975–76. Or he could, as in his late duos with bassist Red Mitchell or with his quintet of 1956–57, strike a highly idiosyncratic balance between acerbity and warmth that many find thrilling. But when one enters the circle of Warne Marsh admirers, one must make room for a unique, at times almost perverse tonal conception quite different from that of other great tenor players. Frequently Marsh seems to have deliberately sacrificed tonal appeal in order to force the listener to focus on the energy of his ideas . . . he will sometimes find only an abstract skeleton of the tune, and little of himself except the fierce integrity that says, "If I find nothing, I will play nothing." (10–11)

Some of Chamberlain's technical passages will put off general readers. Other passages, however, are explained very well to readers with rudimentary music literacy—as in this comparison between Marsh and his colleague, the alto saxophonist Art Pepper:

Marsh's and Pepper's rhythmic differences, also quite noticeable, provide a fascinating contrast. Pepper's characteristically buoyant, dancing time-feel appears to be achieved by sometimes playing the eighth notes almost classically even, sometimes just a hair behind the beat, and by tonguing them separately, with fairly uniform accents. Marsh, on the other hand, "swings" his eighth notes more radically, in a long-short manner, at the same time establishing an accentual pattern that is usually heavier on beats one and three, but on which he plays variations that sometimes seem to "turn the time around." (113)

Many other musical issues receive the extended treatment they deserve: Marsh's position, or anomalous standing, within the jazz tenor saxophone lineage; what "playing across the bar lines" actually means for Marsh; why Marsh stuck with certain standard repertoire; how Marsh's intonation problems were related to faulty reeds; how Marsh's embouchure deviated from standard pedagogy; and the aesthetic philosophy of Marsh's teacher and guru, the blind pianist Lennie Tristano. Chamberlain is not afraid to stress how Tristano's theories could veer into dogma, or how Tristano could psychologically exploit and debilitate his students. At the same time, Chamberlain understands Tristano's musical achievements, and skillfully dismantles the stereotype of his music being overly cerebral and stiff.

Describing a particularly affectless Marsh solo, Chamberlain writes: "If one finds an added interest, it lies in the very lack of emotion, as if something this intellectually correct, this well executed, must contain somewhere the emotion that it withholds" (75). This observation did not require musical training—only Chamberlain's keen sensitivity to the listening experience.

Chamberlain is the only author here to include notated music examples or solo transcriptions (with the partial exception of Catalano, noted above). Chamberlain includes seven complete solo transcriptions, each followed by a written analysis. Four transcriptions and four analyses were contributed by other musicians, including two of Marsh's colleagues, saxophonists Ted Brown and Gary Foster. Perhaps more jazz biographies should become collaborative efforts, like the music itself.

The transcriptions and analyses have several minor faults. Chamberlain's own transcriptions occasionally omit notes, or indicate rests where none exist. Sometimes the transcriptions are overly restricted to notes, without enough ties, swoops, accents, breath marks, or symbols for characteristic gestures and timbral effects. Arrows could have been used to indicate notes played sharp, flat, ahead of, or behind the beat. In one of the transcribed solos—a 1980 recording of the ballad "Body and Soul"—Marsh plays so far

behind the beat that his notes actually fall as much as a quarter-note apart from where they "should" be. The transcription, however, places the notes as if they were all played "on time," thus presenting a kind of auditory mirage rather than the actual rhythmic placement of the notes. Chamberlain does include the following disclaimer: "there are times here when Marsh plays so far behind the beat that it is difficult to hear where the downbeats fall. No attempt has been made to notate this 'lag-along' characteristic on the page" (226). The analysis, however, fails to appreciate the fascinating ways in which Marsh seems to deliberately exploit this rhythmic "double vision."

The interactive elements of jazz improvisation are also underplayed, as if Marsh's solos are purely self-contained. Rhythm section accompaniment is barely mentioned in the analyses, and never transcribed. Despite these drawbacks, however, Chamberlain has clearly demonstrated that transcription and solo analysis are essential tools for understanding the art of improvisation from a practitioner's perspective.

In short, Chamberlain, for specialists and laypersons alike, has done a very good job of making us better listeners. Depressingly, only a specialty publisher (Scarecrow Press), with poor distribution and exorbitant hard-cover prices, has met this basic requirement of a musical biography.

At the very least, all these books are valuable repositories of personal testimony. Nisenson enjoyed the full participation of Sonny Rollins, whose perceptive, candid, and self-analytical remarks are quoted at length, even when he and Nisenson disagree. This alone will be treasured in the long term. Santoro has assembled an extensive and well-chosen collection of interview material. Mary Lou Williams was an eloquent and prolific memoirist, and Dahl knows when to let her subject tell her own story. Maybe Williams's memoirs will now be published on their own.

Merely collecting stories between two covers is a service, and what stories! Clifford Brown sneaks out of his Paris hotel room to record his own group, unbeknownst to his employer, Lionel Hampton (78–79). Sonny Rollins finds a late-night practice spot on New York's Williamsburg Bridge (145–46). Warne Marsh tells a stunned Composition Department at a Norwegian academy, "Schoenberg was probably the worst crock of them all, because he was the first composer that managed to write music to death" (253). Mary Lou Williams lobbies the Roman Vicariate to commission a jazz mass (304–6). Charles Mingus writes to J. Edgar Hoover after being evicted from his Manhattan apartment—as Mingus explains, "I've always written him. If anything goes wrong, I wanna tell all the fellas, all the white folks, I'm trying to be a good boy . . . I'm all for the FBI. Basically, I'm a cop. All kids are" (262). Rahsaan Roland Kirk composes a

mambo in his first encounter with touch-tone phones, eats money on stage to rile a cheap club owner, disrupts the *Merv Griffin Show* to protest the dearth of jazz on commercial television, holds a note on the saxophone for two hours and twenty-one minutes, almost without pause (while officials from the Guinness Book of World Records are preoccupied with a pie-eating contest), and gets arrested in Cleveland for boarding a plane with a ceremonial dagger and a tear gas pistol—"They held me two days in Akron before they decided to let me go. If I had been able to lay my hands on my tenor sax, adjust the mouthpiece, and play a couple of choruses of 'Liza Jane' or 'Prelude to a Kiss' or maybe Thelonious' 'Round Midnight,' even an FBI man would've seen that this blind, black musician ain't gonna hijack no airplane" (153). It may seem like idolatry or gossip-mongering—i.e., "fandom"—but we jazz enthusiasts are interested to know Mingus and Williams both loved horror movies, Brown and Marsh both excelled in chess and Scrabble, Kirk loved Dionne Warwick records, and Mingus loved *All in the Family*.

In the end, we need not fear for the future appreciation of these glorious artists, whose presence and stature somehow emerge intact. The music itself—telling its own story—will remain the primary link to new generations of listeners and biographers. Fandom may threaten to devour its objects. But surely Rahsaan Roland Kirk, even from the grave, has outwitted his first biographer:

Y'know music is a beautiful thing! When I'm reincarnated I'm gonna come back as a musical note! That way can't nobody capture me. They can use the hell out of me but ain't nothin' too much they can do to me. They can mess me up. They can play the wrong note. They can play a C but they can't really destroy a C. All it is, is a tone. So I'm gonna come back as a note! (374)

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