reviews

Eric Porter. *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. xxi, 404 pp.

Reviewed by Krin Gabbard

For too long, jazz writers, including the handful of academics who can legitimately be called "jazz scholars," promoted myths of the music's autonomy. According to this myth, the identity of the musicians, the venues where they performed, and what they said off the bandstand were of little or no importance. It was all about the music. This conviction led the esteemed jazz scholar Gunther Schuller to write a huge book on the Swing Era that consists almost entirely of record reviews. Writing on Louis Armstrong in *The Swing Era,* Schuller goes out on a limb and says that "one must eventually come to grips with the *totality* of his life and work. This can only be done in a dispassionate way, which also takes into account Louis's personality and temperament, and the social-economic conditions within which he labored" (1989:160). This call, however, is in a footnote, and there is virtually nothing in Schuller's book that follows through on his own suggestions about how to understand Armstrong's life and work. It is also significant that Schuller omits any reference to what Armstrong, a highly prolific writer himself (see Armstrong 1999), may have had to say about those "social-economic conditions."

Many of us in the jazz studies community are now likely to agree that it's never just about the music. The music only means what it is allowed to mean. For most of its one hundred year history, jazz has been colonized by critics, most of them white, who have imposed their own meanings on the music. And during much of this period, jazz artists, most of them African American, have struggled to combine their words with their musical utterances in order to create their own meanings.

Especially since the 1960s, African American jazz artists have responded to myths of autonomy and other received wisdom from jazz writers with a powerful counterdiscourse. Eric Porter has taken this counterdiscourse extremely seriously and cast black jazz musicians as central figures in an intellectual history of the music. As a book devoted to ideas in jazz history, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?* is a welcome intervention. It is all the more

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remarkable for concentrating exclusively on African American artists and for reading jazz history scrupulously through the racial discourses of the twentieth century. As Porter phrases it, "I intend this book to be a corrective to scholars' tendencies across disciplines either to ignore the self-conscious aspects of black cultural production or to pay lip service to this self-consciousness without taking it seriously enough to analyze what the producers of black cultural texts think about these texts" (xvii). Porter extends his intellectual history as far back as the New Negro writings from the early decades of the century and concludes with the still simmering debates around Wynton Marsalis and his stewardship of Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Porter is especially concerned with arguments about the distinctions between jazz and classical music and the even more crucial attempts to distinguish jazz from popular music. In addition to keeping issues of race and economics at the center of his analyses, he has taken the extremely welcome step of introducing considerations of gender into virtually all of his chapters. Not only does Porter give us unusually detailed accounts of how musician/composers such as Mary Lou Williams and Abbey Lincoln dealt with gender biases during their distinguished careers, he is also sensitive to how male jazz musicians developed masculinist discourses, often with profoundly misogynist and homophobic shadings. He is, for example, richly aware of how gender politics have been responsible for creating many of the myths of jazz history and how these politics have actually brought about the repression of certain realities of the music. A salient example is the forgotten practice among the first record companies of recording black male instrumentalists only after they had proven themselves by performing behind black female blues singers: "Scholars have noted the irony of the recorded legacy of the masculine world of instrumental jazz developing out of women's blues music in the early 1920s" (31).

Porter's first chapter reads jazz among the discourses of "African-American modernity," specifically the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and James Weldon Johnson. In this context, Porter is able to present original readings of the autobiographies and critical commentaries of W. C. Handy, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong. For example, Porter points out that in the same year that Du Bois wrote *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Handy was first embracing black folk music in order to create "a defiantly 'American' art rooted in African American culture" (21). He also plots out the earliest claims that jazz was a legitimate art form, most noticeably in Duke Ellington's efforts to separate his music from the term jazz itself. Ellington was hoping to distinguish his music from the "swing" that had been so thoroughly commodified by white bands while claiming for himself a Negro idiom as substantial as anything in classical music.

Porter ends his first chapter in the 1930s, when critics began to become major players in the discourses of jazz; for example, writers such as John Hammond criticized Ellington for leaving behind the "purer" forms of jazz for Western concert traditions. When Porter addresses bebop in the next chapter, he enters into the thick of more recent debates about where the avant-garde jazz of the 1940s came from and what it meant for African Americans. Appropriately, Porter accesses scholarship by Scott DeVeaux (1997), David Stowe (1994), and Bernard Gendron (1995), who have made us rethink many of the critical platitudes that once surrounded the music of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and their peers. Porter has also read deeply in the *Music Dial,* an extraordinary but short-lived music magazine run by black writers. One of the journal's contributors to whom Porter devotes special attention is Herbie Nichols, the overlooked pianist who played in Dixieland bands in order to make a living but whose own recordings show that he was the artistic equal of Monk and Bud Powell. In 1944, Nichols was arguing for state sponsorship of jazz, and he joined many black Americans in hoping for the "Double V": victory for democracy in Europe but also for Negro citizens in the United States. In his less optimistic moments, Nichols summarized his up-close and personal encounters with the business of jazz by writing, "The jazz life is ninety percent sham and front" (65).

In his chapter on bebop, Porter is especially attentive to what he calls the "critical ecumenism" of the musicians. He defines the term as "a collective, worldly, African American intellectual orientation" (xx). This stance allowed the boppers to see themselves as cosmopolitan and sophisticated, the living refutation of primitivist notions of jazz. Critical ecumenism did not, however, prevent many writers and record producers from bringing the old images of black musicians in through the back door. Porter quotes Robin D. G. Kelley's accounts of how "a primitive/intellectual homology" was developed for Thelonious Monk, especially on album covers for his records in the 1950s and 1960s (see Kelley 1999). While Monk was at first portrayed as almost scholarly, the iconography of his image became increasingly idiosyncratic, even presenting him as childlike.

Although it paved the way for the black nationalism of subsequent decades, the critical ecumenism of the boppers welcomed musicians from other cultures, especially from Latin America. It was, of course, Dizzy Gillespie who sat next to the Cuban trumpeter Mario Bauza in Cab Calloway's band and who later helped to transform American popular music by fusing Cuban and other Latino musics with jazz. African American bop musicians were also interested in exploring their African roots. Boppers such as Art Blakey were among the first to embrace Islam, searching for a new form of spirituality as well as for "a weapon in the struggle

against the absurdities of race in American society" (79). Another effect of critical ecumenism was the participation of female musicians. Of course, the boppers were not always sensitive new age guys when it came to women, and someone like Mary Lou Williams may have been an anomalous presence in the jazz fraternity of the 1940s. In this context, Porter has benefited from the ground-breaking work of Sherrie Tucker (2000), whose book on the "all-girl" bands of the 1940s sheds new light on the lives of African Americans before and after World War II, especially the "survival strategies" developed by the most resourceful black musicians. For musicians who were both black and female, making a living in the 1940s was an art form as complex as the music they played.

In a chapter appropriately titled "Passions of a Man," Porter turns to the career of Charles Mingus, whose autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog* (1971), may be the single most powerful book by an important jazz artist. Although he denounced Dave Brubeck for not swinging, waged war on white critics, and was immersed in the music of Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and Jelly Roll Morton, Mingus was capable of real generosity toward a handful of white musicians and critics. Before his violent encounter with Jimmy Knepper, resulting in a broken jaw for Knepper and a series of lawsuits, Mingus made the white trombonist one of the most if not *the* most important voice in some of his more challenging works. And it was to the white critic Nat Hentoff that Mingus turned after he made the mistake of committing himself to the psychiatric ward at Bellevue Hospital, where he briefly ran the risk of being lobotomized. Nevertheless, Porter shows how Mingus's insistence that jazz was a valid form of African American art and that jazz artists must achieve economic independence from the whites who control the music business helped move the music away from critical ecumenism and toward militant black nationalism.

Porter is also attentive to the strategies with which Mingus created a masculinist identity, even presenting himself as a pimp in sections of *Beneath the Underdog.* In a section named after one of Mingus's most ambitious compositions, *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady,* Porter explains the importance of pimping to musicians such as Mingus. In a culture that emasculates black male musicians both economically and artistically, the pimp asserts powerful masculinity over women and wins the admiration of his male peers. But Mingus's fascination with pimping may have been only that. There is little evidence in the Mingus biographies that he practiced the profession he so flamboyantly claims for himself in his autobiography. We do know, however, that Mingus could not have pursued his goal of economic independence without the help of his first wife Celia, who ended up managing his business affairs in the 1950s while Mingus was busy composing, rehearsing, and performing. A great irony of Mingus's career is that his legacy is now almost entirely in the hands of his widow,

Sue Graham Mingus, who has recruited the best jazz musicians in New York for repertory bands that play nothing but Mingus's music. The Mingus Big Band—kept alive by Sue Mingus's indefatigable efforts—has been performing on a weekly basis in a New York club for over ten years now.

The chapter on Abbey Lincoln is among the most original in the book. Lincoln's career has been justly celebrated in recent months, most appropriately with a day-long conference at Columbia University in December, 2001, and with three days of diva treatment at Jazz at Lincoln Center in March, 2002. But before Porter, few critics and scholars devoted much energy to putting together the large collection of material with which Lincoln established herself as a speaker for civil rights and feminism. In addition to a substantial body of songs, some of which are fully developed pieces of poetic writing, Lincoln published the essay "Who Will Revere the Black Woman?" in *Negro Digest* (1966), and was a forceful voice in a symposium on black women in literature held at the New School for Social Research in 1965. To his credit, Porter reads all of this material alongside Lincoln's more notorious replies to critics such as Ira Gitler, who criticized her willingness to bring racial politics into jazz with her album *Straight Ahead* (1961) as well as in the records she made with then husband Max Roach. Intriguingly, it is in the chapter on Lincoln that Porter introduces the often heated disputes about political activism among jazz artists. By asserting herself as a woman as well as a black artist, Lincoln was as radical as anyone making jazz in the 1960s.

Porter's analyses tend to be somewhat diffuse in the two chapters on avant-garde musicians. By the late 1960s, the more experimental forms of jazz had ceased to have much appeal for large audiences, and however much we may admire the musicians who were most adventuresome during this time, they often marginalized themselves. Porter succeeds in pulling many of their discursive practices together, but the chapter on the Black Arts movement of the 1970s and the subsequent chapter on theorists of improvisation, such as Marion Brown, Wadada Leo Smith, and Anthony Braxton, are somewhat less satisfying than other portions of the book. Because the projects and obsessions of these musicians tend to range widely, Porter ends up stringing together quotations and summaries of what musicians have said rather than developing a compelling thesis. But here, as in so much of the book, Porter has done a substantial amount of work as an archivist and as an interviewer, and he tells us much that we ought to know about musicians who have suffered more obscurity than they deserve.

The final chapter, devoted to Wynton Marsalis and Jazz at Lincoln Center, is one of the more balanced among the numerous accounts of this controversial figure. An unusual achievement of this trumpeter/

composer/educator has been his success in bringing jazz to what is probably the largest audience the music has enjoyed since the 1950s, while at the same time managing to alienate the vast majority of writers in the jazz press. Porter does not overstate the intensity with which white critics have condemned one of the few institutions of American cultural life that has been controlled by African Americans. (From the outset, Marsalis has worked closely at Lincoln Center with two African American writers and critics, Albert Murray and Stanley Crouch.) Porter does, however, take the original step of placing Marsalis in the context of America's racialized politics of the 1980s and 1990s. When Marsalis was first gaining attention for his work with Art Blakey and Herbie Hancock, Ronald Reagan was coding his racism with statements about "welfare queens." When Marsalis was winning Grammy awards for his classical as well as for his jazz recordings, the first George Bush was recruiting white voters by terrifying them with images of the black rapist Willie Horton. And when Marsalis became artistic director of Jazz and Lincoln Center, the media was portraying young black people almost exclusively as gangbangers and foul-mouthed rappers. As an artist who understood the great achievements of African American artists as well as the European canon, Marsalis stood as a powerful corrective to the racism in much of mainstream culture.

But if he is willing to point out those aspects of Marsalis's persona that his critics are less likely to report, Porter does not let Marsalis off the hook for some of his excesses. Marsalis has been highly critical of developments in jazz after the 1960s, didactically insisting that the music cannot be played without elements of swing and the blues that were crucial to early forms of the music. A major irony of his career is how his celebration of classic jazz artists and his scrupulous attention to jazz history have tended to make Wynton Marsalis himself obsolete. Why should anyone bother with young and emerging jazz artists if the greatest jazz was made over fifty years ago by Ellington, Armstrong, and Parker? Shortly after Porter's book went to press, Marsalis lost his recording contract with Columbia records. Porter's subtle analysis of Marsalis's career offers abundant reasons why Columbia may have decided to let him go.

What Is This Thing Called Jazz? takes a giant step beyond the limited view of jazz culture that was promulgated throughout most of the twentieth century. In examining closely what jazz artists have actually said, Porter has made it much less likely that their work will go on being reduced to non-verbal musical statements, no matter how much this music ought to be celebrated. One might wonder, however, if there is enough substance to all of these non-musical statements to build a full-scale history. If Porter has presented this book as a definitive answer in the affirmative, the next question might be, to what extent ought the utterances of musicians be

questioned? Can we allow the musicians to be the definitive commentators on their own music? By contrast, no self-respecting literary critic would defer to the author of a novel or a poem as she builds her own interpretation. Perhaps we should read what jazz artists say as skeptically as we read earlier generations of jazz critics. With someone like Wynton Marsalis, we are dealing with a musician who may be *more* important as a critic and polemicist than as a performer.

Throughout most of his book, however, Porter does read the musicians with a critical distance, especially when he exposes the sexism in the masculinist rhetoric of some male jazz musicians. He is also adroit at placing artists securely within their historical moments, when the culture may be speaking through them rather than the artists themselves presenting unique views of that culture. To ask Porter to be more critical than he already is would be to ask him to chip away at the foundations of the edifice he himself has so painstakingly constructed. At the moment, he stands alone in creating an exhaustive treatment of black musicians as public intellectuals. My guess is that future attempts at an intellectual history of jazz will be a series of glosses on *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*.

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