Alyn Shipton. *A New History of Jazz.* London and New York: Continuum, 2001. x, 965 pp.

Reviewed by Frank Tirro

The arrival of a book that purports to be a "new" history of jazz signals an event of no small consequence among the dedicated community of jazz scholars. Several excellent histories, such as those by Lewis Porter and Michael Ullman (1992) and by Ted Gioia (1997), have been published within the past decade, the former a work of careful scholarship and good pedagogical sensibility and the latter just as thoughtfully constructed, but more philosophical in nature. At the same time, outstanding dissertations, monographs, research articles, collected readings, conference papers, reviews, obituaries, discographies, useful web sites, and more are now appearing with frequent regularity to expand our knowledge of the field. Barry Kernfeld's finely edited second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (2001), popularly referred to as *JazzGrove II,* is a stellar resource and has been welcomed with consistently good reviews. Additionally, the hundreds of entries on jazz, ragtime, blues, and popular musicians in the new *American National Biography* (Garraty and Carnes 1999) have begun to give us a sense of finally coming to grips with the history of this music.

All of these modern writings of quality, in a sense, stand on the shoulders of Gunther Schuller's pathbreaking work, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Early Development* (1968). In Schuller's first critical study, and its continuation, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930–1945* (1989), this extraordinary composer-performer-researcher set a new standard for jazz research. He developed his history of the music primarily through musical analysis, but he also established a procedure for critical jazz writing that has yet to be improved upon: first, listen critically to enormous quantities of source material (the recordings) as well as witness (and/or perform in) live performances; next, conduct original research that integrates the complementary work of other scholars; then, transcribe and analyze key compositions, not only to construct a framework for the history, but also to allow other researchers the opportunity of critically evaluating conclusions drawn from the analyses; and finally, synthesize the whole into a balanced and meaningful narrative.

It may seem pedantic to state all this, but before Schuller, even though there were important jazz histories, none held to the standards demanded of today's scholarly work in traditional historical musicology.[1] Therefore, a revisionist text that, according to the author, challenges "the assumptions

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that underlie what might be regarded as the mythology of the emergence of jazz" (2); that promises to investigate bebop and the revolutionary jazz of the 1960s in ways that have not been previously undertaken (3); that, according to the dust jacket, challenges hypotheses of earlier authors and re-evaluates those assumptions in the light of new source material and the new historicism of the repertory movement; and finally, that looks at the internationalism of the genre in a new way, is not a work to be taken lightly, nor one to escape the scrutiny of a very close reading. As a serious work of historical writing, it must meet the standards established during the long twentieth century of *Musikwissenschaft.*

In dealing with Shipton's book, we must first put the publisher's hyperbole to rest and hope that it does not truly represent the view of the author. To start with, the book is accompanied by a pair of compact disk recordings entitled: *Jazz: The Definitive Performances.* Almost by definition, there are no definitive performances in jazz, an improvisatory art that reinvents the created art object with each subsequent performance. Also, no collection of thirty-two samples can even approach a representative display of jazz in its many forms or its artists in their various phases. Additionally, any collection of jazz that has no Charlie Parker recordings, for whatever reason, is certainly less than definitive. And finally, compared to the outstanding list of jazz recordings selected by Martin Williams for the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*—even with its faults, omissions, and limitations—Shipton's two CDs are not in the same league. The publisher's press releases also billed this book as an "antidote to Ken Burns' 'Jazz'," the ten-part television documentary that needs no antidote. Burns's work, with all its shortcomings, was constructed in a totally different medium, created with a substantially different audience in mind, and was part of a larger personal triptych on race relations in the United States: *The Civil War, Baseball,* and *Jazz.*[2] The comparison is unwarranted and unfair.

Shipton's book is, however, a sincere and thought-provoking study written by an impressive young man with years of experience as a British radio jazz commentator and on-the-air host. He has a literary flair, and the book reads well. During his broadcasting career, he collected many interviews with important jazz musicians. Additionally, he has read widely in the field and has written an excellent monograph on Dizzy Gillespie (Shipton 1999) that forms the underpinning for his views on the origins of bebop. *A New History of Jazz* is organized into twenty-one chapters. In virtually every chapter there is at least one claim of new evidence or new insight and a challenge to the accepted historical tradition. Even attributing this style of presentation to overenthusiasm, the book cannot help but be provocative. Nonetheless, there are many sections that are outstanding, and I would point out in particular Shipton's writing on Artie Shaw (343–52),

the New Orleans Revival (607–31), George Russell (732–34), Charles Mingus (762–72), Ornette Coleman (773–90), and the AACM and BAG (803–29). Shipton's familiarity with the music in these sections is apparent. Here, his critical evaluations of the music, theoretical writings, historical impact, and musical environment are well thought out and balanced. And he devotes an appropriate amount of space to develop each subject.

That being said, this brings us to the book's first problem: the balance of presentations of major subject areas is out of kilter. Of the 887 pages of text, the first 400 are devoted to the general category of "Origins," but this designation is deceptive or inexact at best, for it includes all jazz, American and international, up to World War II. The next section, Part II, "From Swing to Bop," and its related Part III, "Consolidation of Bebop," encompass another 333 pages (403–736). That leaves only 148 pages for Part IV, "New Jazz," essentially all the music since 1960. And that is the first major shortcoming of this text. For a jazz history published in the first years of the twenty-first century—and this book is not a monograph on particular phases of jazz history but a general survey—this text suffers a severe distortion of perspective. The first sixty years and their nineteenth-century roots receive eighty-three percent of the narrative; the last forty years are left with but seventeen percent. This problem is compounded by the nature of jazz history itself, for there were, in the beginning, a few jazz musicians and a little jazz music. During the first century of its history, the number of musicians multiplied and the repertory swelled. There have never been more living jazz musicians, jazz styles, jazz record sales, or more international jazz venues than there are today, but Shipton's conical approach to jazz's history reverses the inverted cone of the quantity of jazz as it grew through the years. A model for a more judicious approach might be observed in Mark Tucker's article on the history of jazz written for the second edition of the *New Grove History of Music and Musicians* (2001). Tucker's outline history, brief but incisive, reflects much more accurately the quantitative and qualitative nature of jazz as it moved through the twentieth century than does Shipton's history.

The second major shortcoming of *A New History of Jazz* is the book's total lack of notated musical examples. Technical assertions about the music abound, but they lack the specific musical examples that display and prove the point. For example, in his chapter on "Big Band Bebop," Shipton explains that, "the distinctive sound of [the Woody Herman Band's] four new saxophonists [Zoot Sims, Herbie Steward, Stan Getz, and Serge Chaloff] became the defining element of the Second Herd, and it has been known ever since as the 'Four Brothers' band, after Jimmy Giuffre's composition of that name" (537). The first part of the technical discussion, which follows, makes sense without the inclusion of a musical example, even though it would have been informative to have had one:

> The main melody line of *Four Brothers* is carried by Getz, with Chaloff shadowing him an octave below, and the other two tenors sandwiched in between, with the brass adding occasional stabbing chords. (ibid.)

However, the concluding statement of this paragraph suffers severely from the lack of notation to explain what Shipton means by "harmonized coda" and "individual solo tags."

> The harmonized coda and individual solo tags once again marked out the four distinctive saxophone voices of the new band, which, owing principally to the dynamic drumming of Don Lammond, had lost nothing of the energetic spark of its predecessor. (ibid.)

In a different discussion we must accept on faith that:

> *Well You Needn't* was to be recorded by Miles Davis in the 1950s, but it shares its chords with Tadd Dameron's virtually contemporaneous *Dameronia,* and is a good example of a piece where Monk uses similar thematic material for the central eight-bar bridge section to that of the main theme. (489)

Shipton owes the reader two different excerpts with the same changes as well as another example comparing the incipit of the main theme with the incipit of the bridge melody. Complicating the problem are the constant off-handed references to recorded performances without listing the specific recording being referenced. In the first example above, "Four Brothers," Shipton refers to a classic 1947 recording that he includes on his compact disk. On the other hand, "Well You Needn't" had several recorded performances. In many cases, the experienced reader might assume that he or she and the author are thinking about the same performance, but this is not always, perhaps not even usually, the case. There are so many jazz standards with multiple recordings, re-recordings, studio takes, alternate takes, air takes, re-releases, altered releases, pirated editions, and so on, that it is not acceptable, in a book purporting to be a work of serious scholarship, to cite evidence that is not verifiable. Added to this is another minor frustration: the author's use of footnotes without page references, as well as the citation of oral history that was personally collected but neither transcribed for the reader's evaluation nor housed in an archive available to researchers. For example, in Shipton's discussion of the white bassist, Steve Brown (250ff.), he gathers evidence to support his argument that Steve Brown was the first great virtuoso of jazz

string bass playing and that Jean Goldkette's band should have been accorded greater historical recognition than, in Shipton's judgment, it has been given by other scholars.

> Comparing the Goldkette band in early 1927 with almost all its large band rivals from the same period, no other rhythm section—African-American or white—gets close to this combination of lightness and swing. (253)

No small claim, for the competition includes, considering 1927 recordings alone: Ellington's "Birmingham Breakdown" and "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo"; and the Frankie Trumbauer Orchestra's (with Bix Beiderbecke) "Ostrich Walk."[3] Add to that an earlier recording by the Fletcher Henderson band, "The Stampede,"[4] and you have a historical claim worth checking out.[5] Shipton might be right, but he neither convincingly proves his case nor does he make it easy for the reader to run the experiment and check the data. In his opinion, the key to Goldkette's rhythm section is bassist Steve Brown, and he says that Wild Bill Davison told him, in the late 1980s, that Brown was "the first great virtuoso of the string bass, doing things [in the 1920s] that no one else did until Jimmy Blanton in the 1940s" (251). Footnote 78 accompanies this quotation, but it reveals no location where this piece of oral history might reside other than in the author's mind. Why footnote it at all if the reference is unverifiable? Not a serious problem in this instance, but the pattern is repeated throughout the book. A second quotation supporting the first, this time by Milt Hinton, is included.

> Steve Brown was the one everybody listened to. . . . You could hear him loud and clear, even from outside [the Midway Gardens in Chicago]. What a beat that man had! He was doing things, cross-rhythms and stuff, that I've never *yet* heard anybody else do. He was the best and we all knew it.

Footnote 80 for this quotation leads the reader to Richard M. Sudhalter's recent book (1999), but the absence of a page reference leaves the reader to find the item in question the hard way. The inconvenience to the scholar who wishes to check the context of this quotation is enormous and seriously diminishes the value of Shipton's book, even if he might be correct in his assumptions.

The proof of the pudding, of course, is in the music. Shipton cites three 1927 recordings by the Goldkette band in which the author hears significant examples of Brown's band playing from this period: "I'm Looking Over a Four Leaf Clover," "Hoosier Sweetheart," and "My Pretty Girl." The discographical information for these recordings can be found

in Brian Rust's *Jazz Records: 1897–1942* (1978),[6] but Shipton should have cited them for the use of his readers. After tracking down the records and listening to the slap-bass work of Brown on "My Pretty Girl" (on the first of the two possible Victor recordings), I am not the least bit convinced that Brown outshines Wellman Braud or that Goldkette outranks Ellington. I certainly didn't hear any cross rhythms in the bass playing of Brown. Interestingly enough, Shipton solves his own dilemma when he writes,

> I suspect that the influence and historical importance of the Jean Goldkette Victor Orchestra would have been greater had it remained together beyond September 1927, when economic pressures forced Goldkette to break up the group. (253)

The conclusion is obvious. As much as Shipton might like the playing of Steve Brown and the Goldkette band, Wellman Braud and Duke Ellington are more important historically. There is no revision to be made here.

Shipton makes several noteworthy claims in his "new" history of jazz, and I will try to evaluate only a few. He dogmatically states that the 12-bar blues is a twentieth-century creation. "[W]e can regard the twelve-measure, ubiquitous form of the blues as originating in the twentieth century, rather than in the nineteenth" (53). Shipton's evidence for this conclusion is Ma Rainey's recollection of first having heard the blues in 1902 and W. C. Handy's recounting of first having heard the form in 1903. What kind of evidence is this for so sweeping a generalization? Rainey heard her first blues in Missouri and Handy his in Mississippi. Eileen Southern (1971:332ff.) cited both of these references and added Bunk Johnson's recollection, "When I was a kid, we used to play nothing but the blues." Southern's belief that this referred to the 1880s must be amended to the 1890s,[7] but there is little reason to believe the twelve-measure AA'B form sprang up overnight. No doubt the blues crystallized as an omnipresent twelve-measure form in jazz during the twentieth century, but its widespread dissemination by the turn of the century, the early dates of Rainey's and Handy's recollection, and the claim that Bunk Johnson played instrumental blues in his youth all tend to confirm nothing *other* than a nineteenth-century origin. If Shipton had wanted to pursue this matter further, he should have found new evidence and fleshed out his argument rather than toss off a basically unsupported generalization.

On another point, Shipton argues that string bands and minstrel music have been overlooked as prime contributors to the emergence of jazz. He states,

> String bands [banjo or mandolin and violin] were portable, flexible, and musically adaptable. . . . In early sound recordings, the percus-

> sive attack of the banjo was more easily captured than drums or bass instruments, and a clear impression of syncopation and the beginnings of "swing" or jazz rhythm is discernible in recordings of banjo rags from the late 1890s. (26ff.)

He cites no sources, and then continues:

> Even more significant is that in some of the earliest recordings by a full African-American string band, the London recordings by Dan Kildare and Ciro's Club Coon Orchestra from 1916, many of the elements of jazz are present. . . . This suggests that string ensembles derived from plantation music are every bit as significant in the early history of jazz as the singing and percussion-playing that have hitherto preoccupied jazz historians, given the widespread nature of such groups. (27)

Yes, this is a valid hypothesis, and although many writers have referred to minstrel music, banjo music, and plantation dance musicians, Shipton may be the first to note the likelihood of a widespread influence by African American string ensembles. He brings new evidence to support a view only hinted at by others. However, he goes too far when he states:

> Generally, jazz historians have placed emphasis on the brass-band tradition because of the obvious instrumental links with early jazz bands, but since many of the same musicians were playing in string groups, tackling a similar repertoire, and belonging to a more widespread Southern tradition among African-Americans, string bands were every bit as significant as their loud, brassier counterparts. (29)

The brass band tradition was more significant in the development of early jazz, and the preponderance of evidence weighs in heavily for the brass. In New Orleans it is well documented by Rose and Souchon (1967). Most of the memoirs of the early great jazz musicians refer to the influence of the brass bands, not the string bands. And, as Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote in 1903:

> W'en de colo'ed ban' comes ma'chin' down de street,
> Don't you people stan' daih starin'; lif' yo' feet!
> Ain't dey playin'? Hip, hooray!
> Stir yo' stumps an' cleah de way,
> Fu' de music dat dey mekin' can't be beat. . . .
>
> But hit's Sousa played in rag-time, an' hit's Rastus on Parade,
> W'en de colo'ed ban' comes ma'chin' down de street.

Alyn Shipton's *A New History of Jazz* is at once delightful and frustrating. He brings new ideas and new evidence to the story, but he does his work unevenly. He writes knowingly about Muhal Richard Abrams and Anthony Braxton, but virtually ignores Mary Lou Williams. He gives us a photograph of Cassandra Wilson, but he allows her but one sentence in the final chapter. He gives John Zorn and Dave Douglas some much-deserved attention, and tells us virtually nothing about J. J. Johnson. Alas, the New History is an uneven work, both enlightening and disappointing.

Notes

1. Even the fine history by Marshall Stearns (1956), which also set a new standard for its day, lacked the keen analytical prowess Schuller brought to bear on the music. Before Stearns, several interesting and useful histories were published, but most relied only on the author's personal listening experience, which could be fairly comprehensive since they were written early in the history of jazz. However, all these books tended to be anecdotal, some were unwilling to admit that the new style, "swing," was indeed a form of jazz, and all were superceded because of their early date. Among the best of the early histories, one must list Robert Goffin (1932), Hugues Panassié (1934), Sidney Finkelstein (1948), Rudi Blesh (1949), André Hodeir (1956), and Alfons Dauer (1958). Another fascinating booklet (38 pages) should be noted, especially because of its early date: Alfred Baresel's *Das Jazz-Buch* (1925) attempted to separate jazz performance into its basic components of tempo, rhythm, melody, accompaniment, etc., and included notated examples for the piano. It may have been the first systematic attempt to consider the parameters of jazz performance and explain the nature of jazz improvisation, rhythm, and syncopation.

2. See my review, Tirro (2001).

3. Ellington (Brunswick 3480 and Victor 21703); Armstrong (Okeh 8535 and Okeh 8566); Trumbauer (Okeh 40822).

4. Columbia 654-D.

5. Only the Ellington band uses a string bass in the rhythm section, but all the rhythm sections swing. Trumbauer's rhythm section of guitar, piano, and drums is especially light and delicate.

6. "I'm Looking Over a Four Leaf Clover" (Victor 20466); "Hoosier Sweetheart" (Victor 20471); and "My Pretty Girl" (Victor 20588 and Victor "X Vault" Series).

7. Donald Marquis (1978) convincingly demonstrates that Bunk Johnson lied about his age and was younger than he claimed. This also demonstrates the unreliability of unverified oral history as the basis for names, dates, places, and other items of identification. As Lewis Porter points out, "Lay researchers have been especially active in the area of oral history, which produces fascinating and essential tapes and documents. But some of these researchers sometimes confuse oral history with biography" (1988:196).

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