

MARTIN WILLIAMS

THE
JAZZ
TRADITION

NEW AND REVISED EDITION

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Martin Williams

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first debts are to Donald Allen and Barney Rosset who started this when Allen asked me to write about Thelonious Monk in *Evergreen Review* No. 7. From that beginning, *The Jazz Tradition* and some of its theories evolved. My second debt is to Sheldon Meyer who saw what sort of book this could be and encouraged me to revise the material and make it that sort of book.

It may be that I am indebted to every writer on jazz I have ever read and to every musician I have ever heard and spoken with. Specifically, I am indebted to those writers whose names are included herein. The theoretical aspect of my work owes a debt to André Hodeir, particularly to his exposition of the role of Louis Armstrong in jazz history.

Some of the chapters in this book have appeared previously in different form. As included here, they have all been somewhat revised. Some have been thoroughly rewritten and expanded. Also, I have sometimes deleted repetition of basic ideas from one piece to the next except when the repetition seemed to me to serve the purpose of emphasis. I have previously had something to say between hard-covers on several of the artists discussed in these pages. I hope anyone acquainted with those earlier comments will agree that I have things to add here.

The essays on Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, Billie Holiday, Count Basie and Lester Young, John Lewis and the Modern Jazz Quartet, Sonny Rollins, Horace Silver, Coleman Hawkins, and Ornette Coleman originally appeared, in different form, in the *Evergreen Review*. The section on Jelly Roll Morton includes several paragraphs from an essay in the *Evergreen Review* but its major portions, here somewhat revised, come from a study written for *Jazz*, edited by Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy and published by Rinehart in the United States and Cassell in Great Britain.

The chapters on Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis combine material which appeared in the *Evergreen Review* and in the *Saturday Review* in editor Irving Kolodin's "Recordings" section.

The chapter on Charlie Parker combines material which appeared in the *Evergreen Review* and in *Down Beat*. My comments on John Coltrane first appeared in slightly shorter form in *Down Beat*.

In this edition of *The Jazz Tradition*, there are new essays on King Oliver, Sidney Bechet, Art Tatum, Charlie Mingus, and Sarah Vaughan, and I have extensively revised the essay on Duke Ellington. Also, I have added some new comments on those artists whose continuing careers seemed to call for such comment. I have otherwise not restrained an impulse, which any writer must feel, to modify or improve my comments of a decade ago.

I have sought advice and suggestions this time from several colleagues and friends. John Eaton was helpful and encouraging with Art Tatum, and Arnold Laubich, Wiley Hitchcock, and Rick Woodward each offered comment on that same essay. Bob Wilber read and commented on my Sidney Bechet essay. Lawrence Koch saved me from repeat-

ing a blunder in the Ellington chapter. Julian Euell offered suggestions on Charles Mingus and Sonny Rollins, as did J. R. Taylor on Mingus.

On Duke Ellington's music, I am much indebted to several writings of Gunther Schuller's—as I believe all future comment on that remarkable musician should be.

Larry Kart read all the essays in the first edition of *The Jazz Tradition* and made valuable suggestions. Mark Tucker has read most of the essays herein, old and new, offered many valuable comments, and on King Oliver in particular, he encouraged me to do better than I would otherwise have done.

I am grateful to them all.

M. W.

Alexandria, Virginia
October 1982

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The Jazz Tradition

1

INTRODUCTION

A Matter of Fundamentals

One observer has suggested that jazz music—or all jazz music but the most recent—represents a kind of cultural lag in which the devices of nineteenth-century European music have been domesticated and popularized in the United States, adding that at the same time these devices were inevitably influenced by an African-derived rhythmic idiom.

I am sure that proposition is untrue. It assumes that European ideas of harmony and melody are fundamental to jazz and used in jazz in the same way that they were in Europe, whereas the truth may be that in jazz, rhythm is fundamental.

Jazz did not exist until the twentieth century. It has elements which were not present either in Europe or in Africa before this century. And at any of its stages it represents, unarguably it seems to me, a relationship among rhythm, harmony, and melody that did not exist before. Whatever did not exist before the twentieth century is likely to express that century.

If we undertake a definition of jazz, we would begin with the fact that it is an Afro-American musical idiom, and we would already be in trouble, for almost all our music is in an Afro-American or Afro-influenced idiom.

And so, to digress for a moment, is much of our culture Afro-influenced. Most of our slang comes from the gallion

(as the black ghetto was once called), although numbers of our population continue to believe it is the invention of the teenagers in the corridors of our largely white high schools. So does most of our dancing. And how many Americans realize the origins of the strutting and baton twirling of our drum majorettes—and how would they react if they did know? More than one foreigner has observed that Americans do not walk like their European and Asian relatives, and one observer has gone far enough to declare that they walk more like Africans. Modes of comedy in America have been deeply influenced by our minstrelsy, which, however much it was distorted by white blackface, was still black in origin and, more important in device, in attitude, and in outlook.

To return to our music, it might surprise the patrons at the Nashville Grand Old Opry to learn how deeply their so-called “Country and Western” idiom has been influenced by an Afro-American one, but their reaction would not change the facts. And it should be widely acknowledged that no one in any musical idiom any longer writes for (let us say) the trumpet as he once did because of what jazzmen have shown that instrument can do. Most of our musicians also know that American symphonic brassmen generally have an unorthodox vibrato because of the pervasiveness of the jazzman’s vibrato.

It should be acknowledged that today jazz is not *the* popular idiom of American black men. And jazz shares such contributions as its “blues scale” and its unique musical form, the twelve-bar blues, with other popular idioms. But jazz is the most respected Afro-American idiom, the most highly developed one, and the idiom to which improvisation is crucially important.

I hope that from the chapters that follow two ideas will emerge of how jazz has evolved. One has to do with the

position of certain major figures and what they have contributed to jazz. The other has to do with rhythm.

I should say at this point that I did not begin with these ideas as preassumptions. They emerged in my own mind and related themselves to the theories of other commentators only as I undertook to write the chapters themselves. They offer, I hope, a more comprehensive and perhaps more musical view of the way jazz has developed than has previously been available.

If we take the most generally agreed-upon aesthetic judgments about jazz music, the first would undoubtedly be the dominant position and influence of Louis Armstrong—and that influence is not only agreed upon, it is easily demonstrable from recordings.

If we take a second generally agreed-upon opinion, it would concern the importance of Duke Ellington, and most particularly Ellington in the maturity of 1939-42.

And a third opinion? Surely the importance of the arrival of Charlie Parker. And after Parker, what made jazz history was the rediscovery of Thelonious Monk. And after that, the emergence of Ornette Coleman—or so it would be if one were looking for evidence of originality after Parker and Monk.

The pattern that emerges from those judgments would be a kind of Hegelian pendulum swing from the contributions of an innovative, intuitive improviser (Armstrong, Parker), who reassessed the music's past, gave it a new vocabulary, or at least repronounced its old one, and of an opposite swing to the contributions of a composer (Ellington, Monk), who gave the music a synthesis and larger form—larger, but not longer.

And before Armstrong? As I hope my essay demonstrates, Jelly Roll Morton's music represented a synthesis and sum-

mary of what jazz, and Afro-American music in general, had accomplished up to the moment of his arrival.

There remain the matter of the direct influence of the great figures on some of their immediate followers, and the matter of the few players whom one might call dissenters.

Following Armstrong I have written of Bix Beiderbecke, whose ends were comparable with Armstrong's but whose means and origins were somewhat different. I have spoken of the direct but very different effect of Armstrong on Coleman Hawkins and on Billie Holiday, and of the somewhat less direct effect of his work on the Count Basie orchestra. Similarly, I have tried to discuss Charlie Parker's effect on Miles Davis and on Horace Silver, and to discuss their own contributions. I have endeavored to point out the things that Monk, John Lewis, and Sonny Rollins have in common, along with the things they do not.

The question of where a study like this stops becomes fairly arbitrary at some point. One's final word on where it stops must be that it had to stop somewhere, and it stopped where I stopped it. I have here added chapters on King Oliver, Sidney Bechet, Art Tatum, Charlie Mingus, and Sarah Vaughan. Were I to continue, my next choices might include Earl Hines, Fletcher Henderson, Roy Eldridge. . . . But, as I say, my book stops where it stops.

If we examine the innovations of Armstrong and Parker, I think we see that each of them sprang from a rhythmic impetus. Similarly, if we look at pre-New Orleans music—cakewalk tunes, then ragtime—we can again identify a definite and almost logical rhythmic change. Similarly, looking beyond Parker to more recent developments we see important changes in rhythm.

Dizzy Gillespie has said that when he is improvising he thinks of a rhythmic figure or pattern and then of the notes to go with it, and I am sure that any important jazz musician

from any style or period would give us a similar statement. Indeed, the musicians and fans give us the key to the changes in the music in the style-names themselves: cakewalk, ragtime, jazz, swing, bebop. Casual as they are, regrettable as they sometimes may seem, these words do not indicate melodies or harmonies. They indicate rhythms.

In all the stylistic developments of jazz a capacity for rhythmic growth has been fundamental. And in saying that, I believe we are saying more than we may seem to be saying. There is nothing in the outer environment of the music, nor in the "cultural influences" upon its players, to guarantee such growth. Quite the contrary. One might say that during the past hundred years of jazz and the African-American music that preceded it, American black men have relearned a rhythmic complexity (in different form) which was commonplace to their African ancestors.

And here we find ourselves up against the "liberal" bugaboo of "natural rhythm" and whether Negroes have it or not—up against the position which holds that Negroes do not and could not have something called "natural rhythm," and that it is insulting and even racist to say that they do.

Negroes certainly could not have *unnatural* rhythm. The music ultimately comes from people, not alone from their environment or their cultural influences. Certainly blacks must have a rhythm natural to their own music and their own dances (which does not of course mean that "all" Negroes have such a thing, nor that others may not acquire it). Nor is the rhythm simply personal to certain musicians, otherwise there would not be such a wide response to it on the part of others—other musicians, dancers, listeners.

My sense of human justice is not, I hope, dependent on the assumption that black men *could* not have a natural rhythm. Differences among peoples do not make for moral

inequality or unworthiness, and a particular sense of rhythm may be as natural as a particular color of skin and texture of hair. No, it does no damage to my sense of good will toward men or my belief in the equality of men, I trust, to conclude that Negroes as a race have a rhythmic genius that is not like that of other races, and to concede that this genius has found a unique expression in the United States.

It is worth pointing out that the rhythmic capacities of a jazz musician are not directly dependent on other aspects of technique in the traditional sense. Players either *think* rhythmically in a particular style, or they do not. Oscar Peterson has prodigious facility as a pianist but rhythmically he does not think in the manner of "modern" jazz, and when he undertakes a Parker-esque run we may hear an incongruous fumbling in the fingers. Similarly, Buddy Rich, an astonishingly accomplished drummer technically, still plays swing-era drums rhythmically.

I think that a rhythmic view of jazz history provides the most valuable insight into its evolution. But I do not mean to set up absolute standards in pointing it out, and there are contradictions when one comes down to individual players, particularly white players. Thus, such harmonic and linear modernists as Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan, and even Art Pepper think in an older rhythmic idiom of alternate strong and weak accents or heavy and light beats, within a 4/4 time context. Still, pianist Al Haig, for example, who is white, grasped quite early the rhythmic idiom of Gillespie and Parker. Coleman Hawkins, on the other hand, once he had absorbed early Armstrong and begun to develop his own style, became almost European in his emphasis of the "weak" and "strong" beats. (I expect, by the way, that this is because Hawkins is not a blues man.)

Any theory of how an art has evolved holds its dangers.

The life of an art, like the life of an individual, resists schematic interpretations, and the interpreter who proposes one risks distorting his subject to suit his theories. It should go without saying that I hope that my view of jazz history does not involve distortions. But it is my further hope that, the theoretical aspects aside, the individual essays herein may stand on their own as tributes to their subjects.