

## Book Review

### ***Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies***

Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, Editors.  
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#### **Reviewed by Howard Spring, University of Guelph**

How far jazz has come. Once routinely associated with swiveling hips, various drugs of choice, and unruly goings-on, it now has moved to the heart of the cultural establishment. Today, jazz is supported by major foundations, taught at most centres of higher learning, embraced by powerful institutions such as the Lincoln Center and the Smithsonian Institute, and honoured by the White House; there are no more dingy dives for this music. For some, this development represents the kind of attention that jazz deserves. For others, it is the death knell for a once-living art form.

The literature on jazz has been going through a similar shift. Once the purview of record collectors, journalists, and enthusiasts (including writers such as Stanley Dance, Martin Williams, Dan Morgenstern, Max Harrison, Ralph J. Gleason, William Russell, and George Hoefer), jazz is now fully embraced by the academy. I imagine that, by the reckoning of the editors of *Uptown Conversation*, these earlier commentators belonged to the "old jazz studies." They shared a belief in the value of jazz which was, at the time, largely viewed as inferior by proponents of "art" music. They also shared an obsession with documenting the lives and careers of jazz musicians. Few of them had academic credentials or formal musical training. There were some exceptions, of course, including ethnomusicologists Richard Waterman and Alan Merriam; sociologists Morrow Berger and Howard Becker; musician, scholar, and composer Gunther Schuller; and literary scholar Marshall Stearns. However, these writers were in the minority.

In recent decades, many writers on jazz have academic credentials from a broad range of disciplines. *Uptown Conversation* is a case in point with contributors from English, Comparative Literature, Afro-American and African studies, Anthropology, American studies, Film studies, History, and Musicology. The book includes contributions from the non-academic world as well including musical performers, composers, and even a painter. This change in jazz studies is roughly analogous to developments in what has been called the "new musicology," a field that also owes much of its robust health to infusions from disciplines outside of music including Literary Criticism, Philosophy, Feminism, Queer Theory, Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and Cultural Studies.

Many of the articles found in *Uptown Conversation* originated from ongoing meetings of the Jazz Study Group at Columbia University. The first published project to see print as a result of this group's activity was *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, edited by Robert G. O'Meally. *Uptown Conversation* can be seen as a sequel of sorts. While the first book was a compendium of important writings that had been published previously, this one is a gathering of new writing that aims to present a "wide variety of disciplinary perspectives, new methods of studying the history of jazz, its social contexts and broad cultural ramifications" (3).

According to the editors of *Uptown Conversation*, "what is new here is the conviction that jazz is not just for players and aficionados [ . . . ] but that knowing about jazz and its cultural settings is part of what it means to be an educated woman or man in our time—this regardless of the student's own specific major or field" (1). In this respect, *Uptown Conversation* is similar to the mandate of Columbia University's Center for Jazz Studies, an organization directed by O'Meally, one of the book's editors. According to the Center's mission statement, "to be an educated person in the new millennium means understanding jazz music as part of a complete arts and sciences curriculum, as indispensable equipment for living in our time" (par. 1). The mission statement goes on to say that the Center is "multidisciplinary in its approach, and is as concerned with jazz music itself as with jazz's impact on culture and on associated nonmusical arts" (par. 2). This is an apt description of *Uptown Conversation* as well, although the volume runs the risk of losing "jazz music itself" at numerous points.

George Lipsitz's opening essay, "Songs of the Unsung: The Darby Hicks of Jazz", uses a critique of Ken Burns's PBS television series, *Jazz*, to illustrate some of the problems with jazz historiography. Lipsitz suggests that three key overlapping signifiers, introduced in the first segment, go on to inform the narrative of the entire series: modernity, America, and artistic genius. According to Lipsitz, the problem in *Jazz* is that jazz history has been compressed into one time frame (modernity), one place (the United States), and one subjectivity (the alienated heroic artist). Although

this narrative strategy may be part of a long tradition, Lipsitz persuasively demonstrates it to be “partial, perspectival, and interested” (12).

The modernist perspective views art, including jazz, as an autonomous, specialized activity that is disconnected from community and tradition. Emphasis is placed on the work itself, not on the social practices and relations that shape artistic production. This representation of jazz history ignores the “dynamic fusion” that is built on the tension between the past and the present in African American musical communities. Similarly, to say that jazz is quintessentially American denies its international scope. How are we to understand the music and careers of Abdullah Ibrahim, Django Reinhardt, and Toshiko Akiyoshi; the shared performances of American jazz musicians and African performers; the many Puerto Rican and Cuban musicians who have contributed to the history of jazz; and the roles of American jazz musicians who moved to Europe including Sidney Bechet, Randy Weston, and others?

Lipsitz also takes issue with the depiction of musicians in *Jazz* as heroic artists who are alienated from mainstream culture. This view obscures the fact that jazz depends crucially on social, not just musical, relations. Furthermore, the representation of jazz performers as heroic, alienated individuals makes it more difficult to examine gender relations as well as the interconnectedness of jazz with other art forms and types of music. According to Lipsitz, the “interested” aspect of portraying jazz history in this manner is that it allows for only one possible reaction on the part of the viewer: to buy “relics and souvenirs” of this art form (17). Alternate possibilities such as supporting contemporary jazz artists, advocating support for jazz education, and demanding rights and recognition for African American performers are left out of the equation.

The image of the alienated, innovative, male genius who is disconnected from his community and, instead, is rooted in the nation state and acts as the driving force in jazz has a long history. It is a narrative strategy borrowed from European musical historiography. Burns simply follows this widely used model as do many of the jazz history texts used in university courses today. In this regard, these texts and the Burns film are clear examples of the “old jazz studies.” Lipsitz offers Horace Tapscott’s autobiography *Songs of the Unsung* as an example of an alternate representation of jazz history in that it “presents jazz as the product of collective activity in decidedly local spaces” (17). He could have just as well used George Lewis’s essay in *Uptown Conversation* to illustrate this point.

“Experimental Music in Black and White: The AACM in New York, 1970-1985” is the kind of jazz historiography that Lipsitz would like. Lewis consistently refers to the network of musicians, commentators, communities, venues, locales (both inside and outside of the U.S.), and cultural contexts in which the music of the AACM has been produced. In a refreshingly original commentary, Lewis takes a critical look at those who would deny the importance of the dialogue between African American and Euro-American musics and the importance of African American musical practices which are not “obviously or predominantly based in or represented as mass culture” (76). To deny the importance of these musics, Lewis argues, is to misrepresent the diversity and hybridity of African American musical life including the important work of the AACM. This denial results in a situation where “academics accept the notion that the set of positions for studies of black music, as well as for black musicians themselves, is properly defined by the economic and demographic imperatives of media corporations” (76). “In this context,” he continues, “the entry into classical music by black composers, rather than bourgeois accommodation, becomes an oppositional stance” (76).

Lewis provides a much-needed and long-overdue account of the AACM and the jazz avant-garde in general. But is the avant-garde that recent a development in jazz? Salim Washington argues in “‘All the Things You Could Be by Now’: *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* and the Limits of Avant-Garde Jazz” that avant-garde aesthetics have always been a primary principle of jazz. Washington locates this avant-garde sensibility in the music’s rapid changes in style and genre. According to Washington, jazz has been a “perpetual avant-garde” because jazz musicians have continually searched for “expansion of the formal parameters available for artistic expression” and have related this expansion to progress in “social arrangements in society” (28). He suggests that the avant-garde aesthetic has been marginalized in recent decades as jazz has gained more mainstream respectability. Washington uses Charles Mingus’s recording *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* as an example of how a musician can hold on to the avant-garde aesthetic while engaging the history of the music.

In my view, Washington overstates the case. His analysis obscures the fact that jazz was predominantly popular dance music until the late 1940s. During this period, musicians, composers, and arrangers certainly looked for sounds and forms that were fresh—but not too fresh. Early jazz musicians operated within a myriad of constraints, not the least of which were economic ones. They created music that was new, but it still had to have broad market appeal as is true of most popular music. It was not until the advent of bebop that jazz moved closer to ideals associated with European art culture and the avant-garde. Moreover, the term avant-garde usually implies a deliberate break with the past. Although there are certainly dangers in viewing jazz history as an organic whole in which each successive stylistic development flows smoothly from the last,<sup>1</sup> jazz has, for most of its history, been

characterized by a process of renewing and remixing elements from the musical past to create new styles. One could argue that bebop breaks that pattern at some level, but, even there, many of bebop's stylistic features can be found in earlier styles in different combinations.

Washington is right, however, to suggest that the connections between jazz life and "social arrangements in society" have been, until recently, almost completely ignored in writing on jazz. It is one of the strengths of the new jazz literature, including *Uptown Conversation*, that attention is at last being paid to the relationships between jazz and the broader social, cultural, and political frameworks that inform the music and that the music, in turn, helps to shape. However, while much of the older jazz literature discusses the music without reference to its cultural context(s), the new literature typically ignores, or at least does not do justice to, the sounds themselves. It's as if the criticisms that emerged in the 1960s that were directed towards musicology—that it did not adequately take into account the context and the meaning of the music—have gone too far in the other direction. To be sure, many things of value can be said about jazz without discussing the sounds that constitute this vibrant, ever-changing art form. This is evident in many of the articles in *Uptown Conversation*. But in a book of over 400 pages described as "The New Jazz Studies," one might expect to find a fair amount of discussion of "jazz music itself." In my view, ignoring the sonic dimension of jazz is just as likely to lead us in the wrong direction as only discussing the sound of the music without considering the context(s) for its production.

One of the few articles in this book that takes a more balanced approach is by the late Ellington scholar Mark Tucker. In "Mainstreaming Monk: The Ellington Album," Tucker discusses Thelonious Monk's debut recording for Riverside Records. The recording was released in 1955 at a time when Monk was not known to the general public even though he had been recording for a number of years. Tucker argues that it was "a transitional moment in Monk's career, as he moved from relative obscurity into a period of increasing fame and widespread recognition" (152). The recording also coincided with the formation of what came to be known as the jazz "mainstream." The idea of a "mainstream" in jazz is something that many jazz musicians and scholars, including myself, have taken for granted. Tucker explains that the term was just emerging into public discourse around the time that Monk made the Ellington recording.

The first writer to apply the term "mainstream" to jazz was Stanley Dance, who used it in a somewhat more narrow sense than it would come to have. For him, the mainstream was jazz that was neither "traditional" (that is, in a New Orleans-derived style) nor "modern" (bebop). Eventually, the term came to be used, as it is today, to designate a number of different historical jazz styles including bebop and post-bop, but not New Orleans-derived styles or "free" jazz. The term is used in such a way as to suggest that, although there may be different styles in jazz, they all belong to an overarching single tradition. The term "mainstream" suggests, in short, that jazz is both heterogeneous and consolidated.

The owners of Riverside Records, Orrin Keepnews and Bill Grauer, responded to this new consensus by starting to record modern jazz musicians like Monk. They did so, in Monk's case at least, with the idea of a "songbook" album—an album based on the music of one composer—as one way of mainstreaming jazz. Monk's reputation up to this point was that of a relatively obscure modern jazz musician. By recording an album of the music of a well-known, major composer like Duke Ellington, Keepnews and Grauer meant to take Monk into the emerging jazz mainstream.

Tucker argues that Monk agreed to this recording because of his precarious professional standing, but suggests that Monk was not particularly happy with this arrangement. Tucker uses musical transcriptions to illustrate this point. First, he shows that, even when Monk had played jazz standards on previous albums, he did not tone down his characteristic use of bold dissonances. Recording an Ellington album would not, therefore, necessarily lead to a tamer, more mainstream Monk. Tucker provides a number of musical descriptions of how, on the recording, Monk sounds "flat and listless" (159), emotionally neutral, and halfhearted with a few flashes of interesting music which he describes in some detail. Tucker accounts for this by arguing that Monk recorded the album as a "form of begrudging protest" after recording his two previous albums as a leader where he could play what he wanted as he wished. Monk did not record anything resembling the Ellington songbook record again. Tucker claims that there was no need to do so because the notion of the jazz mainstream had broadened and could include, by the late 1950s, the kind of "modern" playing for which Monk was known. Tucker's arguments are convincing because he supports his analysis with references to the music that illustrate a seminal moment in the career of Thelonious Monk and a sea change in the jazz public's concept of the jazz mainstream.

In an article entitled "Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation," pianist and composer Vijay Iyer examines the important (if under-documented) issue of narrative in jazz improvisation, discussing what he calls "traces of embodiment" in African American music (395). He begins by asking just what is meant when we say that a good improvisation "tells a story." Referring to some suggestive bits of dialogue recorded on an out-take of John Coltrane's "Giant Steps," Iyer argues that the stories that are supposed to be embedded in good improvised solos are expressed

not just musically, but also extramusically through various modes of embodiment. Drawing on notions of kinesthetics, aesthetics of the body, and performativity, he argues that the stories that improvisations tell are nonlinear “exploded narratives” that are delivered through an embodied attitude. The inclusion of the body in Iyer’s analysis is refreshing. Although we all have bodies and I think most musicians and scholars would agree that our bodies have something to do with the way we make music, there is almost no discussion of the body’s connection to improvisation in the literature.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Iyer’s essay is groundbreaking work.

A number of articles in *Uptown Conversation* discuss jazz in relation to other kinds of creative activity. In “Louis Armstrong, Bricolage, and the Aesthetics of Swing,” Jorge Daniel Veneciano discusses Armstrong’s collection of photographs, especially his photo-collages. Taken together with Armstrong’s instrumental music, singing, copious writing (he traveled with a typewriter), and acting, we have a picture of an artist whose creative energy seems to transcend the limits of one form of artistic expression (as if his trumpet playing wasn’t enough!). Veneciano compares Lévi-Strauss’s concept of *bricolage* to Armstrong’s 1936 description of swing in *Swing that Music*: “cuttin’ loose and takin’ the music with you, whatever the score may call for... It takes a swing player, a real good one, to be able to leave that score and to know, or ‘feel,’ just when to leave it and when to get back on it” (qtd. in Veneciano 264). Like *bricolage*, a term that suggests deviation and indirectness, Armstrong conceives of swing as a departure from the score as written and from the “straight” version of the melody. Veneciano goes on to compare the European avant-garde with jazz, suggesting that despite the divergent social and cultural contexts out of which these two traditions emerged, they are both characterized by an “interfusion of art and social reality” that he describes as “bricolage aesthetic praxis” (268). In the jazz context, this praxis stems from the vernacular and is an important strategy for African American survival. Veneciano suggests that this strategy of “bricolage aesthetic praxis” informs Armstrong’s creative practice in different media including both music and photo-collage. The inclusion of photographs of Armstrong’s collages and Veneciano’s comments thereon help to clarify the author’s arguments.

In another essay that explores the relations between jazz and the visual arts, Diedra Harris-Kelley discusses the work of her uncle, the renowned African American artist Romare Bearden. Bearden often listened to jazz as he created. He claimed that he structured his collages as if they were jazz compositions and that specific players like Earl Hines influenced his work. Many of his paintings and collages evoke the spaces and musicians associated with jazz. Harris-Kelley discusses a number of specific works by Bearden (reprinted in colour in *Uptown Conversation*) in terms of how they can be related to jazz. Although her analysis is interesting and plausible given Bearden’s intimate knowledge of jazz, I ultimately find the analogies between Bearden’s work and jazz to be highly interpretive. Nonetheless, those interested in Bearden’s paintings will find much to enrich their understanding of his work after reading Harris-Kelley’s detailed discussion.

Unfortunately, there isn’t enough space in this review to discuss every article in *Uptown Conversation* in detail. By discussing several pieces at length, I hope to provide the reader with a sense of the level of scholarship and diversity of topics that characterize this book. Many essays in the book have much to offer on close inspection. Timothy Mangin’s discussion of jazz in Senegal, for example, provides an interesting overview of the history of jazz in Senegalese society. John Gennari’s history of the Newport Jazz Festival from 1954 to 1960 focuses on the riot that occurred during the 1960 festival. John Szwed manages to bring a fresh perspective to the biography of Miles Davis, concentrating on the sound and the persona of Miles Davis both off and on the stage. In “The Real Ambassadors,” Penny Von Eschen describes a politically charged musical review of the same name created by Dave and Lola Brubeck and Louis Armstrong in 1962. Premiered at the Monterey Jazz Festival that year, *The Real Ambassadors* included musicians from both Brubeck’s and Armstrong’s bands as well as other performers including singers Carmen McRae and Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross. *The Real Ambassadors* criticized the American State Department and satirized the irony of using jazz musicians as “ambassadors” to the world at a time when the civil rights movement met with violent resistance in many parts of America and where Jim Crow patterns of segregation were still very much a part of everyday existence for many African Americans. Von Eschen’s essay sheds light on a largely forgotten but very interesting chapter of jazz history.

The relative dearth of discussion about the sounds of jazz aside, *Uptown Conversation* makes an important contribution to jazz literature because of its inclusion of new perspectives and approaches to the study of jazz. Another appealing feature of the book is that practically all of the essays are accessible to readers outside of the authors’ respective disciplines. I would thus recommend *Uptown Conversation* to anyone interested in jazz history and culture. As a final note, I would like to add that reading this book prompted me to go back and listen to many of the recordings discussed therein. I did so with a renewed appreciation and understanding of the music and of the contexts out of which the music emerged—a sure sign for this reviewer of the book’s success.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Scott Deveaux's essay "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography."

<sup>2</sup> David Sudnow's 1978 work *Ways of the Hand: The Organization of Improvised Conduct* is one notable exception.

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