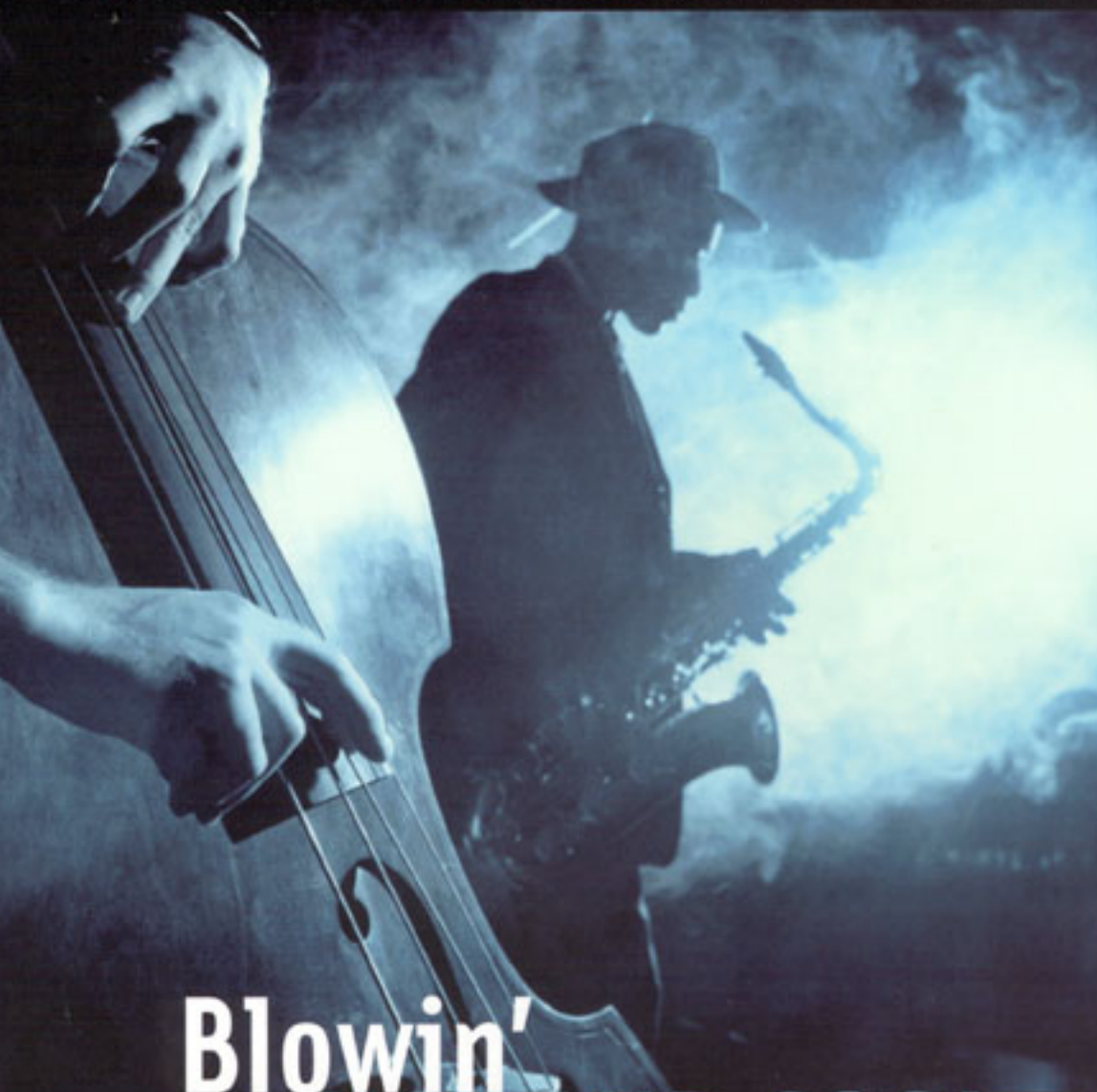


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Blowin' HOT AND COOL

Jazz and Its Critics

JOHN GENNARI

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For my parents,
Remo Gennari and Clara Dal Cortivo Gennari

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In 1990, Neil put me in touch with Gary Carner, who was looking for someone to contribute an article on the history of jazz criticism to a special issue of *Black American Literature Forum*. Catalyzed by Gary's rich suggestions, I wrote and wrote and ended up with a sprawling, seventy-five-page article that became the blueprint for all the jazz work I've done since. Around

the same time, Harvard Law School professor Randall Kennedy invited me to write about jazz in *Reconstruction*, his much missed journal of African American affairs. It frankly astonished me that two such capable people as Gary and Randy thought I had something interesting to say about jazz. Maybe I was on to something.

The *BALF* and *Reconstruction* publications came at a critical time, leading to fellowships that underwrote my research and expanded my circle of contacts in jazz studies, American Studies, and African American Studies. As a Smithsonian Institution Predoctoral Fellow, I soaked up the wisdom and generosity of Charlie McGovern, who urged me to think about jazz as part of a larger, American-cultural narrative, and offered especially acute insights about Martin Williams. I gathered helpful advice from John Hasse, whose passion for Duke Ellington rubbed off on me. I watched Walter Van de Leur scour the Smithsonian's Ellington archive for evidence of Billy Strayhorn's compositional hand. I teamed up with Bob Haddow to interview Willis Conover in his USIA office. I floated a number of Guinness Stout-soaked ideas at the Tuesday pub outings presided over by Pete Daniel.

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social conscience and courage, his stories, his undying love of this music, and his sweet and husky tenor sax croon.

I grew up in a family in which love expresses itself most powerfully in silent communion over food. And so it feels awkward to try to use words to express my heartfelt thanks for their love and faith in me, when what I really want to do is break bread and quaff wine. There will be plenty of that, but words are the coin of *this* realm, and every one of them in this book is a tribute to my parents Remo and Clara Gennari, my brother James Gennari and sister Joan Tyer and their families, and my wife Emily Bernard.

Nobody believes more strongly in the power of words than Emily. And yet words cannot possibly repay the debt I owe her—for her love and caring, for her patience and faith, but most of all for the sublime beauty and fierce honesty of her own words, and her amazing devotion and support as I’ve labored to get mine right.

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INTRODUCTION

(Much More than) a Few Words about Jazz

An Exquisite Corpse

As the story goes, the drummer Art Blakey was driving to a job in Pennsylvania, passing through a small town, when he got stuck behind a funeral procession. Unable to drive past the cemetery until the service was over, he pulled over and got out of his car to listen to the eulogy. After the minister finished speaking on behalf of the deceased, he asked if anyone had anything to add. A heavy silence ensued, until Blakey stepped forward and brightly intoned: “If nobody has anything to say about the departed, I’d like to say a few words about jazz!”¹

Many are the words that have been spoken, the bodies laid to rest, and the corpses exhumed in the telling of jazz’s story. In 1939, the jazz and dance critic Roger Pryor Dodge rued that “as soon as jazz became disturbingly identifiable as something more than ‘our popular music,’ countless uninformed commentators sprung up with something to say about it.”² Fifteen years later, Whitney Balliett noted that “although America has always tried to keep jazz in the same national tower with other queer relatives like the Spanish-American War and the American Indian, it has never been able to stop talking about it.”³ In 2001, in Ken Burns’s PBS documentary on the cultural history of the music, several of jazz’s most garrulous spokespersons held forth for more than nineteen hours, brandishing a vocabulary full of such juicy words as “heroic,” “erotic,” “majestic,” and—the film’s mother of all jazz words—“genius.” And yet the film couldn’t carry the jazz story past the 1960s, which meant virtually excising nearly a third of the music’s

century-long history and strongly implied that jazz is now entombed in a condition of permanent epilogue. One critic of the film has likened it to a “funeral celebration,” while another has characterized the curatorial, neoclassical aesthetic of the film’s main talking head—the trumpeter and Lincoln Center jazz program artistic director Wynton Marsalis—as a form of “musical necrophilia.”⁴

When I first became interested in jazz as a college student in the late 1970s, word of jazz’s death was all around—whether in the sound of printed or spoken words lamenting the passing of a hallowed tradition, or the silence of unspoken words marking the absence of jazz in places (dance halls, hotel ballrooms, neighborhood bars, coffee shops, radio programs) where previously it had been a vital presence. I found this talk both captivating and puzzling—captivating because of the solemn earnestness of the jazz-is-dead discourse, puzzling because the jazz that I was discovering and loving seemed like the essence of life itself. How could jazz be dead if Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Art Blakey, and Sonny Rollins were still alive? How could jazz be dead if every summer brought jazz festivals and outdoor concerts, providing a more rarified experience than the weed- and booze-suffused open-air rock concerts that were defining rituals for adolescents of my generation. More to the point: how could jazz be dead if, as a college student, I could go to a club in the Village, shell out an entire semester’s work-study wages on the cover charge and a couple of scotches, sit close enough to drummer Jack De Johnette to hear him breathe, and between sets try to impress my girlfriend with how much I knew about Jack’s early-career breakthrough with Miles Davis. If jazz was dead, so was my chosen path into hipness and enlightenment.

In my Italian-American working-class home, music was second only to food as a sacrament of family life. In fact the two were ritually intertwined: family dinners usually involved impromptu dancing, while the canning of garden vegetables, simmering of pasta sauces, and grating of cheese all unfurled to the sound of the Valtaro orchestra, Frank Sinatra, Glen Miller, Dean Martin, Johnny Mathis, Motown, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Chaka Khan, and Tito Puente. As a fledgling drummer, I played in school stage bands, rock and funk garage bands, and theater pit bands. Jazz—at least the jazz canon as then represented in something like *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, which I knew about only because my high-school English teacher recommended it as a gift for our departing school band director—was not a central part of my musical life. My budding interest in jazz during my college years took me ever further afield from the familiar territory of everyday mainstream American culture: to the far left of the FM radio dial, to used-record stores run by aging hipsters,

to the dorm rooms of a few nascent aficionados whose stacked wooden boxes full of carefully organized LPs I deeply envied. What I found in those fugitive spaces surely didn't smell like death; it seemed bracingly alive and exciting.⁵

Indeed, it seemed alive and exciting beyond words, or at least beyond my ability to capture it in words. Hence my fascination with the people I was reading during that time who had undertaken to write about jazz—jazz as music, jazz as culture, jazz as history. LP liner notes were the starting point. Twenty-five years later, I still vividly remember finding a copy of Eric Dolphy's *Out to Lunch* in a subterranean used-record shop, then standing there to read and reread A. B. Spellman's description of drummer Tony Williams playing "pulse" rather than "time." A college buddy turned me on to a couple of Nat Hentoff's books; these in turn led me to books by Spellman, Martin Williams, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), and Whitney Balliett. This material gave me historical background for the younger jazz writers I began to read in *The Village Voice* (Gary Giddins, Stanley Crouch, Francis Davis, Howard Mandel, and others), the *Boston Phoenix* (Bob Blumenthal), and in *Down Beat*, *Jazz Magazine*, and other organs of the jazz press.⁶ Each writer—they were all men—had his own writing style, favorite musicians and causes, and pet peeves. Sometimes they argued directly with each other; always they seemed aware of each other. Discussion among my jazz-minded friends often started with "Did you read what ___ said about ___?" Somehow this jazz writing seemed more important, more necessary than the writing about rock and pop music. Many rock musicians were well-known celebrities; we saw them on television. We loved their music because it was accessible. Those of us who were musical dabblers played rock and funk because they felt like native languages, and because we knew we could connect with an audience of our peers. If we ventured into jazz, it was as a second language, and it came with no guarantee of an audience. These jazz writers crucially helped us to understand jazz and, equally important, to imagine ourselves part of a community of people for whom the music mattered more than almost anything else.

These writers are the inheritors of a calling that since the 1930s (I propose in this book) has been crucial to the history of jazz, to the lives and careers of jazz musicians, and to the shaping of ideas about jazz's significance in American culture. As proselytizers, intermediaries, gatekeepers, translators, rhetoricians, conceptualizers, producers, and analysts of jazz, jazz critics have been undeniably powerful voices—some would say too powerful—in the music's public discourse. When we talk about jazz as American music, world music, black music, mulatto music, popular music, art music, democratic music, freedom music, rhythmic music, melodic music, romantic music, tragic music, dead music, or living music, we're talking in a language and through conceptual categories that have been established by

critics. Indeed, the very question of which music is jazz, and which is not, is one on which critics usually get the last word.

Jazz has never been just music—it's been a cornerstone of the modern cultural imagination, an archive of mythological images, and an aesthetic model for new modes of writing, seeing, and moving. Across the spectrum of high, middlebrow, and low culture, from symphonies and modern dance to cartoons and advertising, jazz has been appropriated, remembered, dismembered, loved, and abused. The jazz historian Ted Gioia has noticed that for all of the extraordinary attention paid to Wynton Marsalis in recent years, very rarely does the discussion center on a particular piece of his music; "Marsalis the musician," he writes, "has been eclipsed by Marsalis the institution." And this is part and parcel of a larger process of institutionalization—jazz education, repertory orchestras, documentary films, CD reissue programs, museum exhibits, etc.—that Gioia sees as heavily tilted toward the past, threatening to turn jazz into a "historical artifact." He worries further that the dominant approach to jazz history "has become a form of hagiography," a "litany of the saints." And he suggests that critics, historians, educators, and other members of the "jazz superstructure" often embrace "static models of jazz" because doing so simplifies their job of making sense of the complex world of improvisation.⁷

I share these concerns, and I propose in this book that one of the ways to create a less static model of jazz—and perhaps even to grant more agency and power to jazz musicians—paradoxically is to shift the focus from the musicians to the jazz superstructure. Or, rather, to focus on the complexity of the negotiations and interactions that take place between musicians and the superstructure as jazz is delivered to the audience—to follow the sounds of the music, as it were, from their point of production through channels of distribution out into the public sphere. This is because it seems to me undeniable that the meanings we attach to the music and the musicians—how we make sense out of what we hear and see and feel—are very deeply influenced by the filters that stand between us and the sound that comes out of the musicians' bodies and instruments. This is not just a matter of physical or temporal proximity: even when we occupy the same space as performing musicians, our perceptions of what we are hearing are indelibly, if invisibly, mediated by what we have heard before, including critical discourse. There's something finally mysterious and unintelligible about the relationship between artist and audience, and the critic's job is to provide words for an experience for which there are no words. Critics try to locate words for an experience that is finally elusive. ("Writing about music is like dancing about architecture," goes the phrase variously attributed to Thelonious Monk, Elvis Costello, Clara Schumann, and many others I haven't heard

about.) The circle—musician, critic, audience—composes a dynamic that is perpetually in motion, always fulfilling and always unsatisfying. And it's this dynamic tension—of a desire awakened but only partially met—that makes jazz performance meaningful and demands its repetition.

As in an African dance ritual or an African American preacher's sermon to the congregation, jazz performance functions as a dialogue among the musicians, as well as between the musicians and the dancing or listening audience. Jazz musicians learn to listen and communicate with each other, to be deeply attuned to the nuances of time, gesture, attitude, and sound that each player brings to the performance. This spirit of interactive collaboration often makes the instruments of the band sound like so many voices engaged in a conversation—horn sections spraying riffs across the bandstand; a pianist “comping” behind a soloist; a drummer “dropping a bomb” to kick the band forward; horn players and the drummer “trading fours” or eights like sentences building themselves into a paragraph.

Jazz *speaks*, in other words, through means that can make post-performance written accounts seem secondary or even superfluous. Every musician I know habitually enacts a ritual that seems to have been adopted as a craft requirement: to dismiss critics out of hand, to deny their power of knowledge in this realm. And yet many of these musicians can tell me, sometimes almost word for word, what a particular critic has said about them. Much as jazz has remained rooted in African-derived performance traditions that stress in-the-moment oral and gestural communication, it is also a commercial product whose fate hinges on public understanding (or misunderstanding). It is also, especially for African American musicians and audiences, a hugely important form of historical memory, a vessel of deep meaning testifying to the heroic survival and cultural distinction of an oppressed minority group. Jazz critics may think of what they are doing as an exercise in formal analysis, but musicians read jazz criticism as a first draft of *their* history. This has led to complicated, fraught, and fascinating relationships between musicians and writers. The two black musicians who were most ferocious in condemning white critics, Miles Davis and Charles Mingus, were among those who had the most intimate personal relationships with the white critics they considered exceptions to the general rule. Davis's autobiography, whose bid for raw voice-of-the-musician authenticity dictates regular spasms of critic-bashing, is in fact a highly mediated narrative that contains—as part of the editorial intervention of collaborator Quincy Troupe—whole sections of musical analysis and career emplotment lifted directly from the work of one of Davis's biographers.⁸

It was Thelonious Monk who said: “If you want to know what's going on in jazz, ask a musician.” Many musicians have been fine writers and powerful

spokespersons for the music. Black musicians especially have found it important to speak for and about jazz, and their own contributions to it, in ways that challenge or correct what they see as distortions, evasions, and calumnies generated by the white-dominated critical establishment. Nat Hentoff, one of the white writers who has been most sensitive to this dynamic, wrote in the early 1960s: “the Negro player frequently does not believe that the critics—nearly all of whom are white—have paid the emotional ‘dues’ he has been assessed from the time he was born. Therefore, he reasons, not always with justice, how can the critics possibly understand his message, which is so much more than the notes he plays?”⁹ Many black musicians—including W. C. Handy, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Herbie Nichols, Billy Taylor, Jon Hendricks, Charles Mingus, Abbey Lincoln, Archie Shepp, Art Taylor, David Baker, Anthony Braxton, Leo Smith, Marion Brown, George Lewis, Wynton Marsalis, Salim Washington, and Guthrie Ramsey Jr.—have written about jazz in the idioms of memoir, journalism, interview, criticism, and scholarship.¹⁰ There’s nothing essentially “black” that unites these black musician/writers; there’s also no mistaking that these voices are collectively distinct from those of the white critics. In particular, black musician/critics have tended to emphasize the social messages embodied in the music (“so much more than the notes”) and usually have been more concerned with jazz’s function as a form of communal bonding, ritual, and social interaction—jazz not just as a collection of sounds, but as a way of living in the world. In this approach to jazz, criticism is a form of participatory discourse embedded within the social process of music-making, not a form of judgment or analysis delivered from on high.

Art Blakey carried the language of jazz forward as a master drummer, bandleader, teacher, and orator. For nearly half a century, his group, the Jazz Messengers, functioned as a kind of workshop guild where younger musicians (including Wynton Marsalis) served an apprenticeship in rhythm, harmony, professional deportment, and jazz evangelism. Blakey was like a preacher who first tended to the souls of his flock, then delivered the good word to anyone who would listen. His concern was not primarily for my hipness and enlightenment, but for the survival of a cultural form that carried the history of his people.

Romance and Race

Jazz critics, alas, can be ignored, reviled, resented, misunderstood, or appreciated. What they cannot be—if one is to reckon fully with the cultural history of jazz—is avoided. The British writer Geoff Dyer, in *But Beautiful: A*

Book about Jazz (1996), a set of “poetically charged vignettes” about jazz musicians and their pathologies, calls his approach “imaginative criticism” to distinguish it from the “enacted criticism” practiced by musicians themselves as they continually absorb, interpret, revise, amplify, and reject the existing jazz canon. The tradition of jazz criticism per se, as it has come to be known, Dyer does not explicitly engage—with the result that he fails to acknowledge that his imaginative criticism is crucially dependent on anecdotes, notions, images, and arguments that have come from the trench work of jazz critics.¹¹

Dyer is an adherent of the Romantic tragic view of jazz, one that likens Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Eric Dolphy to Shelley, Keats, and Schubert, seeing in all both a talent “consuming itself even as it flourishes” and the grounds for an argument that “premature death is a condition of creativity.” He sees the jazz life as one defined by “drink, drugs, discrimination, grueling travel, [and] exhausting hours” but muses that “the damage wrought on jazz musicians is such that you wonder if there is not something else, something in the form itself which exacts a terrible toll from those who create it.”¹² The critics I study in this book by and large have taken a different view of the music and the musicians. While obituary writing has always been a staple of their trade, and while their impassioned eulogizing of favorite musicians might sound like so many nails being driven into jazz’s coffin, even this part of the job usually radiates the exalted hopes they’ve attached to the music’s potential as a force of joy, redemption, and transcendence. Peruse the work of any of major jazz critic, and it won’t be long before you find an essay arguing that Armstrong, Ellington, Earl Hines, Billie Holiday, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Carter, Red Rodney, and Doc Cheatham improved with age, that it’s their late-career performances—usually trashed by greenhorn critics itching for the shock of the new—that truly reveal the fullness of these musicians’ artistry. For every sensational example of a famous musician’s tragic decline, these critics offer multiple counterexamples of “outcats” gamely staying afloat in obscurity or exile, then suddenly breaking out in a burst of fugitive glory.

The sensibility at work here might be described as passionate rather than tragic, romantic rather than Romantic. This has something to do with the exigencies of the trade. The people we call jazz critics have never enjoyed the occupational security that goes with the tenured academic positions available to elite literary critics, or with the handsome paychecks available to savvy rock critics who know their way around the media conglomerates that undergird rock’s multibillion-dollar industry. Like the vast majority of jazz musicians, they’ve had to scramble and scuffle to stay afloat in their chosen discipline. As noted by Dan Morgenstern, the jazz critic and editor who

now directs the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers/Newark, jazz critics have worked as “editors and a&r [record company artist-and-repertory] men, broadcasters and emcees, publicity flacks and personal managers, concert producers and TV script advisors, songwriters and lecturers.”¹³

No writer has ever made a living writing exclusively about jazz, and most of the jazz writing that brings any decent remuneration is not the rhetorical analysis and aesthetic judgment that has defined “criticism” in the Western intellectual tradition since Aristotle, but rather the reportorial human-interest stories and celebrity profile magazine pieces that add splash and color to modern journalism. Morgenstern’s jazz critic job description doesn’t include the non-jazz world employment—encyclopedia editing, adjunct teaching, and the like—that even some of the most famous U.S. jazz critics have needed to pay their bills.

In a field of black creative leadership, most jazz critics are white, and they’ve often brought to their work a heightened sense of social purpose in a culture in which crossing the color line historically has been fraught with complications. (Jazz, said Martin Williams, represents “our unsolved problems, all our lack of self-knowledge, all sorts of things . . . we refuse to admit or refuse to face up to.”)¹⁴ Precisely because of the relatively smaller number of black voices (and other voices of color) in this discourse, black critics have carried even more of a burden—the burden of “representing the race” in a way that answers to the complex and often contradictory demands of their communities. Across lines of color, there’s a romanticism that imbues every jazz critic’s engagement with the music, usually starting with an intense, life-changing shock of discovery that comes during adolescence, packing all the power of a religious epiphany. For white critics, the challenge is to talk about their enchantment with black hipness, rhythmic finesse, sensuality, and emotional expressiveness—sometimes expressed through their attraction to white musicians who’ve absorbed black style—without coming off as lame caricatures of the White Negro or Wigger. For black critics, the challenge is to marshal and distill their privileged access to black culture without buying into notions of racial mystique born of white envy or blacker-than-thou purity. Understanding and honestly discussing the emotional complexities of this challenge is quite difficult.

Against endemic suspicion of their motives and qualifications—“the jazz critic is at best tolerated and at worst despised by the great majority of jazz musicians,” Morgenstern has said¹⁵—the critics I’ve studied (race aside) have achieved insider status on the jazz scene, an exceptional status that hasn’t guaranteed their veracity or trustworthiness nor insulated them from musicians’ abuse and censure. Still, as intimates and confidants of the musicians, they’ve known a great deal about the hardships and dissipations that

have been a part of the jazz life. But they've also known something about the prosaic day-to-day struggles and the simple pleasures of musicians' lives. They've known that musicians have bills, hobbies, political views, and favorite foods, movies, and sports teams. They've known about this musician's unruly affairs of the heart and that one's engrossing idiosyncrasies of mind.

These matters of heart and mind can't be reduced to narrow notions of race, but neither can they transcend race in a society that has built itself on a racial fault line. Until the advent of the Lincoln Center jazz program under Wynton Marsalis, no major U.S. cultural institution having anything to do with jazz has had black leadership. U.S. jazz magazines—*Down Beat*, *Metronome*, *Record Changer*, *The Jazz Review*, *Jazz* (later *Jazz & Pop*), *Jazz Magazine*, *Jazz Times*, and *Jazziz*, among others—historically have been dominated by white ownership and editorial control. White voices likewise have dominated jazz's representation in the mainstream print and broadcast media. Record companies and booking agencies have always been white-controlled. In the face of this, it's hardly surprising that some black jazz musicians would liken the jazz world to a plantation economy or would group white critics along with record executives, agents, and club owners as members of the master class.

At the same time, precisely because of this white hegemony in the jazz business and in U.S. culture more generally, it's been crucial for black musicians to gain white critics as allies, and for these critics to use their white privilege on behalf of the musicians. The black writer Amiri Baraka remembers the night in 1960 “when I was a little boy of 25 trying to be a jazz critic I had gone without benefit of a sponsor to the Village Vanguard where [Miles] Davis was playing.” Baraka—then LeRoi Jones—wandered into the dressing room, hoping to get an interview with the man he had idolized in his youth in Newark as a fledgling trumpeter and bebop fan. He was left high and dry. “He waved off my request, mumbling something, I guess about how he didn't want to be bothered.” The disappointed but daring Baraka shot back at Davis: “I'd bet you'd do it if I was Nat Hentoff!”¹⁶ Even when they've most wanted to assert their autonomy and develop more authentic forms of black art (during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, for example), African American artists have never fully exempted themselves from white patronage, critical support, or creative influence. It is the lot of the black artist in America to come to terms with what Langston Hughes called the “white shadows.”¹⁷ This includes cultivating what Emily Bernard calls “the white exception”—which for black jazz musicians has usually meant a white critic who has demonstrated a knowledge of black culture, a social ease with black people, and a proven ability to change minds and shape tastes in the broader culture.¹⁸ For the

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