Review

Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics
by John Gennari

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Jazz critics may not immediately recognize themselves in this book's subtitle; instead, they may suppose John Gennari devotes equal attention to jazz and people who don't like it. Few jazz critics featured in this sweeping masterwork of jazz historiography have even identified themselves as such. The term "jazz critic" has always been shamed by association with pseudo-intellectual magazine journalism. At the same time, it can sound too pretentious for a vernacular musical idiom. And of course jazz musicians tend to defame critics as parasites and ignoramuses desperate for reflected glory. In terms of musical literacy, the bar is indeed too low: unlike their classical counterparts, jazz critics for highbrow magazines, major newspapers or NPR need not learn to identify a quarter-note. For aspiring jazz critics, *Blowin' Hot and Cool* sheds this dreary pedigree. Jazz musicians take their heroic lineage for granted, and Gennari gives the critics their own core curriculum.

Gennari's narrative leads us through early codifications of jazz aesthetics in the 1930s; modernist vs. "moldy fig" debates of the 1940s, stirred by bebop and the Dixieland revival; the "liberal consensus" view of the 1950s "golden age," as incarnated in the Newport Jazz Festival and Lenox School of Jazz; critical upheaval in the 1960s, sparked by

black radicalism and the onslaught of rock, pop and soul; and the "jazz wars" of the 1980s and 1990s often centered on Wynton Marsalis and his stewardship of Jazz at Lincoln Center. Also included, awkwardly, is a chapter-length study of Ross Russell's lifelong obsession with alto saxophone great Charlie "Bird" Parker. Gennari's storyline is often too episodic, disjointed or repetitive, the likely result of a standard academic practice: publishing self-contained advance chapters in journals.

Gennari weaves critics' personal histories and perspectives into a grand picture of the jazz world, not just its critical bookshelf. Featured prominently from the 1930s generation are John Hammond, the Vanderbilt scion turned radical political activist, artist manager, record producer, concert promoter, and writer; and Leonard Feather, a British Jew, prolific author, able pianist and songwriter. Later we hear from traditionalist Rudi Blesh, modernist Barry Ulanov, black literati Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, and Yale medieval English scholar Marshall Stearns, who became "jazz's leading explicator, institution-builder, propagandist, and missionary." Gennari confesses his own politics are "closer to the 1960s radicals than to the cold war liberals," but his closest sympathies seem to lie with critics who came of age in the 1950s, particularly Nat Hentoff, Dan Morgenstern, Whitney Balliett, Martin Williams, and Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. Leroi Jones). Gennari is a fine critic of critics, and we really grow old with these men. He also knows when to include musicians' testimony, noting how they've exploited critics even while vilifying them (Miles Davis being a prime example).

Critical efforts to formalize an aesthetic model, anoint pantheonic figures, designate canonical recordings, and differentiate jazz from popular mass culture were in full swing as far back as the 1930s. (The jitterbug dancer, for example, now just a picturesque accessory to an era when jazz was popular, was then seen by many critics as a threat to its artistic legitimacy.) Gennari has written our best synthesis of jazz critics' never-ending struggle to "reconcile the music's ceaseless forward-moving energy with its equally strong impulse to commemorate and celebrate its history and tradition." (298) Haunting his entire study is the spectre of race, befitting John Szwed's memorable characterization of the black jazz musician as "the first truly nonmechanical metaphor for the twentieth century."

In this space I cannot possibly do justice to all these critical viewpoints, for which I enthusiastically refer you to the book. I do, however, have some reservations about Gennari's methods to bear in mind, and some additional thoughts on the jazz critic's role.

The world of jazz studies has recently witnessed a dramatic proliferation of scholarship from the humanities departments of academia. This is a much welcome development, but also a mixed blessing. Gennari, an assistant professor of English at the University of Vermont (where he directs an ethnic studies program), is inclined to avoid postmodernist academic excess by writing personal, jargon-free prose, without too much psychoanalyzing or voguish, impenetrable theory. He presents earlier generations of critics not just as unwitting channelers of "discourses," but also as free people with the dignity of their own beliefs. And yet it's an indication how entrenched academic dogma has become, that Gennari's nonalignment seems too tentative.

Gennari will have none of the vulgar-p.c. view of jazz critics, stating at the outset, "I want...to challenge and revise the hoary image of the white jazz critic as a parasite or vampire sucking blood and loot off of black musicians." (10) He is also conscientious about inclusion of black critics, and has valuable insights on the differing role of the black press. Other times, however, Gennari should heed a quote in his own book from Yale professor Robert Farris Thompson, a white historian of African and African-American art, and disciple of Marshall Stearns:

> [Stearns] knew so much about black traditions, so he was able to bring a relaxed, totally natural quality to his conversations across the race line. It was a revelation. It was the opposite of today's postmodern concept of the 'other,' with its thousands of spidery webs trapping us in self-consciousness, never allowing us to cross divides. Follow the implications of seeing culture as a 'predicament' to the ultimate, and you might as well just slit your throat. Marshall would have none of that. (154)

When the music transports you, race and identity drop away. Too often today's academics, on principle, with the best of intentions, can't let you forget who you are, lest their training go to waste.

The nadir in this regard is Gennari's chapter on Ross Russell, which includes excerpts from Russell's unpublished correspondence with music writer Albert Goldman. In the 1940s Russell's record company Dial cut some of Charlie Parker's greatest records. Russell later wrote a Parker biography and a novel, *The Sound*, based on his life. Referring to *The Sound*, Gennari writes:

> In retrospect, Russell's rhetorical strategies are less interesting for the degree of their authenticity, their fidelity to a 'real' jazz world and its argot, than they are as evidence of Russell's self-positioning as a figure of ethnographic and critical white intellectual authority. One cannot help but notice, on this count, the heterosexist and racial anxieties coursing through the novel, nor the way in which exoticized Others are brought on stage to allay these anxieties to permit some sort of narrative resolution. (310)

Particularly revealing is Gennari's notion that a psychoanalytic diagnosis of "Russell's self-positioning" is more interesting than verifying his portrayal of the "real" jazz world, which would require more research than reading

Russell's novel and rummaging through his letters.

Gennari's race emphasis is usually nuanced and enlightening. In contrast, his persistent gender theorizing can be insufferable, beginning with all the glib references to "phallic one-upmanship" without any phallus in sight. The most ongoing gender theme is how "...male critics have buttressed their masculinist authority by distancing themselves from sentimental attachments to the popular music of their youth" (16). In other words, males mature. Even some females shed the sentimental attachments of their youth; a few even learn to like jazz.

Here bebop, the modern jazz style pioneered by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie in the 1940s, is force-fitted into the going theory:

> Bebop traded heavily on imitative parody and developed a glossary of stylized mannerisms that went far beyond the figure of the assertively virile horn. The very theatricality of bebop performance called attention to itself as a performance, a display. In so doing, bebop's male performers positioned themselves as objects of the spectatorial gaze, a position many scholars have argued is normatively assigned in Western aesthetic traditions to the feminine pole of the gender continuum. (319)

Bebop musicians were hardly more theatrical than their swing predecessors, but in Gennari's sloppy stream of association, any kind of performative shtick makes you girly. In the end, none of this casuistry sheds any light on the two most enduring mysteries of jazz and gender: why is jazz more male-dominated than other musics, and what if anything would constitute an alternative "female" or "gay" jazz aesthetic?

Some of the book's strongest passages look beyond the race-and-gender axis to broader patterns of American cultural hybridization. Here Gennari credits 1930s jazz criticism and the book *Jazzmen* with helping create:

> ...a new sense of the authentic American experience, an experience akin to those chronicled in 1930s urban proletarian literature and ethnographic journalism and pictured in one of the new Hollywood genres, the gangster film. To the American folkloric pantheon of Daniel Boone, Paul Bunyan, and John Henry were now added the gods and demigods of a new music--Buddy Bolden, Bunk Johnson, Joe "King" Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Leon Rappolo, Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, Bix Beiderbecke. No longer would the Wild West frontier stand alone as America's mythic place of adventure, not after *Jazzmen*'s vivid etching of jazz's incubating sites-- New Orleans's Storyville red-light district, Mississippi riverboats, Capone-controlled Chicago clubs, 52nd Street in New York--in all the glory of their racial and sexual taboo defiance. (123)

Jazz studies needs more of this kind of criticism, especially from scholars with Gennari's broad literary background. Any old grad student can deconstruct jazz novels for exoticized Others, heterosexist anxieties and racial self-positionings.

The foremost weakness of postmodernist jazz studies from the cultural wings of academia has been the neglect of sound. Too often, the music itself is denied the right to constitute "discourse" on its own terms, and becomes a mere cipher for the projection of each listener's subjectivities. Gennari was a "fledgling drummer" as a youth, and clearly knows the music broadly from within the jazz nerd fraternity. In this book the music does get its word in, constantly humbling its analysts. In some cases, however, Gennari isn't paying enough attention to what music is and how it is made. A red flag went up when Gennari, in a typical postmodernist reflex, referred to recordings and written music being "held to represent an empirically knowable artistic tradition," as if this were a quaint idea.

Postmodernists have wisely questioned the "sober formalism of traditional musicology," but this shouldn't become an excuse for non-musicians to avoid any reckoning with musical syntax. Gennari raises an eyebrow as Gunther Schuller, the classical composer and jazz scholar, uses "musical notations and terms like 'tritone' and 'major third,'..." -- as if such basic vocabulary were impossibly fussy and arcane. Schuller "also transcribed improvised passages from the recordings, creating notated musical examples amenable to performance and stylistic analysis." (343) We're supposed to find this fetishistic, but jazz musicians themselves learn this way, so we should take heed. More broadly, Gennari has a selection bias for criticism that's amenable to ideological comparison. This under-represents "music as music" strains of criticism, and thus inadvertently devalues the main event: music as it enters you in real time.

Even when music is not just music, Gennari sometimes needs to let it speak in its own language. For example, he tells the story of a black soldier and jazz fan stationed in France in 1945. The soldier takes pride in how the French Resistance celebrated victory by blasting Louis Armstrong's "Struttin' With Some Barbecue" and Duke Ellington's "Black and Tan Fantasy" in the streets. He is later disappointed that America's 1963 freedom marchers neglect jazz in favor of the spiritual "We Shall Overcome." The choice of liberationist theme is presented only in terms of the music's political and cultural associations. Gennari doesn't consider the music's nature: jazz isn't puritan enough for nonviolent resistors, and "We Shall Overcome" is much better suited to solemn mass spectacle and participation.

You wouldnt know it from *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, but the

question of whether jazz criticism requires musical literacy has become particularly contentious with the dramatic growth in jazz scholarship from cultural studies departments. How musical does a jazz critic need to be, if the great critics of poetry have also been poets? For deeper answers to this question, readers will have to turn elsewhere.

Have jazz critics really made a significant difference to the music and its reception? Gennari presents a strong case in favor, knowing you can't rely on an invisible hand to eventually recognize all artistic achievement:

> Sometimes the creative output and livelihood of key musicians have been crucially abetted by the work of critics--John Hammond's patronage of Count Basie and Benny Goodman; Nat Hentoff's and Martin Williams's hyping of Charles Mingus, Ornette Coleman, and Thelonious Monk; Amiri Baraka's scribing of the 1960s "new thing"; Gary Giddins' numerous interventions on behalf of loft-jazz warriors and aging masters; Albert Murray and Stanley Crouch's coddling of the 1980s neoclassicists. When Marshall Stearns and other critics helped construct the concept of the 'jazz mainstream' and had it implemented at the Newport Jazz Festival and the Lenox School of Jazz, they provided important opportunities not just for a celebration of the jazz past, but for the hatching of creative visions for the jazz future. Such efforts were crucial for another reason: they made jazz part of a larger cultural discourse, and they secured its place in the American narrative. (380-1)

At the same time, however, Gennari himself often points to these critics' superfluity. John Hammond is a prime example. Noting his patronage of key canonical figures Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman, Gennari writes that "no critic has ever wielded as much influence over the development and direction of jazz as Hammond did during the Swing Era." (24) But after reading about Duke Ellington's scathing 1939 indictment of Hammond as an "ardent propagandist," and Hammond's "fine line between healthy advocacy and paternalistic meddling," (41) we have to wonder whether his net services to the music canceled out.

Hammond's case also illustrates that much of what Gennari presents under the umbrella of "criticism" is better described as advocacy, or tastemaking, or providing a kind of parallel sourcebook and support system for the inner sanctum in which the music is actually played and listened to. Of course all criticism is secondary, but jazz criticism is especially haunted by its own tangency. Gennari invokes Ralph Ellison as a warning to all of jazz's would-be interpreters:

> For Ellison, jazz's very resistance to conventional procedures of historical investigation was itself emblematic of the music's Americanness. If jazz's protean, processual, spontaneous, fleeting, and elusive practices and meaning confound the notater, the critic, and the historian, such is the price--Ellison would suggest--of living in a democracy where the experiences of the people count for more than the authority of the trained expert. (118)

Nonetheless, Gennari is confident jazz critics mean more to jazz than other popular music critics mean to popular music. "Of all the great American vernacular musics," he writes, "only jazz has cultivated intellectual discourse as a core element of its superstructure"(14). Gennari spotlights the cream of the crop, backing up this contention well. On average, however, I think popular music criticism attracts better writers, not just because of better pay, but also because rock and pop tend to require more extramusical clothing to make the music relevant and cool. Rock and pop musicians need "critical superstructure" (in the broad sense, highbrow to lowbrow, *The New York Times* to MTV) for the same reason jazz musicians pay less attention to their grooming and CD covers. Rock and pop also have lyrics, which makes criticism more integral. Don't jazz musicians more often say the music speaks for itself?

They also think their music is about "more than just the notes." This is no contradiction: jazz stands alone so well, without critical interpretation, precisely because it embodies so much of life experience. In any case, don't read too much jazz criticism too soon. Stick to Gennari's book, perhaps, and otherwise concentrate on the primary sources. Some of the best jazz critics and listeners have absorbed the most music--or even tried to play it--before reading what other critics have to say.

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