

Jazz and its Publics

PADDY WHANNEL

The Jazz Scene, Francis Newton.
MacGibbon & Kee (18s.).

A great deal of jazz writing is partisan, purist and pretentious. This can be seen in the sleeve notes as well as in the critical journals although the partisanship is common to both fans and critics. The claim has sometimes been that jazz is exclusively a negro music, more often the argument is about the various schools. Each has its defenders. Some would push the classic period back as far as the pre-Armstrong—King Oliver band. When I first became interested the leading *Melody Maker* critic wrote about the Golden Age of Nichols, Lang and Venuti. Today the great schism is Traditional/Modern.

Just how damaging this is can be appreciated by a reference to the two Penguin books, *Jazz* by Rex Harris, and *Recorded Jazz* by Harris and Brian Rust. In the latter, not only is there no reference to Parker, Christian or Monk, but Otilie Patterson is in and Billie Holliday out! The pretentiousness stems from a desire to give jazz standing. There is the eager snatching at any morsel of praise from respected legitimate musicians, the quotations from Ezra Pound, the maze of footnotes and the references to Cocteau, Horowitz, Cortot and Callas (this list from an article on Billie Holliday in the current *Jazz Monthly*). A good style is aimed at and something heavily old-fashioned and pompous is usually achieved.

Francis Newton's book, *The Jazz Scene*, is free from these faults. His approach to the schools is cool. His claims for the music are sensibly modest. The writing is lucid.

These are not merely negative virtues. The intense partisanship of much jazz writing has led to a romantic picture of the growth of jazz and a glamourised presentation of the musicians as disinterested artists fighting against commercialism. For, whatever their other disputes, there is general agreement among the critics that commercialism corrupts. This has driven many writers to explain the development of jazz exclusively in terms of its own inner logic. It is the particular merit of Mr. Newton's book that it opens out the discussion to include the relationship of jazz to popular music and commercial exploitation and to the publics for the music. He reveals the relationship as complex and many-sided.

The book includes sections on popular music, the jazz business and the fans, but the wider approach also informs the more orthodox sections on the development of jazz.

"Jazz," says Mr. Newton, "originally an urban folk music, therefore simultaneously developed towards commercial pop music, and towards a special kind of music for musicians, i.e. the embryo of art music."

He sees one of its merits as "proving that genuine music, even in the Twentieth Century, can avoid both the blind alleys of commercial pop music, which establishes its *rapport* with the public at the expense of art, and *avant-garde* art—music which develops its art at the expense of cutting itself off from all but a chosen public of experts."

The first two sections of the book describe in excellently condensed form the growth and character of jazz. Jazzmen are professional entertainers and the idea of amateurism is firmly dealt with. "But for the entertainment industry Bessie Smith might merely be a memory for a limited number of elderly negroes who had seen her on tour, and a handful of whites who had happened to take in a show in the deep south." Particularly good are the passages dealing with jazz and the pop world. The role of jazz in providing the source material for Tin Pan Alley's product—from the cakewalks and rags to rock and roll—is noted, but so also is the extent to which the relationship runs both ways. Pop songs have become jazz "standards" and some jazz instrumentation and devices have derived from the pop dance band. "A good deal of jazz is essentially the product of the cross between earlier jazz and Tin Pan Alley. In a word, there is no sharp dividing line between the two, except in the minds of the doctrinaires."

Other non-musical factors which have helped to shape jazz development are treated, the role of the white specialist public in creating the New Orleans revival or the element of social protest in the bop movement.

On the movement which produced "bop" and "cool" jazz, Newton writes that it was a "more deliberate musical break" (i.e. than the earlier development of jazz out of folk music). This may be true, and part of it may be described in terms of the musicians' reaction against the standardised playing of the big bands. This is to give the modern movement the same genesis as the New Orleans Revival. But the new style of playing did not come out of thin air.

"Though nobody predicted it at the time, we can now see that 'modern' jazz developed logically out of the middle period."

This makes the middle period particularly significant and one would like to have seen it receiving a fuller treatment. Middle period musicians like Lester Young are obviously important and Mr. Newton traces the tradition further back to the playing of the New York white school of Nichols and Trambauer. This is the sort of hint it would have been useful to follow up. It is not enough to say that the middle period was the period of big bands, because alongside the growth of swing and the Kansas City style there were small permanent outfits such as the John Kirby band and many pick-up groups of coloured musicians playing very hot jazz. Indeed, apart from its historical interest, the period of the late thirties and

early forties provided some of the best jazz on record. It is odd that this did not receive more mention as one of the outstanding sessions with Pete Brown, Albert Casey, James P. Johnson and others was led by the original Francis Newton. (This magnificent session which produced "Who" and "Rompin'" was one of the late Lester Young's favourite recordings and was dismissed by Rex Harris as "very commercial".) There is, in fact, no absolutely "clean break". Indeed in some respects the modern movement represents a return to more fundamental jazz sources—this is true, for example, of jazz drumming.

Jazz in society is the subject of *The Jazz Scene* and a world larger than that of jazz is illuminated. The banjo player Johnny St. Cyr is quoted:

"You see the average working man is very musical. Playing music for him is just relaxing. . . . The more enthusiastic his audience is, why, the more spirit the working man's got to play."

Mr. Newton comments: "If we need an illustration of the sort of art, and the sort of relation between art and the people, of which William Morris dreamed (an art made by the people for the people as a joy for the maker and the user) we might do worse than this. It is a good deal. It is demonstrably from the reality of the arts in our Western urban and industrial society, and the chances are that every decade by industrialising and standardising the production of mass entertainment, shifts it farther away. How are we to restore the arts to their proper place in life, and to bring out the creative capacities in all of us? I do not claim that jazz holds the answer; indeed, much of it has gone down one or other of the blind alleys which bedevil the arts in our world: either into commercialised pop music or into esoteric art music. But the history of jazz, that remarkable noise from the Mississippi Delta which has, without benefit of patronage or advertising campaigns, conquered an astonishing range of geographical and social territory, can supply some of the material for an answer."

The development of jazz parallels that of the cinema. Both have grown up in the lifetime of people now only in their late middle-age. Both have developed art forms within commercial and popular entertainment. Their audience comes largely from the same age range (16-24) and a somewhat similar social class. The young working class Briton responds more readily to this American music and the Hollywood film than to the native product. The young people who attend the jazz clubs and the Hootenanys have fought for their music often in face of opposition from the adult and commercial world.

This is something over which Educationists should ponder. This book is as good an introduction for the layman as there possibly exists. I hope that in particular many teachers will read it. Not because I want to see our schools setting up courses on the story of jazz from Buddy Bolden to Stan Getz (obviously part of the appeal of jazz to the young is (hat it is *not* part of the educational establishment) but because an understanding of the urban popular arts will help us to get the task of teaching in a better focus.

Only a short time ago we read in the *Melody Maker*: "Police guards were posted outside Billie Holiday's room in New York's Metropolitan Hospital this week. Still seriously ill with cirrhosis of the liver and a heart disease, Lady Day was under arrest for an alleged narcotics offence."

A little later her death was announced in the evening papers. And so Billie Holiday died as she had lived, hounded by the society that had helped to make her what she was. In her autobiography she describes how she had to put dark grease paint on her face to appear with the Basie band in case the customers would think she was a white girl singing with a coloured orchestra. In the same book there is this statement:

"By the time Mom and I got together and found us a place of our own in Harlem the depression was on. At least so we heard tell." It was always the depression for Billie even when she was rich and successful. The sadness is there in the songs and, right from those first wonderful sessions with Teddy Wilson in 1935, so is the artistry. Even at the end no one could sing a song quite like Billie and no one has written about her more movingly than Francis Newton.

