Jazz Icons

Today, jazz history is dominated by iconic figures who have taken on an almost god-like status. From Satchmo to Duke, Bird to Trane, these legendary jazzmen form the backbone of the jazz tradition. Jazz icons not only provide musicians and audiences with figureheads to revere but have also come to stand for a number of values and beliefs that shape our view of the music itself. Jazz Icons explores the growing significance of icons in jazz and discusses the reasons why the music’s history is increasingly dependent on the legacies of ‘great men’. Using a series of individual case studies, Tony Whyton examines the influence of jazz icons through different forms of historical mediation, including the recording, language, image and myth. The book encourages readers to take a fresh look at their relationship with iconic figures of the past and challenges many of the dominant narratives in jazz today.

Tony Whyton is Reader in the School of Media, Music and Performance at the University of Salford. Prior to joining the University of Salford, he was responsible for the creation, management and strategic development of the Centre for Jazz Studies UK at Leeds College of Music. He was the founding editor of the interdisciplinary journal The Source: Challenging Jazz Criticism and co-edits the internationally peer-reviewed Jazz Research Journal.
Jazz Icons

Heroes, Myths and the Jazz Tradition

TONY WHYTON
University of Salford
For my parents, Irene and Wallace Whyton
Cultural memory begins with death: the death of the creator. The search for meaning is left to the survivors. It is up to us to decide how to tell the story, how best to represent the struggle and achievement of artists whose lives belong to the past but whose music continues to live in the present. (Scott DeVeaux, The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History)

The history of jazz has come to be read as fabulous, in fact as a kind of Romance; and that history shows how Romance can turn readily into cult, into the regular making of icons, beginning with Buddy Bolden and going at least to John Coltrane. Jazz confirms the claim that our acts of fabulation cannot seriously be separated from the rest of our social lives … That the history of jazz has lent itself so readily to the making of myths explains much of its fascination, much of the power it has with us. (Frederick Garber, ‘Fabulating Jazz’)

If the study of jazz is to come of age and thrive as a discipline, criticism of canonical masters must be tolerated or, at the very least, received without rancor. (Krin Gabbard, ‘Krin Gabbard Replies’)

A jazz fan dies and reaches the other world and meets St Peter, who takes him to a club with bad lighting, crowded tables, and bored waitresses. But when he sees that the customers include Lester Young, Billie Holiday, Monk, and Bird, he cries out to St Peter, ‘This is heaven!’ Then he notices a figure sitting at the end of the bar, dressed all in black, his back turned to the audience. ‘Who’s that?’ asks the fan. ‘Oh’, says St Peter, ‘that’s God. He thinks he’s Miles Davis.’ (John Szwed, ‘The Man’)
Contents

List of illustrations  [page viii]
Acknowledgements  [ix]

Introduction: Jazz narratives and sonic icons  [1]
1 Jazz icons, heroes and myths  [15]
2 Jazz and the disembodied voice  [38]
3 Not a wonderful world: Louis Armstrong meets Kenny G  [57]
4 Men can’t help acting on Impulse!  [82]
5 Witnessing and the jazz anecdote  [106]
6 Dispelling the myth: essentialist Ellington  [127]
7 Birth of the school  [153]

Notes  [178]
Bibliography  [207]
Index  [218]
Illustrations

1 Still from *Collateral*, 2004; courtesy of Photofest [1]
2 Duke Ellington at the London Palladium, 1933; Max Jones Archive @ aol.com [15]
3 John Coltrane, publicity photograph; Max Jones Archive @ aol.com [38]
4 Louis Armstrong, London, 1956; Max Jones Archive @ aol.com [57]
5 John Coltrane; Max Jones Archive @ aol.com [82]
6 John Coltrane, *The Classic Quartet: Complete Impulse! Studio Recordings*, photograph by Paul Floyd Blake [88]
7 Advertisement for Donald Harrison’s *Nouveau Swing*, courtesy of Universal Music [97]
8 Roy Haynes, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus and Charlie Parker; Max Jones Archive @ aol.com [106]
9 Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn; Max Jones Archive @ aol.com [127]
10 Duke Ellington and Sonny Greer, 1933; Max Jones Archive @ aol.com [153]
Acknowledgements


I am extremely grateful to several friends and colleagues who have offered support and advice in putting this book together. In particular, Krin Gabbard, Barry Kernfeld and Jonty Stockdale provided enthusiasm and belief in my work from the outset; without their encouragement this project would not have materialised. I have also been fortunate to have had active advice from, and critical engagement with, a number of scholars including Mine Dogantan-Dack, Nicholas Gebhardt, John Howland, Stuart Nicholson, Lewis Porter, Derek Scott, Alan Stanbridge and Catherine Tackley, all of whom offered me food for thought, encouragement and some brilliant suggestions for improvement. I would also like to acknowledge colleagues at the University of Salford and Leeds College of Music for supporting my research work; in particular, I would like to thank John Mundy, George McKay and David Sanjek for providing me with suitable working conditions to finish this manuscript. I am especially grateful to Julian Rushton for his advice and support at the proposal stage and would also like to thank Victoria Cooper, Rebecca Jones, the anonymous reviewers and staff at Cambridge University Press for their professionalism, patience and enthusiasm. Several people aided my research by providing with interesting source material. In particular, Michael Cuscuna, Paul Floyd Blake, Nick Jones, Peter Martin, Dale Perkins, Andrew Simons, and Sarah Hutchinson at Universal Music have all provided materials that have found their way into the book in one way or another. I would also like...
to thank all of my undergraduate and postgraduate students who have been subjected to, and actively engaged with, the development of ideas within this study. Finally, I am eternally indebted to Fiona who, from the outset, has been an incredibly understanding wife, excellent critic and enthusiastic supporter of my work.