Almost immediately after jazz became popular nationally in the United States in the early twentieth century, American writers responded to what this exciting art form signified for listeners. This book takes an expansive view of the relationship between this uniquely American music and other aspects of American life, including books, films, language, and politics. Observing how jazz has become a cultural institution, widely celebrated as “America’s classical music,” the book also never loses sight of its beginnings in Black expressive culture and its enduring ability to critique problems of democracy or speak back to violence and inequality, from Jim Crow to George Floyd. Taking the reader through time and across expressive forms, this volume traces jazz as an aesthetic influence, a political force, and a representational focus in American literature and culture. It shows how jazz has long been a rich source of aesthetic stimulation, influencing writers as stylistically wide-ranging as Langston Hughes, Eudora Welty, and James Baldwin, or artists as diverse as Aaron Douglas, Jackson Pollock, and Gordon Parks.

MICHAEL BORSHUK is Associate Professor of African American Literature and Director of the Humanities Center at Texas Tech University. He is the author of *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature* (2006), which won the Texas Tech University President’s Book Award for Outstanding Faculty Publication. He has written widely on African American literature, American modernism, and music. For ten years he wrote on jazz for *Coda* magazine.
Twenty-first-century America puzzles many citizens and observers. A frequently cited phrase to describe current partisan divisions is Lincoln’s “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” a warning of the perils to the Union from divisions generated by slavery. America seems divided in almost every way, on almost every attitude. Civic dialogue on issues often seems extremely difficult. America is an experiment always in process, a remarkable union of 300 million diverse people covering all races and faiths. As a forum in which ideologies and interpretations abound, Literary Studies has a role to play in explanation and analysis. The series Cambridge Themes in American Literature and Culture addresses the key cultural themes that have brought America to its current moment. It offers a summation of critical knowledge on key cultural themes as well as an intervention in the present moment. This series provides a distinctive, authoritative treatment of the key literary and cultural strains in American life while also pointing in new critical directions.

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JAZZ AND AMERICAN CULTURE

EDITED BY
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Will Finch’s research focuses on relationships between music and screen media. His doctoral thesis presented the first analysis of music and sound in the BBC’s off-beat arts documentary strand Arena (1975–present) – on the means by which Arena constructs ideas about music, and on the uses the series itself makes of music. He is currently working on an eco-critical history and analysis of sound and music at the BBC’s Natural History Unit and the ways they have shaped popular experiences and understandings of “nature.”

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Acknowledgments

Sometime after I’d assembled this volume’s roster of contributors and shared that list with everyone involved, one of them wrote back enthusiastically, “This is quite a big band you put together!” This is the perfect way to assess the collective excellence of the writers whose work follows here. Each of them, as unique as the soloists in a great ensemble, brings a vital perspective to the history of jazz and American culture. I am exceedingly grateful for their participation and their insight into the wide-ranging, century-plus context we explore together.

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