

**ASK ME NOW: CONVERSATIONS ON JAZZ & LITERATURE** by Sascha Feinstein  
(Ed) Indiana University Press, 2007.

**Reviewed by John Clare**

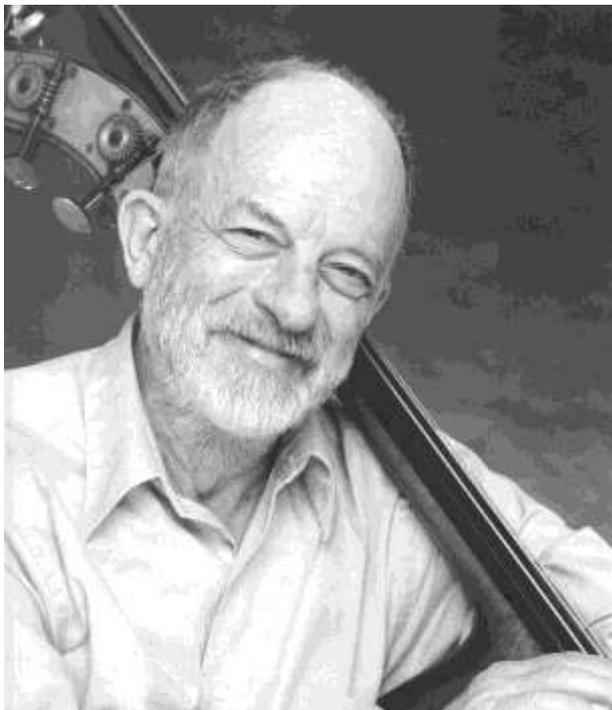
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*[This book review appeared in the first edition of the magazine Extempore, November, 2008, where Miriam Zolin was managing editor.]*

In his old *Downbeat* column 'Out Of My Head' satirist George Crater created a madly hip jazz critic called Zoot Finster. Herman J Pipesucker also figured. Who would want to be introduced as a jazz critic? A jazz reviewer is needed; you seem to know a bit about it and write acceptably. They give you the beret. It was not my mission in life but I came to enjoy it, and of course I take the job seriously.

Sascha Feinstein (real name) has assembled a series of conversations with jazz writers, with poets and novelists who have been influenced by jazz, and with musicians who write. They include Amiri Baraka, Gary Giddins, William Matthews, Sonia Sanchez, Philip Levine and Dan Morgenstern.

Each conversation is preceded by examples of the writer's poetry or prose. These are certainly mixed. Yet even the embarrassing stuff—including the poems that try to approximate jazz with syllables that would serve as well for an imitation of the Great Crested Grebe—is curiously compelling if you love the music. The best writing here by a musician (and perhaps the best prose of all) is that of Bill Crow, who was the bassist in a Gerry Mulligan Quartet whose sole album [*What Is There To Say?*] is a favourite of mine.



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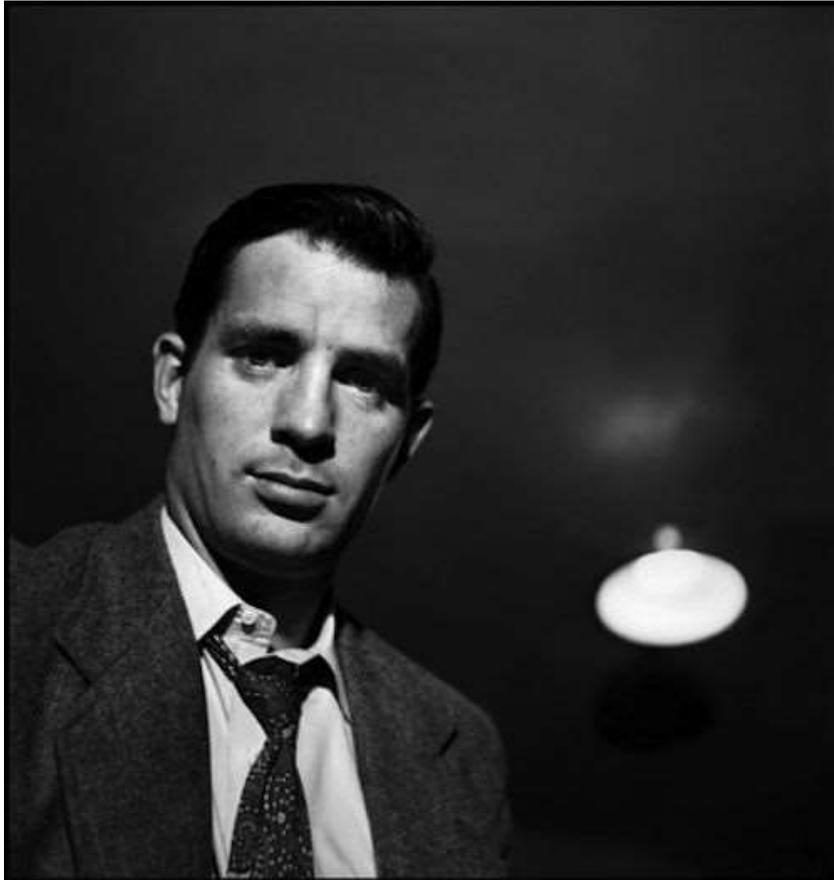
In one immaculate miniature he describes tenor saxophonist Stan Getz almost dying from a heroin overdose. What Getz says when the blood comes back into his face is ridiculously funny, and the little piece in its entirety is brilliantly written. A funny piece about an overdose. A hard thing to do, you will have to admit.



*Stan Getz almost died from a heroin overdose. What he says when the blood comes back into his face is ridiculously funny... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

The conversation with Crow is well worth reading for anyone who is even vaguely curious about jazz. His tastes are sometimes more conservative than mine, but that is neither here nor there. An obsession we share is Duke Ellington. Lamenting the lack of a great jazz biography, they raise the matter of Ellington's *Music Is My Mistress*, and here Crow says something very interesting: "There were large parts of him where you thought, "Oh Jesus, Duke, you don't have to lay it on that thick!" But I guess he did. When I got to reading more about him I realised there was so much superstition and ritual that was a necessary part of his life.'

Crow's writing is about jazz rather than consciously jazz-like. The latter is problematic. Needless to say, anyone who writes will try to write musically to a greater or lesser degree, and the music you are listening to will have some influence on the rhythms and cadences you favour. Of those who have who have tried to flat out write like jazz, I have to go back to good old Jack Kerouac for one of the few success stories. He is mentioned here a number of times, but not analysed. There is no debate on the matter overall. With a few exceptions, to which I will return, writers talk about their attraction to jazz and their tastes in literature overall, but not about the effect jazz has had on the form and execution of their work.



*Good old Jack Kerouac: one of the few success stories... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

On this subject, I have a recording of the late Paul Scofield reading T S Eliot and other verse. In the passage that begins 'A woman drew her long black hair out tight/And fiddled whisper music on those strings' he flutters and pounces in a series of rhythmic displacements, strange pauses and compensatory accelerations. The pulse beneath it is unerring, five beats to the line; his shifting tones are querulous, bleak, resonant and stern. That is a jazz solo, although I have no idea whether Scofield had any interest in the music.

Amira Baraka, whose early poetry and plays were published under his given name LeRoi Jones, has been associated with Kerouac and the Beats. Excerpts from his early work have some virulent kill whitey stuff in which he goes further over the top than Barack Obama's old pastor. It is interesting to see him refer sheepishly to his



*Amira Baraka: referring sheepishly to his early obnoxious (his word) Black Nationalist effusions...*

early obnoxious (his word) Black Nationalist effusions. Interesting, too, to read him on music and the spoken word. I was involved in this area with the band Free Kata and with other musicians including the late Roger Frampton.

We improvised from start to finish. It sounds like a bad idea, but we always got an exhilarating response (including at an actual poetry reading). I have transcribed some recordings of my improvisations, and I must admit that they reach a level beyond anything I have ever written. Curious.

In the general area of words and jazz, and of jazz affecting the music of words, the most interesting chapter—particularly for Australians—is that in which Yusef Komunyakaa discusses his poem *Testimony* (it is about Charlie Parker) which he performed with a small orchestra assembled by Australian composer and



*Yusef Komunyakaa (right), pictured here in 1985 on his wedding day with the Australian writer Mandy Sayer... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY MORNING HERALD*

saxophonist Sandy Evans at the Sydney Opera House. The work was commissioned by the ABC. This actually gets down to the stuff: how cadences in the music led to uncharacteristic line lengths and punctuation, etc. Komunyakaa's comments about Sandy Evans are heartwarming for those who love her writing and playing. I was there when the work was performed. It was a success, I felt, on several levels.

Philip Levine also talks about the influence of Thelonious Monk's compositions (the book under review is named after one) on the form of his collection of poems, *thelonious: a book of monk*. David Jauss—whose poem *Hymn Of Fire* for John Coltrane—is very effective, also makes a strong connection for the reader with his poetry and the lives and music of his subjects. His poem *Black Orchid* was based on Miles Davis's autobiography *Miles* and there is some useful discussion but no opinion of the autobiography—which, it seems to me was a book of strange and compelling power, for all its repetitions and neuroses.



*The American poet David Jauss: His poem Black Orchid was based on Miles Davis' autobiography Miles and there is some useful discussion but no opinion of the autobiography...*

A lot of very interesting history emerges in these discussions, to which Feinstein contributes intelligently. You may be surprised to learn that the long extinct jazz magazine *Metronome* published Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs (pre *Naked Lunch*) and others. Dan Morgenstern was there, and indeed so was Amira Baraka.

There is of course some irritating anti-pop/rock snobbery from one or two veteran writers. Significantly or not, this does not affect the black writers, who regard Little Richard and Aretha Franklin as being as much a part of their heritage as John Coltrane.



*Black writers regard Little Richard (above) and Aretha Franklin (below) as being as much a part of their heritage as John Coltrane...*



This is a book of considerable interest to jazz lovers, to those who are interested in words, and especially to those who are interested in the interactions of the two—although it could have gone a little further in that regard.