

A JAZZ ODYSSEY: MY LIFE IN JAZZ by Oscar Peterson. Continuum, 382pp, \$39.95.

Reviewed by John Clare

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Oscar Peterson could make the piano ring with brilliant clarity in all its registers. His command of the jazz vocabulary was magisterial, his swing and inventive flow almost frightening at times. He has suffered a stroke, but still plays beautifully.

His fans are legion. He has been invited into the homes of European nobility to play a treasured instrument after dinner. The head of Steinway sent a piano of his own choosing for Peterson to try when he heard the musician was looking for a new instrument.



This is Oscar Peterson's story in his own words. For fans it will deliver uniform satisfaction. For those who do not count him among their three or four favourite jazz pianists, some sections may seem rather cosy and clubby, particularly the chapters dealing with his long stint in impresario Norman Granz's travelling jam session, otherwise known as Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP).



Some sections may seem rather cosy and clubby, particularly the chapters dealing with Peterson's long stint in Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP), organised by impresario Norman Granz (above)...

Peterson is intelligent and articulate, and there is a beautifully described scene - a kind of still life within a moving bus - that will bring touring life vividly back to anyone who has been down that road. There are also accounts of pranks - typically involving fart cushions in lifts - where you realise you had to be there but are glad you weren't.

Whether or not we needed to know all the boys-together stuff, the touring accounts are valuable documentation. It is moving to read that in the American south the white musicians turned aside much anticipated hot meals and shared sandwiches with their black colleagues when the latter were refused service.

There is much that is moving in Peterson's success story. Both his mother and father - who was a boatswain on merchant ships, an unusual position for a black man - offered stern discipline and solid encouragement to their children.



Oscar's father Daniel (pictured above, left, with Oscar) was a boatswain on merchant ships. He and Oscar's mother offered stern discipline and solid encouragement to their children.... PHOTO CREDIT CANADIAN PACIFIC ROALROAD

The move from Montreal to the jazz centres across the border and thence to the four corners of the musical world must have seemed inevitable.

Upward, ever upward, it would seem. Except illness is no respecter of success. Nor is racism.

Picture this. Oscar Peterson, a world traveller by dint of natural talent and much hard work, is waiting for his bags to come round after a flight. Two women nearby are obviously confused, worried, even panicky, about their bags. Peterson overhears them and offers: "Ladies, your bags will come out on carousel three." They turn and stare, and one of them says, "Fuck off, nigger!"

Occurrences like this are not so rare as you might think. They have ruined more than a few beautiful days for Oscar Peterson.



I hope this doesn't ruin his day, but my favourite Peterson recordings are those in which he is an accompanist, for example, *Ella & Louis* and *Coleman Hawkins Encounters Ben Webster*.

