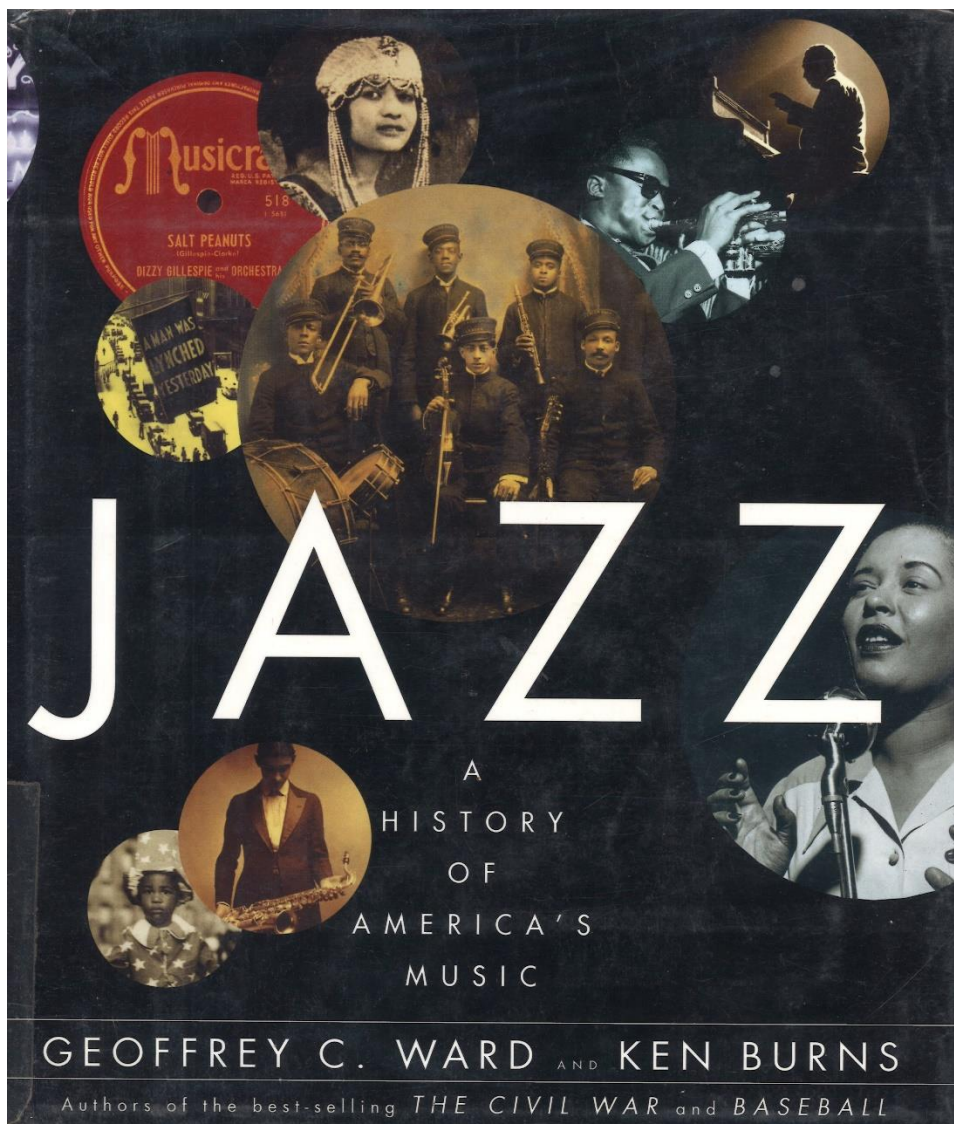


KEN BURNS'S JAZZ: INCOMPARABLE, COOL AND HEART-BREAKING

by Carter B Horsley*

[This is a review of the documentary series “Jazz”, and also of the book “Jazz, A History of America's Music” co-authored by Ken Burns and Geoffrey C Ward, Alfred A Knopf, pp 490, with about 500 illustrations, 2000, \$65. Published on “The City Review” website in January, 2001, at this link <https://www.thecityreview.com/jazz.html>]



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The 10-part series on "Jazz" by Ken Burns on PBS is a very impressive achievement that documents with considerable sophistication the early history of jazz, although it pretty much ignores the last few decades, thereby ignoring to a great extent the realms of "fusion," electronic" and "world" jazz that have continued to greatly expand the parameters of the genre.

The major stars of this production by Ken Burns, who gained fame with his public television documentaries on the Civil War and baseball are Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, and Charlie Parker.



Two of the five stars of the production are pictured here in 1948, Duke Ellington (left) and Louis Armstrong (right) with Billy Strayhorn (in the centre)...



Another of the five stars: Billie Holiday... PHOTO CREDIT BOB WILLOUGHBY



Two more of the five stars: Benny Goodman (above, pictured in 1986) and Charlie Parker (below)...



Also prominent are Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Lester Young, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Art Blakey, Dizzy Gillespie and Ornette Coleman, among others. The great bulk of the series is devoted to swing bands and Wynton Marsalis, the trumpeter, and Gary Giddins, Nat Hentoff and

Stanley Crouch, the critics, and Jackie McLean, the saxophonist, provide much of the narrative with considerable insight and affection. Giddins and Marsalis dominate much of the series' narration.

In his January 15, 2001 article, "Burns' *Jazz* Doesn't Swing," in *The New York Observer* (<http://newyorkobserver.com/pages/story.asp?ID=3673>), William Berling makes the following correct observations:

“It's clear from the tight-assed perspective of *Jazz* that trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, the 'senior creative consultant' on the project, is the real intellectual force behind the film.... Mr Marsalis, who is also the creative director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, has long made it clear where his affections lie. It's 'yes' to Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, and 'no' to post-60's jazz.... His traditional programs seek to establish a jazz canon, to make jazz a classical music.... Jazz lives, but you wouldn't know it from this film....”



Chick Webb on drums, Artie Shaw on clarinet and Duke Ellington on piano in a 1937 jam session at the Brunswick recording studio in New York. PHOTO CREDIT CHARLES PETERSON

While many of the greatest jazz groups of the middle of the 20th Century such as the Modern Jazz Quartet, Stan Kenton, Dave Brubeck and Gerry Mulligan are included, they are given short shrift, a reflection of the series' pro-swing bias and emphasis on

the Afro-American roots of jazz as opposed to its more cerebral and intellectual variants.

The long careers of Armstrong, Ellington and Holiday are interwoven over several segments, which is understandable and justified. To do justice to the vast topic, the series should probably have been in 20 parts, but this is not such much a criticism as an aficionado's lament, although the absence of George Gershwin, and many great song writers, is notable.



The absence of George Gershwin (above), and many great song writers, is notable...
PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

The series is similar in format to Burns's previous documentaries with extensive use of old black-and-white, or sepia photographs, but fortunately this one also includes a great deal of movie and television footage of some remarkable performances such as Benny Goodman's quartet with Teddy Wilson and Gene Krupa, Paul Gonsalves's 27-chorus solo with Duke Ellington at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival and Miles Davis's recording session for the album *Miles Ahead* with arranger Gil Evans.



Tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves (centre) during his 27-chorus solo at the Monterey Jazz Festival, 1955...

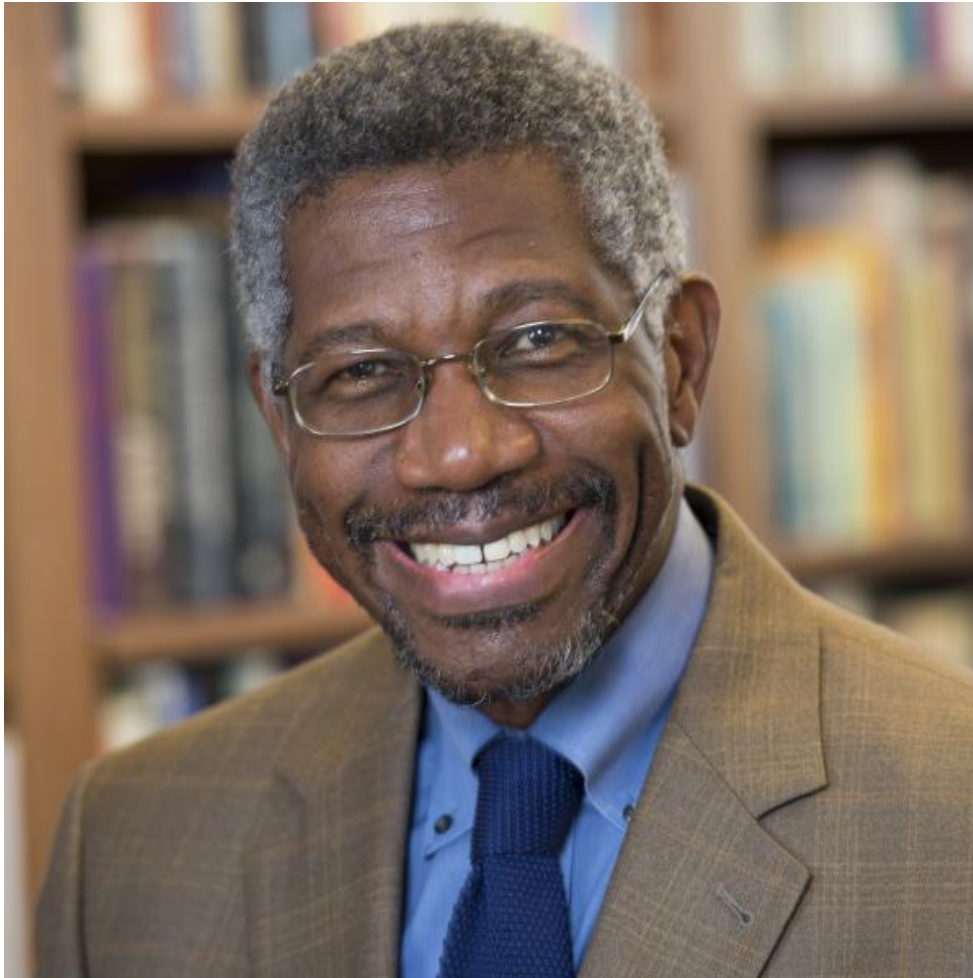
As a general introduction to jazz this series is without peer although its notion that jazz pretty much ends in the early 1960s is ridiculous and leaves viewers without an appreciation of the greatness of such supreme musicians as Keith Jarrett, Pat Metheny, Chick Corea, Josef Zawinul and Wayne Shorter, the founders of Weather Report, and the impressive stables of producers Creed Taylor and Manfred Eichner, to say nothing of the extraordinary revolutions that would be subsequently launched by Miles Davis, and the brilliant later careers of Stan Getz and Gerry Mulligan. Davis is given prominent attention, but the author of the book that accompanies the television series, Geoffrey C Ward, clearly has a bias against much of "modern jazz."



Author Geoffrey C Ward (right) pictured here with Wynton Marsalis (left): he clearly has a bias against much of "modern jazz"...

Much of the text and the series is quite wonderful in tracing the roots and historical development of jazz through the 1940's, but its post-war history is not as thorough or enthused.

In his provocative essay in the book, "White Noise and White Knights: Some Thoughts on Race, Jazz and the White Jazz Musician," Gerald Early discusses at some length the careers of bandleader Stan Kenton and pianist Keith Jarrett. "Kenton's music," he wrote, "was white jazz - in some ways the apotheosis of white jazz. Swinging was beside the point. To put it crudely, in the Kenton worldview, blacks had rhythm but whites had theory."



Gerald Early: "To put it crudely, in the Kenton worldview, blacks had rhythm but whites had theory"...

Early does grudgingly concede, however, that "the white musicians who played with Kenton make an impressive list: Maynard Ferguson, Art Pepper, Laurindo Almeida, Mel Lewis, Charlie Mariano, Anita O'Day, Bob Cooper, Shelly Manne, Howard Rumsey, Kai Winding, Shorty Rogers, Lee Konitz, Frank Rosolino, Bud Shank, Stan Getz, Zoot Sims, Pepper Adams, and Sal Salvatore," adding that "among the arrangers who worked with Kenton were Bill Holman, Gerry Mulligan, Bill Russo, Johnny Richards, and Pete Rugolo, all among the most famous of the post-World War II era."

Early's discussion of Jarrett focuses mostly on his race. "How much did confusion about his race help him in the early days of his career before it become commonly known that he was of French-Hungarian extraction? How much did he exploit the fact that he had wiry hair puffed like an Afro?" Early rhetorically, and incredibly, asks. Early proceeds to cite some comments about Wynton Marsalis, the trumpet player who is featured heavily in the series and the book, to the effect that Jarrett maintains he has never heard him "play the blues convincingly."



Keith Jarrett: how much did he exploit the fact that he had wiry hair puffed like an Afro?...

Early then wrote the following:

"One's immediate response to Jarrett's remarks was that he was jealous because Marsalis had achieved the fame Jarrett felt he himself deserved and, worse still, that he believed Marsalis had acquired this acclaim largely because he is black and the public, both black and white, demands a black musician to be the authenticator of jazz. This reduces Jarrett to being the equivalent of a disgruntled white man who is upset because he believes some prominent black is where he is because of affirmative action, not merit... His remarks about Marsalis grow from his general disappointment with the current jazz scene, which Marsalis symbolizes more than anyone else and which seems to be producing, to Jarrett's mind, little vital music."

Jarrett is correct. Jazz as promoted by Marsalis is at best "mainstream" and "traditional," and while good and derivative, it is neither innovative nor "vital." Jarrett is an extraordinary musician who has experimented widely and wildly and composed and improvised many incredible works as well as continuing to perform

regularly in small jazz groups. He is a creative giant. Marsalis has talent and good clothes and perhaps may mature into a creative artist. Race, and clothes, and political correctness, have nothing to do with creativity and greatness.



Wynton Marsalis: he has talent and good clothes and perhaps may mature into a creative artist...PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

One might be tempted to criticize the series' extensive use of non-jazz related still photographs were they not so wonderful, and often heart-breaking. One does wish that more great jazz singers such as Sarah Vaughan, Anita O'Day, Peggy Lee and Carmen McRae and guitarists such as Wes Montgomery and drummers such as Chico Hamilton and Shelley Manne, had been included, but clearly the world of jazz is just too big for a 10-part series.

Jazz is America's greatest contribution to world culture but sadly has not been as widely appreciated in the United States as it has deserved. It is very sad that so many great jazz artists have not been appropriately honoured or made respectable livelihoods. The scourge of drugs is frequently mentioned in this series and it certainly took a devastating toll on a great many jazz greats, but even those untouched by it have had to struggle with very rare exceptions.

Jazz has evolved down many paths and part of the problem with it as an art form is that much of the press has turned its back on developments after the early 1960s. Certainly, the 1950s and early 1960s were a golden age of jazz. One merely has to listen to *Just Friends* by Charlie Parker and strings, or *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis, or the early records of the Modern Jazz Quartet to be thrilled and entranced.



Percy Heath on bass, Miles Davis on trumpet and Gerry Mulligan on baritone sax, at the 1955 Newport Jazz Festival... PHOTO CREDIT HERMAN LEONARD.

The great swing bands became very popular, but essentially they were conservative and safe and not eager to experiment. Artie Shaw quit because of frustration with playing the same songs and arrangements every night and not being able to grow. Jazz is not only improvisation, but improvisation and its freedom is the heart of jazz. Sonny Rollins withdrew himself from public performance for a while to blow in the wind on the city's bridges and to "grow."

A strong point of the series is its geographic history that shows jazz's roots in New Orleans, and later in Chicago and Kansas City and, of course, New York. The extraordinary patronage role of philanthropist John Hammond is well documented, and fascinating, although much more should have been included much more about the business of jazz, the important record labels such as Verve, Atlantic and Columbia, and important disk jockeys like Symphony Sid and Mort Fega whose late-night programs fueled fans in the 1950s and 1960s.



The extraordinary patronage role of philanthropist John Hammond (above) is well documented... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ A HISTORY OF AMERICA'S MUSIC

This loving and long-overdue tribute, which runs nearly 19 hours with 497 separate pieces of music, is an awesome introduction to the roots of jazz and should be required viewing for everyone who is able to tap their foot. The book has many excellent photographs not included in the series and also is an excellent reference book for all lovers of jazz, with the above caveats, that perhaps will be corrected in subsequent editions.

The series has some coverage of famous New York jazz clubs such as the Village Vanguard and the Five Spot, but not the much-missed Bradley's on University Place, or the Blue Note. Jazz was always better at such smoke-filled clubs, usually in the third, late set, than in the concert hall. One only need to glance at the many pages of display ads in the *Village Voice* to be astounded at how much jazz is still being

played, albeit most of it "traditional" rather than avant-garde, which has tended to be played more in lofts.



The series has some coverage of famous New York jazz clubs such as the Village Vanguard (above) and the Five Spot (below)...



At its best, jazz is magical and much of it is American, but increasingly its legacy has broadened. African and East Asian and Middle Eastern influences have become very important and the fantastic new electronic sounds have also stretched the art form tremendously. Jazz is not exclusionary.