

JAZZ: THE OBITUARY

by Richard Williams*

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The celebrated American filmmaker Ken Burns spent six years chronicling his country's greatest original art form. But one aspect of the documentary has put aficionados and players in a spin: this 'definitive history' stops in 1975.

As family tombs go, Ken Burns's 12-part television history of jazz is an impressive construction. Wrought on a large scale with skill and care, it is distinguished by a vast canopy, firm pillars, lifelike effigies, and many panels vividly illustrating the achievements of the kings and queens of a large, disparate and often quarrelsome clan, from Louis Armstrong to Miles Davis, from Bessie Smith to Billie Holiday, from Coleman Hawkins to John Coltrane.

When it comes to BBC2 next month, cut by a third from the 17-hour version shown in the US earlier this year, it will no doubt win praise for the way the music stomps and swings and bops as the narrative winds from New Orleans's Congo Square to New York's 52nd Street, telling tales of talent and tragedy. But to many of those for whom the music remains a living concern, Ken Burns's *Jazz* resembles nothing so much as a jam session in a mausoleum.

Burns, a 48-year-old documentary film-maker, is described in his publicity material as "America's storyteller", and *Jazz* is the final part of his American trilogy, which began in 1990 with his acclaimed series on the civil war. On first encountering his



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film-making technique, audiences around the world were struck by the way the director seemed to make time stand still as his camera quietly panned and slow-zoomed across the surface of antique photographs, pausing to examine a hand or a face, accompanied by voiceovers reading the letters and poems of ordinary soldiers juxtaposed with those of generals and politicians. Burns seemed to have invented a profoundly expressive new language for television, and the awards - more than 40 of them, including a Bafta - flowed in. Four years later he followed it with *Baseball*, a 25-hour history of the game which was equally well-received and seemed to confirm the special nature of his talent.



Ken Burns: he seemed to have invented a profoundly expressive new language for television...

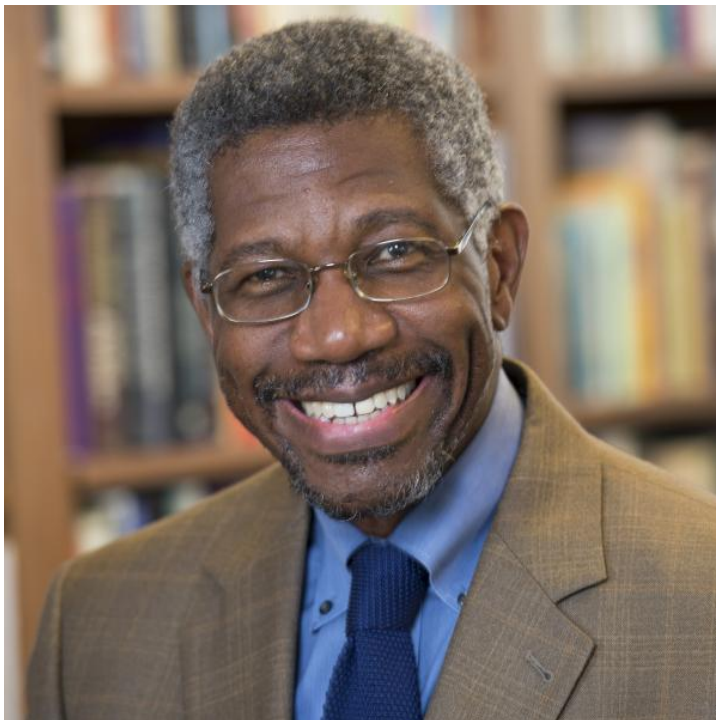
The story of jazz provided him with another opportunity to assemble a luxuriant social history of America, this time from the raw material of 75 interviews, 500 pieces of music, 2,400 stills and 2,000 archive film clips. Burns's skills allow him to configure these riches into many montages of sound and image possessing a genuinely poetic resonance, leading the *Village Voice* to describe the series as "the last best hope for jazz to connect with the American public again".

To others, however, such a connection may not be worthwhile if it comes at the expense of Burns's perceived mistakes, which include a refusal to reflect the continued life of the music since 1975 (his self-imposed cut-off point), a concentration on the great figures to the virtual exclusion of the myriad bit-part players who have given the music its astonishing diversity, and a failure to look beyond America to the effect that jazz had on the rest of the world, a phenomenon that may turn out to be its most significant legacy.

His critics would say that these omissions betray Burns's ignorance of what jazz really is, and he is happy to admit that he went into the project knowing little about the music. "I'd worked in a record store in high school," he said during a visit to London the other day, "so I wasn't completely ignorant. I knew the names. It just wasn't my music."

The notion of the series came to him while making *Baseball*, when he realised that the most effective passages dealing with the 1920s and 1930s were being energised by the jazz he was using to accompany them. "To a child of rock and roll and R&B, this was a compelling revelation. I felt that I was seeing a much more sophisticated version of what I had grown up listening to."

Then, during his interview for the baseball series, the author and academic Gerald Early said something that aroused Burns's interest. "He remarked that when they study American civilisation 2,000 years from now, the country will be known for only three things - the constitution, baseball and jazz music, the three most beautiful things Americans have ever designed. He was absolutely right. The American genius is for improvisation. The constitution is just four pieces of paper. Baseball has infinite combinations. And at the heart of our art form is the belief that we can play what we feel at this moment, and that will be the art. I think those three things will commend us to posterity."



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The other fateful formative encounter came while he was giving a speech on the role of black soldiers in the civil war and noticed the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis in the front row of the audience. Afterwards they met. "He gave me a hug and said, 'Man, you should do jazz.' Normally I'd say, 'You can't tell me what to do. I do my own things.' But he was right."



Wynton Marsalis: he gave Ken Burns a hug and said, 'Man, you should do jazz.'
PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ A HISTORY OF AMERICA'S MUSIC

Early in the process of preparing *Jazz*, while assembling a panel of consultants, Burns co-opted Marsalis, who is the director of the jazz programme at the Lincoln Center and the most visible and influential figure in jazz today. The figurehead of its neo-classical tendency, Marsalis came out of New Orleans 20 years ago and established himself as a prodigy who started by imitating Miles Davis before working his way back through the history of jazz via Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk and ending up with Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton.

There had been revivalists in jazz before Marsalis, but he was the first to succeed in reversing the forward momentum that had carried the music through its first century. Deploying his skills as an educator and a publicist, he assumed the role of frontman for an idiom which had been losing its major figures to old age and other forms of attrition and, as its popularity waned, was having little success in replacing them.

Burns deflects charges of over-reliance on Marsalis by claiming that he worked with the trumpeter for only five or six days during the six years that it took to prepare and make the series. "Other people who are philosophically opposed to Wynton had a much greater effect," he said. Nevertheless Marsalis's voice is frequently heard, and his sensibility pervades the programmes. The impression is strengthened by the presence among the other talking heads of Stanley Crouch and Albert Murray, two outspoken commentators whose opinions happen to coincide with those of Marsalis, and whose trenchant polemics tend to overpower the more reflective voices.



Stanley Crouch (above) and Albert Murray (below), two outspoken commentators whose opinions happen to coincide with those of Wynton Marsalis...



In the opening episode of *Jazz*, the first voice we hear is Marsalis's. "Jazz music objectifies America," he says. "It's an art form that can give us a painless way of understanding ourselves. The real power of jazz and the innovation of jazz is that a group of people can come together and create art, improvise art, and can negotiate their agendas with each other, and that negotiation is the art."

Such a message - of jazz as a mirror of American democracy - certainly fits the agenda of Burns, with his need to attract corporate and charitable funding (one third of the funding for *Jazz* was provided by General Motors, the rest by foundations). For that task, the story of the music and the musicians alone might not be enough. To turn it into a metaphor for the national dream could be far more persuasive.

"Because I'm interested in how my country ticks," Burns explained, "I'm making the same film over and over again. I'm just asking, who are we? Ultimately the subject is

not important. It becomes the medium through which one can explore other questions. So *Jazz* is about two world wars and a devastating depression, it's about sex and drugs, and it is hugely about race."

Which is where, ironically enough, the trouble starts. The series' principal totemic figures, quite rightly, are Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. Since a large proportion of *Jazz* is devoted to the swing era, two white bandleaders, Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw, are also given prominence - as, later on, is Dave Brubeck. But even some critics who have spent their lives arguing for a proper recognition of jazz's African American essence believe that Burns - with the encouragement of Marsalis, Crouch and Murray - has pushed the Afrocentric line so far that the refusal to give credit to the contribution of white musicians undermines the series' historical accuracy.

"It's not a documentary that will make jazz experts particularly happy," Geoffrey C Ward, Burns's co-writer, cheerfully remarked when the first wave of criticism made itself felt. "There's something missing for everyone." But something like the deprecation of the influence on Miles Davis of the pianist Bill Evans and the arranger Gil Evans, both of whom are believed by Crouch and his friends to be "too European" for the music's good, is too serious to be dismissed with a quip. There was certainly "something missing" for Keith Jarrett, one of the pre-eminent figures of jazz's last 25 years and yet omitted from the series. A confirmed opponent of the Marsalis tendency, he expressed his anger in the letters page of the *New York Times*.



Keith Jarrett: he describes Burns as "a jazz-illiterate historian"...

"Now that we've been put through the socioeconomic radical forensics of a jazz-illiterate historian and a self-imposed jazz expert prone to sophomoric generalisations and ultraconservative politically correct (for now) utterances," Jarrett wrote, "not to mention a terribly heavy-handed narration (where every detail takes

on the importance of major revelation) and weepy-eyed nostalgic reveries, can we have some films about jazz by people who actually know and understand the music itself and are willing to deal comprehensively with the last 40 years of this richest of American treasures?"



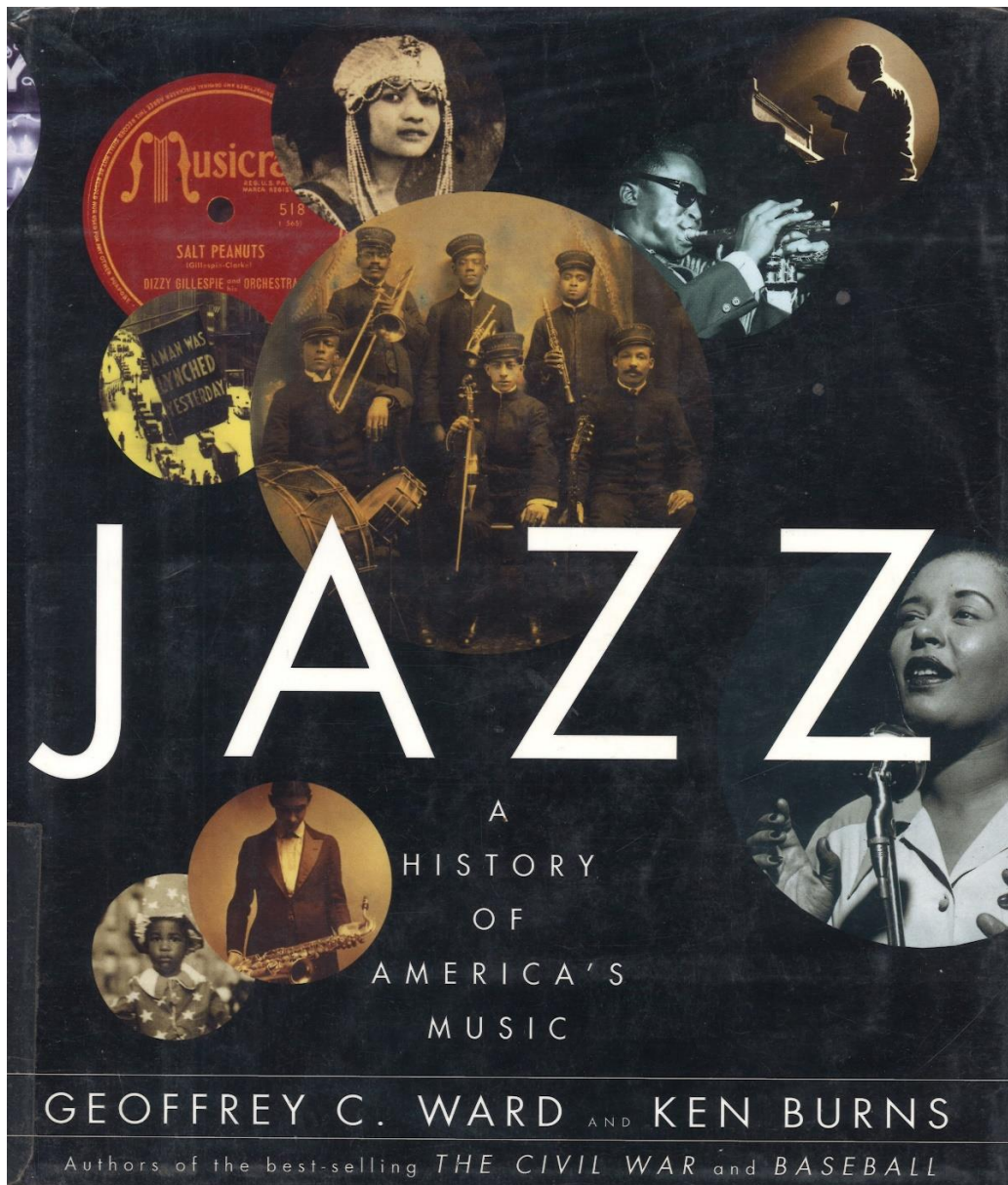
Burns (above) says Keith Jarrett is a student of the Russian mystic Gurdjieff, who stresses the need for every man to struggle against negativity...

Burns sighed as I reminded him of it. "Keith Jarrett is a student of the Russian mystic Gurdjieff," he said, "who stresses the need for every man to struggle against negativity. I found that his rather pathetic violence towards the series spoke more about him." Jarrett was not alone, however. "I've got the best reviews of my life for this series, even better than for *Civil War*," Burns claimed, but amid the general chorus of mainstream approval, three leading American critics came out strongly against his approach, and drew much support.

"Those are three gentlemen who were expecting to be filmed," the director observed. "In a couple of cases we did a pre-interview and found them wholly without substance for our film. So there may have been a reaction. And I was reminded of the joke we have about why the conversation inside the larger American academe is not vitriolic: someone says, 'It's because the stakes are so small.' I think jazz is so insecure and so small and so fragmented and so Balkanised into so many different groups that you can't help but have this kind of ethnic cleansing going on. I felt the reviews said more about the reviewers than about the series."

The jazz family is undoubtedly "insecure and dysfunctional", as he says, and ever ready to adopt a siege mentality, but what Burns chooses to ignore is that favourable reviews also sometimes say something about the reviewers - about their subservience to commercial interests, about their desire to belong to a successful club, even about their ignorance. And unfavourable reviews can be motivated by a passion and a deep empathy with the subject.

His great shield against the critics is the evidence that, in America, the success of his series has doubled the commercial market for the music, pushing its CD sales up from 2 to 4% of the total market. Not all of this, he says, is attributable to the sales of the 20 "definitive" CDs devoted to individual artists, the five-CD boxed set and the single disc of greatest hits marketed by two major record companies, Universal and Sony, under the rubric of Ken Burns's *Jazz*, which - together with the video cassettes, DVDs and the lavishly compiled £30 paperback of the series - make this the most powerful marketing campaign ever waged on behalf of jazz.



Ken Burns's Jazz: the most powerful marketing campaign ever waged on behalf of jazz...

Those scheduled to interview Burns during his visit to London, for instance, were in receipt of calls and packages from publicists employed to promote the series and its offshoots. This was a pleasant experience, but not at all the sort of thing usually associated with the promotion of jazz. And it was interesting to ponder the fact that none of these companies was marketing something that involved an investment in

new music. Indeed, in the last year the major labels have actually been reducing their commitment to signing and presenting new jazz artists. Wherever the increased revenue is going, it seems less and less likely that it will be invested in the task of discovering the successors to the old masters.

Which raises another thorny question, answered by Burns with his customary alacrity. "I asked my colleagues, 'Who among today's players is the equal of an Armstrong, an Ellington, a Parker, a Coltrane, a Davis, a Monk?' Silence. And they'd say, if I pressed them, 'It will take us another 20 years to understand.' And I say, 'That's why I stopped (at 1975) - in a sense, to honour your position. I couldn't have done justice to it. I'm involved in history. History is about something that is over. The current critical scene is about stories that are ongoing. My argument was that we just don't know.'"



Burns: who among today's players is the equal of an Armstrong, an Ellington, a Parker, a Coltrane, a Davis, a Monk?...

Nevertheless, this superficially unjudgmental series "knows" enough to deliver rebukes to the aspirations of two fathers of the avant-garde of the 1950s and 60s, Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. The first is from Albert Murray: "Ornette came up and said, 'This is free jazz.' But what is freer than jazz? The whole thing is about freedom. Why would anyone want to free it? Because the whole idea of art is to create a form that is a bulwark against entropy or chaos. That's the function of jazz. It's not to be formless or absolutely self-indulgent. You cannot embrace entropy. You cannot embrace chaos."



This superficially unjudgmental series "knows" enough to deliver rebukes to the aspirations of two fathers of the avant-garde of the 1950s and 60s, Ornette Coleman (above) and Cecil Taylor (below)...



Taylor catches it from Branford Marsalis, Wynton's brother, who describes as "total self-indulgent bullshit" the pianist's suggestion that audiences, as well as musicians, need to prepare themselves for a performance. The critic Gene Lees also weighs in with the judgment that Taylor "has a right to do what he wants to do, and I have a right to listen to somebody else".

Gary Giddins, the eminent critic of the *Village Voice* and a key figure in the series, does his best to defend the avant-garde. But where are Archie Shepp and Amiri Baraka, the musician and the poet who would be described as the Marsalis and Crouch of the 60s were it not for the fact that they were more interested in political activism than in building their careers? Like many surviving figures of importance,

they seem not to have been considered for inclusion in a series that could find room for not one but two Marsalises.



Where are Archie Shepp (above) and Amiri Baraka (below), the musician and the poet who would be described as the Marsalis and Crouch of the 60s were it not for the fact that they were more interested in political activism than in building their careers?



Burns claims the last 40 minutes of the film, which skims over the surface of the last 25 years, to be "one of the most beautiful pieces of film I've ever worked on". But even here, the Marsalis influence is evident in the exposure given to two gifted young musicians, the saxophonist James Carter and the trumpeter Nicholas Payton, who are heard playing pieces indicating no recognition of anything that has happened to jazz in the last 50 years. If this represents the way ahead, jazz really must be dead.



Saxophonist James Carter (above) and the trumpeter Nicholas Payton (below): no recognition of anything that has happened to jazz in the last 50 years...PAYTON
PHOTO CREDIT MICHELLE VAGINS



Its survival is due as much as anything to the spread of the spirit of jazz among the world's musicians, something that Burns acknowledges only in a glimpse of the French rapper MC Solaar, performing with the bassist Ron Carter. "Guilty," Burns replied. "Absolutely. The purview of this film just could not contain all that and still be a film that could stand on its own. It would have been a bridge that collapsed from

too much traffic." There was a similar response to the final objection, which concerns his readiness to let the Great Man theory of history prevail over a more sophisticated analysis that would reflect a vision of jazz as a vast mosaic made up of countless musicians who have been enabled by the nature of the music to discover and express their own originality. Any lover of jazz has her or his own list of minor figures who somehow seem as important as the established giants. Few of them will be found in Ken Burns's *Jazz*.

"Yes, we've left out a lot of people," he said. "The film has about 20 people you get to know very well, another 40 people who are secondary characters, and maybe 150 tertiary figures who pass across the stage. They have to stand in for many others. So yes, you can do more on Bud Powell, yes, you can do more on Stan Kenton. But it just won't work. You want to pick one story and tell a textured and nuanced tale through many episodes rather than tell nine more stories and tell none well, and end up with the narrative drive of the Manhattan phone book."



Yes, you can do more on Bud Powell (above), yes, you can do more on Stan Kenton (below). But it just won't work...POWELL PHOTO COURTESY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES; KENTON PHOTO COURTESY ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ



There are dozens of moments of exhilaration and enlightenment to be found in Ken Burns's *Jazz*. If you know nothing of James Reese Europe's Hellfighters, a black big

band which serenaded US troops during the first world war, this is the space to watch. Anyone who can't understand what made Louis Armstrong a genius should watch the magical sequence when a young musician named Matt Glaser takes us through Armstrong's 1931 recording of *Up a Lazy River*, nudging and nodding and humming us into a recognition of the precise nature of the talent bursting out of the former inmate of New Orleans' Colored Waifs' Home. The story of Bix Beiderbecke is told with great sensitivity.



The story of Bix Beiderbecke (above) is told with great sensitivity...

Unseen footage of the Count Basie band at a festival on Randalls' Island in 1938 has a riveting vitality. Jackie McLean's description of the heroin plague "coming in like a tidal wave" has the chill of authenticity. And then, during another rare clip, there is the look in Charlie Parker's eye - the look, as his wife Chan suggests, that said, "I'm not one of those boys you're used to."



The Count Basie band in 1937 at the Meadowbrook Lounge, New Jersey...PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ A HISTORY OF AMERICA'S MUSIC

No, the Manhattan phone book it is not. But what Burns has ended up with is a series that, despite its length and an attitude that suggests that it is conveying the definitive wisdom, tells only part of the story. From the jazz family's point of view, maybe the best news is that for all the eloquent obituarising, the post-mortem feels distinctly premature.

WHO'S IN KEN BURNS'S JAZZ HALL OF FAME...

Louis Armstrong
Dave Brubeck
Billie Holiday
Charlie Parker
Miles Davis
Benny Goodman
Artie Shaw
Thelonious Monk
Dizzy Gillespie
Duke Ellington

...AND WHO'S OUT (Richard Williams's semi-arbitrary choice of 10 musicians, major and minor, who aren't in Ken Burns's *Jazz*)

Herbie Nichols (1919-1963), piano: a wonderfully original thinker, rediscovered 20 years after his death, whose compositions are now widely played.



Joe Wilder (b 1922), trumpet: the owner of perhaps the most exquisite tone ever produced on the instrument, and a soloist of discreet but imperturbable grace.



Art Pepper (1925-1982), alto saxophone: long jail stretches punctuated a career that began with Stan Kenton and produced many wonderfully impassioned recordings.



Jimmy Smith (b 1925), organ: not the first jazz organist, but the man whose funky Blue Note albums spread the Hammond gospel around the world.



Lee Konitz (b 1927), alto saxophone: a progenitor of the Cool School and a member of Miles Davis's 1949 nonet. The solos he plays today sound as fresh as tomorrow.



Eric Dolphy (1928-1964), alto saxophone, bass clarinet, flute: a confederate of Coltrane, Coleman and Mingus, and an improviser of astonishing rhythmic and harmonic fertility.



Stanley Turrentine (1934-2000), tenor saxophone: the most soulful and forthright of tenor players, a modernist with firm blues roots.



Betty Carter (1930-1998), singer: the most inventive, musically demanding and commercially uncompromising of all jazz singers, greatly revered by her fellow vocalists.



Richard Twardzik (1931-1955), piano: best known for his precociously imaginative work with Chet Baker, silenced at 24 by a heroin overdose in a Paris hotel.



Albert Ayler (1936-1970), tenor saxophone: jazz's last great individual voice, and an innovator who dragged the music back to its origins in order to propel it into an uncertain future.



Ken Burns's Jazz is on BBC2 from June 9-27. The book of the series is published by Pimlico (£30). CDs by Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Sidney Bechet, Art Blakey, Dave Brubeck, Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Herbie Hancock, Coleman Hawkins, Fletcher Henderson, Billie Holiday, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Sarah Vaughan and Lester Young are available on the Sony and Universal labels, as are a special five-CD box set, The Story of America's Music, and a single-CD compilation, The Best of Ken Burns's Jazz.