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Listening to Jazz. By Benjamin Bierman. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 398 pp. $69.95.

Review by Ed Berger

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ed Berger completed this review (both the initial draft and revisions in consultations with other JJS editors) before his passing in January 2017. While we feel it is important to see Ed's work through to publication, a second edition of this book was released in the time between the initial review and this publication. Therefore, we reached out to Benjamin Bierman to offer him the opportunity to clarify anything discussed in the review that has been changed or updated in the new edition. Bierman's editorial comment appears below within these followed by Ed Berger's original review.

Editorial comment from Benjamin Bierman, author of *Listening to Jazz* : Ed Berger was a wonderful human being and an important person in the jazz world in many ways. We all miss him. It is an honor to have had him take an interest in my book. Since the review was written, however, *Listening to Jazz* 2e was published by Oxford University Press in March 2019. While numerous things have changed in the second edition, I feel that the review still accurately reflects the book as it stands. The only thing I would like to mention is that sidebars and boxes that he refers to are now woven into the text rather than set apart. Pricing is different and options have broadened, the delivery method of audio has changed, and a great deal of video content has been added. The current companion page with support materials is: https://oup-arc.com/access/bierman-2e.

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Benjamin Bierman has experienced jazz from several perspectives: as a player, as a teacher, and as a scholar. *Listening to Jazz* benefits from the author's expertise in all three areas. In the preface, he discusses his personal connections with the music—not in a self-serving way but as a means of connecting with students and sharing his first-hand experiences as a player in a variety of musical settings: "I am a trumpet player, composer, arranger, and music professor. Like most musicians, I'm not a star and never was. I played as a side musician with many big names, however, and spent most of my adult professional life toiling in the trenches that most working musicians occupy…" (xxi) He goes on to provide a dose of reality for those who may harbor some romantic notions of "the jazz life" by recounting some of his grueling tours with Johnny Pacheco, the Johnny Copeland Blues Band, and various territory bands on the Midwest and Southwest ballroom circuit. His description of these road experiences is not intended to discourage young musicians, for he views music—especially jazz—as a calling, noting: "…jazz musicians

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have practiced their craft intensely, care deeply about what they do, and have often sacrificed simpler and more secure lives to pursue a career as musicians." (xxii)

Unlike many earlier texts, *Listening to Jazz* wisely refrains from attempting to define the word "jazz," an exercise that is doomed to failure. Bierman explains why some of the more commonly cited, and ostensibly essential, elements of jazz (e.g. swing and improvisation) cannot serve as universally accepted criteria in formulating even a broad definition. Instead, he presents a cogent summary of the music's origins and influences as well as the musical characteristics of its various styles and eras.

Some may fault the author for not exploring at greater length the prehistory of jazz. As important, fascinating, and often controversial as that subject may be, many introductory courses devote an inordinate amount of time to jazz's origins, resulting in the unfortunate need to condense the last fifty years of jazz history into a few class sessions. In Chapter 2, a ten-page survey of jazz's precursors, the author illuminates the fundamentals of the blues and ragtime and their influence in jazz's development, and he guides listeners through two salient recorded examples of these genres. He also touches upon the contributions such seminal early creators as Bessie Smith, James P. Johnson, Scott Joplin, James Reese Europe, and W.C. Handy.

The book is aptly titled because the most compelling of its many strengths is the author's ability to guide listeners through specific recordings in a precise and detailed manner while avoiding inaccessibly technical language. Through a companion website (www.oup.com/us/bierman), purchasers of the book may download (at a discount) some 37 tracks that are discussed in the text, from Bessie Smith's 1927 "Backwater Blues" to Joshua Redman's 2013 "The Folks Who Live on the Hill. The website also provides a more extensive Spotify playlist of tracks referred to in the text. In addition to many standard recorded milestones, the Spotify list also includes a number of lesser known but intriguing selections, particularly those illustrating the Latin influence on jazz.

Listening to Jazz is lavishly illustrated (the majority of photos come from the now public domain William P. Gottlieb Collection at the Library of Congress) and attractively produced. It is also well organized and has several innovative features that should enhance the learning experience. Alongside the central text, recurring sidebars offer interesting digressions on individuals and issues that complement the book's overall narrative. For example "Questions and Controversies" sidebars tackle such topics as listening to early recordings (46), "Who Wrote Duke Ellington's Hits?" (166), "Race in the Swing Era" (143), "Billie Holiday and 'Strange Fruit'"(180), "The Resistance to Free Jazz" (242), and "Is Fusion Music Jazz?" (289). The brevity of some of these asides inevitably leads to some misleading generalizations and oversimplification. "Race and Economics in the Birth of

Bebop" (196), gleaned from Scott DeVeaux's *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*, is an example of the dangers of reducing a complex and controversial topic to a few bullet points. Where Deveaux's work draws from both the "evolutionary" and "revolutionary" theories of the emergence of bebop, Bierman's brief synopsis does not adequately convey the ties between the new music and that which preceded it. Similarly, his discussion of Monk rightly stresses the pianist's unique approach but fails to mention his firm ties to early jazz piano styles as demonstrated by his highly original and wonderfully idiosyncratic interpolations of the stride piano style first popularized in the 1920s.

The valuable "In Performance" sidebars introduce additional topics, many of which are rarely addressed in an introductory text. For example, in "Jazz Composition and Arranging" (53), the author explains the relationship between these two creative processes and where improvisation fits into the overall picture. "Spontaneous Interaction in Jazz," uses the famous 1928 Armstrong – Hines collaboration on "Weatherbird" as the focal point for an insightful excursus on how musicians communicate with one another. In addition to identifying some specific points of interaction in the recording, Bierman explains what sets Armstrong and Hines's performance apart from other jazz classics: "They clearly had fun together, and this joy is palpable in 'Weatherbird.' It even feels casual, almost as if they are playing in our living room…" (83). Other "In Performance" topics include "Clave and Afro-Cuban Rhythms" (109), "The Hard Life of a Territory Musician" (116), an especially perceptive look at "The Role of Side Musicians" (145), "Bebop Changes the Role of the Rhythm Section" (195), and "The Hammond B3 Organ" (250). Again, due their brevity, some of these pieces barely scratch their topic's surface, but the author deserves credit for addressing them.

"Jazz Lives" sidebars elaborate upon the life stories and contributions of a eclectic selection of figures: Scott Joplin (36), Earl Hines (82), Fletcher Henderson (92), Benny Carter (96), Art Tatum (105), John Hammond (120), Lester Young (128), Bubber Miley (164), Billy Strayhorn (167), Frank Sinatra (186), Charlie Parker (195), Chet Baker (227), Benny Golson & Lee Morgan (233), Tito Puente (240), Cal Tjader (254) Alice Coltrane (277), and Wynton Marsalis (317).

As helpful and engaging as these digressions are, the book's major strength lies in Bierman's ability to analyze the well-curated set of recordings and to guide the listener through these performances in a clear and engaging way. He has a knack for explaining musical concepts to listeners with little or no technical training. The analyses of specific recordings appear throughout the book primarily in two forms: "Listening Guides" and "Listening Focuses."

The Guides appear in chart form with a time code and corresponding commentary, allowing students to follow the piece's form, style, melody and harmony, rhythm and accompaniment measure by measure. The Focuses are somewhat less

detailed but nevertheless instructive discussions of recordings. Both types, as well as the book's overall narrative, benefit from the author's informed musical observations and his obvious enthusiasm for the performances he has chosen.

There are four "Overview" sections placed at appropriate points in the historical chronology. Each consists of text and timelines designed to provide a succinct summation of jazz eras and styles and to place them within a broader social and historical context. Each chapter concludes with a useful summary ("Coda") and key terms ("Talkin' Jazz") that are defined in the extensive Glossary that appears at the end of the book. There is also a list of questions for further discussion and a helpful bibliography ("Key Resources"). Moreover, each chapter also contains one or more citations of relevant readings from *Keeping Time*, a wide ranging anthology of primary source writings edited by Robert Walser.

In addition to the canonic musicians highlighted in "Jazz Lives" sidebars and throughout the text, *Listening to Jazz* also shines the spotlight on some figures typically overlooked in introductory surveys like this. The author repeatedly emphasizes the continuing influence of Latin music during all eras of jazz, citing relevant artists and recordings in almost every chapter. For example, flutist/bandleader Alberto Soccarás is given credit for introducing Latin rhythms into jazz.[1] Similarly, the author underscores the contributions of (and barriers faced by) women jazz musicians throughout the music's history. Arranging is another welcome strand that Bierman weaves throughout the book. As an arranger himself, he is able to convey the importance of this essential but often overlooked role.

In its organization *Listening to Jazz* relies heavily on the traditionally accepted jazz styles and eras, as is the case with most jazz texts, Students expect this type of categorization and perhaps some type of codification is necessary in an introductory survey. Still, I have always found the commonly used geographical/stylistic subdivisions at best confusing and at worst misleading. The use of such terms as "New Orleans," "Chicago," "New York," "Kansas City," "West Coast,""traditional," "dixieland," "swing," "bebop," "cool," "hard bop," "free jazz," "avant-garde," and "fusion," and "mainstream" seems a mostly futile attempt to impose largely arbitrary demarcations on a complex musical continuum. Moreover, throughout most of its history, all jazz styles have continued to be played; as newer styles emerged, they did not necessarily supersede previous ones. And finally, jazz artists routinely play within a wide range of styles. This criticism is not directed specifically at *Listening to Jazz*; although Bierman uses all the aforementioned categories--indeed the book is more or less based on them--he is not as doctrinaire as many authors

[1] One error: Bierman credits Soccarás with playing in Benny Carter's early big band but that was flutist Wayman Carver, who takes an early jazz flute solo on the 1933 "Devil's Holiday".

in placing artists in categories, and he does acknowledge that there is both ambiguity and crossover in the use of these terms. As he writes: "There are a number of remarkably important jazz artists whose work cannot be confined to a category or a particular period. We have seen this already with the music of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Louis Armstrong" (265). Pianist Ray Bryant, who in the 1950s routinely played and recorded with both "swing" and "mainstream" artists like Charlie Shavers, Coleman Hawkins, and Jo Jones, as well as with "modernists" Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, and Curtis Fuller, sensibly downplayed the differences between styles: "A C-chord is a C-chord no matter where you find it. I never made a conscious effort to play differently with anyone."[2]

The term "mainstream" underscores the nebulous character of these categories. In his "Mainstream" chapter, Bierman discusses five artists: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, Bill Evans, and Herbie Hancock. (265). These figures are not the typical exemplars of "mainstream" as coined by writer Stanley Dance in the 1950s to describe the later music played by the Swing Era veterans he admired and their followers Semantics aside, Bierman acknowledges that the careers of the five aforementioned musicians "have been marked by constant evolution that helped them move through a number of styles and bands while also shaping modern jazz" (265), and he goes on to consider their careers and contributions in their totality. I believe this approach should be applied to far more jazz artists, particularly those whose careers spanned several eras.

One pitfall of over-categorization is that jazz histories and textbooks tend to relegate players to a certain style or movement. Because jazz has evolved in a relatively short time and its stylistic eras are measured in decades (or even shorter periods) rather than centuries, artists' careers can span several eras and their styles can reflect these changes. Coleman Hawkins is perhaps the best example of an artist who continued to evolve, yet he is often relegated in general surveys to the Swing Era, with little attention or analysis devoted paid to his later style. (Bierman includes a discussion of his iconic 1939 "Body and Soul.") Similarly, Benny Carter, an artist with an even longer performing career, certainly did not sound the same in 1928 as he did in 1998. Of course Duke Ellington is the paradigm of an artist who was "beyond category," but due to his stature and sheer output over many decades, his later works tend to receive some attention (Bierman devotes several pages to his later career).

Another feature of introductory texts is a preponderance of lists of musicians. Bierman confines his to the opening chapter which lists "notable" players by instrument. Of course, "notable" is highly subjective, but based on those included, I

[2] "Ray Bryant: Through the Years," by Ed Berger. *Jazz Times*, January/February 2005; http://jazztimes.com/articles/15236-ray-bryant-through-the-years

was surprised not to find George Shearing in the list of pianists, Russell Malone (guitarists), Dave Tough, Buddy Rich, and Louie Bellson (drummers), Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen (bassists), and Fats Waller, Mildred Bailey, and Dianne Reeves (singers). In addition, these lists include a one-line summary of a musician's "importance." Most of these entries are harmless if, by brevity alone, less than enlightening, but I make note of the following: Lester Young: "Prominent sax player with Count Basie; carried forward Hawkins' melodic innovations." And Dexter Gordon: "Carried forward a swing-oriented style well into the '70s and '80s." (12) (Perhaps this was intended for Scott Hamilton.) Far more important than the lists is the narrative itself, and here the author is admirably thorough. Of course one may quibble with the space, or lack thereof, accorded to particular musicians. For example, the coverage of Sonny Rollins seems rather scanty: three paragraphs under "Saxophone" in a "catchall" chapter titled "Many Movements" and no analysis of any of his recorded works. But, again, this is the exception, and highly subjective.

While I'm nitpicking: Billie Holiday's and Sarah Vaughan's names are misspelled on p. 96 (in fairness, I found no other such errors). A personal pet peeve of mine: more than once the author uses "notoriety" (which has a negative connotation) when he means "celebrity" or "fame" ("Ella Fitzgerald…brought Chick Webb's band national notoriety…" [99].) The author cites Artie Shaw's hiring of Hot Lips Page and Benny Carter as an example of Shaw's attempts at integration. Unlike Page, however, Carter was only hired for a record date, not to tour with Shaw's band. And finally, the author overuses the adjective "terrific."

The preponderance of "terrifics" notwithstanding, Bierman's writing style is clear, direct, unpretentious, and engaging. He eschews jargon and draws the reader in from the book's opening paragraph, which vividly captures the ambiance of a dance hall during the height of the swing era and the symbiosis between musicians and dancers (3). He has no axes to grind, nor does he view jazz history from any particular theoretical or ideological perspective. (As examples, see his fair and nuanced assessment of Paul Whiteman [75-76, 79-81] and his clear-eyed view of the Harlem Renaissance and the problematic relationship of some of its key figures to jazz [90-91]). *Listening to Jazz* offers a well-reasoned, logically organized, clear, and often passionately written introduction to the music from one who has viewed it from multiple vantage points. It ranks among the best introductory jazz texts thanks to the author's ability to guide listeners through the selected recorded performances, the introduction of figures and concepts not typically covered in such works, and the inclusion of innovative and entertaining features that enhance the general narrative. While I highly recommend it for introductory jazz courses, there is much of interest for more advanced students and jazz followers as well.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Edward "Ed" Berger is the former Associate Director of the Institute of Jazz Studies. He held multiple roles in the world of jazz throughout his life, including as an author, editor, record label owner, and librarian. He is the author of *Softly, With Feeling: Joe Wilder and the Breaking of Barriers in American Music* (2014) and *Benny Carter: A Life in American Music* (1982) among numerous other publications ranging from monographs to research guides to articles and reviews. He was also editor of this publication, the *Journal of Jazz Studies*, a position he held until his death. He passed away in 2017 and this review is published posthumously in his honor.