

## BOOK REVIEW

*Rhythm Man: Chick Webb and the Beat That Changed America*. By Stephanie Stein Crease. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. 360pp. \$34.95.

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*Rhythm Man: Chick Webb and the Beat That Changed America* is a valuable work that expands the methodological boundaries of jazz biography. Crease presents Webb's narrative as a tapestry of people, creative spaces, and events, and she ties them together in a way that challenges the isolated genius narratives that often accompany significant figures in jazz history. By delving deeply into the multitudinous agents and circumstances that made up what she calls Webb's "cultural surroundings," Crease provides a rich, dynamic look at Webb's lived experiences and the channels through which his musical and cultural influence have permeated numerous dimensions of American culture.

Crease eschews strictly linear biographical form in *Rhythm Man*. While it is generally chronological, the catholicity of Crease's methodology results in a style of storytelling that shifts fluidly from one topic to another. Though somewhat unconventional in this respect, the book is strengthened by this approach. Much like Webb when he first arrived in Harlem, someone reading *Rhythm Man* has no choice but to take in everything as it comes: people and places, sights and sounds, frustrating problems and ingenious solutions. As such, the book's chapters overlap and interlock with each other, creating an image of Webb that lies within abundant perspectives ranging from civic histories of Baltimore and Harlem, practical conditions for Black workers at the Savoy Ballroom, relevant musical recordings, racial and institutional politics between various other Harlem venues, and Webb's well-known but often misunderstood physical disabilities. In short, *Rhythm Man* illustrates Webb's life and music with a rich clarity that is accessible to fans of the music while also serving as a valuable reference to those researching the histories of big bands, jazz drumming, Harlem, Black vernacular dance, musicians with disabilities, and more.

The first two chapters deal with Webb's childhood and early musical career in his hometown of Baltimore. Crease emphasizes the city's identity as "Harlem before Harlem," and frames its robust Black community full of artistic brilliance as an ideal starting point for the ambitious young drummer who would go on to be hailed as the "Savoy King" and a key figure in Harlem's history. In chapter one, Crease examines Baltimore during the early twentieth century—its unique

infrastructure, the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904, and the social atmosphere of Webb's neighborhood in East Baltimore—to show how the city's Black population negotiated both social agency as well as structural racism. Crease also uses archival research to clarify the multiple points of view regarding how Webb developed the spinal tuberculosis that caused his physical disabilities. By synthesizing conflicting explanations from Webb's family lore and various medical professionals from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Crease provides a factual account of the matter that also foregrounds what Webb's childhood illnesses meant to his family members. Chapter two focuses on the densely interconnected musical network in Baltimore during the 1920s. Situating Webb within the legions of influential Black Baltimoreans such as Eubie Blake and Cab Calloway who migrated to Harlem, Crease paints a vivid picture of what Harlem meant to these individuals: a place of legitimate promise for Black Americans, albeit tinted with a rosy mystique.

Chapter three discusses Webb's earliest years living in Harlem. Webb's experiences mirror those of countless other Black musicians who moved to Harlem at that time, and Crease uses Webb as a case study on the social and professional mechanics of the neighborhood's musical scene. She describes the hierarchical ladder of performance spaces that Webb had to ascend: Harlem's idiosyncratic jam session culture, rent parties, and the dance academies that served as another crucial space for musicians to gain experience. In chapter four, Crease describes Webb's early career as a bandleader in Harlem. She shows how this endeavor was enabled not only by Webb's tenacity, but also by a robust network of elite musicians, professional collaborators, and the musical avant-garde aesthetic being cultivated in Black dance clubs.

Having described the broader conditions of Black life and art in Harlem during the 1920s, Crease zooms in to feature the space that became synonymous with Webb's name: the Savoy Ballroom. Chapter five tells the story of the Savoy's founding and how it was deliberately conceived to be a respectable space run for and by Black Harlemites. Given the extent to which white voyeurism and so-called "slumming" have played a role in Harlem's history, Crease's research on the Savoy provides a valuable dimension of Black professional agency to this narrative. Webb is but one of numerous figures featured in this chapter—bandleaders, dancers, managers, and more—who contributed to the dance-oriented music at the Savoy. By examining sounds and movements within an array of different lived experiences, she frames Webb as an exceptionally important character operating within a constellation of individuals.

Crease recenters on Webb as a bandleader in chapter six, describing how he built his band's reputation through "battles" at the Savoy and extensive touring. Like many of his contemporaries, Webb initially had minimal skill for the

business side of bandleading. Crease places this common shortcoming alongside his interpersonal strengths, resulting in a complex depiction of Webb as an ultimately successful ensemble manager. The early business struggles of famous bandleaders are often glossed over by historians, so Crease's approach here could serve as a model for future research on successful bandleaders who faced similar frustrations early in their careers. For the remainder of the chapter, Crease further marries the narratives of Webb and the Savoy, underlining how the former's musical style was perfectly suited for the daring, boundary-pushing dancers at the latter. She also draws on foundational scholarship on jazz and American film to critically analyze Webb's significant appearance in the 1929 film *After Seben*, placing Webb squarely within the discourses surrounding the depiction of Black Americans in early American film.

The Great Depression serves as a backdrop for the next three chapters. In chapter eight, Crease portrays musicians' experiences during the early stages of the Depression as varying widely, not instantly and ubiquitously calamitous. Chapter nine focuses on how Webb's professional collaborations with Louis Armstrong during the Depression served to lay the foundation for Webb's later successes. In chapter ten, Crease shows how Webb solidified his ensemble as the sonic signifier of the Savoy as the club served as a beacon of community relief efforts in Harlem.

In chapter eleven, Crease uses a detailed description of the mudslinging press battle between the Apollo Theater and the Harlem Opera House as a backdrop for her introduction of Webb's most famous collaborator: Ella Fitzgerald. This chapter is particularly valuable due to Crease's thorough depiction of the politics of these Harlem theaters, their identities as centers for Black art, and the cutthroat white men who profited from it all.

Chapter twelve features an in-depth examination of Webb's idiolect as a drummer. Crease compares his style with the more gimmick-oriented approaches that were the norm for many of his contemporaries, and she frames Webb as the prototype for subsequent drummers in idioms ranging from swing to modern jazz to rock 'n' roll. Crease also delves into how Webb's talent as a drummer served as a means of agency for him within a highly ableist society. To this point, Crease critiques previous tellings of Webb's biography, calling them oversimplified "feel-good narratives." It is only at this point that Crease mentions the growing discourse at the intersection of musicology, ethnomusicology, and disability studies. While providing valuable framing for this chapter, introducing this perspective earlier in the book would have provided vital context for some of Crease's earlier discussions of Webb's disabilities. For example, in chapter three, Crease conflates "suave looks"—something Webb had in abundance—with the privileges afforded to the able-bodied. There is certainly

a discussion to be had about the way conventional attractiveness and able-bodiedness factor into each other, and Webb would be a fascinating subject for such a future study.

Chapter thirteen illustrates the Savoy Ballroom as it was at the dawn of the Swing Era: an expressly “world famous” attraction at which one could spot white and Black celebrities. As mechanisms in a well-oiled entertainment machine, each member of the Savoy’s staff played a part in curating a top-notch experience at an authentic Harlem dance club. Crease details this fascinating dimension of the space in which Webb performed with recollections by those tasked with keeping the dance floor safe and full: bouncers and hostesses. By incorporating the lived experiences of these individuals, Crease shows how Webb’s music fit into a broader professional enterprise that centered around attracting and maintaining dancing patrons.

In chapter fourteen, Crease explores the significance of radio as a catalyst for Webb’s success. As Black American music exploded in popularity via national radio broadcasts, bands such as Webb’s saw new levels of success that nevertheless highlighted the racism of the musical institutions that profited from them. Webb’s orchestra was particularly notable for the way they used their success at the Savoy as a guide for what to record, often upending hegemonic expectations for Black ensembles by playing both “hot” and “sweet” music interchangeably. Furthermore, radio offered Webb the opportunity to expose national audiences to his talent without prejudices geared toward his body. As Crease points out, subsequent tours served to then “close the disconnect” between Webb’s physique and the disembodied sounds heard by radio audiences.

The next three chapters examine Webb’s professional career at its zenith and the racial dynamics surrounding some of his relationships with white contemporaries. Chapter fifteen provides a vivid illustration of how Webb negotiated a segregated landscape that was often nebulous and contradictory, particularly as he continued to cultivate a more commercial identity for his orchestra. Crease then contrasts these realities with those of Benny Goodman, providing an illuminating comparison of two musicians who she deems “exemplars of musical racial fluidity in unexpected ways.” In chapters sixteen and seventeen, Crease critically analyzes the promotional methods employed by Helen Oakley. As a key planner of legendary events in Webb’s career such as his orchestra’s “battles” with those led by Goodman and Count Basie, Crease scrutinizes Oakley’s white privilege as she pressured Webb on multiple fronts to eschew popular appeal in favor of an image that aligned with her own imagining of Black authenticity.

As Webb's story begins to conclude in chapter eighteen, Crease draws on the memories of those closest to him, illustrating how his declining health highlighted his identity as a figurehead of Black culture who helped break color barriers in multiple major metropolises. In chapter nineteen, Crease shifts the narrative back to Baltimore as a backdrop for Webb's death. Citing individual memories and city historians, she examines the significance of Webb's widely attended funeral in the cultural history of Baltimore. Finally, in the book's epilogue, Crease meditates on the immediate outcomes of Webb's death on the careers of Fitzgerald and his other musical collaborators. She also concludes the story of the Savoy, with its shuttering mirroring the end of swing dominance after World War II.

*Rhythm Man* is a prime example of how an interdisciplinary methodology can result in a vivid biographical profile that resonates across numerous scholarly discourses. This book is a valuable resource for research on a wide range of topics intertwined with and adjacent to Chick Webb's career. It may also serve as a blueprint for robust discussions of significant figures in jazz history whose lives ended prematurely and have thus been marginalized in mainstream historical narratives. Among these scholarly dimensions, *Rhythm Man* offers an accessible, page-turning story of Webb's life and numerous listening suggestions, so it will also interest fans of more conventional jazz biographies. This broad appeal makes *Rhythm Man* a particularly welcome addition to the mosaic of discourses that make up jazz history.