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Jazz: A History Of America's Music



Synopsis

The companion volume to the ten-part PBS TV series by the team responsible for *The Civil War* and *Baseball*. Continuing in the tradition of their critically acclaimed works, Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns vividly bring to life the story of the quintessential American music—jazz. Born in the black community of turn-of-the-century New Orleans but played from the beginning by musicians of every color, jazz celebrates all Americans at their best. Here are the stories of the extraordinary men and women who made the music: Louis Armstrong, the fatherless waif whose unrivaled genius helped turn jazz into a soloist's art and influenced every singer, every instrumentalist who came after him; Duke Ellington, the pampered son of middle-class parents who turned a whole orchestra into his personal instrument, wrote nearly two thousand pieces for it, and captured more of American life than any other composer. Bix Beiderbecke, the doomed cornet prodigy who showed white musicians that they too could make an important contribution to the music; Benny Goodman, the immigrants' son who learned the clarinet to help feed his family, but who grew up to teach a whole country how to dance; Billie Holiday, whose distinctive style routinely transformed mediocre music into great art; Charlie Parker, who helped lead a musical revolution, only to destroy himself at thirty-four; and Miles Davis, whose search for fresh ways to sound made him the most influential jazz musician of his generation, and then led him to abandon jazz altogether. Buddy Bolden, Jelly Roll Morton, Dizzy Gillespie, Art Tatum, Count Basie, Dave Brubeck, Artie Shaw, and Ella Fitzgerald are all here; so are Sidney Bechet, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and a host of others. But Jazz is more than mere biography. The history of the music echoes the history of twentieth-century America. Jazz provided the background for the giddy era that F. Scott Fitzgerald called the Jazz Age. The irresistible pulse of big-band swing lifted the spirits and boosted American morale during the Great Depression and World War II. The virtuosic, demanding style called bebop mirrored the stepped-up pace and dislocation that came with peace. During the Cold War era, jazz served as a propaganda weapon—and forged links with the burgeoning counterculture. The story of jazz encompasses the story of American courtship and show business; the epic growth of great cities—New Orleans and Chicago, Kansas City and New York—and the struggle for civil rights and simple justice that continues into the new millennium. Visually stunning, with more than five hundred photographs, some never before published, this book, like the music it chronicles, is an exploration—and a celebration—of the American experiment.

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Customer Reviews

Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns have produced another handsome book, featuring the same opulent look and feel as their earlier, best selling books on The Civil War and Baseball. Their writing on jazz's early history is outstanding. Burns & Co. have also done a magnificent job of culling the nation's photo archives for rare photos of jazz's most famous founding fathers along with many of its long since forgotten contributors. For me, this alone is worth the price of admission. The big problem with this book is that it provides, at best, a severely truncated and tendentious history of the music. The (generally crisp) narrative simply peters out about 1955. One chapter gives a cursory overview of several developments in the 1950s. The final chapter covers the remaining 40 years in a slim, almost perfunctory twenty or thirty pages. Perhaps the book should have been titled "Jazz: The First 50 Years." It appears to me that the authors - both autodidacts in the field of jazz - simply lost their nerve. Writing a jazz history in the years after 1950 admittedly gets harder. The music splits into many competing schools and styles. Much of it is simply harder for the uninitiated to listen to. But this is no excuse to gloss over or ignore the great music and musicians who mean so much to jazz fans born after 1940. (Would you believe that Charles Mingus only merits a piddling sidebar?) The authors seem to have signed onto the orthodoxy of Wynton Marsalis and his ilk. In a nutshell, this holds that jazz took (multiple) wrong turns in the modern era. It stopped featuring the familiar, danceable, toe-tappable shuffling swing that earned it its original popularity. In other words, modern jazz has turned into a musical dead end.

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