

# Toward Jazz's "Official" History: The Debates and Discourses of Jazz History Textbooks

KENNETH E. PROUTY

The emergence of the "new jazz studies" over the last decade has seen an increasingly pointed critique of the historiography of the music, and of the construction of a canonical history of jazz in particular. While the "new jazz studies" does not have a definitive starting point, many attribute it to the emergence of Krin Gabbard's 1995 *Jazz Among the Discourses*, which in the words of one reviewer, represented a "compelling critique of the modernist [jazz] canon."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Gabbard himself lays out such a critique early in his introduction to the volume, arguing that the blame for the "jazz canon" lies with a desire to legitimize jazz by classicizing it:

All jazz writers are richly aware of the various strains of prejudice that place classical music in a loftier position in the cultural hierarchy. A great deal of jazz writing implicitly or explicitly expresses the demand that jazz musicians be given the same legitimacy as practitioners of the canonical arts.<sup>2</sup>

Yet for all the hand wringing about the canonical nature of jazz's conventional history, there is very little discussion within "new jazz studies" about the *teaching* of jazz history, aside from the obvious implication that it has followed a largely canonical trajectory. While numerous studies point to the flaws in the canonical approach to jazz, seldom do the same authors advance a strategy for not using it. Anti-canonical arguments generally tend to point to what is missing from the canon—a certain artist, an underrepresented group, a particular sub-style—rather than how to exist without it.

This article is adapted from an expanded discussion of jazz historiography and community in my forthcoming book, *Knowing Jazz: Community, Pedagogy and Canon in the Information Age*, from the University Press of Mississippi. I am grateful to Molly Ryan for her editorial assistance.

1. Ingrid Monson, "Review," *American Music* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 110.

2. Krin Gabbard, "Introduction: The Canon and Its Consequences," in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 2.

In contrast to the mostly non-musicological bent of the practitioners of “new jazz studies” in Gabbard’s book,<sup>3</sup> musicologist Scott DeVeaux’s influential essay “Constructing the Jazz Tradition” links the problems of jazz canon more directly to the conventions of academic history courses and their related publications. While references to the conventional academic “jazz studies”<sup>4</sup> in Gabbard’s edition are generally oblique,<sup>5</sup> DeVeaux tackles the issue more directly:

To judge from textbooks aimed at the college market, something like an official history of jazz has taken hold in recent years.... from textbook to textbook, there is substantive agreement on the defining features of each style, the pantheon of great innovators, and the canon of recorded masterpieces.<sup>6</sup>

DeVeaux himself does not critique specific textbooks directly, advancing instead a broad critique of jazz historiography and its canonical tendencies.<sup>7</sup> Yet textbooks are, as DeVeaux suggests, where the canonical narratives of jazz are on full display, and where they exert a great deal of influence on students and teachers of jazz history. In this essay I will discuss some of the main trends and debates surrounding the emergence of jazz history texts, in particular

3. The late Mark Tucker, himself a musicologically trained jazz scholar, picked up on this point in his review of this work, as well as Gabbard’s companion edition *Representing Jazz*, lamenting the lack of inclusion of musicological perspectives (save for Robert Walser’s essay on Miles Davis in the former). Tucker may himself have popularized the term “new jazz studies” in his essay, comparing it (though not entirely favorably) to the “new musicology” of the early 1990s. See Mark Tucker, “Review,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 131–48.

4. The term “jazz studies” was, and still is to a large degree, used in American academia to refer specifically to academic jazz performance programs in colleges and universities. When and where the first such use of the term occurred is not clear, but it was in common usage by the mid 1970s, as evidence to Walter Barr’s dissertation, “The Jazz Studies Curriculum,” (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 1974), a study that proved very influential on the establishment of NASM standards in the area. Most current music schools, when they offer jazz majors, confer music degrees in “jazz studies.” Occasionally, such majors might be named as “jazz and contemporary music” or some similar designation, but the term “jazz studies” is still the preferred title for such programs.

5. In fact, Gabbard’s frequent use of this term to refer to an emerging interdisciplinary challenge to the jazz canon is confusing in light of its accepted use in academia. Gabbard makes no mention of the fact that the term was, in effect, already “claimed” to refer to jazz performance programs, and his few scattered references to such programs cloud the issue even more.

6. Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (Autumn 1991): 525.

7. Despite this, it is not all that difficult to extrapolate that DeVeaux is referring mainly to Frank Tirro’s *Jazz: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977) and Mark Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1978), which were, by 1991, firmly established textbooks among teachers of jazz history.

those intended for the "college market" (as opposed to general trade books or scholarly monographs). I suggest that while DeVeaux's argument is essentially correct, the specific nature of such published works reveals a dialectic of attachment to and discomfort with the jazz canon that speaks to the larger issues of how jazz history is taught, or should be taught, in an academic setting. Authors of textbooks must negotiate their relationships to the canon, acknowledging both its flaws and its importance in establishing a framework for the teaching of history. The emergence of a literature devoted to the teaching of jazz history since the late 1970s must be contextualized both within the hegemony of canonical, classically-based approaches to history in musical academia, and the sustained critique of such perspectives in contemporary jazz scholarship.

### Setting the Stage: Marshall Stearns, Paul Tanner and the Teaching of the Jazz Canon

Marshall Stearns's *The Story of Jazz*<sup>8</sup> was arguably the first attempt to create a unified, coherent jazz narrative that tied together the different stylistic trends which had emerged to that point (the mid 1950s). That Stearns took great pains to avoid coming down on any particular side of the fierce critical wars of the 1940s is evident. The result was what John Gennari has labeled a "liberal consensus view" of jazz's development,<sup>9</sup> a stylistic and critical big tent in which all movements in jazz could be easily explained in relation to each other. Departing from the polemical approaches of Rudi Blesh, Sidney Finkelstein, and others,<sup>10</sup> Stearns's jazz history advanced a common cause of jazz, one that was becoming increasingly vital in the face of a new, rising threat—rock and roll.

For Stearns, the legitimating value of jazz lay in this broad developmental course which paralleled that of the western canon. Like classical music, jazz history was one that could be traced through a logical progression of stylistic development; *this* was why jazz had to be taken seriously. Jazz was said to exist, and must be understood, as a fully formed art with its own path. Perhaps that is Stearns's greatest legacy as an historian, the portrayal of jazz as an art form whose legitimacy is confirmed by the similarity of its trajectory

8. Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

9. John Gennari, *Blowing Hot and Cool: Jazz and its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 152.

10. See Rudi Blesh, *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz* (New York: Knopf, 1946); Sidney Finkelstein, *Jazz: A Peoples' Music* (New York: Citadel Press, 1948). Though Blesh completely ignores contemporary developments (intentionally so), his book is among the first to use the term "history of jazz" so explicitly.

with those of other established art forms. It is this broad view of jazz that has shaped the core of legitimating arguments about jazz nearly since its inception, positioning jazz as “America’s Classical Music.” Stearns merely formalized it and gave it academic grounding. Ironically, his identity as a non-music scholar may have given *more* credence to this idea; if a Yale educated scholar of Chaucer could find artistic value in jazz, then maybe it really *did* have value. In the same way that early jazz educators created methods of instruction that “spoke the language” of musical academia, so did Stearns “speak the language” of historical canon, and his ability to apply it to jazz is his most important legacy.

That Stearns’s work provided a foundation for modern jazz historiography is clear; general history texts written since *The Story of Jazz* track remarkably close to his narrative. What is less apparent is the degree to which his work is based in earlier scholarship. Gennari argues that Stearns was notable for his refusing to take sides in the critical debates that characterized jazz in the previous decade.<sup>11</sup> But that does not mean that he did not draw upon arguments that were made in these critical discourses. As a developing scholar at Yale, Stearns was influenced by figures in a number of fields, establishing what is best described as an interdisciplinary approach to jazz history. As William Kenney notes, Stearns “consulted with” a number of academics during his graduate years at Yale, gaining some expertise in anthropology, sociology and musicology from faculty members in different areas.<sup>12</sup> And with this eclectic approach, not dogmatically tied to musicology, criticism or his own chosen academic career in English, Stearns was able to pull together numerous perspectives to form a consensus narrative. In his discussion of African influences, Stearns echoes much the work of Blesh and his revivalist peers, though without the primitivist trappings.<sup>13</sup> But modern developments also form part of his story. The core narrative that links older and newer approaches to the music tracks remarkably close to that of Barry Ulanov’s 1952 *History of Jazz in America*,<sup>14</sup> with perhaps less emphasis on modern developments, but generally covering the same territory. In short, Stearns does not reinvent the wheel—he just makes it spin better. By advocating for an inclusive view of jazz, Stearns may be arguing that jazz, in facing an increasingly bleak commercial future with the rise of rock and roll, cannot afford the kinds of divisive debates that took place in the 1940s. Of course, such debates would emerge again with the development an experimental, avant-garde

11. Gennari, *Blowing Hot and Cool*, 152.

12. William Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890–1945* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16.

13. For a more detailed discussion of primitivism in early jazz criticism, see Ted Gioia, “Jazz and the Primitivist Myth,” *The Musical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (1989): 130–43.

14. Barry Ulanov, *A History of Jazz in America* (New York: Viking Press, 1952).

approach to jazz at nearly the same time *The Story of Jazz* was hitting the bookshelf.

Though Stearns was himself a pioneer in the teaching of college-level jazz history, creating a renowned series of courses at NYU and the New School, his text does not seem to be specifically intended to be used in a classroom setting. If anything, it would seem that the opposite was true; Stearns's text flowed from his classroom experiences.<sup>15</sup> Paul Tanner, a jazz trombonist with Glenn Miller and later professor at UCLA, would produce (along with Maurice Gerow) *A Study of Jazz* in 1964,<sup>16</sup> what could be rightly seen as the first textbook produced specifically for a collegiate classroom audience. Tanner's jazz history classes at UCLA were the stuff of legend since their inception in 1958, a staple on campus for many years that regularly drew hundreds of students per session. The narrative of Tanner and Gerow's text follows that of Stearns very closely, breaking up the subject into similar style-defined sections (though Tanner and Gerow give more extensive coverage to later developments, as might be expected). Speaking directly to the use of Stearns's book as a classroom tool, Tanner writes:

The Stearns book was more popular before there were others on the market. The consensus of opinion is that Stearns did excellent research, especially in the prejazz area, although he did lack understanding of more modern idioms.<sup>17</sup>

Stearns's untimely death in 1966 precluded any further revision to the narrative to include or expand on these more modern idioms, thus limiting its applicability as a classroom text for future generations of students and teachers. Tanner's book thus serves as an important step in the move from jazz history as a critical and scholarly pursuit into one where applicability for pedagogy is of prime concern. With the canon more or less established by the

15. Syllabi for Stearns's lectures are widely available, and demonstrate an organizational scheme that is remarkably similar to many conventional jazz history syllabi today. For one example, see Marshall Stearns, "Jazz in the Classroom," in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Robert Walser (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 195–98.

16. Paul Tanner and Maurice Gerow, *A Study in Jazz* (Dubuque, IA: W. C. Browne, 1964).

17. Paul Tanner, "Jazz Goes to College" *Music Educators Journal* 57, no. 7 (March 1971): 106. Tanner notes in this essay that five texts seemed to dominate the market at the time, those by Stearns, Schuller (*Early Jazz: Its Roots and Early Development*), Andre Hodier (*Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence*), Joachim Berendt (*Jazz Book*), and his own text with Gerow. Two observations are in order regarding this passage. First, Tanner provides no specific documentation for this assertion, nor explanation of any sample or survey size. It may well have been an informal poll of colleagues. Second, he points out flaws in each of these texts, including, remarkably, his own (noting that the included musical examples might "frighten" some people—he is not clear as to whether he refers to students or teachers).

1970s, writers of general jazz histories could now begin to interpret it for use in the classroom.<sup>18</sup>

### The Battle Over Textbooks: Frank Tirro and the “Jazz Grout”

Following on the heels of these works, the introduction of newly minted texts in the late 1970s would profoundly affect jazz’s historiographic discourse. The introduction of Frank Tirro’s *Jazz: A History*<sup>19</sup> was no insignificant event in the emerging field of jazz scholarship. Jazz studies had been, to this point, without a musicologically-based general study of jazz history, and Tirro, a professor of music at Duke (he would later move to Yale), sought to fill that void. Much of the anticipation of (and subsequent reception to) Tirro’s text was likely due to its publisher. W. W. Norton was (and still is) regarded as one of the industry leaders in the production of academic textbooks in music. Norton is perhaps best known in musicology for its publication of Donald Jay Grout’s 800-pound gorilla of musical canon, *A History of Western Music*,<sup>20</sup> for decades the central text in the teaching of music history in undergraduate music programs across the United States. Known (sometimes with derision) simply as “Grout,” this text has been a stalwart of music curricula across the U.S. since its first appearance in 1960. Even after Grout’s death in 1987, Norton has continued to produce this seminal text, first under the guidance of Claude V. Palisca, and currently in association with J. Peter Burkholder. While individual teachers and students may take issue with certain themes and conclusions the authors have reached, no one can deny the enormous influence of the text, nor its role in codifying and solidifying the historical canon in musical academia.

For many who anticipated its arrival, Tirro’s *Jazz* could potentially provide the still nascent field of jazz studies with a similar unifying, codifying historical text around which to rally, a “jazz Grout” as one of my former professors

18. Not all general jazz history books are explicitly marketed as textbooks, of course. In his review of jazz history texts, Paul Tanner notes that many books (he refers specifically to those by Stearns and Schuller) are not well suited to the classroom. More recently, historical texts by Ted Gioia and Alyn Shipton have presented detailed, thorough assessments of jazz history, and have in some ways provided alternatives to the canonical narratives which dominate the textbook market. Shipton’s exhaustive work is notable for its attention to jazz outside the U.S. (which is perhaps understandable given that Shipton is British), while Gioia’s work is more conventional in approach, though it is (like Shipton’s book) exceptionally thoughtful and well written, and fairly detailed. Both books have seen somewhat limited adoption as classroom texts.

19. Frank Tirro, *Jazz: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).

20. Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960); the most recent edition is J. Peter Burkholder, Donald J. Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 8th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

called it. Like Grout, Tirro was a dyed-in-the-wool historical musicologist. And, like Grout, he was primarily (at least as academic training is concerned) a specialist in the western canon.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Tirro's background might have given his efforts more intellectual heft, as now "real" musicologists (as opposed to interdisciplinary scholars such as Stearns, musician-teachers such as Tanner, jack-of-all-trades scholars such as Gunther Schuller, or critics like Leonard Feather or Barry Ulanov) were beginning to turn their attention to jazz studies, and not simply to attack it. Tirro explains, in the preface to *Jazz: A History*, the need for such a text, and how his work, arising from musicology, filled a particular void in jazz writing:

The history of jazz is a fascinating subject, and a variety of writers—musicians, scholars, enthusiasts, journalists—have treated it with love and respect. Of all the works presently available, however, no single volume offers the reader an analysis and interpretation of jazz, both historical and musical, which incorporates recent research from allied fields—sociology, cultural anthropology, and American history—as well as from music history and theory.<sup>22</sup>

He also notes some of the difficulties faced by historians in confronting the vastness of the topic of jazz history, as well as its implications for creating a canon in jazz history:

Historians try to be objective, but this writer was ultimately forced to include and emphasize those aspects of the historical development which seemed to him to be the most important, most representative, and most germane to present-day readers.<sup>23</sup>

Tirro's comments point to a tension between bias and objectivity that often shades historical study; he *wants* to be objective, but there are certain accommodations that have to be made to make the study manageable. This is a fair point, but there is one problem—many of Tirro's choices, those that seem to simply strike *him* as important, are the same choices made by previous scholars. In other words, he's "choosing" what is already established in the canon. It is entirely possible that Tirro might independently arrive at the conclusion that his selections of artists, recordings and stylistic delineation are indeed important, but I am skeptical, if for no other reason than for the fact that he makes extensive use of the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz (SCCJ)* throughout his narrative.<sup>24</sup> He did not need to choose who was important; the

21. For example see Frank Tirro, "Giovanni Spataro's Choirbooks in the Archive of San Petronio in Bologna," PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1974.

22. Tirro, *Jazz: A History*, xvii.

23. Tirro, *Jazz: A History*, xvii.

24. It is worth taking some time to consider the appearance of the *SCCJ* and its impact on the development of the jazz history canon. First published in 1973, and later revised, this set, assembled by Martin Williams, has been one of the primary forces behind the creation of a recorded jazz canon. The first significant jazz anthology on record, the *SCCJ* has been the

very reliance on this collection made the choice moot. Still, it is interesting that such a canonically focused work would include this type of qualifier, the “I really struggled with these choices about whom to discuss” type of argument, all the while emphasizing those who are in the canon. Thus, Tirro places his work within an implicit debate about the jazz canon, and he sets his own bar for scholarship relatively high. It is his expressed intent to make his own work distinct from previously published histories of jazz via an explicitly *musicological* approach. To say that this project seems ambitious might be an understatement, and it seems clear that Tirro’s intent is to produce, at some level, the “jazz Grout,” a textbook that would, it was hoped, finally give jazz historians a work of substantial depth and scholarship that would provide a unifying historical narrative. This was, to be sure, an ambitious project—one that had the potential to re-shape the teaching of jazz history in American academia.

Unfortunately for Tirro, the reaction to his textbook was far from enthusiastic, especially among the handful of figures who by the late 1970s were beginning to establish enclaves of jazz scholarship within music departments nationwide. In a crushing review of the book in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Lawrence Gushee attacked Tirro’s book on a number of fronts. Gushee, like Tirro, possessed impressive credentials in musicology, receiving his PhD from Yale (before Tirro’s tenure there) where he was (again like Tirro) a specialist in early music.<sup>25</sup> Acknowledging Norton’s “unique rela-

---

subject of both praise and scorn among critics and scholars, and it is difficult to overstate its importance in the development of jazz history texts at least to the 1990s. Many reviewers point to the collection’s immediate applications for jazz history teachers. John C. Nelson notes, “if you are teaching a jazz history or jazz theory course...this is one album no [jazz] collection should be without.” (John C. Nelson, “The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz: A Review” *Black Music Research Journal* 1 [1980]: 112.) And while Krin Gabbard has been deeply critical of the canonizing effect of collections such as the SCCJ, even he acknowledges that it was perhaps the “only major listening text for an introductory course in jazz history. Many critics have second guessed Martin Williams’s choices for what ought to be included in the set of recordings, but as of early 1995 no one has undertaken to replace it with a comparable anthology of favored recordings.” (Gabbard, *Discourses*, 13.) Others, however, have been less positive. David Schiff expresses the attitudes of many in pointing out problems with Williams’s “conscious and unconscious prejudices” in his selection of music for inclusion, the overwhelmingly male roster of artists, and the problem of “its very excellence.” (David Schiff, “Riffing the Canon,” *Notes* 64, no. 2 [December 2007]: 220.) With respect to the last point, Schiff argues that the anthology’s emphasis on the exemplary “took the lumps and bumps and uncertainties out of jazz history—a field marked almost from the beginning with passionate disputes between its followers, all now neatly resolved and forgotten.” (Schiff, “Riffing the Canon,” 220.)

25. Whereas Tirro’s dissertation was a study of a renaissance musical source, Gushee’s was a critical edition of an early music theory text; see Lawrence A. Gushee, “The *Musica disciplina* of Aurelian of Réomé: A Critical Text and Commentary,” PhD diss., Yale University, 1963.

tionship to American musicological scholarship," an obvious nod to Grout, Gushee suggests that the "implicit promise held out by such a conjunction is, in my opinion, not fulfilled."<sup>26</sup> Highlighting what he contends are mistakes of fact, interpretation and editing, Gushee is unsparing in his criticism, pointing out specific problems such as the lack of critical perspective, inaccuracies with transcriptions used in the text, inadequate fact-checking, and erroneous documentation. Gushee begins the concluding section of his review by saying:

To sum up: I find *Jazz: A History* an enormous disappointment, particularly because for the past ten years at least there have been appearing more specialized works which are superior in standards of scholarship and clear expression. It may be that, notwithstanding the buzzing swarm of incorrect or imprecisely stated facts and the contradictions and ambivalence of Tirro's broader historical or sociological interpretations, *Jazz: A History* will be found to be a "serviceable" textbook. For myself, I do not believe that compromises of this sort benefit education or public understanding at any level.<sup>27</sup>

That Gushee would suggest that some teachers (which presumably would not include himself) might find the book "serviceable" in their classrooms conjures up the phrase "close enough for jazz," an oft-heard colloquialism within musical academia, even within jazz studies itself, though in an ironic fashion. What is at issue here, I suggest, is not simply a literary critique. Gushee seems genuinely concerned that a text such as Tirro's, coming from a publisher like Norton, might actually do damage to the cause of jazz studies in the long run. First impressions are important, and if this is the "best" that jazz musicology can produce, then the discipline may have a serious problem.

Tirro himself addressed these criticisms in a published response in the same journal (which was presumably solicited by the editors, as is often the case with such scathing reviews). He challenges some of Gushee's specific points, such as Tirro's use of the word "agrarian" as a demographic descriptor for 1870s America, or differences in the appearance of the text and trade editions (which Tirro argues demonstrates carelessness on the part of Gushee in reviewing the different editions), and also addresses Gushee's criticisms of his use of transcriptions. Most notably, he directly challenges Gushee's musicological bona fides, suggesting that Gushee's writing is characterized by "journalistic prose [that] can be entertaining and may be appropriate for newspaper record reviews and record jacket blurbs."<sup>28</sup> Late in the letter, Tirro writes:

26. Lawrence Gushee, "Review," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 31, no. 3 (Autumn 1978): 535.

27. Gushee, "Review," 539–40.

28. Frank Tirro, "To the Editor of the *Journal*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 32, no. 3 (Autumn 1979): 596.

He [Gushee], together with Martin Williams and his associates, represents a school of thought and writing which has dominated American jazz criticism for several decades.... My book calls into question many of their published notions and even raises doubt about their expertise; it challenges them to write in a different way.<sup>29</sup>

The “different way” of which Tirro speaks would seem to be, from his perspective, a more thorough musicological approach that is not based in what he sees as an inferior mode of writing and research, which is ironic given his book’s emphasis on using recordings from Williams’s *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*.

Gushee was not alone in his negative response to *Jazz: A History*. In the “other” major musicological journal, *The Musical Quarterly*, James Dapogny calls *Jazz: A History* “a seriously flawed work, with many errors of fact and, on a different level, problems of conception and depth of penetration of the subject.”<sup>30</sup> In another review in *Black Perspective in Music*, Lewis Porter also harshly criticized Tirro. Writing in a review that also included discussions of new texts on jazz by Leroy Ostransky, Jerry Coker, and Mark Gridley (resulting a sort of “state of late 1970s jazz scholarship”), Porter argues that Tirro’s misinterpretations of King Oliver’s “Dippermouth Blues” solo suggests that “[He] is not adequately familiar with one of the most celebrated solos in all of jazz.”<sup>31</sup> Porter’s assertion that “Such errors...do not belong in published works and would not be tolerated in comparable works in, say, the classical-music field,”<sup>32</sup> lend credence to the perception that scholarly works in jazz were perhaps not taken as seriously by some in musicology. He continues, “We who know the music well enough to realize its worth have a responsibility to help the field by producing work that is as flawless as possible.”<sup>33</sup> This last sentence is telling, with Porter setting himself and other like-minded jazz scholars “who know the music” apart from Tirro, who by implication does not.<sup>34</sup>

It might be easy to simply dismiss these debates as intellectual posturing or professional infighting, but there are serious issues at stake in the development of a musicologically-based jazz scholarship at this point in time. The late 1970s was a period in which jazz was in decline, at least in terms of public

29. Tirro, “To the Editor,” 597.

30. James Dapogny, “Review of Books,” *The Musical Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (July 1978): 407.

31. Lewis Porter, “Book Reviews,” *Black Perspective in Music* 6, no. 2 (Autumn 1978): 234.

32. Porter, “Book Reviews,” 234.

33. Porter, “Book Reviews,” 237.

34. In another negative review, Martin Williams writes that “On page after page, the book contains the most elementary mistakes of date and fact.” Such negative treatment was an especially cruel blow, as so much of Tirro’s text had been based on Williams’s *Smithsonian Collection*, that most canonical set of recordings whose influence pervades jazz studies to this day. See Martin Williams, “Reaction to *Jazz: A History*,” *Music Educators Journal* 65, no. 8 (April 1979): 15.

reception of the music, and, depending on whose perspective you align with, in decline artistically as well. The perception was, for many, that jazz was dying, or was already dead, as Miles Davis famously declared.<sup>35</sup> The appearance of jazz-rock fusion represented for many a degradation of the jazz tradition, a "selling out" to commercial interests, and likely spurred on a sentiment that "real" jazz needed to be preserved. Jazz, it was thought, was becoming a thing of the past, and an accurate record of its most important practitioners and developments was crucial to its preservation. While we can see in retrospect that jazz was not about to become extinct, it is not difficult to imagine in the mid 1970s why such a perspective might be widespread. Jazz had recently lost arguably its two biggest names, Armstrong and Ellington, and had been thoroughly displaced by rock, soul, and disco as Americans' popular music of choice. Historical efforts in jazz were aimed at preserving the legacy of the music (nowhere in any of the critical reviews do the authors chastise Tirro for neglecting to mention current developments), and few could have foreseen the renaissance of mainstream jazz in the 1980s. These debates would shape the legacy of jazz in what probably looked increasingly like a post-jazz world, and they are crucial to the development of a focused, musicologically sound approach to the music's preservation.<sup>36</sup>

### The Market Expands

Given the relatively limited number of jazz history texts that were in existence at the time of DeVaux's historiographic essay, it is not terribly difficult to establish just which ones he is referring to. DeVaux actually talks very little about the main college textbooks of the time, despite his invoking them to set up his discussion of the canonical narrative of jazz history. Besides Tirro's book, two other college-level publications dominated the market by the end of the 1980s: Mark Gridley's *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis* (Prentice Hall),<sup>37</sup>

35. This statement has been attributed to Davis in several different contexts. The PBS series *Jazz* by Ken Burns quotes Davis as saying, in 1975, "Jazz is dead, the music of the museum." Davis was also quoted as saying this in relation to Wynton Marsalis, telling an interviewer in 1986 that "The past is dead. *Jazz is dead.*" (Emphasis in original.) See Nick Kent, "Lightening Up with the Prince of Darkness," in *Miles on Miles: Interviews and Encounters with Miles Davis*, edited by Paul Maher, Jr. and Michael K. Dorr (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009), 260.

36. W. W. Norton published a second edition of *Jazz: A History* in 1992. Tirro very briefly and indirectly addressed the criticisms of his work, writing in a new introduction that he had "rethought" many views espoused in the first edition. "Most remain firm," he states, but "a few have been modified." (xix) This second edition was the last version of Tirro's text to date.

37. Mark Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1978); the 10th edition of the full text was published in 2010 and the 6th edition of the abridged *Concise Guide to Jazz*, was also published in 2010. All following quotations from the text are taken from the first edition.

and Donald Megill and Richard Demory's *Introduction to Jazz History* (Prentice Hall).<sup>38</sup> But what in these texts constitutes the "official history" of which DeVeaux writes?

Gridley's book is arguably the most widely used jazz history and appreciation text on the academic market, and its longevity is evidenced by the fact that it has recently seen the release of a tenth edition. Gridley, a jazz musician and professor of psychology (i.e., not a musicologist or historian by training or profession as opposed to Tirro and Gushee) at Heidelberg College in Ohio, presents an overview of jazz history that focuses exclusively upon characteristics of different styles and genres, rather than on historical or personal narrative. Little attention is paid to the contextual development of jazz styles, or to the ways in which jazz reflected issues of identity or historical circumstance. One of the most notable features of Gridley's text is his emphasis on breaking down selected listening examples, in which Gridley guides the listener through a selected set of recorded examples that are, like Tirro's book, were keyed largely to examples drawn from the *SCCJ* (at least in earlier editions). In finding a place for his own work in the emerging literature, Gridley is both pragmatic and philosophical. On the one hand, he casts his work as eminently usable; the first words of his preface note that he intends the book to be "a guide to appreciating jazz as well as an introduction to most styles which have been documented on records."<sup>39</sup> As a text intended for "high school through adult level readers,"<sup>40</sup> who are not music specialists, Gridley seems to be striving to reach perhaps a wider audience than Tirro, and one that is perhaps less knowledgeable about music; this is not a "jazz Grout" to be sure. Nevertheless, his book was widely adopted by teachers of jazz history courses throughout the United States, as he notes in his introductions to later editions.

Gridley speaks to the nature of jazz education and scholarship in the late 1970s by noting that the "American colleges and government have shown increasing interest in jazz" during this period, and that his book is "part of that development," arising from his own work teaching jazz history.<sup>41</sup> Speaking to the ideas of canon and the historical development of jazz generally, Gridley writes:

Although it is very difficult to generalize about music, certain recognized styles, such as swing, bop, and West Coast, can be described. Some of the following chapters are devoted to important musicians like Duke Ellington and John Coltrane. These chapters are not biographies. They are descriptions of styles as important as those

38. Donald Megill and Richard Demory, *Introduction to Jazz History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984); the 6th edition was published in 2004.

39. Gridley, *Jazz Styles*, vii.

40. Gridley, *Jazz Styles*, vii.

41. Gridley, *Jazz Styles*, 4.

named for such "chronological" eras as swing and bop. It just happened that certain important styles became attached more to musician names than to era names....

Much of the text is organized chronologically. Although I do not think a knowledge of jazz history is essential to the appreciation of jazz, an historical approach provides the most expedient means of organizing a wide range of diverse styles.... Many players fail to fit precisely in any single style. But a particular performer's playing often will have enough in common with a given style to justify mentioning him in the discussion which treats the style....

Although styles tend to flow one from another, jazz history cannot be accurately described as a single stream, evolving from Dixieland to swing to bop, and so forth.<sup>42</sup>

Gridley thus outlines both the problems and advantages of canon. While a single historical narrative cannot explain all developments in jazz, it can still provide a useful, even necessary framework for conceptualizing its evolution. If Gridley's comments here seem contradictory, they probably are; they are a reflection of the relationship between the establishment of canon and its application in actual classroom settings. When Gridley's text first appeared in 1978, it was reviewed by Lewis Porter in the same essay as his blistering attack on the work of Frank Tirro. Fortunately for Gridley, his work fares much better than the other texts considered in the essay; Porter calls it "admirably complete and well-organized." In summing up his assessment of Gridley's work, Porter writes that the book "may be the best all-around text on the market, and it certainly contains the best history of jazz since 1950."<sup>43</sup> Yet Porter himself would seem to have some sense of lingering dissatisfaction with the state of textbook publishing in jazz history, a point I shall return to later.

Gridley's text certainly represents a different approach than that of Tirro, whose intent to create a comprehensive historical narrative is clear. For Gridley, the experience of jazz for students is one that is based squarely on stylistic analysis derived from directed listening. The various editions of his text are well known for the inclusion of lists of significant musicians, representing both specific genres and more nebulously defined classifications. One list, for example, offers us "A Few of the many Hard Bop Style Musicians," though Gridley's definition of "few" is open to debate—there are over 100 musicians on this particular list, sub-categorized by instrument. Other lists include "A Few of the Many Trumpeters Influenced by Miles Davis," "Some of the Many Musicians Who Have Improvised Without Preset Chord Progressions," or "A Few of the Many Musicians Who Have Been Important to Basie." Like his lists, Gridley's narrative of style is based on clearly defined stylistic criteria, which he makes plain in each chapter, and often re-emphasizes in the form of inset boxes which compare styles or musicians (cool vs. hard bop, or the

42. Gridley, *Jazz Styles*, 4–5.

43. Porter, "Book Review," 237.

trombone playing of J. J. Johnson vs. Curtis Fuller, for example). This type of factual detail as presented in the book is, in some cases, overwhelming—is it realistic that any student would remember all of the musicians in one of Gridley’s lists? But that is probably not the point; such information is intended to give the student a starting point, rather than the final word on the topic. Still, the lack of attention to social and historical context in Gridley’s work is remarkable, especially considering its wide adoption as a standard text in the field. Even in more recent editions, this narrative of name, style and sound is remarkably similar to its first manifestation.

Tirro’s and Gridley’s works might be seen to reflect two very different approaches to the study of jazz history in the late 1970s. Tirro’s approach is encyclopedic, reflective of the types of detailed, dense study that characterized musicology of the time. Aimed at faculty members and their students, the text would likely be considered inappropriate for general audiences. In contrast, Gridley’s book is less of an exercise in “musicology” per se, but rather an attempt to create a comprehensive approach for the more casual listener, one who might be enrolled in a basic jazz appreciation course. His incorporation of listening guides, particularly in subsequent editions, speaks to this idea. Gridley’s listening guides not only direct students to what they are listening to (i.e., the great masterworks of the canon), but what to listen *for* (i.e., why they *belong* in the canon).

As jazz gained an increasingly important place in academia in the late 1970s, the disparity between two potential audiences, those comprised of specialists studying music (or even jazz studies specifically) and the general audience whose exposure to jazz might be more limited, was becoming more apparent. Jazz studies programs, as well as courses aimed at specialized jazz studies majors, increased dramatically during this period. Tirro’s text seems aimed clearly at the former, while Gridley makes a play for a longstanding audience for jazz appreciation, following in the tradition of authors such as Paul Tanner, whose book *Jazz* was itself developed for the author’s own large jazz appreciation lectures at UCLA. But despite differences in approach, writing, and their target audiences, both of these texts make many of the same assumptions about canon, the importance of artists deemed to be significant, and the stylistic delineations that have driven much of the conventional jazz narrative. For each, canon is seemingly negotiated, as both men’s statements indicate. And yet, both men seem to follow narratives that are eminently canonical in structure.

Of course, the economic realities of academia also meant that in many cases, there was *not* a distinction between specialist-oriented and general-interest jazz courses (in fact, this remains the case in many situations). Appearing several years after the initial publication of Gridley’s text, Megill and Demory’s *Introduction to the History of Jazz* is less comprehensive than Tirro’s

text, but more overtly historical than Gridley's, and certainly more attuned to placing jazz within the context of significant events in American culture. The authors purport to employ an even-handed, non-canonical approach to the subject, stating in the Preface that "we cannot say one performer is more important than another, and have had a difficult time choosing which performers to discuss."<sup>44</sup> This is a perplexing comment, as the writing of any historical text either necessitates such choices, or relies simply on a pre-existing narrative. What is important here, however, is the statement itself—the authors are expressing a discomfort with canon, trying to present what they are doing as an alternative to it. For them, at least as far as this statement is concerned, jazz history is a messy, confused topic that is open to debate and interpretation. Yet a scan of the table of contents belies this sentiment, as sections are devoted to discussions of Armstrong, Morton, Ellington, Parker, Monk, Davis, Coltrane, and other canonically established musicians whose work is seemingly deemed more important than that of other players. In fact, there is little in the text that does not support the "official history" of which DeVeaux writes; the book could be seen as a major source of that narrative.<sup>45</sup>

Take, for example, the discussion of early genres. Megill and Demory, like most other authors, treat blues, work songs, and other forms pre-dating jazz as contributing to its early development. But these genres are often treated in an ahistorical manner, as if all blues were some how "pre-jazz." Blues is positioned here as a pre-cursor to jazz despite the fact the many of the blues genres discussed were, in fact, contemporary to or later than early jazz groups. The discussion of "work songs" is similarly placed in an antecedent position in the text, but the section's focus on the music of Leadbelly as an exemplar of the tradition, whose popularity occurred only after jazz had been well established, undercuts the flow of an historical narrative; so does the reliance on Robert Johnson as the epitome of the country blues as he, like Leadbelly, achieved his greatest recognition only after the popularization of swing in the mid 1930s.<sup>46</sup> Whatever Johnson's contributions were to popular music and jazz, he certainly was not personally influential on the development of early jazz in New Orleans. In the discussion of "City Blues," Megill and Demory likewise present a conventional evolutionary narrative, stating that "City blues replaced the intimacy of country blues with a refinement and sophistication

44. Megill and Demory, *Introduction to Jazz History*, vii.

45. And it was, of course, widely available by the time DeVeaux's essay was written.

46. Johnson has been the subject of a good deal of revisionist scholarship in recent years, most notably through the work of Elijah Wald, who argues in *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad, 2004) that the narrative of Johnson's influence was constructed in the 1960s as more and more white rock musicians "discovered" his music.

that held audiences and played on their feelings.”<sup>47</sup> This neglects the fact that the first country blues recordings appeared only after the early “classic” recordings of Mamie Smith and others, and were in many ways a response to them.<sup>48</sup>

Discussions of jazz genres themselves are also problematic in their simplicity of narrative. In the chapter on bebop, Megill and Demory begin:

Only rarely has a musical era paralleled the career of one individual. Bebop was one of those rarities. It is linked to Charlie Parker, who presided at its beginning and rise to preeminence.<sup>49</sup>

There are several problems with this account, most notably that Parker did not “[preside] at its beginning;” there were many early leaders of the movement, such as Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Christian, Thelonious Monk, Kenny Clarke, Coleman Hawkins, and a host of others.<sup>50</sup> A statement like this is particularly awkward in light of the authors’ assertion that “we cannot say one performer is more important than another.” Here, they are clearly saying Parker is more important than, say, Dizzy Gillespie, whose photo graces the first page of the chapter on bebop, but whose contributions to the genre are barely mentioned in it (only Parker and Monk are discussed in depth). Equally little attention is given to the social and cultural milieu which helped give rise to jazz; the unique musical and social climates of New Orleans, the importance of World War II to the changing jazz scene in the 1940s, or the fostering of political consciousness among many free jazz musicians of the 1960s. These are glaring omissions for a book that seeks to explore a genre whose practitioners “have been influenced by social and historical forces peculiar to America.”<sup>51</sup> The failure to properly contextualize jazz’s development, either through misplaced discussions of pre-jazz genres (as in the discussion of blues) or a failure to follow through on a pledge to provide thorough discussions of historical environment (as with bebop) leaves us with a text that makes a specious claim to questioning the canon. While the authors note both the difficulty of choosing which artists to discuss and the problems inherent in contextualizing the music within the social and cultural environment of the day, the book reflects neither of these things.

47. Megill and Demory, *Introduction to the History of Jazz*, 19–20.

48. See Wald, as well as Charles Keil, “People’s Music Comparatively: Style and Stereotype, Class and Hegemony,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 10, no. 1–2 (July 1985): 119–30 for more detailed discussions of these issues.

49. Megill and Demory, *Introduction*, 119.

50. See DeVaux’s *Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) for further discussion.

51. Megill and Demory, *Introduction*, vii.

This is not simply a matter of pointing out flaws in a source—these issues have profound implications for the historiography of jazz as it is evolving toward a solidified, unified narrative of the music's development. No one can seriously question the influence of blues in jazz (take for instance any of the literally hundreds of blues-based jazz recordings from throughout the genre's history). But its treatment in such narratives, while supporting a canonical version of jazz's pre-history, misses critical points in the relationship *between* blues and jazz. What is important to remember is that blues is a both *an influence on jazz* and *a parallel tradition to jazz*, and the two genres have been mutually reinforcing throughout their histories. As much as blues "gave" jazz certain melodic inflections and formal structure, jazz "gave" blues certain modes of performance practice; the classic (city) blues of the 1920s owes a profound debt to jazz, as evidenced by the frequent employment of jazz musicians on record dates by blues singers. What is most troubling about the way in which a history such as the one advanced by Megill and Demory is that such critical perspectives are not offered to the student. The specific connections between blues and jazz are never really explored, and readers are left with a sense that blues, because it comes before New Orleans in the text, is an "earlier" form. The lack of a critique of such canonical perspectives can be seen in many such texts, but is all the more striking given the authors' claims to an alternate way of understanding the genre.

Taken together, these texts present a consistent narrative structure for the history of jazz. In these works, jazz history is seen as a logical, flowing developmental narrative, in which stylistic trends are organized within the framework of decade-defined periods (i.e., early jazz in the 1920s, swing in the 1930s, bebop in the 1940s, and so forth). This basic historical narrative has become arguably the most commonly used method of organizing jazz's history into more manageable units.

### **Critiquing the Canon, or Canonizing the Critique?**

In Lewis Porter's review of Tirro's and Gridley's texts, the juxtaposition of these two sources is notable in that as bad as he believes Tirro's book to be, his praise of Gridley's book seems to indicate that this might be the jazz history book that will carry the field into academic acceptance. To a large degree, he was right, as the widespread adoption of Gridley's book probably did much to help solidify both the emerging academic jazz canon, and the ability of potential jazz history teachers to prepare clear, cogent course materials. In fact, Gridley himself became something of an authority on the pedagogy of jazz history during the 1980s, publishing a guide for potential jazz history instructors

called *How to Teach Jazz History* in 1984.<sup>52</sup> This spiral-bound book offers a wealth of specific pedagogical advice on the ins and outs of classroom teaching that is clearly aimed at potential jazz history teachers who have never been in front of a large group of students in a classroom lecture. What is notably absent from Gridley's "how to" guide is any discussion of how teachers make the decisions about precisely what to teach, about how to approach the canon. In some sense, this is moot, as Gridley undoubtedly designed *How to Teach Jazz History* to be adopted by teachers who were already using his own *Jazz Styles* text (which by 1984 was already in a second edition). His brief chapter on "Breaking Jazz History into Comprehensible Pieces" is concerned not with the division of jazz history into stylistic segments, or advice on how to approach the canon, but with developing listening skills and a vocabulary to talk about music.

Despite his glowing review of Gridley's book, Lewis Porter seems ultimately to have been unsatisfied with the choices given to him as a teacher by the textbook market, because in 1993 he and colleague Michael Ullman produced yet another jazz history book, *Jazz: From Its Origins to the Present*. In the Preface, Porter and Ullman write:

We began this book in 1982 in response to what we—as fans, educators, authors, and, in Porter's case, a sometime performer—saw as a need for a literate, accurate, and up-to-date one-volume history of jazz and its major figures. We wanted that book to be musically sophisticated, inclusive, and unbiased..., but more importantly, to give a fair representation of the music that had the greatest impact on musicians and on the general public. When faced with a choice between an obscure personal favorite and a historically significant piece, we have opted for the latter.<sup>53</sup>

There are several points we should consider in reading this passage. In 1982, the texts on the market included those by Stearns, Tanner, Tirro and Gridley,

52. Mark Gridley, *How to Teach Jazz History* (Manhattan, Kansas: National Association of Jazz Educators, 1984). Gridley's prominence as an authority on teaching jazz history is ironic in light of his background in psychology, rather than musicology. Given jazz history's penchant for attracting "interdisciplinary" scholars (recall that Marshall Stearns was a professor of English, coming to jazz through his work as a record collector and columnist), it should not be entirely surprising. This makes the Tirro/Gushee debate even more pressing, as musicologists had to contend not only with issues of disciplinary approach and method, but with the predominance of non-musicological perspectives in the teaching of jazz history. Gridley's anointing as the best representative of jazz history pedagogy by the National Association of Jazz Educators (a society which lasted from 1968 to 2008, and through which Gridley's handbook was published) underscores the lack of serious musicological perspectives in emerging jazz studies programs.

53. Lewis Porter and Michael Ullman, *Jazz: From Its Origins to the Present* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), vii.

among others, as well as the first volume of Schuller's histories.<sup>54</sup> The use of the word "response" suggests that Porter and Ullman are consciously constructing their work to address what they see as shortcomings in the existing literature. Porter's issues with Tirro are, of course, well documented, as is his praise of Gridley's text. Megill and Demory's text would appear a few years later, and its appearance certainly informed their approach as well. But what is most notable about this statement is in the latter part where Porter and Ullman engage the canon directly, rather than critique it, and stake out their own interpretive territory relative to its pervasiveness. Wanting to appear "unbiased" suggests that the authors find bias in other materials, though this not specified. More importantly, though, they seemingly come down on the side of the canon, favoring examples that have "the greatest impact" or are more "historically significant," drawing heavily on the *SCCJ* and similar sources.

As a scan of the text demonstrates, however, these examples do not deviate significantly from previous narratives, though there are some notable differences. For example, Porter and Ullman include specific chapters on Sidney Bechet, Bill Evans, and a chapter on lesser-studied genres in the 1960s, such as bossa nova and soul jazz. But the basic structure of the narrative is essentially the same as other texts; Armstrong, Ellington, Parker and Coltrane are all discussed in depth, and the decade-defined course of jazz is as evident as in previous works. Porter and Ullman are clearly influenced by analytical discussions following the model of Gunther Schuller's texts and also rely on personal interviews conducted by Ullman (a point the authors themselves allude to in the Preface). For Porter and Ullman, the problem with jazz historiography does not seem to be the canon itself (which they clearly follow, and even could be said to reinforce), but rather the haphazard scholarship and lack of attention to detail that plagued books like Tirro's, or the lack of a cohesive contextual argument in a work such as Gridley's. There is none of the posturing about the canon that we find in Megill and Demory's work—for the most part, the canonical narrative is assumed to be at the heart of an historical understanding of the idiom. In relying heavily on such narratives, and such sources as the *SCCJ*, Porter and Ullman make full use of the canon rather than engage with it critically, as one might expect given the emergence of the "new jazz studies" at nearly the same time.<sup>55</sup>

54. Schuller's *Early Jazz* appeared in 1968. Its companion volume, *The Swing Era*, would follow in 1989. Both volumes, published by Oxford, are meticulous, painstakingly detailed treatises that represent, in my opinion, some of the most important period work in jazz historiography. As they are not intended as general texts, I have chosen not to include them in the present discussion.

55. DeVeaux's canon-thrashing essay on jazz historiography had appeared two years earlier. Gabbard's edition *Jazz Among the Discourses*, often regarded as marking the

More recently, writers of jazz histories have begun to more explicitly position themselves in relation to the canon in different ways. Critiques of prevailing narratives, implicit or explicit, have begun to influence the textbook market. Perhaps using DeVeaux's 1991 essay as a point of departure, the "official version" of jazz history is increasingly seen as problematic. That does not mean, however, that it has been abandoned. Take, for instance, the remarks of Henry Martin and Keith Waters, whose *Jazz: The First 100 Years* was first published in 2002. In the Preface to the first edition, the authors state:

We wrote *Jazz: The First 100 Years* to provide college students with a text that presents a fresh overview of jazz history and focuses greater attention on jazz since 1970, a period often slighted in previous surveys. We have also tried to stimulate fresh thinking about the jazz canon by including on the accompanying two-CD set recordings that compliment more than duplicate the selections available on the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*. In addition to the book's primary concern—the development of jazz and its most important artists—our text relates the music to aspects of social and intellectual history, including the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>56</sup>

Again, a few points are in order. First, the reference to "fresh thinking about the canon" is defined, in this context, almost exclusively in reference to the use of the *SCCJ*, rather than any specific type of narrative. This points both to the pervasiveness of recordings in establishing canonical perspectives on jazz, as well as the role of the *SCCJ* in influencing such perspectives. Second, the authors implicitly suggest that previous sources have not properly contextualized jazz within its social and cultural context. These are both important statements, and begin to move the narrative in a direction that is certainly in line with what DeVeaux suggested in his 1991 essay. But, in the following passage, the authors note:

Our chronological presentation of jazz history preserves the customary divisions of the music into stylistic periods, because we feel that this is the clearest method of introducing the material to the student. Nonetheless, throughout the text we acknowledge the arbitrariness of the stylistic divisions and emphasize that many (if not most) artists have produced significant work beyond the era in which they first came to public attention.<sup>57</sup>

Thus Martin and Waters come face to face with a fundamental dialectic between the problems of the canon, with its limited, circumscribed view of the music, and the necessity of having *some* way of categorizing and

---

emergence of new jazz studies, appeared the following year, but was based largely on already in-print essays. In other words, the questioning of jazz canon had begun in earnest when Porter and Ullman's text appeared.

56. Henry Martin and Keith Waters, *Jazz: The First 100 Years* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002), xix.

57. Martin and Waters, *Jazz*, xix.

organizing the often messy, contradictory narratives of jazz's past and present. A canon that is based in large part on a clear chronological development provides just such a method of organization, and it is no surprise that Martin and Waters lean heavily upon it to construct their narrative. Indeed, the chronological presentation of jazz history in this text tracks very closely with that of most previous texts, with discussions devoted to decade-defined stylistic movements, major innovators such as Parker and Coltrane, and a largely developmental thesis. Martin and Waters's text has been increasingly adopted by jazz history teachers, in no small part due to its clear organization and sharp focus on context.<sup>58</sup>

In 2009, W. W. Norton finally got back into the jazz history market after its experience with Frank Tirro's book, publishing a new work co-authored by Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins.<sup>59</sup> The authoring of a book by DeVeaux, considered one of the pre-eminent jazz scholars of the last two decades, and Giddins, one of the most highly regarded jazz critics working today, illustrates Norton's efforts to once again establish itself as a major player in the ever-growing jazz history textbook market. An impressive looking book simply titled *Jazz*, the DeVeaux/Giddins collaboration purports to tell the "story of jazz as it has never been told before" (from the book's back matter). Indeed, a critical perspective is made explicit in the book's introduction, as the authors write that "The canon of masterpieces is open to interpretation,"<sup>60</sup> a sentiment that has been at the heart of much of DeVeaux's work. But there are, of course, different ways of interpreting this statement. On the one hand, we might critique the idea of the canon itself, whether such a construct is really necessarily or useful for study. If we are to re-interpret the canon, we might start by abandoning some of its most basic assumption, such as which musicians are more important than others, or why we need to privilege certain artists at all. On the other hand, DeVeaux and Giddins might simply be suggesting that the canon, as it exists, is not correct. Maybe Martin Williams simply selected the wrong recordings for the *SCCJ* in some instances—decisions that have had long-lasting consequences for the study of jazz history.

One important departure from many earlier history texts is the inclusion of a bundled four-CD set with the text, breaking the long ties between jazz history texts and the *SCCJ*.<sup>61</sup> Some tracks are notable departures from the

58. In the interest of full disclosure, I have used the Martin and Waters text in my jazz history classes for the past several years.

59. Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins, *Jazz* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

60. DeVeaux and Giddins, *Jazz*, xiii.

61. Martin and Waters have also bundled a CD set, and recent editions of Gridley's text have also featured accompanying recordings. The *SCCJ* is currently out of print (though rumors of a successor set have circulated for years), which necessitates that recent textbooks

SCCJ, particularly with the emphasis on pre-jazz genres (included are examples of African music, a Sousa march, and a society band, to name a few). But many of the recordings are from the “usual suspects” of the canon; Armstrong, Ellington, Parker and Coltrane are well represented, as are contemporary artists such as Keith Jarrett and Jason Moran. Omitted are examples of Smooth Jazz and Acid Jazz, as well as contemporary pop-jazz singers like Norah Jones and Diana Krall. To be clear, I’m not necessarily arguing that these latter figures *need* to be included in the narrative jazz history; we all, as teachers, make decisions about what we should teach, and most of us simply do not have the time or resources to address everything. The point, rather, is that a canon built on such a collection is not that much less canonical or “official” than the SCCJ. Could not DeVaux and Giddins simply be replacing one canon with another? Only time (and the extent to which their text is adopted in the discipline) can answer this. But one thing is clear—a canon is often measured as much by what is excluded as by what is included; this, of course, has been one of the primary criticisms of the SCCJ. By not including examples of Acid Jazz, or substantial contributions from either female or non-American artists, do we not risk taking the same route as before? How, in such a context, are we to reinterpret the canon?

The text of *Jazz* seems, for the most part, to be organized along the same lines as previous studies, breaking down jazz’s history roughly by decade-based stylistic categories, and emphasizing the contributions of major figures like Armstrong, Ellington (who are described as jazz’s “pre-eminent” soloist and composer, respectively) and Coltrane, who headline individual chapters. While the thoroughness of the narrative is impressive, DeVaux and Giddins take us through a relatively familiar path, the “official history” that has defined jazz scholarship for so long. Many of the “masterpieces” of jazz are included on the accompanying CD set, and the same major canonical figures occupy the same roles in the narrative. In fact, most of their narrative sounds strikingly familiar to those who have made a study of jazz’s history. In the opening to their chapter on New York, they state that “New York City, particularly the borough of Manhattan, has served as the focus for jazz’s maturity and evolution since the 1920s to the present.”<sup>62</sup> Louis Armstrong is referred to as the “single most important figure in the development of jazz,”<sup>63</sup> Ellington’s “Black and Tan Fantasy” is provided as an example of the

---

authors create their own collections. Nevertheless, other commercially available anthologies have emerged to fill the void, such as the five-CD set produced in conjunction with the Ken Burns’ *Jazz* series on PBS. Despite this, the production of textbook-CD bundles has become fairly common, indicating that authors and publishers would rather produce their own recorded supplements than rely on existing sources.

62. DeVaux and Giddins, *Jazz*, 111.

63. DeVaux and Giddins, *Jazz*, 139.

“amazing progress jazz made in the 1920s,”<sup>64</sup> and Dizzy Gillespie is described as the “intellectual force behind bebop,”<sup>65</sup> all assessments that are decidedly within the canonical discourse of jazz history. Bebop is still defined by mainly Parker and Gillespie in the mid 1940s (which is particularly surprising given DeVeaux’s superb study *The Birth of Bebop*, in which he advances a far less canonical view of the genre). There are some notable and welcome exceptions, such as a chapter devoted to the historical debates in jazz today, the discussion of Rhythm and Blues in the 1940s, more extensive coverage of contemporary artists (which may simply be a function of the book’s more recent publication), and a discussion of debates over historiography themselves. But by and large the book offers a narrative that is strikingly similar to the “official version” that DeVeaux decried in 1991. The “story of jazz as it has never been told before”<sup>66</sup> in fact sounds very familiar. The text is limited in its coverage of non-canonical topics such as jazz outside the U.S., and, most notably, women in jazz (a topic which is relegated mainly to an inset box discussion, aside from brief discussions of a few significant figures like Mary Lou Williams). These are, given the current debates that characterize the “new jazz studies,” very surprising omissions.

I should stress that I greatly admire both DeVeaux’s and Giddins’s work, and that overall I find their textbook to be very well researched, engaging, and well written—certainly destined to enjoy wide adoption among jazz history students and teachers. But despite their claims that the canon is “open to interpretation and adjustment,” much of the text serves to reinforce what we already know, and what is already part of the “official history.”

### To Canonize, or Not to Canonize

Critiques of the jazz canon, such as those leveled by Gabbard, DeVeaux, and others whom we might identify with the “new jazz studies” are certainly valuable, and have forced those of us who teach jazz history to question some basic assumptions about how we approach the subject. No one would seriously argue that the canonical narratives of jazz, be they based on a developmental thesis proposed by Marshall Stearns, or the anthology of jazz masterpieces assembled by Martin Williams, are not without deep flaws, perhaps most notably in their exclusion of marginalized groups within the discourse. Such critiques have helped steer the pedagogy of jazz history into a more contextualized, broadly representative perspective, as we can see illustrated in the works of Martin and Waters and DeVeaux and Giddins, in particular.

64. DeVeaux and Giddins, *Jazz*, 137.

65. DeVeaux and Giddins, *Jazz*, 285.

66. From the back cover.

But critiquing the canon as an academic exercise is only part of the equation; applying such sustained critiques to the teaching of history in the classroom is quite another. The particular realities of curriculum and pedagogy—a fixed length term, regular assessment (of both students and faculty), linkages between academic and performance areas, for example—often limit the extent to which teachers feel free to depart from the canon. There is, in most cases, a certain expectation at the programmatic and institutional levels about what will be taught. While we may wish to present an historical narrative for jazz that is more inclusive, that is less rigid in its stylistic classification, or that questions the basic assumptions of canon, most of us by necessity still approach our classes from the same basic narrative, with the same musicians deemed more significant than others. In this sense our academic classes are no different from other aspects of the jazz studies curriculum (lessons and ensembles), which have long faced similar struggles with the tension between jazz as an alternative to the dominance of the western canon, and its own incorporation of canonical pedagogies that have enabled it to function in academia.<sup>67</sup> When Stearns wrote of the parallels between the developmental trajectories of jazz and western art music, he was doing more than simply pointing out similarities; he was establishing a framework by which jazz could “speak the language” of musical academia. Authors of jazz history textbooks certainly are sensitive to this idea, and in order to be successful, most have adopted similar postures. Jazz history may be messy, confused, and complicated, but these are classifications that are difficult to represent in a syllabus, or in a table of contents, where clarity and simplicity of organization are important.

Jazz history textbooks, despite stated claims about problems with and alternatives to the canon, have almost universally shied away from a sustained critique of the idea of a canon itself; nor have they made a serious attempt to offer alternative methods and perspectives on how to approach jazz history from a broad non-canonical standpoint. Though some teachers have proposed innovative ways of approaching the history of jazz,<sup>68</sup> there is simply no literature on which to base such a course. Authors of jazz history texts must certainly be aware of such debates and critiques. If there is one constant

67. The curricular and pedagogical structures of jazz studies programs have long been based on an adaptation of the language and perspectives of western art music theory, a topic about which I have written on other venues; see, Kenneth E. Prouty, “The ‘Finite’ Art of Improvisation: Pedagogy and Power in Jazz Education,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4.1 (2008): 1–15, <http://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/csieci/article/view/346/964> (accessed 15 February 2010).

68. David Schiff, for example, writes of teaching courses “in reverse,” in order to begin with what student are more familiar. Others in my experience have proposed thematic approaches, focusing on issues such as race or economics, regionally-based approaches, and other non-standard methods; Schiff, “Riffing the Canon,” 20.

in the recent publication of jazz history texts (besides the core narrative itself), it is that writers of jazz history texts seem to express both an uneasiness about canon, and an implicit sense that there is no better game in town. The canon is with us, like it or not. The pages of Prefaces, Introductions, and Author's Notes of jazz history textbooks are filled with ruminations about what is wrong with the canon, and how they are going to go about doing things differently, but the contents of these books are more inclined to demonstrate how much things remain the same. This, I suggest, is the most disappointing aspect of the critiques of canon in contemporary historiographic discourses. It is one thing to point out what is missing or what is wrong with a particular historical narrative. Suggesting an alternative, however, is more difficult. Perhaps this is why we have yet to see a jazz history text that truly departs from the canon, one that represents a clear break from the "consensus view" of Marshall Stearns, or of Scott DeVeaux's "official history."

In writing this, I in no way want to dismiss the outstanding work done by scholars such as DeVeaux (on bebop), Sherrie Tucker (on women in jazz), Taylor Atkins (on global jazz), and others whose work has forced us to ask important questions about what jazz is and what it represents. Nor do I take issue with the basic critiques of canons themselves, as advanced by figures such as Krin Gabbard. This is all exceptionally important work, and it needs to continue. My concern is that such critiques, valuable as they are, often are limited in what they can offer the classroom jazz history teacher. Alternatives to tried-and-true histories are fine in and of themselves, but often fall on deaf ears in a classroom full of jazz majors whose main goal is to play like Parker or Coltrane, or a classroom full of non-major students whose primary goal is to have a clear sense of what may be on the next test. These, of course, are separate issues that have been discussed at great length by many other scholars and teachers, to say nothing of the debates which rage within jazz studies itself. But the reality for many teachers is that they teach from the canon because that is the expectation, or because it is simply easier to teach a canonically-based course than to reinvent the wheel, and those of us who teach jazz history for a living understand this all too well. The canon survives because it is the basic historical language of the musical academy, both in terms of performance and scholarship. It has its uses, allowing us to easily structure a course, and to more closely coordinate historical learning with what students are doing in their ensembles and applied study. We often preface our use of the canon with a qualification, a metaphorical "but there's more to it." Textbooks often reflect this duality, taking perspectives that relate to the canon from within and without. They allow us to utilize, and even embrace the canon, but always with the idea that it cannot be the whole story.