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ACCENTUATE THE NEGATIVE? ON TEACHING BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS IN JAZZ HISTORY

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On Teaching Biographical Details in Jazz History

Abstract

Jazz history professors and book authors may be prejudicing their students' impressions of jazz by including negative biographical information about the major musicians. This author scrutinizes biographical presentations that are unnecessarily disparaging of the musicians, including too much data that is musically inconsequential. Some of these instances illustrate how the quality of recorded performances contradicts what would be expected after reading detailed accounts of a musician's personal weaknesses. This author asks whether such details are detrimental to a balanced and respectful view of the musician's historic musical contributions and stature. Authors and publishers of materials for introductory jazz courses are urged to consider the implications, and teachers are advised to be more mindful in selecting what they present in lectures, textbooks, and supplementary material.

On Teaching Negative Biographical Details in Jazz History

Biographical details for great musicians are included in most of today's textbooks for courses titled Introduction to Jazz and Jazz History. However, educational goals for the choices of such details are not always clear. In numerous instances, accounts of some of the saddest moments in the lives of the jazz greats are included in the biographical material, and may be problematic for the impressions they make on novice listeners.¹ Even if these accounts are presented as attempts to provide insight into the creative process, not merely for entertainment and for engaging student interest, they may actually contradict points that authors and teachers wish to make about the achievements of the musicians. Such accounts may be out of touch with the music that their students will hear.

To begin, let us consider the quality of saxophonist John Coltrane's recorded improvisations in light of accounts of his concurrent ill health, as in this passage from Brian Harker's introductory textbook *Jazz: An American Journey*. On page 271, Harker writes, "Unfortunately, his addiction to heroin and alcohol interfered with his musical progress. Habitually late and prone to sleep on the stand, Coltrane finally lost his job with Gillespie. In 1954 he got another promising opportunity when he was hired to play in the septet of his youthful idol, Johnny Hodges. But within a few months Hodges also fired him for drug-related irresponsibility." Note that, despite the embodied implications of

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this sad personal narrative, Coltrane contributed robust, powerfully executed performances to Gillespie's 1951 studio recording of "We Love to Boogie,"² Gillespie's 1951 live broadcasts of "Birks' Works," "Night in Tunisia," and "The Champ,"³ and Hodges' 1954 live recording of "In a Mellotone."⁴ The unceasing vigor and invention that are evident in Coltrane's recorded improvisations from the same period that Harker reports about the man's health indicates how musically inconsequential the medical histories of jazz musicians might be. In fact, reciting details of Coltrane's ill health and bad personal judgment of this period is not musically relevant because the artist's health is not revealed in any corresponding effect on any recordings that students will ever hear. Moreover, this information might be detrimental to the novice listener's appreciation and respect for a man who became the most influential saxophonist in the past third of jazz history, whose later groups conceptualized entire idioms within jazz, and whose compositions set the pace for three different style periods in the music's history.

Harker follows the above accounts with reports of personal problems that befell Coltrane during a later period of the saxophonist's career. On page 271, of his introductory textbook Harker writes, "And, yet as we have already seen, Coltrane's problems with substance abuse marred his tenure with [Miles] Davis just as they had done with Gillespie and Hodges. Davis recalled that Coltrane appeared on the bandstand in clothes 'that looked like he had slept in them for days.'" Note that between Coltrane's departure from the Davis band and his return to the Davis band he broke his addiction and performed and recorded with Thelonious Monk in 1957.

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The lack of correspondence between sad personal stories and the quality of concurrent performances recurs when on page 272 of his textbook Harker writes, “During his time with Monk, finally freed of the paralyzing effects of drugs and alcohol, Coltrane began practicing with almost compulsive dedication, a commitment that he would keep until the end of his life.” In this passage Harker informs his student readers about an unfortunate health condition for the period in Coltrane’s life before “his time with Monk,” yet if students hear the saxophonist’s playing from 1956 on the Miles Davis albums *Cookin'*, *Relaxin'*, *Workin'*, and *Steamin'* they might notice that it was intensely fluid, vigorous, and strikingly inventive, particularly on “Airegin,” “Tune-Up,” and “Oleo.”⁵ In other words, in no recordings by Coltrane that students will ever hear from 1956, “before his time with Monk” (in 1957), is there any musical evidence to reveal that Coltrane was experiencing “the paralyzing effects of drugs and alcohol.” Furthermore, the assertion that Coltrane only “began practicing with almost compulsive dedication” at this point in his career is contradicted not only by the virtuosity that Coltrane demonstrates on all those recordings, but also by Lewis Porter’s Coltrane biography, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*, which documents how Coltrane’s legendary practice habits were established “from the beginning,”⁶ which was well before his time with Monk.

Though he describes his book *History and Tradition of Jazz, Fourth Edition* as “designed for the college non-music major,” Thomas Larson also includes among “some of the features of the text” the goal of presenting “the stories and legends of important events and people that shaped jazz history, ...”⁷ One of the examples that Larson

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provides for illustrating the tragic personal life of saxophonist Charlie “Bird” Parker actually contradicts the quality of the music being made. On page 122 of his introductory textbook, Larson writes, “Bird himself was viewed by many who came to see him as a pathetic junkie.” Then on page 123, Larson writes, “On May 15, 1953 at a concert at Massey Hall in Toronto that was to feature the greats of the bebop period, he had to borrow a plastic saxophone—he had pawned his own to pay off a drug debt.” Perhaps Larson incorporates the anecdote about pawning the saxophone as support for his previous statement that Parker was seen as “a pathetic junkie,” as that is all Larson writes about that particular performance. However, Parker’s work is masterful on the recording of the Massey Hall concert. His solo on “Salt Peanuts,” for example, is spectacular in its fertility of imagination, speed of execution, and confidence in delivery. His playing at that concert is so good that a 1991 reissue of the album *Jazz at Massey Hall* was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1994, and it is included in National Public Radio's *Basic Jazz Library*.⁸ Likewise, the quality of the performance offers no evidence that Parker was playing on a saxophone that was not his own—so musicians, particularly saxophonists, might actually increase their admiration for him if they learn that he performed with a strange and unfamiliar instrument. The Grafton plastic model that Parker played is known for its sluggish action, quite unlike the action of the brass models that Parker usually played. Therefore, contrary to being “pathetic,” as indicated above, Parker showed prodigious ability in his Massey Hall performance. Larson emphasizes the negative circumstances of that event despite the fact that such information has no clear

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musical relevance. What's more, the details might contradict his intended message once listeners hear the music that came from this period in Parker's life.

If personal biographical details were musically consequential for novice listeners to know, shouldn't variances in the health of the musician be reflected by differences in the sound of the music available to those listeners? For example, if it were musically consequential, would not the "ravages of addiction" be reflected in the musical competence of the players? Yet the recordings of bebop in the 1940s and 50s collectively provide an example of how this connection fails to hold up. Any connection between aspects of the personal lives of the musicians and their professional performance is contradicted by the sound of their music on the recordings, but several standard jazz history texts, particularly those of Harker and Larson, devote considerable space to recounting heroin addiction that occurred during the 1940s and 50s among bebop musicians. Though it is true that heroin addiction reached near-epidemic proportions at that time, we should ask whether heroin addiction proved to be musically consequential before we assign such coverage to our students' reading assignments or recount such details in our lectures. Consider the fact that bebop is the most virtuosic of any jazz in history. Speed and agility were prized, and the tempos were dizzying. Dazzling displays of instrumental virtuosity and intricate harmonies, rhythms, and melody pervade the music of that period. In other words, knowing that many of the players were heroin addicts adds nothing to students' understanding of the music.

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More importantly, knowing of the addictions could easily distract novice listeners from appreciating the tremendous musical fertility that this era produced. It might be relevant in purely biographical accounts in a fan magazine or novel-style book, if only to satisfy an author's desire for completeness or a fascination with personal tragedy. But is such knowledge relevant in a brief history of jazz that devotes only a few pages to introducing the musician's stature? For example, if Charlie Parker's exalted place in jazz is based upon his unparalleled artistry, is there any need for a student in a jazz appreciation course to know the sordid details of his addictions and death?

In order to help investigate whether teaching biographical information could affect student perception of a musician's legacy, this author was among the participants in a two-year study conducted on a few hundred students at several colleges. The unpublished study showed that biographical details could indeed affect how students perceive emotion and performance quality in jazz improvisation. Half of the students were exposed to sordid details about saxophonist Charlie Parker's life and read the story of one recording session where Parker had fallen ill and subsequently been hospitalized for a nervous breakdown. The other students were not exposed to this information. Both groups subsequently listened to the recording of "Lover Man" that Parker made at that session. When asked to rate the emotion and the quality of playing, the group who had received the sad biographical information rated the music as significantly sadder and more poorly performed than did the students who had not been exposed to the sordid biographical details.

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Coincidentally, not knowing the circumstances surrounding this recording session, there are listeners who have revered the music from it. For example, in his book *Charlie Parker: His Music and Life*, saxophonist-historian Carl Woideck writes, “Amazingly, some young jazz players enthusiastically learned Parker’s halting ‘Lover Man’ solo note for note, not realizing that his playing represented a personal disaster and musical low point.”⁹ Parker’s musical colleagues also have expressed admiration for his playing on this session. Howard McGee, the trumpeter on that recording date, stated “... but the sound came out fine. There were no wrong notes, and I feel that the records are beautiful.”¹⁰ Additionally, the eminent bassist-composer-bandleader Charles Mingus once chose the “Lover Man” solo when asked to name his favorite Parker recordings.¹¹

The story about that particularly troubled recording session is presented in several books that are currently used in jazz history and appreciation courses: Thomas Larson’s *History and Tradition of Jazz, Fourth Edition*,¹² Henry Martin and Keith Waters’ *Essential Jazz: The First 100 Years*¹³ and *Jazz: The First 100 Years*,¹⁴ Lewis Porter and Michael Ullman’s *Jazz: From its Origins to the Present*,¹⁵ Donald Megill and Richard Demory’s *Introduction to Jazz History*,¹⁶ and Brian Harker’s *Jazz: An American Journey*.¹⁷ Such reporting on the circumstances of the session biases listeners who would otherwise judge the music on its own merits. Not only is it superfluous to publish Parker’s medical history and recount his lapses in judgment, but also these textbook authors apparently overlook the real possibility that such coverage might prevent novice listeners from perceiving its emotion in whatever way they are personally inclined. This might be roughly analogous to taking a student to an art museum and telling the student

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what a given painting means prior to hearing what the student might think of it. Other plausible meanings are thereby circumvented, and appreciation of the painting in its entirety might be curtailed by premature closure in the thinking and feeling of the student. Additionally, by devoting so much space in the textbook to this one episode in Parker's life, the authors' presentations are not balanced. They overlook the fact that Parker's stay in a hospital sidelined him for only about six months out of a very prolific 15-year career, which produced hundreds of other recordings, and that the recordings he made just before and just after his stay have been revered by jazz fans for decades thereafter.

Though their implicit viewpoint is that such material is "part of the overall understanding of jazz and its history," as an editor once told me, the authors of textbooks with so many sad stories do not supply sufficient evidence to support this viewpoint. On the contrary, the evidence in this article should indicate that there are reasons to reconsider subscribing to that viewpoint. Moreover, negative biographical details could be distracting. In fact, in his jazz history textbook *Experiencing Jazz*, Richard Lawn concedes the potential for distraction. After recounting elements in the tragic personal life of singer Billie Holiday, he writes, "While her life was clouded with problems, including prostitution, and drug and alcohol addiction which eventually led to her arrest, her talent should not be obscured by these details."¹⁸ Nevertheless, Lawn does indeed include the sad details, and ultimately he concludes his coverage of Holiday by providing additional tragic accounts: "Her life was ultimately overcome by the effects of her substance abuse, which eventually overtook her life, leaving her destitute in her final days."¹⁹ Lawn could

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omit such information, but he does not. The textbook author thus risks distracting his readers from the legacy of the singer's great musical contributions, though he had previously pleaded with readers, "her talent should not be obscured by these details."

Regardless of the motive for including anecdotes such as those above, the message they are likely to convey is that the jazz world is populated by alcoholics and junkies. Are students likely to draw from such details any comprehension of the tremendous focus and discipline required to perform spontaneous music night after night or the extensive training and diligence required to attain the virtuosity and creativity that jazz represents? Are such details essential to cultivating an understanding of the player's music, especially when no effect of such life events is evident in any recordings that students will ever hear? Might coverage of them not only be musically inconsequential but also be detrimental to the impression they make on novice listeners in their first exposure to the player's stature? Might reference to a musician's health record undermine proper respect and appreciation for the player's historical contributions? Might knowing a musician's *personal* weaknesses unfairly diminish student perception of that musician's huge *musical* strengths?

The extent of negative biographical details varies in the field of jazz appreciation textbooks. Attitudes vary regarding how appropriate it is to reveal musicians' personal problems in brief introductory texts. When I complained to one book editor that presenting the musicians' medical histories in his online supplement for jazz history textbooks was in poor taste, the editor retorted that coverage of drug addiction in discussing bebop was "an essential part of the music's history." Harker and Larson apparently also adhere to that stance, as their texts include coverage of substance abuse

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for almost every important player who used heroin for even a brief period of his or her life. Though not as thorough in this regard as Harker's and Larson's books, the introductory texts *Jazz* by Paul Tanner and David Megill,²⁰ *Introduction to Jazz History* by Donald Megill and Richard Demory, *Jazz: From its Origins to the Present* by Lewis Porter and Michael Ullman, and *Experiencing Jazz* by Richard Lawn also weave information about substance abuse into their narratives about the music of numerous jazz giants. Note, however, that this is not a universal practice among jazz history book writers. A few textbooks omit coverage of private lives altogether. Examples of books that steer clear of such information are Mark Gridley's *Jazz Styles*,²¹ Gridley's *Concise Guide to Jazz*,²² Jack Wheaton's *All That Jazz*,²³ John Szwed's *Jazz 101*,²⁴ and James McCalla's *Jazz: A Listener's Guide*.²⁵

Summary and Conclusions

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the classroom teacher to present the academic content he or she thinks is important. The teacher can choose the textbook that emphasizes the right information, can choose particular passages for assigned reading, and can emphasize the important aspects of a performer's musical contributions. Yet teachers should consider the fact that negative biographical information is, at best, irrelevant—and, at worst, prejudicial to students in introductory jazz courses. Reciting the sad episodes in a player's *personal* life story could submerge the *musical* story in students' minds, in effect nullifying it. Such emphasis may become the eulogy for the musician. If such information is presented concomitantly with the information on the artist's musical contributions, a jazz novice could conclude that these are important

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details to the appreciation of jazz. I suggest that teachers thoroughly consider the implications of including those details in lectures and in the textbooks and supplementary materials that they require.

Author Note

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Endnotes

¹Numerous examples appear in Brian Harker's *Jazz: An American Journey*. [Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005]. Here are a few samples: On page 84, regarding cornetist Bix Beiderbecke: “Beiderbecke occupies a hallowed place in jazz mythology for his enigmatically beautiful solos, his tormented life, and his tragic early death from alcoholism In 1925, hoping to remedy his musical deficiencies, Beiderbecke enrolled at the University of Iowa. Eighteen days later he was expelled for his participation in a drunken melee. As this incident suggests, drinking had by this time become a serious problem.” Similarly, on page 111, regarding cornetist Joe “King” Oliver, Harker posits, “Perhaps the saddest experience was King Oliver’s. Cursed with a raging sweet tooth, Oliver developed pyorrhea of the gums—an affliction that loosened his teeth and severely weakened his trumpet embouchure By the middle of the decade he had become stranded in Savannah, Georgia, where he took work sweeping out a pool hall and selling fruit on the street.” And again, on page 210, regarding Charlie Parker, Harker writes: “Unfortunately, during this period [Charlie] Parker began undoing all the progress he had made in managing his drug problem. During an engagement at Chicago’s Argyle Show Bar in 1948, an inebriated Parker urinated in a telephone booth in the lobby, thinking he was in the men’s room.”

²Found in *School Days*. Savoy Jazz: 17256. Reissued in *The Last Giant: John Coltrane Anthology* (Rhino 2-71255).

³See *Trane's First Ride-1951: First Broadcasts Vol. 2*. Broadcast Tributes 009. Also issued as *Trane’s First Ride on Oberon 5100*.

⁴This can be found in these albums: *Great Moments in Jazz, Vol. 2: Alto Masters* (Swing Treasury 109); Johnny Hodges: *At a Dance In a Studio, On Radio* (Enigma 1059); John Coltrane: *First Steps* (Jazz Live 8039).

⁵*Cookin'!* Fantasy: OJC128 (Prestige 7094); *Relaxin'!* Fantasy: OJC190 (Prestige 7129); *Workin'!* Fantasy: OJC296 (Prestige 7166); *Steamin'!* Fantasy: OJC-391 (Prestige-7200).

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⁶University of Michigan Press, 1998. Porter states on page 32: “From the beginning John is said to have practiced constantly.” He began playing saxophone in the early 1940s. Porter continues on page 33: “Once Mary moved there, she was again surrounded by John’s practicing: ‘We never looked at John as a genius, he was John. We all just lived in those two rooms, and he would just sit there all the time and practice . . .’” This refers to his cousin Mary Alexander recalling the early 1940s. Then, on page 52: “There is absolute agreement that Coltrane practiced maniacally.” This refers to the years he studied at Granoff Studios, from fall of 1946 into the early 1950s. And, finally, on page 64: “[Jimmy] Heath describes Coltrane’s practice regimen: ‘When I’d go to his apartment in the summertime, Trane would be stripped down to his boxer shorts. He’d be sweating and practicing all day Anything that Trane grabbed, he would work on it until he got it . . .’” This refers to the period of 1947 to 1951.

⁷Kendall-Hunt, 2011, p. vii.

⁸Original issue: Debut Records Presents the Quintet: Jazz at Massey Hall (Debut DLP-2; 124). Reissued as Prestige OJC-044

⁹University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 130. Incidentally, Harker printed the wrong date for the “Lover Man” session. The recording was made on July 29, not July 19.

¹⁰Gitler, Ira. *Masters of Bebop*. Boston, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2001, p. 32.

¹¹*Ibid*, p. 33.

¹²Kendall-Hunt, p. 122.

¹³Schirmer, Cengage Learning, 2013, p. 130.

¹⁴Schirmer, Cengage Learning, 2012, p. 205.

¹⁵Prentice Hall, 1993, p. 228.

¹⁶Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004, p. 159.

¹⁷Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005, p. 209.

¹⁸McGraw-Hill, 2007, p. 186.

¹⁹*Ibid*, p. 186

²⁰12th Edition, McGraw-Hill, 2013.

²¹11th Edition, Pearson, 2012.

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²²7th Edition, Pearson, 2013.

²³Ardsley House, 1994.

²⁴Hyperion, 2000.

²⁵Prentice Hall, 2000.