



Visions of Jazz: The First Century

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Poised to become a classic of jazz literature, *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* offers seventy-nine chapters illuminating the lives of virtually all the major figures in jazz history. From Louis Armstrong's renegade-style trumpet playing to Sarah Vaughan's operatic crooning, and from the swinging elegance of Duke Ellington to the pioneering experiments of Ornette Coleman, jazz critic Gary Giddins continually astonishes the reader with his unparalleled insight. Writing with the grace and wit that have endeared his prose to *Village Voice* readers for decades, Giddins also widens the scope of jazz to include such crucial American musicians as Irving Berlin, Rosemary Clooney, and Frank Sinatra, all primarily pop performers who are often dismissed by fans and critics as mere derivatives of the true jazz idiom. And he devotes an entire quarter of this landmark volume to young, still-active jazz artists, boldly expanding the horizons of jazz--and charting and exploring the music's influences as no other book has done.

Visions of Jazz: The First Century Details

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Author : Gary Giddins

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From Reader Review Visions of Jazz: The First Century for online ebook

Jazz Fan says

Overall an excellent reference book on some of the giant figures of Jazz in the 20th Century.

Michael Finocchiaro says

I have been on a jazz kick for nearly a month. Well, for years actually but recently, more obsessed than usual. I had a copy of Gary Giddins' *Visions of Jazz* staring at me accusingly from my bookshelf for years, as well as the dense but fascinating *Reading Jazz* anthology compiled by Robert Gottlieb. So, I finally grabbed Giddins and dove into it and was richly rewarded. The book is a series of portraits of various jazz musicians and analysis of some of their more seminal works as he covers the history of 20th C jazz from King Oliver to Don Byron. His style is interesting and passionate – he has seen and talked to many of the musicians so the insights are precious. I started watching the PBS / Ken Burns mini-series called *Jazz* and he is one of the primary commenters there as well. If you like jazz and wish to dive in a little deeper and understand where it came from, who the most critical musicians are/were and what are the key albums to listen to and own, then this book is for you. Note that there is actually a 2-CD soundtrack accompaniment as well available on Amazon.

Phil Overeem says

Giddins' passion for jazz, technical knowledge, and broad taste make this and its follow-up *Weather Bird* the perfect primer for readers interested in not only starting or expanding their jazz collections but being stimulated by enlightening, precise and exquisite writing. You'll seldom find a jazz critic writing with expertise on Ethel Waters AND Cecil Taylor in the same volume.

John says

This book's going to be hanging out on my currently reading shelf for some time to come; I'm not reading it straight through, but dipping into it occasionally, whenever I want to read a superb essay on jazz history. I'll say more when I finish it and write a proper review.

Emil says

An interesting view of jazz history. Giddins touches on a number of artists from the beginning of jazz through the early 1990's (when the book was published). There were a few artists I expected to see covered that weren't, but given the scope of the text, I'm not completely surprised.

Giddins also maintains a good depth in terms of music theory. You don't need to be a musician or have a background in musical theory to appreciate the text, but the author does provide enough commentary on the artists' use of various techniques to provide food for thought for someone with a musical background.

While the book is quite large, the structure of the book as chapters/essays on various artists makes it easy to handle a small chunk at a time. Despite years of musical training in jazz and years of listening to jazz music, this text gave me a much deeper appreciation for this American music.

Mutlu says

Perhaps deserves a 5 star rating if it was not too technical for me.

Jono says

I re-read the first half, finding Oberlin music library recordings of each artist - taught me the meaning of a haunting saxophone and a screeching clarinet solo among other things.

CD says

A very fine piece of work for the music historian and collector.

Well written including unexpected depth of detail going as far as to dip into music theory. Giddins far surpasses the pitfall of writing chapter after chapter of short form biography and review. No pretense is made that some of the writing is just exposition on known biographical notes as there are jazz figures and stories about which little is known or a brief, but important entries.

The author in the preface quickly informs the reader that their favorite or current jazz obsession may not be included. This is a Vision of Jazz that Giddins has and expresses well. By following important or seminal movements within this realm of music the author leads the reader to a much richer view of the world of jazz if not specific sounds.

For the reader who is very well versed, or even somewhat familiar, in the 'classics' and revolutionary moments (Monk, Parker, Ellington, and so on of the biggies) the writing will elicit auditory echos. I 'heard' things playing while reading some sections about a few of my favorites and gained some different insights and understanding of works that previously had 'stood alone'.

This work will challenge most readers, and intimidate or bore the casual jazz fan. It is eclectic and perhaps a bit deferential to certain 'trends' yet it stands up well to scrutiny. A lot is added to the library of Jazz history and musicology with this one work.

If you think and do know Jazz, you probably will find 50 or more pages of new or unusual information that hasn't been seen before. I ran across half a dozen names that I never had heard of (though some of the music was familiar once I dug up what I could) and found some new very serious analysis of works that I hadn't seen the like previously.

If you think Jazz is confined to a few famous areas or base any sense of reality in Ken Burns PBS works, the book may be a revelation. There are gaps, missing names other than notes or brief mentions, perhaps a few too many pages devoted to some and not enough to others. Don't look for lists of dates performances and recordings. That would have made this just another 'reference'. This is a book about Jazz to be read and perhaps, heard.

Winter Sophia Rose says

A Listener's Guide!

Seth says

4.5

Rick says

Published in 1998, *Visions of Jazz* provides a thematic, chronologically sequenced tour of jazz music's first 100 years. Giddins is an able, erudite tour guide, a deeply knowledgeable and strongly opinionated student of jazz. He writes not just cogently but with style and grace, making him informative and assessable, inspiring me to several hundred dollars of CD purchases during the course of my reading. (The internet rescued me from spending even more.) Giddins is particularly strong (or was to this reader) through the beginning and early foundations of jazz, mixing social history in with the music's development. All of the great names and many that are less well known but critical to the music's development are here: W.C. Handy, King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Spencer Williams, Duke Ellington, Bunk Johnson, Ethel Waters and more. In chapters that look at the origins of jazz, Giddins discusses the importance of spirituals and of popular song, as well as the more traditionally identified ancestors, the blues and the rich international flavors of New Orleans music. Armstrong and Ellington, because they must, get multiple chapters cast through the books thematic parts (Precursors, A New Music, A Popular Music, A Modern Music, A Mainstream Music, An Alternative Music, A Struggling Music, and A Traditional Music).

The book is strongest in its earliest two-thirds, absolutely compelling and a real education for anyone who likes jazz but is uncertain to why. Depending on how you feel about the music of Charles Mingus, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, and Muhal Richards Abrams, the stretch of brilliance will continue into the essays in *An Alternative Music*. For me it mostly provided a better understanding of music that still doesn't appeal to me. *Visions of Jazz* falters as two challenges come together, the fallow period of jazz when it was overwhelmed by rock and roll music beginning in the mid 60s and sort of lost its way in the 70s and 80s (fusion and lite jazz), and the nearer to today we get the more the chapters read like journalism and less like cultural history. Perspective is blocked by the nearness of the back wall of the present moment so the writing, while enthusiastic seems to lack authority. That said, the journalistic chapters about Geri Allen, Joshua Redman, Don Byron, Joe Henderson, and others still inspire the reader with optimism and an appetite to listen to the music Giddins writes so passionately about. And the early parts, from *Precursors* up through *A Mainstream Music*, are insightful and entertaining and as fine an introduction to some of the world's best music as can be found in one place. Giddins is that rare critic (Clive James also comes to mind) who educates without condescension, whose opinions inspire interest, and whose enthusiasms are infectious.

Robert says

Visions of Jazz: The First Century is a mostly comprehensive look at Jazz through the first 100 years of its existence as a music genre. Giddins breaks up the book into eight parts, including Precursors, A New Music, A Popular Music, A Modern Music, A Mainstream Music, An Alternative Music, A Struggling Music, and A Traditional Music. Giddins looks at some of the figures that continue to loom over jazz today (Armstrong, Ellington, Davis, Coltrane) but also gives room and attention to some artists that don't typically make these books. Budd Johnson, Spike Jones, Chico O'Farrill, and Dinah Washington are just a couple examples of this.

The book itself is fairly straightforward, with each chapter examining each musician, some of their biggest contributions to jazz as a genre, and their place within the context of when they were active. Fans of music theory will be happy as Giddins takes the time to discuss it thoroughly for a number of musicians.

Individuals that fall within the Traditionalists camp for jazz music will also be pleased as Ellington receives almost 50 pages in a book where the majority of artists receive 10 and the author does a fair job examining jazz's roots. Although the constraints the author mentions in the introduction (no Paul Whiteman, no Diana Krall, no Wynton Marsalis, and no foreign music) come off as odd in the larger context of jazz.

My biggest gripe with this book is the complete disregard for jazz fusion and 90s jazz for the most part, which the author even admits to in the introduction of the book. It irritates me every time a jazz writer decides to completely disregard a certain subgenre because of their personal tastes. It would be like a rock historian ignoring punk rock or ignoring everything after 1979 until Jack White. This book becomes a disappointment to me because of that in what is otherwise an enjoyable read and actually makes reading some of the later chapters less enjoyable. The author also just about completely writes off Miles Davis's career after 1965, saying that Davis's albums didn't sell well as evidence that it's not legitimate. Except the author has no problem discussing artists and their music either long after their sales declined or even their relevance. There's also the weird treatment of Coltrane's career, where the author seemingly decides to cast Coltrane's career almost entirely within the free jazz context by mentioning "Chasin the Trane" and "My Favorite Things" at least 10 times combined but Giant Steps gets one mention.

Readers looking for an interesting read about the origins of jazz through the early 1990s should definitely give this book a read. Any reader looking for major developments in jazz after 1965 in the realm of fusion or similar areas will find themselves sorely disappointed.
