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***Jazz Icons: Heroes, Myths and the Jazz Tradition.* By Tony Whyton. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010. ix + 219 pages. ISBN 978-0-521-89645-0**

Tony Whyton has long been one of the leading British jazz scholars, so it comes as a bit of a surprise that this is actually his first book publication – and a comparatively slim one at that (although that is by no means a bad thing). To cut matters short somewhat, *Jazz Icons* has been worth the wait. That said, it is not easy to summarise. It is the kind of book where I find myself nodding with approval almost all the time as I go along, only to ask myself later what I had actually been reading and what arguments were made. This may have to do with a fairly dense, although by no means inelegant, writing style, but also with a certain elusiveness of subject matter: it is not entirely straightforward what the book is about. One way of characterising it is as a work of meta-criticism, in that it is not really about jazz or indeed the eponymous ‘jazz icons’ as such, but about the ways in which jazz has been understood. An added difficulty is that Whyton does not confine himself to a particular medium or genre, such as criticism (the subject of John Gennari’s excellent *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*), but ranges freely between scholarly jazz studies, popular discourses, album covers and, briefly, film. The common ground is provided by a concern with what the cover blurb calls the domination of jazz history by ‘iconic figures who have taken on an almost god-like status’. Except, that is, I am not actually sure that this concern is quite so predominant throughout the book as is claimed. What the book is extremely good at is interrogating the myths accruing around jazz, both in scholarly debates and the wider culture: the heavy reliance of jazz historiography on canons and a simplistic succession of period styles, the mystification of improvisation, the problematic status of recording vis-à-vis live performance and so forth; the hagiography surrounding the ‘jazz greats’ appears more as one among several inter-related themes, rather than as the central one. In that sense, the subtitle *Heroes, Myths and the Jazz Tradition* arguably describes the content more accurately.

Its general outlook links *Jazz Icons* to the so-called ‘New Jazz Studies’, a more critical and theoretically self-reflective approach to jazz that is often said to have emerged with Krin Gabbard’s

Jazz among the Discourses, and indeed, Gabbard comes out rather well in the book. It is this critical, theoretically informed and self-reflective aspect of *Jazz Icons* that perhaps best underlines jazz studies' claim to have come of age. By the same token, it also marks the moment when it irrevocably finds its home in the academy. *Jazz Icons* is the work of an academic through and through, unashamedly, perhaps even ostentatiously so. This is probably an inevitable development, and on balance arguably a positive one. Nevertheless, it is one that I note with some regret: over many decades, many of the most inspiring writers on jazz were journalists and other 'amateurs', and jazz culture as well as scholarship have benefited from a relatively permeable boundary between and fruitful discussion across academic and non-academic discourses. While this era may not be over yet, the gulf is becoming wider.

The book is organised as a series of case studies, taking in the cultural function of the heroic depiction of jazz artists; the conflict between the celebration of jazz as a 'live, improvisatory, performance-based art' (56) and its 'symbiotic relationship with recording' (45); the Pat Metheny – Kenny G. controversy over the latter's 'inauthentic' cover versions of Louis Armstrong's music, which for Whyton raises the whole question of the ultimate grounding of such inter-dependent concepts as (jazz) 'community', 'standards', 'values' and 'authenticity'; jazz culture as consumption and collecting, with its attendant visual and advertising codes; the problematic role of often dubious anecdotes in jazz history; the mythical, god-like status of Duke Ellington; and, finally, jazz education (its value and values so to speak).

That is quite a lot for one book to deal with; at times it feels a little as if it had to take in all the things that Whyton has stored up in his career, and it buckles under the strain. As I have suggested, while all the issues mentioned have something to do with the function accorded to charismatic individuals, what is cause and effect and hence what is primary is not always so clear. Whatever their inter-connection, there is no doubt, though, about the centrality of the issues debated here, and Whyton brings an impressive grasp of the relevant literature from several disciplines and an astute critical intelligence to bear. Perhaps the most arresting formulation of the cultural function of

jazz icons comes in his discussion of Ellington: 'Heroic figures are portrayed as fixed entities beyond critical discourse; they are divorced from the complexities and contradictions of the present day. In this respect, icons serve the needs of the present, by maintaining stability and control within the existing social order' (136).

By contrast, the least convincing argument (for me) occurs in the chapter on education. After having subjected canonic and hagiographic depictions of jazz to a vigorous critique, Whyton performs a surprising about-face. Writing on Ken Burns's controversial PBS documentary, Whyton argues: 'Rather than dismiss Burns's *Jazz* as a valueless addition to the repertoire of historical works, as an educator I suggest that it is important to place works such as these at the heart of jazz studies, in order to develop a critical understanding of the cultural framework within which the music operates (170)' and, in general, '[r]ather than dismiss the established canon of jazz, the critical model I suggest aims to introduce a more inclusive, comparative and interdisciplinary approach to jazz studies, where the canon is subject to continual appraisal and discursive methodologies (172)'. Who could be against such a vision? Except that it sounds like a division of labour between unreconstructed traditional historians and trendy theorists who then dissect and critique the formers' work, to the bewilderment of their students, without contributing any constructive approach of their own. Pluralism is a marvellous thing, but it is not a panacea and it does not absolve us from the responsibility of making constructive contributions. As Kenneth E Prouty seems to suggest in his critique of the 'New Jazz Studies', this may ultimately include replacing outdated narratives if they are found wanting, rather than adding more and more layers of meta-commentary, as *Jazz Icons* does. As in several similar cases, Whyton is strangely reluctant to take sides or state a firm position: he is endlessly critiquing and problematising, only to remain sitting on the fence.

This is without a doubt a significant book: it engages with some of the most pressing issues in jazz studies and does so in a subtle and nuanced way. It is also at times a slightly frustrating one, on account of Whyton's reluctance to state a firm position, and, moreover, on account of the elusiveness of its subject matter. This latter issue brings me full circle to the concept of 'icon' as

developed in the introduction. What actually is an icon? Whyton discusses this at some length, but at the end I was more confused than before. He develops five categories ('icon as visual image', 'icon as symbol', 'icon as uncritical object of devotion', 'icon as deity', 'icon as sign', 6-14). That they are overlapping (e.g. what is a symbol if not a form of sign and aren't visual images signs too?) is one thing, but the real problem is that this differentiation plays no role in the discussions to follow, where Whyton never clarifies what type of icon he is concerned with. It doesn't help that the explanation of 'icon as sign' with reference to Peircean semiotics is quite simply wrong: 'jazz figures become inseparable from the myths they represent (12)'. This is a property of all categories of signs and not a criterion to distinguish between them. What, according to most definitions (of which there are many in Peirce's dispersed writings), characterises the icon instead is a resemblance between the representamen and its object. Whether they have 'become inseparable' or not, a person is not morphologically or visually similar to a myth. Confusingly, in the book it is not only people that are icons, but recordings can be 'iconic' too (45, 51). What has happened here, I think, is that Whyton has adopted the indiscriminate use of 'icon/iconic' in popular culture, and, instead of undertaking a critical enquiry into its origin and meaning, has embarked on a doomed attempt at defining it for his own purposes. This is the most problematic but not the only occasion when words or terminology are used too loosely: Whyton has a tendency for the sports commentators' use of 'synonymous' to mean 'commonly associated with', as on p. 115: 'Anecdotal evidence has become synonymous with jazz practice in both practical and theoretical terms.' No, it hasn't!

Overall, these problems affect but do not undermine what is otherwise an excellent book.

References

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