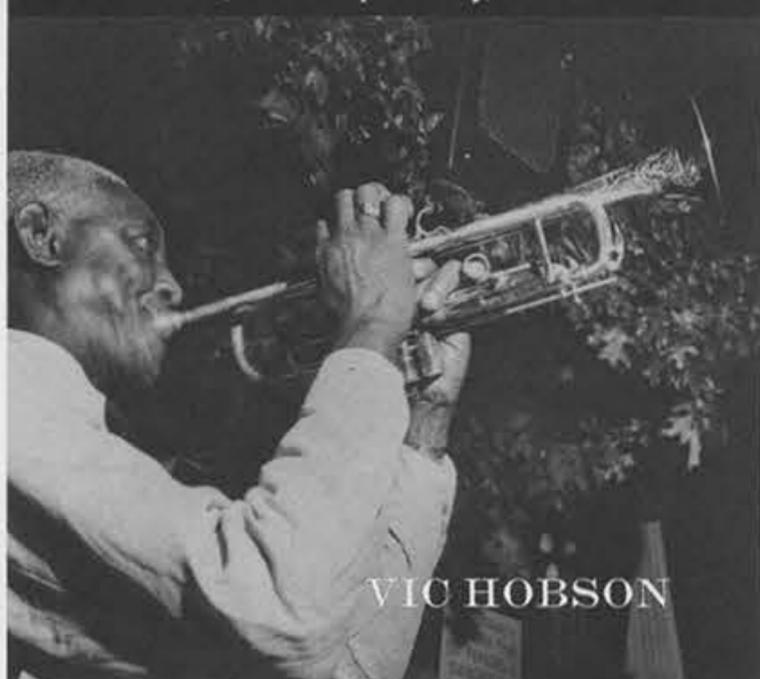


Book & DVD Reviews

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CREATING JAZZ COUNTERPOINT

New Orleans, Barbershop Harmony, and the Blues



CREATING JAZZ COUNTERPOINT: NEW ORLEANS, BARBERSHOP HARMONY, AND THE BLUES

By Vic Hobson. University Press of Mississippi, hb, 168pp, \$60. ISBN 978-1-61703-991-1

Wynton Marsalis describes blues in its relationship to jazz as “the roux in the gumbo”, but Hobson’s book seeks to examine the subject in much greater historical and musical detail. The press release for this 2014 publication claims that “How early jazz musicians improvised together and how the blues became a part of jazz has until now been a mystery.” Jazz archive curator Bruce Boyd Raeburn describes this book as “. . . a meticulously researched and incisive musicological analysis of how four-part ‘barbershop’ harmony and the blues influenced the development of New Orleans jazz heterophony”. In case you haven’t yet realised, this book was written by a jazz academic. As a whole, it seems to take a while to start moving up the gears (the first three chapters), however, the end result, although finishing a little abruptly, provides us with fascinating insight into a subject that to my knowledge at the time of writing has not previously been tackled with such rigour.

The press release reminds us that “Bunk Johnson made many recordings talking about and playing the music of the Bolden era,” and that these recordings have been treated with scepticism because of the doubts about Johnson’s credibility. It goes on to explain, “Using oral histories, the *Jazzmen* [book] interview notes, and an un-published archive material, *Creating Jazz Counterpoint New Orleans, Barbershop Harmony, and the Blues* confirms that Bunk Johnson did play with Bolden. This, in

turn, has profound implications for Johnson’s recorded legacy in describing the music of the early years of New Orleans jazz.”

Finally it gets to the most insightful issue, saying that the book “describes in both historical and musical terms how the practices of a quartet singing were converted to the instruments of a jazz band, and how this, in turn, produced collectively improvised blues-inflected jazz.” Hobson achieves the latter by means of both word and musical score; taking the role of a “musical archaeologist”, but his methodology doesn’t exclude the reader who can’t read music, because his written explanations are clear.

Chapter 4, *Cracking Up A Chord*, is where it starts to get particularly interesting in musical, rather than historical terms, and Hobson proves his point regarding barbershop quartet singing in some detail, with numerous examples. Chapter 6 clarifies the role that Creole musicians played in the development of jazz, the blues and ragtime in New Orleans, and Chapter 7, entitled *The Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, has their bandleader Nick LaRocca describing the counterpoint in early jazz: “The way we played was in fugue form . . . I went to many operas, opera places where I could hear good music, and I see how they played background contra-melody and different melodies against one another.” He cites *The Livery Stable Blues* as an example of the incorporation of this practice in the work of his band. Hobson’s subsequent analysis of *The Livery Stable Blues* shows that the Original Dixieland Jazz Band was familiar with barbershop harmony, along with many other jazz musicians of the time who sang in barbershop quartets.

At \$60 for hardback and around the same price for a Kindle version, it’s a pretty expensive read, but anyone with a detailed interest in this subject is unlikely to find the same kind of insightful detail elsewhere.

Dave Jones

AND ALL THAT MOTIVE

By Joan Merrill. CreateSpace, pb, 214pp, £10.00/\$15.00. ISBN 978-1-5002-3535-2 (ebook 978-1-5002-3535-0)

For her fifth Casey McKie crime novel, Joan Merrill takes her detective to the Pacific Coast Jazz Festival at Monterra where the country’s leading male jazz singer, Sid Satin, is shot dead. A decidedly unpleasant man, Satin had dozens of enemies in both the jazz world and in his private life and no one is really sorry to learn of his death. Unfortunately, the local cops suspect veteran jazz singer Dee Jefferson of the crime and that brings in Casey McKie. A San Francisco-based private investigator, Casey hangs out at Dee’s club; the singer is her best friend so she promptly sets out to find the real killer. Travelling between San Francisco and Monterra, Casey follows leads one by one and is drawn into the lives of jazz