Gene Lees Ad Libitum

Jazzletter

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Ken Burns Jazz — to the Ground

Part One

Any way you look at it, the Ken Burns PBS series titled *Jazz* is, if not the biggest thing ever to happen to this music, one of the biggest. It was widely publicized and ubiquitously advertised with funds from General Motors, occasionally received tepid praise, usually in the conventional jazz magazines — extensive beneficiaries of its ad budget — and was everywhere excoriated by critics and musicians alike. It depended almost entirely on the vision of jazz shared by Wynton Marsalis and his mentors Stanley Crouch and Albert Murray. These three — the Holy Trinity, as James T. Maher and Whitney Balliett have called them — were among the series' main talking heads, endlessly drilling one singular vision of ethnic exclusion. But whatever one thought of the series, it was big, in physical size (ten broadcasts totaling nineteen hours), in the scope of the publicity expended on it, size of its budget (publicly said to be five million dollars but according to some reports the real figure was twenty million), and range of its impact. In a pre-broadcast story published in its *Arts and Leisure* section on Sunday, January 7, the *New York Times* expended four full pages on the subject. More on that later. Two days earlier, on January 5, the *Christian Science Monitor*, which has far less space to play with, gave it almost two full pages.

The January 31 issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that on the average, 10.3 million Americans per night watched its episodes. How many saw the full nineteen hours of it was not stated, but the paper did report that the series averaged a 3.6 national rating.

"The series also is having a dramatic impact at record stores and online outlets, where sales of CDs with the Burns imprint are soaring," the *Chronicle* reported. A group of CDs produced in a cooperative arrangement between Sony and Verve bore a broad yellow banner on the cover saying *Ken Burns Jazz*. "Three of them," the paper continued, "are on *Billboard*'s top 200 albums chart — it's unprecedented for that many jazz discs to hit the paper's charts — including the 5-CD box *Ken Burns Jazz: The Story of America's Music.*"

But how accurate are the polls? Christopher Hitchens of *Vanity Fair* is ardently skeptical of political polls. During his lectures, sometimes to as many as three thousand persons, he asks that whoever has been polled hold up a hand. No one, he says, ever does. Then he asks if anybody knows anyone who has been polled. No one ever does. And I don't know anyone (do you?) who has ever been polled about television, including whether he or she watched *Jazz*. .

On February 5, Jonathan Yardley wrote in the *Washington Post*:

"The tempest stirred by *Jazz*, the ten-part series that finally (mercifully) ground to its conclusion last week, may be boiling in a teapot. As one of my occasional correspondents wrote, 'No one I work with watched it. No one in my family watched it.' It was pretty much the same here, too: Only a handful of my fellow workers seem to have paid much attention to it, and even the person in my family who is most passionate about music caught only glimpses of it.

"So the avalanche of e-mail that has tumbled into my inbox since I wrote about the PBS series three weeks ago may be misleading. The only people who really care about *Jazz* may be die-hard aficionados — whose numbers, as is well known, are lamentably small — and others keenly attuned to the subtlest nuances of race relations in the United States. The rest of the country — I'd guess something on the order of 275 million souls — seems to have been blissfully unaware of the series; given the distortions, omissions, and fabrications with which it was riddled, doubtless that is for the best."

Yardley's review appeared in the *Post* January 15. He said of the earlier Burns epic, *The Civil War,* that "it is undeniably powerful, if overlong and emotionally manipulative. For this work he has been praised, and he seems to have come to believe his own press clippings. Not merely is he content to recycle all the formulas that were once fresh but are now exhausted, he has assumed a self-aggrandizing near-messianic pose. Thus we have various films (about Congress, the Statue of Liberty and so forth) presented as aspects of "Ken Burns's America," and now we have Ken Burns's *Jazz*.

"Well it isn't Ken Burns's America and it certainly isn't Ken Burns's jazz. "

Yardley, in common with many other writers, notes that Burns focuses almost entirely on a few dead giants, while

ignoring many major later figures. This, he says, "may be good news for record companies that can repackage their backlists at minimal expense" but "it so obsessively places race at the center of the tale that it manages to politicize jazz in ways that would have deeply offended, say, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, and that surely will offend many potential converts, whatever their own race may be.

"Ken Burns's *Jazz* isn't jazz; it's politics and ideology — at times one is tempted to say racism — masquerading as history and sociology."

This, he noted in the piece that followed three weeks later, "sat well with some readers (mostly white) who were angered by the gratuitous slights inflicted by Ken Burns et al on even the finest white jazz musicians, but poorly with others (mostly black), who argued that, as one reader put it, 'jazz may be color-blind but the musicians and society in which they live and play definitely [are] not.'"

Yardley notes that the series, while never claiming that black musicians had "natural rhythm," nonetheless came close to the Noble Savage idea of the past: "Marsalis wouldn't say that blacks musicians are 'savage' — quite to the contrary — but that their blackness affords them, ex post facto, a 'nobility' that white musicians cannot hope to attain. This was a leitmotif in *Jazz* from beginning to end. Indeed the series ended with a shameless glorification of Marsalis himself as savior of jazz — and it did far more to widen the racial divisions among jazz musicians than to narrow them."

A number of writers observed that Burns acted and spoke, in interviews, as if he had personally invented the art. Jelly Roll Morton also claimed to have invented it. Comment on this extended, confused, and ponderous television series has been flowing to me in a stream, or perhaps I should say scream. And although I had vowed never to say another word about Marsalis, who once was a very good trumpet player and lost it, such is the uproar (I have never seen anything like it) that I have no choice but to organize an extended survey of reaction.

The critics were universally dismissive — all those I read, in any case — and musicians were frequently furious. Some of the best writing, as so often is the case, was that in the *New Yorker* by Whitney Balliett, who said that some of the interviews are invaluable, but noted:

> Many first-rate musicians are tapped only in passing or are ignored altogether. Those who are mentioned briefly, then left on the cutting-room floor, include Charles Mingus, a great bassist and a wildly original composer and bandleader; the Modern Jazz Quartet, for forty years the most lyrical and swinging of jazz chamber groups; and the seminal pianists Earl Hines, Bud Powell, and Bill Evans, who, taken together, invented modern jazz piano.
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> There are more: Pee Wee Russell, an endlessly original and lyrical clarinetist; the trombonists Vic Dickenson and Jimmy Knepper, utterly different but both inimitable and ceaselessly inventive; Jim Hall, Charlie Christian's successor; and the cornetist Bobby Hackett, whose solo on Glenn Miller's *A String of Pearls* belongs with Armstrong's baroque edifice on *West End Blues*.

I thought the Civil War series Burns did was good, though lugubrious and not up to the level of the wanton ecstatic praise it received. For one thing the use of music in that series should have alerted me to Burns' insensitivity to this art, a country-fiddle dirge endlessly repeated and played, as it turns out, by Matt Glaser, of whom more later on. But it was time someone did a protracted documentary on jazz, and, when someone on Burns' staff contacted me, I agreed to an interview. I gave the Burns people a day of my time, including two or three hours on camera. Ah, and then I made a fatal error: I told the young woman conducting the interview that if they wanted to have a good series, they should not allow Wynton Marsalis too much say in it. With cool dishonesty, she neglected to tell me he was "senior artistic adviser" on the project, and had been from the beginning. Indeed, he suggested the project to Ken Burns. Had I been told this in advance, I would never have assented to the interview, and had I been so advised *after* the interview, I would never have signed the release form. It was inevitable that I would end up on the cutting room floor.

All you see of me in the series is a brief segment in which I seem to trash Cecil Taylor. I say that he had a perfect right to do whatever he wants musically and I (meaning anybody) had a perfect right to listen to something else. The fact is that I have a lot of respect for Cecil Taylor, and I mentioned him in a larger context of the dilemma facing *all* music at the end of the twentieth century, the restrictions of tonal music and the theme and variations form and the loss of audience for those who break out of them. But Wynton Marsalis doesn't like Cecil Taylor, and he doesn't like me, either. "That Gene Lees," he told Chip Deffaa, "he's pathetic." And so, he and Burns apparently thought, they could kill two birds with one comment, and thus he used me as a weapon to hurt Cecil Taylor. If anybody reading this knows Cecil Taylor, please convey this to him.

Far more significant than my excision was the omission of Benny Carter. I remember telling the young woman that the one man she *must* interview was Benny Carter, for he is the only still-active jazz musician whose career was coeval

with that of Louis Armstrong: Armstrong was born in 1901, Carter in 1907. More to the point, Benny Carter is one of the massively significant jazz musicians. Phil Woods (who also isn't in the series) asserted,"My inspirations were Benny Carter, Johnny Hodges, and Charlie Parker — in that order."

Carter is seen briefly in a background shot, and there is no serious treatment of him as the major artist he is. I believe he is mentioned twice, the second time only in a list of bandleaders who broke up their groups at the end of 1946. I called him to ask, "Did they interview you?"

"Yes. I guess they didn't like what I said."

John Clayton, the bassist, composer, arranger, and bandleader had a similar experience. In an interview with Don Heckman of the *Los Angeles Times*, he expressed the hope that the series will accomplished something positive, but said he was dismayed at Carter's almost total absence from the history

"I was outraged by that," Jon said. "When I asked Benny why he hadn't been interviewed for the show, he said, 'I was.' And when I asked him why material from this interview wasn't included, he said, 'I guess they didn't like what I said.'"

The question is: What did they ask? Knowing Benny as well as I do, I doubt that we will ever know.

Bassist John Heard was equally incensed at the exclusion of Nat Cole. Cole was beyond question one of the most influential pianists in jazz history. Horace Silver has attested to his influence on his own work. So have Oscar Peterson and Bill Evans, and if you want to extend out from these three to all those they in turn influenced, the length of the man's shadow is astounding, not to mention his own superb, haunting playing. But *Cole is not mentioned at all.*

Marsalis, who is ubiquitous in the series, sometimes illustrates a point by playing his trumpet. He can, it is said, like Clark Terry and the late Harry Carney, do the trick of rotary breathing, which permits one to inhale through the nose while maintaining pressure in the embouchure with the air in the mouth and thus sustaining the melodic line without a break. Marsalis seems to have gone further: he has mastered the trick of rotary speech: making the same points over and over in long, tortured, tautological and often nonsensical maunderings delivered into your face with a rebarbative condescension, his expression fixed in a perpetual slight snigger, his head shaking in almost orgasmic tremors of self-love. Had Burns simply cut some of the Marsalis redundancies, he might have had time for a few kind words about, well, Big Sid Catlett for one. Marsalis's defenders often say that he is good at teaching children. Teaching them what? His own blinkered view of jazz history? Or his mangled grammar? He referred to someone as "de most wisest sage." Is that as opposed to the de most stupidest sage? How is it that his brother Branford (far the better musician) doesn't talk that way?

Two of the most interesting pieces about the series were written for the *Columbus Dispatch* by S.R.B. Iyer, of whom you may never have never heard. Bala Iyer was born in Coimbatore, India. He studied economics in Delhi, moved to the U.S. in 1981 to work on a doctorate, and studied English literature at Purdue and Ohio State universities. He wrote two pieces about *Jazz,* the first an interview, the second a review.

In order to avoid confusion about who is being heard in this and in other pieces I will quote, I have placed in bold face and italics, the byline at *both* the beginning and the end of the commentary.

By S.R.B. Iyer

One

Ken Burns, the television documentarian, was asked recently to reflect on American indifference to the past.

He was in Walpole, New Hampshire.

"It comes," he said over the telephone, "from the relative youth of the country. I live here in a village, one of the oldest on this continent. And yet there were Indians here 225 years ago, killing off the first white people. So, you know, it's a very, very young country. The response to the Civil War (series) was flabbergasting, not just for me, but for the rest of the country, because we suddenly realized we had a past and wanted to have one . . . ."

His new documentary series, *Jazz*, is the final installment of his "trilogy on American life." Burns says he began his Civil War television series without any idea that he was embarking on such a long project. But the pattern of American history made his trilogy inevitable. The Civil War, he says, quoting Shelby Foote, "defined us." *Baseball* (his television series and the game) "helps us understand what we had become." Jazz (the music, and possibly his series as well) is "a very accurate witness of the twentieth century" and "suggests some sense of what we might become." This is because "the model of jazz is so democratic, is so without barriers, so utterly American."

Burns has been listening seriously to jazz for about six years. And in all his pronouncements on the subject, one hears the fervor of a recent convert. He acknowledges, when pressed, the irony that he has discovered jazz during what is widely agreed to be one of its most fallow periods. However, he feels that this is a superficial view.

"Jazz isn't as popular as it used to be, but that doesn't

mean that it isn't a vital art form. Witness *Citizen Kane*, the greatest film of all time: a huge box-office disappointment when it first came out. Van Gogh was essentially a suicide. Today his paintings sell for more than anyone else's on earth."

Some Americans feel that jazz is old-fashioned, he says. Others think "it has an esoteric dimension." They think that to understand it, they "need advanced degrees." This "is an unfortunate consequence of a jazz community that is consistently fighting and bickering with itself." Burns has made *Jazz* to dispel all these misconceptions. He is confident "that after 25 years of experience, that the sorts of things that I have done have sort of hit the *zeitgeist* of my country quite accurately at times."

He says that the good news about jazz has spread all over the world. Its appeal is universal. He visited the president at the White House not long ago. "We stayed up all night listening to jazz. He told me about meeting a saxophone player in Russia. The president is a huge jazz aficionado. He said that when this guy was on, "it was as good as anything I have heard."

One gets the sense that Burns is exasperated by "the jazz community" even as he is preparing to carry the gospel of jazz to millions of American television viewers. He complains that his documentary has already been criticized by members of this "contentious" tribe for omissions, misplaced emphases, etc.

When this subject is raised, he becomes declamatory, even ecstatic.

"My story," he says, "is much larger. I'm a very controlling and in-control film maker. Nobody is going to arrest my agenda. And my agenda is to tell a compelling national narrative to my countrymen, in the most compelling way I can, filled with the undertow of contradiction and irony that attends any manifestation in this universe and to eschew the kind of simplistic philosophical, dialectical, or political solutions that criticism often applies to things. I'd rather deal with a complex relationship to minstrelsy, a complex relationship to race in the early white practitioners of jazz, to drugs, to war and things like that. And I think the film has done it and done it magnificently."

Jazz also "parses the question of race in America." Burns says that "the greatest poetic justice that I have ever come across is the fact that the only art form Americans have created was born out of the community that has experienced a lack of freedom in a supposedly free land."

Asked how the series ends, Burns says, "We quite consciously turned the spigot of our narrative off about '75." He made this decision not out of fear — "I have been fearless about the other aspects in all the episodes" — but because he "is in the business of history" and prefers to "deal with the past."

He is happy to leave the present to "reviewers, critics, journalists."

Two

To enjoy (this) documentary series, it is helpful, if not essential, to know as little as possible about jazz. If one knows very little — absolute ignorance is ideal — about the history of this country in the twentieth century, one might be Burns's perfect audience.

Burns's basic assumption is breathtakingly simple-minded: jazz reflects, at every stage of its evolution, the social, cultural, and political circumstances of the period. It has been a running commentary on American life. We are told, for instance, that Louis Armstrong's monumental *West End Blues*, recorded in 1928, was "a reflection of the country in the moments before the Great Depression." How a piece of music does this is not made clear. One might wonder then whether Charlie Parker's *Cool Blues* is a vote for or against Keynesian economics.

Three elements in *Jazz* compete for the viewer's attention: the script, the music, and the pictures on the screen. The pictures — still photographs, documentary footage, clips of musicians — are superb. The music, some curious choices notwithstanding, is often as good. But both pictures and music are overwhelmed by the sheer badness of the script.

The script is everything good jazz isn't: sentimental, solemn, melodramatic, and deficient in both humor and subtlety. It is oppressively defensive. It is sanctimonious and self-important. Crammed with superlatives, it often seems less history than advertisement.

Structurally, *Jazz* is both repetitious and unimaginative. A musician, say Sidney Bechet, is introduced. His social-political-historical context is established with period photographs, documentary footage, and the testimony of experts and contemporaries. Sometimes the order is reversed. Wynton Marsalis then reassures us of this person's worthiness. The process isn't complete without this intrusion by Marsalis.

In Sidney Bechet's case, could we not have heard instead from the soprano saxophonist Bob Wilber? He knew Bechet; he was a student of Bechet's in the late '40s; he played with Bechet. He is alive; and he speaks English.

Burns seems to have learnt about jazz from Stanley Crouch, Albert Murray, and Wynton Marsalis. The ideological tilt of the film is recognizably theirs. Those who follow jazz might wonder at the experts Burns has chosen. Fortunately Gary Giddins is among them. He is vivid, funny and

memorable; and especially eloquent on Armstrong and Parker.

Gerald Early, who is heard from at great length, is at the other end on the spectrum of eloquence. Early is Burns's expert on race. His commitment to opaque generalization is total: "Jazz seemed so much to capture the absurdity of the modern world." "Jazz is a kind of lyricism about the great American promise and our inability to live up to it in some ways." Etc. He opines that Miles Davis "had decided he was going to be the ultimate Walt Whitman," but the description of Davis's Whitmanesque trumpet style is beyond him. "It was a kind of piercing sort of sound," he offers. "It was piercing and mellow at the same time."

The story of jazz, in Ken Burns's narrative, is essentially the story of four or five representative figures. Louis Armstrong — the Shakespeare, Bach and Dante of American music (Gary Giddins) — is unknowable. Duke Ellington, "the greatest American composer," is presented as something of an exemplary figure. Charlie Parker is the jazz martyr, undone by drugs, drinks, and "inner demons." Benny Goodman, a lesser musician, is an expert popularizer, the white face of jazz. Miles Davis epitomizes black militancy.

In addition to these suns, a number of satellites are considered in passing. They are chosen to illustrate some socio-cultural point.

The naive jazz lover, expecting to see his heroes celebrated, will get some nasty shocks. The treatment of Benny Carter, for instance. Carter was, with the exception of Johnny Hodges, the finest alto saxophonist before Charlie Parker and is, perhaps, the most versatile musician to grace jazz. Besides the alto saxophone, he has been recorded playing the clarinet, piano, trombone, the tenor and soprano saxophones, and he is a brilliant trumpeter. Carter was a fine bandleader and one of the most influential composers and arrangers in the history of jazz. Unfortunately, his importance is merely musical, and he is therefore not usable by Burns. He doesn't rate even a moment's consideration.

The parochialism of *Jazz* is another surprise. "Utterly American," a "uniquely American music." Jazz is undoubtedly all of that. But, almost from the beginning, it has had a passionate following outside the United States. The importance to jazz of the French writers Hugues Panassié and Charles Delaunay — as critics, record producers, magazine editors, and discographers — cannot be emphasized too strongly. There are large jazz festivals every year in France, Wales, England, Canada, Switzerland, Japan, and other countries. The working American jazz musician understands the importance of all this, even if Burns and Co. don't.

When Louis Armstrong died, in 1971, Philip Larkin wrote that he had been "something inexhaustible and unchanging like the sun," that he was "an artist of world stature, an American Negro slum child who spoke to the heart of Greenlander and Japanese alike." The universality of jazz is a miraculous achievement. It should be one of the themes of a documentary like Burns's. It isn't. And perhaps, understandably. For it would have meant examining those qualities of jazz — musical and emotional — that resist simple sociological interpretation.

Philip Larkin wrote in his poem *For Sidney Bechet*: "On me your voice falls as they say love should / Like an enormous yes."

While suffering through the epic dreariness of Ken Burns's story, I found myself, all too often, entertaining feelings of an altogether different sort.

— S.R.B. Iyer

Another interesting piece appeared in *The Weekly Standard*, a publication that normally occupies itself with politics. But then, there was never a more political polemic than *Jazz*, and so perhaps the piece is not an inappropriate subject for its pages. It was written by Diana West. Raised by parents with a love for jazz and the American song, she studied classical piano, was educated at Yale, worked at the *Washington Times* as reporter and feature writer, and freelanced for the *Washington Post, Weekly Standard, Wall Street Journal* and other publications. She currently writes editorials for the *Washington Times* and has a column distributed nationally by Scripps Howard.

By Diana West

Louis Armstrong was a great trumpet player, a major jazz innovator, and a widely loved entertainer. But was he the Second Coming? This is the hardly exaggerated implication of Ken Burns's *Jazz* documentary, and it's one well worth pondering — not for what it says about the great Satchmo, but for what it says about a tightly blinkered view of history and race that has come to dominate the presentation of music in America.

Burns is an admitted musical neophyte. But he found as mentors the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and writers Stanley Crouch, Gerald Early, and Albert Murray, who anchor the commentary for the nineteen-hour documentary Burns has now produced. They also provide the thematic core of the book *Jazz*, which has been published in tandem with the documentary's PBS premiere.

The average viewer might expect of these men both a helping hand in introducing the novice to a new life of listening pleasure and, at the same time, apt historical and

musical context for the devotee. But their role in the Burns documentary proves quite different. Rather than helping viewers to *hear* the rich and varied history of jazz, they are there to instruct us in how to *see* it: the exclusive domain of the black, blues-oriented musicians who have long suffered at the hands of the white and derivative interloper.

It's an old story, but there's something freshly shocking about watching it unfold—unchecked, even unremarked upon—as a matter of uncontroversial fact, "proven" by the seeing-is-believing conventions of documentary making: the grainy photos and film clips, the talking heads, the soothing voice-over narration, and the marvelous music (which is, by the way, all too often voiced-over by those talking heads). The result is a vigorous exercise in political correctness, a distortion of cultural history that only deepens racial division while ill-serving the music it sets out to celebrate. Even more dispiriting is the fact that Ken Burns passed up a genuine opportunity to showcase one of the only organically and expansively multi-cultural movements in American history — the evolution of jazz.

Of course, neither Burns nor his mentors see the music that way. Where there was an unprecedented mixing of musical forms and colors a century or so ago, they see near-isolated black creativity. Where there was a blending of black rhythmic virtuosity with European harmonic sophistication, they see black musical separateness. As various musicologists have reminded us, what became a bona fide American musical vernacular in the twentieth century emerged from a complex cacophony: Negro spirituals and blues, Caribbean dances, Methodist hymns, North Country modal ballads, cowboy round-up tunes, gallops, hornpipes, polkas, "nationality" tunes from Europe, Victorian ballads — not to mention the national craze for brass bands, and the emergence of Tin Pan Alley. But this historic, eclectic mix remains out of earshot of *Jazz*. The essence of this documentary is blues, the blacks who played those blues, and the whites who tried to play them and couldn't.

Such a point of view, as noted several years ago by Terry Teachout in a searing commentary about the racial cleansing of Jazz at Lincoln Center, stems from what may be called the "racialist" school of jazz theory. Murray, Crouch, and Marsalis—joined in *Jazz* by Early and, of course, Burns — all enthusiastically subscribe to it. Teachout defined this outlook as "an ideology in which race is a primary factor in the making of aesthetic judgments." At New York City's Lincoln Center, under the direction of Marsalis and Crouch, the racialist ideology has played out in a series of jazz programs based on the work of black players, composers, and arrangers. In Ken Burns' *Jazz*, it has been codified for the general audience.

It couldn't be otherwise, given the guides Burns has selected. Albert Murray is the author of *Stomping the Blues*, a 1976 explication of jazz as an outgrowth of the blues, which was ardently praised by Stanley Crouch as "the first real aesthetic theory of jazz." The book might also be called the jazz racialist's bible. You can get its flavor from the fact that Murray's single assessment of white jazzmen occurs in a perfectly poisonous caption accompanying a photograph of a few white and several black musicians. Murray derides the whites — among them Miff Mole, Gene Krupa, Bud Freeman, and Gerry Mulligan — as members of the so-called "third line," a play on New Orleans parade lingo, suggesting worthless followers and hangers-on. This isn't respectable music criticism; it's racially charged invective.

If anything, Gerald Early is even more direct. "The greatest practitioners of this kind of music have been African American," he states in the documentary. "It comes from a particular kind of American experience with democracy, with America, with capitalism, with a whole bunch of other stuff." To accept this point of view requires the strict segregation of all black musicians from white musicians — ranking Cootie Williams, Art Blakey, and Thelonious Monk above Harry James, Buddy Rich, and Mel Powell. It calls to mind a famous 1950s color-blind test the critic Leonard Feather gave trumpeter Roy Eldridge, who had claimed he could tell a jazz player's race just by listening; Eldridge incorrectly guessed the race of almost every musicians who was played for him. It may be possible to perform the kind of subjective ranking of master musicians that *Jazz* attempts, but there is something perverse about doing it entirely by racial bloc, which is what *Jazz* forces the viewer to do.

Consider Wynton Marsalis's shameful explanation that Benny Goodman's white skin — not the electrifying clarinet playing, and certainly not his part in launching the big-band era — earned him the title the "King of Swing." "The majority of people who bought the records were white," says Marsalis (who is to *Jazz* what Shelby Foote was to Burns's Civil War series: the touchstone commentator for the duration). "The majority of the people who wrote about it were white, the record companies were owned by whites. Just the music came out of the Afro-American community. So it stands to reason that the 'King' would be white." Just in case a viewer doesn't get the full import, Burns cuts wordlessly to a vintage portrait of Duke Ellington, whose place in the racialist theory of jazz is that of the legitimate but denied monarch.

To uphold this and other unabashedly racialist theories, Burns's commentators must boost black musicians to heights beyond reach and denigrate white musicians to mediocrity. Which brings us back to Louis Armstrong and his role in the documentary. It bears repeating: Louis Armstrong was a great trumpeter, a major jazz innovator, and widely beloved

entertainer. But was he, as viewers are informed, "a gift from God"? "America's Bach, Dante, and Shakespeare"? The creator of "the melodic, rhythmic vocabulary that all of the big bands wrote music out of"? The creator of "some of the most abstract and sophisticated music that anybody has ever heard, short of Bach"? Someone with "an unprecedented sense of rhythm"? "The greatest musician in the world"? Is it true, as Burns writes in the series's accompany book, that "Louis Armstrong is to twentieth-century music (I did not say jazz) what Einstein is to physics, Freud is to psychiatry, and the Wright Brothers are to travel"?

The point is neither to criticize Armstrong nor to deny his impact on American music. The point is rather to question the near-hysterical hyperbole that characterizes *Jazz* in its assessments of its pantheon of players — Armstrong above all, along with Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis, joined by Count Basie, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Thelonious Monk, and Art Blakey (and, what do you know, Wynton Marsalis).

Duke Ellington, for example, is "America's greatest composer," who "couldn't write or record anything other than masterpieces," all the while "creating chords that were never heard before" (at least by Ken Burns). Billie Holiday was "the greatest jazz singer of them all," and even "the single most influential singer America ever produced. (Of course, Bessie Smith is also said to be "the most important female vocalist in the history of jazz," so go figure.) Count Basie "had the greatest rhythm section in jazz history," and "a pulse that was definitive"; indeed, "no band had a greater impact than Count Basie and his band."

The flip side to this feverish pitch is the low-key letdown, the undercutting technique perfected in *Jazz* to deflate the reputations of those white musicians who even rate a mention. (The documentary also presents baleful historical footage of lynchings, Ku Klux Klan marches, and "whites only" signs to drive the point home.) Benny Goodman, for one, is consistently depicted as something of a commercial fraud whose success came at the expense of others, particularly Fletcher Henderson, a black arranger of great talent without whom, it is implied, Goodman wouldn't have amounted to much.

Even Goodman's early sessions with black musicians — beginning with 1934 recordings that ultimately led to serendipitous collaborations with pianist Teddy Wilson and vibes player Lionel Hampton, among others — are presented in such a way as to suggest petty acts of self-aggrandizement: "Benny Goodman saw no reason why mere custom and prejudice should keep him from improving his band," the narrator intones, slipping yet another compliment into the leader's back. After what Goodman suffers in *Jazz*, it is a smarmy thing that his picture is used to sell the documentary's boxed CD collection.

Every *Jazz* viewer will have his own list of omissions and gloss-overs. Mine begins with Oscar Peterson, Gene Krupa, and Mel Powell. Other regrettable gaps include the musically daring Boswell sisters, especially considering the influence of Connee Boswell on Ella Fitzgerald, for instance. And, speaking of Ella Fitzgerald, why is there hardly any mention of "the First Lady of Song" following her debut as a teenager singing novelty tunes? Indeed, there are few singers featured in *Jazz* aside from Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Bessie Smith — no jazz-age Bing Crosby, no Mel Tormé, and no band vocalists.

Which brings us to what may be the most telling omission of *Jazz*: its complete disregard of American popular song. To be sure, instrumentals were at the heart of jazz, from Count Basie's *One O'Clock Jump* to Benny Goodman's *Sing Sing Sing* to Dizzy Gillespie's *A Night in Tunisia*. But so were the songs by the likes of Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, Harold Arlen, the Gershwins, and others. The standards of the jazz songbook composed by these men — who were, pace Ken Burns, mainly white and often Jewish — are too numerous to list, but jazz lovers would be bereft without Louis Armstrong's rendition of Hoagy Carmichael's *Stardust*, Sarah Vaughan's version of Vernon Duke's *Autumn in New York*, Tommy Dorsey's version of Irving Berlin's *Blue Skies* (vocal by Frank Sinatra), Coleman Hawkins's version of John Green's *Body and Soul*, and John Coltrane on Rodgers and Hammerstein's *My Favorite Things* ("a cloying little waltz," says *Jazz*), to name just a few.

Aside from Duke Ellington, the only composer I remember hearing about in *Jazz* is George Gershwin, peremptorily dismissed as having "spent countless hours listening to black piano players in Harlem." Of course, as Albert Murray would have it, jazz performers produced their own material. "Blues musicians," he explained in *Stomping the Blues*, "proceed as if the Broadway musical were in fact a major source of crude but fascinating folk materials."

Ken Burns seems receptive to this rather outré point of view. *Jazz* explains how it was that Louis Armstrong managed to transform "the most superficial love songs into great art," and how poor Billie Holiday had to do the same, turning "routinely mediocre music into great art." ("Art" is a common word in *Jazz*.) Robin and Rainger's *Easy Living* — a favorite Holiday recording — springs to mind as an example of the tripe the poor woman had to sing. No wonder she took to drugs. And while we're on the subject of root causes, consider poor Bix Beiderbecke, the lyrical and legendary cornetist who came to a tragic end at twenty-eight, a victim, as one *Jazz* theorist would have it, of artistic segregation: if Bix had only been permitted to play with

black musicians — who were, we are told, "as good and in some cases better than he was" — he might not have died so young.

Over Burns's preface to the book version of *Jazz* there stands a quotation from Duke Ellington, who said "the music is so free that many people say it is the only unhampered, unhindered expression of complete freedom yet produced in this country." We can indulge a great musician, but it is tough to take this kind of faux-intellectual stuff from Burns and the rest of his *Jazz* band. In the end, these nineteen hours of film are about too many angry axes and too many senseless words. Fortunately, what endures is the music, so much of which remains available, beckoning anyone — of any color — who has an open ear.

— Diana West

Many critics who took exception to the Murray-Marsalis-Crouch ideological approach to the subject matter had praise for the film at a technical level. Not so Robert Parker, the brilliant Australian jazz scholar and recording engineer who a few years ago did the remarkable restorations of 1920s jazz in quite convincing stereo, issued on CDs by the BBC. Parker, who now lives in England, wrote me:

> A friend has sent me the first three episodes of the Ken Burns PBS *Jazz* series. I was horrified.
>
> The picture quality is excellent. Little care, however, was taken with much of the early silent film material, which was not slowed down to correct viewing speed — easy to accomplish in these days of vari-speed tape replay, and *de rigeur* for all UK historical productions. The resulting pixilation of the action is an insult to the era depicted.
>
> The sound quality of the historic jazz recordings is, frankly, appalling. On a budget reported to be $5 million there is no excuse for this. There are now around a dozen sound engineers, several working in the USA, who could have produced superb reproductions from this source material.
>
> But even worse — where was the *jazz*? Buried behind endless, turgid voice-over and talking head interviews, that's where. And all too often, not even the right jazz. Burns must rate early jazz so lowly, or understand it so poorly, that it took him until near the end of episode three to let us hear any of these masterworks under discussion in full — *West End Blues*.
>
> All well and good, perhaps, if what we were hearing from the pundits was a deathless revelation of the heart and soul of jazz. What we got was reasonably factually correct, true, but laced with so much needless hype and turgid political correctness and so endlessly repetitive as to become, ultimately, just plain boring. I mean, how long does it take to say "jazz is an amalgam of European and African culture, is largely improvised, comes straight from the heart and soul and is a great force in the world for racial social justice and general enjoyment and life enhancement"? Four hours? If only Burns had musical as well as social perception he might have realized that the heart and soul of jazz is *the music*. *West End Blues* said more in three minutes than all the talking heads laid out in line from New Orleans to Chicago to New York and back. And if you don't understand it, from just hearing it, all that explanation will make not a whit of difference to your ability to feel the emotion being transmitted from Armstrong's amazing brain to your own poor instrument.
>
> My friend's fourteen-year-old watched the first ten minutes or so of episode one and then left the room. Later, asked why, he replied, "No music."

Inevitably, whenever there is a travesty — and the Burns series is nothing less — laughter eases the pain.

Claudio Slon is an outstanding Brazilian (although he was born in Argentina) percussionist, who was with Sergio Mendes for several years. This went zipping along the e-mail circuit:

Announcing Claudio Slon's PBS
12 Part Series "Samba"

Part 1: Creation of Samba by White East African tribes.
Part 2: Arrival of tribes in Brazil.
Part 3: Commercialization of music by Portuguese sailors.
Part 4: Milton Nascimento and social unrest.
Part 5. Accidental discovery of Bossa Nova by Stan Getz.
Part 6: Wynton Marsalis on Louis Armstrong's influence in Antonio Carlos Jobim's *Wave*.
Part 7: Louis Armstrong.
Part 8: Luis Bonfa and racial tensions.
Part 9: Louis Armstrong.
Part 10: Louis Armstrong, Barbra Streisand, and *Dindi*.
Part 11: Louis Armstrong.
Part 12: (last ten minutes, if enough time left) Heitor Villa-Lobos, Guerra Peixe, Pixinguinha, Tom Jobim, Edu Lobo, Chico Buarque, Dorival Caymmi, Noel Rosa, Milton Nascimento, Marcos Valle, and a special tribute to Louis Armstrong, Stanley Crouch, and Wynton Marsalis by Sergio Mendes and Brazil '01.

To Be Continued