Gene Lees Ad Libitum

Jazzletter

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Ken Burns Jazz — to the Ground

Part Two

The following too traveled the e-mail circuit. I have not been able to determine its authorship, but the accuracy with which it echoes the tone of Burns' comments to Bala Iyer strongly suggest that it was written by someone close to him, possibly even on his own staff.

Ken Burns' *Ken Burns* will be the next production from America's self-described "greatest living documentary film maker." The indefatigable Burns will examine his own life in thorough, even exhaustive, detail — 18 two-hour shows, a 650-page coffee-table book, calendars, neckties, napkin rings, a bagel toaster, a children's breakfast cereal, a Sony Playstation 2 game, and a nine-volume CD set of his favorite music, including one CD of him humming what may or may not be his favorite show tunes.

Narrators will include John Chancellor, James Earl Jones, Garrison Keillor, Maya Angelou, Wynton Marsalis, Rosie O'Donnell, Barney Frank, Buck O'Neill, Jaime Escalante, Bill Clinton, Shelby Foote, Sister Wendy, Yo-Yo Ma, and a member of N'Sync to be named later.

"This is the next logical step in my development as America's best-loved and smartest person," said Burns at a press conference. "I was the first American to really 'get' the whole Civil War thing. I was the first person to figure out that baseball had a social importance beyond the beer-swilling yahoos who watch it. And most recently, I forced America to acknowledge that Negroes had a key role in the birth and development of jazz music. Now I want to share my life's pilgrimage — an adventure that is nothing less than a blueprint for Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey* so that others might benefit."

Burns will utilize archival photos, drawings, vintage 8 mm family film clips and Japanese shadow puppets to dramatize his life so that others might benefit. Interviews will include Mrs. Blanche Goltz, his third grade teacher, Finley Blassingame, his agent, Kent Zimmer, a man he impressed at a party by naming every member of the Miles Davis *Kind of Blue* quintet, and Thorndyke Havrisham Jr., vice president of Public Broadcasting and the third person to call Burns a "genius."

After a lengthy negotiation, Burns has also agreed to an extensive interview with himself. "I didn't know if I could get me. But after I explained just how important I was to the story, I talked myself into it."

He didn't disappoint himself. He was able to uncover surprising insights into his life. "Before I undertook this project," says Burns, "I had no idea I had done so much to enlighten so many ignorant, wretched people. I had no idea I was such an avatar of enlightenment, especially as it pertains to my funky soul brothers. And I had no idea that I liked great old movies, romantic walks on the beach, and a glass of wine by the fire."

The entire project will take five years and cost 11 million dollars. The cost is being underwritten by General Motors, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and whatever tobacco company is most in need of positive PR spin at the end of this year. The first episode, *From Cosmic Dream-Dust to Potty Training*, will air in 2005. The last episode, *Everything a Human Being Can and Should Be,* might air as late as 2007.

If I cannot determine the authorship of that piece, the following was written by John Grabowski. It went whizzing along the e-mail circuit. :

Presenting Ken Burns' 144-hour Extremely Important documentary *Jazz*

Fade up on grainy old photograph of a man in a three-piece suit, holding a cornet. Or a bicycle horn — it's hard to tell.

Narrator: Skunkbucket Le Funke was born in 1876 and died in 1901. No one who heard him is alive today. The grandchildren of the people who heard him are not alive today. The great-grandchildren of the people

who heard him are not alive today. He was never recorded.

Wynton Marsalis: I'll tell you what Skunkbucket Le Funke sounded like. He had this big sound, and he always phrased off the beat, and he slurred his notes. And when the Creole bands were still playing de-bah-de-bah-ta-da-tah, he was doing bo-dap-da-lete-do-do-do-bah! He was just like gumbo, ahead of his time.

Announcer: Le Funke was a cornet player, gambler, card shark, pool hustler, pimp, male prostitute, Kelly Girl, computer programmer, brain surgeon, and he invented the Internet.

Stanley Crouch: When people listened to Skunkbucket Le Funke, they heard do-do-dee-bwap-da-dee-de-da-da-doop-doop-doop. And they even knew how deeply profound that was.

Announcer: It didn't take Le Funke long to advance the art of jazz past its humble beginnings in New Orleans whoredom with the addition of a bold and sassy beat.

Wynton Marsalis: Let me tell you about the Big Four. Before the Big Four, jazz drumming sounded like BOOM-chick-BOOM-chick-BOOM-chick. But now they had the Big Four, which was so powerful some said it felt like Six. A few visiting musicians even swore they were in an Eight.

Stanley Crouch: It was smooth and responsive, and there was no knocking and pinging, even on 87 octane.

Wynton Marsalis: Even on gumbo.

Announcer: When any musician in the world heard Louis Armstrong for the first time, they gnawed their arm off with envy, then said the angels probably wanted to sound like Louis. When you consider a bunch of angels talking in gruff voices and singing *Hello, Dolly*, you realize what a stupid aspiration that is.

Gary Giddy: Louis changed jazz because he was the only cat going do-da-dep-do-wah-be-be, while everyone else was doing do-de-dap-dit-dit-dee.

Stanley Crouch: And that was very profound.

Marsalis: Like gumbo.

Stanley Crouch: Uh-huh.

Matt Glaser: I always have this fantasy that when Louis performed in Belgium, Heisenberg was in the audience and he was blown away and that's where he got the ideas for his Uncertainty Principle.

Wynton Marsalis: Because the Uncertainty Principle, applied to jazz, means you don't know if a cat is going to do day-da-de-do-ba.-ta-bah or day-da-de-do-bi-de-beep. Louis was the first one to realize that.

Stanley Crouch: And that was very profound.

Throughout the series, Marsalis and Crouch delivered themselves of confident generalities, some of them in almost incomprehensible English. Grabowski accurately pillories Marsalis for one of the most embarrassing aspects of the whole thing, his constant singing of illustrations of his point. He was especially discomfiting when he tried to sing drum patterns, particularly to anyone who ever heard Dizzy Gillespie do it. The "drum" solo Dizzy used to sing as a preamble to *The Champ* is awesome. Marsalis is merely clumsy; indeed, his singing made me realize he just doesn't have very good time.

Marsalis was at his self-admiring silliest when he discoursed so pontifically on how Buddy Bolden played — hence the Skunkbucket Le Funke fantasy — in the same tone he brings to his dissertations on Louis Armstrong. Armstrong died when Marsalis was ten, and it is unlikely that he knew him. I, on the other hand, did, and others I know (Clark Terry among them) who knew him *very* well would not pretend to tell you Armstrong's mental processes in making music. I never understood Marsalis's frequent parallels between jazz and gumbo. Clark Terry is interviewed briefly about the Ellington band, but he is never heard playing a note. He is not interviewed about Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie, although the three were close friends.

One of the early segments of the show made much of the fact that, since the black Freddie Keppard, fearing that somebody might "steal" his stuff, refused to record, the white Original Dixieland Jass Band became the first group to record jazz. And it emphasizes that the group's leader, Nick LaRocca, made the obviously absurd claim that blacks had nothing to do with the invention of jazz. After the first or second episode of *Jazz*, Phil Woods wrote me:

I got as far as the Keppard-ODJB thing and then

that pained look on Wynton's face and the long stage wait until the inevitable truth: "It's a race thing." For Christ's sake, Keppard said no and ODJB said yes. Of course Nick LaRocca was an asshole, but an American asshole who was ambitious. Would everything have been cool if Freddie Keppard had agreed to record? I don't think so, and by the way I don't give a fuck how Buddy Bolden played.

Keith Jarrett wrote a letter published in the *New York Times*:

> Regarding Ken Burns's (or was it Wynton Marsalis's?) *Jazz*: Now that we've been put through the socioeconomic racist forensics of a jazz-illiterate historian and a self-imposed jazz expert prone to sophomoric generalizations and ultraconservative politically correct (for now) utterances, not to mention a terribly heavy-handed narration (where every detail takes on the importance of major revelation) and weepy-eyed nostalgic reveries, can we have some films about jazz by people who actually know and understand the music itself and are willing to deal comprehensively with the last forty years of this richest of American treasures?

Marvin Stamm, who, when it comes to the playing of the trumpet, can carve Wynton Marsalis a new belly button (that's an expression I picked up from Gerry Mulligan, another of the musicians slighted in the series), had this to say in a letter to Doug Ramsey:

> Marsalis, the "senior creative consultant" for the project and the most ubiquitous figure among the talking heads, demonstrates the importance of Dizzy Gillespie's trumpet improvisations. He picks up his own trumpet and plays a solo typical of the 1930s. He then plays a more elaborately embroidered solo that sounds like Gillespie in the 1940s, complete with fast but symmetrical triplet patterns in the upper register. Marsalis looks up, and instead of offering a few words to explain how Gillespie was different, simply says, "I mean, what is that?"
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> Can one be so above Dizzy? I mean . . . what is that?
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> The mostly elegiac tone of the final segment is obligatory for a program that accepts Marsalis's argument that the only valid way to promote jazz is to look backward.
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> So much for all of us who play this music today and look for the forward development of it with each performance! Don't he and all these other retro" artists know that music, and especially jazz, is always supposed to move forward, never backwards? Where are these people coming from? Or are they just frightened that they don't have the originality or voice to move their own music forward?

Stamm touches on a point that struck me strongly as I watched. At one point, Marsalis plays the stunning stentorian statement Armstrong made as an opening to *West End Blues*, which countless musicians know by heart. Artie Shaw sang that figure to me in the car on the way home from a concert, and said, "All those of you who were born a little later and didn't hear Louis until you'd been listening to those he inspired, like Roy Eldridge and Bunny Berigan, cannot imagine how revolutionary he was to those of us who heard him at that time." If that's not verbatim, it's close to it, and it certainly bears the intent of what Artie said.

When I heard Marsalis play that passage on his own horn, I was (again) uncomfortable, because he made you realize how far below Armstrong Marsalis is. And thus too when he played that upper-register triplet figure that Dizzy loved to throw in for sheer excitement (and which Oscar Peterson has absorbed into his own playing). There was nothing in Marsalis' playing remotely like the bite and fire and passion of Dizzy's playing. Heard *a capella*, you realized that his time is not wrong, it's just sort of dopey, flaccid, lacking the crackle and certainty that one hears in Dizzy Gillespie or Oscar Peterson or, to cite a younger player, Nicholas Payton.

To check on myself, I called a certain prominent (black) bassist to ask his impression of Marsalis's time. Did he like it? "I don't like anything about his playing," he said, "and that includes his tone. It's lifeless."

I earlier mentioned that the *Arts and Leisure* section of the Sunday, January 7, *New York Times* carried a four page piece on the series. It was written and compiled by Ben Ratliff. Cogent and clear, it is well worth reading if you can find it, possibly through the Internet. Ratliff too hoped for the best, that the series would be good for jazz. But, he said, and I will quote some of his important points:

> It is a documentary with a grave tone that doesn't try to be comprehensive and fumbles in its treatment of the last forty years of the music . . . .
>
> [Most] of its quirks are due to a small number of critics and musicians, including Wynton Marsalis, Stanley Crouch, Albert Murray and Gary Giddins, who are used extensively as commentators in the film . . .
>
> You would never know that jazz exists in other

countries; over and over you hear that jazz is an American music through and through . . . .

Part of the problem here is the film's rigorous maintenance of the old saw that jazz is "democracy in action" — a facile way to understand a music that can also be perfectly autocratic . . . .

No matter how [Burns] tells the story, he valorizes the players. There's a particular tone to this. It is in the deep, mellifluous voice of Keith David, the film's narrator, making every action of a jazz musician richly portentous. (It's like God narrating a slide show.) It is the out-of-control hyperbole that floods the entire film, both in [the] script and in the contributions of the talking-head experts. The great Art Tatum, for example, may call for a special set of adjectives, but the script gushes over, saying that "he had an ear for pitch so uncanny that he could tell the difference between a penny and a dime dropped on a table by the sound it made." Well, probably, so can you . . . .

[The] verbal cliches march onward; someone who has read the histories can almost anticipate what the script will say about Parker, Miles Davis, Paul Desmond and Thelonious Monk. The hyperbole of the narrative becomes surreal by Episode 8, when every new figure is garlanded with superlatives so fat and rich that they become meaningless . . . .

The film's heroes of the last forty years are Dexter Gordon — not so much for his influence as a musician as for his archetypal story of a jazzman gone abroad who returns home to find a new audience for jazz — and, of course, Wynton Marsalis . . . .

What will the film do for the sake of live jazz, other than Mr. Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra? Not much, besides suggesting that the last forty years has been uneventful. Sorry, kid . . . .

But the greatest service it could provide for the world would be to initiate other films about jazz that might be more educational about music, less isolationist and long-winded.

And, Lord, give me no more gumbo metaphors.

This last refers to the opening segment, titled *Gumbo* because Marsalis oozes on about the music being a gumbo in its original mix. This prompted Phil Woods to call it Mumbo Gumbo.

The Ratliff piece is followed by a number of comments from musicians and critics about the series. Critic and former bassist Terry Teachout said:

By his own admission, Ken Burns knew little about jazz when he undertook to tell its long, complicated story. Hence it should come as no surprise that *Jazz* has little of interest to say about the music with which it is nominally concerned. I find it revealing that Mr. Burns rarely allows any piece of music to play more than a few seconds, uninterrupted by the distracting chatter of a talking head (usually Wynton Marsalis).

Instead, he gives us hour upon hour of garrulous anecdotage and gaseous generalizations, many of the latter seemingly intended to suggest that jazz was less a musical phenomenon than a sociological one.

"Jazz" says Mr. Burns, "necessarily becomes a story about race relations and prejudice, about minstrelsy and Jim Crow, lynching and civil rights." That may be what *Jazz* is but it's not what jazz was. Of course you cannot properly tell the story of jazz without closely examining its cultural context, but to treat the aesthetic achievements of geniuses like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington as mere opportunities for historical point-making is to distort them beyond recognition. Jazz is neither a war nor a sport — it is an art form, one significant enough to be chronicled in its own right and on its own terms, something that *Jazz* scarcely even attempts to do.

One of those quoted in the *Times* piece is Jon Faddis — another trumpet player who can blow Wynton Marsalis away. He had this to say:

I've come to realize that this film has given me the blues. It gave me the melancholy blues, the sadness that comes from realizing that so many of the significant contributors to our music were apparently not consulted and definitely not represented. While I realize full inclusion may not have been feasible, I nonetheless find the omission of James Moody, Bill Evans, Erroll Garner, Keith Jarrett, Benny Carter, and many others curious, if not disturbing.

And it gave me the angry blues, the anger that comes from hearing the philosophy of Wynton Marsalis, Stanley Crouch, and others presented as fact, rather than opinion or interpretation. A glaring example: the assertion that Charlie Parker was the sole genius of the bebop era. I'm also angry that music from 1961 until now was given only one episode of two hours.

Some of the most powerful sections of the film were those dealing with problems in America. Images

of lynches, the Depression, war, the atomic bomb, racism: these gave me the painful blues. I dare anyone to watch these images and not feel their humanness. The inclusion of these images and the stories of the musicians whose art and actions survived and spoke out and transcended them gave me the blues of hope, the hope that America, like jazz, will continue to grow beyond its limitations and stereotypes.

A particularly good piece on the subject was written by Francis Davis. You can find it in its entirety on the Internet at www.theatlantic.com/burnsjazz. Davis said he found the series "enjoyable televison." Some did, some didn't, and more than a few persons I have talked to hated it and tuned out after an episode or two, or simply fell asleep during its relentless drone. But having offered the best he could find to say about it, Davis made these points:

> A few seconds into the first episode the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis — a senior creative consultant on the series who is onscreen so much that he might as well have been given star billing — informs us that "jazz music objectifies America" and gives us "a painless way of understanding ourselves." His declaration is followed by a montage of the music's major figures over which the actor Keith David, reading copy supplied by Geoffrey C. Ward (who also co-wrote the scripts for Burns's two previous series) is an "improvisational act, making itself up as it goes along, just like the country that gave it birth." The lecture continues throughout the series, delivered by Marsalis and others. Close to the end, Marsalis restates the theme with a little extra spin, as he might with a melody to conclude a performance with his band. Jazz "gives us a glimpse into what America is going to be when it becomes itself," he says, talking in the way that presidential candidates are prone to do — as if believing that democracy is a form of existentialism.
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> Marsalis shares Burns's long-standing propensity for overstatement in the service of high ideals. Burns lets Marsalis and others get away with so much in *Jazz* — presenting the character and motivations of long-dead musicians, for example, without distinguishing between legend and actual memory — that his methods as a documentarian are open to question, along with his credentials as a social historian.
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> After some preliminary flag-waving, Burns's new series begins with the hoariest of creation myths: that New Orleans was the single birthplace of jazz, something I doubt anyone besides Burns and his New Orleans-born senior creative adviser believes. It's one with the latest in resurrection myths that Marsalis's arrival on the scene in 1980 saved jazz from death at the hands of self-indulgent avant-gardists and purveyors of jazz-rock fusion (we're even shown snapshots of the baby Wynton) . . . .
>
> Burns has admitted to knowing nothing about jazz going into this project, and he seems to have learned most of what he now knows about the subject from Marsalis. With Crouch and Murray on the board of advisers and serving as commentators, what we're getting is the party line . . . .
>
> Bill Evans was the most influential pianist of the last forty years, but all we learn about him is that he once played with Miles Davis and was white. You'd think he was significant only as an example of the black trumpeter's enlightened employment policy . . .
>
> Burns is big on sociological context, so the music unfolds against a backdrop of speakeasies and bread lines, dance crazes and world wars, lynchings and civil rights marches. The series certainly looks good, and it sounds good, too, if you ignore Keith David's overenunciated delivery (he sounds like he was bitten by the same bug that got Maya Angelou) and the melodramatic readings by a host of other actors . . . .
>
> As annoying as Marsalis can be, though, he takes a back seat to the preening Matt Glaser, a violinist who performed on the sound tracks of *The Civil War* and *Baseball,* who turns up every so often to share an insight on, say, Armstrong's relationship with the space-time continuum. Glaser sounds like one of those guys you overhear trying to impress their dates in jazz clubs, only it's us he's trying to score with . . . .
>
> The larger problems with the series stems from the dubious habits Burns has picked up since *The Civil War.* For every person we hear speaking from experience, another comes along to tell us things he couldn't possibly know. Talking with certainty about events in the lives of Armstrong and Ellington, Marsalis might as well be a televangelist chatting confidentially about Jesus. Of the semi-mythical early-twentieth century New Orleans cornetist Buddy Bolden, Marsalis says his "innovation was one of personality, so instead of playing all his fast stuff, he would bring you the sound of Buddy Bolden." How could he know? No recording of Bolden survives, and he is said to have played in public for the last time in 1907. As Marsalis speaks, we hear a trumpeter on the soundtrack playing a rollicking blues, with no indication that it's a recent performance by Marsalis. Most viewers will probably assume it's Bolden, and will surely accept what

Marsalis says about him.

> As in *Baseball*, Burns shows tendencies toward cockeyed legend, cut-rate sociology, and amateur psychoanalysis.

Many musicians privately expressed outrage over the series. But when questioned for public print, they often modified their tone, usually expressing the cautious hope that the film would help build an audience for jazz.

Herbie Hancock said: "My other feeling is that it seems to suggest that the heroes are all in the past and they all happen to be dead. It also seemed odd that, when there are musicians alive from the thirties and forties and fifties — and even beyond — who have stories to tell that they weren't [asked]. I mean, why are we listening to Wynton talking about things that happened before he was born? Why would they ask Wynton about Miles when Ron Carter and Wayne Shorter are still around?"

Hancock is interviewed about Miles in the film, but there is little if anything about his own illustrious career.

Don Heckman, in the *Los Angeles Times,* noted how little attention was given to jazz on the West Coast. He wrote:

"From the early appearances by Jelly Roll Morton in the twenties, through the glory days of Central Avenue, into the cool sounds of West Coast jazz in the fifties, through the edgy sixties and into the diverse blends of funk, blues, avant-garde and revisited mainstream . . . Southern California has been a primal, if underappreciated, producer of world-class jazz."

Heckman quotes John Clayton: "And it fails to acknowledge the special relationships — as co-workers and friends — that have historically existed between most jazz musicians, black and white, in Los Angeles."

Bill Evans wasn't there of course because of the Rasputin power of Stanley Crouch over Wynton Marsalis, and that of Marsalis in turn over Ken Burns. Crouch, holding court, once said to a group of people in the presence of Eric Nisenson, "Bill Evans was a punk." The segment of the series on Miles Davis deals with the *Kind of Blue* album, relegating Bill to a minor sideman role, and says that Miles invented modal jazz. Wrong: Bill Evans and George Russell were key figures in implementing this approach in modern jazz. Russell, an extremely important composer who, unless I missed it, isn't even mentioned in the series, published his *Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* in 1953. Bill played on Russell's recording *The Jazz Workshop* in 1956, and it was George who recommended and then introduced Bill to Miles. The tune *Blue in Green* is attributed to Miles, but Bill really wrote it: Earl Zindars was there when he did.

Ken Downey wrote in the *Seattle Weekly* that "the way Burns & Co. cram the last forty years of the music's hundred-year history into the last tenth of the series' running time, and the way Marsalis and his cronies dominate much of that, is as comic as it is arrogant."

If the series raised jazz record sales through the ceiling, he says, that "is good news for the media conglomerates who hold the copyrights on past masterpieces. Most have shut down their jazz divisions; why spend money recording the living when you can do so nicely fattening on the dead?"

Downey wasn't even enthralled by it as movie-making. He wrote:

> As one who can claim not to have missed one second of [its] 1,067 minutes . . . I am here to tell you that *Jazz* is one hundred percent twenty-four karat Burnsiana, in every respect a meticulous stylistic copy of his earlier PBS blockbusters, *The Civil War* and *Baseball.*
>
> And that's exactly what's wrong with it. Never have subject matter and style been so ill-matched in a non-fiction film: Imagine *Roger and Me*'s Michael Moore documenting daily life in a nunnery — that far off key. Jazz, the music, is exuberant, anarchic, mercurial; *Jazz* the film is solemn, plodding, relentless. . . .
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> Even in *The Civil War*, Burns' unremitting solemnity and death-march pacing troubled some viewers (well me, anyway) but at least the approach suited the seriousness of the subject. Apparently due to the enormous commercial appeal and critical success of that film, Burns has approached every subject since in the same spirit and with the same set of technical tools until both have hardened into invariable formula. Once again we have the slow pans across grainy historic photos intercut with interpretive color by contemporary experts, both bathed in the reverential musings of an omniscient narrator . . . and evocative, ever-changing background noise.

Jazz has an unwholesome preoccupation with heroin addiction. One odious sequence shows a young man sticking a needle into his arm. An elder musician said, "It makes us look like a bunch of drunks and dopers." It shows nothing of the gracious (and sometimes wealthy) lives lived by Benny Carter, John Lewis, Gerry Mulligan, Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Clark Terry, and many more, nor does it show the remarkably long list of addicts who, like Mulligan, kicked the habit. In this it is deeply, grimly, morbidly misleading.

To Be Continued