

Reading About Jazz

Gene Lees was a well trained journalist, jazz lyricist, and an editor of *Downbeat* in the early 60s. For nearly 30 years he published *Jazzletter*, a monthly collection of his own essays and, occasionally, selected writing from other contributors. Collections of these essays, nearly all about music, and most about musicians he knew intimately, were published as seven books, including *Waiting for Dizzy, Meet Me at Jim and Andy's, Cats of Any Color, Singers and the Song, Friends Along the Way, You Can't Steal a Gift*. Gene also wrote biographies of Woody Herman (*Leader of the Band*), Oscar Peterson, Johnny Mercer (*Portrait of Johnny*), and the songwriting team, Lerner and Loewe (I've read and enjoyed all but the last, which I've not seen). Lees, who died in 2010, wrote from the perspective of an insider who knew nearly of the people he wrote about, most of them very well. His writing is direct, well researched, and nearly always quite perceptive in the assessment of his subjects. All of it is worth reading.

Doug Ramsey is another professional journalist who writes about jazz as a well informed insider. His excellent blog, *Riffides*, is mostly about jazz, and includes reviews of CDs, DVDs, books, and an occasional live performance. His biography of alto saxophonist **Paul Desmond**, who had been his close friend for more than two decades, may be the best ever written about a creative artist and the creative process. *Jazz Matters* is a nice collection of Doug's essays.

Jazz bassist Bill Crow contributed *Jazz Anecdotes*, and *From Birdland to Broadway*. Pianist Marian McPartland's collection of essays is called *All In Good Time*; Max Gordon's *Live at the Village Vanguard* begins the story of the world's most respected jazz club, and his wife Lorraine Gordon, who took over after he died, continued the story in *Alive at the Village Vanguard*. Drummer Art Taylor, who played on hundreds of classic sessions during the 50s and 60s, contributed *Notes and Tones*, which gives voice to the anger and resentment still of concern to Black musicians during the 80s and 90s. Marshall Royal, long time lead alto saxophonist with the Basie band, did more of the same in *Jazz Survivor*. In Nat Shapiro and Nat Henthoff's delightful *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, (1955) hundreds of jazz musicians, most of whom were part of the music from the 1920s through the '50s, share their memories of those years and their observations on the scene, and in their own voices. It's an especially interesting read 55 years later. Dan Morganstern's *Living With Jazz* is a collection of much of his writing over a lifetime of intimate involvement in the music. Whitney Balliett wrote about jazz for nearly 50 years, much of it for the *New Yorker*, and there are many collections of his work, all of them interesting. Will Friedwald's writing, most of it about singers in general and Sinatra in particular, are worth reading. *Parisian Jazz Chronicles* by trombonist and *New York Times* journalist Michael Zwerin, and *Offbeat* by composer and french hornist David Amram (who was close to both Monk and Kerouac), are quirky and highly personal glimpses into the jazz life. *Reading Jazz*, edited by Robert Gottlieb, and *The Oxford Companion to Jazz*, edited by Bill Kirchner, are nice collections of the short works of many authors. For a "who's who in jazz," nothing beats the *Encyclopedia of Jazz* by Leonard Feather (1959), updated by yearbooks at the end of the 60s and 70s, and by a completely new last edition begun by Feather and finished after his death by Ira Gitler.

There are definitive biographies of **Thelonius Monk** (Robin D.G. Kelley), **John Coltrane** (Lewis Porter), jazz impresario record producer **Norman Granz** (Ted Hershon), **Hoagy Carmichael** (Richard Sudhalter), and the aforementioned Doug Ramsey bio of **Paul Desmond**. All are well written, well researched (all for a decade or more), musically informed, and highly perceptive by authors who are serious academics and/or journalists. Also well researched, *Delightful Lee*, Jeffery McMillan's bio of **Lee Morgan**, effectively addresses Lee's tragic life, first with heroin addiction and then murder by the woman who saved him from it, but gets lost in too many long descriptions of his recordings and bands. **Dizzy Gillespie's** autobiography is very good, as is *Clark Terry's*, and while *Jimmy Heath's* bogs down

a bit with musical details, it's well worth reading. I've also enjoyed biographies of **Clifford Brown** (Catalano), **Bill Evans** (Pettinger), **Stan Getz** (Maggin), **Gigi Gryce** (Cohen and Fitzgerald), **Gil Evans – Castles Made of Sound**, (Hicoock), **Django Reinhart** (Dregni), **Billy Strayhorn** (Hadju), **Bud Powell** (Paudras), **Tonight at Noon**, by Sue Mingus about life with her husband Charles, and **Nica's Dream** by David Rastin, about the Jazz Baroness, Pannonica (Nica) Rothschild de Koenigswarter, who was a patron to many jazz artists, especially Thelonius Monk.

Of special note is **Three Wishes**, by Nica herself, a lovely collection both of Nica's photographs of jazz musicians and of answers by 300 of them to the question, “*if you had three wishes, what would they be?*” Two collections of photographs by bassist Milt Hinton have the same intimacy; and collections by **William Claxton**, **Herman Leonard**, and **K. Abe** are also quite nice. **Lester Leaps In**, the biography of Lester Young by Douglas Henry Daniels, is well-researched, but the author, an anthropologist, gets mired down in anthropology and misses Lester and his music. It's too long, and deadly dull. Better choices are Lewis Porter's **Lester Young Reader**, which collects a lot of primary sources to make an interesting read, and **Being Prez**, a short bio by Dave Gelly.