ForeWord Reviews

A Jazz Odyssey: The Life of Oscar Peterson
Oscar Peterson
Continuum
978-0-8264-5807-0
(July 2002)

The author is one of the

most significant jazz pianists still playing. His influences cast a wide net on the world of music. Classically trained, he is noted for his eclecticism. The same can be said of his writing: in addition to vignettes, portraits, and essays, Peterson includes several of his poems. His poetry lacks the beauty of his piano solos, however, never venturing far from conventional rhyme schemes and metaphors.

Where Peterson's writing is exceptional is in his verbal portraits of his friends and acquaintances in the jazz world, most notably Norman Granz, the often-maligned jazz promoter. More than any other writer, Peterson puts a human face onto Granz, who is too frequently presented as a ruthless businessman. Peterson makes a strong case for Granz's importance, not only to jazz, but also to civil rights, since the promoter absolutely refused to book his widely popular shows in segregated theatres or concert halls.

Like a bad piano solo, the book sometimes loses its way. Its meandering structure is the book's greatest flaw. Peterson makes reference to the frustrations of recovery, but doesn't tell the nature of his illness for another fifty or so pages. A couple of anecdotes, most notably about attending a party thrown by Billie Holiday, are repeated almost verbatim at different spots in the book.

The book's subtitle is misleading, suggesting more or less chronological recounting of a life. While it may begin as such, it becomes something else entirelyÃ'a series of vignettes, descriptions of friends and non-friends, and essays. The chronological account sometimes has huge gaps that the book's editor attempts to fill with long notes. The reader can only imagine that there must have been tensions between author and editor over the book. The problem with the subtitle is worth mentioning only because it may create expectations that could distract readers from what is otherwise a very fine book.

Despite these flaws, A Jazz Odyssey belongs on every serious jazz fan's bookshelf, where it will reside beside other notable jazz autobiographies and memoirs such as Charles Mingus's Beneath the Dog.