FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton

Graham Lock
Duke University Press
978-0-8223-2404-1
(February 29, 2000)

It would be difficult to imagine three more different composers than Sun Ra, Duke Ellington and Anthony Braxton. Sun Ra with his Cosmic Arkestra and his claims of coming from Saturn inhabits the fringe, science fiction edge of American music. Ellington, the urbane and sophisticated composer of extended compositions has reached the pantheon of the greats in jazz history. Braxton, the avante guarde composer who admires the European classical composers creates compositions whose titles are frequently codes or diagrams. It is hard, on a purely musical basis to reconcile these radically different personalities and musical approaches.

Luckily, Lock doesn't try to explore the music in this fascinating book. In fact, the book isn't about jazz as music at all, but is a tightly focused exploration of music as an alternative history of being black in America, of being "the other" and lastly, of being the focus of unwanted racial stereotypes which obscure the realities of the music.

It may seem that a book about jazz that doesn't explore the music in depth is an odd concept. At the core of this book is race, not race as in a cultural attribute, but as in racial stereotypes. It is Lock's main thesis that jazz criticism has always swayed between overt and covert racism. One of the best examples from his book is an exchange between Ellington and a white fan, "Once I asked him what he considered to be a typical Negro piece among his compositions. He paused a moment before he came up with 'In a Sentimental Mood.' I protested a bit and said I thought that was a sophisticated white kind of song and people were usually surprised when they learned it was by him. 'Ah,' he said, 'that's because you don't know what it's like to be a Negro." The implications could not be more obvious. Since a Negro artist is by

definition unsophisticated, a sophisticated composition could not be considered to be “normal” from a racial perspective. The second implication, common to all three of these composers is that of being an “alien” or an outsider in the culture. Consider Braxton’s critique of white jazz critics, “…many white critics adopt ‘jazz’ as part of a personal rebellion against the stifling respectability of their own mainstream culture and, consequently, value and define the music not on its own terms but in terms of their argument with establishment values…The result being that the music’s intellectual and spiritual dimensions are ignored.”

What this book does very well is to reflect on the manners in which white culture holds itself up as the lens through which all things are to be judged. This is the essence of racism, to hold everything which is different to be inferior, or equally bad, to hold it as superior because of its supposed lack of sophistication, its crude immediacy. This book focuses on the history of racial attitudes in jazz criticism and in doing so offers hope of seeing jazz, not in its relationship to American popular music, but for its unique and intrinsic qualities.

Peter Skinner