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Biography

KD: A Jazz Biography
Dave Oliphant
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Trying to put jazz into words can be tricky, like setting James Joyce to music. But Texas author, poet, and jazz expert Dave Oliphant has embraced a novel way to do so that is adventurous, just a little odd, and entirely satisfying.

First he selected the confining and highly structured poetic form of the quatrain, with its four-line stanzas and AABB, ABAB, or ABBA rhyming schemes. Then he chose to write an epic poem about a relatively obscure trumpet side man, Kenny Dorham, who could blend into any style of jazz, from Miles Davis cool to Diz and Monk's be-bop.

Both Oliphant's choice of subject and form are superb. The structure enforced by the quatrain is no more severe than the structure of jazz itself. Every musician from Django Reinhardt to Thelonius Monk knows you can riff wildly inside a jazz motif, but ignore chord progressions and key changes, and you're playing noise, not music. So Oliphant riffs with four lines that rhyme. And like a great musician, he can make a deceptively simple line speak eloquently: "his fleet patented tonguing so under control / high to low a Bud Powell quote a coda with soul."

Because Ken Dorham left so few traces of his nonmusical life, Oliphant gives us instead a biography of his music, parsing and reflecting on virtually every song he ever recorded, backing a dazzling array of geniuses from Lester Young to John Coltrane to Dorham's favorite, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers to: "prodigious Joao Carlos Martins / pianist who recorded all of Bach's / preludes gigues fugues & gavottes / corrente notes as if fins in streams."

Dorham was a musical vagabond who lived wherever his horn would take him—Copenhagen, New York, Hermosa Beach, St. Louis, Pittsburgh—with fame just around the corner but never any nearer. As he discovered: "yet mastery can't assure survival much less / control not even success…"

He died at the relatively young age of forty-eight of kidney failure, too weak to play, out

of the music business, mostly forgotten. But thanks to YouTube, his beautiful solos live again, and thanks to Dave Oliphant's slightly quirky but richly rewarding quatrains we have the Rubaiyat of Kenny Dorham.

Jack Shakely