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Roy Eldridge: Little Jazz Giant

John Chilton
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Roy “Little Jazz” Eldridge earned his nickname because of his diminutive size, but he is a giant in the jazz world. His trumpet stylings provide an important link between Louis Armstrong and Modernists like Dizzy Gillespie. Given Eldridge’s importance in jazz history, it is amazing that this is the first full-length biography of the legendary figure, who died in 1989.

Eldridge played his trumpet at a furious pace, as though he were afraid that he wouldn’t be able to fit in everything he wanted to say musically in one solo. This biography reveals the extent to which he felt driven to play. After playing for several hours at a dance club, Eldridge would often seek out late-night clubs, where he could continue to blow until the sun rose. In fact, in establishing this drive to play, the author is at his best as a biographer, capturing the feel and flavor of the after-hours gigs and their importance in developing be-bop, a musical style that Eldridge did not favor, although many of its pivotal players, most notably Gillespie, cite him as a major influence.

Chilton is a jazz trumpeter himself and a highly celebrated jazz writer, and he was a personal friend of Eldridge. While the friendship enabled Chilton to preserve many memories and stories, at times he depends too much on Eldridge’s version of incidents without corroborating or drawing upon other sources. For instance, he devotes three sentences to an affair between Eldridge and Billie Holiday, and only presents Eldridge’s version of what happened and why it ended. The author’s inability to capture Eldridge as a full person instead of a musician is a constant problem. Only passing reference is made to Eldridge’s long-term marriage to Vi, suggesting by its exclusion that his wife wasn’t particularly important, but when she dies Chilton writes that “Roy’s spirits buckled completely. The bereavement caused him to lose all interest in life. He virtually gave up eating, and, despite Carole’s [his daughter] loving care, he gradually abandoned the will to survive.” Three weeks later he was dead. Chilton does not prepare the reader for such an ending, neglecting to develop the loving relationship the couple must have had.

Chilton does, however, do an excellent job of developing the hurt and anger that Eldridge felt due to racism. Jazz bands were much more integrated than the nation as a whole throughout most of the twentieth century. One evening in California while touring with Artie Shaw’s band, Eldridge was refused service at a Mexican restaurant and then was denied entrance to the club where his name was on the marquee. According to Eldridge, “When I finally did get in I played that first set trying to keep from crying. By the time I got through the tears were rolling down my cheeks.” It is a poignant moment, captured sensitively.
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