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Book Review: To BE or Not To BOP Memoirs - Dizzy Gillespie

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In a 1940 speech, the aristocrat-turned-communist declared: "Art must be a weapon on the front line in the service of the people." We will be hearing more of this fascinating figure—a man encompassing many contradictions, between wealth and poverty, the finest French culture and that of the simplest peasant, the pursuits of poetry and scholarship as well as of social justice—tragically dead in 1944 at the early age of 37.

Roumain's political conversion, in 1932, may well have inspired his most important work, *Masters of the Dew*, which stands alone, a gem. *Ebony Wood*, the little sheaf of poems with its title-metaphor for the slave trade, is yet untranslated in its entirety. Ironically, however, its considerable impact in excerpts is much diminished, this reviewer feels, when read as a whole, because of passages which depend too exclusively on litanies of proletarian rhetoric.

Cobb also shows what Faith Berry's *Good Morning Revolution* (1973) demonstrated about Langston Hughes, that the writings of all three were deeply influenced by radical political ideas during the 1930s and 40s. All three were sympathetic to Republican Spain during the Civil War, visiting the country as war correspondents. And all three wrote poems about this 1937 war experience. Hughes alone was never a party member, skeptical perhaps after his Russian experience that any single political doctrine could remedy the social ills he so well perceived and depicted. Hughes was also the only one of the three to gradually drop ideological references from his work.

It is interesting to recall Hughes' well-known manifesto of 1926, the one that begins: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If the white folks seem pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter." Among the generations of Black intellectuals it later influenced were, of course, the French-speaking Léon Damas, Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. But Martha Cobb's research has turned up another, less familiar, literary credo of Hughes. "I do not write chiefly because I'm interested in form—in making a sonnet or a rondeau—" said the poet in an undated newspaper interview: "I am not interested in doing tricks with rhymes. I am interested in reproducing the human soul. . . ."

What is exciting, and occasionally

thrilling, about these three writers is the extent to which, out of the ordinary life of the ordinary people of their times in Harlem, in Haiti and in Havana, they were able to accomplish just that. □

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To BE or Not To BOP Memoirs—Dizzy Gillespie With Al Fraser

Doubleday & Co., New York
552 pp., \$14.95

Reviewed by Gregory S. Kears

Dizzy Gillespie is innovative. He loves and lives music. He can play Bebop. Bebop. Like the crazy blue notes created by "Bird's" brain/lips/ax. Like a summer with a thousand Julys, Dizzy goes to your head. His legendary up-bent horn. Bebop. Bebop. Play, man.

To conclude that Dizzy Gillespie is a musician is sort of like deciding that Julius "Dr. J" Erving is a basketball star. Or like saying that the late Bruce Lee was a karate expert. These men transcended the norm. Each moved beyond the world of what was normal and delved into the uncharted, risky realm of the theoretical to create something new and dynamic.

In the case of "Dr. J," basketball became the poetic expression of the spectacular dunk shot. In the case of Bruce Lee, the body became the cosmic connection between the soul and the spirit.

With Dizzy, well . . . it became what is now called bebop. The year was 1942 and he was playing solo trumpet in Earl "Fatha" Hines' band. He was only 25.

Oddly, one does not really get to know Dizzy Gillespie in these memoirs, not intimately. There are simply too many unexplored areas. For example, what was Dizzy's principle psychological/motivational reaction to a merciless father who would routinely whip the children "just in case we thought of doing something bad.?"

The only explanation Dizzy offers his readers for his father's travesties is that his father "wanted us all to be tough." Later Dizzy claims to have loved (and undoubtedly feared) his father and his childhood.

Dizzy never had children of his own. And

the only *explanation* offered in the book is one by his wife Lorraine (one of the more colorful of this all-star entourage), who simply states: "I don't regret [not] having any kids. See, that's why people don't understand me. I feel like if God wanted me to have children, I woulda had plenty of them." Interesting ontological rambling, even humorously ironic, yet hardly the intimacy one should expect.

Even with the help of Al Fraser, a fairly well-regarded musicologist and teacher at Cheyney State College in Pennsylvania, one is none the wiser. And Fraser's off-the-cuff conversation and pretentiously penetrating questions, although well-intended, hardly enlighten the reader.

In *Memoirs*, one gets the notes but not the subtlest nuances. One hears the music, but it frequently comes off dull and contrived, as if Dizzy responded to scads of form questions and built his life around the answers.

The redeeming quality of this work, however, is that it is strangely saved by the many *purple passages* of Dizzy's remembrances and broodings about the fantastic people he had known, admired and worked with.

Credit must be given to Fraser, despite his pesky omnipresence, for overcoming an obviously Herculean task of editing the hundreds of hours of taped interviews with the greatest names in jazz, from Dicky Wells to Charlie Parker to Sarah Vaughan to Roy Eldridge and a host of lesser luminaries. The result is an unpolished, yet often exciting oral history of not only John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie, but an important chronicle of jazz music's most dramatic evolutionary period. The book is rich with illustrations.

The great Cuban trumpeter Mario Bauza, whom Dizzy met at the Savoy in New York in 1937, says that there were two movements (as far as trumpet goes) in American music in the last 50 years. One was Louis Armstrong and the other was Dizzy Gillespie. Bandleader Woody Herman is quoted as saying, "Diz to me was the beginning of an era. And Pops (Louis Armstrong) was the beginning of an era. And during that span from Pops, everyone else in-between is not terribly important."

Those accolades must be placed into perspective, at least within the context in which Dizzy developed.

Certainly, by the middle to late 1930s jazz, as a legitimate music form, had solidified. White bands began picking up

on the strange, albeit, exotic syncopations. And like the blues, it had a structure—a formalized and technical “correctness” to it. Jazz was no longer precisely thought of as a cacophony of inspired improvisations by some crazy Blacks “blowing their horns.” There were notes to achieve, *riffs* to be made and *bridges* to be crossed. So by the time Jimmy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Woody Herman and other white bandleaders/arrangers came along, Thelonious Monk, Roy Eldridge, Bill Doggett, King Oliver and the other 52nd Street crowd had established the corner market on this new musical expression.

The only thing that remained to be done was to “discover” the next natural progression or step from this hybrid blues form. Indeed, Roy Eldridge was the seed. His unique style and speed put him at the head of the class of honor graduates. He was Dizzy Gillespie’s lifetime idol and informal mentor; informal because while Dizzy copied initially from Roy, the relationship was a mutual admiration duet.

Dizzy had picked up the trumpet and learned to play by ear, but eventually forced himself to learn to read music. Interestingly, playing the piano taught him more about the trumpet. It was constant discovery, experimentation with chords, playing a gig here and there, more discovery and finally mastering (at the age of 14 or 15) the technical aspects of the trumpet. He played locally in the Carolinas and Mississippi and Georgia, gaining more knowledge about the limits of his instrument. By the time he was 17 he had gained a “grapevine” reputation as a proficient trumpet player.

The book, through interviews with various musicians and friends, carefully chronicles Dizzy’s move to Philadelphia and New York, with enough color commentary about the racism and poverty to make his story interesting. But during this coming of age among the giants in modern jazz, Dizzy discovered that he played fast, faster than his mentor Roy Eldridge. Not only that, he also found new notes and a new way to bridge these notes while maintaining his speed. Dizzy, therefore, realized a different beat—a new untried accent.

Dizzy Gillespie discovered an exciting emphasis, an emphasis that others would pick up and claim. This new sound was to be later called “bebop” by anxious white fans who wanted to hear him; the word was picked up by the press and it stuck.

Memoirs is sprinkled (almost as if by cue) with enough gossip and inside information to encourage the reader to endure the all too puffy dialogue.

The comments by Billy Mitchell, Cab Calloway, Lalo Schifrin, Ella Fitzgerald, Max Roach, Mary Lou Williams and many others, make this book vaguely attractive. The discography of Dizzy’s career is significant. His awards and accomplishments are very impressive and valuable inclusions in the book. However, they read like undisguised egocentric droppings.

I would like to see a book by or about Dizzy Gillespie that tells more about his psychological reactions to racism, particularly during the 1930s, and its effect upon the creativity of Black artists. Dizzy knew Charlie “Bird” Parker well. I would like to know what effect Parker’s genius and melancholy and drugs had on Dizzy as a friend and colleague. What were the strains between them?

I would like to know (and Dizzy is in a fabulous position to tell it) what contributions Miles Davis, Horace Silver and others make to his music. How are the younger jazz musicians different from those that grew up during the 1930s and 1940s? What was his reaction to white musicians gaining the huge commercial successes with swing and bebop?

There are too many questions that beg for answers. All we are offered in this work are Dizzy’s memoirs . . . and that, at least to this reviewer, only whets the appetite. □

The reviewer is an editor with the Howard University Press.