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A JAZZ RETROSPECT, by Max Harrison
David and Charles/Crescendo, 1976 (£5.95)

JAZZ NOW: THE JAZZ CENTRE SOCIETY GUIDE, edited by Roger
Cotterrell
Quartet Books, 1976 (£1.75)

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Writing about any sort of music is difficult enough; writing about jazz is more so. There are very few serious analyses of any type of jazz, or any style, and jazz criticism, where it is not reportage, remains social in origin, anecdotal in execution, or both. There are of course exceptions to this: André Hodeir's *Jazz, its evolution and essence*¹ remains a superb book on music, while statements by the musicians, e.g. Charles Mingus's *Beneath the underdog*,² retain their fascination. But generally the bibliography of jazz reflects the nature of the art: an act of performance that is immediate, vital and contemporary and, because of these qualities, essentially ephemeral.

Max Harrison is one of the best writers on jazz working in this country, and he shows in his articles that he has thought deeply about many of the issues in and surrounding his subject. He generates enough confidence in his quality of thought for the reader to accept that he mentions Nietzsche, Rilke and Rolland in the first two paragraphs of his introduction because they are helping his case rather than to prove he has heard of them. He is also not afraid of controversy or of putting jazz firmly in its place from time to time, and there is scarcely a subject in his book, which covers topics from Bunk Johnson and Fats Waller to David Mack and serial jazz (sic), that is not illuminated in some way by Harrison's thoughtful commentary.

He discusses the music under six headings: improvisation, collective creation, extension of the language, extension of the form, fusion with other music and the consideration of some individuals who do not fit into any mainstream. His method is to take the approaches of individual musicians and, having set up any idea, to place an individual within that context. There are many acute pieces, especially the longish article on Gil Evans.

The book is, however, open to criticism on two main counts. First, the blurb alleges that Harrison 'has written a jazz book with a difference: a fascinating and informed review of the art form in all its intricacies'. He hasn't. Even allowing for the enthusiasm that overtakes discretion, the author has merely selected from his output various articles that have appeared in *Jazz Monthly* or *Jazz Journal* and, some pristine, some revised, grouped them under the headings mentioned above. This is essentially a retrospect of Harrison rather than a retrospect of jazz. Those who are interested would probably have read the articles when they first appeared; emphatically not a book for the potential convert, it is not a successful proselytising agent either. Further, the book does actually read as a collection of articles; it suffers from a lack of stamina — a necessary condition for a book though not essential in an article.

The other main criticism stems from the nature of jazz itself. Musical analysis and musicology take place away from their subject ('straight' music); usually the last thing the protagonists in these fields consider is the noise of the thing they are discussing — rightly, for the subject of the analysis or the historical investigation is not music as sound but music as symbol, i.e. notation. Pace Hodeir, the preservation of improvisation in notation (for analysis) is lethal to the improvisation. Jazz is an immediacy that defies the scholarly apparatus or any criticism other than that of its performance and on its own terms. Collecting articles on jazz for publication in book form is about as fruitful as compiling a volume of

racing reports from 20 years back. The essential frame of reference for the potential audience is their presence at the event or their knowledge of it. Without this frame of reference most of the point will be missed. If the records (Harrison is, inevitably, most concerned with records) are in your collection, this book is likely to illuminate them or your appreciation of them. Otherwise it's not going to mean a great deal, although it does serve to show once again that jazz, hampered in criticism by its lack of notation, analytical technique and epistemology, proves resistant to discussion of itself away from itself.

One of the best things that happened to jazz in Britain was the formation of the Jazz Centre Society, a pressure group/promotion agency that believes in jazz musicians as musicians rather than as jazzers.³ *Jazz Now* is the JCS guide and is reasonably essential (a bluffer's guide?) to those in Britain (not just London) wishing to know where they can hear the stuff, who's playing it and where they can read about it. The best section of the book is the reference directory: entries here on nearly 250 musicians ranging from Beryl Bryden to Dudu Pukwana with brief resumés of their careers, details of their agents etc. There are a few inaccuracies such as incorrect telephone numbers and the like and doubtless there could be argument over the inclusion of some names, the exclusion of others and the relative lengths of entries. However, as one of the musicians said of the JCS itself, it may not be very good, but it's the only thing there is. This directory is followed by information on recorded and filmed jazz, books on jazz and, most important, many jazz venues: all very valuable.

There are also individual articles preceding this reference section, and these contributions are distinctly variable as regards both quality and relevance. Peter Clayton is cosy, Charles Fox historical and Michael Garrick a bit too 'up-market'; there are some interviews with older British musicians telling it like it was and short pieces on folk influences in modern jazz and reflections on the avantgarde. There is also one article which is quite irrelevant to the rest of the book; presumably it was felt that the author ought to be included.

Jazz Now does, however, have one example of very successful writing. The history and the anecdote are not to be despised in musical contexts, and Brian Blain's tribute to Phil Seamen is an excellent example of how the personal view and the anecdote may be rendered into a very moving piece of writing that will send the reader to the music of its subject. And that is what the JCS — and jazz — is all about.

NOTES:

¹London: Gollancz, 1956.

²Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975.

³For information about the work of the society, write to Charles Alexander, Full-time Administrator, Jazz Centre Society, 12 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1.