

RECENT BOOKS

ONCE AGAIN, LE JAZZ HOT

IN *The Real Jazz* by Hugues Panassié (Smith and Durrell), you can learn, if you are interested, that Hot Lips Page used to play the trumpet in Bennie Moten's Band, or that Jack Teagarden was the trombonist in the Mound City Blue Blowers' recording of *Tailspin Blues*. I was most interested, but that's because fifteen years ago I played nothing but Bennie Moten and the Blue Blowers on my phonograph. Otherwise, all but the first four chapters of this book would have been pretty annoying. Only the reader who shares at least some of the author's boundless enthusiasm for jazz and blind admiration for its more talented exponents will have the patience to go through the volume.

The book is really two. The first four chapters are a fairly accurate and complete account of the nature and development of jazz. The next twelve are simply Mr. Panassié's personal reactions to all the important (and many unimportant) interpreters of it, with a chapter devoted to each instrument, plus one to singers, one to arrangers and one to recordings. (Throughout the book there are innumerable references to records, most of which are now unobtainable.) In these chapters of summaries occur most of the examples of imprecise overwriting for which other jazz books have been justifiably censured. By being scattered casually through the text, expressions like "greatest," "prodigious," "dazzling," "beautiful," "above all possible praise," "tremendous," "unforgettable," "monumental," "limitless," "vast, grandiose,"

"magnificent flights," "massive," "sublime," "breath of genius," to pick out a few, greatly weaken the force of its argument.

For the book has a polemical element: it is a defense of jazz against those who are left indifferent enough by it to fail to recognize the difference between the true and the false.

The public's failure to distinguish the one from the other, he believes, is destroying the art form. He deplors the commercialization of jazz during the past twenty years, and attributes it to various factors: the end of the era of prosperity, the evil influence upon the Negroes of the white man's radio, the Negroes' own inferiority complex regarding White culture, and most of all the jazzmen's acquisition of an "artistic conscience." This was forced upon them, of course, by just such people as Mr. Panassié. The cascade of hyperbolic praise in the form of ecstatic magazine articles and books which appeared about the time commercial "swing" took the public's fancy, was certainly not designed to keep jazz pure and humble. On the contrary, every performer whose talent ranged from mediocre up was encouraged to think of himself as possessed of a truly personal style.

At the end of the book there is an eighty-nine page appendix which lists recordings by exactly one hundred and fifty musicians. I quote the text apropos of this list: "For each of the great jazz musicians I have chosen a certain number of records . . . which are typical of his style, in order that the reader . . . may

know and study the musical personality of each musician." It is manifestly impossible that there should be that many instrumentalists (only seven of the total are vocalists) worthy of such minute consideration.

In the expository section of the book we get a story whose synopsis is roughly as follows. The Negro church service, whose musical keystone was the Protestant hymns they had been given to sing, first of all underwent certain modal changes dictated doubtless by unconscious observance of tradition.* A musical style emerged, incorporating these scalar changes with the original harmonic base of the songs, the accents on the off-beats (handclapping, tambourines and drums are still used in church). For secular use, new and profane words supplanted the sacred text; the musical material remained the same. This is already the blues, purely vocal, with rhythmical accompaniment. Next a solo instrumentalist—probably a cornetist, trombonist or clarinetist—interpolated responses based on the singer's vocal inflections. This approximation of Negro vocalization was the most important factor in determining the instrumental style which was to characterize jazz playing. In New Orleans the procedure was applied in bands which used collective improvisation in the playing of adaptations of ragtime, polkas, quadrilles and marches. The melodic instruments played on the strong beat, with the weak beats still taken care of by the percussion.

The new art moved northward, was adopted by some Whites who understood it and by many more who perverted it. Here the piano and saxophone made their appearance. At this point Mr. Panassié

offers his apologies for having stressed in his earlier writings the importance of the so-called "Chicago style" which he now ostensibly considers only a transitory phase. The rest of the story is the sad one about the degree to which each individual and performing organization has accepted or withstood commercialization. The author sees little hope for the future. Although he upholds the present trend toward larger orchestras, thus indicting the snobbish preference of today's swing fans for small groups which, he claims, lack good men, he believes the ability to read music weakens the musician's ear, and that in turn damages the improvisatory faculty. He fears jazz is doomed to undergo a paralyzing further transformation which will rob it of all its spontaneity and beauty.

There are shrewd remarks and valid observations as well as exaggerations and misstatements. On the credit side we have things like: "When a Negro sings the blues, it is not to give way to his sadness, it is rather to free himself of it." "Most improvised interpretations are more beautiful at the end than at the beginning." (Because of the interchange of inspiration between each player and the others.) "Music with an unchanging tempo is more natural and is a direct reflection of life." (This is true of art music as well as folk music.)

On the debit side we have Mr. Panassié's assumption that music, any kind of music, is a universal language. "No previous education is required in order for the notes to signify what they were intended to signify." Ridiculous, of course. He claims that the record gives us "at the same time both the interpretation and the musical score itself." He

*Here Mr. Panassié assumes that the alterations are fixed and consist only of the ambiguous third and seventh tones of the scale. In the deep South I have been present at entire services where the scale comprised only the tonic, the mediant, the dominant, and a tone halfway between the last two mentioned: a partially sharpened sub-dominant.

says that the Negro's instinctive marking of off-beats in keeping time to jazz "would be enough in itself to explain the white man's lack of understanding of jazz." Perhaps he means the European's lack of understanding; plenty of Americans, regardless of their racial antecedents, mark the weak beats. Apropos of the "eternal weakness" of written music as opposed to the oral tradition and improvisation, he writes: "At best, musical writing can only be a memorandum to suggest the ideas of the composer." Composers like to think of notation as something a little more solid and complete.

There are too many signs of the priestly attitude: "One cannot define it (swing) for him (the listener) just as one cannot

describe the idea of the diversity of colors to a blind man." This pontifical air is likely to try the patience of the analytical reader, whether he is a swing fan or not. Duke Ellington came nearer to a definition when he said: "You can't write swing because swing is the emotional element in the audience."

Paul Bowles

In the November-December, 1942 issue of MODERN MUSIC, the author of the article on Stravinsky in The Book of Modern Composers (Alfred A. Knopf) was erroneously referred to as Paul Swan. The correct name is Alfred J. Swan.—Ed.