

RECORDING REVIEWS

Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW 40820, 2010.

In 1973, *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz* appeared, compiled and annotated by Martin Williams. Its contents included Jelly Roll Morton's 1926 recording of "Dead Man Blues," but without the vaudeville routine that had originally begun that record, featuring the spoken words of Morton and his banjoist Johnny St. Cyr. It's not hard to understand why. Williams was working at a time when jazz was in a relatively low position on the ladder of cultural prestige, and stripping the recording of its associations with comedy and perhaps even minstrelsy was a canny move.

In 2000, Ken Burns released his anthology of jazz recordings, which included the same track but which restored the original dialogue that Williams had deleted. Again, it's not hard to see why. By then, jazz had been declared by Congress a "national treasure," and its stature as an art form was no longer seriously in question by most of the people who make such determinations. Burns's concern for the *Urtext* seems to have overridden any worries about the possible indignity of the comic introduction.

In 2010, *Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology* appeared, and "Dead Man Blues" was not included in it. So we will never know how the organizers of this new set might have dealt with that problem. But the principle is clear: anthologies are shaped by the cultural priorities of their historical moments.

For example, the introduction of this set compares jazz to popular and "serious" music, and the scare-quotes remind us of Richard Taruskin's triumphant observation that he had made it impossible to use the word "authentic" with regard to early music without qualifying it with that punctuation. The same sort of shift has happened as jazz rose in cultural prestige. When writers say "serious" rather than serious, it's because deep down they know that they shouldn't say it at all.

But the members of the Executive Committee that supervised this collection do not present themselves to us as deep thinkers. They refer to the historical fact that jazz was "once assailed as noisy, discordant, and an assault on moral values," but "is now taught in high schools and colleges," without doing anything at all to explain how or why this stunning reversal came about. The implication is that people just used to be stupid.

That may be flattering to us, but it's historically obtuse. And it is the effacement of history—how and why people lived their lives, the circumstances in which they worked, struggled, dreamed, failed, and triumphed, the ways in which different musics have meant and mattered at different times and places—that makes this collection disappointing.

Every reviewer argues about what should or shouldn't have been included in an anthology. Do we really need three recordings by The Jazz Messengers? Why begin with a ragtime recording from 1975, for heaven's sake, instead of the 1916 Joplin piano roll that was such an interesting feature of the earlier Smithsonian collection? And there's no "Free Jazz," one of the iconic recordings of the whole tradition?

James Reese Europe should be present. I also would have included a smooth jazz track, probably by Kenny G, since his name has been synonymous with jazz for millions of people. Doing so would get us closer to the history of jazz that people have actually lived through, rather than one that some of us might wish they had experienced.

There is no question that this new collection attempts to expand the jazz canon in useful ways, particularly in its inclusion of Latin jazz, jazz fusion, and artists from outside the United States. I loved the track by Nguyễn Lê, with its jagged, distorted guitar lines, the best of the very few surprises the anthology offered me.

But to what end? The implication is that this broader range of sounds is still somehow constitutive of one thing—jazz—which has some kind of unspecified essence holding it together. That has the effect of making everything the same, blurring meanings and significance. And this despite the one thing that we know best about jazz history is that people—musicians, fans, critics, everyone—have always argued—vehemently, incessantly—about what it was, why it mattered, who and what counted and why. The new Smithsonian collection, on the contrary, continues to suggest that all of these people and musical practices belong together, naturally and harmoniously.

To be sure, those of us who teach jazz history risk doing the same thing. We have to divide up knowledge somehow, and a course on jazz is a means of doing so that traces some kind of thread linking disparate practices and sounds, telling important stories about how people have lived their lives and understood them with and through music. Yet in the classroom, we can and should challenge our students to think through the conflicts and contradictions as well as the continuities. This collection has the same opportunity, even obligation. But that doesn't happen here.

Certainly, some of the track annotations are more illuminating than others, but overall they present a bland tale of unspecific greatness. Bessie Smith “has never been equaled.” Louis Armstrong produced “transcendent art.” We worry that later musicians may not turn out to be as “enduring and influential” as earlier ones—something that actually doesn't just happen magically, but which results from cultural work, such as the makers of this collection are attempting to accomplish. And I'm tired of reading the condescending cliché that Billie Holiday's voice was “physically limited”—what on earth does that mean when applied to someone who was so extraordinarily gifted as a singer?

The most interesting question raised by this new anthology, though, is this one: why does it exist? The producer writes of the “overwhelming demand” for a new Smithsonian jazz collection. Really? By whom? Aficionados and educators will surely need to own more than six CDs of jazz. And we all ought to recognize that in the age of YouTube, Spotify, Dropbox, and digital library reserves, students don't want to, nor should they have to, pay a hundred dollars for a set of recordings that will be used exactly once—to rip the tracks into their iTunes libraries—after which they might as well throw the whole box away.

Martin Williams had a mission, and his anthology had good reasons to exist: he was already doing crucial, consequential cultural work in 1973, proposing a canon for jazz and a coherent rationale that supported it. He wanted to gain respect for the music he loved and for the musicians who made it. That's why he

called it “classic”—an adjective that strategically removes things from their original contexts so as to argue that they have larger significance—and that’s why he over-emphasized Ellington, Morton, and Armstrong: they were his trump cards. He included recordings that were not easily available at the time, and his anthology homed in on outstanding tracks that would only have been acquirable by purchasing whole albums, if at all.

In comparison, why does this new anthology exist? Who benefits from it, and how? Does it simply reflect the interests of those who now depend on the prestige that jazz did not have in 1973? Surely, people who care about jazz will continue to find curation and guidance useful, but it may well be that they will not prefer that physical objects made of paper and plastic will necessarily be part of that experience.

More importantly, people may not need to have jazz singled out as a kind of music that ought to be respected above all, or almost all, others. Williams made his collection at a time when that was a brave and consequential undertaking. But every exaltation diminishes. When we blithely celebrate jazz, as is done in this new anthology, we inevitably compete with other musics, running some down in order to raise another up.

Despite the broadened scope of this new anthology, the organizers and authors don’t seem to be completely aware not only of their freedom and responsibility to tell a broader story about jazz, but of the lower stakes that now depend on doing so. This Smithsonian collection cannot possibly mean as much as Williams’s version did, no matter what it includes or what its multitudes of consultants say. And the contributions of these writers to our sense of what jazz has been and why it has mattered should not blind us to that fundamental weakness of this collection—a weakness that the passage of time and the blitheness of the writers have produced.

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Composing America: Adams, Bolcom, Copland & Moravec. The Lark Quartet. Bridge Records Inc. 9423, 2014.

Composing America, the Lark Quartet’s newest CD release, should be the title of a whole series of recordings exploring the nation’s chamber music, and one hopes that the group considers creating just that. This is great music, played beautifully, and more needs to be heard.

The four composers included on this CD, John Adams (b. 1947), William Bolcom (b. 1938), Aaron Copland (1900–90), and Paul Moravec (b. 1957), have written pieces reflecting a range of personal temperaments, instrumental combinations, and musical styles and influences. Each man has received both Guggenheim awards and Pulitzer Prizes for other works, which might portend conformity to an established, East Coast aesthetic ideal, but instead of a single American voice we hear the