

Indian maiden,” who in turn convinces her father, the chief, to let her marry him.<sup>6</sup> The musical arrangement delivers a sonic arsenal of ethnic and Old West clichés: tom-tom, horse galloping, whoops, grunts, and the omnipresent “oy.”

In a podcast interview conducted soon after the release of *Jewface*, Jody Rosen stressed the contemporary counterparts of such “fish-out-of-water” nebbishes as Levi in the screen personas of Woody Allen, Larry David, and Ben Stiller.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* showed Larry David on his deathbed (prematurely, as it turned out) reminding his agent of a \$5,000 debt—a remarkable echo, aptly adjusted for inflation, of Irving Berlin’s Old Man Rosenthal singing “Cohen Owes Me Ninety Seven Dollars.” Berlin does not give the delinquent Cohen a first name, but you could probably guess it.

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*Journal of the Society for American Music* (2008) Volume 2, Number 1, pp. 125–127.  
© 2008 The Society for American Music doi: 10.1017/S1752196308081108

Ken Nordine, *You’re Getting Better: The Word Jazz Dot Masters*. Hip-O-Select, Geffen B0005171-02 (2 CDs), 2005.

Reissue collections address their buyers with a dignified, curatorial rhetoric. *The Charlie Parker Dial Masters*, *The Judy Garland Decca Masters*, *The Machito Columbia Masters*—the titles assume a certain form: the imperious definite article, the name of the artist, the recording company, and, at the end, that masterful word, *masters*. Though this only means that the recordings are reissued from the company’s master tapes, a CD with such a title is gravid with implication. What you are holding in your hands is the authorized, authoritative collection of the great artist’s works, the works that have held up for all these years, the works that now, after a long and distinguished career, are assembled in a virtual gallery and laid out before you in an era-defining retrospective exhibition.

Then what are we to make of Hip-O-Select’s Ken Nordine reissue, *You’re Getting Better: The Word Jazz Dot Masters*? Nordine is a hipster’s hipster, a cult figure whose records are treasured by connoisseurs of pop culture esoterica. But he did not define his era, and it did not define him. He is a performing artist of indeterminate medium, all but unknown to the general public and not well-known among musicians either. Most of his career has been in television and radio, where he lent his dark, agile bass voice to numberless commercials. One of the pleasures of discovering his word jazz recordings is the moment of recognition: “Hey, it’s the Taster’s Choice guy!” Jazz,

<sup>6</sup> For more on the Jewish-Indian encounter on the American musical stage, see Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Jody Rosen, podcast interview by Sara Ivry, *Minstrel Show*, 13 November 2006, <http://www.nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html?id=455>.

with its habitual distrust of commercialism, cannot easily find a place for someone whose work is commercial in the most literal sense. (His 1966 album *Colors* was originally a series of radio spots for the Fuller Paint Company.)

There's no trouble placing Nordine in the record store: file under "spoken word." But Nordine's word jazz albums are not quite like anything else in that short bin. They are the sole occupants of a hybrid genre, which the liner notes to the original *Word Jazz* describe in the equation "remarkable words + remarkable jazz + remarkable hi-fi sounds = a somewhat new medium." Nordine's "remarkable words" include prose-poems, monologues, humorous skits, thought experiments, and unclassifiable conceptual pieces, interwoven with the "hi-fi sounds" of Jim Cunningham's audiotape collages. Fred Katz's jazz compositions (performed by the personnel of the Chico Hamilton Quintet) are pastiches of various pop-music styles with 1950s California *jazz moderne*, full of fugal entries, classical instrumentation (Katz was a cellist who had studied with Casals), and mild faux Stravinsky dissonance.

Nordine's Dot albums appeared during the jazz-and-poetry fad, and if jazz critics noticed him at all they assumed that he was riding the coattails of the Beat poets. But Nordine doesn't sound much like the Beats. He wittily steered away from their self-consciousness about sensibility and spirituality: at the beginning of "Miss Cone" we feel on familiar ground ("Know what a square is? I used to be a square"), but as the narrator becomes a cube, so as to be worthy of his girl's three-dimensional love, only to lose her to a point, we find we have wandered down some unfamiliar path. At the same time Nordine's albums don't really resemble what might be called "beatsploitation" records, like Rod McKuen's *Beatsville*, which are like the snapshots tourists would take on their trips to Greenwich Village in the late 1950s: exotic evocations of the *vie de bohème*. Nordine didn't try to depict society, nor did he do hipster dialect numbers like those of Al "Jazzbo" Collins, except to mock them gently in "My Baby." And in any event, what Nordine does is not exactly jazz-and-poetry. The accompaniment is not always jazz, nor is it exactly accompaniment. At times it isn't exactly music: "Secretary," for example, is a boss's mumbled apology for an unspecified wrong, with the secretary's angry typing as its only counterpoint. The absence of any clear boundary between music and sound, or sound and voice, might spark the thought that word jazz has more to do with Cagean composition in sound than any bongos-and-angst record.

But Nordine raises this possibility with the lightest touch, for he can be very funny, and this is maybe why his albums have aged so well. Better than almost anyone, Nordine's conceptualist sensibility pointed towards the Second City style of humor that has remade American comedy since World War II. Nordine is funny the way that *SCTV* or *Mr. Show* is funny, abstracting the setup/release mechanism of the joke into performances that work through the implications of an odd premise. Nordine's word jazz is all performance, and one of its real pleasures is hearing his buttery voice catching the vanities, neuroses, desires, and delusions of his various personae in unexpected angles.

As oddly as Nordine sits within American music, *You're Getting Better* gives the four albums he recorded for Dot Records between 1957 and 1960 the full curatorial treatment. Its two compact discs come in an appealing foldout sleeve that reproduces

visual motifs from the original albums—*Son of Word Jazz*'s exact shade of yellow, the photo of Nordine as a battered pacifist boxer, the grinning paper-collage face from the cover of *Word Jazz*. The twenty-page insert booklet includes appreciations by Laurie Anderson and Tom Waits, reminiscences by Nordine and Cunningham, all the original cover art and liner notes, and a new poem by Nordine. Other than an out-of-print best-of collection and two tracks on Rhino's excellent *Beat Generation* anthology, none of this music has been reissued on CD, and it is a pleasure to hear it at last rendered in crisp, deep-etched, and unblemished sound. The only shortcoming of this album is its stingy run of five thousand copies, which are intermittently hard to find. Perhaps Hip-O-Select was hedging its bets; perhaps, too, they are protecting Nordine's ineffable hipster status, or what Sarah Thornton would call its subcultural capital, which is dependent in part on scarcity. So if you see a copy, snap it up while you can. *You're Getting Better* is a beautiful object whose material generosity makes an implicit claim for Ken Nordine's real importance to American popular culture.

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