

18 Images of jazz

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Although novelists, film-makers and photographers are likely to rely upon familiar myths when they create images of jazz, they can also bring new life to a music that can be opaque, even to the initiated. As David Yaffe has argued, a novelist such as Ralph Ellison can surpass both musicologists and critics when, for example, he links Louis Armstrong's music with his metaphor of invisibility: 'Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around' (Ellison 1952, 8). In Ellison's metaphors, Yaffe hears a definition of swing more convincing than one based on empirical data or formal analysis.¹ At their best, fiction, cinema and photography produce illuminating, often startling representations of jazz through different sets of metaphors appropriate to the history and aesthetics of each medium. In hopes of identifying these metaphors and how they function, I devote special attention to 'tutor texts' that facilitate a long view of jazz within specific art forms. Although these texts may not be the most canonical, they may be the most representative. I begin with a book that sums up how images of jazz were presented during the twentieth century.

Jazz in fiction

The eponymous hero of *The Bear Comes Home*, by Rafi Zabor (1997), is a Kodiak grizzly of smaller proportions than most.² (Grizzly bears generally achieve an adult weight of approximately 410 kilos but, perhaps so that Zabor's bear can pass for human in a bulky trenchcoat and a big hat, the author has given him only half that weight.) Otherwise, the Bear, as he is called throughout the novel, is indistinguishable from other members of his species. He also speaks perfect English and plays the alto saxophone in the tradition of Charlie Parker, Jackie McLean and Ornette Coleman. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes grizzlies as 'unpredictable, often sullen and ill-tempered'. Accordingly, the Bear has difficulties with record producers, children and policemen; at one point he is literally hunted down by the police and confined in a cell. Nevertheless, the Bear is extremely

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learned, witty and emotionally capable, ultimately achieving a satisfying romantic relationship with a human female. The 'sullen and ill-tempered' aspects of his character are ultimately attributable to his artist's temperament and the usual exploitation of jazz artists and trained animals.

The Bear Comes Home is intended for an audience of intellectual jazz connoisseurs. Mozart, Stendhal and Kafka are cited almost as often as Parker, Charles Mingus and Thelonious Monk. The narrator regularly refers to jazz lore, casually mentioning Carla Bley's stint as a cigarette girl at Birdland, Mingus's increasing tendency to resemble his bass as he aged and the ironies in King Pleasure's lyrics to 'Parker's Mood'. The novel also abounds with playful references to bears in literature, including a climactic nod to Goldilocks as well as a direct quotation of Shakespeare's most famous stage direction, 'exit, pursued by a bear' (*The Winter's Tale*, Act III, scene 3). Zabor frequently ignores the line between fiction and documentary by enlivening his narrative with walk-ons from real-life artists such as Coleman, Lester Bowie, Arthur Blythe, Charlie Haden and Billy Hart. He also finds room for other figures well known to New York jazz *cognoscenti*, including the notoriously long-winded jazz disc jockey who discourses at length about what Monk and his sidemen had for lunch between takes of 'Bye-ya'. When the Bear first begins playing in public, he is denounced by Wynton Marsalis for presenting 'a degrading image of the jazz musician'.

The choice of a bear as protagonist is especially appropriate for this hulking, often overwritten novel. But as the hero of a jazz novel, a saxophone-playing bear wryly invites allegorical readings. On the one hand, there is virtually no discussion of race for much of the first half of *The Bear Comes Home*. The Bear could represent African-American men, whose complex inner lives have little in common with the menacing beasts for which they are regularly mistaken. On the other hand, any jazz musician – black or white – is a stranger in a strange land, inhabiting a subculture that seems completely bizarre to many but utterly natural to its denizens. And as Will Straw has observed in a discussion of writing about jazz and popular music (1997, 8), the figure of the 'brute' often appears among the masculine types favoured by followers of the music. Straw points out that 'pure and uncultivated instinctuality' can be an admired aspect of a musician's stance. There is also a certain brutish power even in the connoisseur's constructions of the jazz artist, especially when the artist is African-American. As we shall see, aspects of the black jazz artist as brute were still present as late as 1988 in *Bird*, Clint Eastwood's film about Parker. Indeed, the hypermasculine image of the black jazz artist is a regular element in what David Meltzer has called the 'permissible racism' of jazz *aficionados*, who celebrate the beauty and spontaneity of the music while also harbouring – at least in some cases – fantasies of idealised primitivism (Meltzer 1993, 4). Although

Zabor's Bear resembles many of the most admired jazz artists by possessing substantial knowledge of the jazz tradition and by deploying it regularly in his performances, he is also capable of distancing himself from that tradition and playing with spontaneity, strength and, in keeping with the metaphor, instinct. If, in fact, an allegorical reading is the best way to approach *The Bear Comes Home*, then a highly intellectual, musically inspired bear may be an ingenious way of representing the best jazz artists' careful acquisition of a revered tradition as well as the brute instinct necessary for remaking that tradition.

Stripped of its allegory, *The Bear Comes Home* may even provide a familiar characterisation of jazz artists and the jazz life. Sudhalter has insisted that the book 'easily transcends its genre' (1999b, 1), but the book treads several paths well known to readers of jazz fiction. In particular, *The Bear Comes Home* plays with two of the most important tropes in jazz fiction identified by Michael Titlestad (1999): the notion that the improvising jazz artist becomes inseparable from his (the protagonist is almost always male) instrument, and the idea that the improvising musician can achieve some kind of transcendence.

As Titlestad demonstrates, writers of jazz fiction frequently adopt the conceit of an artist's body fusing, sometimes mystically, with a musical instrument. An especially honoured text that exploits this convention is Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), in which a fictionalised Buddy Bolden lives out many of the myths that make up his legend. Jelly Roll Morton, for example, said that Bolden 'went crazy because he really blew his brains out through the trumpet' (Lomax 1950, 60). In one of Bolden's internal monologues in Ondaatje's novel, the trumpeter combines sexual experience with musical performance, ultimately describing how his own blood 'comes up flooding past my heart in a mad parade, it is coming through my teeth, it is into the cornet' (*ibid.*, 131). Anchored in the body of the musician, the instrument that expresses so much sexuality becomes itself sexualised.

But even when sexuality is not explicitly evoked, the jazz artist in fiction often fuses with an instrument. In James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues', the narrator realises the sacrifices his jazz-pianist brother must make in attempting to make music out of 'the roar rising from the void'. Watching the face of his brother, the narrator understands 'how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own. He has to make it do what he wants it to do' (Baldwin 1965, 127). We can find another type of yoking of musician to instrument in John Clellon Holmes's novel, *The Horn* (1958). The protagonist is a tenor saxophonist named Edgar Poole, based closely on Lester Young. Like Young, Poole holds his tenor away from his body and parallel

to the floor, like ‘some metallic albatross caught insecurely in his two hands, struggling to resume flight’ (Holmes 1958, 8). As with so many images of jazz artists, this one suggests that musicians struggle with both their bodies and their instruments in order to create music.

Trapped in the body of an animal, Zabor’s Bear plays the saxophone with that additional degree of bodiliness that allegedly separates the jazz artist from ‘ordinary’ musicians who merely use an instrument to read off music written by someone else. According to this myth, non-jazz musicians do not achieve that oneness that characterises jazz performance at its most inspired. As Titlestad argues, jazz writers have taken this myth into religious, even mystical territory. At a climactic gig at a Brooklyn club called ‘The Bridge’ (in honour of Sonny Rollins), the Bear takes a solo that allows him a rare moment of self-transcendence in which he is ‘plucked out of existence like a cheap suit’ (Zabor 1997, 454). A (typically) long passage describes the Bear’s visions as he solos with an exhilaration previously unavailable to him. Here is an excerpt:

He saw the treasured geometry of his lights and vitals, the wellscanned signature of his timeless self erased by waves of greater light, the vessel bursting, and as the Bear sped to the limits of his own transcendent outline, he could discern details – gardens, geometries, geometric gardens, fine dust and starry singularities, all the declensions of Life into lives – rushing toward annihilation and embrace, their mayfly constructions swept away, since under these circumstances even metaphysical flesh was grass. [453]

In the midst of this vision, the Bear even sees the face of Coltrane, the one figure in jazz history who has inspired an organised religious following. The Saint John Coltrane African Orthodox Church is in San Francisco and has figured prominently in at least one jazz novel, a mystery about a serial killer of successful ‘jazz-lite’ musicians.³

The quasi-religious moment of transcendence through jazz takes different forms in different narratives. In ‘Sonny’s Blues’, the jazz artist behaves like a mystic, ‘wrapped up in some cloud, some fire, some vision all his own’ (Baldwin 1965, 114). Edgar Poole of *The Horn* makes dangerous pilgrimages into the unknown with his saxophone, identified as ‘the holy vessel of American song’ (Holmes 1958, 36). The spiritual dimensions of jazz seem especially important to African-American writers. Amiri Baraka hints at why this may be the case when he clarifies the cultural positions of two canonical trumpeters from the 1920s. Armstrong, according to Baraka, functioned as ‘an honored priest of his culture’, while Bix Beiderbecke, a member of the white bourgeoisie from Davenport, Iowa, was ‘an instinctual intellectual’ with an emotional life ‘based on his conscious or unconscious disapproval of most of the sacraments of his culture’ (L. Jones [Baraka] 1963, 154).

At the risk of essentialising jazz writers according to race, I would suggest that, on the one hand, African-American authors are more likely to characterise jazz musicians in Baraka's terms as priest-like. White writers, on the other hand, are more likely to celebrate the subversiveness of jazz artists as they refuse their culture's 'sacraments'. Especially in the 1950s, the Beats and other oppositional writers found great opportunity for rebellion in jazz. *The Sound* (1961), Ross Russell's *roman à clef* about Parker, has many of these elements, as do the novels of Jack Kerouac. Thomas Pynchon, who expressed sympathy with the Beats and their desire to *épater le bourgeois* (1984, 7), falls back on this tradition in a memorable scene in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Parker's legendary discovery of bebop harmony while soloing on 'Cherokee' in 1939 becomes a kind of cinematic soundtrack for the hallucinatory moment when Pynchon's character Slothrop vomits up a hamburger, a Clark bar, a half-bottle of Moxie and 'the cherry from some Radcliffe girl's old-fashioned' (1973, 63). In other words, Parker subverts 'Cherokee', which Pynchon calls 'one more lie about white crimes' (*ibid.*), while the hero expels the familiar garbage of white American culture from his body. By contrast, James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues' often invokes religious imagery to describe Sonny's life in jazz. Think also of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, who finds Armstrong to be the perfect muse as he retreats into invisibility, presumably to create a novel that will tell the truth about Negroes in the United States. Even when jazz strikes a character in an African-American novel as shocking and vulgar, as seems to be the case for the young and innocent Sandy of Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1969), the experience of watching musicians and dancers gracefully sway and gyrate together becomes a crucial moment in the child's maturation. Previously protected from jazz and the corresponding aspects of African-American culture by his puritanical aunt, Sandy suddenly senses the transformative, even redemptive power of jazz: 'Four homeless, plug-ugly niggers, that's all they were, playing mean old loveless blues in a hot, crowded little dance-hall in a Kansas town on Friday night. Playing the heart out of loneliness with a wide-mouthed leader, who sang everybody's troubles until they became his own' (Hughes 1969, 105).

In much of the jazz fiction written outside the United States, the potential of jazz to upset bourgeois decorum becomes a central motif. The novels and stories of Josef Škvorecký are probably the most celebrated examples of jazz as the Dionysian alternative to the repressions of a totalitarian regime. In stories such as 'The Bass Saxophone' and 'Red Music' and novels such as *The Cowards* and *The Swell Season*, Škvorecký repeatedly holds up jazz – even ragtag versions played by clowns and barely musical teenagers – as 'a sharp thorn in the side of the power-hungry men, from Hitler to Brezhnev, who successfully ruled in my native land' (1979, 26). Milan Kundera found a

similar function for jazz in his novels, including *The Joke* (1992), in which the music takes on great political significance, representing everything that is free, vital and forbidden. According to Titlestad (1999, 45), a black South African poet named Kelwyn Sole even looked to the repression of jazz in Eastern Europe as a vehicle for critiquing his own country's policies during the height of the apartheid era.

Like many poets inspired by jazz, Sole uses the music as a paradigm for writing even more than as a subject for impressionistic description. As Michael Jarrett has brilliantly demonstrated (1999, 45–56), Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* may be the best example of a novel that looks to improvised jazz for its structure. Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1993) and Xam Wilson Cartier's *Be-Bop, Re-Bop* (1987) also attempt to appropriate the eccentricities of jazz harmony and rhythm into the texture of the novel. Leland Chambers has even argued (1995) that the several accounts of Gypsy's death in Eudora Welty's story 'Powerhouse' (in Breton 1991) can be read as parallels to the fourteen choruses that Powerhouse performs at the piano. But, however much we might admire these books, they take us away from the *images* of jazz that are the subject of this chapter. Much the same can be said for the jazz-inspired paintings of Jackson Pollock, Piet Mondrian and Stuart Davis, not to mention the paper cut-outs of circus figures that Henri Matisse called 'Jazz' (see Hadler 1983).

Jazz and photography

Certainly the best place to find compelling images of jazz is photography. William Claxton may have transformed the image of jazz musicians (and edged popular representations of masculinity closer to androgyny) when he extensively documented the youthful beauty of Chet Baker in the early 1950s. As Jarrett has pointed out (1995), Claxton was especially imaginative when he posed Rollins wearing a cowboy outfit in the Californian desert for the cover of the 1957 LP, *Way Out West*, thus comparing the saxophonist to a gunslinger and suggesting a connection between innovation in jazz and America's westward expansion.

The photos that Francis Wolff took for the celebrated Blue Note album covers of the 1950s and 1960s consistently portray black artists as good-natured, dignified and even a bit adventuresome (see Marsh *et al.* 1991). With their dark glasses, their cigarettes and their streamlined cars, they represent a standard of 'cool' to which subsequent generations still aspire. Rock-and-roller Joe Jackson actually posed for an album cover that unambiguously recalled the front of *Sonny Rollins, Vol. 2*, the tenor saxophonist's 1957 LP with J. J. Johnson, Horace Silver and Art Blakey. The

Blue Note album covers were of course designed to promote the recordings of the artists, and they are not unusual in idealising jazz musicians and their artistry. Even Lee Friedlander's stark photos of Coleman's 1960 quartet with Ed Blackwell, Don Cherry and Charlie Haden suggest purposefulness, strength and even a touch of the black nationalism that was then on the rise. (See, in particular, the cover of the Atlantic LP, *This Is Our Music*.)

The African-American photographer, Roy DeCarava, creates images of jazz that are seldom as idealised as those on Blue Note albums. Like Milt Hinton, the black bassist and photographer who worked regularly as a jazz artist from 1931 until the end of the century, DeCarava surely benefited from his ability to put black artists at ease. He often finds new ways of presenting important artists, including a playful Duke Ellington from 1967, a flirtatious Sarah Vaughan from 1956 and a quizzical Mary Lou Williams from 1952. But DeCarava also seems interested in rendering the transcendence that jazz writers have attempted to describe in prose. Often allowing his images to blur and even presenting them in semi-darkness, DeCarava depicts the labour of jazz that can lead the perspiring, grimacing musician to a level of consciousness that few have witnessed, let alone experienced. Many of DeCarava's photographs of Coltrane carry this valence, including the extraordinary photo of him in a tight embrace with Ben Webster in 1960 (Galassi 1996, 46). Webster, who is taller than the younger man, appears to be pulling Coltrane to his neck in a gesture that connotes a nurturing spirit as much as affection. Coltrane presses his face against Webster as if to absorb some of his revered and beloved predecessor's essence. Few photographers have presented so revealing an image of the relationship between two jazz musicians, an image that is even more remarkable for its absence of musical instruments.

The best-known photographs of William P. Gottlieb tend to be less intense than DeCarava's, at least in part because they come from *The Golden Age of Jazz* (1995), the title of Gottlieb's famous collection of images. Jazz became less golden when it lost its popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, perhaps because too many white Americans began associating the term with black artists such as Coltrane who appeared to be angry or simply inaccessible. Nevertheless, Gottlieb's work does more than simply promote the artists. His late-1940s photograph of a dignified Ella Fitzgerald in a white, feathery hat is typical (see Plate 18.1). The singer had dropped by a 52nd Street club to hear Dizzy Gillespie as well as his bassist, Ray Brown, whom she would later marry. While the singer closes her eyes and seems to lose herself in the lyric, Gillespie appears in the right margin smiling dreamily and perhaps flirtatiously at Fitzgerald. Ray Brown, at the other side of the photo, seems to be eyeing Gillespie with a trace of suspicion. In the bottom foreground of the picture is the balding head of the Danish jazz connoisseur



Plate 18.1 Ella Fitzgerald with Dizzy Gillespie and Ray Brown: photograph © William P. Gottlieb

and record producer, Timme Rosenkrantz. In his note to the photograph, Gottlieb points out that Rosenkrantz was a titled aristocrat. With this one image Gottlieb has played with the complex social (and sexual) milieu in which the music takes place, as well as the vastly diverse levels on which people can listen to it. In many of his photographs, Gottlieb tries hard to

frame his artists with the spellbound faces of people watching and listening. Even when his subjects are alone, he frames them with mirrors in dressing rooms where the various accessories always tell us a great deal. In a well-known photograph from the 1940s, a smiling, dapper Duke Ellington poses in front of a piano. This is the same dressing room in which Gottlieb also photographed white bandleader Glen Gray with his golf clubs and a target pistol.

Jazz and cinema

In turning to cinematic images of jazz, I start with another representative text, but one that has little in common with either Zabor's *The Bear Comes Home* or the photographs of DeCarava. *The Benny Goodman Story*, directed in 1955 by Valentine Davies, may be the most typical of all American jazz films. As I have suggested elsewhere (1996, 54–8), *The Benny Goodman Story* resembles several other biographical films in recalling *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the breakthrough film that first presented large audiences with the image *and* the sound of a man singing. Like the blacked-up singer played by Al Jolson in the 1927 film, the protagonist of *The Benny Goodman Story* is a poor Jewish boy who overcomes his father's opposition to popular music and becomes extremely successful playing music associated with African-Americans. Along the way, the protagonists of both films acquire beautiful gentile women while maintaining the uncritical adulation of their mothers. Both artists also have the uncanny ability to maintain strong roots in their Jewish heritage even as they forge ahead with a music beloved by a large American audience. Just as Jolson can sing 'Kol Nidre' in the temple on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar and then perform 'Mammy' in blackface in the Wintergarden Theatre, so can Benny arrange for the pop tune 'And the Angels Sing', performed by the whiter-than-white Martha Tilton, to segue into a klezmer-inflected solo by Jewish trumpeter Ziggy Elman at the film's climactic concert at Carnegie Hall. Even though *The Jazz Singer* is presented as fiction and *The Benny Goodman Story* is presented as biography, an American narrative of ethnic assimilation through jazz has become the inevitable backbone of supposedly true stories. Even earlier, the story of bandleader Ted Lewis's ascent was given a *Jazz Singer* plot in *Is Everybody Happy?* (1943), as was – not surprisingly – Al Jolson's early history in *The Jolson Story* (1946). Both men overcome the obstacles of Jewish fathers opposed to secular music before they become stars, and both transform the supposedly primitive music of black Americans.

But whereas Al Jolson does not interact with African-Americans in the original *Jazz Singer*, the hero of *The Benny Goodman Story* has several

encounters with 'authentic' jazz artists of colour. In fact, the Goodman film makes the African-American artists, Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton, significant presences throughout the narrative. The hero's first and most significant encounter with a black artist, however, takes place just after the teenaged Benny has been humiliated by a young woman who laughs at him for wearing short trousers. Moments after this sexualised degradation, Benny wanders into a ballroom to hear the music of a group of New Orleans musicians led by trombonist Kid Ory, appearing as himself in the film (as do, later on, Wilson and Hampton). Fascinated by the unfamiliar sounds, Benny asks Ory where the music comes from. In a speech that probably does not reflect Ory's own attitudes, the trombonist insists that the music is 'nothing special', that most of the musicians cannot read music, and that they just 'swing on out and play what they feel'. Benny asks if he can join in and immediately plays a convincing solo in New Orleans style (Goodman himself dubbed in the clarinet solos throughout the film). With only the vaguest familiarity with jazz, the young clarinetist has no difficulty keeping up with the New Orleans veterans. The film seems to suggest that Benny's romantic mishap has given him a new depth of feeling that finds expression through the medium of jazz, in which untutored artists simply play what they feel. As is frequently the case in American narratives, the untutored artists are people of colour.

Later in *The Benny Goodman Story* the mature Benny (played by Steve Allen) supposedly transforms the music of New Orleans by giving it a new sophistication. The film goes so far as to acknowledge the role that the black composer and orchestra-leader Fletcher Henderson played in the band's first successes with audiences. It was Henderson's arrangements, after all, that were crucial to Goodman's success with a large audience in 1935. In fact, Henderson (played by Sammy Davis, Sr) is nearby when Ory returns to tell Benny that he has 'the best band I ever heard anywhere'. Significantly, Ory reappears just as Benny has begun to fall in love with Alice Hammond (Donna Reed), the woman he eventually marries. Benny thanks Ory for the compliment, casually hands his clarinet to Henderson ('Fletch, could you hold this, please?'), and quickly moves to the side of Alice as she enters the room.

These are crucial moments in the familiar narrative of the white jazz artist: an older black artist acknowledges the superiority of the white artist at the same time as the sexual maturity of the white jazz hero is tied to his mastery of black music. The scene is staged so that Henderson is there to assist the hero in his romantic progress as much as to provide the arrangements that made Goodman a millionaire. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Hollywood repeatedly told the story of white jazz artists in which black musicians played these kinds of marginal but essential role. The music of

the white hero is sanctified by a black musician in *Birth of the Blues* (1941), *Blues in the Night* (1941), *Carnegie Hall* (1947) and *Young Man with a Horn* (1950). And in both *The Glenn Miller Story* (1954) and *The Five Pennies* (the filmed biography of Red Nichols, released in 1959), a white brass-player performs with the real-life Armstrong in a Harlem nightclub just before he consummates a romantic relationship with a woman. By the implicit logic of the film, Armstrong authorises the musical *and* the sexual success of the white musicians.

Conventions drawn from *The Jazz Singer* as well as myths of white artists surpassing black veterans were so well established by 1959 that they were even recapitulated in *St Louis Blues*, the biography of the black composer W. C. Handy (played by Nat King Cole). Like Jolson, Goodman and many other white heroes, Handy learns from 'primitive' black musicians, overcomes the opposition of his clergyman father to popular music, indulges in a flirtation with the highly sexualised Gogo Germaine (Eartha Kitt, essentially standing in for the gentile goddess), and crosses over to mainstream success at the finale when he performs with a symphony orchestra made up entirely of white musicians. In large part because he was played by Cole, one of the few black artists to attract a substantial white following in the 1950s, Handy was effectively configured as a white hero.

By the time of *St Louis Blues*, however, jazz had ceased to be America's popular music, and the nostalgia for older jazz had run its course. There were no more biopics about white jazz musicians after 1959 (although films about Chet Baker, Stan Getz and Louis Prima are 'in development'). But as jazz became a music for the elite, it could easily be denounced as pretentious in a film such as *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), a vehicle for Elvis Presley (see page 79). In more ambitious films, the music could be associated with highly ethical artists like the characters played by Martin Milner in *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) and Gerry Mulligan in *The Subterraneans* (1960). Significantly, both of these glorified white musicians perform with black artists, who validate the white men's broadmindedness while subliminally shoring up their masculinity. The actual black artists in these films (Chico Hamilton in *The Sweet Smell of Success*, and Art Farmer and Dave Bailey in *The Subterraneans*) have little else to do except play the music.

This is not to say that black jazz artists were never allowed centre stage in the American cinema. Both Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington starred in short films directed by Dudley Murphy in 1929. Smith plays an abused, gin-swilling woman in *St Louis Blues* (not to be confused with the Handy film from 1959), and Ellington plays a stylishly dressed but principled composer/bandleader in *Black and Tan*. The degraded image of Smith and the idealised portrait of Ellington in two films from the same year by the same director surely reflect the personal charisma of Ellington as much as the

racist stereotypes associated with dark-skinned women such as Smith. And, of course, black artists frequently starred in 'race films', made with all-black casts explicitly for African-American audiences. *Jivin' in Be-Bop* (1947) provided generous portions of Gillespie's big band, not to mention his witty repartee with a master of ceremonies. A much more ambitious film was *Broken Strings*, directed by Clarence Muse in 1940. In one sense another remake of *The Jazz Singer*, *Broken Strings* showed the healing effects of jazz on a classical violinist (played by Muse himself) who had forbidden his son to play popular music. After his hands have been paralysed in an accident, the violinist miraculously recovers and finds himself clapping in spite of himself when his son uses the occasion of a classical concert to break into a joyous jazz performance.

But these films were not typical of the dominant American film industry. In the 1930s and 1940s, black jazz artists often appeared in short scenes that could easily be removed for audiences unnerved by the sight of African-Americans. Even the most estimable artists were usually presented as grotesques. Think of Cab Calloway wildly waving his hair in *The Big Broadcast* (1932) or Fats Waller exercising his lips and eyebrows in *Stormy Weather* (1943), an image that surfaced even earlier when Eudora Welty created the macabre character 'Powerhouse' after she saw a performance by Waller in the 1930s (Breton 1991, 29–43). By the 1950s, black jazz musicians might appear as dignified if marginal attachments to the hero, as in *The Benny Goodman Story*, or as the providers of a romantic atmosphere, as when Benny Carter elegantly serenades Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952).

In the 1960s and after, African-American jazz artists occasionally became the subjects of feature films, although the films were almost always low-budget and independently produced. In 1966, for example, two black-and-white films appeared that were loosely based on the lives of black jazz musicians. *Sweet Love Bitter* starred Dick Gregory as Richie 'Eagle' Stokes, based on Charlie Parker, and Sammy Davis, Jr played the eponymous hero loosely based on Miles Davis in *A Man Called Adam*. Both films went well beyond familiar Hollywood practice by representing the climate of hatred and neglect in which black artists have historically performed, but the two films also chose to frame the lives of the jazz musicians within the gaze of attractive white actors. In *Sweet Love Bitter*, the narrative begins and ends with the actions of Dave (Don Murray), a college teacher who befriends Richie and struggles to make sense of the saxophonist's self-destructive behaviour. Similarly, in *A Man Called Adam*, the young trumpeter Vincent (Frank Sinatra, Jr) endures abusive treatment from Adam but is there to mourn when the black hero dies, the victim of the even greater abuse that a black artist must suffer.

Little had changed by the 1980s with the appearance of *Round Midnight* (1986) and *Bird* (1988), both made on small budgets and mostly ignored by audiences. Like the black biopics of the 1960s, neither film sought to represent the kind of transcendence that occurs in jazz literature. *Round Midnight* starred Dexter Gordon as a figure based on both Bud Powell and Lester Young, while *Bird* starred Forest Whitaker as Charlie Parker. Significantly, both Gordon and Whitaker are large men, embodying that aspect of white mythology that sees black jazz artists as idealised brutes. Both musicians in the two films turn to drugs and alcohol in hopes of easing their sufferings in a world that cannot accommodate their bulkily talented souls. And, again, important white characters stand between the black musician and the audience to interpret the otherwise incomprehensible behaviour. In *Round Midnight*, the French commercial artist Francis (François Cluzet) is the one character who truly understands the music and the needs of Dale Turner (Dexter Gordon) and protects him from a large group of people, both black and white, who would take advantage of him. In *Bird*, Parker's common-law wife Chan (Diane Venora) and the trumpeter Red Rodney (Michael Zelniker) consistently look after the welfare of Parker and interpret his actions for the spectator. At one point in *Bird*, Chan explains that her saxophonist-husband's unprovoked attack upon a white inmate in an institution is the result of his need to feel *something*, even the pain that comes with a fight, after he has been deprived of drugs and alcohol. The film seldom gives Parker the opportunity to give his side of the story. Unlike Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller and the white hero of *The Jazz Singer*, the protagonists of the black biopics live on a downward trajectory in spite of their abilities as artists. Audiences for the black jazz biopics were invited to condemn America's neglect of great artists at the same time as white liberal spectators could identify with their surrogates in the films who understood the music, often better than the black artists themselves.

But there are also narratives of white jazz musicians laid low by substance abuse and the philistine attitudes of the public. Bix Beiderbecke, who drank himself to death at the age of 28, inspired what may have been the first jazz novel, Dorothy Baker's *Young Man with a Horn* (1938), as well as the 1950 film with the same title. For Vance Bourjaily, Baker's novel was the first version of 'The Story':

The Story goes like this: a musician of genius, frustrated by the discrepancy between what he can achieve and the crummy life musicians lead (because of racial discrimination, or the demand that the music be made commercial, or because he has a potential he can't reach), goes mad, or destroys himself with alcohol and drugs. The Story might be a romance, but it is a valid one.

[1987, 44]

Bruce Weber's documentary film on Chet Baker, *Let's Get Lost* (1988), certainly adopted this narrative, and the feature film of Baker's life, in which Leonardo DiCaprio is scheduled to star, will probably also be a desultory experience.

The view of jazz artists as self-destructive and intentionally marginal began to wane at the end of the twentieth century. Partially in response to the old clichés of 'The Story', and partially because jazz was gaining serious cultural capital, new forms of the jazz narrative were invented. I'm thinking in particular of the documentaries broadcast on American public television and the cable network Bravo as part of a series titled, appropriately, 'American Masters'. These programmes presented artists such as Ellington, Parker, Coltrane, Armstrong, Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday and Monk as significant figures whose lives are consistent with their achievements as artists. Kendrick Simmons and Gary Giddins say much at the outset by naming their 1987 documentary *Celebrating Bird: The Triumph of Charlie Parker*. The programmes soft-pedal the troubling incidents in the biographies of Monk, Parker and Holiday, often bordering on the kind of hagiography that until recently has only been afforded to canonical figures from classical music.

The best evidence that there is a viable middle path between 'The Story' and the saints' lives of the 'American Masters' series may be two films directed by Robert Altman in the 1990s. In *Short Cuts* (1993), based on the short fiction of Raymond Carver, the Jazz Singer Tess (Annie Ross) and her cellist daughter Zoe (Lori Singer) provide a key to understanding how the many narratives of the film might fit together. Tess and Zoe represent, respectively, characters who wear their emotions on their sleeves, and those who repress their feelings until they explode – or, like Zoe, commit suicide. In addition, some characters in *Short Cuts* are improvisers like Tess, while others seem to need scripts such as Zoe reads when she plays classical music on her cello. Altman's film is remarkable enough in showing Annie Ross/Tess singing in real time with her band; it is even more unusual in making her story central to all the narratives and in refusing either to pathologise or idealise her career as a jazz artist.

On one level Altman's *Kansas City* (1996) is about kidnapping and politics in the midwestern city, but the film is also about the jazz of 1934 with biographically accurate references to Parker, Count Basie and Bennie Moten. The highlight of the film is the musical competition between Lester Young (Joshua Redman) and Coleman Hawkins (Craig Handy). As Hawkins, Handy even pauses to remove his coat as in the perhaps mythological account of how the upstart Young overwhelmed the revered Hawkins when he passed through Kansas City with Henderson's orchestra in 1934. The cutting contest between musicians takes place at the same time as another

‘cutting session’ in which a group of African-American gangsters repeatedly stab a turncoat member of their group. When the saxophonists finally bring their contest to an end, they shake hands as a sign of mutual respect. The saxophone competition and the brutal stabbing of the gangster are cut together so that the black men in the alley are killing one of their own at the same time that the black musicians are engaging in the richest kind of co-operation. Like *The Bear Comes Home*, the film is an especially thoughtful appropriation of jazz after many years of images that used jazz to promote ideological and racial agenda rather than the music itself.⁴