



Jazz: The American Theme Song

By James Lincoln Collier

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Praised by the *Washington Post* as a "tough, unblinkered critic," James Lincoln Collier is probably the most controversial writer on jazz today. His acclaimed biographies of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Benny Goodman continue to spark debate in jazz circles, and his iconoclastic articles on jazz over the past 30 years have attracted even more attention. With the publication of *Jazz: The American Theme Song*, Collier does nothing to soften his reputation for hard-hitting, incisive commentary. Questioning everything we think we know about jazz--its origins, its innovative geniuses, the importance of improvisation and spontaneous inspiration in a performance--and the jazz world, these ten provocative essays on the music and its place in American culture overturn tired assumptions and will alternately enrage, enlighten, and entertain.

Jazz: The American Theme Song offers music lovers razor-sharp analysis of musical trends and styles, and fearless explorations of the most potentially explosive issues in jazz today. In "Black, White, and Blue," Collier traces African and European influences on the evolution of jazz in a free-ranging discussion that takes him from the French colony of Saint Domingue (now Haiti) to the orderly classrooms where most music students study jazz today. He argues that although jazz was originally devised by blacks from black folk music, jazz has long been a part of the cultural heritage of musicians and audiences of all races and classes, and is not black music *per se*. In another essay, Collier provides a penetrating analysis of the evolution of jazz criticism, and casts a skeptical eye on the credibility of the emerging "jazz canon" of critical writing and popular history. "The problem is that even the best jazz scholars keep reverting to the fan mentality, suddenly bursting out of the confines of rigorous analysis into sentimental encomiums in which Hot Lips Smithers is presented as some combination of Santa Claus and the Virgin Mary," he maintains. "It is a simple truth that there are thousands of high school music students around the country who know more music theory than our leading jazz critics." Other, less inflammatory but no less intriguing, essays include explorations of jazz as an intrinsic and fundamental source of inspiration for American dance music, rock, and pop; the influence of show business on jazz, and vice versa; and the link between the rise of the jazz soloist and the new emphasis on individuality in the 1920s.

Impeccably researched and informed by Collier's wide-ranging intellect, *Jazz: The American Theme Song* is an important look at jazz's past, its present, and its uncertain future. It is a book everyone who cares about the music will want to

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Collier, who has written biographies of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman, is an engaging and often controversial critic. The essays collected here are centered on the notion that "style or form in art gains adherence not simply from purely aesthetic considerations, but also from how well it appears to agree with fashionable social, philosophic, or even political considerations." Collier argues clearly and concisely that jazz was originally created by African Americans but has long been part of the cultural heritage of other races and classes; that jazz criticism is too deeply mired in adulation, not insight; and that race is not a criterion for appreciating jazz. Collier credits white college "hot collectors" of the 1930s with providing vital information for jazz scholarship and local jazz players for continuing interest in this profoundly American music.

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From School Library Journal

YA-Divided into 10 chapters, each of which can be read as an essay, Collier's book looks at the place of jazz in American culture and at the events that shaped its development. One of the author's biggest complaints about other jazz scholars is that they "keep reverting to the fan mentality" and lose their objectivity. Collier himself cannot be accused of this-he documents his work extensively, creating 31 pages of endnotes. Students doing research may find the bibliographical information contained therein to be as valuable as the essays themselves. Teachers, especially those who try to integrate disciplines, will appreciate Collier's comparisons of jazz to art and his views on how history affected its development and vice versa.

Marilyn J. Schoon, Thomas Jefferson Sci-Tech, Fairfax County, VA

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From Library Journal

Collier adds another highly opinionated book to his opus of more than 50 titles, which includes biographies of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Benny Goodman. As he discusses jazz, race relations, and popular culture, Collier questions the notion that jazz represents a generalized "black culture" or "black experience" and argues that Sidney Bechet, more than Louis Armstrong, transformed jazz from an ensemble music to a soloist's music. Collier further traces the evolution of jazz from a scorned bordello music to its acceptance as a university-level discipline. This well-written and well-researched study shows wide reading and an attention to scholarly accountability. Collier is an important music critic, and his book will enhance large music collections.

- Paul Baker, CUNA Inc., Madison, Wis.

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