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Review

Bruce Epperson, *More Important than the Music: A History of Jazz Discography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. xvi + 284 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-06753-7 (hbk). $45.00.

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Many readers and researchers who are aware of the usefulness of jazz discographies as reference tools might think that compiling them would be scarcely more exciting than compiling a telephone book. Such perceptions persist due to lack of awareness about the personalities and external circumstances which drove the development of jazz discography, and the results of various authors' interaction and competition. Bruce Epperson's *More Important than the Music* fills a largely neglected gap in the literature on jazz history and historiography, demonstrating along the way that it is not only discographies, as Dan Morgenstern points out, but also their history which offer 'a key and supplement to the history of music and can be as exciting to read as a good mystery or adventure story' (6).

Aside from Epperson's book, Kernfeld and Rye's two-part article 'Comprehensive Discographies of Jazz, Blues, and Gospel' (1994, 1995) in the Music Library Association's journal *Notes* has served as a *de facto* primer on the history of discography. Not only was an update to this document long overdue on account of the passage of two decades and revolutionary advances in technology, but the stories it contained invited much more elaboration than time and space would permit. Epperson's emphasis of the human element of the narrative alongside encyclopedic technical detail maintains the reader's interest, and his work also invites other researchers to pick up the proverbial baton and continue exploring particular subjects in more depth.

Epperson does not specify an intended audience to the inclusion or exclusion of any group, but provides a brief account of the project's genesis and its connections to the Association for Recorded Sound Collections. While obvious audiences would include audiophiles and record collectors with an interest in jazz, *More Important than the Music* also demonstrates

the impact of discography on accepted narratives of jazz history and the jazz 'canon', affecting discussions on authenticity, race and stylistic and generational biases. Concepts such as 'solography' and the blurred lines of 'original' recordings after the decline of the 78 rpm record and its distinctive matrix numbers carry implications for what constitutes a 'work' in jazz, in contrast with the printed page in classical music. As such, the book would be of considerable use in a graduate or advanced undergraduate course dealing either centrally or tangentially with jazz. It is a narrative, and would not lend itself to use as a free-standing textbook, but would be a useful addition to assigned readings. The extensive bibliography at the end is of great use to librarians of music and other humanities, especially as the publication of the *Basic Music Library* reference work has been repeatedly delayed.

Beginners who are new to the subject would do well to read some of Kernfeld and Rye's article, or to keep it on hand for reference. Epperson covers numerous authors and titles with an admirable balance of depth and breadth; it is helpful to approach the book with a basic knowledge of major names in jazz discography, such as Delaunay, Rust, Jepsen, Bruyninckx and Lord. Epperson provides a detailed index, which is also helpful in keeping track of so many names.

More Important than the Music is organized into two sections: most of the book treats the history of comprehensive jazz discographies, followed by two chapters on various kinds of specialized discographies (e.g., record label, subgenre, national discographies, listeners' and buyers' guides), with a concluding chapter on future directions and the evolving needs of discography users.

After prefatory material on the genesis of the project, Epperson opens his first chapter with a character sketch of Brian Rust, whose work perfected the recording session-based format which is fundamental to jazz discography. He then describes the significance of Charles Delaunay's use of the matrix number to organize his discography, thus identifying the two main pillars of traditional jazz discography: session and matrix number. This organizational setup is excellent, and Epperson could have called more attention to what he was doing; the organization of subsections in chapters is often more easily understood in hindsight. Verbal section headings (as opposed to simply numbers) may help orient the reader and mark the progress of the narrative.

The first chapter also provides a very useful discussion of definitions of various terms, not taking for granted that the reader will automatically

understand the terminology as the author does, and acknowledging controversial terminology such as 'metadiscography', which Epperson declines to use on account of its conflicting definitions.

Subsequent chapters are organized according to specific time periods in the history of jazz discography. The second chapter treats the period from 1926–1944, and thus covers claimants to the title of the first discography, the first use of the term itself, the primary role of British and French enthusiasts in early discographies, and American attempts to catch up. This chapter demonstrates the primacy of the European perspectives in those formative years, providing fertile ground for further exploration of the impact of figures such as Roy Schleman and Charles Delaunay on shaping the canon and narrative of jazz which are largely accepted in the United States. Delaunay's organizational scheme of 'affinities of style' invites particular examination, as does his working relationship with Hughes Panassie, who had no qualms about stating his opinions as facts.

The third chapter covers 1945 through 1960, the decline of Panassie's influence, Delaunay's continued work, George Avakian's research, and iterations of Orin Blackstone's *Index to Jazz*. Epperson illustrates how comprehensive jazz discographies remained the gold standard even as they became increasingly unwieldy and fell behind on ambitious publication schedules. The growing need to find boundaries for the scope of a comprehensive jazz discography again raises the issues of canon-building, race and authenticity, what constitutes jazz in the first place, and differing perspectives from the United States and Europe.

Epperson's comprehensive knowledge and personality-driven narratives yield many amusing anecdotes, including one in this chapter in which a discographical resource's title was changed after being mistaken for a guide to the local sex trade (62). Turf wars, conflicts of interest and even outright sabotage also gained traction in this era, as Epperson relates a British writer's ill-considered planting of phony articles in an attempt to discredit a rival (67).

This chapter also describes the various problems which sweeping technological changes such as the advent of the LP record and advances in tape recording posed for discographers, including the eroded concept of a single take, single-disc albums with multiple, distinct titles, and a flood of re-issues, all of which challenged the concept of what constitutes a discrete work, and which manifestation may be called original. Epperson also foreshadows the coming wave of plagiarism that awaited jazz discographers as the often quixotic pursuit of comprehensive coverage continued.

Epperson covers the 1960s in the fourth chapter, and so returns to the story of Brian Rust, whose *Jazz Records A–Z* was first published privately in 1961 (85), with a second printing in 1962 (87). Bias and exclusivity remained thorny issues, from discerning a dividing line between jazz and blues, to deciding what made music 'black' enough for inclusion. Discographers also attempted to coordinate efforts more often in an effort to manage the scope of their works and leave matters outside that scope to other discographers rather than duplicate efforts.

Plagiarism takes centre stage near the end of this chapter, as *Blues and Gospel Records* garnered the dubious distinction of being the 'first discography to be pirated wholesale' (94). The fifth chapter (1968–1998) continues the saga of appropriated data, as Bruyninckx's *50 Years of Recorded Jazz* only intensified the debate over plagiarism, copyright and intellectual property due to its free appropriation of the work of Rust and Jepsen (103–106). Here, Epperson's career as an attorney enables him to offer a uniquely detailed discussion of legal definitions, obligations and limitations of copyright, with references to case law and a humorous anecdote about the use of fictional 'squib' entries (sometimes off-colour) to track plagiarism (110).

All the while, controlling the price and size of publications became ever more daunting, and Epperson chronicles the rather late entry of computer technology into jazz discography. The technological affordances only enabled further wholesale appropriation of prior discographies, most notably in the work of Tom Lord.

Chapters 6 and 7 run a gamut of specialized discographies, from single-artist works to 'solographies' (a discography of solos taken by a given jazz artist), bio-discographies, national discographies in Europe and Japan, label discographies, Armed Forces Radio Service broadcast transcriptions and V-Discs, as well as listeners' and buyers' guides, with another amusing anecdote about two competing works vying for dominance under the same large publishing company.

The eighth chapter discusses the future role of discography, and how further changes in technology demand adaptation from older organizational models and practices. While Epperson stops short of examining the quandary posed by 'born-digital' music, he names several useful online discographical resources (with a caveat about quality control on 'free' sites), and discusses the potential for 'crowd-sourcing' discographical work among many users, in an open-ended setting that can be updated continuously. While technology helps to resolve some problems of labour, first-copy costs and cut-off dates which plagued mid-century comprehensive

efforts, Epperson observes that questions of purpose, selection and exclusion will remain. There is a subtle symmetry in the beginning of the first chapter with the story of Brian Rust, and the detailed coverage of the BRIAN discographical database (named for Rust) in the last.

Relatively few issues detract from the overall presentation of Epperson's work. While most chapters are organized chronologically, readers may at first find it difficult to keep their bearings as the chronology bounces around. It does so for good reason, as one of the most fundamental contributions of Epperson's work is to place discographical works in their historical, political, economic and interpersonal contexts, often over a number of years prior to publication. Again, however, the organizational structure of the book is often better understood in hindsight, and subsection headings might help the reader's sense of direction.

One anecdote questioning whether a buyer who pays $550 for a discographical work can be treated as a mere member of the 'general public' is repeated on pages 166 and 189. Occasional lapses of style into a much more conversational tone (use of contractions, 'you') are detectable, but not disruptive. The journal *Notes* is unfortunately mischaracterized as a music education journal in the introduction, but properly cited later as a product of the Music Library Association. Occasional misspellings of names, such as those of Albert Ayler (spelled 'Ayer'), or the Austin High Gang ('Austin Hill Gang' in the index), Frank Teschmacher (spelled 'Teshmaker') are worthy of comment, but do not ultimately detract from the quality and significance of the work. Rather, the text offers many delightful turns of phrase which keep the narrative lively, such as 'plagiaristic vacuuming' to describe the wholesale appropriation of earlier discographies (150), or the description of Brian Rust as 'an eccentric contrarian who almost got sacked for practicing trombone in the lunchroom' (79).

The crafting of a comprehensive history of jazz discography undoubtedly parallels some of the challenges of crafting a jazz discography, as a time-consuming labour of love which few understand. Epperson's knowledge and experience with jazz discography—and as an attorney as well—put him in a unique position to tell a story which had hitherto been sorely lacking from available literature in a single, well-written monograph. As strong opinions abound in jazz discography, the historical narrative of the field is also likely to invite spirited discussion; the aggregation of so much information in the text, end notes and bibliography in one place invites further research and publication of articles, if not books. Indeed, while academia has been a latecomer to the discipline of jazz discography, Epperson's

meticulously sourced and indexed book provides a stronger basis for communication between academic researchers and the independent enthusiasts who have dominated discography from its earliest days.

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