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Review

Ellen Johnson, *Jazz Child: A Portrait of Sheila Jordan*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. xvii + 234 pp. ISBN 978-0-8108-8837-1 (e-book). $54.99.

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Ellen Johnson's comprehensive biography on the life and career of jazz legend Sheila Jordan extends beyond that of traditional historic narrative through its ability to capture the nature of Jordan's personality within the context of a chronological account of her life. Through the anecdotal observations of Jordan, her family, friends and colleagues, Johnson illustrates the artist's respect and admiration for a music she helped pioneer. As a self-proclaimed 'messenger of the music' (xiv), Jordan's appreciation for the language and its contributors shines a light on the humility and utter selflessness of her musical approach. The book is initially structured as a chronological summary of the artist's life, while later chapters look to address Jordan's inspirations, friendships, ensemble preferences, social struggles, substance-abuse issues and educational interests. Each of these themes effectively conveys the dynamic and complex personality of a warm, caring and well-respected artist. Johnson's biography succeeds in familiarizing the reader with Jordan by tackling issues of musical and social significance as they relate to Jordan herself. In doing so, we are able to gain an appreciation for the essence of Jordan's character through a biographical work seemingly intended to channel the message of the 'messenger' (xiv).

Recognized as one of the most iconic and influential musicians active in the jazz community today, Sheila Jordan is a role model for countless musicians, young and old. Her contributions to the music and its community, through stylistic innovation, egalitarianism, education and jazz philosophy, allow her to represent effectively the music she has grown to love so dearly. Throughout the book, Johnson tackles each of these aspects of Jordan's career in an effort to demonstrate her overwhelming initiative and strength of character. Johnson succeeds in illustrating the role that camaraderie and friendship had in enabling the young Jordan to prevail in a community

heavily stricken with racial, financial and social injustices. In doing so, she is able to examine issues such as substance abuse, bigotry and discrimination in the jazz community with remarkable tact and care. Johnson takes on these sensitive yet highly integral aspects of Jordan's upbringing and musical development in order to give the reader an understanding of the pressures that surrounded those involved in the jazz community in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The introductory paragraph of Johnson's chapter 'God Blessed the Child', quoted below, serves not only to acquaint the reader with the resilient and ambitious nature of a young Jordan, but demonstrates the playfulness of a musician who allowed the beauty of her art to consume her and act as a healing force throughout her life. It establishes the tone of the narrative and brings the reader's attention to a certain sentimentality in Johnson's writing.

> Sheila Jordan's life story is a series of triumphs over odds that were stacked against her from the time she was born: abandoned by her father, growing up with her grandparents in a poor coal mining town in Pennsylvania, seduced by alcoholism and drugs, battling racism, and simply being a woman, a woman whose dream was to become a jazz singer. Jordan attributes her survival to the music of jazz and the person whose music she declares 'saved' her life, Charlie 'Yardbird' Parker, who bestowed his blessing of bebop on a young, struggling girl living in Detroit in the late 1940s. When Jordan made her first recording, 'You Are My Sunshine', with composer George Russell, it was more than a song she was singing. It was a haunting memory of her life and a significant part of what would mold the self-reliant woman who had emerged from a childhood of pain and poverty. Clearly, when Jordan sings that song, it is not meant for a particular person but for her one and only love—jazz (1).

Although Johnson's slightly saccharine branch of historiography reflects certain biases often associated with autobiographical rhetoric, Johnson does succeed in taking the reader methodically through Jordan's life and career, while staying true to her promise of avoiding 'overly-academic' and 'impersonal' jargon (xiv).

Alto saxophonist Charlie Parker's contribution to modern jazz is highly significant. Widely held as the primary figurehead of 1940s bebop, Parker's improvisational voice served then as it does today, as a methodological guidepost for students and educators of the idiom. In a wonderful contribution to Parker's memory shared through Jordan's treasured insight, Johnson shines a light on the artist behind the music. Johnson's seventh chapter 'The Bird' is a welcome contribution to jazz scholarship as it not

only demonstrates the complex dynamics surrounding the relationships between fellow performers, but unravels certain misconceptions about Parker's personality resulting from his issues with substance abuse. As the majority of jazz musicians will attest, Parker has had, at the very least, a certain amount of influence on the craftsmanship of all post-bebop-era jazz musicians. However, aside from Jordan, very few had the opportunity to call him a friend. Jordan's initial appreciation for Parker's music ultimately fostered an admiration for a genre she believes saved her from the adversity of her adolescence. Naturally, a friendship between the two would develop as Jordan found herself romantically engaged and eventually married to Parker's pianist Duke Jordan. It was Parker's support and friendship at this time that would eventually blossom into the shared kinship that Johnson so eloquently expresses in her narrative. This chapter succeeds in illuminating a certain sensitivity of character often overlooked while addressing Parker and his struggles with substance abuse throughout his career.

A true innovator in her own right, Jordan's contribution to the jazz medium has undoubtedly paved a road for vocalists interested in an improvisation-centric, ensemble-oriented solo vocal role. Her eschewal of the traditional vocalist-as-showman persona not only enabled her to address the intricacies of the language more thoroughly, but garnered the respect of instrumentalist colleagues appreciative of her sensitivity and ensemble-oriented mindset. The organic nature of her musical conception remains to this day an inspiration to vocalists inspired by her well-rounded, flexible approach. This concept is well exemplified in the work of former student and protégé Theo Bleckmann. As a disciple of the bebop idiom, it is hardly surprising that Jordan's musical trajectory has led her to an ensemble pairing principally concerned with a democratic interplay between voices. Jordan's penchant for the bass and voice duo throughout her career has unquestionably been a factor that has led to the maturation of her style. Her 'raw delivery' (115) and purity of expression in this format has inspired bassists and vocalists alike. Johnson speaks at length in her chapter, 'I've Grown Accustomed to the Bass' (113), about Jordan's personal development in the style, her philosophy surrounding the creative dynamic of the duo setting, and the synergy she has shared with bassists such as Peter Ind, Steve Swallow, Arild Andersen, Harvie S, Cameron Brown and Attilio Zanchi. This chapter, however, is surprisingly devoid of information surrounding Jordan's sources of inspiration for an instrumental pairing of such significance in her artistic development that it has become largely associated with her

career. Although brief mention is made of Lennie Tristano and his weekly sessions (113), little is credited to his role as one of the first to circumvent the standards of bebop ensemble composition in his own career. Often a characteristic in the music of his contemporaries, unusual instrumentation was a common feature of the Tristano School from as early as 1946, in his drummerless trio recordings. Jordan's artistic partnership with bassist Peter Ind—a fellow student often heavily associated with the Tristano idiom—begs the question whether Tristano's influence played a role in prompting Jordan's initial foray into the duo format.

In 1977 Jordan officially began her teaching career at City College of New York. Initially invited to host a concert-style masterclass and vocal workshop, as a result of its success, Jordan's initial foray into the realm of jazz pedagogy sparked a second passion in the singer that would contribute to the future direction of her career. Approaching this new aspect of her career with a level of intention and integrity matching that of her own artistry, Jordan found herself at the cutting edge of vocal jazz pedagogy as early as 1978. The development of one of, if not the first, solo vocal jazz programmes with a true emphasis on improvisation led to a number of fulfilling opportunities to teach and perform worldwide. Highly regarded and sought after as a guest educator to this day, Jordan's pedagogy relies heavily on the technical foundations of the music and knowledge garnered from the major innovators of the language.

Johnson makes reference to some of the key innovators that shaped Jordan's lineage-based pedagogy as follows:

> Jordan based her program on the knowledge she had received from the jazz geniuses who had nurtured her during her formative years: Lennie Tristano, George Russell, Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus and countless others. Her mentors had supplied her with the necessary ingredients to become the unique and impressive interpreter of jazz and improvisation that she remains today (148–49).

Although Johnson's effort to avoid overly academic rhetoric succeeds in making her publication as accessible as possible, a reader may benefit from a closer examination of the contributions of those who shaped her pedagogy. Interesting to note, for example, is that in the field of jazz education, the early efforts of Lennie Tristano are considered by many to be a foundation of modern institutional jazz pedagogy. Possibly because the links between Jordan's and Tristano's pedagogy remain underexplored in existing literature, apparent similarities in their educative mantras remain undiscussed in Johnson's work.

Throughout her career, Jordan has maintained a delicate balance of teaching and performing and has succeeded in both avenues by insuring the recommendation of trusted colleagues to oversee teaching duties in her absence. Following her departure from City College in 2004, the spirit of Jordan's historically-rooted pedagogy remains at the core of the programme, currently under the supervision of Suzanne Pittson.

In summary, Johnson's *Jazz Child: A Portrait of Sheila Jordan* is a welcome contribution to the field of jazz history. An emotional and gripping statement of resilience and success against all odds, Jordan's story is one of cherished importance to the jazz community. Throughout the book Johnson provides a detailed account of the artist's life and career and succeeds in capturing the nature and personality of Jordan in her words.