

## Review

**Peter Pullman, *Wail: The Life of Bud Powell*. New York: Peter Pullman, LCC, 2012. 488 pp. ISBN 978-0-9851418-1-3 (pbk). \$19.99.**

**Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr, *The Amazing Bud Powell: Black Genius, Jazz History, and the Challenge of Bebop*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. 240 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-24391-0 (hbk). £24.95/\$34.95.**

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These two books by Peter Pullman and Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr are welcome additions to the scarce literature about the pianist Earl 'Bud' Powell. Until now, Alan Groves and Alyn Shipton's *The Glass Enclosure* (Groves 1993) was the most recent work to provide a general coverage of Powell's life and music.

Pullman's biography was the first of the two to be published, as an e-book in February 2012 and then as paperback in November 2012, while Ramsey's book was published in 2013. The authors take very different approaches which in many ways complement each other well. Pullman's book is a straightforward biography, wherein Bud Powell's life unfolds chronologically from his birth to his early death in 1966. As the author says in his introduction, the book is also much more than that, dealing with a hefty 800 formal and informal interviews, in addition to public records, press and literature on and around Powell. Pullman creates a detailed picture of the pianist's movements and activities, of his personality and of his immediate environment, but also of the society in which he was living. The depth of the research makes it a reference against which every subsequent work on the subject will be compared.

Ramsey's book begins where Pullman ends, at Powell's death. His short overview of the last years of Powell's life set the tone for a work that illuminates the relationship between the pianist's life, the construction of his figure as a genius, the development of bebop as art and racial issues in both the music business and in the American health system. Powell's

achievements as a musician are not forgotten and are treated through musical analysis as a distillation of the evolution of bebop. Overall Ramsey's work is like a commentary on many of the questions that are raised by Pullman in his biography. He handles the complicated dialogue between a great musical personality and his cultural and social environment with a virtuosity equal to that of Powell on the piano.

According to Pullman, Powell acquired his genius status very early in his life, due to his precocious skills on the piano and his mastery of both classical and popular tunes that he learned from his teacher, William Rawlins, and his father. So much so that by the age of ten he was exhibiting his talent at rent parties. He was a subdued person with a remarkable lack of social skills. Pullman writes: 'he quickly realized that, afterward, if he remained unobtrusive, he overheard his mother or father telling the host that he was a genius. As he had already been made fun of for the way that he spoke, there was now more than one reason for keeping silent' (13). This propensity to keep a low profile and then burst into dramatic antics or odd behaviour added to his reception as a virtuoso, and created an aura of mystery and fascination around him. For both Ramsey and Pullman, the question is not whether Powell was a genius but how he came to be considered as one. His virtuosity, physical and mental engagement, and tendency to lose himself in his own performance, contributed to the construction of his genius image. It is probable that the loss of concentration and memory that later came to plague him reinforced this genius status, albeit as a fallen one. In return this primed many commentators, I believe, to dismiss many of his recordings from the mid-fifties onwards.

For Ramsey, however, Powell's genius 'cannot be understood as simply an acknowledgement of a virtuoso's creative work, but must be thought of as part of a larger complex of ideas' (88). In this sense, Powell's genius does not transcend his social and cultural circumstances but 'anchor[s] him' in it. Powell's voice obtains its power from the contextual evolution of jazz criticism, health care, manhood and the rise of bebop as art music, with the idea of blackness central to it all. Ramsey evokes two stories in particular that show how jazz lore contributed to the construction of Powell's genius: his challenge to Art Tatum and his arrest with Monk. Pullman's account of both anecdotes is quite different. In particular, the story of Powell's incarceration at Pilgrim highlights how internal politics in these mental institutions influenced the fate of people like Powell, with games and disputes amongst experts leading to shock therapy or release. The mythologies created around Monk and Powell rely on the idea of them transcending

their social conditions and reaching artistic heights despite the great difficulties they had to suffer from racism and their mental conditions. This is a discourse on autonomy that Ramsey brilliantly challenges.

To write about Powell is to write about mental illness. His condition is as difficult to comprehend today as it was in his time. Knowledge of psychological and psychiatric issues has improved, and the language used to define them has changed too. According to Pullman, Powell was 'diagnosed, Manic Depressive Psychosis, Manic Type' at Bellevue Hospital the first time he was admitted there (Pullman, 52). Often his files mentioned the older term of 'Dementia Praecox, Paranoid Type' (169). Ramsey doesn't qualify Powell's mental condition; he sometimes writes about his delusion, his hyperactivity and paranoia. Both Pullman and Ramsey try to understand how it was possible for a person to be treated so arbitrarily, and to contextualize Powell's internments, but Ramsey sees Powell more as a victim of a health system in which racial discrimination mirrored that of the 'outside' society. He also betrays a slight bias due to his admiration for Powell and his status in the history of jazz which shows particularly in this quote: 'Inside the mental health system, Powell was not considered an amazing artist revered for his startling technique and sophisticated compositions. He was just another delusional African American man in his late twenties—a statistic' (Ramsey, 107). It seems understandable that Powell's musicianship and genius had no relevance for the psychiatrists who had to diagnose, treat and care for him within the regulations, habits and limitations of the health system.

Pullman has the advantage of having had access to Powell's files, which included his interviews and reports from doctors. He also tries to understand the system of internment and how Powell's behaviour and lack of communication worked against him in interviews that were quickly conducted, and where the smallest clues for diagnosis might lead to a quick solution. Ramsey, based on Cootie Williams's memory of the events, considers Powell's beating up by the Pennsylvania Railroad Police (Pullman, 49) after playing with Williams's band in Philadelphia, as the cause of his life-long struggle with mental health and addiction issues. He writes: 'Williams could not have known that Powell's lot, from that night until the end of his life, would be a cycle of triumph and struggle' (62). And then: 'Powell had everything in place for a successful run in the music business. He was dashing, a brilliant technician, a fast learner, and he was moving up the ranks as a professional musician on the New York scene' (77). Ramsey appears to fall into the trap of romanticizing Powell's life (a trap into which

Pullman occasionally falls too), which he criticizes elsewhere. By overlaying the tragic narrative, Ramsey forgets that at the source, regardless of Powell's musical abilities, lay mental illness. The real tragedy is that he never really found the constant support he needed to concentrate on what he was able to do, his music, and let others deal with the everyday side of life, which he *wasn't*.

Powell was declared incompetent at the instigation of Oscar Goodstein with the support of Powell's mother in 1953. Armed with this legal weapon Goodstein set out to manage Powell's life in order to exert as much control possible and bring him commissions. He arranged Powell's wedding with Audrey Hill, and when the time came for Althea Edwards to enter the picture, he asked Max Cohen for help to declare Powell competent again so he could divorce Hill and marry her. Ramsey points exactly to all the elements described in detail by Pullman, which amounted to locking Powell out of his own life for the appropriation of his music and commodification of his genius. Ramsey engages successfully with the complex layers of 'social orders', each containing their own 'interlocking discourses grounded in historical and material conditions that work to give Powell's genius its logic' (119).

Pullman does not provide any musical analysis of Powell's music, but offers comments and description of the most outstanding moments in his discography of live recordings. Drawing from his extensive interviews, the evolution of Powell's style is discussed by the very people who were either working with him, producing his music or listening to his performances. These eyewitnesses often provide a formidable insight to Powell's physical and musical approach to the piano and music-making. He appeared extremely involved physically with the keyboard, using all the weight of his shoulders and back to provide that specific percussive sound, positioning his left hand almost flat while slightly arching his right hand. He also seems to have been a very intuitive musician, rehearsing little and often at the demand of producers such as Alfred Lion (probably as much to ensure effective cohesion with other band members as to keep an eye on him), if at all.

Ramsey on the other hand devotes a whole chapter supported by music analysis to discuss Powell's main musical changes and characteristics. By doing so, the author also outlines some of the musical features that came to be associated with the bebop piano style, and were re-used by generations of pianists influenced by Powell: the use of third, fifth and seventh intervals in the left hand (167), phrasing musical sentences across an

uneven number of measures (169) and creating interest by shifting rhythmic accents (175).

There isn't much in Ramsey's book on the European career of Bud Powell. The author gives the impression that Powell had already said everything he had to say, and that this career wasn't a match for his previous work in the USA. Fortunately, Pullman gives detailed accounts of Powell's performances around Europe and of the few recordings he made. The general impression is that, in spite of bad days, he was capable of producing some spectacular music. His modes of performance were quite settled, however, and the repertoire was changed little if at all, in spite of some late additions such as 'Sweet and Lovely' with Mingus at Juan-les-Pins in 1960.

Both authors agree on Powell's creative legacy, his invention of the modern piano trio, the paramount importance of his contribution to the language and to the style of what has been called bebop, and his virtuosity and constant flow of fresh ideas when he was playing at his best. From the list of interviewees in Pullman's book it is easy to see the scope of his influence on people such as Al Haig, Jackie McLean, René Urtreger, George Shearing, Horace Silver and many others.

One of the strengths of both books is to open lines of enquiries, such as Powell's relationship with women (Pullman devotes a lot of space to the women of influence in Powell's life, including his partners, but also admirers such as Margareta Jonsson or Evelyn Glidden) and the issue of wage inequality between African American and white musicians. Ramsey touches on what it meant to be black in the American health system in the 1950s, and Pullman uncovers a wealth of information that he presents in the light of practices of the time. However, Powell's medical history could also be revisited by current psychiatrists, which might provide further insight into his mental condition and its impact on his music, as well as the impact of his treatments.

Not helped by their overlap in press (Ramsey's book was in production while *Wail* was published as an e-book), there are many discrepancies between the two books. For example the account of Parker and Powell's last performance in 1955 is very different, Ramsey makes Powell's daughter Celia five years old in 1949 when she was born the year before. Some details of Powell's stays in mental institutions are different too. Given the breadth of his research I tend to find Pullman's account to be more accurate, and in Ramsey's case, the discrepancies don't change his overall argument.

For both authors there are occurrences of unsupported claims such as: 'the best musicians have always found such mixing and matching

[of different musical styles] an attractive creative process' (Ramsey, 86); 'Powell's first leader session was obviously rehearsed well' (Ramsey, 69); 'Powell wanted them [the musicians playing on "Webb City"] to earn the right to solo' (Pullman, 69); 'the greatest improvisers rely on no more than a dozen or two discrete phrases that are unique to them' (Pullman, 147, note q). I also feel that in Pullman's book, more references would have added support to some of the general historical jazz context, and a discography would have been welcome.

These are small problems that don't diminish the excellence of both works, which are accessible to a readership from academics to the general public.

## **Bibliography**

Groves, Alan, and Alyn Shipton (1993) *The Glass Enclosure: The Life of Bud Powell*. Oxford: Bayou Press.