

Review

***Icons Among Us: Jazz in the Present Tense*. Michael Rivoira, Lars Larson and Peter J. Vogt, directors. John W. Comerford and Theo N. Ianuly, producers. Lars Larson, director of photography. Paradigm Studio. 2009. DVD B002RNO1BW.**

Reviewed by Colter Harper, University of Pittsburgh, 2759 Mt Royal Rd, Pittsburgh, PA 15212, USA
colterharper@gmail.com

The documentary *Icons Among Us: Jazz in the Present Tense* makes a case for jazz as a living culture and growing art form in North America and Europe. Jazz artists, including Nicholas Payton, Terence Blanchard, Ravi Coltrane, Bill Frisell, Donald Harrison, Wynton Marsalis and Esperanza Spalding, provide the film's primary voices; these musicians, along with others, address how they reconcile the demands of tradition with the realities of changing audiences and markets. This is no small task because, as the documentary demonstrates, jazz is comprised of a fractured and contested set of overlapping and often conflicting values and practices. Because of this approach, *Icons* provides an alternative narrative to Ken Burns's *Jazz* (2000), which has drawn criticism for portraying jazz as a uniform expression of American democratic ideals rather than a multiplicity of stories struggling to be told.¹

This 93-minute documentary is presented in a traditional style with talking heads interspersed with performances and other B-roll material. This format allows the viewer to connect the featured musicians' personalities to their live performances while not getting mired in extended concert footage or third-party pontifications. We see the jazz musician as a working artist, struggling with their craft while negotiating shifting economic and social worlds. We are also taken into the contemporary contexts of jazz, from grimy college bars, to concert halls; from outdoor festivals to street corners and intimate clubs. Few viewers will miss the stark contrast of saxophonist Skerik's (Eric Walton) punk-laced mosh-inducing performance in a cramped and sweaty bar with

1. George Lipsitz, in his chapter 'Jazz: The Hidden History of Nationalist Multiculturalism' (*Footsteps in the Dark* [Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007]), articulates one such criticism noting the limitations of Burn's 'celebratory nationalism'.

clarinetist Anat Cohen's delicately crafted interpretations of American song-book standards for reserved Manhattan listeners.

The central theme of the documentary emerges from a survey of musicians' attitudes towards the idea of change, a long-contested concept in jazz. The viewer quickly realizes that while the various musicians interviewed in *Icons* draw from a common tradition of music-making, they interpret that tradition in widely varied ways. The documentary opens with trumpeter Nicholas Payton's enigmatic statement, 'The truth never remains the same and to me a lie is anything that has nothing to do with now'. While setting a revisionist tone, this statement does little to clarify what the boundaries of change are or should be in jazz. For guitarist Bill Frisell, the boundaries of change are theoretically limitless:

I just don't like it when the name of something has the effect of excluding. If you say it's one thing then it can't be something else. That doesn't work for me because the words are always smaller than whatever it is you're trying to describe. For me jazz is infinite.

Jazz, in Frisell's world, is a means to joyfully deconstruct the world and test cultural boundaries. His brooding interpretation of Bob Dylan's 'Masters of War' in *Icons* is a case in point.

Trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and scholar Paul de Barros counter Frisell's utopian art-scape realization of jazz with essentialist readings of the music's history. Marsalis states, 'In jazz, it's interesting in America, that we are one of the only people in the world that created an art form then tried to figure out how to make it not have a definition.' Fundamental to this statement is the idea that jazz's identity hinges on *one* definition rather than many overlapping and contested definitions. While Marsalis focuses on the aesthetic choices of musicians, de Barros points to contemporary musicians' lack of social engagement as the source of jazz's current disenfranchisement from audiences and markets. As he states,

If you ask Lee Morgan and Sonny Rollins what their music was saying they would say, 'I'm a black person in a white society where I have something to say and I need it to be heard.' That was part of the message behind that music. That was part of the urgency of it. We understand the relationship between Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman with black freedom. We do not understand what the relationship is between Bill Frisell and the society.

The viewer is left questioning what Marsalis and de Barros have to gain from exclusionary definitions of jazz. Is it not enough for Bill Frisell to build a successful career finding new paths of musical expression?

Icons shows how the realities of nightclub performance pay make the careers of most jazz musicians either a labor of love or an exercise in flexibility. Because jazz musicians make little money from record sales, they build careers from performing and teaching. A telling segment of *Icons* focuses on Will Bernard, a jazz guitarist and composer who relocates to New York in search of new artistic challenges. Bernard represents the mass of jazz musicians who move to New York every year to grow musically while negotiating the daunting economic realities of the working musician. On the way to a gig, Bernard realizes his car won't start and has to rely on a car service to travel from Brooklyn to Manhattan. At the club, the band members seem more focused on reading Bernard's charts than interacting with one another or an audience. This raises the question of whether jazz is in danger, particularly in the oversaturated markets of New York, of becoming an act of self-edification.

Icons acknowledges that some jazz musicians have found an audience in the jam band scene, which has grown since the mid-1990s and fed off fans of bands such as the Grateful Dead and Phish. Jam bands, which have been criticized for aimlessly improvising over formulaic backbeat-driven songs, have nonetheless found a way to serve audiences and establish legitimacy through festival exposure. These bands have adapted the practice of jazz improvisation to highlight dance rhythms over harmonic and melodic interplay. *Icons* show that a shared inspiration in the legacies of great artists such as John Coltrane tie the jam band scene to Jazz at Lincoln Center despite the cultural chasm that separates them. While musicians from these various communities may not collaborate or even acknowledge the legitimacy of each other's work, they demonstrate the range of social contexts that jazz has come to influence.

To its detriment, *Icons* does not directly address the issues of race and gender in jazz. The documentary likely avoids these topics to maintain a focus on the musicians' artistry. However, by ignoring these polarizing issues, the documentary implies that women no longer face unique challenges and that divisions along racial lines no longer exist in the music. We are given a glimpse of how jazz is defined in racial terms when pianist Robert Glasper dismisses European jazz on the grounds that it lacks the emotion of the blues. Rather than delve deeper into these divisions, *Icons* opts to support the image of jazz as an inclusive art form.

Icons also avoids discussing the role of university jazz programs in the current jazz world. Since the late 1960s, universities have increasingly provided students with degrees in jazz performance while the infrastructure

of venues and audiences, which supported jazz at the mid-century, have largely disappeared. *Icons* does not address how the older system of mentoring in performance contexts has been adapted into lecture and lesson-oriented four-year undergraduate programs. The mentoring system predates university jazz programs and recalls a time when working bands regularly crisscrossed the United States on tour circuits. In this context, the student learns the profession as well as craft of being a musician. The university, by contrast, requires students to survey a variety of topics and master the music's formal aspects. By ignoring university jazz programs, *Icons* avoids any discussion of how institutionalization has shaped the music. At the very least, it would have been informative to know which musicians had attended a university program and how that had helped or hindered their creative processes and professional lives.

This documentary will appeal to a general audience while also serving jazz fans looking for new music. Educators will find *Icons* to be a useful introduction to jazz for it provides both a survey of current jazz performances and discussions of the music's future. Undergraduate students of survey classes will appreciate seeing jazz presented by a generation influenced by alternative rock and hip-hop. *Icons* places jazz in the context of rock clubs, jam band festivals and dance clubs, demonstrating the music's flexibility as an improvised language that can reach across cultural barriers. Also, as a counterpart to Burns's *Jazz*, *Icons* provides a critique of the dominant historical narrative of jazz.

Icons concludes with two inspired performances that artfully articulate the idea of jazz as a unified practice created from opposing ideas. First is Norwegian pianist and producer Bugge Wesseltøft who improvises over looped rhythms sampled from the piano. The music grabs the listener's attention as both an understated technical feat and exploration of new possibilities. Labeled as part of the European jazz movement, Wesseltøft argues for an inclusive conception of jazz: 'You can't separate everything and say that it's exclusively [American] music.' Second is saxophonist Donald Harrison playing a bucket and singing a Mardi Gras chant on the porch of his home, which he is working to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. Harrison's performance is a glimpse of resolution in the face of devastation and is unencumbered by market demands, concert programming or the noise of aesthete criticism. As an ex-member of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, Harrison is a proponent of a tradition-rooted jazz awareness: 'You can't move a tradition forward without knowing it because jazz is a tradition. You might come up with something unique and new but it is not part of moving the

tradition forward.' Wesseltoft and Harrison present jazz as Janus, looking both backward and forward. The power of their performances speaks to the validity of both orientations and demonstrates the breadth of jazz. *Icons* shows that jazz's ever-growing diversity is both a challenge to its identity and key to its continued relevance.

Icons carefully balances its task of celebrating new directions and critiquing historicism in jazz. Discerning definitions of jazz have always struggled with the music's inherent paradoxes: jazz as African-American culture and global music; jazz as individual meditation on timeless ideals and community practice tied to local economic and social forces; jazz as tradition rooted in the mid-twentieth century and shifting form open to an ever increasing number of interpretations. The popularity of Ken Burn's *Jazz* was due to its clear narrative path. That this path circumvented many of these paradoxes mattered little to general audiences. *Icons* attempts to break this mold by allowing the viewer to sort through and evaluate contradictory perspectives of active jazz musicians. While this approach requires a more critical viewer it is effective in examining the decentered state of jazz.