Review


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One observation that becomes devastatingly clear while watching Ken Burns’s terrific 2021 four-part documentary miniseries, *Muhammad Ali*, is that post-exile, neither the late boxer’s staccato-like cadence of his footwork, nor his speech, was what it once was. Older and weighted down by media scrutiny, the threat of religious excommunication resulting from a friendship with Malcolm X, the burden of being asked to speak ‘on behalf’ of Black America (as if this is a monolith), and staring down the high likelihood of prison time for his refusal to fight in the Vietnam War on the grounds of religious freedom, Ali’s mind, body and spirit were not as effervescent with possibility as the young Louisville fighter who stood over a crumpled and dejected ‘Sonny’ Liston just a few years earlier in 1965.

While I am hardly the first observer to note a connection between boxing, particularly from a specific time in American history, and jazz music, I was indeed struck by the similarities of Ali’s aforementioned vivacity in the ring (and subsequent decline) and the similar creative conceit, buoyancy of language (in this case musical), and career trajectory in miniature of Charlie Parker’s, as is beautifully presented by the late author and MacArthur Foundation recipient Stanley Crouch.

Part one of a proposed two-part biography on ‘Bird’ (as the saxophonist and architect of bebop was known) that never came to be—with Crouch’s passing in 2020—the book, some thirty years in the making, is truly a post-modern affair with its blending of rigorous factual details interspersed with the author’s creative imagining of what the late jazz musician’s first nineteen years of his cruelly short life were like, all delivered in Crouch’s singular literary style. Further, where biographies about ‘great’ men of history are
often measured for their verisimilitude, Crouch rejects this yardstick as a meaningful construct, foregrounding instead the idea of ‘what if’, holding out as possibility a capture of Parker’s life that makes up in creativity and rich imagination what it may lack in factual sacrosanctity.

If *Kansas City Lightning* needed a subtitle other than its given one of *The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker*, then ‘a life of juxtaposition’ would be a good candidate. Rigorous and disciplined in his music, but shambolic in life; ambitious and driven towards a sense of greater purpose, yet ultimately existentially self-sabotaging; fetishising of such signifiers of Western Europe as so-called ‘Classical’ art music, but arguably at his most poignant when extemporising over American blues; and, timeless in the legacy of his music, but cut short by dying prematurely at thirty-four, juxtaposition runs like a *leitmotif* throughout both this expansive book, and Parker’s life.

Crouch, too, seems ensnared in such positional asymmetry. Employing a circuitous narrative style that is anything but ‘stay-in-your-lane’ scholarship, he frequently (and oftentimes unexpectedly) swerves into parenthetical discussions on Sherlock Holmes, D.W. Griffith, the gangster Al Capone, and the pedagogical importance of Kansas City interracial ‘swinger’ clubs to the development of Parker’s style, that, in the hands of a less skilled wordsmith, might result in tangential meandry, but with Crouch reify a patchwork of bric-a-brac miscellanea into a cogent and compelling whole.

Curiously, and despite all of the above, there were perhaps few improvisers in jazz who exhibited a style more coherent and linear than Parker. Coming of age musically at a time of tremendous progress, civil advancement and technological innovation in the United States, Parker’s ornate single-note lines, as well as the frenetic tempos he favoured, embodied in sound all of those aforementioned harbingers of modernity, creating a style that was the very definition of teleological. Simply put, Bird’s lines and ‘vital drive’, to use a phrase from André Hodeir, accelerated a pace with a forward motion suggestive of a giant arching tonicization towards a point of musical resolution.

How compellingly different, then, that Crouch chooses a narrative style that is anything but linear. *Kansas City Lightning*, having more in common with the great Christopher Nolan film *Memento*—with its frequent jumps from time, place, space and scene that more closely mirrors the film protagonist’s anterograde amnesia then any of the countless Parker contrafacts over ‘I Got Rhythm’—is not confined to present a history that is chronological, comprehensive, systematic, or even entirely factual. Similar to such purveyors of so-called ‘new journalism’ (rebranded today as ‘Creative
Non-Fiction’) as Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, and George Plimpton, Crouch inserts himself into the historical narrative. Here, Crouch’s presence is not felt in the way of Plimpton throwing the ball for the 1963 Detroit Lions, but rather in a manner that reverberates with Richard Cohen’s conclusion in Making History: The Storytellers Who Shaped the Past (2022), that those who write history, ‘infuse into it, perhaps unconsciously, the character of his own spirit’ (cited in Menand 2022).

Like the etic anthropologist who knows that emic perspective veracity is a fallacy, or Dr Emmett Brown in Back to the Future who warns Marty McFly that his presence and actions have the potential to change the course of history, or Louis Menand, writing in the New Yorker, who states, ‘when we listen to a tale, we need to take into account the teller’ (2022), Crouch knows that any Parker truths captured in this book will also be his. And now, with Crouch having stood on the shoulders of initial Bird biographer Ross Russell in both an effort to peer over what is widely understood to be more hagiography than historiography and to add his own specs of wisdom to what one hopes is an ever-growing body of work on the late saxophonist, Parker’s history, now available, is not only his, but Crouch’s and, as readers, ours.

References