



Collected Works: A Journal of Jazz 1954-2001

Whitney Balliett

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Jazz critic for *The New Yorker* since 1957 and the author of some fifteen books, Whitney Balliett has spent a lifetime listening to and writing about jazz. "All first-rate criticism," he once wrote in a review, "first defines what we are confronting." He could as easily have been describing his own work. For nearly half a century, Balliett has been telling us, in his widely acclaimed pitch-perfect prose, what we are confronting when we listen to America's greatest—and perhaps only original—musical form.

Collected Works: A Journal of Jazz 1954-2001 is a monumental achievement, capturing the full range and register of the jazz scene, from the very first Newport Jazz Festival to recent performances (in clubs and on CDs) by a rising generation of musicians. Here are definitive portraits of such major figures as Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Django Reinhardt, Martha Raye, Buddy Rich, Charles Mingus, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holliday, Art Tatum, Bessie Smith, and Earl Hines—a list that barely scratches the surface. Generations of readers have learned to listen to the music with Balliett's graceful guidance. For five decades he has captured those moments during which jazz history is made.

Though Balliett's knowledge is an encyclopedic treasure, he has always written as if he were listening for the first time. Since its beginnings in New Orleans at the turn of the century, jazz has been restlessly and relentlessly evolving. This is an art form based on improvising, experimenting, shapeshifting—a constant work in progress of sounds and tonal shades, from swing and Dixieland, through boogie-woogie, bebop, and hard bop, to the "new thing," free jazz, abstract jazz, and atonal jazz. Yet, in all its forms, the music is forever sustained by what Balliett calls a "secret emotional center," an "aural elixir" that "reveals itself when an improvised phrase or an entire solo or even a complete number catches you by surprise." Balliett's celebrated essays invariably capture the so-called "sound of surprise"—and then share this sound with general readers, music students, jazz lovers, and popular American culture buffs everywhere. As *The Los Angeles Times Book Review* has observed, "Few people can write as well about anything as Balliett writes about jazz."

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