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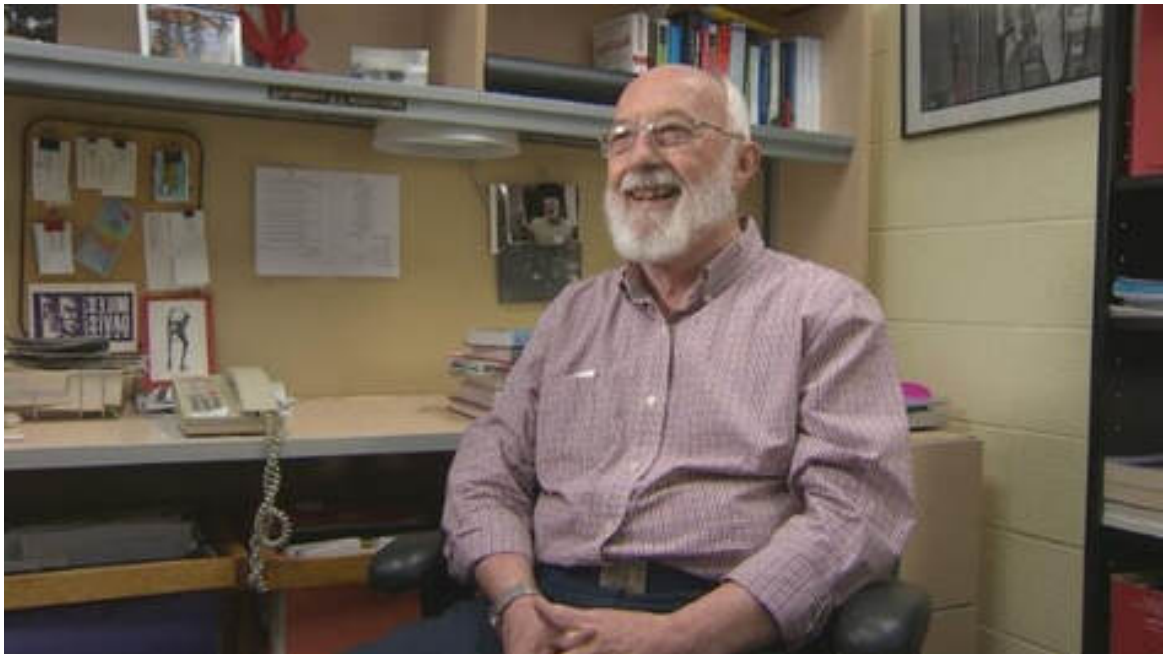
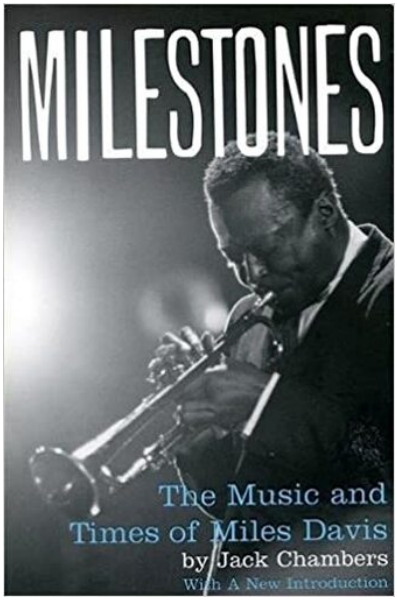
JACK CHAMBERS

Jack Kenny interviews the author of major books on Miles Davis, Duke Ellington and Richard Twardzik.



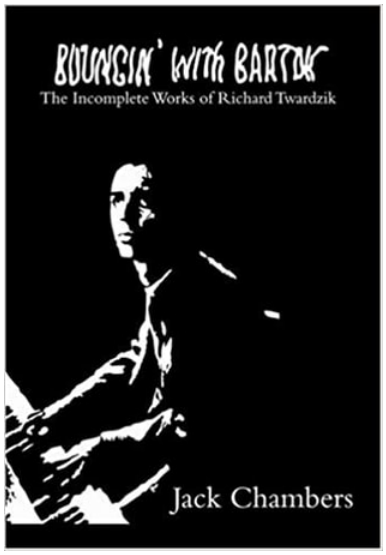
Jack Chambers, one of the most important writers about jazz, is a professor of linguistics at the University of Toronto. His three books Milestones: The Music and Times of Miles Davis (Da Capo Press); Bouncin' with Bartok: The Incomplete Works of Richard Twardzik) (Lulu Books) and Sweet Thunder: Duke Ellington's Music in Nine Themes (Milestone Music and Art)



Which part of Davis' life and music do you find most rewarding now?
I skip around. I recently prepared a script for a short CBC series called (by the host, not me) "Jazz for People who Hate Jazz" and I scheduled "Jean Pierre" (1981) in the second episode. (COVID canceled the series after the first episode.) I gave a talk to an audience of experts a few years ago on 1954 Miles —the neglected Prestige flowerings with Monk and young Horace Silver. I don't think I have ever gone back to the 1970s music with Pete Cosey and the r 'n' b guys, but I presented a master class to the U of Toronto Jazz program a few years ago and got intelligent questions about "Rated X" and "He Loved Him Madly." I was surprised at how vivid they were in my mind after so many years. As always, though, the mainstays are the quintet/sextet records 1955-1958 and the first three Gil Evans orchestrations. I like *Sketches of Spain* even better now than when I wrote the book, almost as much as *Miles Ahead* and *Porgy and Bess*. I have listened to that music all my life.

What did you feel when you first read Miles' autobiography and realised that your book had been extensively plagiarised? How do you feel about the issue today?
I was surprisingly benign, looking back on it. I reviewed the autobiography when it was new for the Globe and Mail. I pointed out the plagiarism and said something like, "I suppose Miles can tell his story in whatever words he wants, even if some of them are mine." Stanley Crouch was not so kind in the *New Republic* a few years later. He pointed out that Quincey Troupe had stolen from my book "by the shovelful" (not exactly the kindest metaphor). In the 1990s Crouch phoned me from time to time just for small talk (I guess). I think he liked me because the plagiarism gave him a cane for flogging Troupe. Not all of Stanley's targets deserved his vitriol, but Troupe did.

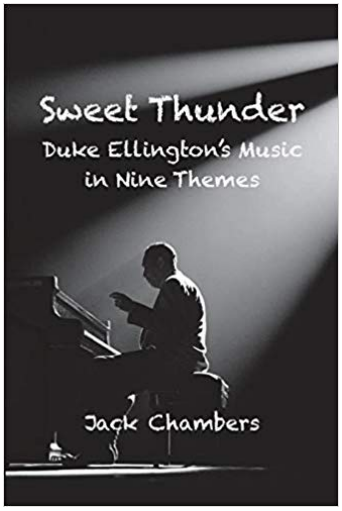
You have written about major figures Ellington and Miles Davis. Why did you choose to write about an obscure, almost forgotten, figure like Twardzik?
The impetus for writing about Richard Twardzik was the same as for Ellington and Miles. He gave us magnificently performed music, so indelible and idiosyncratic and creative that it deserved to be heard. What a shame there were only five of his own compositions and eight of Bob Zieff's, and a half dozen standards. His death by overdose was an occupational hazard at that moment in jazz history.



Can you talk about the problem of researching the background to the Twardzik book *Bouncin' with Bartok*?
I got lucky. Around 2000, I wrote a long article that was sort of a summary of my infatuation with Twardzik's music in my teens and my gratitude for the obscure stuff that came out in the CD boom. I intended it as my last word. When my editor at *Coda* hemmed and hawed about publishing it, I posted it on my website. I immediately got hits from a coterie of obsessed fans, and then I got one from Dick's second cousin, with news of the trove of materials in the hands of his first cousin. My wife and I drove several hundred miles to Maine, and spent five days going through the stuff, using cousin Jane's photocopier. After that, I found his girlfriends, his photographer-buddy, and other links. I was already in touch with Bob Zieff for years (since 1986). So Twardzik

became flesh and blood. Then my California publisher went nuts and folded, but eventually it got published. Obscurely. But it's out there, and maybe someday someone will notice what a jewel he was.

Recently you hinted that there might be more Ellington material from you, can you expand on that?
With the lockdown, I have been developing more of Ellington's themes as articles/chapters— more entry points into his fabulous productivity. Before the lockdown, I taught the themes in the book at University of Toronto, and I was halfway through teaching them at Ryerson University. Of course I knew they worked because they grew out of more than twenty years of talks to the Toronto Duke Ellington Society. But these students were non-specialists, and they loved them. These new pieces I'm writing, I don't know how they will end up—I would like to integrate them with the others but I might have to make a companion volume. I intend to keep teaching the themes. I did a Zoom talk last month from a theatre on Ellington and Shakespeare, and I long for the day when we get back to face-to-face contact.



Some writers have suggested that Ellington was unfair to Strayhorn. Is there a good case for that belief?
Not at all, and Strayhorn knew it. Whatever problems there were came from Ellington's carelessness about credits. When Strayhorn's café society pals got him to complain in the early 50s, Ellington was dumbfounded. They were working on the Shakespeare suite, and he immediately sought to appease Strayhorn. He gave him full composer credit for "Star-Crossed Lovers" (correctly), took full credit for "Half the Fun" (though it was mainly Strayhorn's), and gave Strayhorn joint credit on all other titles (almost all Ellington's alone, according to Walter van de Leur). That is gaga. Mostly, though, Ellington provided very well for Strayhorn, allowed him to lead the life he imagined in "Lush Life" ("weeks in Paris," "jazz and cocktails"), praised him lavishly at Carnegie Hall, the Rainbow Grill, and everywhere else. I think David Hajdu's biography is very fair, but some of his reviewers felt the need to raise a fist for the underdog and claim exploitation. I was in England when the review of Hajdu's book was published in either the Independent or the Observer; it was grossly unfair to Ellington. That reviewer (and some others) failed to notice Billy Byers' observation (quoted by Hajdu): "Ellington worked like a dog, and Strayhorn was the playboy." Without Ellington, Strayhorn might have "rotted with the rest" while he "lived a lush life in some small dive." There would have been no "Day Dream," no "'A' Train," no "Passion Flower," no "Isfahan." Thank god Duke found him.

You wrote in the Ellington book: 'Duke Ellington's music is in danger of being ignored.' Is that inevitable?
I think it will require a culture shift to prevent it from becoming ever more of a niche indulgence. I think it also true of Bach, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis. And Verdi, Rossini, Balanchine, Bob Fosse. I wrote about this at greater length in *Milestones*—when baby boomers formed the global majority in the 1950s and 60s, there was a rush led by American entrepreneurs to supply these free-spending, easy-going youngsters with the most accessible entertainments/ amusements/diversions. The entrepreneurs made fortunes from the dumbing down. We might have expected the kids to look for deeper thrills when they got older but few did, and even fewer now than before. Because of that, all genres of 'serious' music are struggling—have been struggling for decades. It takes curiosity and maybe education to get kids to move on from kidstuff. With each generation, it gets remoter.

In your Ellington book you often compare Ellington to Shakespeare. Shakespeare is for all ages. Isn't Ellington trapped in the twentieth century? Reinterpretations of Shakespeare's plays illuminate the present time; reinterpretations of Ellington's music are almost always unsatisfactory.

I think Ellington tapped into human experience with a perspicacity that listeners would respond to for all time if they got the chance. The rush of urban life, the swing of one who walks in beauty, the basic instinct to move rhythmically, the moodswings from major to minor. If plunger mutes and woody clarinets are embalmed in the 20th century, they are hardly more old-school than Shakespeare's hoary "forsooth" and "babbling o' greenfields" and "incarnadine" seas. Dressing Coriolanus's troops in American battle fatigues is not what makes the play work; lots of us think it is as likely to make it fail. Of course it is hard to know what will endure. I expect Andy Warhol will be wiped out like COVID-19, but he might surprise me. Like Shakespeare, Ellington started by entertaining groundlings, Shakespeare making lowbrow skits with fools and knaves, and Ellington making bouncy music for kicklines to show their panties to the front -row johnnies. Somehow they ended up writing *King Lear* and *A Tone Parallel to Harlem*.

If you compare the last ten years of Davis with the last ten years of Ellington what do we learn about their music?

Davis was exhausted. He had charisma, and he survived his last ten years by blasting a few notes at the proscenium, and preening in front of a wall of badly balanced electronics. Ellington was way too busy to preen. His last ten years started with *Far East Suite* and ended with *The River*, marvels in almost diametric ways, though both patently Ellington. To me, the music of the Sacred Concerts seems shallow, but the concerts were undeniably ambitious, humongous productions. Davis had an aesthetic vision fueled by Elwood Buchanan, Charlie Parker, Gil Evans, and Ahmad Jamal, but he abandoned it to the twin scourges of sickle-cell anemia and Clive Davis. Ellington had a richer aesthetic vision and he never abandoned it even while traveling miles to bask in the applause at every ephemeral one-nighter he was offered.

What is the main role of a writer about jazz: to illuminate, to enthuse, to criticise?

The best one can do is feel the beat and try to persuade others to try it on. Hope they feel it too.