

A Certain Respect for Tradition: Mark Miller on Jazz: Selected Writings 1980-2005.
Toronto: The Mercury Press, 2006. 191 pages. ISBN-13: 9781551281254.

There is a school of jazz critics and writers who maintain that jazz is dead, and that nothing significant has happened since the passing of John Coltrane in 1967. I have long suspected that these poor souls just aren't getting out enough and that they aren't buying enough (or the right) new recordings. A reading of this fine collection of writings (most of them first published in *The Globe and Mail*) by the leading Canadian jazz critic, Mark Miller, leaves me further convinced that there is room for improvement in the listening habits of the notorious Jazz Is Dead Gang. This is a book that leaves the reader filled with optimism about the future of jazz as a creative art form, although perhaps less optimistic about its future commercial viability in the face of a music industry that generally values the predictable and the re-used (the DPDK [Dead People and Diana Krall] formula, as one writer as recently put it) over music that is new, exciting, and innovative. This rosy picture of jazz's future as an art form may in part stem from Miller's decision to slant the selection of writings included in the book towards the musicians whom he admires and whose work he appreciates. Generally absent are the negative reviews which all critics must inevitably produce from time to time. In Miller's own words, the book "is as much a celebration of jazz as it is a survey of my work as a journalist".

Miller's career as a jazz journalist began in 1973 with the publication of his first piece in *Coda Magazine*, and he soon went on to contribute to other jazz periodicals, such as *Down Beat*. His long freelance association with Toronto's *The Globe and Mail* began in 1977 when that newspaper published the first of over 4,000 Miller articles; his last article in that newspaper appeared in 2005, the year in which Miller decided to end the relationship. Most of the 91 articles included in *A Certain Respect for Tradition* are drawn from his work for the *The Globe and Mail*, although a few first appeared elsewhere or are previously unpublished. With the exception a small number of pieces that have been revised extensively, the selected articles have been re-published in more-or-less their original state, with minor corrections as required. Among the articles in the book are reviews of concerts and club dates, short pieces based on interviews with musicians, more extended biographical and thematic articles which often draw on Miller's wide knowledge of jazz history, and a few extended essays. The presentation of the articles is chronological, with the exception of two closely related essays on Cecil Taylor which are presented side by side, although written a year apart.

There is a slight, and no doubt intentional, ambiguity to the title *A Certain Respect for Tradition*. It soon becomes clear to the reader that it is Miller's respect for the jazz tradition that is certain; his is not a qualified, "kind of" respect. Equally clear are Miller's own views as to what is at the heart of that tradition: continual evolution, a willingness to explore and to synthesize with other musical idioms, improvisation in the moment, and the importance of bringing one's own self and voice to the music. Thus a music that originated in the southern United States with a meeting of African music and European

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harmony has gone on to meet and interact with other idioms, such as popular songs, classical, rock, World Music, and hip hop, and to emerge in each case reborn. Those musicians, such as Betty Carter, Ran Blake, D.D. Jackson, Steve Lacy, Phil Minton, William Parker, Jabbo Smith, and Cecil Taylor, who have valued exploration and change and given priority to their artistic vision over commercial concerns, are treated with great sympathy in these pages. Those musicians who have espoused a museum-music/arrested-development view of jazz, often with the encouragement of the recording industry, are spoken of much less warmly, no matter how virtuosic their playing: the name of Wynton Marsalis is raised more than once in this regard. Considerable respect is shown for those elders who have lived and survived the jazz life, with its myriad challenges ranging from racism to bill collectors; among the elders featured in Miller's book are Benny Carter, Doc Cheatham, Jimmy McPartland, Jay McShann (a regular visitor to Toronto well into his nineties), Jabbo Smith, and Clark Terry. Miller's collection also serves as a snapshot of jazz in Canada, and particularly in Toronto, in the latter part of the twentieth century and early in the new millennium. In addition to articles on the many international artists whose Toronto/Canadian appearances are reviewed, there are wonderful portraits of relatively less known Canadian artists such as manic drummer Guy Nadon (fascinatingly juxtaposed with Art Blakey in the earliest article in the collection), pianist Tony Collacott, saxophonist Christopher Cauley, vocalist Kate Hammett-Vaughan, and Ian Bargh (Toronto engineer by day, and apparently a pretty good jazz pianist by night). The reader is left wanting to know more about these musicians, and to check out their music as soon as possible. The usefulness of the book as a reference work is enhanced by the inclusion of a nominal index.

Miller is also a fine jazz photographer, and the book includes a selection of nine of his black-and-white portraits of international artists on tour in Toronto and Montreal. There is something intriguing about these images of jazz artists in performance, perhaps because they capture people who are totally absorbed in what they are doing, oblivious to the world around them, in a moment that is at once very private and very public. As mentioned, all of the photographs are of visiting international artists, and one wonders why no Canadians are included in the illustrations.

If there is one quibble to be had, it is perhaps Miller's overuse of the word "avant-garde" as an umbrella term for the diverse new music that has followed bebop and the standard repertoire, but this is a small quibble to raise in relation to such a readable and worthwhile collection. The publication of *A Certain Respect for Tradition*, Miller's seventh monograph on jazz since 1982, solidifies his position as a leader among Canadian jazz writers. Along with the publication of such titles as David Lee's *The Battle of the Five Spot: Ornette Coleman and the New York Jazz Field* and other efforts by Miller (including an important reference work, *The Miller Companion to Jazz in Canada and Canadians in Jazz*), the appearance of this fine collection also adds to The Mercury Press's reputation as a leading Canadian publishing house for jazz writings.

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